

Man's Depravity: Sinfulness Versus Nature

Dear Friends,

We occasionally use words to summarize rather major themes or ideas. The word “depravity” has been so used in historical Christian theology. It is typically associated with certain adjectives; “total depravity,” “partial depravity,” as examples. If we do not understand the gravity of human sin before our holy, righteous God, we will never grasp the Biblical concept of divine saving grace. Occasionally in a zealous penchant to paint man, even saved people, as undeserving as possible, people will refer even to saved individuals as “totally depraved.” I believe this is a highly inaccurate and unfortunate abuse of the term, one that should be avoided for its inherent erroneous implications. If saved people were “totally depraved,” they wouldn’t hunger for God, read their Bibles, attend church, transform their lives to make God and other people more important than self, or even preach the gospel for that matter.

In this week’s study we explore whether depravity refers to man’s actions or to his nature. I will make a case for the term referring to his nature. Total depravity does not mean that wicked people do every possible sinful deed they are capable of performing. Rather it means that unsaved man in his natural and fallen state is dead to any spiritual fellowship or attraction to God—that this state pervades all of his constitution, not just part of it. Based on this definition, I will also reject the notion that a regenerate (born again, saved) person is “totally depraved.” Occasionally people will refer to a certain part of themselves that is totally depraved. This use of the term misses the historical use of the idea, and—I believe—the teaching of Scripture as well. We could review many passages that describe depraved humans in terms of their conduct, but these passages present the out-workings of total depravity, not the trait itself. Based on its historical use as outlined in the quote from Elwell’s Evangelical Dictionary of Theology below, total depravity does not describe man’s actions, but rather his state. Is man—in every part of his being—depraved, or did Adam escape the divine judgment for his sin with only part of his persona damaged by sin? In our earlier chapters dealing with the teachings of Pelagius, semi-Pelagians, Molina, and Arminius, we noted the inclination in these schools of theological thought toward the idea that man’s will escaped the fall. If man’s will remains unfallen, then man in the sum total of his being is not “totally depraved.” These schools of theological thought hold to a form of “partial depravity.” Parts of man were damaged by the fall, but other parts remain unfallen, both in Adam and in his offspring.

This question of depravity becomes quite significant as we examine John’s reference to the light shining in darkness, but the darkness not comprehending it. Why didn’t the darkness comprehend the light? God bless, Joe Holder

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"In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. ([Joh 1:4-5](#))

Depravity--we hear the term bantered around, but what does it mean? Does it apply to regenerate and unregenerate alike? Or does it refer uniquely only to the unregenerate? Does it mean that unregenerate man is as sinful as he can possibly be? As we study the moral and spiritual darkness that pervades fallen man, this question is highly significant. It will shape much of our subsequent theological framework.

In [Ro 3:9-18](#) we find a rather vivid description of sinful man's conduct. Can we view this passage as a definition of depravity or as a description of man's sinful conduct? Since the verbs all express specific action, I offer that this passage describes sinful man's proclivity to sin, but not a functional definition of depravity. Occasionally descriptions of depravity indicate the speaker's-writer's-idea that depravity means that sinful man practices every form of sin possible—that fallen man is actively as sinful as he can

possibly be. I believe this idea is an unfortunate misrepresentation of Biblical human depravity. The Reformers used the term "total depravity," not to mean that fallen man practices sin as intently as possible, but rather that man is fallen, depraved, in all of his being, that there is no part of man that was not affected in the fall. Ryrie offers this definition of depravity. "A proper definition of total depravity should not focus primarily on the question of sinfulness vs. goodness or ability vs. inability, but on fallen man's relation to a holy God. Because of the effects of the fall, that original relationship of fellowship with God was broken and man's entire nature was polluted. As a result no one can do anything, even good things, that can gain soteriological merit in God's sight. Therefore, we may concisely define total depravity as the unmeritoriousness of man before God because of the corruption of original sin. The concept of total depravity does not mean (1) that depraved people cannot or do not perform actions that are good in either man's or God's sight. But no such action can gain favor with God for salvation. Neither does it mean (2) that fallen man has no conscience which judges between good and evil for him. But that conscience has been affected by the fall so that it cannot be a safe and reliable guide. Neither does it mean (3) that people indulge in every form of sin or in any sin to the greatest extent possible. Positively total depravity means that the corruption has extended to all aspects of man's nature, to his entire being; and total depravity means that because of that corruption there is nothing man can do to merit saving favor with God." (1) Key points to note in this expanded definition of "total depravity" include 1) that man does not at all times practice the greatest degree of sinfulness possible—man is not as wicked in practice as he could possibly be, but 2) that the fall affected every part of man so that fallen man is wholly incapable of doing anything to merit salvation. In an earlier study we examined the teachings of Pelagius, his successors, Molina, and Arminius. These teachings functionally teach that man's will was not affected by the fall; that fallen man retains the ability through the exercise of his unfallen will to gain his salvation. This teaching defines grace as something that God extends to those who do not need it; they functionally save themselves! If we accept the Ryrie definition of depravity as valid, another significant question arises. Is it appropriate—even sound theology—to refer to a regenerate person as still "totally depraved"? Is the saved person capable of doing anything that pleases God? Forget the question of meriting salvation; he/she is already saved.

"Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord." (Col 3:20) "But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts." (1 Thessalonians 2:4) "Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more." (1 Thessalonians 4:1) These passages indicate that regenerated people in fact do please God when they obey His commandments and live according to the rule of faith. In regeneration God makes a substantive change in the person's nature that enables him/her to walk by faith and to please God in thought, word, and deed. Occasionally the idea surfaces among Christians that the indwelling Holy Spirit makes no material change in the person; that the Holy Spirit enters and directs the person to do good, and leaves randomly with no lasting or permanent effect whatever. We might refer to this idea as "hollow log" teaching, that the Holy Spirit enters the person much as a rabbit enters a hollow log, stays for a time, and leaves without making any material change in the log. When someone refers to a saved person in terms that do not account for a material change that God accomplishes in the new birth, they are effectively teaching this "hollow log" concept of the new birth. Thus to imply or claim that a regenerate person remains in "total depravity" after the new birth is a major error at best, heretical at worst. It is equally errant to teach that regeneration changes the whole man in all of his parts or identity. In the various analogies that Scripture presents of the new birth we find a rather consistent point that God makes a material and permanent change in the person. It does not alter every aspect of the person, but it does alter some portion of the person. God's law "written in the heart" necessarily alters the nature of the heart. It is no longer wholly depraved. New birth results in a change of nature, not merely a change of mind, in the person whom God saves. The basic concept of human depravity that Scripture presents establishes the fact that God must accomplish

the whole of regeneration alone. Man before regeneration is incapable of doing anything cooperatively or pleasingly to God. This truth affirms Jesus' words to Nicodemus ([Joh 3:1-8](#)). This truth rejects any synergistic cooperation from man prior to regeneration. By logical extension embracing the fundamental Arminian-Molinistic-Pelagian concepts of new birth requires that the unsaved, unregenerate person perform certain acts, mental, physical in order for God to work cooperatively with him/her to complete the salvation process. Reformed theologians are divided on the question of how the new birth actually occurs. Most contemporary Reformed theologians embrace some form of "process" salvation (as opposed to a divine and instantaneous act of God) that includes man acting synergistically with God to accomplish the new birth. No less than the Arminian view, they face an insurmountable hurdle in explaining how the unsaved and depraved person is capable of doing anything in that unsaved state that pleases God. The deterministic view that God orchestrates the unsaved human will doesn't really relieve the problem. It ironically puts God in the role of necessarily using depraved man's depraved faculties in order to remove the man from his depravity—a bit nonsensical at best. Some older Reformed, or Calvinistic, theologians recognized this problem and taught immediate, Holy Spirit regeneration with no intermediate agency or action on man's part. W. G. T. Shedd, a highly respected Reformed writer, in his *Dogmatic Theology*, wrote a concise defense of immediate regeneration in the chapter dealing with the new birth. "Fourth, man is passive in regeneration. He cannot actively originate spiritual life. His relation to regeneration is that of a recipient. This is a part of the meaning of "passivity" in this connection. In that particular instant when the divine and holy life is implanted, the soul of man contributes no energy of efficiency of any kind. Being dead in sin, it cannot produce life to righteousness. A corpse cannot originate animal life. Lazarus was passive at that punctum temporis²⁴ when his body was reanimated. The same is true of the soul of man in respect to regeneration. But since regeneration is instantaneous, the sinner's passivity is instantaneous also. Man is passive only for a moment, during the twinkling of an eye. God's regenerating act is like the sounding of the last trumpet. The resurrection of dead bodies is instantaneous, and the regeneration of dead souls is so likewise. The doctrine that the sinner is passive in regeneration does not imply that the passivity extends over a great length or even any length of time in his existence. On the contrary, it is only a punctum temporis⁽²⁾ in his history. Up to that point of time, he is active: active in enmity to God. After that point of time he is active: active in submission to God. The carnal mind is enmity; the spiritual mind is love. Enmity and love are activities of the soul. Between the carnal mind and the spiritual mind, there is nothing but the instant of regeneration. In this instant when the new life is imparted, the activity is solely that of God the Holy Spirit. Fifth, man cannot cooperate in regeneration. This follows logically from the fact that he is passive in regeneration. A dead man cannot assist in his own resurrection. It also follows from the fact that cooperation implies some agreement between the parties. God and the sinner must harmonize before they can work together. Two forces cannot cooperate unless they are coordinate and coincident forces. But up to the instant of regeneration, man is hostile to God: "The carnal mind is enmity toward God" ([Ro 8:7](#)). Enmity cannot cooperate with love. (See supplement 6.3.4.) Upon the Semipelagian, the Tridentine, and the Arminian theory of depravity, there may be cooperation, but not upon the Augustinian and Calvinistic. According to the former theories, there are slight remainders of holiness in the natural man which, though feeble, yet afford a point of contact and an element of force in his regeneration. Calvin (3.24.13) attributes synergism to Chrysostom and also to Bernard and Lombard (2.2.6)."(3) To be fair to his ideas, Shedd later in this work advocated something of a "process" in regeneration, but he distinctly rejected active human agency as exemplified in this quote. The Calvinistic idea of human agency (typically some form of teaching that utilizes the gospel as an agent) in regeneration runs headlong into the same insurmountable hurdles that Arminian theology faces. First, God gives spiritual-eternal-life in the new birth, regeneration. Then the regenerated person may become active in the exercise of his/her spiritual nature. In 1647 Samuel Richardson, who signed the 1644 London Confession of Faith, wrote a thesis on faith as the evidence of salvation, not the agent in the act of

salvation. William Kiffin, who signed both London confessions (1644 and 1689), wrote the preface to this work, endorsing Richardson's interpretation of faith as an evidence of salvation, not an agent in the saving event. "Justification By Christ Alone Sets Forth the True Place of Faith in Salvation As An Evidence of Interest In Christ But Not A Join-Partner With Christ." Arminian or Reformed/Calvinistic, any view of the new birth that depicts man as in any way cooperating in the process rejects the Biblical teaching that the unsaved person is "dead in trespasses and sins," wholly incapable of doing anything to contribute to his new birth. Some Reformed theologians imply that God sovereignly performs the work in the unregenerate person, a rather mystical idea of "passive obedience." God requires that man contribute to the salvation process; then robotically orchestrates the sinner's actions. Years ago in dialogue with some Christians of a different "stripe," I became aware that folks who embrace the doctrines of grace, along with any form of synergism, human action that fills an agency role in the new birth, always held to the companion doctrine of the absolute predestination of all things. The two ideas must go hand in hand. If God has chosen His elect, but also ordained an intermediate agency (belief of the gospel, faith-response, believing in Jesus, or more aggressive conditions of works for salvation), in order to ensure that all the elect shall hear the gospel and respond favorably to it (whatever one's definition of the terms or conditions of human agency), the advocate of agency-regeneration must hold that God predestinates all the events of human history. Only by making God cause all things can advocates of this doctrine ensure that all the elect shall hear and respond favorably to the gospel. Advocates of this view may claim to be infralapsarian in their view of salvation, but in fact they hold to the supralapsarian view. I suggest that Scripture teaches the view presented by Richardson and Kiffin in 1647, that God acts sovereignly and exclusively in regeneration. Subsequently the regenerated person is capable of manifesting faith in action, the result, not the agent, in his/her salvation experience. Regeneration is an instantaneous act of God, not a synergistic "process." Total depravity requires this view. We shall examine the new birth more fully in a later study.

(1) Elwell, Walter A, Editor, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Baker Books, 1995) Article, "Total Depravity," by C. C. Ryrie, 312-313. (2) Point of time. (3) William Greenough Thayer Shedd and Alan W. Gomes, *Dogmatic Theology*, "First One-Volume Edition (3 Vols. in 1)"--Jacket., 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Pub., 2003), 768.

Elder Joe Holder