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The False Charge of Semi-Pelagianism

by David Dunlap

Many Reformed leaders find themselves in an war of words with evangelical Christians, especially those who hold and teach Dispensational theology. This is unfortunate, for Dispensationalists have always stood on the front lines fighting for the truth of inerrancy and plenary verbal inspiration of Scripture, the person and work of Christ, and the doctrines of salvation. In their ranks number some of the stalwarts of the faith: J. N. Darby, D. L. Moody, R. A. Torrey, W. E. Vine, John Walvoord, W. A. Criswell, and others. However, over the years, Reformed leaders have come to see Dispensationalists less as allies and more as an enemies of biblical truth and New Testament Christianity. Within recent years their charges have become increasingly more shrill and accusatory. One area in which Reformed leaders have chosen to focus their attack is the doctrine of “semi-Pelagianism”.

Reformed Theology’s Charge of “Semi-Pelagianism”

In recent years Reformed writers, Bible teachers, and church leaders have repeatedly charged Dispensationalism with the error of semi-Pelagianism. This serious and false charge has been used so frequently that within Calvinistic circles Dispensationalism is considered to be rank heresy. One can scarcely open a book by a Reformed writer without seeing this indictment. Examples seem to abound on every hand. Reformed writer Keith Mathison writes:

Dispensationalism has adopted a semi-Pelagian, Arminian doctrine not based on Scripture and has rejected the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity rooted deeply in Scripture.¹

Respected Calvinist author Dr. R. C. Sproul continues the assault:

In the church we are widely exposed to Arminianism, which is more properly speaking a variety of semi-Pelagianism; the “semi” is a thin patina. The essence of Pelagianism is retained in semi-Pelagianism, and it is carried through into Arminianism and, to a degree, into Dispensationalism.²

Before, we can determine whether or not these charges are fair, accurate, or factual, let us first examine the doctrines of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism.

What is Pelagianism and “semi-Pelagianism”?

Pelagius (350-409?AD) was a Roman Catholic monk from Great Britain who, church history records, was a heretic and unorthodox teacher. Pelagius (1) denied the biblical doctrine of original sin and the depravity of man; (2) argued that each person is created with perfect freedom to do good or evil; (3) taught that salvation is possible without the aid of divine grace. Pelagius wrote, “An unregenerate man

**“...To use a
pejorative and
prejudicial term
(Semi-Pelagian) of
those who were
not heretics is
wrong. Would
anyone like to
be called a
semi-heretic,
just because
you do not go
all the way with
Augustine?”**

C. Gordon Olson
Professor of Missions and
Theology

can be without sin and keep the commandments of God, if he wishes...” Aurelius Augustine (354-430 AD), the bishop of Hippo in North Africa, was outraged, and this began a 25-year crusade against the teaching of Pelagius. In 431 AD, the teaching of Pelagius and his followers was fully condemned by the church council at Ephesus. In time, the condemned teaching of Pelagius was no longer a factor in the church, and Pelagian’s followers disbanded. However, over the next 100 years, *semi-Augustinians* began to rise in influence and threatened biblical orthodoxy.

The much-used term “semi-Pelagianism”, however, is unfortunate and misleading. This doctrine was not developed by either Pelagius or his followers, nor was it based on his writings, for Pelagius put very little of his teaching into written form. Where then did so-called “semi-Pelagianism” originate? Semi-Pelagianism would be more correctly called semi-Augustinianism for the doctrine developed from the fellow-leaders and followers of Augustine. Church historian and theologian Richard Kyle writes in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*:

The label “Semi-Pelagianism,” however, is a relatively modern expression, which apparently appeared first in the Lutheran *Formula of Concord* (1577) and became associated with the theology of the Jesuit Luis Molina (1535-1600). The term, nevertheless, was not a happy choice, because the so-called semi-Pelagians wanted to be anything but half-Pelagians. It would be more correct to call them semi-Augustinians who, while rejecting the doctrines of Pelagius and respecting Augustine, were not willing to follow the ultimate consequences of his (Augustine’s) theology.³

A good number of Bible scholars and church historians have chosen to use the term “semi-Augustinian” instead of “semi-Pelagian”. Theologian and author Gordon Olson and church historian Philip Schaff are among those who have chosen to use the term “semi-Augustinians” in their writings.

Followers of Augustine believed that his teaching on total depravity and the bondage of the will was too severe and felt, therefore, that a new more moderate position was needed. This issue became more heated in the fifth century when Augustinian leaders such as John Cassian, Hilary of Arles, and others began propounding a tempered Augustinian position. They suggested that, unlike Pelagius, there was indeed original sin and that this corruption had touched all mankind. However, this corruption was not total or absolute. They taught that original sin was better understood as a *sickness* which merely limited unregenerate man. Man, though ruined by original sin, still had the ability in this fallen nature to choose for God. Augustinian John Cassian taught that it was possible for unregenerate man, despite his weakened position, to take the initiative in salvation, apart from divine grace. Therefore in 531 AD this teaching was condemned in the Synod of Orange. This position is in direct opposition with the biblical teaching that “salvation is of God”(Jonah 2:9); “there is none that seeketh after God” (Romans 3:11). Today very few orthodox Christians hold this teaching.

Interestingly, all Reformed leaders and teachers readily admit that Augustine laid the foundation for what is called Calvinism or Reformed theology. Calvin himself said that he was indebted to the theology of Augustine. However, although Augustine did not support semi-Augustinianism, yet his followers, and not those of Pelagius, were the ones who eagerly moved it forward.

So, today it is very surprising to find Calvinist leader after Calvinist leader falsely accusing many Bible-believing non-Calvinists of semi-Augustinianism. The chief targets of their attacks are Jacob Arminius, John Wesley, and especially

“Since this sinful nature has taken possession of man, he is not capable by an act of the will to determine himself with a view to holiness. The grace of God alone in each individual case can restore that ability to the will.”

Dr. Henry Theissen
Dispensational Professor of
Theology at Graduate School
of Wheaton College

Christians who hold Dispensational theology. Furthermore, these attacks have caused great harm to the cause of Christ and have polarized the evangelical church in her efforts in outreach and evangelism. The question we would raise is: Are these attacks fair, true, and based upon the writings of these respected leaders?

The Testimony of Jacob Arminius, John Wesley

A careful reading of Church history will show that Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) was a Calvinist in good standing until his death in 1609. However, he differed in a number of points from the hyper-Calvinists who lived in Europe at the time of his death. Nevertheless, it cannot be shown that Arminius followed the view of the semi-Augustinians or in any way denied the biblical doctrine of original sin or the depravity of man. Many of his writings which exist today clearly show his position. In the *Works of Jacob Arminius* we find the following statement:

In his sinful state, man is not capable, of and by himself, either to think, to will, or to do that which is really good; but it is necessary for him to be regenerated and renewed in his intellect, affections or will, and in all his powers, by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, that he may be qualified rightly to understand, esteem, consider, will, and perform what is truly good. ⁴

Jacob Arminius was biblically-based, orthodox, and sound on the fundamentals of biblical faith*. It is inaccurate to label him as a false teacher or even as one who held any teaching related to false teacher Pelagius.

Church history clearly shows that John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist church, likewise was not a proponent of semi-Augustinianism. We may find error in some of his later followers, but it is impossible to label John Wesley as one denying original sin or the depravity of man. We can easily find his position in this area through his many writings that exist today. In the *Works of John Wesley* we read:

My theology is within a hair's breadth of Calvinism; for I ascribe all good to the free grace of God; and deny all natural free will, and power prior to grace, and excluding all merit from man; even for what he has or what he does for it is all by the grace of God. ⁵

Occasionally one finds a fair minded Calvinist who readily admits to the biblical position of John Wesley and who is willing to set the record straight. Calvinist Thomas R. Schreiner of Southern Baptist Seminary writes:

Wesley's analysis of the human condition and his bold proclamation of divine grace should warm the heart of any evangelical Calvinist. ⁶

Dispensationalism, Human Depravity, and Salvation

Dispensational theology differs from that of Arminian or Wesleyan theology, yet all these theologies are sound in the fundamentals of the faith* and none can be called heresy. In the area of human or total depravity, all Dispensationalists argue that man is separated from God by original sin. Man, apart from God, can not seek after God nor initiate an approach to God nor produce faith for salvation. Salvation is the work of God. Concerning this, Dispensational preacher and author H. A. Ironside writes:

Man is hopelessly corrupt. He is not only guilty, but is utterly unable to retrieve his condition. The law only accentuates his guilt.⁷

Only God, through the Holy Spirit, can transform the unregenerate man into a new creature in Christ. Only the Holy Spirit can so work in the unsaved

“Man in his natural state, is altogether corrupt, through all the faculties of his soul: corrupt in his understanding, his will, his affections, his conscience, and memory.”

John Wesley

Standard Sermons of Wesley,
vol 9, Epworth Press, 1955

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heart to move the individual to exercise faith in Christ (Acts 2:36-41); only the Holy Spirit can convict of sin, which works salvation in the souls of men (John 16:8-9). Only divine grace can speak so that the "...Dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live"(John 5:25). While this is not Calvinist theology, neither is it Pelagiansim or semi-Pelagianism. It is a sound, fundamental theology of salvation.

Closing Challenge

Yet a question remains: why is it that Reformed leaders today seek to attack Jacob Arminius, John Wesley, and leading Dispensationalists? History clearly shows that these men did not hold to the teaching of which they are accused. Why then the charges? What theological viewpoint do all of these leaders hold in common? Interestingly, all of these Christian leaders do not support many key aspects of Calvinism. They all, nevertheless, are biblically sound on the fundamentals* of the faith; but if these men can be accused of error often enough and loudly enough, it is hoped that perhaps some their followers may turn away to embrace Calvinism. Have we come to the place where a Christian's doctrine must be regarded with highest suspicion merely because he is not a Calvinist? Must we label Christians as heretics because they do not agree with Augustine or Calvin on every point? Certainly not! Nonetheless, in every age there is a need for all Christians to test the doctrines of men with the teaching of Scripture. However, in all our striving after biblical truth may labor to be accurate, generous, and fair in all that we affirm.

Endnotes

1. Keith Mathison, *Dispensationalism: Rightly Dividing the People of God?*, (Phillipsburg, NJ : Puritan & Reformed, 1995), p. 50
2. R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), p. 180
3. Walter Elwell (ed.) *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Semi-Pelagianism, Richard Kyle, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), p. 1089-1090
4. Jacob Arminius, *Works of Jacob Arminius, vol. 1*, trans. James Nichols, (Grand Rapids, MI : Baker, 1986), pp. 659-660
5. John Wesley, *Works of John Wesley*, ed. T. Jackson, vol. 8 (1831; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), p. 284
6. T. Schreiner, Bruce Ware (ed.), *Still Sovereign*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), p. 233
7. H. A. Ironside, *Romans*, (New York, NY: Loizeaux, 1976), p. 46

*"Fundamentals of the faith" includes orthodox views concerning Trinity, Total Depravity, Inerrancy, the Inspiration of Scripture, Deity of Christ, Death & Resurrection of Christ, etc.

