

SUMMARY STATEMENT REGARDING NATURAL DEPRAVITY

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The proposition counter to natural depravity is as follows:

There is no (1) clear (2) biblical basis for saying that Adam's ability in regard to (3) spiritual things after the fall was any different from what it was (4) before the fall in a (5) biologically inheritable sense.

By “clear” biblical base we mean that there are some passages that could be understood the way natural depravity takes them. However, no passage requires such an understanding. In fact, many texts offered in support of that concept cannot have that meaning.

By “biblical” base we mean that there are experiential observations that could be put in the service of a view like natural depravity. Skinnerian psychology proposes something similar even though in our estimation the experimental evidence for it is no closer to positive proof than any biblical evidence for it. But Christian theologians are concerned primarily with biblical rather than scientific evidence. More particularly, “biblical” evidence contrasts with philosophical thought. Natural depravity is an understandable concept that has relatively strong explanatory power, and it can be put in relatively self-consistent terms (minus, of course, the strictures noted above in at least the Calvinistic formulation of it). But the theological task is not most basically a creative one so much as an interpretative one. Christian teaching needs to arise from Christian scripture, not from creative imagination.

Ability in “spiritual” things distinguishes the issue at hand from losses that scripture indicates our first parents incurred when they disobeyed. Nothing in Genesis or elsewhere indicates any loss that reduced people’s innate ability to operate interpersonally with God or other people.

The phrase “before the fall” draws attention to a comparison between the way people were after they first sinned and the way they were before. The value of that observation lies in the fact that we may be able to imagine how people could have more power to resist temptation and obey God. But the proper comparison is not between the way people are and some imaginable possibility, but between the way they were before and after the fateful disobedience. When people first sinned, they did not have a “fallen” nature; so having a fallen nature is not necessary for explaining why people sin.

“Biologically” inheritable specifies that whatever defect a person could have must be transmitted genetically for it to require supernatural remedying by the Spirit. Behavioral depravity can be socially transmitted as well as originated repeatedly in each person through ignorance plus the pull of neutral bodily drives that can be fulfilled in negative ways. The failure to live above a person’s viewpoint of consciousness and to override bodily drives by rational values stems from the fact that it is easier not to live transcendently. It is easier to act on the basis of our own present material interests than to curb self-gratification by taking into consideration the welfare of others, future consequences, and transcendent principles. After sin has originated in individuals, the neutral ability to form habits explains how it is perpetuated in them. In other words, psychological depravity—the power of sin to hold us down, the bondage of the will—results from previous sin. It is the pull of past sin on present resolve, that is, ingrained habit rather than inborn defect. Psychological depravity comes from “self-depravitization” rather than

hereditary corruption. The natural-depravity proposal represents overkill for explaining universal, all-pervasive sin in mankind.

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