Pelagianism is Alive and Well in the Modern Evangelical Church.

In the Introduction to Martin Luther’s *Bondage of the Will*, J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston make some very important and pertinent comments:

> These things need to be pondered by Protestants today. With what right may we call ourselves children of the Reformation? Much modern Protestantism would be neither owned nor even recognised by the pioneer Reformers. The Bondage of the Will fairly sets before us what they believed about the salvation of lost mankind. In the light of it, we are forced to ask whether Protestant Christendom has not tragically sold its birthright between Luther’s day and our own. Has not Protestantism today become more Erasmian than Lutheran? Do we not too often try to minimise and gloss over doctrinal differences for the sake of inter-party peace? Are we innocent of the doctrinal indifferentism with which Luther charged Erasmus? Do we still believe that doctrine matters?¹

Packer and Johnston ask if Protestantism has become today (in 1957!) more Erasmian than Lutheran or Reformed. However, the question in the 21st century might be better phrased, Has Protestantism become more Pelagian than Lutheran or Reformed? Much of today’s popular evangelical preaching and teaching, including sermons and books, has taken on a decidedly non-Reformed slant, with the result that much of it has become not just Arminian but Pelagian. Packer and Johnston write that the Reformers, whatever their differences, stood on the same ground regarding the concept of grace alone. Luther was convinced that the real issue of the Reformation was grace, which was the underlying doctrine of faith alone. The question was of salvation by faith alone, but this principle is not rightly understood without the underlying anchor of grace alone. What is the source

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of that faith? The Reformers, and the Bible, understood it as a gift from God alone, the instrument through which justification is received.

However, the question of faith and grace still plague the Christian church in America today. Is faith the God-given instrument through which man receives justification, or is it something man has within himself and must exercise as a condition in order to receive justification from God? How many times have pastors in churches who are giving an invitation stated, “God has taken 99 steps. Now you must take the last one.” Or as Billy Graham, the great American evangelist, is fond of saying, “God does ninety-nine percent of the work, but you must still do that last one percent.” These statements, and others like them by such “evangelical” pastors as Rick Warren, Bill Hybels, Robert Schuller, Joel Osteen, and others show that the church has become less “Lutheran” and more Pelagian. This paper will briefly explore the tenets of the Pelagian Controversy, the beliefs of Pelagius and his followers, and their resurgence in the modern American church.

Pelagius, from whom the term Pelagianism is derived, was a British monk in the fifth century. Schaff states that he was “a man of clear intellect, mild disposition, learned culture, and spotless character; even Augustine, with all his abhorrence of his doctrines, repeatedly speaks respectfully of the man.”² In opposition to Pelagius was the great church father Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in North Africa. Both engaged in combat for the life of the gospel and of the church, and it was Augustine who won the day by the grace of God.
Berkhof states that the most important questions in the debate between Pelagius and Augustine were those of free will and original sin. However, it was all basically due to a prayer of Augustine that Pelagius adamantly opposed. Augustine stated, and prayed, “O God, command what you would, and grant what you do command.” Pelagius even appealed to Rome to censure the prayer. Pelagius reasoned that, yes, praying that God as creator can ask or impose anything, any obligations, on his creatures is a legitimate prayer. However, it was the second part of the prayer that prompted Pelagius to respond. How can God ask of his creatures something that He does not provide the ability or will to do, he reasoned? He believed that moral responsibility always implied moral ability. Whatever God commands, he provides the ability to do. Pelagius saw that otherwise this as a black mark on God’s character if God asked His creatures to do something that they were not capable of doing on their own.

Augustine, on the other hand, thought otherwise and sought to prove it from the Scriptures. Schaff states that the one problem Pelagius had was that “he could not conceive, that the power to obey the commandment must come from the same source as the commandment itself. Faith, with him, was hardly more than a theoretical belief; the main thing in religion was moral action, the keeping of the commandments of God by one’s own strength.” Augustine made it clear that in creation, God commanded nothing from Adam or Eve that they were incapable of performing. However, once transgression entered and mankind became fallen, God’s law was not repealed nor did God adjust his

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4 Schaff, no page #.
holy requirements downward to accommodate the weakened, fallen condition of His creation. God did punish His creation by visiting upon them the judgment of original sin, so that everyone after Adam and Eve who was born into this world was born already dead in sin. Original sin is not just the first sin; it’s the result of the first sin. It refers to our inherent corruption, by which we are born in sin, and in sin did our mothers conceive us. We are not born in a neutral state of innocence, but we are born in a sinful, fallen condition.

Pelagius, however, did not agree. He had a follower named Coelestius, of which Schaff states that “Pelagius was the moral author, Coelestius the intellectual author, of the system represented by them.” The principle positions of the system were enumerated by Coelestius, as recorded in Schaff:

1. Adam was created mortal, and would have died, even if he had not sinned.
2. Adam’s fall injured himself alone, not the human race.
3. Children come into the world in the same condition in which Adam was before the fall.
4. The human race neither dies in consequence of Adam’s fall, nor rises again in consequence of Christ’s resurrection.
5. Unbaptized children, as well as others, are saved.
6. The law, as well as the gospel, leads to the kingdom of heaven.
7. Even before Christ there were sinless men.

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5 Schaff, n.p. See also Berkhof, 132-134.
6 Ibid.
Points #2 and #3 were the ones that primarily became the subject of the Pelagian controversy with Augustine.

Pelagius said there is no such thing as original sin. Adam’s sin affected Adam and only Adam. There is no transmission or transfer of guilt or fallenness or corruption to the progeny of Adam and Eve. Everyone is born in the same state of innocence in which Adam was created. And, he said, for a person to live a life of obedience to God, a life of moral perfection, is possible without any help from Jesus or without any help from the grace of God. Pelagius said that grace — and here’s the key distinction — facilitates righteousness. It helps; it makes it more facile; it makes it easier, but you don’t have to have it. You can be perfect without it. Pelagius further stated that it is not only theoretically possible for some folks to live a perfect life without any assistance from divine grace, but there are in fact people who do it.

Augustine responded by denouncing these views. Augustine said that we are infected by sin by nature, to the very depths and core of our being, so much so that no human being has the moral power to incline himself to cooperate with the grace of God. The human will, as a result of original sin, still has the power to choose, but it is in bondage to its evil desires and inclinations. Luther explained this in more depth in his book mentioned earlier, *The Bondage of the Will*. The condition of fallen humanity is one that Augustine would describe as the inability to not sin. Simply put, what Augustine was saying was that in the Fall, man loses his moral ability to do the things of God and he is held captive by his own evil inclinations.
Before examining the influence of Pelagianism in the modern American church today, the subject of semi-Pelagianism must first be addressed. Full Pelagianism was condemned at the Council of Orange, and it was condemned again at the Council of Florence, the Council of Carthage, and also, ironically, at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century in the first three anathemas of the Canons of the Sixth Session. So, consistently throughout Church history, the Church has roundly and soundly condemned Pelagianism, because Pelagianism denies the fallenness of our nature; it denies the doctrine of original sin. However, there has emerged a variant of this doctrinal system called semi-Pelagianism. This system attempts to take a middle ground between Augustinianism and Pelagianism. Semi-Pelagianism affirms the fall and the effects of the fall in that man’s nature has been weakened by the fall so much so that man absolutely needs God’s grace for salvation. However, the difference is that while man’s nature has been corrupted, mankind is still able to accept or reject grace when it is offered. Man is depraved, but not totally depraved. Man is corrupt and sick, but not dead in sin.

According to Berkhof, while semi-Pelagianism was also condemned by the Church, by the time of the Reformation, Pelagianism had revived in the form of Socinianism, and semi-Pelagianism had been revived in the form of Arminianism and Catholic doctrines as affirmed in the Council of Trent.⁷ At the time of the Reformation, all the reformers agreed on one point: the moral inability of fallen human beings to incline themselves to the things of God; that all people, in order to be saved, are totally dependent, not ninety-nine percent, but one hundred percent dependent upon the

⁷ Berkhof, 148-151.
monergistic work of God in regeneration in order to come to faith, and that faith itself is a gift of God. It’s not that we are offered salvation and that we will be born again if we choose to believe. But we can’t even believe until God in his grace and in his mercy first changes the disposition of our souls through his sovereign work of regeneration. In other words, what the reformers all agreed with was, unless a man is born again, he can’t even see the kingdom of God, let alone enter it. Jesus says in the sixth chapter of John, *No man can come to me unless it is given to him of the Father.* The necessary condition for anybody’s faith and anybody’s salvation is regeneration.

That brings us to the examination of the modern evangelical church. One of the best ways to understand the theology of the modern evangelical church with regards to Pelagianism is to examine its evangelism. How a church teaches that one may be saved says a lot about what one believes about sin, Christ, redemption, faith, and works. One of the most popular evangelism tools is the *Becoming a Contagious Christian* book and class by Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg, of Willow Creek Community Church. Much in this book is good, but it is obvious that it was written with the decisional method in mind. Much of the technique is based upon what I can do to persuade an individual to decide for Christ. For instance, the authors discuss four points in the gospel: God, us, Christ, and you. God, us, and Christ are decent presentations of the situation that the Bible presents. However, the first sentence of the “You” section sums up the point of the matter: “The ball is in your court, and it’s up to you to decide what you’re going to do with it. Jesus paid the price of salvation for the whole world, but only those who say yes
to Him will actually receive His forgiveness.”⁹ What is interesting is that later on in this section, the authors state that, “Anyone who relies on their personal efforts to get into God’s family is eventually going to experience the world’s worst nightmare.”¹⁰ But what is a personal decision if not personal effort? What is the difference between personal effort and the reason one makes a personal decision for Christ in this system? Why does someone make the decision when someone else does not? Hybels seems to indicate that it is because the evangelist is persuasive enough, and that the Holy Spirit is empowering him to make a good case. However, not much is said about the fact that the Spirit draws people to Christ (John 6:44).

Again, later in the book, Hybels discusses sermons that do not have a call-to-action. He specifically states that a good sermon must not only help people understand something, but inspire people to do something about it. He says that so many people are frustrated about evangelism because they have lost track of the real objective and as a result, fail to ask people to take action upon what they have heard. Hybels states, “So many Christians have gotten the mistaken idea that the goal of evangelism is just to tell people about Christ…. But the goal is not merely to tell people about Christ. That’s just the process we use to reach the goal, which is to lead people to Christ.”¹¹ My question then becomes, What is the role of the Holy Spirit if our role is to lead people to Christ? Hybels spends considerable pages in this chapter about crossing the line of faith in coaching someone how to “close the deal.” The point of all of this is that Hybels believes

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⁹ Ibid., 154.
¹⁰ Ibid. Emphasis in original.
that man has within himself the ability not only to persuade someone through sound arguments and patience to become a Christian, but also to actually reach deep down and through the reasoning of sound arguments and patient persuasion, become a Christian of their own ability and decision. Man may be depraved, but he is not totally depraved. He may be sick, but he is not dead. This doctrine holds that man still has some amount of ability to make the decision for or against Christ of his own volition. This is at least semi-Pelagianism.

Hybels was tremendously influenced by a professor at Wheaton named Gilbert Bilezikian, who has written a book called *Christianity 101*. His specific theology regarding salvation is explained in this book. He states, after a brief discussion of predestination, “Having said this, we must quickly add that Scripture does not teach that God has foreordained which individuals will become believers. All biblical statements about predestination…make reference to predestination as a collective reality. God has decided that there will be a community of faith, but he has not chosen the individuals who will be part of it. This choice is left to ‘whosoever will.’ God makes salvation available; it is up to individual people to accept it or to reject it.”[^12] This is about a clear a statement as one could possibly get regarding the semi-Pelagianism taught by a professor at a major Christian university that has, through one of his pupils, influenced a major portion of evangelicalism. Without getting into more detail, Bilezikian also teaches that one must first be convicted, and respond to the gospel, before one is converted or regenerated. Again, clearly he falls into the camp of a semi-Pelagian.

[^11]: Ibid., 182.
In a major study by the National Study of Youth and Religion, called *Portrait of Protestant Teens*, done in 2005, Phil Schwadel and Christian Smith report that most teens may say they hold somewhat orthodox beliefs, yet their actions and their explanations of these beliefs indicate that their system is more like Moralistic, Therapeutic, Deism. In a book based on the findings called *Soul Searching*, Christian Smith elaborates on the findings and states that most of the teens interviewed believed that man was basically good, and that God helps those who help themselves. Salvation is based on living a good life (moralistic), and that God helps people when they are in trouble or in order to make them happy (therapeutic). Additionally, God is a distant observer until He is needed, and only then does He possibly come down and help someone (deism). This seems to be Pelagianism, and certainly not the Christianity of the Bible. This begs the question: What are pastors and parents teaching their kids?

George Barna has done some fascinating surveys on the state of American evangelicalism. In one survey, he states that 25% of born again adults rely on means other than grace to get to heaven. On his website, www.barna.org, there are a number of articles that seem to indicate that works are the way to heaven, that man is basically good, and that one can somehow contribute to their own salvation. If the Barna assessments are even close to revealing the true state of evangelicalism, then it appears

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that the evangelical church has steered away from Reformational theology, from Biblical theology, towards a theological system that has been constantly condemned by church councils throughout the centuries as unbiblical. It seems our enemy Satan just repackages the same old attacks and false doctrine for a different time, probably because many Christians and pastors do not study historical theology and therefore understand that much of what ails the American church today are the same ailments of previous centuries.

I have heard evangelists and pastors use this analogy to describe what happens in our redemption. Sin has such a strong hold on us, a stranglehold, that it’s like a person who can’t swim, who falls overboard in a raging sea, and he’s going under for the third time and only the tops of his fingers are still above the water. Unless someone intervenes to rescue him, he has no hope of survival, and his death is certain. God must throw him a life preserver or he can’t possibly be rescued. Not only must God throw him a life preserver in the general vicinity of where he is, but that life preserver has to hit him right where his fingers are still extended out of the water, and hit him so that he can grasp hold of it. It has to be perfectly pitched. That man will drown unless he takes his fingers and curls them around the life preserver and God will rescue him. But unless that tiny little human action is done, he will surely perish. This is the view of salvation in many churches today.

However, the Bible is clear about this issue. Ephesians states that we are dead in the trespasses and sins (2:1). Paul also writes in Ephesians 2 that God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our
trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— (4-5). A better analogy than the one above would be that we are a stone cold lifeless corpse, floating on the water, bloated, decaying, and nibbled on by fish and birds. We’ve been there for some time, and we stink. God dove into the water, picked us up, and breathes into us supernatural life, and we are then awakened. The Pelagian and semi-Pelagian doctrine of free will prevalent in the evangelical world today is a pagan view that denies the captivity of the human heart to sin. It underestimates the stranglehold that sin has upon us. It has the church captive, and it will take true gospel preaching and teaching to set the church free.