

HUMAN DEPRAVITY

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Overview of Natural Depravity

In the late fourth century Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa, gave classical expression to natural depravity as part of his understanding of the nature of evil. In his thought, evil is a lack (privation) in the form of substance relative to its original form. That relatively deformed condition produces evil action. The nature of evil is lack, the cause of evil is lack in form, and the criterion of evil is lack in form compared to pristine form

Applying the idea to human nature meant that our sinful actions are caused by a loss of order in comparison to the way God originally made us. This loss of form occurred at the Fall of Adam. His first sinful act brought upon him a fallen nature that all his descendants inherit biologically. By birth each of us receives the “sinful nature” that cannot act righteously as it originally could. We all become sinners personally because of the inherited fallen nature we did not choose to have.

Historically, the doctrine of natural depravity has held sway in the thinking of practically every strain of Christianity. Augustine’s influence on the church down through the Middle Ages is well known. The leaders of the Reformation had basically the same view of humankind. In modern evangelicalism the same view prevails. The concept of natural depravity has permeated the length and breadth of Christian thought.

Systematically, natural depravity connects with several topics in Christian theology. This inability to respond to spiritual influences forms a basic element in belief about (a) the nature of humankind itself (anthropology). We are not capable of obeying God and having fellowship with him. (b) Natural depravity affects the work of the Spirit because he must supernaturally regenerate the fallen nature before conversion can take place and spiritual growth can begin (pneumatology).

Inability to respond to God qualifies (c) the role of Christian evidence (apologetics). Giving reasons for believe Christianity and trust in Christ has no value if we cannot appreciate them. The function of Christian evidence is not to lead us to accept Christ; in its most extreme form, it only confirms us afterward in the previous choice supernaturally accomplished irresistibly by God himself.

The doctrine of natural depravity impacts how we conceptualize (d) the process of salvation (soteriology). First, it explains why we all sin: we have all descended from the same

first parents, who had the fallen nature. Secondly, it explains why we cannot save ourselves: we do not have the ability to respond to God and to save ourselves by those responses.

(e) Depravity affects biblical interpretation in a couple ways. It causes us to take biblical statements about humankind differently than otherwise. It also predicts that as unregenerate we cannot understand the Bible and come to a saving knowledge of Christ by hearing the message.

Finally, (f) sanctification may include a “*second definite work of grace*” by the Spirit on our nature to “*remove the last vestiges of inbred sin.*” Regeneration is hypostatically a supernatural work of the Spirit that raises our capacity to where we can fully respond to the gospel—whether resistibly or not. Before the Wesleyan movement in England that regeneration was not something that could lead to a wholly sinless life of love. “Entire sanctification” plus regeneration fully restores us to the moral ability Adam had before the fall.

Responding to Natural Depravity

Hermeneutically within scripture, we need a principle by which to get behind the impasse posed by certain pairs of passages that deal with the relationship between human and divine action. Lacking such a principle has caused the deadlock between thinkers throughout the history of interpretation on many texts.

For example, Psalm 51:10 says, “*Create a clean heart in me, God; and renew a right spirit in me.*” Ezekiel, however, says in 18:31, “*Make for yourselves a new heart and a new spirit.*” The problem comes in deciding which statement provides the logically prior framework by which to understand the other. Similar questions arise between other pairs of contrasting passages.

Interpreters agree that there are ways of understanding either passage as guided by the other, but where to start? They need some principle for that determination. If scripture shows that we can respond to God, the interpreter can decide how to manage the interpretation of the passages in question.

Beyond scripture, Christians seek some frame of reference for critiquing hypotheses advanced by the scientific community in anthropology, psychology, and sociology. A positive conclusion about human ability gives them a perspective for evaluating what will and will not fit with their faith.

The doctrine of natural depravity is questionable on two bases. **First**, scripture does not say that human nature differed in spiritual ability after the Fall from what it was before the Fall in a biologically inheritable sense. We do not need natural depravity to explain why sin happens; Adam sinned before he fell. Individual texts do speak about the sinfulness of unsaved people and their frequent resistance to repentance in response to the good news. That is quite different from

saying that it takes a supernatural operation on their very nature to remove the resistance. Without going into detail here, we simply affirm that no clear positive evidence exists for natural depravity.

Second, there is negative evidence. Scripture says that God does not want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9). Elsewhere, it says that some will perish (Matthew 25:46). Furthermore, God is self-consistent: “*God is not a mortal that he should lie*” or repent (Numbers 23:19). The variable that explains the difference between the “all” God desires to save and the “some” he decides to save must lie outside himself or he would be inconsistent. That variable must lie in us, the only other actors. If we have no ability to respond to God, God becomes the chooser of who is saved by virtue of whom he enables to respond unto salvation. We do not have a depraved nature, not only because scripture provides no positive basis for it, but because natural depravity makes God inconsistent in desiring to save all while deciding to enable only some.

The principle that gets behind the impasse is psychological depravity. It results from ignorance, pervertible desires, and evil influence. We all go through the process our first parents experienced and deal with the same kinds of consequences.

Extremes often beget extremes, so we must not overreact by viewing human spiritual ability too highly. In place of a natural depravity that takes a supernatural miracle to correct, we can speak of psychological depravity that interpersonal influence can correct. We do experience the drag of past failure on present resolve. We more than sympathize with Paul in not being able to succeed morally as he wanted (Romans 7:13-25). Our frustration at recurring moral failure is real and appropriate. But Paul’s experience shows that the kind of frustration we experience is true after salvation as well as before even though the degree may not be the same.

Hopefully, frustration over moral failure will decline as we grow in Christian virtue. We must assist that growth by putting ourselves in contact with the influence of other people in fellowship and service and by putting ourselves in contact with the influence of God through “spiritual exercises” like prayer, Bible reading, and fasting. The influence of persons provides us with the psychological strength to respond to God and to make progress at overcoming psychological depravity.