
Mission 119 Ministries

**DECONSTRUCTING CALVINISM
EPISODE 7: WHAT IS TOTAL
DEPRAVITY?**

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SERIES GOALS

- **Short, focused lessons**
 - **Explain Calvinism**
 - **Address claims of Calvinism**
 - **Exegetically**
 - **Historical**
 - **Philosophically**
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TOTAL DEPRAVITY

The Calvinist concept of total depravity means, among other things, that apart from God's regeneration, a person lacks the capacity to understand and believe the gospel. It is not that the person hears the gospel, considers it, comprehends it, and rejects it. Rather, he hears the words, but because he is so hopelessly and helplessly lost and unable to move toward God in the slightest, he cannot comprehend it and can only reject the message unless God first makes him spiritually alive by "regeneration," in which case the person not only comprehends the message but cannot reject it, for it is now compelling to him.

SOME QUESTIONS

The issue before us, of course, is whether this is a Biblical view of man. In some sense, the question is how lost is man? Or asked another way, how fallen is man? If you say that man is totally depraved, what does that mean? The Calvinists often say the issue is whether man is depraved, but that is not really the issue since many non-Calvinists would agree that man is depraved. Even more to the point, what can a lost person do? Can a lost person believe the gospel apart from God first regenerating him? Does the Bible teach “total inability”?

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

Total depravity means that man in his natural state is incapable of doing anything or desiring anything pleasing to God. Until he is “born again” of the Holy Spirit and given a living human spirit, man is the slave of Satan (“the Prince of the power of the air”) who drives man to fulfill the desires of the flesh that are in enmity with God. In the sight of God the “best hearted man” holds only evil thoughts because they are oriented to doing human good for the glory of himself or Satan but never for the glory of the Creator... (Duane Edward Spencer)

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

Man is totally depraved in the sense that everything about his nature is in rebellion against God. Total depravity means that man, of his own “free will,” will never make a decision for Christ. (Duane Edward Spencer)

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

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 thoughts 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. (David Steele, Curtis Thomas, Lance Quinn)

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

David Steele, Curtis Thomas, and Lance Quinn also explain depravity by saying that man is spiritually depraved, that is, “the natural man is totally unable to do anything spiritually good” and, as a consequence, “he can do nothing pertaining to his salvation.”

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

...that every sinner is: (a) totally destitute of that love to God which constitutes the fundamental and all-inclusive demand of the law; (b) chargeable with elevating some lower affection or desire above regard for God and his law; (c) supremely determined, in his whole inward and outward life, by a preference of self to God; (d) possessed of an aversion to God which, though sometimes latent, becomes active enmity, as soon as God's will comes into manifest conflict with his own; (e) disordered and corrupted in every faculty, through this substitution of selfishness for supreme affection toward God; (f) credited with no thought, emotion, or act of which divine holiness can fully approve; (g) subject to a law of constant progress in depravity, which he has no recuperative energy to enable him successfully to resist. (Augustus Strong)

SOME IMPLICATIONS

Finally, sin results in inability to love. Since other people stand in our way, representing competition and a threat to us, we cannot really act for the ultimate welfare of others if our aim is self-satisfaction. And so suspicions, conflicts, bitterness, and even hatred issue from the self-absorption or the pursual of finite values that has supplanted God at the center of the sinner's life. (Millard Erickson)

SOME IMPLICATIONS

Second, because man is totally or pervasively corrupt, he is incapable of changing his character or of acting in a way that is distinct from his corruption. He is unable to discern, to love, or to choose the things that are pleasing to God. (Robert Reymond)

REPROBATION

The reader should note the term reprobation, which is that aspect of God's decrees that certain men would remain totally depraved for their entire lives. Reprobation and election are twin doctrines in the Calvinists' system that fall under the larger umbrella of predestination: "While God's decree is His purpose as to all things, His predestination may be defined to be His purpose concerning the everlasting destiny of His rational creatures. His election is His purpose of saving eternally some men and angels. Election and reprobation are both included in predestination." (R.L. Dabney)

REPROBATION

Louis Berkhof states that “[p]redestination is simply ... the purposes of God respecting His moral creatures” and that it “includes two parts, namely, election and reprobation.” He defines election as follows: “It may be defined as God’s eternal purpose to save some of the human race in and by Jesus Christ.”

REPROBATION

The doctrine of election naturally implies that some of the human race were not elected. If God purposed to save some, He also purposed not to save others... Reprobation may be defined as that decree of God whereby He has determined to pass some men by with the operation of His special grace and to punish them for their sin to the manifestation of His justice. From this definition reprobation appears to be really a twofold purpose namely, (a) to pass by some in the bestowal of regenerating and saving grace; and (b) to assign them to dishonour and to the wrath of God for their sins. (Louis Berkhof)

REPROBATION

Thus, the Calvinist system teaches that God, as part of His decree of all things that would come to pass, elected certain people for salvation, whom He will enable (“with the operation of His special grace” He will undo their total depravity) to believe, and passed over the others. Since they were passed over, they remain forever reprobate or totally depraved, destined to make the only choice they are capable of, namely to reject the gospel and spend eternity in the lake of fire.

REPROBATION

“Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure.” (Wayne Grudem)

“Reprobation is the sovereign decision of God before creation to pass over some persons, in sorrow deciding not to save them, and to punish them for their sins, and thereby to manifest his justice.” (Wayne Grudem)

OBVIOUS QUESTIONS

- **Wayne Grudem says God passed over people “in sorrow,” but why did He pass over any?**
 - **Why doesn't the New Testament ever explicitly state that anyone is incapable of understanding the gospel?**
 - **Why is total depravity largely built on a metaphor found nowhere in the Bible? (i.e. that a lost person is a corpse, allegedly found in Eph. 2:1)**
 - **Why is there no simple, explicit statement in the Bible that regeneration precedes faith?**
 - **Why would God repeatedly command us to seek him if we are totally unable to do so? (See, e.g., Is. 45:19-20, Jer. 29:12-13, Acts 17:26-27)**
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POPULAR PROOF TEXTS

- **PILLAR PROOF TEXTS: Romans 3; 1 Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 2:8**
 - **Other common proof texts...**
 - **Unsaved cannot believe, John 8:43-44; Romans 8:7-8; Ephesians 4:17-19**
 - **Must be given our faith, Lamentations 3:26; John 1:11-13; 1 Timothy 2:25-26**
 - **Made unable to believe, Matthew 11:25-26; Jude 4; 1 Peter 2:8**
 - **Total depravity by analogy, Ephesians 2:1-3; Matthew 7:16-18**
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SOURCES

- **Duane Edward Spencer, TULIP, Baker Books (2d ed. 2007)**
 - **Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, Inter-Varsity Press (1994)**
 - **David N. Steele, Curtis C. Thomas, and S. Lance Quinn, The Five Points of Calvinism, P & R Publishing Company (2d ed. 2004)**
 - **Augustus H. Strong, Systematic Theology, Judson Press**
 - **R.L. Dabney, Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology, The Banner of Truth Trust**
 - **Louis Berkhof, Manual of Christian Doctrine, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (1933)**
 - **Robert L. Reymond, A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith, Thomas Nelson, Inc. (1998)**
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