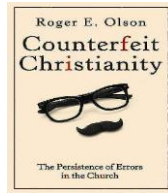


## **2025 Summer Virtual Study**



### **“Counterfeit Christianity”**

**By Professor Roger E. Olson**

#### **Session 4: Setting Grace Aside & Making God a Monster**

**July 29, 2025**

**7:30 PM**

#### **Session 3 Recap...**

In Session 3 of our study, we examined the heresies that centered on the Deity of Jesus Christ and those that questioned the doctrine of the Trinity. One of the foundational truths in Christianity is that Jesus Christ is fully divine. This belief is rooted in Scripture and has been found in writings by the early Christian Church as early as the late first and early second centuries. However, alternative thoughts about Jesus' deity began to emerge as early as the third century. Adoptionists, such as Paul of Samosata, believed that Jesus began life as just a mere human being, but later was “adopted” into a special role as either “divine” or in a “special relationship” with the Father. The belief was that Jesus was never of the same substance or equal with the Father. Arian and his followers in the fourth century raised the greatest debate about Jesus's divinity. What later became known as “subordinationism”, Arian in his debate with Alexander and later Athanasius argued that Jesus was the Logos, the Word, but was the first and greatest creation of the Father. Jesus was not of the same substance as the Father (not homoousios), and he denied the Trinity. The Church's response was that Jesus was “one substance, and three persons” – reaffirming the Trinity. Nestorius and Eutyches also shed doubt on Jesus being one substance or united – both fully human and fully divine. Their arguments portrayed Jesus as more of a “corporate personality” rather than a united God. The Church centralized their orthodox beliefs about Jesus at the Council of Chalcedon – Jesus as a “Hypostatic union” – a union of two full and complete natures, human and divine, in one unified person. Jesus Christ was

and is “one who and two whats” – one undivided person, but two whole natures.

One of the greatest debates in Christianity revolves around the Trinity. While the Trinity can never be fully explained and understood, the “doctrine of the Trinity” is a formula shared by the Christian Church to help believers to understand parts of the mystery of this orthodox belief. The formula can be found in the Nicene Creed which states the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in substance; equally good, eternal, and powerful. The Son is “eternally begotten” by the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from Father. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct (not separate) “persons.” Some early heresies developed out of the understanding of this orthodox belief. Subordinationism proposed that the Holy Spirit (and Son) are created beings, and not equal with the Father in substance. They denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Basil the Great wrote against this in his treatise “On the Holy Spirit”, arguing that the Holy Spirit and Son are of the same substance and equal with the Father. Modalism (also called Sabellianism, Patripassionism) argued that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not in any sense “persons”, but merely outward manifestations of the one God person. The underlying motive in Modalism begins with the assumption that monotheism must mean God can be only one person in undifferentiated unity; any distinctions is only in appearance (an outward appearance – like a mask), not in immanence (within God himself). This denied the Trinity. Gregory of Nyssa argued against this thought, specifically focusing on the concept of God being the essence of love. If God is “love”, before He created the world, who did He love? There had to be a symbiotic relationship – the Trinity. Also, what about the Scripture passages (i.e. Jesus’s baptism) where the Son speaks to the Father, the Father speaks to the Son, or the Son speaks about the Spirit. Proof of the Trinity. The final heretical argument toward the Trinity was Tritheism, supported by individuals like Joachim of Fiore. Tritheists argued that the Trinity was proof that the Father, Son, and Spirit were three separate gods – so Christianity was polytheistic. The Church quickly silenced these thoughts.

Each of these heresies still have influence in the world and in churches and other religious organizations today.

## **Opening Prayer**

## Session 4 Video – “Setting Grace Aside”

### Setting Grace Aside: Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism

#### Christianity a Religion of Grace Alone

- **Scripture Focus: Ephesians 2:8-9**
- Orthodox Christian belief that salvation is wholly God’s doing and not at all earned by humans – it is undeserved grace
- God alone saves and that even the beginning of a good will toward God is enabled by God’s grace and not solely a human achievement
- Agreed by Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Protestants
- Default American heresy: salvation is half God’s and half ours (“God waits for us to initiate a saving relationship with Him and then He responds...” – really semi-Pelagianism)
- **Scripture Focus: Philippians 2:12b-13**
  - Vs. 12 - In English – “work”, in Greek, “carry on to completion”
  - Vs. 13 – “work”, in Greek, “provides all the ability”
  - Even our activity in spiritual growth is wholly enabled by God
- Protestant Reformation (Luther, Zwingli, Calvin) – “by grace alone through faith alone”
- Reconciliation with God is a bridge built from God’s side, all we have to do is walk across it
- Good works are necessary – as evidence of a saved life
- Wesley/Methodism – emphasized good works also; however, writings on “justification” (initial reconciliation with God, forgiveness, and right standing with God) agree with other Protestants that God alone does all the saving; good works flow naturally from it
- Question to ask: Is salvation by grace along through faith as *trust* alone, or is salvation by grace through faith understood as *trust and obedience* – that is “faithfulness” to the way of Jesus? (Wesley, orthodox Christians and Catholics take the second view; Luther, Calvin take the first view)
- So, what is the orthodox belief? “If a person is saved it has nothing to do with his or her goodness but only to do with God’s grace. Grace is the sole efficient cause of salvation. Salvation is a sheer gift.” (p. 109)

- *Grace* – God’s undeserved favor; “Prevenient Grace” – God’s undeserved enabling power to hear, understand, and receive salvation offered freely by God through Christ.
- Grace – goes before repentance and faith; it calls, convicts, illumines, and enables; “saving grace” is God’s embrace in reconciliation

### **The Heresy of Self-Salvation: Pelagianism**

- Implicit orthodoxy – what was already taught and believed by Christians following the apostles before there was need to write/put anything down; Explicit orthodoxy – formal, official expression of the former
- Long before salvation by grace was written, it was already accepted and believed; however, during the second century and after, some orthodox Christians tended to emphasize good works and holy living because Gnostics believed they were not important
- As a rebuke of the Gnostic antinomian view/lifestyle, church fathers stressed the importance of good works and holy living for authentic Christianity – this led to legalism
- Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa – dominant theologian in the West in fifth century – emphasized God as the sole actor in salvation and the passivity of sinners being saved; he believed the Christian life consisted of faith and good works, but salvation, one’s relationship with God as forgiven and righteous, is solely by grace – a gift from God
- Augustine believed that before and apart from God’s grace, all human beings (even infants) are sinners capable of evil
- Question he asked: Why would Jesus have died for all if some can save themselves through good works?
- Pelagius, British monk in 5<sup>th</sup> century – visited Rome, noticed Christian living immoral lives, quoting Augustine; after reading Augustine’s thoughts about grace alone, he disagreed; began preaching and said, “people are capable of obeying God on their own without any special help from God’s grace”, also that sin is never necessary or inevitable in human life

- Pelagius taught the ideal is to live such a perfectly holy life of obedience to God's will that one never has to repent at all; it is fully possible in our natural state
- Pelagius rejected idea of original sin, no inherited sinfulness; all are born as Adam, capable of hearing and obeying God
- Pelagius wrote all this in his book, *On Nature*; also said that all that humans need is moral guidance toward the good, not supernatural help to do the good
- Augustine was outraged; wrote *On Nature and Grace*, argued that nobody except Jesus (because conceived without sin) is capable of obeying God without the special aid of grace; salvation is totally dependent on the cross of Christ and God grace through faith and the sacraments
- Pelagius fled Rome, went East to gain support; Augustine wrote to his friend, Jerome, in Egypt to watch out for Pelagius and his teachings; eventually his beliefs were condemned by the Council at Ephesus; sent into exile
- Do not have Pelagius's actual writings, just Augustine's responses; Pelagius began to alter his teachings as he began to be questioned more

### **Semi-Pelagianism Seeks Middle Ground**

- After Pelagius, Augustine went on to deny self-salvation and free will; he affirmed predestination (he was a partial Calvinist before Calvin!)
- A group of monks tried to find a middle ground between Augustine and Pelagius – from France, Faustus of Riez, John Cassian, Vincent of Lerins – teachings called “semi-Pelagianism”, could be called “semi-Augustinianism”
- Semi-Pelagianism – human beings are not so damaged by original sin that they cannot, or themselves, without supernatural grace, initiate a good will toward God; they taught that normally the initiative in salvation is the human side; the first exercise of a good will toward God is the sinners' without supernatural prevenient grace (this came to be the rejected part of the heretical belief)

- 529 AD – Synod at Orange – met to discuss Semi-Pelagianism beliefs; condemned as heresy; rejected the belief that sinners are capable of initiating a saving relationship with God or cooperating with grace in any way that would lessen the necessity of grace or give saved persons room to boast; also condemned any belief that God predestines anyone to evil (“double predestination”) – called Semi-Pelagianism a “heterodox” – outside of orthodoxy, not quite as serious as heresy
- While Pelagianism was virtually wiped out of all branches of Christianity, not the same for semi-Pelagianism

### **Modern Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism**

- Many argue that Arminianism is Pelagian or semi-Pelagian; Arminianism is belief that although salvation is by grace through faith alone, grace can be resisted and must be freely accepted; belief in free will; seen in Methodist and Pentecostal churches; while it does emphasize free will, Arminianism places emphasis on God’s initiative in salvation and denies that sinners are capable, apart from special grace, of exercising a good will toward God – so, not Pelagian or semi-Pelagian
- Popular “folk religion” – very evident; “God helps those who help themselves
- TV Show – “Touched by an Angel” – sometimes the messages verged on Pelagianism; as does many shows trying to emphasize religion
- Gospel songs and sermons often portray salvation that way – Savior, standing at a distance, waiting – sinner must step forward; need to emphasize prevenient grace
- Charles Finney – evangelist of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Great Awakening – injected semi-Pelagianism into American Christianity; denied inherited depravity and the absolute necessity of prevenient grace
- Also, Billy Sunday (died in 1935) – revivals, human effort – semi-Pelagianism
- Very few Christian leaders promote Pelagianism; many promote semi-Pelagianism without even knowing it
- Mormonism – rejects original sin, teaches sinner’s unaided ability to convert to Christ; kind of humanism that makes grace unnecessary

- Bruce McConkie – “Quorum of the Twelve Apostles” – in book, *Mormon Doctrine*, denies original sin and salvation by grace alone
- James Talmage – “Quorum of the Twelve Apostles” – in book, *A Study of the Articles of Faith*, salvation by faith and works; grace alone by faith alone is a “most pernicious doctrine”
- Some branches and offshoots of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Adventist movement have elevated good works over grace and faith as necessary for salvation
- Jehovah’s Witnesses – deny deity of Christ and the Trinity; also deny original sin and salvation by grace alone; “good works” are necessary for full salvation

### **Antidotes to Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism**

- Best antidotes are the Bible, Christian tradition, reason, and experience
- Scripture teaches that “there is no one who looks for God” – Romans 3:11b
- Christian tradition holds to the doctrine of human inability to contribute to salvation by effort or good works without grace
- Classical Catholic theology/tradition teaches the meritorious good works of a Christian are dependent on gratuitous grace – God’s undeserved gift.
- Both Protestants and Catholics believe that reconciliation with God that guarantees heaven is only through God’s grace, even if good works cannot be separated entirely from “heavenly reward”
- Why would Christ have died for everyone if it is possible to live a perfectly obedient life and never need grace? Reason works too.
- Who can legitimately claim to be so good as to deserve God’s favor?
- “Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience point to the fundamental truth that nothing truly good is a product of human effort or achievement alone and that grace overshadows and surrounds and undergirds everything true, beautiful, and good. (p. 120)

## **Questions to Ponder...**

1. What is your understanding of grace? What is the relationship between God's grace and human good works?
2. When we say things like, "God helps those who help themselves," how does that deny God's grace?
3. When was a time that you experienced the grace of God? How can Christians be channels of God's grace for others?

## **Making God a Monster:**

### **Divine Determinism**

#### **A Different Kind of Heresy**

- So far, we have examined "official heresies – those rejected by the Christian Church at ecumenical councils and by Protestant reformers – these are agreed upon by all Christian leaders across all major branches of Christianity
- This section, and the session next week will focus on beliefs that Christians see as wrong and are destructive to the Church but not condemned as heresies at ecumenical councils
- These are very controversial to Christians; however, they seem appealing to Christian followers
- Each one is rising in popularity in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, and causing turmoil in Christian circles
- Now "heresy" means unofficial, a matter of debate and controversy among authentic Christian believers; they distort the gospel, even though it may not be apparent at first
- Instead of investigating them, many followers accept them without debate because the person teaching seems spiritual or popular and has appeal
- Remember, a heretic is someone who knows what they are teaching is contrary to standard, doctrinal beliefs of their faith community; people who merely believe it are not heretics

- The decision by a faith community that doctrine is heresy usually comes slowly
- The criteria to determine a theological belief is orthodox or Christian are revelation, tradition, reason, and experience (Wesleyan Quadrilateral) – if a belief or teaching fundamentally contradicts one of these, then it is most likely and can be labeled heretical

### **What is *Divine Determinism*?**

- Divine Determinism – belief, whether explicit or implicit, that God determines all things according to a preconceived plan and by his omnipotent power, including sin and evil
- Supported by Augustine, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli; Reformed Protestants (God's sovereignty, God's providence over and predestination of all things)
- Most influential from 5<sup>th</sup> century to Reformation – Augustine – wrote many treatises and books debating heresies and establishing/explaining orthodox beliefs
- No teaching of Augustine has been more controversial among Catholics and Protestants than his teaching about God's sovereignty: meticulous providence and unconditional predestination
- God's sovereignty – his rule over the world and history; "de jure" – God's right to rule, "de facto" – God's actual *control* of events – Augustine believed both
- Non-Augustine theologians – God is always sovereign "de jure", but not yet sovereign "de facto"; God chooses not to determine everything yet; allows creatures/humans to resist God's perfect will, how sin enters the world, what about sin and evil?
- Augustine, "For the Almighty (God) sets in motion even in the innermost hearts of men the movement of their will, so that He does through their agency whatsoever He wishes to perform through them."; he did not believe this was occasional, constant and unbroken method of God
- What about free will? People are free whenever they do what they want to do, even if they could not have done otherwise

- Augustine believed that God could not be “limited” by creation – always in control
- Is God the author of sin and evil? No, that would offend the dignity of God; left it as a paradox; from creature’s rebellious wills
- Twin to doctrine of God’s sovereignty (doctrine of God’s providence – His sovereignty in relation to history and individuals’ lives) is *predestination* – God’s will in relation to individual’s ultimate destiny in either heaven or hell
- Augustine believed that God chooses whom to save without reference to their own personal “free” choices; since all inherits the fallen nature from Adam and is incapable of not sinning, God freely and graciously chooses some out of the damnation to save – the elect (later supported by Calvin)
- Did not teach “double predestination” – denies that God predetermines anyone to hell; simply chooses some to save and leaves others to the deserved judgement for disobeying God
- For Augustine, God determines everything – with its outcome and its genesis
- Evil – not a “thing”, it is the absence of good
- “Our conclusion is, then, that Augustine’s doctrine of God’s sovereignty *logically implies* divine determinism *even with regard to sin and evil* even if he did not affirm that God determines them.”
- Second Council of Orange (529 AD) – the belief that God “predestines to evil” was condemned as heresy

### **Divine Determinism in Christian History**

- John Wycliffe (14<sup>th</sup> century) – promotion of English Bible translation, forerunner of the Protestant Reformation; salvation is by grace alone and through faith; denied Catholic doctrines of transubstantiation
  - Also, a “divine determinist”, firm believer in “double predestination”
- Ulrich Zwingli – Reformer in the Swiss city of Zurich – also believed in “divine determinism”; strong battle with the Catholic church (literal battle, died in a battle between Catholics and Protestants)
  - “Father of Reformed Protestantism”

- No “law” to which God is bound, including one within His own nature; free to decree and cause anything he wills
- Whatever God does is good because “God wills it”, everything happens because “God wills it”
- God instigates sin for greater good – his own “honor”
- Affirmed “double predestination”; elected – ones that are blessed
- Denied “free will”; the “damned” sin and become condemned not by free choice but according to God’s will
- John Calvin – also taught “divine determinism”, but with greater caution
  - God is not the author of sin and evil
  - God’s supreme sovereignty over all things including the sin, evil, and eternal damnation of the nonelect, the “reprobate”
  - God has good purposes in everything that he ordains
  - “...everything that happens, including sinful and evil deeds, are foreordained and rendered certain by God while God remains unstained by their wickedness because he does not force creatures but only permits them to sin. But God’s permission of sin and evil is “willing permission”.” (p. 129)
- Most Reformed Christians follow Calvin’s account of God’s providence and predestination – God does not merely permit anything to happen but willingly permits sin and evil, which he has foreordained, because he plans to overcome them and through that reveal his greatness and glory
- Jonathan Edwards (1700’s) – most influential “divine determinist” in modern Christianity; Great Awakening, contemporary of John Wesley (Arminian theology)
  - Why did God create everything in the first place? God himself, and his “glory”, is the ultimate purpose of everything
  - Fall of humanity into sin and all its consequences were not merely possible; they were determined by God
  - Even God does not have free will in the sense of being really able to do otherwise than what he does because it is what is most fit and wise
  - God creates continuously – God creates the whole world and everything in it *ex nihilo* at every moment, includes sin and evil

- Also believed in “double predestination” – damned are there because of their own disobedience to God’s revealed law and for the greater glory of God; through hell, God reveals His justice through wrath and make the blessedness of the saved sweeter

### **Contemporary Divine Determinism**

- Reformed theology has been reemerging in the 20<sup>th</sup> century among college students – “Young, Restless, Reformed Movement”
- Influential leaders – R.C. Sproul (Presbyterian), John Piper (Baptist)
- Sproul – “one maverick molecule” in universe not under God’s control, then God is not God; if don’t believe God is in control of everything, should be an atheist
  - No undetermined free will
  - Whatever God permits – sin and evil too – he decrees to permit
- John Piper – popular to those late teens to early forties; premier speaker at the huge “Passion” youth conference each year
  - Controversial after 9/11 – all acts (terrorist too) – from God; does not mean that God directly causes the perpetrators to sin – especially not against their own perverse wills; but even those are under the sovereignty of God
  - Believes in “double predestination”
  - Believes in unconditional election and irresistible grace
- Neither Sproul or Piper is bold enough to come out and state where these arguments lead to – that God is the author of sin and evil (R.C. Sproul, Jr. does in one of his books, though)

### **Why Divine Determinism is Heresy (and What Should Be Done About it)**

- Making God the author of sin and evil is heresy.
- This has often been “the line” for Divine Determinists – going too far
- John Wesley – viciously attacked “Divine Determinism”
  - In an essay, “Predestination Calmly Considered”, focused on the doctrine of “reprobation” – that God alone decides who will be damned to hell; natural consequence of unconditioned election – God chooses to save some without regard to free decision and “pass over” others, leaving them to “deserved damnation”

- Single predestination requires Double predestination – thus the doctrine of reprobation
- Focused on nature of God as love and God’s goodness – those being “passed over” not being shown love, goodness – not experiencing true God
- Believed if this belief of “Divine Determinism” would fall, then the whole belief system would crumble too
- What should we do with Divine Determinism?
  - If you are in a church that teaches/preaches this ideology, really examine as an individual, class, and as a church – all the parts.
  - In Olson’s opinion and mine as well, Christian congregations ought to be very careful with “divine determinism”. It needs to be rooted out, especially the views that God is the author of sin and evil, and “double predestination.”
- **Follow Up Questions...**
  1. Throughout church history, people have tried to understand why bad things happen, especially to good people. Does attributing evil and sin to God help settle the matter for you?
  2. If God is love and God’s love is steadfast, loving kindness, how can God also cause, allow, or permit evil? Do you see a difference between “causing” and “allowing” evil?
  3. How does “double predestination” square with God’s grace? Is anyone ever beyond the grace or help of God?

## **Closing Prayer**

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## **Session 5: Reducing God to Manageable Size & Using God for Personal Gain**

(Chapters 9 and 10 in the Book)

**Thursday, August 7**

**7:30 PM**

**Facebook Live**

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