

ITEMS AFFECTED BY THE DOCTRINE OF NATURAL DEPRAVITY

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Since the nature of mankind is a central consideration in Christian theology, the doctrine of natural depravity in mankind affects a variety of issues and impacts them in significant ways. The following enumeration of consequences may not be necessary in every case, but historically this concept has triggered them.

1. Anthropology itself is significantly different because mankind is understood as born without the full spiritual capacity that Adam and Eve had before they sinned. Beyond the consequences of their sin that Genesis 3 and elsewhere indicate, natural depravity adds to the silence of scripture by saying that in some way—either by built-in natural result or direct divine penalty—their sin led to a defective genetic nature that everybody has biologically inherited. Because we all have descended from the same pair, we are all infected with this defect in every aspect of our being. The will is weakened so that we cannot resist temptation even when we want to. The affections are so disoriented that often we do not even want to resist. We do not love what we should. Even emotional disorders may integrate with natural depravity. Bodily drives are perverted, which accounts for unwholesome sexual desires, homosexuality, bestiality, gluttony, drunkenness, as well as inhibitive and compulsive behaviors.

The intellect is skewed at least relative to spiritual matters, so that we are blind to what should be “as clear as the nose on our face.” Some have integrated the concept more broadly by connecting it with the idea that supposedly people use only 5-8% of the brain’s capacity. That somehow represents the difference between the IQ of fallen and unfallen man. Unfallen Adam could use 100% of his brain power and was more intelligent than afterward. He supposedly had great intuitive knowledge as well as greater intellectual power than anyone has now. Some have claimed that he had such a grasp of natural science as is unattainable today (John Laidlaw, *The Bible Doctrine of Man*, 1895; see Gordon Clark, pp. 20-21).

2. The doctrine of sin (hamartology) changes because, in addition to sin as action contrary to a shared standard for action and sin as a consequent state of alienation resulting from that action, there is sin as a condition of human nature before regeneration and to a significant extent afterward. This latter point raises some speculations on Paul’s self-description in Romans 7:12ff. To some interpreters, the struggle would not even occur if Paul were describing his unregenerate state. To others, the struggle must not refer to his regenerate state or he would be succeeding in that struggle; Christ delivers from “*this body of death*” (7:24-25). Depravity serves as the primary explanation for universal, all-pervasive sin; sin negatively affects every human being in every aspect of self and associations.

Those who adopt the doctrine of natural depravity usually take a dim view of unregenerate people’s morality. They are overly negative about the sinfulness of sinners. Because of unavoidable inherited depravity, people cannot be good, not simply in the biblical sense that no one does everything right, but in the sense that no one does anything right. Even the “good” they do is evil. Not only can they not do good, but they cannot do a good. Their “good” act is evil because of tainted motives perhaps. Benevolence and philanthropy may look good, but they are apt to be perverted by some self-seeking motive, some attention-getting behavior that feeds pride. Another tack says that the good act is evil because they do not do it to the glory of

God—a true observation in a sense because the unbeliever is not acting in the name of Christ. The fear seems to be that if we admit that unsaved people can do any good at all, we risk the assumption that they could do all good, which in turn they falsely understand to imply that unbelievers could save themselves. The self-salvation inference is unacceptable because that would mean there is another way under heaven by which salvation is possible than by the name of Jesus Christ; Christ then died for nothing. So we pass to the next observation.

3. Salvation (soteriology) is complexified because supernatural regeneration must occur from God before conversion can happen. Ontic rehabilitation must occur before behavioral change can take place. If sin is ontologized, salvation must be supernaturalized; if being is defective, miracle must repair it. “New birth,” “born again,” “regeneration,” is not just an image for a new life in which we “start over again” as from birth; it becomes a change of substance rather than just a change of behavior and relationship.

Natural depravity serves as a basis for denying self-salvation—autosoterism. The reasoning they cannot “save themselves” is that they cannot respond influence. So parallel to proclamation there must be supernatural operation to enable them to respond to the message.

Classical Calvinism has been summarized under the TULIP acronym: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. Total depravity logically precedes unconditional election and sets the stage for it. Even if salvation could in theory be conditional without being by works, it cannot be conditional for one practical reason: people do not have the ability to meet the condition. If election is unconditional, atonement need not be intended for more than those whom God has unconditionally designed to save; hence, total depravity correlates with a limited (*vs.* universal) scope of the atonement. Christ did not die for everybody, but for those arbitrarily chosen ahead of time. When grace is then dispensed, the previously chosen will necessarily respond; there is effectual grace, effectual calling, irresistible grace. Once God has repaired the fallen nature, it is permanently capacitated; hence, we have perseverance of the saints as well (see below). All four subsequent doctrines harmonize with natural depravity even if they are not positively required by it strictly speaking.

4. The ordinances become involved, too, if baptism relates to salvation in some way. Baptism may be affected because the ontic change can be associated with that event, a concept included under the expression baptismal regeneration. At baptism the candidate may be regarded as receiving the ability necessary for Christian faith and practice. Particularly in the Lutheran tradition, there is even the notion of infant faith that is engendered by the washing of regeneration.

5. In the Wesleyan tradition, sanctification becomes an essentially supernatural act in which a saved person receives a second benefit that removes the last vestiges of inbred sin—vestiges beyond those removed by regeneration. Having been restored to full spiritual capacity, a Christian can live a sinless life.

6. Perseverance of the saints depends on the idea that when God regenerates the fallen abilities of people, he does it effectually. If a person is genuinely converted, the conversion will last till the end. Any apparent case of falling from grace is taken to indicate that the original conversion was not genuine or that it was backsliding rather than apostasy.

7. The doctrine of infused grace teaches that a transformation occurs within the saved that enables them to fulfill the will of God by their own now-increased ability.

8. Consequently, interpretation of scripture gets affected because unregenerate minds cannot understand spiritual things unless the Spirit enlightens those minds. That enlightenment does not take place just by understanding the truth, but by upgrading the mental equipment by

which the understanding can come—or perhaps by implanting the concepts directly in the mind rather than indirectly through the word. Enlightenment occurs during proclamation more than by it, parallel to scripture more than through it.³⁵

Besides affecting the process of interpretation, the natural depravity concept leads readers to interpret a host of passages differently from what they apparently mean aside from reading that concept into them.

9. Bibliology—word revelation in general—may be adversely affected in correlation with the concept of natural depravity coupled with depreciating the adequacy of word communication and a negative higher critical view of scripture. Most Calvinists hold a high view of scripture and prioritize special revelation, but Karl Barth has tried to make up for the inadequacy of word revelation and a low view of scripture by a “high” view of the work of the Holy Spirit. In this way, revelation ends up getting identified with illumination.

10. Illumination, particularly for the unbeliever, is not just the subjective experience of enlightenment that corresponds with objective revelation. It is a supernaturally caused experience on the occasion of revelation rather than a natural experience through the agency of revelation. Enlightenment occurs parallel to proclamation, not through it.

11. Apologetics may become an essentially *post facto* enterprise because the unregenerate man cannot appreciate evidence for the truth of the Christian message. Conversion is a supernatural operation more than a response to evidence and influence that have been directed to personal need. In such a schematic, Christian evidence moves from a primary role to a confirmatory one.

Canonicity figures into the picture differently as well. How a person recognizes which writings belong in the canon of scripture is ultimately a subjective consideration. Historical, doctrinal, and subjective considerations (in that order) are not adequate to establish reasonable certainty about the origin of biblical materials. The people of God intuitively recognize the voice of God that speaks in writings that are normative for them.

Not only is special revelation unavailable to sinners because they cannot accurately read it or hear it, as noted above, but general revelation is unavailable as well. For theologians of this persuasion, the witness of nature and conscience is usually considered sufficient theoretically for giving a correct knowledge of the true God. The depravity in man, however, vitiates that otherwise adequate basis for knowledge about God.

12. Natural depravity broadens pneumatology because it is the Spirit that performs the various supernatural acts that reverse the effects of degenerate nature. In addition to the work not occasioned by natural depravity, the Spirit must accomplish the miraculous regeneration that enables conversion to occur. In Wesleyan thought, he also performs a second definite work of grace that makes entire sanctification possible so sinless living can result. His work includes infusing grace and supernaturally illuminating the mind parallel to word revelation.

13. Practical areas are also affected by the natural depravity concept. Depravity alters what are appropriate procedures in pioneer missions work. Since unregenerate people cannot apprehend the real import of general revelation, nature and experience cannot serve as a foundation for introducing further truths made known in special revelation, specifically those truths related to salvation through Christ.

Historically, the missionary enterprise was hindered because if God wants the heathen converted, he will do it without our help (quietism). Besides the misunderstanding of divine sovereignty in such a sentiment, the reason this obvious falsehood seemed sensible is that

depravity must be overcome before preaching can do any good. If God decides to regenerate any heathen, he will at the same time specially call someone to proclaim the message to them.

14. Similarly, evangelism in previously penetrated ethnic groups is a matter of simply offering good news without defense or argumentation, not simply because of the inherent power of the message to convict the hearer but because unbelievers cannot respond to preliminary apologetics based on reason, experience, nature, conscience.

Evangelism can even degenerate into “getting it said.” Since unbelievers cannot respond to argumentation and persuasion anyway or even to the message itself, readiness is not something that can be—or need be—enhanced. Propriety, quality of presentation, methodology, and the like have no bearing on the “success” rate. It is unnecessary and even irrelevant to take church growth principles into consideration. The point is simply to get it said, because it is in connection with “saying it” that God has sovereignly chosen to regenerate unbelievers so they can respond.²²

15. Sexuality in general takes on a negative character because bodily drives are considered perverted. With this notion have come levels of sexual morality, the lowest of which is faithfulness in marriage, then celibacy in marriage after conversion, and celibacy without marriage. Intertwined with this reconstruction is the doctrine of sex for procreation always. This negative attitude toward sex underlies much of the disdain for marriage, the exaltation of celibacy, and the practice of clerical celibacy. It is likewise responsible for the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, a notion that might be forced into scripture but not something that arises from it. The sex drive itself is depreciated to the point that no essential distinction remains between a husband’s desire for his wife and a man’s lust for any woman; both exhibit concupiscence. Augustine himself even theorized that if the fall had not occurred, sexual relations would have been purely volitional acts aside from desire.

16. Natural depravity impacts Christology in a couple ways. First, when combined with other speculations, natural depravity is used to explain the need for the virgin birth. Christ’s incarnation would otherwise have been tainted by his being born through sexual desire, that is, concupiscence. The idea is further elaborated by saying that the male carries the defective genetic material related to depravity (see DeHaan’s *Chemical Analysis of the Blood*).

Depravity also reduces the power of the incarnation. One may ask whether Jesus really identified with the human condition as man must currently deal with it since Christ was not born with the hindrances that we must handle. The incarnate Christ starts moving in the direction of the docetic Christ.

17. The doctrine of the immaculate conception grows out of the depravity concept as well. For Jesus not to be born depraved, Mary needed to be born without depravity; that is, she was immaculately conceived.

18. Calvinists often object to speaking favorably about self-esteem. Their pessimistic view of mankind makes it seem inappropriate to encourage feeling good about ourselves or about what we have done. We should glory only in what God does, what he has done to us, and what he does through us. The point is not so much that in order to glorify God we must depreciate man—although that does not always come through very clearly; but that because of people’s innate, inherent sinfulness, they should not think anything good about themselves, only something good about themselves as regenerated and sanctified by God. Self-worth amounts to pride, and self-interest equals self-centeredness.

19. In light of the natural depravity concept, we must also ask the theodicy question. How can God be just in holding us guilty for what we cannot help doing? God makes us in such a way

that we are genetically defective by birth, which makes us sin. We cannot avoid sinning in the first place—even theoretically, and we cannot turn away from sinning in the second place without regeneration. Responsibility and guilt must lie at the point of decision, and we cannot act responsibly at that point because we cannot make choices in spiritual matters. God becomes guilty for our sin because he made us the way we are, which leads to the final observation.

20. Perhaps the most distressing implication of natural depravity is its implication for theology proper. Because of his sovereignty God supposedly cannot be considered unholy for holding us responsible for what we cannot help doing. Sovereignty degenerates into capriciousness, holy love degenerates into holiness plus selective love—a contradiction of terms, and God starts taking upon himself the nature of a principle or law more than the nature of a person. He starts looking more like Allah than Yahveh.

In so many areas, Calvinism tends to operate in absolutes because it does not have a good feel for the interpersonal construct in contrast to legal, natural, and metaphysical systems. Its simplistic format is driven by the legal, natural, and metaphysical categories. It is frankly an impersonal system that does not allow for the nuancing, qualifying, reciprocating, compenetrating characteristics of interpersonal relationship.

²²As observed by Donald McGavaran, Kennedy's technique in *Evangelism Explosion* is predicated on the Calvinistic doctrine of mankind and the doctrine of calling.

³⁵Cp. Augustine's theory of knowledge (epistemology), known as illumination, which contrasts with anamnesis (Plato) as well as empiricism and rationalism.