

Smoky Mountain Reflections, June 2014

Summer is here and it is time to finish that series on historic heresies. We discussed Legalism, Gnosticism and Arianism, so let's wrap things up and discuss Pelagianism and Socinianism.

PELAGIANISM: The next great heresy in the church was Pelagianism. This heresy is named after the British monk named Pelagius (354-420 or 440) who first popularized the view. Pelagianism is the belief that original sin did not taint human nature and that mortal will is still capable of choosing good or evil without special divine aid. Modern day Pelagians reject the doctrine of original sin or what Calvinists call total depravity, and they reject the practice of infant baptism. This heresy leads to works righteousness or partial works righteousness known as semi-pelagianism.

Pelagius and Augustine were opponents and the conflict between Pelagius and Augustine involved some of the very same issues Calvinists and Armenians (believing in decision theology) still argue over today. Pelagius was motivated by a concern to elevate human free will, because he was (wrongly) convinced it was the only way to preserve human responsibility. Augustine defended the sovereignty of God, because he (rightly) knew it was the only way to preserve the centrality of divine grace in salvation.

Augustine responded by demonstrating from scripture that the human will is not free in the sense Pelagius taught; our wills are hopelessly bound by sin (Romans 8:7-8). Sinners are utterly helpless to change for the better apart from the external working of divine grace in their hearts (Jeremiah 13:23). The Council of Ephesus in 431 condemned Pelagianism as heretical.

SOCINIANISM: Socinianism is a system of Christian doctrine named for Fausto Sozzini (Latin: Faustus Socinus), which was developed among the Polish Brethren in the Minor Reformed Church of Poland during the 16th and 17th centuries, and embraced by the Unitarian Church of Transylvania during the same period. It is most famous for its Non-Trinitarian Christology but contains a number of other unorthodox beliefs.

Socinianism is the culmination of heresy—an amalgamation of all the other heresies—and it is without a doubt the most widespread of all the heresies in our generation. Modern theological liberalism is nothing more than a variety of Socinianism. Rejecting everything Catholic, the Socinians ended up with a doctrine that embraced virtually every serious error that had ever assaulted the church. Like the legalists and the Pelagians, they taught salvation by works. Like the Gnostics and the Arians, they were Anti-Trinitarian. In fact, they denied not only the deity of Christ but also every miraculous element of scripture, just as many do today. They blended the skepticism of the Sadducees with the humanistic rationalism of the enlightenment era, and that combination is what gave birth to this heresy. Modern day Unitarian Universalism is a clear representation of this heresy. This heresy does away with the authority of scripture and makes human reason supreme. Socinians would say that Jesus came to show us how to live not to die for our sins.

Every cult and every false doctrine that exists today has something in common with one or more of these five false doctrines. Now you are equipped to take on any serious heretic. So remember, if you run into a any of these garden variety heretics, let them know the church condemned Legalism in the first century, Gnosticism in the second century, Arianism in the third century, Pelagianism in the fifth century, and Socinianism around 400 years ago. Or, just tell them to read the Bible.

Blessed Summer,
Pastor Portier