

Total Depravity

by Ronald Hanko

Ronald Hanko's sermon on total depravity emphasizes humanity's complete inability to do good and the necessity of God's grace for salvation.

Scripture: Genesis 6:5, John 3:3, Romans 3:9, Romans 5:12, Ephesians 2:1

Topics: "Total Depravity", "Original Sin"

Description

Ronald Hanko preaches on the doctrine of total depravity, emphasizing its importance as the foundational truth that describes man's sinful nature and wretched condition, highlighting the need for God's grace in salvation. The doctrine of total depravity reveals man's rebellious and deliberately evil nature, emphasizing that he is conceived and born a sinner due to original sin. This doctrine is crucial as it leads to a correct diagnosis of man's spiritual condition, showing the necessity of God's grace in the other four points of Calvinism for salvation.

Transcript

The doctrine of total depravity is the first of the Five Points of Calvinism and is represented by the letter T in the memory-help TULIP.

In the Canons of Dordt, the original Five Points, total depravity is not the first point. Unconditional election, represented by the U of TULIP, is first. The reason for this is historical. At the time the Canons were written it was the doctrine of unconditional election that was being attacked more than any other doctrine, and it was that doctrine, therefore, that was defended first.

There is good reason, however, for putting total depravity first. Because the doctrine of total depravity describes man's sinfulness and wretched condition, it shows the need for the grace of God that is described in the other four points. And, certainly, we must see our need before we can have any appreciation for the grace of God that brings salvation. In other words, we must have a correct diagnosis of man's spiritual condition in the first point in order to see that the remedy prescribed by the other four points is the correct remedy. For this reason especially it is best to begin with total depravity and not with unconditional election.

A. The Doctrine

1. Depravity.

This doctrine is sometimes called "total inability," emphasizing correctly sinful man's inability to do good. This name, however, is deficient in this respect, that it describes man's wickedness only as a lack of good, while the opposite is also true. Sinful man not only lacks the good but is actively and willingly evil, and since the word depravity does emphasize this, total depravity is the better name.

So, when we describe man's sinfulness as depravity, we are not just saying that he is bad or wicked, but that he is rebelliously and deliberately evil, that he loves and delights in wickedness of every kind. He is not just passively overcome by sin but actively and willingly uses his strength, ability, and gifts to sin.

The idea is, then, that men are very wicked, much more wicked than they themselves would ever admit. Nor is this wickedness accidental, but deeply imbedded in what a man is, what we call his "nature." In other words, his depravity is not something he has learned or that is the result of his environment, but he is by nature wicked. He does not just do evil but is evil. He is conceived and born a sinner.

The explanation for this is "original sin." By original sin we refer to the sin of man in Adam and every man's responsibility for the sin that Adam committed. Adam did not stand in Paradise as a private individual, his deeds having consequences for himself alone. But Adam stood in Paradise as the head and representative of us all. He was the king of the earthly creation. Being a king, what he did affected all those over whom he was king. The result was that when Adam sinned, we sinned. His sin was reckoned by God to be our sin. This is clearly the teaching of Romans 5:12: "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." (Cf. also I Cor. 15:22.)

The result was further that the punishment of Adam's sin was visited by God upon all men. All men have sinned in Adam, and all men share in the punishment of that sin. The punishment was death. That had been God's threat: "For in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:17). God carried out that threat. Man died - God killed him. One aspect of that death, now, is what the Bible refers to as spiritual death, the loss of man's spiritual life, his total depravity. God punished sin with sin.

So sinful is man by nature that he is dead in sin: "And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). Man is not merely sick, very sick, even critically sick. But he is dead. There is no spiritual life in him whatsoever. Being dead, he has no ability to raise himself to spiritual life, to cooperate in his spiritual resurrection, or even to desire it. From a human point of view, his condition is hopeless.

2. Total depravity.

To speak of total depravity, then, is a bit redundant. This language is used, however, to emphasize that man is so wicked that he lacks any good and even the ability to do good or to want what is good. This emphasis is necessary because of the many ways in which the doctrine of total depravity is denied.

Usually three things are meant by the word total:

a. Total depravity means, first of all, that the totality of the human race is depraved. There is no one, not even a newborn infant, who is not so corrupted and wicked. Nor are there any primitive people who still

live in some kind of "innocence." All are depraved.

b. Total depravity means also that every part of man's existence is filled with wickedness. In other words, not only his actions are wicked, but his speech, his thoughts, his motives, his wishes, his mind, his soul, his spirit, everything he is and does, inwardly and outwardly. He cannot do, desire, or even understand what is good.

c. Total depravity also means that every part of man's existence is completely wicked. That is to say, his mind is not partly wicked and partly good, but totally wicked. And the same is true of every part of his existence, especially of his will. His will is in bondage so that he cannot even want what is good, nor is there any desire for good to be found in his life and thoughts.

This does not mean that every man shows the evil of his sinful nature as much as possible and at all times. Not everyone has the opportunity or means to do so, or even the time in his brief life span. Also, God Himself puts various restraints on men to prevent them from doing all the wickedness that is in their hearts. Among these restraints are the fear of punishment, the desire for the approval of others, and the strictures of government and civil law. But it must be emphasized that these restraints are outward restraints only, something on the order of a muzzle on the jaws of a mad dog, and that they do not in any way lessen the actual wickedness of man or change his wicked heart or make it possible for him to do good. Man is, therefore, as bad as he can be, though he does not always show it and often hides it.

Now, it must be remembered that this is not a judgment any man would make or wants to make of himself or of others. Nor is this a judgment that can be made by observation. The reason for this is also to be found in man's depravity. Just as a blind man cannot fully understand his own blindness because he has never been able to see, so the sinner cannot comprehend his own sinfulness and always thinks well of himself (cf. Jer. 17:9, below). Therefore, the judgment of man's spiritual state can be made only by God Himself. God makes that judgment in His Word and makes it by comparing men to the standard of His own holiness, not to any social standard, or to other men. In fact, God's holiness and perfection are the only standard against which the doctrine of total depravity can be true, and we must learn the truth of total depravity from the Bible and not from our own observations of ourselves or of others.

B. Scripture Passages

1. References to total depravity.

a. Genesis 6:5. And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Notice here the emphasis on the totality of man's depravity. When Scripture says that man's wickedness is "great," it explains this to mean "total." And this is God's own judgment of man's condition ("God saw ..."). It may not be our judgment and we may not agree with it, but that makes no difference.

b. Genesis 8:21. And the Lord smelled a sweet savour; and the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done.

Scripture once again here records God's judgment of man's spiritual condition and this time shows that man's depravity is not merely something that belongs to his maturity but characterizes his life from its beginning.

c. Job 15:14-16. What is man, that he should be clean? and he which is born of a woman, that he should be righteous? Behold, he putteth no trust in his saints; yea, the heavens are not clean in his sight. How much more abominable and filthy is man, which drinketh iniquity as water.

Here the Word of God reminds us that man's wickedness is as natural to him and as much a part of his life as drinking water. And once again the emphasis is on God as the standard by which man is judged, even when in his own sight he may be clean.

d. Psalm 14:1-3. The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good. The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

Here depravity is described as something that characterizes the whole human race. In that respect also it is total. Notice the fivefold emphasis on the fact that no one does any good. This too is the judgment of God when He looks down on the human race. Here also, then, our thinking must be shaped by the Word of God and not by what we ourselves or anyone else may think.

e. Jeremiah 4:22. For my people is foolish, they have not know me; they are sottish children, and they have no understanding: they are wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge.

Depravity, according to this passage is so great that even God's people of themselves do not know how to do good. But this passage is also valuable because it reminds us that man is depraved not only in his actions, but even in his mind, knowledge, and understanding.

f. Jeremiah 13:23. Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to evil.

It is as impossible for man, in his own strength, to do any good as it is for him to change the color of his skin. That is the truth of total depravity - not just that man does not do good but that he cannot. Thus, this passage also teaches us that man's depravity is natural to him.

g. Jeremiah 17:9, 10. The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I, the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give to every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

God asserts here His right as judge and also gives His judgment telling us that our depravity does not merely consist in outwardly wicked actions but that it is finally a matter of our hearts, which are the fountain of all our life (Prov. 4:23), so that the fountain itself being impure it is impossible that anything clean or good should come forth from it.

h. John 3:3, 5. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.... Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Jesus tells Nicodemus and us here that we cannot even see (understand) the kingdom of God except by a miracle and that miracle must be the miracle of a whole new life. As far as the life we now live is concerned, there is no hope. This, of course, is the application of the doctrine of total depravity that must be made. It is not just a doctrine but a description of our hopeless condition.

i. John 6:44. No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.

This passage is concerned with faith, described here as "coming to Jesus." This coming to Jesus or believing, Jesus says, is impossible except by the power of God. No man has that power of himself. This passage is especially important because so many Christians have the mistaken idea that believing is the one good action that sinful man can do. The Word of God here says that it is not so.

j. John 12:37-39. But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him: that the saying of Esaias (Isaiah) the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed? Therefore they could not believe, because that Esaias said again, He hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them.

Here again the emphasis of the Scriptures is on man's total inability to believe apart from the grace of God, but we also find here that this depravity of man is the direct result of God's judgment upon man and does not just happen to be the case with him. His depravity is, then, the death with which God threatened him in the beginning.

k. Romans 1:28-32. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind to do those things that are not convenient; being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, without understanding, covenant breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.

Here the Word of God establishes the fact that man's will is not at all inclined toward God ("they did not like to retain God in their knowledge"), but toward evil. In fact, we read here that men not only do evil but delight in it, even though they know the judgment of God. And the preceding context supports this fully by showing that the worship of the heathen is not a seeking after God, or longing for him, but a changing of the truth of God into a lie.

l. Romans 3:9-19. What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles that they are all under sin; as it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are all together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: their feet are swift to shed blood: destruction and misery are in their ways: and the way of peace they have not known: there is no fear of God before their eyes. Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

The apostle Paul is quoting here from eight different Old Testament passages to prove the depravity of man. That, in itself, is a powerful testimony to the fact that all the Scriptures teach this doctrine. But he shows especially both that all are under sin and that this is due to the fact that all are guilty before God. He also shows from the Scriptures that both in relation to God and to men, in understanding, speech, and deeds, man is wicked. That is the third aspect of total depravity of which we spoke above.

m. Romans 6:16-19. Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey: whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness? But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness. I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to unrighteousness and to iniquity unto iniquity: even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness.

Here Paul describes man's inability to do good as a kind of spiritual slavery, which indeed it is, for in sin we not only refuse to have God as our Master but give our members, that is, ourselves, to the service of sin and Satan, nor can we serve God any more.

n. Romans 8:7, 8. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God.

Once again the Scriptures show that man does not just do evil, perhaps without even intending it, but that he is evil and that his evil-doing is always conscious, active rebellion ("enmity") against God. And again, not only is he not subject to God and not pleasing to God, but he cannot be. He has no ability to do or be good.

o. Galatians 3:22. But the Scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe.

Here is proof that sin is slavery, that depravity is total in the sense that it is true of all men, and that this is not our judgment of ourselves and others, but Scripture's judgment.

p. Ephesians 2:1, 5. And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins.... Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved).

This time our depravity is described as a spiritual death to help us understand that no more than a dead man can think, will, understand, speak, or act can we think, will, understand, speak, or act in a way that is pleasing to God - not without grace and salvation. This passage is proof, therefore also that total depravity and spiritual death are one and the same.

q. Colossians 2:13. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses.

This passage reproduces almost word for word Ephesians 2:1, 5, but we should also note the emphasis on the word "you" in both passages. Paul is reminding us that total depravity does not apply just to the heathen or to savages, but to civilized, educated members of the church, such as these Colossians and such as we.

r. Titus 3:3. For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.

Once again the emphasis lies on the fact that we must confess the truth of total depravity not just of men in general or of other men, but of ourselves. Otherwise it is not total depravity.

2. References to original sin.

a. Genesis 5:3. And Adam lived an hundred and thirty years, and begat a son in his own likeness, after his image; and called his name Seth.

What a testimony this is against man who was created in the image of God but who now begets children, not in God's image, but in his own! We have seen in all the preceding passages what that image is!

b. Job 14:4. Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one.

Not only does this passage teach that it is impossible for a sinner to produce anything good as far as his own words, thoughts, and actions are concerned, but it shows that he cannot even produce offspring who are any different from himself. As the Canons of Dordt say: "A corrupt stock produced a corrupt offspring."

c. Psalm 51:5. Behold I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Here, once more, is the truth that wickedness is not something learned but hereditary and original, attaching itself to the infant still within the womb. Also, we should note that "in sin" does not mean that the act of procreation and conception are sinful but that we are conceived and born utterly sinful, slaves of Satan - that our whole lives are "in sin."

d. Psalm 58:3. The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies.

This text proves that even the depravity of infants is not just a lack of good but an inclination to evil action. And indeed, one has only to observe small children to see that they know how to lie naturally and go astray from God naturally. In fact, they can be taught to speak the truth and follow God only with great effort crowned with the grace of God.

e. Romans 5:12. Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.

This passage not only teaches that spiritual death or depravity is hereditary but that it is hereditary because all men have sinned and therefore are guilty in Adam. That is the essence of the doctrine of original sin and a reminder that man cannot be in any worse condition than he now is before God.

There are, of course, many other passages that could be quoted, but these are the principle passages, and they show that whatever people may think of the doctrine of total depravity, it is, unmistakably, the teaching of the Scriptures.

C. Difficult Passages

There are also a number of Scripture passages which are used against the doctrine of total depravity. We should look at some of these passages and see what they actually teach in order that we may see clearly that the Scriptures do not contradict themselves or teach anything else than man's total depravity.

1. Deuteronomy 29:19.

This verse would seem to teach that natural man (man unsaved) has a free will, that is, that he can at least choose whether or not he wants life or death, blessing or cursing, even though he may not be able to obtain these things by his own strength. If he can do that, he is able to do real good, for there are few things as pleasing to God as choosing life and blessing.

The mistake that is made, however, is that some conclude from verses such as this that the command to choose between life and death implies that men have the power to obey it. That is not true. Man cannot obey anything God commands, but God continues to command it of him and judges him for his disobedience. Nor is it unfair of God to command what man cannot do without God's grace, for it was man who willingly chose his present condition when he fell into sin in the beginning.

2. Joshua 24:15, 22.

Here is another passage that might seem to teach that people not only have the opportunity to choose either the service of God or idolatry but that they are actually able by themselves to choose that service of God. Again, if it be true that men can choose to serve God by the power of their own wills (choosing is the function of the will), then they are able to do some good and cannot be said to be totally depraved.

The solution to this must be found in the context, especially in verse 19, where Joshua tells the people that they cannot serve the Lord, meaning obviously that they cannot do this apart from the grace of God. This text does not mean, then, that God's people, i.e., those who are saved by God's grace, cannot choose to serve God. They do, and they not only choose to serve Him but actually do serve Him, though never without sin. They can do good, therefore, but only then because God Himself has worked in them both to will and to do His good pleasure. Apart from God's grace Joshua's words are always true: "Ye cannot serve the Lord."

3. II Kings 10:28, 30.

The argument here is that Jehu, though he himself was a wicked man, was nevertheless able to do good by doing what God had commanded when he destroyed the whole family of wicked Ahab. It is very clear, however, that Jehu did not do this out of love for God, for he himself re-established the worship of the golden calves, which Jeroboam had originally set up to keep the people from the worship of God in Jerusalem (I Kings 12:26-28). Rather, he did it only for himself, to secure for himself the kingdom. And the Bible teaches us that whatever is not done for the glory of God, even though it be what God commands, is neither obedience nor good in the sight of God (Matt. 22:37, 38; 23:25-28; Rom. 14:23; I Cor. 10:31).

4. Acts 2:40.

Here again, the command to the people gathered for Pentecost to save themselves does not imply that they have the ability to do that. In fact, the Word of God makes it very clear that no man has that power in himself (Eph. 2:8-10).

5. Acts 16:31.

What we have just said applies to faith also. The command to believe does not imply that all men who hear that command have the ability to obey or that their believing depends upon their choice whether or not they will do it. The passage cited above, Ephesians 2:8-10, emphatically says that faith is a gift of God.

6. Romans 2:14, 15.

Though this passage says that the Gentiles, that is, the heathen, do the works of the law and have the work of the law written in their hearts, it does not say that this is in any way good in the sight of God. Actually, the opposite is true, that they are all under sin (Rom. 3:9), and their doing the works of the law is their condemnation and leaves them without excuse (Rom. 1:19, 20). So, here again the context makes it very clear that this passage does not at all contradict the truth of total depravity but rather supports it.

Many other passages could be cited in this connection, but the main two points are clear, first, that the commands of God do not imply that man has the power to obey them, and second, that mere outward conformity to the law of God is not good as far as God is concerned but a very great abomination.

D. Objections

1. Total depravity is a depressing doctrine.

One objection to the doctrine of total depravity that is often heard is that it destroys people's happiness and peace and leads them to despair. If this is true, then the doctrine cannot possibly be biblical, for the teaching of the Bible is designed to be "good news" and to lead to the greatest happiness and blessing (Ps. 29:11; 119:165; II Cor. 1:3, 4).

That this is not true is due to the fact that the doctrine of total depravity is never preached apart from all the other doctrines of grace, and in connection with the doctrine of grace it is, as we have seen, the divine "diagnosis" which must precede the application of a proper remedy to the sinner. Without such a correct diagnosis the remedy will never even be recognized or received.

The Scriptures themselves show this. In Luke 5:32, Jesus says: "I came not to call the righteous (that is, those who thought that they were righteous), but sinners (that is, those who know themselves to be sinners) to repentance." The parable of the Pharisee and the publican was specifically addressed to "certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others" (Luke 18:9). In that parable, it was the man who acknowledged himself such a sinner as we have described that went home justified. The Pharisee, who did not know himself to be totally depraved, did not.

2. Total depravity contradicts our experience.

Another objection that is sometimes adduced against the biblical teaching of total depravity is that it contradicts our experience. People just do not appear to be as bad as the Bible seems to indicate they are. This is apparently even more of a problem when one looks at the "good" deeds, the works of charity and philanthropy, that people do.

There are several things we must remember in answering this objection. First of all, we must remember that even our ability to see and judge sin is affected by our own sinfulness. One of the great characteristics of the sinner is that he is spiritually blind, not just to his own sin, but also to the sinfulness of mankind. His heart deceives him also in this (Jer. 17:9).

We need to remember, too, that we see only the outward deeds a person does. We cannot see his heart and cannot, therefore, know anything about his motives in doing even works of charity and philanthropy. And the Word says that anything which is not done out of faith, with thanks, and for the glory of God is sin (Is. 66:3; Rom. 1:20, 21; 14:23; I Cor. 10:31).

What is more, when our experience seems to contradict the Word of God at this or any point, there is no question what we must believe. The Word of God must stand and before it even our experience must bow.

E. Denials of Total Depravity

Through the history of the church there have been many attacks on the doctrine of total depravity and many different ways in which the doctrine has been denied. It is good to know something about these errors because they are still being taught today. However, we will study them not by way of criticizing any particular person who may believe differently, but so that we ourselves are firmly grounded in the truth (Col. 2:7).

1. Pelagianism.

The oldest of the heresies which deny total depravity is the error of Pelagianism, named after the British monk who first taught it in the fifth century, A.D. This error is mentioned seven times by name in the Canons of Dordt.

Pelagianism teaches that Adam's sin had no consequences for his descendants and that therefore all men are born spiritually neutral, neither good nor bad, and that it is possible that they live an entirely sinless life. Even having sinned, according to Pelagius, it is possible for man to return to harmony with God by his own will and good works, and if he receives God's grace, it is only an assisting grace, not an efficacious (powerful unto salvation) grace. The fact that most men are sinners is to be explained only by their imitating others and not by any inherent or natural tendency toward sin.

This error is still taught today in many forms. It is really the error that lies behind modern educational philosophy, modern psychology and psychiatry, and modern judicial theory. These all hold that man's only problem is that he learns (by imitation or from his environment) wrong patterns of behavior, which must be

changed and can be changed by education, rehabilitation, or psychiatric counselling. A very good example of this philosophy is the modern idea that criminals ought not be punished but rehabilitated. This, of course, is humanism through and through, but Pelagianism and humanism are really the same thing. In both cases sin is not seen as sin against God, the total depravity of man is not recognized, and his faults are only viewed as social failures.

The chief problem is, however, that much of the church world has accepted this humanistic and Pelagian philosophy. It is taught, for example, by those who advocate a "self-help" gospel, or a gospel of "positive thinking," which teaches that man is basically good, must not think guilty thoughts, and can save himself by his own willpower. It is accepted by those who see the calling of the church not as the calling to preach the gospel but to do away with slums, poverty, sickness, segregation, and other such social evils, i.e., to change man's bad environment. It is basic to the notion that the church's fight is the fight against earthly oppression. It is the essence of so-called liberation theology, i.e., that salvation consists in the liberation of all the poor and oppressed peoples of the world. All such teaching is Pelagian in that it does not recognize man's spiritually fallen condition and believes that he is fully able to help himself and deliver himself from his problems. In addition, of course, there is a Pelagian tendency in all of us in that we often fail to see our own sin and its seriousness and try so often to find our own way out of our sin problems. That is why Pelagianism is so dangerous.

2. Semi-Pelagianism.

Semi-Pelagianism is a modified form of Pelagianism that was taught in the church after Augustine. Due to his influence the church first rejected Pelagianism but later compromised and began to teach what is called Semi-Pelagianism. This is still today the theology of the Roman Catholic Church.

Semi-Pelagianism says that Adam's fall did have an affect upon Adam's descendants and that they are born sinners. However, Semi-Pelagianism teaches that the effect of Adam's fall is not that men are totally depraved, or dead in sin, but that they are only sick in sin. In other words, man still has some ability to do good, just as a sick man still has some power. Semi-Pelagianism even teaches that man is so sick in sin, that though he can do good, he cannot actually save himself. Nevertheless, apart from saving grace, he is able to do good works and to earn some favor with God (the Roman Catholic doctrine of meritorious good works). All this is possible because God gives what is called "prevenient grace" to all men without exception, that is, grace which makes it possible for them to do good and to merit without receiving saving grace.

3. Arminianism.

Arminianism is a further modification of Semi-Pelagianism that is taught in Protestant circles. It is also named after the man who first taught it, Jacobus Arminius. It was against his teaching that the Canons of Dordt were written. For a good understanding of Arminianism one should consult the negative (Rejection of Errors) sections of the Canons. Arminianism is different from Pelagianism only in this respect, that it rejects the idea that men can do all sorts of meritorious good works and teaches that there is but one good thing that he can do by his own power, that is the good work of choosing Christ, or of believing in Him. In other words, the principal teaching of Arminianism is that man has a free will and that he is not totally the

slave of sin. It teaches that man's will is hindered by sin but that God gives grace to all men sufficient to remove these hindrances so that men can, by their own power, choose for or against God. The difference, then, between Roman Catholic Semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism is that in Semi-Pelagianism salvation is of him that runneth and in Arminianism it is of him that willeth (cf. Rom. 9:16). In neither case is it of God who shows mercy.

This is, by and large, the belief of the majority of Christians today, though there are exceptions. The whole theology, for example, of "decisions for Christ," of "accepting Christ," of "opening one's heart to Christ," of the altar call, and of the "Jesus is waiting" type of preaching presupposes that man has yet some ability and freedom of will unto salvation. And faith, then, is not a gift of God, primarily, but man's own good work.

It is not difficult to see that this is not the doctrine of total depravity.

Nor is this merely a doctrinal issue. This teaching, among other things, changes the very character of gospel preaching, so that the preaching becomes an attempt to sell Christ to men and to persuade them to accept Him, instead of the proclaiming of the glory and grace of God.

4. Common grace.

The theology which teaches a common grace of God also denies total depravity. It admits that man has no power to do what is called saving good, that is, the good of choosing for God and for Christ and for salvation. It says, however, that there is a certain grace of God which is given to all men, even to the unsaved, which makes it possible for them to do what is called civil good, that is, things which though they have no saving value, nevertheless are good in the sight of God in that they promote decency and good order in society and allow men to live in some ways in peace and harmony among themselves. Along with this the doctrine of common grace usually teaches that there is a universal operation of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of all men which makes it possible for them to do this good and which keeps them from being as bad as they might be.

This is really no different from Arminianism in that it says that there is yet some good in man. It may be very little, but it is still good, and obviously, if man can do anything good, he is not totally wicked. But it should also be pointed out that this teaching fails to take into account the fact that there is more to a good deed than just the outward action. The most important thing, in fact, is not the action itself but the motivation for it. If it is not done for God's glory and by faith, it is sin and God hates it (cf. Prov. 21:4; Is. 66:2, 3; Mal. 2:11-13).

5. The free offer of the gospel.

This very common teaching says that the preaching of the gospel constitutes a well-intentioned offer from God to all who hear, i.e., that God, for His part, wants their salvation and even offers it to them.

Now, apart from the fact that the Scriptures never once speak of the gospel as an offer of salvation and apart from the inconsistency of many who believe this and at the same time say that God from eternity does not want the salvation of all who hear the gospel, there is the fact that an offer, if it is to be meaningful, must mean that those to whom the offer is made have some power to accept or refuse that

offer. And if man has any power to respond to an offer of grace in the gospel, he cannot be totally depraved. An offer of assistance to a dead man is obviously meaningless, and an offer, to use another example, to teach physics to a retarded person would be mere mockery. God's work is neither meaningless nor mockery.

The answer of many to this dilemma is to say that God gives to all men who hear the gospel a certain preparatory grace or common grace (another version of that doctrine) to make such a choice, but this is simply the old Roman Catholic doctrine and also a denial of the biblical truth that grace is always irresistible and unto salvation.

6. Free will.

Many Christians today believe that man has a free will, that is, he is able to choose between good and evil, between God and the devil, between salvation and damnation. This is the basic teaching of Arminianism but is important enough that it should be mentioned separately. Nor is it much different from the idea that the gospel is an offer of grace. It only looks at the matter from a slightly different viewpoint. This freedom of the will, according to those who believe in it, may be limited, so that the sinner can do nothing more than make the necessary choice. God must do the rest. But once again, it ascribes some ability to do good to fallen man, no matter how limited and small that ability may be. Free will and total depravity, therefore, are not compatible, but opposite doctrines.

7. Absolute depravity.

Some make a distinction between what they call total depravity and something they call absolute depravity. Absolute depravity, they say, is the doctrine we have been describing, which is neither truly Calvinistic nor biblical, that is, that man is utterly bad, without any good or possibility of good to be found in him. Total depravity, in their opinion, only means that men are wicked in every part, heart, soul, mind, and strength, but not completely wicked in any part. One writer uses the example of a few drops of ink in water. Every drop is discolored, but none is completely black. That, supposedly, is total depravity. But apart from the fact that this is mere sophistry (what is the difference between total and absolute?), this clearly cannot be said to be the doctrine of total depravity, since it is not total. Nor is it the doctrine of total depravity that has been taught by Reformed and Presbyterian churches from the time of the Reformation on. Actually, absolute depravity, if it refers to anything, refers to the depravity of the fallen angels for whom there is no hope of salvation.

F. Practical Importance

There are many practical implications of the doctrine of total depravity. It is important that we see some of these implications so that we are persuaded that this doctrine is not a mere abstraction and that debate about it is not just empty talk of no importance.

1. Total depravity and repentance.

The most important practical implication of total depravity for each individual Christian is that knowledge of the doctrine leads to true repentance for sin. Only if we understand that we have no goodness at all and that we are entirely without hope, will we be able to see the greatness of our sin and mourn over it as we should. As long as we think that there is even the least bit of good in us, we will not be inclined to think of our sins or confess them before God.

The opposite is also true. One who does not confess his sins daily before God and mourn for them does not really understand the truth of total depravity, even though he may call himself a Calvinist. Indeed, it may be said, that the proof of our belief in total depravity is our attitude toward our own sins.

2. Total depravity and parental discipline.

In our families it is the doctrine of total depravity that motivates faithful discipline of our children. When we constantly cover up and overlook the sins of our children, make excuses for them, and do not discipline our children as we should, it is because we do not take their sin seriously; and if we do not take their sin seriously, it can be only because we fail to see that they are totally depraved.

The Bible itself makes this connection between the depravity of our children and the necessity of Christian parental discipline in Proverbs 23:14, 15:

Withhold not correction from the child: for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die.

Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell.

Clearly, only the parent who really believes that his child is hellbound in his sins will be able to receive the Word of God in these verses and do it.

3. Total depravity and the gospel.

In the church and on the mission field only the faithful preaching of total depravity will convict the sinner of his need for the cross and insure at the same time that all the glory of his salvation is given to God. We all know from our own experience that as long as we have any strength or resources of our own we do not turn for help to Christ as we should and neither will the unconverted sinner as long as he is told that he has some worthiness or goodness of his own. Also, to the extent that the doctrine of total depravity is neglected in the preaching and that some good is ascribed to the sinner, the honor of God and glory of God as the only Savior are stolen from Him. The doctrine of total depravity, then, can never be a dangerous doctrine in the preaching of the gospel, as some think, but is an integral part of the gospel. This we sing in the beautiful hymn "Beneath the Cross of Jesus":

And from my smitten heart with tears

Two wonders I confess -

The wonder of redeeming love

And my unworthiness.

The wonder of our own depravity and the wonder of salvation by grace go hand in hand. We cannot confess one without the other.

4. Total depravity and the antithesis.

In the world and in relation to wicked men only the truth of total depravity will motivate us to maintain our spiritual separation from the world (sometimes called the antithesis). If we think that there is any good in the ungodly, we will not see any reason to be separate from them. Only when we see that they are "unrighteousness," "darkness," "sons of Belial," "infidels," and "idolaters," will we heed the call to "come out from among them and be separate" (II Cor. 6:14-17). Then and only then we will see that there is no possibility of cooperating with them (II Chron. 19:2), inter-marrying with them (I Cor. 7:39), or keeping fellowship with them (Eph. 5:11).

These are some of the more important implications of the doctrine for our life. May we see in them the importance of holding to this doctrine without compromise or neglect.

G. Relation to the Other Four Points

There is a very close relationship between this first point and the other four points of Calvinism. There are those who call themselves three- or four-point Calvinists and even hold to some degree to these truths, but in the end and because these five truths are so closely interwoven with each other, it is impossible to maintain any of them consistently without maintaining them all.

The relationship is this: the doctrine of total depravity, or, if you will, of total inability, makes sovereign grace the only possible way of salvation and makes necessary an election which is unconditional, not depending on man's work or worthiness, an atonement which does not just make salvation possible for all men but actually saves those whom God has chosen, a grace which is so powerful as to be utterly irresistible, and which saves to the uttermost those who receive it, so that they are preserved and do persevere to the end.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/ronald-hanko/total-depravity/>

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