

## THE DENIAL OF NATURAL DEPRAVITY: A DISTINCTIVE OF “THE RESTORATION MOVEMENT”

Virgil Warren, PhD

One distinctive of the Churches of Christ/Christian Churches has been their relatively high view of human nature. They have stood virtually alone in denying the traditional doctrine of natural depravity.

In the late fourth century, Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa, gave classical expression to this concept as part of his understanding of the nature of evil generally. In his thought, evil is a lack (privation) in the form of substance relative to its original form. This relatively de-formed condition produces evil action. Thus, 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 original form.

Applied to the nature of man, the idea meant that man's sinful action is caused by a loss of order in comparison to the way God originally made him. In the human race, this loss of form occurred at the Fall of Adam. His first sinful act brought upon Adam a fallen nature that all his descendants inherit biologically. By birth each person receives the “sinful nature” that cannot act righteously as it originally could. All people necessarily become sinners personally because of the inherited fallen nature they did not choose to have.

Historically, the doctrine of natural depravity has held sway in practically every strain of Christianity. Augustine's influence on early Catholicism and the Middle Ages is well known. During the Reformation, John Calvin, Luther, and others had basically the same view of man. Even Arminius took this view of mankind. In evangelicalism today the Reformed and Presbyterian churches have followed John Calvin in teaching depravity. The Lutheran bodies have done likewise under Martin Luther's influence. Traditionally Roman Catholicism, the Anglican and Episcopal churches, and the Wesleyan heritage that derived from them represent similar positions. The Anabaptist movement in Europe and the baptistic communions in the New World have perpetuated the belief that mankind after the Fall has had a lower nature than he had before. The concept of natural depravity, then, permeates the length and breadth of evangelical Christian theology.

Systematically, natural depravity connects with several topics in the Christian understanding of things. Of course, this inability to respond to spiritual influences forms a basic element in a person's belief about (a) the nature of mankind itself (anthropology). People are not capable of obeying God and having fellowship with him. (b) The work of the Spirit is affected significantly because the Spirit must supernaturally regenerate the fallen nature so conversion can happen and spiritual growth can begin (pneumatology).

The lack of ability to respond to God qualifies (c) the role of Christian evidences (apologetics). Giving reasons for believing Christianity and for trusting Christ have no value for anyone who cannot appreciate them. The function of Christian evidences, then, would not be to lead people to accept Christ, but to confirm them afterwards in the correctness of a previous choice supernaturally made possible by God himself.

The doctrine of natural depravity impacts how people conceptualize (d) the process of salvation (soteriology). First, it explains why all people sin. They do so because they have all descended from the same first parents, who had the fallen nature. Secondly, it explains why none of them can save themselves. They do not have the ability to respond to God and thus to save themselves by those responses.

(e) Biblical interpretation is affected by the depravity concept in a couple ways. It causes readers to take biblical statements about mankind differently from the way they would otherwise read them. It predicts that unregenerate people cannot understand the Bible, appreciate its message, and come to a saving knowledge of Christ by studying it.

Finally, (f) sanctification is understood differently, especially in the Wesleyan tradition because the Spirit performs a “second definite work of grace” on the very nature of humankind to “remove the last vestiges of inbred sin.” As in Calvinism and Arminianism, regeneration is a supernatural work of the Spirit to raise human capacity to a level where people can respond to the gospel. (Calvinism makes this an irresistible enablement whereas classical Arminianism does not.) That regeneration, however, was not previously considered something that made it theoretically possible to lead a wholly sinless life. Wesley proposed a concept of “entire sanctification” that, combined with regeneration, fully restores a person to the original level of moral ability Adam had before the fall.

Hermeneutically within scripture, there is a need for developing some biblical principle for getting behind the impasse posed by certain pairings of passages that deal with the relationship between human and divine action. The lack of such a principle has caused the deadlock between Calvinistic and non-Calvinistic thinkers throughout much of the history of interpretation on several passages.

For example, Psalm 51:10 says, “*Create within me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within 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 for understanding the other. Similar questions arise between other pairs of passages.

Interpreters agree that there are ways to understand either passage as guided by the contrasting one, but they must determine which one to start with. They need some principle for that determination. If it can be shown that people have the ability to respond to God, then the interpreter can decide how to limit the hermeneutical possibilities for the passages in question.

Hermeneutically beyond scripture, a Christian seeks some frame of reference for critiquing hypotheses advanced by the scientific community in anthropology, psychology, and sociology. A positive conclusion regarding human ability gives the Christian a perspective for evaluating what will and will not fit with Christian faith.

In an abbreviated way, 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 Adam sinned. Natural depravity is not necessary for explaining why sin happens, because Adam sinned before he was depraved. Individual texts do speak about the sinfulness of unsaved people and their frequent resistance to respond to the good news. That is quite different from saying that it takes a supernatural operation on their very nature before they can believe. Without going into further detail, we simply affirm that there is no clear positive evidence for natural depravity.

Second, there is negative evidence. Scripture says clearly 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 human 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 mankind since they are the ones involved. If, however, people have no ability to respond to God, God becomes the essential chooser of who is saved by virtue of whom he enables to respond unto salvation. People do not have a depraved nature, not only because there is no evidence for

it, but also because natural depravity makes God inconsistent in desiring to save all while enabling only some.

Extremes often beget extremes, and so we must not over-react by viewing human spiritual ability too highly. In place of a natural depravity that takes a supernatural miracle to correct, we may speak of a psychological depravity that takes interpersonal influence to correct. We 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 the kind and cause of that frustration is true after salvation as well as before it even though the degree of it may not be the same and should decrease over time.

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 interpersonal influence of other people in fellowship and service and by putting ourselves in contact with the interpersonal 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 overcome psychological depravity.

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 indeed some passages that could conceivably be understood in the way natural depravity assumes. However, no passage requires such a construction of thought; in fact, many texts proposed in support of that concept cannot have that meaning.

By “biblical” base, we mean that there are perhaps 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 such a scientific conclusion is no closer to being proof than the biblical evidence for it. But Christian theologians are concerned primarily with biblical rather than “scientific” evidence. More particularly, “biblical” evidence stands in contrast to “philosophical” thought. Natural depravity is an understandable concept, one that has relatively strong explanatory power as far as ideas go, and advocates can put it 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 a creative one so much as an interpretative one. Christian teaching needs to arise from scripture, not from imagination, that is, from philosophy.

Ability in relation to “spiritual” things distinguishes the issue at hand from losses which scripture indicates our first parents incurred when they disobeyed. Nothing in Genesis or elsewhere says anything about a loss in our inborn ability to operate interpersonally with God or fellowmen.

The phrase “before the fall” draws attention to a comparison between the way Adam was after he sinned and the way he was before. We can imagine having more power to resist temptation and obey God, but the proper comparison is not between the way we are and some ideal, but between the way we were before and after the fateful disobedience. When mankind first sinned, he did not have a “fallen” nature; so having a fallen nature is not necessary for explaining why we sin.

“Biologically” inheritable specifies that whatever defect we have must be transmitted genetically for it to require supernatural remedy by the Spirit. Behavioral depravity can be socially transmitted as well as originated again and again in each person because of ignorance in combination with viewpoint of consciousness and the pull of neutral bodily drives that can be fulfilled in negative ways. Psychological depravity—the power of sin to hold us down—can result from previous sin. It can be explained as the pull of past sin on present resolve, that is, ingrained habit rather than inborn defect. Psychological depravity is “self-depravitization” rather than hereditary depravity. The natural-depravity proposal represents overkill for explaining universal, all-pervasive sin in humankind.

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