

QUOTES FROM THE EARLY CHURCH ON FREE WILL

Compiled by Jesse Morrell

“It is our responsibility to live righteously. God asks this of us, not as though it were dependent on Him, nor on any other, or upon fate (as some think), but as being dependent on us . . . We have freedom of the will and that we ourselves are the cause of our own ruin or our salvation” Origen (*Will the Real Heretics Please Stand Up*, by David Bercot, pg 74, printed by Scroll Publishing).

“There is, therefore, nothing to hinder you from changing your evil manner to life, because you are a free man” Melito (*A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 286, published by Hendrickson Publishers).

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good deeds’ . . . And ‘Why call me, Lord, Lord, and do not do the things that I say?’ . . . All such passages demonstrate the independent will of man . . . For it is in man’s power to disobey God and to forfeit what is good” Irenaeus (*A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 287, published by Hendrickson Publishers).

“God has put good and evil in our own power,... he has given us a free power to choose the one or the other...God has endued us with free agency”. Chrysostom (*An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism* by John Fletcher, Volume Two, pg 202, Published by Carlton & Porter)

“We . . . have believed and are saved by voluntary choice.” Clement of Alexandria (*A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 287, published by Hendrickson Publishers)

“The Lord clearly shows sins and transgressions to be in our own power”. Clement of Alexandria (*A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 287, published by Hendrickson Publishers)

“For man is able to both will and not to will. He is endowed with power to do both.” Hippolytus (*A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 288, published by Hendrickson Publishers)

“It would be more just to punish the stars, which make a wicked action necessary, than to punish the poor man, who doe that wicked action by necessity.” Epiphanius (*An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism* by John Fletcher, Volume Two, pg 203, Published by Carlton & Porter)

“The fountain of life is open to all, nor is any one deprived of the right of drinking: but if thy pride be so great that thou refuseth the offered gift and benefits, why

dost thou blame him who invites thee”? Arnobius (*An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism* by John Fletcher, Volume Two, pg 205, Published by Carlton & Porter)

“Man was made with a free will... [with the] capacity of obeying or disobeying God. For this was the meaning of the gift of free will.” Methodius (*A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, pg 292, published by Hendrickson Publishers)

“To do good or evil is in our own power”. Methodius (*A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 276, published by Hendrickson Publishers)

“Natural will is the free faculty of every intelligent nature, as having nothing involuntary pertaining to its essence.” Alexander of Alexandria (*A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, pg 293, published by Hendrickson Publishers)

“How will he refute and convict a man who alleges *the frailty of the flesh* as an excuse for his faults [The argument of the Gnostics] – unless he himself will also be clothed with flesh – so he can show that even the flesh is capable of virtue? Lactantius (*A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* by David Bercot, p. 293, published by Hendrickson Publishers)

“In the manner of good-for-nothing and haughty servants, we cry out against the face of God and say, ‘It is hard, it is difficult, we cannot do it, we are but men, we are encompassed by *frail flesh!*’ [The argument of the Gnostics] What blind madness! What unholy foolhardiness! We accuse God of a twofold lack of knowledge, so that he appears not to know what he has done, and not to know what he has commanded; as if, forgetful of the *human frailty* of which he is himself the author, he has imposed on man commands which he cannot bear. And, at the same time, oh horror!, we ascribe iniquity to the righteous and cruelty to the holy, while complaining, first, that he has commanded something impossible, secondly, that man is to be damned by him for doing things which he was unable to avoid, so that God – and this is something which even to suspect is sacrilege – seems to have sought not so much our salvation as our punishment!” Pelagius (*The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* by B. R. Rees, p. 53, published by The Boydell Press)

“Yet we do not defend the good of nature to such an extent that we claim that it cannot do evil, since we undoubtedly declare also that it is capable of good and evil; we merely try to protect it from an unjust charge, so that we may not seem to be forced to do evil through a fault of our nature, when, in fact, we do neither good nor evil without the exercise of our will and always have the freedom to do one of the two, being always able to do either” Pelagius (*The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* by B. R. Rees, pg 43, published by The Boydell Press)

“Nothing impossible has been commanded by the God of justice and majesty . . . Why do we indulge in pointless evasions, advancing the frailty of our own nature as an objection to the one who commands us? No one knows better the true measure of our strength than he who has given it to us nor does anyone understand better how much we

are able to do than he who has given us this very capacity of ours to be able; nor has he who is just wished to command anything impossible or he who is good intended to condemn a man for doing what he could not avoid doing.” Pelagius (*The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* by B. R. Rees, p. 53-54, published by The Boydell Press)

“Whenever I have to speak on the subject of moral instruction and conduct of a holy life, it is my practice first to demonstrate the power and quality of human nature and to show what it is capable of achieving, and then to go on to encourage the mind of my listener to consider the idea of different kinds of virtues, in case it may be of little or no profit to him to be summoned to pursue ends which he has perhaps assumed hitherto to be beyond his reach; for we can never end upon the path of virtue unless we have hope as our guide and compassion . . . any good of which human nature is capable has to be revealed, since what is shown to be practicable must be put into practice.” Pelagius (*The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* by B. R. Rees, p. 36-37, published by The Boydell Press)

“It was because God wished to bestow on the rational creature the gift of doing good of his own free will and the capacity to exercise free choice, by implanting in man the possibility of choosing either alternative . . . he could do either quite naturally and then bend his will in the other direction too. He could not claim to possess the good of his own volition, unless he was the kind of creature that could also have possessed evil. Our most excellent Creator wished us to be able to do either but actually to do only one, that is, good, which he also commanded, giving us the capacity to do evil only so that we might do His will by exercising our own. That being so, this very capacity to do evil is also good - good, I say, because it makes the good part better by making it voluntary and independent, not bound by necessity but free to decide for itself” Pelagius (*The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* by B. R. Rees, pg 38, published by The Boydell Press)

“If men are thus [sinners] because they cannot be different, they are not to blame.” And “Sins ought not to be visited with even the smallest punishment, provided they cannot be avoided.” Pelagius (*An Historical Presentation of Augustinism And Pelagianism* by G. F. Wiggers, p. 154)

Pelagius said that sinners, “abuse the liberty granted to them” while the righteous are “rightly using freewill.” (*An Historical Presentation of Augustinism And Pelagianism* by G. F. Wiggers, p. 223)

“Grace indeed freely discharges sins, but with the *consent and choice* of the believer” Pelagius (*The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* by B. R. Rees, pg 92, published by The Boydell Press)

“The beginning of our salvation flows from the merciful God; but it is in *our power to consent* to his saving inspiration.” Augustine (*An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism* by John Fletcher, Volume Two, pg 206, Published by Carlton & Porter)

“Nobody can help what comes into his mind; but to consent or to dissent from involuntary suggestions, is the prerogative of our own will.” Augustine (*An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism* by John Fletcher, Volume Two, pg 206, Published by Carlton & Porter)

"Whatever may determine the will, if it cannot be resisted, is complied with without sin; but if one can resist it, let him not comply with it and it will not be sin." Augustine (*An Historical Presentation of Augustinism And Pelagianism* by G. F. Wiggers, p. 128-129)

““In all laws, warnings, rewards, punishments, etc. there is no justice, if the will is not the cause of sin.” Augustine (*An Historical Presentation of Augustinism And Pelagianism* by G. F. Wiggers, p. 129)

"There can be no sin that is not voluntary, the learned and the ignorant admit this evident truth" Augustine (*De vera relig.*, xiv, 27)

"Their fulfillment [the law] would not have been commanded, if our will had nothing to do in it" Augustine (*De. Perf. Just. Hom.* 10.)

“Is it possible then for a man not to sin? Such a claim is indeed a hard one and a bitter pill for sinners to swallow; it pains the ears of all who desire to live unrighteous. Who will find it easy now to fulfill the demands of righteousness, when there are some who find it hard even to listen to them?” Unknown (*The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* by B. R. Rees, pg 167, published by The Boydell Press)

“When will a man guilty of any crime or sin accept with a tranquil mind that his wickedness is a product of his own will, not of necessity, and allow what he now strives to attribute to nature to be ascribed to his own free choice? It affords endless comfort to transgressors of the divine law if they are able to believe that their failure to do something is due to inability rather than disinclination, since they understand from their natural wisdom that no one can be judged for failing to do the impossible and that what is justifiable on grounds of impossibility is either a small sin or none at all” Unknown (*The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* by B. R. Rees, pg 167-168, published by The Boydell Press)

“Under the plea that it is impossible not to sin, they are given a false sense of security in sinning. . . . Anyone who hears that it is not possible for him to be without sin will not even try to be what he judges to be impossible, and the man who does not try to be without sin must perforce sin all the time, and all the more boldly because he enjoys the false security of believing that it is impossible for him not to sin . . . But if he were to hear that he is able not to sin, then he would have exerted himself to fulfill what he now knows to be possible when he is striving to fulfill it, to achieve his purpose for the most part, even if not entirely.” Unknown (*The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* by B. R. Rees, pg 168, published by The Boydell Press)

“Consider first whether that which is such that a man cannot be without it ought to be described as sin at all; for everything which cannot be avoided is now put down to nature but it is impious to say that sin is inherent in nature, because in this way the author of nature is being judged at fault . . . how can it be proper to call sin by that name if, like other natural things, it cannot be avoided, since all sin is to be attributed to the free choice of the will, not to the defects of nature?” Unknown (*The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* by B. R. Rees, pg 168-169, published by The Boydell Press)