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What Is Meant by Total Depravity?

This depravity, Scripture and our Confessions teach us, is total.

Before we enter into a more detailed description of that, I must call your attention to some distinctions that have been made and have become increasingly popular. These distinctions are evidently intended to soften the truth of total depravity. There is, e.g., the distinction which is sometimes made between *total* depravity and *absolute* depravity. This distinction is intended to mean that while man is totally depraved, he is not absolutely depraved. The following quotation will serve to elucidate what is meant by this distinction. (It is taken from *The Banner* and is found in an article which is explaining the *Canons of Dordt*, especially *Canons III & IV*, Article 4.)

The result of the fall is total depravity or corruption. By this is meant that every part of man is rendered corrupt. The Canons say that man "became involved in blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity, perverseness of judgment; became wicked, rebellious, obdurate in heart and will and impure in his affection." There was no part of his nature that was not affected by sin. The word "total" must not be taken in the absolute sense as though man is completely depraved. Man is not as bad as he can be. Article 4, which we hope to consider more fully later in this series, speaks of "glimmerings of natural light which remain in man since the fall." God does restrain the working of sin in the life of man on earth. And sinful man still has a sense of right and wrong. His corruption is total in the sense that there is no part of his being that is pure and holy; and the good he does is done for God and for His glory.

In this quotation the distinction is made between total depravity and absolute depravity. Total depravity means that man is depraved ***in every part of his being***. But while he is depraved in every part of his being, at the same time there remain in every part of his being remnants of good. Absolute depravity means that every part of his being is wholly bad. This

distinction therefore is intended precisely to leave room for some good which man is able to perform. And this good is particularly the good of accepting with his will the offer of the gospel. That is precisely what our Canons do **not** mean by total depravity.

Another distinction which is oftentimes made is a distinction between the inward motive of the heart and the outward deed. There are some who maintain that, while indeed man is, as far as his nature is concerned, depraved, nevertheless, as far as his outward deeds are concerned, he is still capable of a considerable amount of good. He can perform works that are externally in harmony with the law of God. He doesn't live a totally adulterous life. He doesn't go around shooting his fellow man with a gun - every man he meets on the street. He is capable of conforming his life and conduct in an external manner to the law of God and of performing a great deal of good even though within he is corrupt.

That too is something which our fathers did not mean. They spoke of total depravity. And indeed they meant that man is just as bad as he can be. And this is what Scripture teaches.

There is another distinction which is made between what is called spiritual good and natural good. The quotation above also suggests this distinction. By spiritual good is meant good which is a possible basis for salvation. It is a tentative step in the direction of heaven. These insist that, while man is indeed incapable of such spiritual good, nevertheless he is definitely capable of natural good. By natural good is meant something very much like external goodness which is an external conformity to the law of God. Those who maintain this will point to the world in which we live where much of this natural goodness is to be found.

All of these distinctions, in one way or another, are intended to soften the hardness of the doctrine of total depravity.

When Calvin and the fathers of Dordt insisted that depravity was total, they knew what words mean. And they knew that "total" means precisely that. They intended that the expression "total depravity" be a description of what Scripture calls "death". The sinner is dead; spiritually dead. He comes into this world from his mother a spiritual still-born. He is not sick. He is not afflicted with a malady or a disease no matter how fatal. He is dead. And

this is the emphatic teaching of Scripture. Always the Scriptures insist that the sinner is dead.

What does this mean?

This means that his nature is so thoroughly corrupted by sin that it is incapable of producing anything good. There is nothing which the sinner can do which is pleasing in the sight of God. His heart is dead. Does not Solomon say, "Out of the heart are all the issues of life?" Prov.4:23. Yet the heart, the source of all man's life, is dead. Man's mind is dead. It is so darkened by sin that man cannot with his mind know any spiritual good. He can, of course, in a formal sense understand the truth. When a wicked man reads the Scriptures, he can understand what words mean. He can understand the thoughts in these words. This is not the point. But his mind is so thoroughly darkened that every time he sees the truth concerning God he hates it and turns against it. He rebels against its clear teaching. He pushes it away from him. So true is this that Jesus tells Nicodemus ([John 3:3](#)): "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." His mind is so filled with the darkness of the lie that there is no room for the truth in it.

The same is true of man's will. The bondage of the will describes man's state precisely. His will is bound - bound by sin. Man cannot even will the good. The sinner does not, but also cannot will the good. This is his nature. He is dead. Can a dead man think? Can a dead man will? Can a dead man give evidence of life? The spiritually dead man is incapable of any spiritual good.

This is what our *Canons* express in III & IV, Article 1:

Man was originally formed after the Image of God. His understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator, and of spiritual things; his heart and will were upright; all his affections pure; and the whole man was holy; but revolting from God by the instigation of the devil, and abusing the freedom of his own will, he forfeited these excellent gifts; and on the contrary entailed on himself blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity and perverseness of judgment, became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in his affections.

I cannot think of a worse description of man than that. You object perhaps, and say: "Yes, but the *Canons* also speak of glimmerings of natural light."

This is true. They speak of glimmerings of natural light whereby man retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil. These glimmerings give man some regard for virtue, for good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment.

But two points must be made in this connection.

In the first place, when God brought death upon man as the punishment for sin, God did not make man a devil. God did not make man an animal either. Man remained man. And this is what our Canons mean. He was totally depraved; but he was emphatically a totally depraved man. It is sometimes objected that if God had not preserved some remnants of good in man, man would have become a demon or a beast. This is absurd. Man would not have become a demon or a beast if some elements of goodness were not preserved in him. He was created a man. As a man God punishes him. As a man God drives him out of His world. As a man God puts him in hell. But he remains a man. This is what the Canons mean.

In the second place, the Canons explain themselves what these glimmerings of natural light are; and the Canons in the same article (III & IV, 4) show clearly that they do not mean that man is still good.

But so far is this light of nature from being sufficient to bring him to a saving knowledge of God, and to true conversion, that he is incapable of using it aright even in things natural and civil. Nay further, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God.

This is the sorry picture of man which our Canons make as they defend the truth of total depravity. And the point is then that if man's nature is dead, one cannot expect that out of that dead nature there will proceed good works. How is this possible? Can a dead man do good? natural good? external good? good by whatever name it is called? Can a rotten tree bring forth good fruit? Can an impure and foul fountain bring forth sweet water? Can a dead corpse bring forth life? If man's nature is depraved, not simply in all of its parts, but in such a way that each part is thoroughly corrupt, then there is no good at all which man can perform in any sense of the word which is pleasing in the sight of God, He cannot do natural good. He cannot do spiritual good. He cannot do civil good. He cannot conform his

nature to the law of God. He cannot will his salvation. He is bound hopelessly in the shackles of sin.

Nor must some good he found among the heathen. It is often pictured in our day as if the heathen earnestly crave to be delivered from their idols; earnestly long to escape from the shackles of dark heathendom. And, so it is told us, they would indeed serve the true God if only they knew Who He was. They wait in eager anticipation for someone to tell them about the true God, about Christ, because all their yearnings are in the direction of the true religion. And so it is that when the gospel is preached, this gospel brings to them words which they have long desired to hear; and which now they readily embrace.

But all this can never be. We must not soften the harsh sentence of Scripture. Man is totally depraved. In him is to be found no good thing.

I suppose there are some who would object to all this and insist: "Yes, but when I go out and observe the conduct of my fellow man, I observe something quite contrary to what you say. I see in the world a great deal of love--love between man and wife; love between parents and children; love of man for man. There is a great deal of compassion, philanthropy, desire to help one another in the world of the wicked. There are marvelous accomplishments, which stagger the imagination, on the frontiers of science, technology, and industry. There are wonders of healing performed in medicine. What mighty deeds man can perform! What great things he is capable of! Are not you being unduly harsh? Is not your sentence unjust? Are not you closing your eyes to obvious realities which surround you? Go into the world and you will find that your judgment of man is too severe."

What must we say of this?

There are three points which need to be made.

In the first place, we must be reminded of what was said in the very introduction. We are not formulating the truth of total depravity on the basis of observation. If we do, we shall fail. We must not pay attention to the sentence of man pronounced upon man. We must rather listen to the Word of God -- God's sentence upon man. God Who knows the heart. We have one calling, and that is to bow before the Word of God. And God says that man is dead.

In the second place, we must say something about these apparent good deeds.

That problem, strikingly enough, arose already at the time of Augustine. There were those who objected to Augustine's doctrine on the same ground. But Augustine made this very pointed comment: the apparent good which men do is the result of the fact that, in their lives, one kind of lust represses and restrains another kind. He used the example of a man whose whole life is dominated by the lust for money. Such a man is so completely absorbed in acquiring to himself an abundance of material things that this lust is dominant, all-encompassing in his life. It is a completely driving force which banishes all other lusts. In the pursuit of gain, he foregoes all other pleasures. He does not want to squander his money in gluttony, drunkenness, riotous living. He eats sparingly and drinks in moderation. He does not waste his precious hoard of silver and gold in an adulterous life. He thinks this foolish, for he seeks money for its own sake. This is the explanation for the apparent good which men do. One lust restrains another. This was Augustine's answer. And this is true.

Can you call these things the man does "good"? Can you call it good when a man foregoes the pleasures of adultery in order to accumulate for himself greater riches of gold? Is this good in the sight of God? Of course not. The same is true of the so-called apparent philanthropy of men and their many works of mercy. The one driving force in man's life is his lust for honor and recognition. Sin is pride. And man is always attempting to exalt himself before the eyes of his fellow man. In this lustful, dominating drive for honor and fame he is willing to spread his largesse abroad. He is willing to share his riches with his fellow men in order that they may praise him and he may hear, ringing in his ears, the acclaim of those with whom he lives. Is this good? How can it be?

In the broader sense of the word, this is true of the entire history of this sorry world. When God created Adam in Paradise, God set Adam in the midst of this beautiful world only that Adam might love his God with all his heart and mind and soul and strength. He was given the world to glorify his Maker. This was the sole reason for his existence. But Adam refused and bent his ear to the devil. He listened to the devil's whisperings: "You shall be as God, knowing good and evil." Adam took the side of the devil. But it was the devil's purpose -- his unwavering purpose to drive God from His throne and steal this world from God. He enlisted the aid of man to

accomplish this. Sin means therefore (from this point of view), that man who stands on the side of the devil, is driven in all that he does to pursue the evil goal of making this world the kingdom of Satan. This determines everything. This is what sin is all about. It is hatred of God. It is rebellion against the Most High. And it is, therefore, a desperate, undying attempt on the part of man to seize this world in which he has been placed and make it his own; to drive God out of His world; to depose Christ from His throne; to make this universe subservient to the cause of sin. And, in order to accomplish that goal, he is willing to bend every effort at his disposal. He is willing to use every means available. And if he must, in the pursuit of this goal, forego for a little while certain other pleasures in order to accomplish this, he is willing to do it. He knows then that if government is not instituted to make laws and enforce them, anarchy will prevail. And anarchy will prevent him from attaining his goals. And so he not only makes laws, but also conforms his life to them. That is, he will do this as long as is necessary to drive God out of His world. Just as soon as he believes he can safely escape the fury of God's wrath, the consequences of sin, he will do as he pleases. He will sit back in his pride and say: "The world is mine. God is gone. I can do as I please -- sin all I want. There is no need any more of bearing sin's consequences. God is banished from His throne." Everything man does, therefore, (all this apparent good) is determined by this overriding desire. He may stand on the frontiers of space. He may make marvelous inventions in the fields of science. But it is because he is engaged in a desperate struggle to wrench this world from the hands of the Creator. He will not rest until that goal is reached. This is the deepest principle of his life. This is why all the human race's sin culminates at last in that man of sin, the Son of Perdition, Antichrist. In Antichrist he thinks he has attained his goal.

Indeed man's depravity is *total*.