



## **Reformed Theology**

### **Total Depravity**

**What total depravity is not and what it generally is**

Depravity (def.): moral corruption; wickedness

Other names for Total Depravity

Radical corruption

Total inability

Totality Depravity is not...

The doctrine of total depravity, however, does not teach that man is as wicked as he could possibly be. (Sproul)

The totality of that depravity is clearly not that man does as much evil as he could do. (Piper)

## Generally

To be totally depraved is to suffer from corruption that pervades the whole person. Sin affects every aspect of our being: the body, the soul, the mind, the will, and so forth. The total or whole person is corrupted by sin. (Sproul)

Sin is not tangential or peripheral but arises from the center of our being. (Sproul)

We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners. (Sproul)

When we speak of man's depravity we mean man's natural condition apart from any grace exerted by God to restrain or transform man. (Piper)

If a person embraces the doctrine of Total Depravity, the other four points pretty much fall in line.

## **Total Depravity and the nature of man**

### Total Depravity as opposed to humanism

Let me mention parenthetically that the idea of mankind's basic goodness is a cardinal tenet of humanistic philosophy. It also pervades modern American evangelicalism if recent polls are at all accurate. In a Gallup Poll the overwhelming majority of professing evangelicals indicated their agreement with the proposition that people are basically good. (Sproul)

We do corrupt things because we are corrupt people. This is the essence of what it means to be fallen. (Sproul)

Man is not "basically" good. He is not good at the core.

Humanism asserts that man is basically good. So the issues that we face can be addressed with education, behavioral modifications, government, etc.

Reformed Theology asserts that...

Our sin infects us to the core.

Our need is a renovation from the inside. We are in need of regeneration.

Man's ability to make certain moral things has been completely lost. Man is unable, on his own, to choose God.

## Total Depravity and the need for grace

T: *Total Depravity*: This doctrine establishes the human need for divine grace. (Orrick 24)

The *total* in *total depravity* does not mean that every human is as bad as he or she might possibly be; rather, it means that every component of human nature has been infected with sin. Stated another way, when we assert that every human is totally depraved, we are not saying that every human is totally *saturated* with sin. Rather, we are asserting that sin is totally *distributed* through every component of human nature. (Orrick 27-28)

When we speak of man's depravity, we mean man's natural condition apart from the grace exerted by God to restrain or transform man. (Piper)

Total Depravity means that rebellion against God is total, everything we do in this rebellion is sinful. Our inability to submit to God or reform ourselves is total and we are therefore totally deserving of eternal punishment. (Simple Theology)

We are in need of something radical to save us.  
(Simple Theology)

## Calvinism, Arminianism, and Palagianism

The moral ability lost in original sin is therefore not the ability to be outwardly “moral”, but the ability to incline oneself to the things of God. In this spiritual dimension we are morally dead. (Sproul 151)

Psalm 51:5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.

We aren't sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners.

### Pelagianism

Pelagianism is the unbiblical teaching that Adam's sin did not affect future generations of humanity. According to Pelagianism, Adam's sin was solely his own, and Adam's descendants did not inherit a [sinful nature](#) passed down to them. God creates every human soul directly, and therefore every human soul starts out in innocence, free from sin. We are not basically bad, says the Pelagian heresy; we are basically good.

Pelagianism is named after [Pelagius](#), a monk who lived in the late 300s and early 400s AD. Pelagius began teaching the doctrine associated with his name in an effort to promote holy living among Christians. When people sinned, Pelagius grew weary of hearing the excuse of “I can’t help it. It’s in my nature to do wrong.” To counter that excuse, Pelagius stressed the freedom of the human will, essentially teaching that all sin is the result of a conscious choice of evil over good; everyone has the ability to freely choose to do good all the time. And, since there is no such thing as [original sin](#) or an inherited sin nature, then we cannot blame Adam. God created us good, so no one ever has an excuse for sinning. If you’re not living a holy life, it’s because you’re not trying hard enough.

## Arminianism / Calvinism (Piper)

Arminianism – People are depraved and corrupt but are able to provide the decisive impulse to trust God with the general divine assistance that He gives to all people.

This is not Pelagianism.

Prevenient grace

Calvinism - People are so depraved and rebellious that they are unable to trust God without His special work of grace to change their hearts so that they necessarily and willingly believe.

Total Depravity defines a particular view of our sinfulness.

## **Total Depravity and seeking God**

Thomas Aquinas observed that people are seeking happiness, peace, relief from guilt, personal fulfillment, and other such benefits. We understand that these benefits can be found ultimately in God alone. We draw the inference that, because people are seeking what God alone can supply, they must be seeking God himself. This is our error. In our fallen condition we desire the benefits that only God can give us but we do not want him. We want the gifts without the Giver, the benefits without the Benefactor. (Sproul 146)

We do not “find” God as a result of our search for him. We are found by him. The search for God does not end in conversion; it begins at conversion. It is the converted person who genuinely and sincerely seeks after God. (Sproul 147)

## **Total Depravity and free will**

To be dead in sin is to be in a state of moral and spiritual bondage. By nature we are slaves to sin. This does not mean that the fall has destroyed or eradicated the human will. Fallen man still has all the faculties to make choices. We still have a mind and a will. The problem is not that we cannot make choices. Natural men make choices all the time. The problem is that, in our fallen condition, we make sinful choices. We make these choices freely. We sin precisely because we want to sin, and we are capable of choosing exactly what we want to choose. (Sproul)

If we still have a will, why are we unable to convert ourselves or even prepare ourselves for conversion? The simple answer is this: because we do not want to. We have no desire for the righteousness of God, and free choice, by definition, involves choosing what we desire. (Sproul)

We like to think that we have more moral power than we do. We think our will is utterly unaffected by original sin. This is the cardinal point of humanism. The humanistic and pagan view of free will is that the will acts from a posture of indifference. By *indifference* we mean that the will is inclined to neither good nor evil but exists in a state of moral neutrality. The mind of fallen man has no bias, no predisposition to evil. This view of free will is on a collision course with the biblical view of sin. (Sproul)

The struggle between the spirit and the flesh is the struggle of the regenerate person. The unregenerate, natural man has no such struggle. He is in bondage to sin, acting according to the flesh, living according to the flesh, and choosing according to the flesh. He chooses according to the inclination that is dominant at the moment, and this inclination is never a desire to honor God out of a natural love for him. The desires of the unregenerate are wicked continuously. This is the bondage or spiritual death with which the doctrine of original sin is concerned. (Sproul)

For man to be able to choose the things of God, he must first be inclined to choose them. Since the flesh makes no provision for the things of God, grace is

required for us to be able to choose them. The unregenerate person must be regenerated before he has any desire for God. The spiritually dead must first be made alive (“quicken”) by the Holy Spirit before they have any desire for God. (Sproul)

We are so lost that we would never, on our own, choose Christ. (Simple Theology)

### Our state

A person who is inclined only in one direction, whether to the good or to the evil, is still free in a certain sense. This freedom is real. For example, God is totally free, yet he is morally unable to sin. This inability is rooted in his character, his internal righteousness by which he never desires or is inclined to sin. He is free, but free only for goodness. This lack of desire for evil does not diminish God’s freedom; it enhances it.

Likewise, in our glorified state in heaven we will be unable to sin because all desire for sin and all remnants of original sin will be removed from us. We will still be free to choose what we want,

but we will choose only the good because this is the only thing we will desire. This is the freedom Augustine referred to as liberty in the ultimate degree. (Sproul)

## **Total Depravity is seen primarily in relation to God**

The terrible condition of man's heart will never be recognized by people who assess it only in relation to other men. Our son will drive his friends to the ballgame. This is "kindness", and they will experience it as a benefit. So the evil of our actions can never be measured merely by the harm they do to other humans. Romans 14:23 makes plain that depravity is our condition in relation to God primarily, and only secondarily in relation to man. Unless we start here, we will never grasp the totality of our natural depravity.

(Piper)

Our depravity must be seen in relation to God.

Romans 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

I Peter 4:11 whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Romans 14:23 But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.

Sin by its nature is falling short of the glory of God.

Romans 1:23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

I Corinthians 10:31 So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

## Texts

Ephesians 2:1–3 [1] And you were dead in the trespasses and sins [2] in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—[3] among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

John 6:63–68 [63] It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. [64] But there are some of you who do not believe.” (For Jesus knew from the beginning who those were who did not believe, and who it was who would betray him.) [65] And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” [66] After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. [67] So Jesus said to the twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” [68] Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,

John 3:1–8 [1] Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. [2] This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.” [3] Jesus answered him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” [4] Nicodemus said to him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” [5] Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. [6] That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. [7] Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ [8] The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

## Summary Statements

Our sinful corruption is so deep and so strong as to make us slaves of sin and morally unable to overcome our own rebellion and blindness. This inability to save ourselves from ourselves is *total*. We are utterly dependent on God's grace to overcome our rebellion, give us eyes to see, and effectively draw us to the Savior. (Piper)

By nature we have no desire for Christ or for the things of God, so we freely reject Him, unless God changes the desire of our hearts. So are in need of the power of the Spirit freeing us from our bondage and stirring life in us. (Sproul)