

Pelagians, Donatists, Monks, Anabaptists and other Perfectionists

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Labels and Insults

‘Anabaptist’ was only one of several damning epithets used to discredit, rather than merely describe, the various radical groups that emerging across Europe in the first half of the 16th century. ‘Anabaptist’ was especially damaging because it invoked a centuries-old threat of capital punishment against re-baptisers. The epithet ‘Donatist’ carried a similar implication¹, recalling the North African movement that insisted on re-baptising those whom the Catholic churches had already baptised.

But labelling the Anabaptist groups ‘Donatists’ also suggested they shared another characteristic with the earlier movement – the search for a pure and spotless church. Other epithets hammered home the same accusation: Anabaptists were ‘Pelagians’², who advocated a form of salvation by human effort that diminished the grace of God; and they were a new form of ‘monasticism’³, worryingly suggesting that all Christians should separate from the world and aspire to monastic levels of discipleship.

Such labels seemed to those who used them justified by the Anabaptists’ emphasis on ‘following’ Christ, their limited enthusiasm for forensic understandings of salvation, their practice of the ban to keep the church pure, their literalistic interpretation of New Testament texts and their insistence on separation from the world. Anabaptists were accused of moralism, legalism and perfectionism.

What are we to make of these accusations? Were the Anabaptists guilty as charged? They were evidently re-baptisers, but were they perfectionists? Were they Donatists, Pelagians and even new monastics?

We might also ask what such accusations reveal about those who used these epithets. What aspects of Catholic or Reformed church life were the Anabaptists critiquing, either explicitly or implicitly? Labelling can be used as a way of dismissing people and views without facing the troubling possibility that they might have something helpful, albeit disturbing, to contribute. What assumptions about discipleship and church life did those who used epithets like ‘Pelagian’ and ‘Donatist’ hold?

A further set of questions would take us further back into church history. Whether or not the Anabaptists were Pelagian, was Pelagius a Pelagian? Did he actually hold or teach the views that were ascribed to him by some of his contemporaries? Were the Donatists troublesome schismatics or faithful representatives of an indigenous African spirituality? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the monastic tradition?

Many questions on various levels, most of which cannot be adequately addressed in a single paper. First, then, I will offer some reflections on perceptions of 16th-century Anabaptists; then I want to investigate one of the charges – that of Pelagianism; and finally some questions for those of us today who draw on the Anabaptist tradition.

Were Anabaptists perfectionists?

So why were 16th-century Anabaptists regarded as perfectionists and labelled in ways that suggested this? Let's consider first some of the assumptions that their accusers held as they watched with alarm this spreading movement.

- For hundreds of years European Christians had lived with the realities of two-tier Christianity: a minority who attempted to live by New Testament teaching and practise rigorous discipleship, surrounded by the vast majority who had lower aspirations. Historians debate the level of piety, spiritual experience and moral behaviour that characterised the citizens of Christendom, but all accept that two-tier Christianity was regarded by most people as normal. This is not to underestimate the corruption of many monks and priests (witness Michael Sattler's question: 'Do you know a chaste priest?'), nor to denigrate the piety of so-called 'lay' Christians, many of whom lived more Christianly than their priests. But, except in certain renewal or dissident movements, this two-tier approach was not challenged until the early 16th century. The Reformers and the Anabaptists, however, both challenged this system – but in opposite ways. The Reformers tried to abolish the monks; the Anabaptists suggested that all Christians should live as serious disciples, exposing themselves to accusations of monasticism.
- At least since the 4th century most European Christians had accepted that the church would be impure and mixed until the return of Christ. Perfection was an eschatological hope, not a present aspiration. The Parable of the Weeds was widely used to provide biblical undergirding for this position (despite the fact that the text explicitly interprets the field as the world, rather than the church: see Matthew 13:38). Those who espoused a vision of a pure church were out of step with the teaching of the Christendom theologians and were accused of perfectionism.
- At the end of the 4th century and early in the 5th century, perfectionism was at the heart of the debates between Augustine and Pelagius and Augustine and the Donatists. Pelagius appeared to Augustine to be advocating perfectionism at an individual level; the Donatists were advocating this at a congregational level. He opposed both vigorously, interpreting the Parable of the Weeds⁴ as indicating a mixed church throughout human history, and triumphed over both his adversaries, ensuring that Donatism and Pelagianism would become insults in future theological controversies.
- Such insults were the standard responses to various dissident movements that disturbed the unity of Christendom in the medieval period. Their advocacy of a pure church, which would otherwise be threatening to the status quo, could be dismissed as a recurrence of ancient heresies. Inquisitors, however, were often faced with the problem of dealing with dissidents who lived apparently godly lives, who practised what they preached. This was troubling. Heretics were meant to be, by definition, ungodly and immoral. What was going on? A useful line of argument was that such apparent godliness was deceptive and demonically inspired. Furthermore, in persecuted movements there were always some who under severe pressure acted unwisely: such incidents could be used to castigate the movement, to demonstrate as demonstrably false its pretensions to purity and godliness.

Those who encountered the 16th-century Anabaptists, then, were predisposed to doubt their integrity, regard them as irresponsible perfectionists and brand them as heretics, using familiar labels. In light of the history of the church in Europe, we may be able to understand this predisposition, but we may also want to challenge the assumptions on which it is based.

In particular (here comes my hobby horse!), we may want to ponder the connection between the 4th-century Christendom shift and the issue of perfectionism. Donatism arose during the 4th century and, among other things, represented a protest against the lower standards in discipleship and church life that the Christendom shift seemed to be producing. Pelagius attracted attention because of his protests at the end of the 4th century against the degenerate morality of the churches. Many have interpreted the emergence of the monastic movement as, at least in part, a protest against the growing worldliness of the church under Christendom.⁵ Robert Evans concludes that ‘most of the controversial issues exercising the Western church in the latter two decades of the fourth and the first two decades of the fifth centuries were related to one large question: the nature of Christian perfection.’⁶

Is what Christendom theologians labelled ‘perfectionism’, then, actually a yearning for whole-hearted discipleship at both personal and corporate levels? Were the 16th-century Anabaptists doing any more than recovering this persistent longing at a time when two-tier Christianity was under threat from others for different reasons? Will it do simply to label this persistent longing ‘Pelagian’ or ‘Donatist’? Or do we have here another example of the Christendom mindset distorting perspectives. Is perfectionism (or however we label this) actually the stance of any who dissent from the nominality and ethical compromise that seems to have been inherent in the Christendom system?

Having said all this, though, we need to consider another possibility – namely, that perfectionism is a distorted response to the distorting perspective of the Christendom mindset. The dissidents may have rightly protested against the low moral standards and corrupt structures of the Christendom churches; they may indeed have practised a higher level of discipleship that confused the inquisitors; but did the momentum of their protests carry them too far in the opposite direction? Was there some truth, after all, in the accusations of perfectionism levelled against Anabaptists and others?

Restricting ourselves for the sake of this paper to the 16th-century Anabaptists, I think we must acknowledge that their accusers were not entirely wrong. There were aspects of the Anabaptist movement that seem, at least to me, less attractive and actually quite worrying. Let me mention just three of these:

- The use of the ban. I remain convinced that the practice of what Anabaptists in a pre-inclusive language era called ‘fraternal admonition’ is crucial for healthy communities. Matthew 18, which they also referred to as the ‘rule of Christ’, sets out a process for challenging ungodly behaviour and resolving relational difficulties. One of the consequences of the Christendom shift was that biblical church discipline largely disappeared, replaced either by toleration of immoral behaviour or by persecution of dissent. Movements such as Anabaptism took steps to restore the biblical process, as part of their quest for a pure church. It was this practice that some opponents regarded as a sign of perfectionism. But even if we regard the process of church discipline as biblical, not perfectionist,

(once the Christendom blinkers are removed), we may question *how* the ban was used. And what I have read of its application by Anabaptists in the 16th century does not fill me with any great enthusiasm. Whatever their motivation, however much external pressure distorted their practice, the use of the ban in some Anabaptist churches seems to me to have been excessive, nitpicking, cruel, acrimonious and contrary to the spirit of Christ. Indeed, ‘psychological violence’ and, yes, ‘perfectionism’ are charges that might be justified in such cases.

- Legalism. Any movement that takes seriously the teachings of Scripture can succumb to literalism and legalism. At times, 16th-century Anabaptists were guilty, I believe, of both. We can excuse them as a first-generation movement facing huge pressures and working out their theology and practice on the run, but we can, I think, detect a legalistic tenor in some of their statements and practices. And this has left a legacy among Mennonites and others who are influenced by Anabaptism. Legalism may not be equivalent to perfectionism, but the two are surely linked. I find some Anabaptist writings (historical and contemporary) lacking in grace and compassion for human weaknesses.⁷ I have also noticed a form of perfectionism among Anabaptist scholars, who dare not publish or speak without exhaustive preparation.
- Seriousness. Did 16th-century Anabaptists make good table companions? Were they fun to be with? Did they have a sense of humour? Could they ever relax? Again, I appreciate that they were a persecuted community, facing pressures that I have not experienced, and that they were rightly serious about forming communities of faithful disciples in a world they found corrupt and evil. I do not want to underestimate these factors. But I have a suspicion that Martin Luther might have been a more entertaining dinner guest than Conrad Grebel!

I am not suggesting that Anabaptists were inherently perfectionist nor that the charges brought against them were fully justified, but I do think – once we have recognised the illegitimacy of some of the assumptions behind these charges – there remain causes for concern. Passion for discipleship and yearning for a pure church can slip over into a form of perfectionism.

Was Pelagius Pelagian?

But what about the epithet ‘Pelagian’? Were Anabaptists Pelagian in their theology? I want to return to this question once we have addressed a prior question: was Pelagius Pelagian?

Did Pelagius actually hold the opinions which were ascribed to him and for which he was eventually condemned by the Council of Ephesus after being exonerated by two earlier Councils? Part of the difficulty as we consider this question is that we have so little of Pelagius’ own writings available – a common problem with those accused of heresy. If we read Jerome or Augustine on Pelagius, we will undoubtedly conclude that Pelagius was in error – although even these outraged adversaries were honest enough to acknowledge that this arch-heretic not only practised what he preached but he was actually a really nice bloke! But do they accurately represent his theological views? A second factor is that, just as later dissidents may have over-reacted under severe pressure and ended up in perfectionism, so too Pelagius may have been incited

by his opponents to more extreme statements than truly represented his views. A third factor is that Pelagius has been regarded as a heretic for so long that challenging this designation can be regarded as unwise and illegitimate. Pelagius is simply accepted as someone who got things wrong.

So Robert Evans writes: 'Pelagius is one of the most maligned figures in the history of Christianity. It has been the common sport of the theologian and the historian of theology to set him up as the symbolic bad man and to heap upon him accusations which often tell us more about the perspective of the accuser than about Pelagius.'⁸ And Philip Yancey concludes: 'Pelagius was urbane, courteous, convincing, and liked by everyone. Augustine had squandered away his youth in immorality, had a strange relationship with his mother, and made many enemies. Yet Augustine started from God's grace and got it right, whereas Pelagius started from human effort and got it wrong.'⁹

But did Pelagius get it wrong? In preparation for this forum I have read not only three or four books by scholars who are far from convinced he got it wrong but one of the few substantial extant works of Pelagius – his commentary of Romans. Theodore De Bruyn, in his introduction, notes that this is 'the largest extant work by Pelagius, and one of the few whose Pelagian authorship is now undisputed. For this reason, and also because it antedates the polemics of the Pelagian controversy, it is a most important document of Pelagius' views.'¹⁰

What does Pelagius teach in this commentary? Does he, as Yancey suggests, 'start from human effort'? Does he downplay the grace of God? I am not convinced that he does; indeed, several comments suggest the opposite. He certainly advocates a life of obedient discipleship:

On Romans 3:24: 'At the same time it should be noted that he did not buy us, but bought us back, [because] previously we were his by nature, although we were alienated from him by our transgressions. If we stop sinning, then indeed will our redemption be profitable.'

On Romans 3:28: 'Some misuse this verse to do away with works of righteousness, asserting that faith by itself can suffice, although the same apostle says elsewhere "And if I have complete faith, so that I move mountains, but do not have love, it profits me nothing" (1 Cor 13:2); and in another place declares that in this love is contained the fullness of the law, when he says "The fullness of the law is love" (Rom 13:10). '

But he also writes:

On Romans 3:21: 'The righteousness which has been given to us freely by God, not acquired by our effort, has been made plain without the written law, and, having lain hidden in the law, has been revealed with greater clarity through the examples of Christ, which are more obvious.'

On Romans 3:26: [concerning Jesus] 'Who alone has been found righteous, and also the one whom he has justified, not by works, but by faith.'

On Romans 4:16: 'Because faith cannot be voided, nor the promise annulled, heirship is not by the law, but by faith. For the law does not forgive sins, but condemns them, and therefore cannot make all nations children of Abraham, since all must finally be punished, inasmuch as all are found under sin. But faith makes all believers children of Abraham, their sins having been forgiven by grace.'

As De Bruyn says, this commentary is significant because it predates his controversy with Augustine. Perhaps provoked by this controversy Pelagius hardened his views, maybe even becoming a Pelagian, but we have no sure way of assessing this. Maybe his colleagues pushed his teachings further than he wanted to himself (not unknown in church history). What is clear is that Pelagius never regarded himself as a heretic and that he was interested in inculcating faithful discipleship rather than haggling over theological points of detail. Furthermore, it may not only have been Pelagius whose views hardened: Augustine too seems to have taken more and more extreme positions in his debates with Pelagius (and the Donatists).

I suspect the teaching of Pelagius had deficiencies (although we do not have enough of his writings to be sure): he may have under-estimated the power and pervasiveness of sin; he may have over-estimated the capacity of human free will; he may not have worked through a theology of atonement; and he may have said little about the work of the Holy Spirit. But were these deficiencies more problematic or damaging than those of his opponent, Augustine, with his teaching on predestination and his low expectation of discipleship in the churches of Christendom. It is certainly arguable that the teaching of Pelagius represents the tradition of the pre-Christendom churches and that Augustine's position represents accommodation to the new era.

And does the character of the theologian matter? Pelagius was widely respected and liked, whereas Jerome appears to have been a vitriolic and thoroughly nasty person. And Pelagius did not represent an extreme position on issues such as asceticism and celibacy: actually he seems to have held the centre ground between Augustine and Jerome on the one side and ascetics like Jovinian and Vigilantius on the other.

So was Pelagius Pelagian? I rather doubt this, although I do not think we have enough evidence to convict or clear him of this charge. Should he be rehabilitated? Should we regard him (with whatever deficiencies) as a prophetic figure in the early Christendom era, urging his contemporaries not to accommodate to the spirit of the age but to live as true disciples? Within some traditions such rehabilitation is underway.

- We've received input from the Methodist tradition at this forum, so perhaps we should recall that John Wesley is on record as stating that Pelagius was wrongly called a heretic, and that his so-called heresy was no more than holding that Christians may, by God's grace, 'go on to perfection' and so fulfil the law of Christ.¹¹
- I've read recently that some Eastern Orthodox theologians are suggesting that it may be time to rehabilitate Pelagius – partly because they find Augustine's theology unhelpful at various points, and partly because he was exonerated by two Eastern Councils before being condemned by a Western Council.¹²
- The Northumbria Community regards Pelagius as a Celtic saint and keeps 28th August (traditionally the feast of St Augustine) as the feast day of Pelagius in the Celtic Daily Prayer Book!

Were Anabaptists Pelagian?

What about Anabaptists? Were the 16th-century Anabaptists Pelagian? It depends on our evaluation of Pelagius as to how we interpret this epithet. Certainly they shared his concern about low standards in the churches and his passion for discipleship. Did they fall into the error that he was (rightly or wrongly) accused of – downplaying the grace of God? My reading of their writings suggests they did not and that ‘Pelagian’ in the normal use of this term is an inappropriate epithet for the movement. But they were certainly Pelagian in the sense of being heirs of Pelagius in their championing of radical discipleship and distinctive churches.

And I have been intrigued to discover many resonances with Anabaptist themes in the life and teaching of Pelagius. For example:

- His central conviction that to know God is to do his will (echo of Hans Denck)
- He concentrated on the New Testament and on the teaching and example of Jesus, and he had a Christocentric approach to biblical interpretation.¹³
- He opposed the swearing of oaths.¹⁴
- He challenged the possession of riches and urged Christians to hold these in common for the good of all.¹⁵
- Although he continued to advocate the baptism of infants, his theology and moral teaching really presumed believers’ baptism.’¹⁶

Conclusion

This has been a brief and exploratory paper. I am not an expert on Pelagius and so I look forward to our discussion here and hopefully elsewhere in the future. Maybe I have missed or misinterpreted things that are important. But I am suggesting that, as others seem to be doing, those who draw on the Anabaptist tradition might rehabilitate Pelagius and learn from him. I am aware that some Mennonites are more appreciative now of Augustine than they used to be. This may also be helpful but not, I suggest, at the expense of a renewed marginalisation of Pelagius.

Finally, let me pose four questions that occurred to me as I put this paper together:

- How might the history of the church in Europe have been different if Pelagius and Augustine had listened more carefully to each other? What can we do to foster debates and discussions that do not polarise people and push them to extremes but enable us to listen to and learn from each other?
- How significant is the character of theologians in relation to the theology they promulgate? If Arius was a more attractive person than Athanasius or Pelagius was a more likeable man than Jerome¹⁷, is this irrelevant to what they taught?
- How can we combine serious and faithful discipleship with a capacity not to take ourselves too seriously?
- Does the search for a pure church inevitably breed intolerance, fragmentation, impatience? Or is this an inevitable part of serious discipleship? What would the church lose if it gave up the search for such a church?

¹ Used in the imperial mandate published at Speyer in 1529.

² The Doctrinal Formulas of Henry VIII declare that ‘The opinions of the Anabaptists and Pelagians are to be held for detestable heresies’. See Strype’s *Memorials of Archbishop Crammer* (Oxford Ed. 1848) Vol. I., 85. John Knox also writes in *Against an Anabaptist: In Defence of Predestination*: ‘For with the Pelagians and papists, you [Anabaptists] have become teachers of free will, and defenders of your own justice’.

³ ‘Because of this withdrawal from the world the Reformers actually called the Anabaptists “the new monastics”’: Donald Lewis & Jim Packer: *With Heart, Mind and Strength* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1990), 92.

⁴ *The City of God* XX.9 and elsewhere, especially in anti-Donatist writings. He did not employ this text to argue against coercion despite the injunction against pulling up weeds ahead of time!

⁵ See further Stuart Murray: *Post-Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), 94-108.

⁶ Robert Evans: *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1968), 28-29.

⁷ See further an influential article by Stephen Dintaman: ‘The Spiritual Poverty of the Anabaptist Vision’ *Conrad Grebel Review* (Spring 1992), 205-208

⁸ Evans, *Pelagius*, 66.

⁹ Philip Yancey: *What’s so Amazing about Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 71.

¹⁰ Theodore De Bruyn: *Pelagius’ Commentary on St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 26.

¹¹ See, for example, John Ferguson: *Pelagius: A Historical and Theological Study* (Cambridge: W Heffer & Sons Ltd, 1956), 182.

¹² See, for example, Geoffrey Ó Riada at www.brojed.org/pelagius.html#Intro#Intro.

¹³ Ferguson writes: ‘there are [in his commentaries] nearly three times as many citations of the New Testament as of the Old...It shows that Pelagius is concerned with Christianity, the Christianity of Jesus and the Apostles, and the Old Testament takes second place to that, and is introduced only as illustrating and illuminating that’: see Ferguson, *Pelagius*, 120. Cf. 149.

¹⁴ Evans, *Pelagius*, 76.

¹⁵ Ferguson, *Pelagius*, 147.

¹⁶ ‘There is a final issue in relation to baptism on which Pelagius is in serious difficulty with himself. His reflection upon the sacrament of Christian initiation is built on the model of adult baptism and makes scarce sense if baptism is administered to infants... Yet baptism is to be administered to infants...’ Evans, *Pelagius*, 118.

¹⁷ John Ferguson writes: ‘It would not be improper to call Pelagius the herald of Love. This is the real centre of his message; in it he is very close to the mind of Christ; before it much of the controversy that surrounds his name seems irrelevant’: Ferguson, *Pelagius*, 126.