For century after century, one man has been the bogeyman of Western theology. He's the bad guy. The one nobody wants to be like. Yes, you guessed it: that old Welsh heretic, Pelagius.

　　For centuries the malign influence of his worksy free will religion has been resisted. Bede narrates in his history of the English church how persistently both Celtic and Catholic Christians opposed in these fair Isles the poison of Pelagianism, which the great Augustine of Hippo had refuted so clearly, and which was condemned by an early church council at Carthage (418) and excommunicated.

　　In the East, they are not such fans of Augustine. But in the West, he the man, and so his enemy is our enemy, so to speak. Identification with Pelagius has been "a bad thing" throughout our history.

　　Which makes it so strange that the great and famous John Wesley was actually a fan of Pelagius. Am I being nasty now? Am I being offensive: "a cynic, a bear, a Toplady" (to use Wesley's own sour put down)? Not at all. Here it is in Wesley's own words.

　　Discussing how the gates of hell have not prevailed against the true church, Wesley writes that, "God always reserved a seed for himself; a few that worshipped him in spirit and truth." He has often wondered, he says, "whether these were not the very persons whom the rich and honourable Christians, who will always have number as well as power on their side, did not stigmatise, from time to time, with the title of heretics."

　　Which heretics in particular do you think have been unfairly stigmatised by the glitterati, Mr Wesley? The first he mentions is "that arch-heretic, Montanus", who he thinks might well have been "one of the holiest men in the second century" (despite his rather absurd doctrines and practices).

　　But then he affirms that Pelagius too was one of the holiest men of his age. Certainly better than Augustine who was "as full of pride, passion, bitterness, censoriousness, and as foul-mouthed to all that contradicted him."

　　Mr Wesley continues, "I verily believe, the real heresy of Pelagius was neither more nor less than this: The holding that Christians may, by the grace of God (not without it; that I take to be a mere slander,) 'go on to perfection.'"

　　Augustine may have "bespattered" poor old Pelagius, but "his word is not worth a rush" says Mr Wesley. Why? "And here is the secret: St Augustine was angry at Pelagius: hence he slandered and abused him, (as his manner was)". See The Works of Wesley (Third Edition. Baker, 2007), volume 6 pages 328-329.

　　So there we have it: holy Pelagius, one of the righteous remnant of church history, unfairly stigmatised by that nasty brute Augustine and his upper class pals, and who taught -- well, what do you know! -- the same things as John Wesley himself, regarding free will and perfectionism.

It's very unusual in the whole history of Christian theology for anyone to voluntarily identify themselves and their theology with Pelagius. But here we have it from the horse's mouth. What are we to make of that...?

　　Dr Gatiss promises that he's not just trying to drum up interest in his new book "Strangely Warmed: Whitefield, Toplady, Simeon and Wesley's Arminian Campaigns" (Latimer Trust), which was based on his recent St Antholin's Lecture. for the audio：https://www.churchsociety.org/blog/entry/george\_whitefields\_birthday/

https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/wesley-and-pelagius.php