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What Is Depravity?

Before we enter into a discussion of the meaning of depravity as it is set forth in Scripture, it is important to survey briefly the history of this doctrine from the time of Augustine to the time of the Synod of Dordt. This history perhaps holds for us some surprises.

The occasion for Augustine's formulation of the truth of total depravity was the teaching of a certain Pelagius who appeared in Rome in the early part of the Fifth Century. He began to teach views which were totally at variance with Scripture. He taught that every child which is born into the world is born good, without any sin. In fact he insisted that every child was as good as Adam when he came forth from the hands of his Creator and before he ate of the forbidden tree. If you would ask Pelagius: "What is the explanation then for the fact that there is sin in the world?" he would answer: "That is to be determined by the choice which man is able to make either for good or for bad." His nature, Pelagius said, is inclined to the good. In fact there have been in the history of the world men who have lived their entire lives without sinning at all. But some people sin. And they sin because of the fact that they pick up from their fellow men bad habits. Sin therefore, in the view of Pelagius, is a habit. And as is true of any habit, the more a particular sin is committed, the stronger also the habit becomes. The more a man is guilty of one particular type of sin, the more deeply this habit becomes rooted in his nature. Nevertheless, sin always remains nothing more than a habit. And inasmuch as sin is only a habit, the solution to the problem of sin lies in the breaking of the habit. Nothing else. There is no need, Pelagius insisted, for salvation. There is no need for grace; much less for sovereign grace. All that a man has to do if he wants to break the habit of sin is have a firm enough resolve. By a choice of his own will he will presently succeed.

Augustine raised a long and loud protest against these anti-Scriptural views. Augustine himself knew better. And he knew better, on the one hand, because he had in his own life experienced something quite different.

In his early life Augustine was very evil, even immoral. He had committed many grievous sins. He had learned from his own personal experience that sin was more than a mere habit. It was a vicious, destructive, and powerful force in man's very nature. And he had learned too, by the grace and mercy of God which he never ceased to extol, that the only possibility of deliverance from sin was through the power of sovereign grace.

And so, on the other hand, he found these truths set forth in Scripture. He insisted that while indeed Adam was created by God in a state of perfect righteousness, nevertheless the fall brought such consequences upon Adam and upon his posterity that man became totally incapable of doing any good at all - of any kind. Augustine was so insistent on this point that he included in his condemnation the apparent good deeds of heathen men - of heathen philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Cicero. He claimed that these deeds were not good in any sense of the word; that they were a perversion and corruption of the good; that the only power of doing good was to be found in the power of sovereign grace.

Now the views of Augustine did not prevail in the church of his time, except among a few. But there arose instead in the church a view which became known as Semi-pelagianism. The men who held these views did not want to go to the ridiculous and absurd extremes of Pelagius himself. And yet, at the same time, they did not want the system of Augustine either. They attempted a compromise. And as is true of all compromises, they only invented a new heresy. They taught that it is indeed true that a man who is born into the world is not good. He does not stand in the state in which Adam stood in Paradise before the fall. But while they insisted on that, they nevertheless also insisted on the fact that man was not totally depraved. They said he was sick. And indeed, while the kind of sickness which he had was a fatal sickness, so that if this sickness was not cured, presently it would result in death, nevertheless, in this period of sickness man was capable of accomplishing a great deal of good. Particularly, he was capable, by an exercise of his own will, to summon to his aid the Great Physician to come with the balm of healing grace to save him from his fatal disease. God on His part, said the Semi-pelagians, has prepared salvation for all men. He has prepared the cure for this malady which afflicts mankind. And God is also prepared to give this healing balm to all men. In fact, God even goes one step farther than this, and offers this balm to all men to be accepted or rejected by them. But beyond that, the Semi-pelagians insisted, God will not go. That healing balm will ultimately be

applied to man to cure his malady if man himself wants it. The whole matter of his cure therefore, of his salvation, turns upon the choice of his own will.

If this position of the Semi-pelagians sounds somewhat familiar to you and appears to you to be characteristic of much of modern day preaching, be assured of the fact that it is indeed an ancient heresy.

This whole system of Semi-pelagianism became the foundation for the doctrine of Roman Catholic work-righteousness. The whole imposing structure of Romish work-righteousness was founded foursquare upon this modification of Pelagianism.

It was not until the time of the Protestant Reformation that the truths which Augustine set forth were once more truths publicly proclaimed in the Church. Martin Luther began this. In opposition to Roman Catholic work-righteousness he saw that the whole structure of Semi-pelagianism had to be torn away and that the firm foundation of total depravity had to be set forth once more. And he insisted that so complete is that total depravity that even the will of man itself is completely enslaved by sin. He wrote a book about it. It is available today. It is called "*The Bondage of the Will*."

But it was John Calvin who set this truth forth in connection with all the truth of the Word of God and formulated this truth as it was expressed at the time of the Synod of Dordrecht. It is not necessary to go into detail regarding the teaching of Calvin. Anyone who is at all acquainted with Calvin's writings (especially in his "*Institutes*") knows that this truth of total depravity is taught or presupposed on almost every page. One quotation will suffice for our purpose. In it he demonstrates his dependence upon Augustine. In discussing Augustine's use of the term "concupiscence" he writes:

...our nature is not only destitute of all good, but is so fertile in all evils that it cannot remain inactive. Those who have called it *concupiscence* have used an expression not improper, if it were only added, which is far from being conceded by most persons, that everything in man, the understanding and will, the soul and body, is polluted and engrossed by this concupiscence; or, to express it more briefly, that man is of himself nothing else but concupiscence. (*Institutes*, Vol. I, Bk. II, Chap. 1, Para. 8; Allen translation.)

It was this truth which Calvin so sharply set forth as he paid his tribute to Augustine. It was this truth formulated by our fathers at the synod held in Dordrecht.

What then is meant by depravity? What did our fathers mean? What does Scripture teach?

In the first place, depravity has to do, of course, with sin. This seems obvious; yet it is only to the extent that we emphasize the reality and true character of sin that we shall also be able to maintain the truth of total depravity.

Historically and today, those who deny the truth of total depravity are also those who soften the harsh realities of sin. This is why, for example, sin is not taken seriously any more today. Pelagius considered it only a habit. The Semi-pelagians considered it only a sickness. Today also it is easily shrugged off, lightly considered. The horror of sin as it is defined in Scripture is denied. On the far extremes of the ecclesiastical world are the liberal theologians who teach that sin is only a social affliction or a mental deficiency. The cure for sin is to be found then in social rehabilitation, in social do-goodism, in social reform, in outward character reformation. This is the cure for sin because sin is only a remnant of our animal ancestry which we have kept through the upward climb of evolutionary processes.

But closer to home, to the extent that sin is considered to be only a habit or an illness, the horrible character of sin has been denied and the truth of total depravity has proved impossible to maintain.

Scripture gives us quite a different opinion of sin. Scripture emphatically informs us that sin is always committed in relationship to *God*. That is fundamental. God is the holy, sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. He is infinitely perfect. His holiness is so great and the glory of the brightness of His perfections so brilliant that before Him the angels cover their faces and sing all the day long: "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty." It is against Him that all sin is committed. This must never be forgotten. Sin is a contradiction of His holiness. It is a rebellion against Him Who is the Lord of heaven and earth. Every sin, no matter how minor, no matter how insignificant, is always committed in relation to God. God created man and set him in Paradise. And the sole purpose of God's creating man was in order that man, who stood at the crown of God's creation, could glorify his

Maker. There was not any other purpose why God set man in Paradise than that. With all his life, with all that he was, with all the creation over which he was placed, he had no other calling than to set forth the praise and the glory of God Who alone is worthy of all praise and glory.

Adam's sin of eating of the forbidden tree therefore, was a sin which he committed against God. It was the sin of disobedience against the express command of God. And inasmuch as it was a sin of disobedience against God, it was a deliberate, conscious, willful determination to cease to perform the purpose for which Adam was created. He wanted nothing to do with God and with His glory any more. He chose to cast his lot with Satan who tempted him. He chose to represent Satan; to aid Satan in Satan's nefarious scheme to steal this world from its Creator. He deliberately turned his back on the God of heaven and earth with that one act of disobedience. That made his sin so horrible. It was committed against God.

To this day, in all the history of this sorry world, there has never been a sin of a different kind. This we must understand. It will never do to talk of sin in terms of social relations, social maladjustment. Sin is against the God of heaven and earth. It is for that reason that the punishment for sin is so very great.

The punishment therefore is that God killed Adam. You can understand why this was necessary. God had formed Adam in order that Adam might represent God's cause in the world, that he might glorify his Maker. He did not have any other purpose for existence than that. He refused to do that. He chose to glorify the devil. That was Adam's desire. But because of this, there was no place for him any more in God's world. So God killed Adam. "The day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die."

What does that mean, that God killed Adam? He didn't drop dead at the foot of the tree, as we well know. It means, in the first place, that God poured out upon Adam the fury of His wrath and hatred. God hated Adam. It couldn't be any different from this if God was to maintain His own holiness as He always does and must do for His own name's sake. He could not any longer love anyone who sinned and was not holy as He was. You understand that this is now apart from Christ. We know that in Christ Adam was saved. But as far as this death which came upon Adam is concerned, God poured out upon Adam His wrath. It was in the nature of God Himself to do so. Adam was alienated from God. As he was driven out

of the garden of Eden, so he was driven from God's face. Where once his life was filled with the sunshine of God's favor, it now was filled with the lowering clouds of God's wrath. Where once he knew peace and joy and happiness and life in fellowship with his Maker, now all that he knew was unrest, alienation, wrath, trouble, affliction, distress, and death.

In the second place, that God killed Adam means that God made Adam totally depraved. That is what death is. Death and total depravity are synonymous. How does the apostle Paul express it in [Ephesians 2:1](#)? "But you hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins." The punishment therefore, for Adam's awful transgression was that God brought upon Adam the horror of total depravity. He made him a slave of sin with the whole of his being and nature. That was the punishment for sin. And it is in terms of the punishment for sin that we must consider the truth of total depravity. Because sin is so terrible, it deserves such terrible punishment. That punishment is the total depravity of man's nature. All men therefore are totally depraved.

How is it possible that all men are totally depraved? We must briefly mention two reasons.

In the first place, all men are in Adam responsible for the sin which Adam committed. Because Adam was the head of the whole human race this is true. This is true even as Christ is the Head of His elect people. The apostle Paul expresses that in these words: "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." [1 Corinthians 15:22](#). Adam was the head of all men, and all men are therefore responsible with Adam for Adam's transgression.

In the second place, Adam was the father of the whole human race so that from Adam proceeded a human race as corrupt and depraved as he was. It was David who plaintively sang long ago in [Psalm 51:5](#): "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me."

And so depravity has come upon all men.

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