

# Total Hereditary Depravity

**Introduction.** There are only a few true Calvinists who accept all of Calvin's tenants. Most people understand that we must choose to follow God instead of our salvation being totally controlled by God. Yet, although some of Calvin's concepts have been rejected by many, there are a lot who hold on to all of these doctrines without understanding them.

The system of Calvinism is a very logical system. It is not the logic of the system that is at fault, but the origin of it and the failure of the facts to support the logic. The entire system of Calvinism fits together like pieces in a puzzle which in turn are all based upon total hereditary depravity. If one can prove this wrong, the whole system falls!

## I. **Total Hereditary Depravity Explained By Calvinists**

- A. Man's nature is corrupt throughout. Steele and Thomas, in *The Five Points Of Calvinism*, say, "When Calvinists speak of man as being totally depraved, they mean that man's nature is corrupt, perverse, and sinful throughout. The adjective 'total' does not mean that each sinner is as totally or completely corrupt in his actions and thought as it is possible for him to be. Instead the word 'total' is used to indicate that the WHOLE of man's being has been affected by sin. The corruption extends to EVERY PART of man, his body and soul; sin has affected all (the totality) of man's faculties -- his mind, his will, etc."
- B. Man does not have the ability to choose spiritual good over evil. Again, Steele and Thomas state, "Man did not come from the hands of his Creator in this depraved, corrupt condition. God made Adam upright; there was no evil whatsoever in his nature. Originally, Adam's will was free from the dominion of sin; he was under no natural compulsion to choose evil, but through his fall he brought spiritual death upon himself and all his posterity. He thereby plunged himself and the entire race into spiritual ruin and lost for himself and his descendants the ability to make right choices in the spiritual realm. His descendants are still free to choose -- every man makes choices throughout his life -- but inasmuch as Adam's offspring are born with sinful natures, they do not have the ABILITY to choose spiritual good over evil. Consequently, man's will is no longer free (i.e., free from the dominion of sin) as Adam's will was free before the fall. Instead, man's will, as the result of inherited depravity, is in bondage to his sinful nature."

## II. **The Results Of Total Hereditary Depravity**

- A. Men would have come to know God naturally without any extraordinary means of conveying the knowledge of Him to their hearts.

1. According to Calvin, if Adam had not sinned, then all men would have come to the full knowledge of God in a natural manner. The awareness of God planted in man would have responded to the manifestation of God in nature.
  2. He said, "I speak only of that simple and primitive knowledge, to which the mere course of nature would have conducted us, had Adam stood upright" (*Institutes*, vol. 1, p. 40), and "Hence would arise both confidence in Him, and a desire of cleaving to Him, did not the depravity of the human mind lead it away from the proper course of investigation" (p. 41).
- B. Now it is necessary that the Spirit penetrate our hearts to convince us of God's will.
1. He wrote, "Our conviction of the truth of Scripture must be derived from a higher source than human conjectures, judgments, or reasons; namely, the secret testimony of the Spirit" (*Institutes*, vol. 1, p. 71).
  2. Calvin also says that although the scripture is inspired, "Still, however, it is preposterous to attempt, by discussion, to rear up a full faith in Scripture" (p. 71). He wrote, "The same Spirit, therefore, who spoke by the mouth of the prophets must penetrate our hearts, in order to convince us that they faithfully delivered the message with which they were divinely intrusted" (p. 72), and "This singular privilege God bestows on His elect only, whom he separates from the rest of mankind" (p. 73).
- C. Many infants are lost in hell.
1. This is probably the most unpopular doctrine of Calvinism. In our day, it would be regarded as anathema by most people. The doctrine is so unpopular that in 1910 the Methodist Church rejected it.
  2. In Calvin's day, the doctrine of Original Sin was widely believed, both in the Catholic Church and among Protestants. Let us show how this result may be fairly drawn from Calvin's teachings.
    - a) All of the non-elect are born into the world, just as are the elect. Some of the non-elect die as infants. Therefore they are in hell, because they are reprobates. According to Calvin, therefore, it is as Jonathan Edwards used to preach: "There are babes in hell not a span long." Note this statement by Calvin: "Moreover, infants who are to be saved (and that some are saved at this age is certain) must, without question, be previously regenerated by the Lord" (*Institutes*, vol. 2, p. 541). Calvin refers to infants who are to be saved. Clearly his statement implies that some infants are not to be saved. Also his words, "some are saved at this age," implies that some are not. That infants are in hell is a necessary inference from Calvin's teachings.

- b) The practice of sprinkling children is a direct result of the doctrine of Original Sin, first in the Catholic Church and then in the Reformed Church. Calvin argues extensively for the practice. He seems to teach that children who are baptized are thereby indicated to be of the elect. "The objection [that infants are incapable of penitence and faith] is easily disposed of by the fact, that children are baptized for future repentance and faith" (p. 543). Infant baptism is a sign of regeneration. Calvin says, "If those on whom the Lord has bestowed His election, after receiving the sign of regeneration, depart this life before they become adults, He, by the incomprehensible energy of His Spirit, renews them in the way which He alone sees to be expedient" (p. 543).
- c) Do you suppose that any infants that were sprinkled grew up to forsake the Lord and the church? Who would like to guess how many did this? What impact would this fact have on the idea that infant baptism is a sign of regeneration, and that it would be an indication of election?

### III. ***Prooftexts Examined***

#### A. Romans 5:12-19.

1. Paul is discussing the fact of how sin entered into the world. Nothing in the text suggests the doctrine of total depravity.
2. By one man, Adam, sin entered the world and death by sin. So death passed on all men on the ground that all sinned. Through one act of righteousness, free gift came unto all men.
3. The contrast is not identical: They differ in power, one to kill -- death; one to make alive -- grace. They differ in causes, one offense -- condemnation to all -- death; grace for all offenses -- righteousness -- eternal life. They differ in character, Adam's sin, death reigns as a tyrant; while grace and justification by faith reigns through Jesus.
4. Men are not constituted righteous in Christ without some act of obedience on their part; men are not constituted sinners in Adam without transgression on their part. If this passage teaches universal depravity, then it teaches universal salvation.

#### B. Ecclesiastes 7:20.

1. This refers to a just man, not to a totally depraved baby (cf. Ecclesiastes 7:29).
2. No one lives above sin (1 John 1:8).

#### C. Job 14:4.

1. Job is arguing that surely man cannot be expected to live perfectly. All men are unclean because of sin before God. How could perfection be expected from such?

2. We must remember that in any case such as this, any obscure verse must be interpreted in the light of plain passages such as Ezekiel 18:20.

D. Psalm 58:3.

1. Estranged from womb is a hyperbole to show that men begin to sin early (Psalm 22:10; 7:16).
2. They go astray, they are not born so. Speaking lies is impossible for infants. If babes can do this, then infant damnation must exist (Revelation 21:8).

E. Isaiah 48:8.

1. Rebellion involves voluntary action; not inherited depravity.
2. This refers to Israel as a nation; her origin was compared to a birth. This verse means that from her earliest existence, Israel was disobedient to God.

F. Genesis 8:21.

1. Again, this is from his youth; it is not stated that he was born that way.
2. Goliath was a man of war from his youth; it does not mean he was born fighting (1 Samuel 17:33).
3. Rejoice with the wife of your youth (Proverbs 5:18).

G. Psalm 51:5.

1. His mother was in sin, not David. If he were brought forth in a garden and conceived in a pumpkin patch, would he be a pumpkin? Jesus was born in a stable, but He was not a colt or a bale of hay.
2. Jesus was born of woman, experiencing human nature in its completeness (Galatians 4:4; Hebrews 2:16-17). Was He totally depraved? Calvin says, "We do not hold Christ to be free from all taint, merely because He was born of a woman unconnected with a man, but because He was sanctified by the Spirit, so that the generation was pure and spotless, such as it would have been before Adam's fall" (*Institutes*, vol. 1, p. 414), and "He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, that, completely pervaded with His holiness in the flesh which He had assumed, He might transfuse it into us" (vol. 2, p. 541).
3. What David referred to was the environment in which he was conceived and born. It is a world of lust and evil influences. He did not prove immune to its allure.

H. Proverbs 29:15.

1. This is true. However, the text does not say, "The child does so because he is born totally depraved."
2. A child like this would already be a shame to his mother.

I. Exodus 20:5.

1. Children suffer the consequences of the father's sin but not the guilt (Ezekiel 18:20).
2. Adam's sin is not transferred to us, and Christ's righteousness is not transferred to us. Sin and death come because of personal transgression (Romans 3:23).
3. In Matthew 18:3; 19:14, if children have a depraved nature this would make Jesus teach that one must become totally depraved to enter the kingdom!

J. Ephesians 2:3.

1. Notice the statement, "ye walked," in vs. 2. Children are not born walking!
2. Thayer defines "nature" as "a mode of feeling and acting which by long habit has become nature." How can a child have a long-held habit?

K. Romans 3:9-20.

1. All have gone, not born, out of the way (vs. 12). They are become, not born, unprofitable (vs. 12).
2. They are changed by the gospel, which is the righteousness of God (vss. 21, 26; Romans 1:16-17).
3. In the context, not one of these descriptions fits a newborn infant, but all of them are applicable to adults who have turned from God and gone into sin.

**Conclusion.** Calvinism stands or fall on the doctrine of total hereditary depravity. If the claim is true that man does not have the ability to choose good over evil, then obviously no one could be righteous unless God makes him so. This doctrine not only denies the free will of man, it leaves God to blame if anyone is left lost and unchosen by Him (Acts 10:34-35; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4-6). Therefore, the doctrine of total hereditary depravity is false not only because of its untenable consequences, but also because the doctrine itself contradicts the Bible which teaches that each person is responsible before God (Romans 14:12; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

I am deeply indebted to Robert Harkrider for the use of his material.