

“As the Pelagians do vainly talk”

This note addresses the question how easily we Christians can behave well and so whether we can be sensibly expected to do so.

The simple view of Pelagius is that he held the doctrine of Ecclesiasticus: “if you wish, you can keep the commandments”. Men needed information, perhaps, as to what their obligations were; but they did not *automatically* need grace (that is, God’s gift of himself) to help them. Which is not to deny that grace might be available to those who asked for it. Yet it was more dignified to do without. This simple view may indeed not be fair to the man himself, though it seems to be more true of some of his followers.

Such a position makes it rational to preach good conduct. Since the Lord plainly did so preach, this is rather important. Similarly, the Last Judgement is closely connected to conduct. And even St. Paul allows that the gentiles sometimes both know what is right and do it.

Pelagius might add that when the rich young man claimed to have kept all the commandments from his youth up, the Lord did not tell him he was wrong.

Pelagius in practice reduces to preaching in favour of a moderately high moral standard, which many can perhaps achieve much of the time *but which is not Christian perfection*.

The general view of the early church is that Christians *with grace* could maintain a high standard of conduct and so any major sin was a grievous, perhaps fatal, failing. Again, this made it appropriate to preach good conduct. The assumption of grace is critical, though they did expect a steadiness of conduct even in catechumens who might be thought not fully within the sphere of grace.

Always in the background were the gnostic and later Manichean views which devalued the body and so, to taste, might require extremes of asceticism or of indulgence. St. Augustine was for a time party to this error; some thought he never wholly escaped from it. And the subsequent development of St. Augustine logically ends in “total depravity” and double predestination. But we are not innocent souls dragged down by bodies - it is the whole person who sins and needs salvation. (Origen located original sin in the soul - in sins of pre-existence - which is an equal mistake.)

It is fair to say that St. Augustine’s doctrine was pastorally derived. He simply did not find that high standard of conduct prevailing among the faithful. His analysis is to develop the Pauline view of original sin as a heavy burden *even to the redeemed*. (This may be a mistaken exegesis of Romans.) Therefore little can be expected of them. But he still wants to preach in favour of that little.

Now original sin fascinated me because it is also the theologically exciting part of IV Esdras, an unusual development in Judaism. It should however be noted that while the excuse of the “evil heart” is made by Ezra, the angel does not accept that excuse. And the work climaxes in the affirmation of conventional Jewish preaching of good conduct.

It is fairly clear that one reason for the doctrine of original sin lies in the need to justify infant baptism. It is thought that baptism is about the forgiveness of sins and infants have not yet committed sins of their own. (Somehow the idea that baptism might be about receiving the Holy Spirit - or even joining the church - seems to get lost.) According to Bicknell, the term original sin was used first by Tertullian. “It denotes not an act or habit but a condition of our nature.” Whatever else it is, it is not a sin.

There is in turn a slide into original guilt - that we deserve God’s wrath simply by existing. This slide is visible in Article IX. It starts by asserting “the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man” and that “this infection of nature doth remain, yea in them that are regenerated” which I do believe (so we all need the healing and help of grace) but it slides into “it deserveth God’s wrath and damnation” which I find less convincing. (I can’t incidentally see what the “it” refers to in the English and the Latin is no better.)

Article IX ends even worse by asserting that “concupiscence and lust hath of itself the nature of sin”. This is by clear implication to be applied to married Christians. The Council of Trent more wisely says that concupiscence is not truly and properly sin, but is of sin and inclines to sin (according to Bicknell). I am sure sex is disordered, like all other aspects of humanity; I doubt that it is *significantly and in all cases* more disordered than any other aspect, let alone that it is sinful in itself.

Original guilt was supported by “Adam in quo omnes peccaverunt” (vet. lat.) which was wrongly retained by the Authorised Version. This is certainly a mistranslation. St. Paul says rather that everybody follows Adam in sinning. That we can believe. Therefore everybody (of any age of responsibility) needs God’s forgiveness. But there is no repentance for (or forgiveness of) original sin.

I suggest we should think of a hereditary defect which can be traced back to the first sin, and which will sooner or later work itself out in actual sins, so that we need both healing of the defect and forgiveness of the sins. (Of course we are using mythological language here but the important point is the fact of the inherited defect rather than how it started.)

I personally do agree that the Vincentian canon needs to be slanted in favour of those authorities who seriously studied a topic, and that the East too casually ignored Augustine on human weakness. However, the East rightly rejected Augustine on predestination. And human weakness in our present condition is not itself a sin or a matter of guilt, though it makes sins more likely and so leads to guilt.

I think it is also a problem that both East and West rapidly came to adopt an asceticism which adulated high moral expectations but in practice confined these expectations to monks and a minority of the clergy. This will not do.

I do think that the Christian can by God’s help (and not without it - I agree that we have no merits which we do not owe to God’s grace) achieve much and that we preachers ought to ask for that. This is consistent with the recognition of the evil heart (or in rabbinic terms evil impulse). We are “miserable sinners” in that we need God’s mercy and his healing of our damaged nature.

The task of behaving well is indeed difficult. For some individuals and in respect of some sins, it may be very difficult indeed. But we are all called to perfection. Therefore as preachers we must continue to demand the high standards of the Lord; but as pastoral workers (and sinners ourselves) we know that our main business is with repentance.