

# Superficial Views of Evil in the Era of the Early Church: Two Persistent Heresies<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Gnosticism and Pelagianism were two rather different heresies that emerged in dissimilar contexts and set forth widely divergent teachings. Gnosticism's convoluted, dualistic narrative of the origins of the world and evil strayed so far from mainstream Christian orthodoxy that it entirely appalled the Church Fathers; it undeniably represented a false gospel. Pelagianism, on the other hand, sought unsuccessfully to gain approval from the "Catholic" leadership of the fifth century.

**Keywords:** Gnosticism, Pelagianism, Evil, Church Fathers

The patristic age, which spanned from the latter half of the second century into the early Middle Ages, was a decisive time of doctrinal

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clarification for the emergent Christian movement. As the early church doggedly responded to the deaths of the apostles, threats of heresy, the trauma of persecution, and eventual toleration and establishment, it became an increasingly urgent task for bishops and theologians to set the boundaries of correct beliefs and practices. As a consequence, theological controversies often generated the need for church councils, which typically produced doctrinal definitions and creeds that attempted to express a consensus about essential Christian truths. Those who participated in the councils believed that their formulations represented an "orthodoxy" that was consistent with apostolic teaching, as well as with the "rule of faith" that preceded the ecumenical creeds like those of Nicaea and Chalcedon. Today, most Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestants affirm the convictions of the early councils on basic doctrines like the Trinity and the Person of Christ.

At the same time, other theological issues like the nature of evil, the root of sin, and our fallen human condition demanded reflection and careful elucidation. While some may have regarded these matters as not so weighty in comparison to Trinitarian and Christological concerns, many understood that ultimately all theological subjects were interrelated. Moreover, heretical teachings that challenged both the goodness of creation and the reality of human sinfulness forced the Church Fathers to state the church's theological precepts in clear and compelling ways. In particular, the Gnostics in the second and third centuries, and Pelagians in the late fourth and early fifth centuries raised disturbing ques-

tions about evil and sin that actually jeopardized the heart of the gospel message of salvation by grace through faith.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Gnostic Delusion: Creation Bad, Humanity Ignorant**

Since the 1945 discovery of the Nag Hammadi papyrus codices in a jar near the base of a cliff in Upper Egypt, scholarly and popular interest in Gnosticism has surged dramatically. The fifty or so Coptic tracts that comprise this unusual “library” have been dated to the fourth century; however, most scholars believe that the texts were translated from Greek originals into prior Coptic versions in the second century.<sup>3</sup> This discovery thoroughly transformed the field of Gnostic studies, which previously had been dependent on the unfavorable assessments of the Church Fathers and a small number of other widely scattered Gnostic materials. A much fuller picture of the Gnostic worldview, based on a variety of primary sources, became possible for the first time.

The Nag Hammadi documents demonstrate that Gnosticism was anything but monolithic. Indeed, as University of North Carolina professor Bart Ehrman has put it, the texts “represent widely divergent and

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<sup>2</sup> For the most part, the Church Fathers failed to comprehend fully the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. Augustine of Hippo, discussed later in this essay, came the closest to a Pauline expression of the gospel.

<sup>3</sup> See James M. Robinson, “Introduction,” in Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 10-22. One of the better post-Nag Hammadi overviews of Gnosticism is Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. P. W. Coxon, K. H. Kuhn, and Robert McLachlan Wilson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

disparate understandings of the world, the divine realms, humans, Christ, and so on. We should probably speak of Gnosticisms rather than Gnosticism."<sup>4</sup> The convoluted and sometimes obscure storylines in the sources have worked against any substantial agreement on a definition of Gnosticism, with some scholars even proposing that the term itself be abandoned.<sup>5</sup>

Despite Gnosticism's pluralistic character, some common ideological threads permeate the literature and are cited in general descriptions of Gnostic tenets. For example, a radical dualism stood at the foundation of Gnostic thought. Gnostic authors pushed well beyond the body/soul, material/spiritual, and particular/universal dichotomies of some Greek philosophers. As a matter of fact, Gnostics typically extended their dualistic speculations to include the divine nature. A pervasive theme in Gnostic texts centered on the idea that the created order represented the malicious efforts of an evil god or demiurge; thus the physical world could not be attributed to the good, totally transcendent God who was above and beyond any direct contact with matter.

Gnosticism's dualistic cosmogony was given vivid expression in *The Apocryphon of John*, a late second-century document that is usually viewed as a product of the Sethite school. In a post-resurrection appearance, Jesus purportedly revealed a secret tradition to John, the son of Zebedee, concerning the origins of evil and the human race. The villain of this drama is Yaldabaoth, the monstrous and malformed creator god,

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<sup>4</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 122.

<sup>5</sup> Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking Gnosticism: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

who is at least implicitly portrayed as the Yahweh or Jehovah of the Old Testament. Hence, the story offered a bizarre twist on Genesis 1-3; the reader discovers that Yaldabaoth was not an eternal sovereign but rather the son of Sophia, an “aeon” who brought forth her child as an act of rebellion against divine authority. In turn, Yaldabaoth stole power from his mother, and then fashioned his archons (or angels) to help him create the world and Adam. Yaldabaoth bestowed on Adam a body, placed him in paradise, and provided a wife; all of these actions represented a grand satanic conspiracy to keep humanity chained to the material world. The true God then sent Christ to assist his elect in gaining the *gnosis* (knowledge) needed to overcome the ignorance in which Yaldabaoth had trapped them. Salvation could be gained by those who acquired the necessary secret knowledge, thus releasing the divine spark within from the bondage of the material world. Jesus’ words to John made clear that the number of those who would ultimately be saved was limited: “Those on whom the Spirit of life will descend and (with whom) he will be with the power, they will be saved and become perfect and be worthy of the greatness and be purified in that place from all wickedness and the involvements in evil.”<sup>6</sup> The pneumatic elect subsequently confirmed their calling through the strenuous practice of ascetic disciplines.

The Valentinian school of Gnosticism, while not identical to the Sethian brand and probably more “moderate,” nonetheless sounded some similar notes. *The Gospel of Truth*, which might have been written in the second century by Valentinus himself, focused like *The Apocryphon of John* on the salvation that overcame ignorance through a special

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<sup>6</sup> *The Apocryphon of John*, in Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 119. For the entire text, translated by Frederik Wisse, see 105-23.

knowledge that was mediated by Jesus Christ. The Valentinian text even highlighted the death of Christ on a cross, although his suffering was not pictured as an atonement for human sin but rather as a punishment by the forces of error and ignorance who were angry that Jesus had revealed knowledge to those groping in darkness.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, *The Gospel of Truth* explained the role of Christ's power and knowledge much more explicitly than *The Apocryphon of John*: "He became a way for those who were gone astray and knowledge for those who were ignorant, a discovery for those who were searching, and a support for those who were wavering, immaculateness for those who were defiled."<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, it is never clear that the Son of God was a real man; the writer spoke ambiguously of Jesus' "fleshly form," which he inferred was incorruptible.<sup>9</sup>

The Gnostic documents, moreover, put forward a curious and seriously truncated "gospel." Noticeably absent are the biblical motifs of human sin and the need for redemption through the vicarious, atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who is both fully God and fully man—indeed, the Eternal Word who became flesh and dwelled among us, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Neither *The Apocryphon of John* nor *The Gospel of Truth* treated humans as accountable moral agents or fallen creatures in

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<sup>7</sup> *The Gospel of Truth*, in Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 41-42. For the full text, translated by Harold W. Attridge and George W. MacRae, see 40-51. On Valentinianism as a milder form of Gnosticism, see Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), 32-33. On the passion of Christ as a "stratagem" in *The Gospel of Truth* see Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), 195-96.

<sup>8</sup> *The Gospel of Truth*, in Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 46.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

need of a Savior. Instead, human beings appear as mere “playthings” of mysterious, sometimes hidden powers and forces locked in cosmic battles that end up overwhelming the narratives of real human history. Whatever “good news” can be found in the Gnostic evangel seems to be restricted to a few elite who overcame ignorance through secret knowledge. In short, a superficial notion of the human condition spawned a shallow gospel whose offer of hope was extended to an extremely limited audience.

The deficiencies of the Gnostic message are likewise evident in the most publicized text from the Nag Hammadi collection, *The Gospel of Thomas*. This late second-century work consists of 114 “secret” sayings of Jesus, about half of which have parallels in the canonical Gospels. In a manifestly Gnostic tone, salvation is linked to knowledge; Jesus promised eternal life, for instance, to “whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings.”<sup>10</sup> More remarkably for a “Gospel,” there are no narratives about Jesus’ life, ministry, death, burial, resurrection, or ascension. The document concludes with yet another unusual twist on salvation when Jesus assured his disciples about Mary’s eternal destiny: “I myself shall lead her in order to make her male, so that she may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every women who will make herself male will enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>11</sup> Once again, the New Testament emphases on the need for repentance from sin and faith in Christ’s saving work are conspicuously absent in this Gnostic “Gospel.”

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 126. For the full text, translated by Thomas O. Lambdin, see 126-38.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 138. For an unconvincing attempt to explain this puzzling passage, see Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, 63-64.

Although the Church Fathers fought valiantly against this and other heresies, the Gnostic ethos continued to resurface at various points through the centuries. A century or so after Gnosticism attracted adherents in places like Syria and Egypt, Manichaean dualism added some new twists in a syncretistic system that had followers as far to the east as central Asia; the great Church Father Augustine of Hippo identified with this movement for almost a decade before he concluded that it failed to offer a satisfying solution to the problem of evil.<sup>12</sup> During the High Middle Ages, a neo-Manichaean movement known as the Cathari or Albigenses spread in some European areas like southern France. The Roman Catholic Church vigorously opposed this sect; indeed, ecclesiastical hostility reached a culmination when Pope Innocent III launched a crusade against the Cathars in 1208.<sup>13</sup> While this heresy was not a mere repetition of earlier ones, its limited success indicated that some Gnostic concepts continued to linger within Western Christendom's boundaries.

In modern times, undercurrents of Gnosticism have been detected in such far-flung and divergent venues as Enlightenment philosophy, Romantic literature, the New Thought movement, nihilism, existentialism, psychology, "Beat Generation" literature, the New Age movement, and science fiction.<sup>14</sup> Stripped of its ascetic and elitist im-

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<sup>12</sup> On Mani and his system, see Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 206-37. See also Augustine *Confessions* 3.6-7.

<sup>13</sup> See Malcolm Lambert, *The Cathars* (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998); and Mark Gregory Pegg, *A Most Holy War: The Albigensian Crusade and the Battle for Christendom, Pivotal Moments in World History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> See Douglas Groothuis, "Ancient Assistance against the New Age," *Christian History* 9 (May 1990): 39-40; Jonas, "Epilogue: Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism," in *The Gnostic Religion*, 320-40; Peter Jones, *The*



pulses, Gnosticism seems to appeal to a post-Christian society in the West where spiritual seekers want religion on their own terms. For them, the Gnostic “Gospels” reinforce their narcissistic quest for self-deification, for the discovery of the divine spark that is allegedly found within the human psyche. Whether in the more scholarly yet agenda-driven writings of those like Elaine Pagels, or in the popular fiction of Dan Brown, modern Gnosticism celebrates human autonomy even as it rejects any external authority such as Scripture, doctrine, or the church. In particular, Pagels reads the ancient Gnostic texts through the lens of her own religious quest: “[T]hose gnostics who conceived of *gnosis* as a subjective, immediate experience, concerned themselves above all with the internal significance of events.” A couple of pages later, she reiterates what she evidently admires in the Gnostics: “This conviction—that whoever explores human experience simultaneously discovers divine reality—is one of the elements that marks gnosticism as a distinctly religious movement.”<sup>15</sup> Thus the early Gnostics and their contemporary sympathizers share an illusory worldview that basically addresses the problem of evil with a reductionist approach that disregards human sin and depravity.

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*Gnostic Empire Strikes Back* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992); and Richard Smith, “Afterword: The Modern Relevance of Gnosticism,” in Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, 532-49.

<sup>15</sup> Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, 132 and 134. For an excellent critical assessment of Pagels, Brown, and other current champions of the Gnostic spirit, see Ross Douthat, “Lost in the Gospels,” in *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 149-81. For a critique of Pagels’s more recent work, see Gary A. Anderson, “Can You Believe It? The Gospel according to Elaine Pagels,” *Weekly Standard*, August 4 / August 11, 2003, 39-41.

## The Pelagian Delusion: No Real Fall, Moralistic Model of Salvation

Not long after the resolution of the Trinitarian debates but before the Christological conflicts began in earnest, the Celtic “monk” Pelagius (c. 354-418?) and Bishop Augustine of Hippo (354-430) engaged in a heated and passionate altercation about the Fall, divine grace, and human free will.<sup>16</sup> A vigorous ascetic, Pelagius migrated from the British Isles to Rome c. 380. As one who had been thoroughly immersed in monastic disciplines, he was shocked and dismayed by the sometimes lax and superficial Christian culture of the imperial capital. In that context, Pelagius took particular offense at a thrice-repeated line in Augustine’s *Confessions*, where the North African cleric petitioned God to “grant what you command, and command what you will.”<sup>17</sup> Pelagius apparently feared that Augustine’s request presumed upon God, encouraged spiritual complacency, and even promoted an antinomian approach to the Christian life.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For a handy survey of their dispute, see William J. Collinge, “Introduction,” in *Saint Augustine: Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge, *Fathers of the Church* 18 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), 3-21. Pelagius did not belong to any official monastic order, but practiced a strict lifestyle. Augustine himself was not technically a monk, but nevertheless lived like one while serving as a bishop.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine *Confessions* 10.29.40; 10.31.45; and 10.37.60.

<sup>18</sup> See Augustine *On the Gift of Perseverance* 20.53, where he responded to Pelagius’s critique. Unfortunately, not much has survived from Pelagius’s writings. Augustine quoted from Pelagius’s works at many points, but some scholars have questioned the reliability of some of the citations. See Collinge, “Introduction,” in *Saint Augustine*, 7.

The ensuing mêlée unfolded principally over two contrasting estimations of human freedom and sinfulness. As patristic scholar J. N. D. Kelly explained the disagreement, "Pelagius was primarily a moralist, concerned for right conduct and shocked by what he considered demoralizingly pessimistic views of what could be expected of human nature."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Pelagius's view of Christian holiness essentially presupposed that the human will was not substantially debilitated by the Fall. Pelagius denied the Augustinian doctrine of original sin; instead, he affirmed that humans came into the world without the impediment of an Adamic sin nature; people sinned because of bad examples, not because they were born sinners. Hence, he placed virtually no constraints on the exercise of free will, even after the Fall. This optimistic appraisal of human ability provided the foundation for his advice on living the Christian life. For example, in his *Letter to Demetrias*, he drew a close link between his anthropology and his expectations for human behavior:

When I have to discuss the principles of right conduct and the leading of a holy life, I usually begin by showing the strengths and characteristics of human nature. By explaining what it can accomplish, I encourage the soul of my hearer to the different virtues. . . . Where a more perfect form of life is to be established, the explanation of nature's goodness should be correspondingly fuller. With a lower estimation of its capacity, a soul will be less diligent and insistent in pursuing virtue. . . . A power that is to be exercised must therefore be brought out into full attention, and the good of which nature is capable must be clearly explained. Once something has been shown possible, it ought to be accomplished.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Revised ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 357.

<sup>20</sup>. Pelagius, *Letter to Demetrias*, in J. Patout Burns, trans./ed., *Theological*

In other words, Pelagius understood sin as a choice, not as something inherent in the human condition; he went so far as to claim that “[o]ur souls possess what might be called a sort of natural integrity which presides in the depths of the soul and passes judgments of good and evil.”<sup>21</sup>

Pelagius’s sanguine construal of human sin and volition meant that—in his judgment—Christians lived in this world under the banner of *posse non peccare* (it is possible not to sin). He typically attributed this ideal to the grace of Christ in that he regenerated and cleansed us, but also to the Lord’s instruction and example.<sup>22</sup> In reality, the role of grace virtually took a back seat to meritorious human effort that could lead to perfection in holiness. Unlike Martin Luther, who much later described Christians as simultaneously justified by grace through faith and yet still sinners (*simul iustus et peccator*), Pelagius pressed the Christians of his day to an essentially impossible standard of righteousness:

That person is a Christian who is so not only in name but also in deed; who imitates and follows Christ in all things; who is holy, innocent, and pure; who is uncorrupted; in whose heart there is no place for evil; in whose heart there is only true religion and goodness; who is incapable of hurting or wounding anyone, but can only come to the aid of everyone. That person is a Christian who, with Christ as an example, cannot even hate their enemies but does good to them, praying for their persecutors and enemies.<sup>23</sup>

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*Anthropology*, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 40-41.

<sup>21.</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>22.</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>23.</sup> Pelagius, *On the Christian Life*, in Oliver Davies, trans., *Celtic Spirituality*, The

Pelagius seemed to assume that what believers positionally are in Christ through his cross and resurrection is identical with what they actually are as sinners in the process of becoming sanctified. Although he commendably urged Christians to pursue godly lifestyles, he lacked any meaningful appreciation for the reality of indwelling sin with which the Apostle Paul so clearly struggled (Rom. 7).

Augustine of Hippo countered Pelagius with a much more realistic viewpoint on the human condition. In anti-Pelagian works like *On Nature and Grace*, *On the Proceedings of Pelagius*, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, and *On the Gift of Perseverance*, the North African bishop argued that (1) Adam was a federal head in whom all humans fell; (2) the spiritual, moral, volitional, and noetic effects of the Fall precluded sinless perfection—hence, Pelagius’s axiom was negated into *non posse non peccare* (it is not possible not to sin); and (3) human sin and evil can only be overcome by divine grace, which Augustine insisted was irresistible in those whom God predestined to eternal life.<sup>24</sup> The divergent positions of Pelagius and Augustine on these basic theological issues were plainly irreconcilable.

At the heart of this controversy was Augustine’s sense that Pelagius held a seriously deficient concept of God’s grace. Furthermore, Pelagius appeared to blur the categories of law and grace by centering grace in the law, divine promises, and Christ’s teaching. Augustine

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Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, N. J.: Paulist Press, 1999), 387. On Luther’s insight, see Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988), 71-72.

<sup>24</sup> The above cited texts are conveniently brought together in Mourant and Collinge, trans., *Saint Augustine: Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*.

wondered whether Pelagius's conception of grace ultimately stripped it of its glory by picturing it more as a tool of instruction than as a free gift:

Here then it becomes evident that the grace Pelagius acknowledges is God's showing and revealing what we ought to do, not his giving and helping us to do it. Yet when the assistance of grace is missing, knowledge of the law is more effective in producing a violation of the commandment. . . . Thus the law and grace are so different that the law is not only useless but actually an obstacle in many ways unless grace assists. This shows, moreover, the function of the law: it makes people guilty of transgression and forces them to take refuge in grace in order to be liberated and helped to overcome evil desires. It commands more than it helps. It diagnoses illness but does not cure.<sup>25</sup>

In the final analysis, Augustine—because he had a more profound grasp of the magnitude and depth of human sin—set forth a more radical understanding of grace than his Irish antagonist. If a lost sinner can be compared to a swimmer drowning in the deep waters, Pelagius stood ready with a set of swimming instructions; by contrast, Augustine threw out a life preserver.

One does not need to embrace Augustine's theories about the transmission of original sin through procreation, baptismal regeneration, or the sacramental mediation of grace to recognize that on the basis of both Scripture and human experience he trumped Pelagius with a more compelling explanation of the human condition as "dead in transgressions and sins" and "by nature objects of wrath" (Eph. 2:1-4, NIV; cf. Col. 2:13). Pelagius's rosy assessment of human ability woefully misjudged the consequences of the Fall, which in turn robbed the gospel of

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<sup>25</sup> Augustine *On the Grace of Christ* 8.9.

its good news by raising questions about how in actuality he had a meaningful role for the atoning sacrifice of Christ in his soteriology.

Augustine and the Council of Carthage (418) dealt Pelagianism a serious blow, but it was not a mortal one. Semi-Pelagians of southern Gaul like John Cassian and Vincent of Lérins espoused an Augustinian view of original sin, but stood closer to Pelagius on human ability. Semi-Pelagianism, which was not formally named until the seventeenth century, entertained a synergistic approach to the *ordo salutis*; divine grace worked cooperatively with human effort to bring salvation. The same monastic impulse that motivated Pelagius likewise captivated the semi-Pelagians, although it manifestly influenced Augustine toward a much different approach to the holy life.<sup>26</sup>

During the early part of the Reformation, Erasmus of Rotterdam and Martin Luther engaged in an impassioned debate on human freedom and ability, with the Dutch humanist assuming a position closer to Pelagius while Luther sounded much like Augustine. Indeed, Luther emphasized the “bondage” of the human will over against Erasmus’s more optimistic evaluation.<sup>27</sup> A few years after this exchange, German Anabaptist Balthasar Hubmaier chimed in with *On Free Will* (1527), which echoed Erasmus more than Luther and has been cited to illustrate synergistic tendencies in the Anabaptist tradition.<sup>28</sup> In the theological

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<sup>26.</sup> On the semi-Pelagians, see Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 370-72.

<sup>27.</sup> See E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, trans./eds., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, Library of Christian Classics 17 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).

<sup>28.</sup> Balthasar Hubmaier, “On Free Will,” in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. George H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal, Library of Christian Classics 25 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957), 114-35. Hubmaier (124) saw the

battles over justification in the Reformation era, however, the more typical Protestant response was to detect at least a semi-Pelagian tinge of works-righteousness in Roman Catholic doctrine as it had been passed down from the Middle Ages.

In modern times, secularists might be attracted to the Pelagian notion of a basic goodness in human nature, although there is no substantial evidence of any direct impact. A more probable line of lingering influence can be traced in some elements of the American revival tradition. For instance, during the Second Great Awakening of the nineteenth century, evangelists like Charles Finney revealed some Pelagian/semi-Pelagian features in his (1) repudiation of the doctrine of original sin; (2) avowal of a natural human ability to repent and be converted on the spot; (3) rejection of substitutionary atonement; and (4) muddled concept of justification by faith alone.<sup>29</sup> The Finney legacy still surfaces in a type of revivalism that is heavy on techniques (e.g., “how to promote an conduct a successful revival”), emotional manipulation, and lack of theological substance. The fruit of such revival is often ephemeral because it overemphasizes human agency and lacks a clear awareness of God’s providential action.

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human spirit, unlike the flesh and soul, as essentially unfallen; it maintained an “inherited righteousness” even after the Fall. For a critique of Anabaptist synergism, see James Edward McGoldrick, *Baptist Successionism: A Crucial Question in Baptist History*, ATLA Monograph Series 32 (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1994), 103-112.

<sup>29</sup>. See the biting attack in R. C. Sproul, “The Pelagian Captivity of the Church,” *Modern Reformation* 10 (May/June 2001): 22-29. Cf. Charles Finney, *Finney’s Systematic Theology: The Complete and Newly Expanded 1878 Edition*, ed. L. G. Parkhurst Jr. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1994), esp. Lectures 13, 14, 16-17, 20-25, and 30.



## **Conclusion**

Gnosticism and Pelagianism were two rather different heresies that emerged in dissimilar contexts and set forth widely divergent teachings. Gnosticism's convoluted, dualistic narrative of the origins of the world and evil strayed so far from mainstream Christian orthodoxy that it entirely appalled the Church Fathers; it undeniably represented a false gospel. Pelagianism, on the other hand, sought unsuccessfully to gain approval from the "Catholic" leadership of the fifth century. It failed primarily because it articulated a distorted gospel that failed to account adequately for human sin and God's initiative in salvation.

At the same time, the two aberrant movements exhibited some similarities. Both embraced ascetic lifestyles, although with different motives. Partly as a result of strict asceticism, both assumed an elitist character, which was typically accompanied by a self-righteous air. Both ultimately failed to offer compelling explications for the existence of evil in the world and among human beings. Most important, Gnosticism and Pelagianism fell far short of doing justice to the grand biblical drama of Creation/Fall/Redemption/Restoration. They were signposts pointing to moral and theological disaster in the period of the early church, and they remain so today.

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