

BAHRAIN REFORMED BAPTIST CHURCH
Total Depravity / Total Inability

November 1, 2024

Preliminary

Review: The Synod of Dort was convened in November of 1618 to deal with the Arminian challenge.¹

Question 1: How does fallen man come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Arminian: Response with their first point became known as *partial depravity* or *the wounded man theory*.

Point: Although man is fallen, they insisted that his mind, will, and emotions were only wounded by the Fall.

[Articles of Faith of the National Association of Free Will Baptist X] – “The human will is free and self-controlled, having power to yield to the influence of the truth and the Spirit, or to resist them and perish.”

Synod of Dort: Responded to the contrary, articulating what has come to be known as *Total Depravity* or *the dead man theory*

Point: In the Fall, man didn’t just become spiritually sick – he’s dead... Eph 2:1

Result: Man is completely unable to do any ultimate good in the eyes of God, including believing the Gospel.

➤ Since Adam's Fall, every person is born spiritually dead and enslaved to sin by nature... Rom 5:12

Four States of Man in Relation to Sin (Augustine)²

1. Able to sin, able not to sin (*posse peccare, posse non peccare*) – the state of man in innocency, before the Fall
2. Not able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*) – the state of the natural man after the fall
3. Able not to sin (*posse non peccare*) – the state of the regenerate man
 - *Simul justus et peccator* – a Christian is at the same time both righteous and a sinner – (Martin Luther)
4. Unable to sin (*non posse peccare*) – the glorified man

Total Depravity | Total Inability

Definition: [*WCF & 1689 BCF VI. 2*] – “By this sin they (Adam and Eve) fell from their original righteousness, and communion with God, and so became dead in sin and *wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body*.”

➤ Every faculty that humans have is affected by the Fall ... our mind, will, emotions, memory, dreams, and conscience are predisposed toward corruption and evil... Rm 3:10-18

[David Steele & Curtis Thomas, *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended, Documented*, Loc. 48.1/214] – “When Calvinists speak of man as being totally depraved, they mean that man’s nature is corrupt, perverse, and sinful throughout. The adjective “total” does not mean that each sinner is as totally or completely corrupt in his actions and thoughts as it is possible for him to be. Instead, the word “total” is used to indicate that the *whole* of man’s being has been affected by sin. The corruption extends to *every part* of man, his body and soul; sin has affected all (the totality) of man’s faculties—his mind, his will, etc... As a result of this inborn corruption, the natural man is totally unable to do anything spiritually good; thus Calvinists speak of man’s “total inability.” The inability intended by this terminology is *spiritual inability*; it means that the sinner is so spiritually bankrupt that *he can do nothing pertaining to his salvation*... they do not have the ABILITY to choose spiritual good over evil”

Note: It does not mean that man is as bad as he could be nor every unregenerate man is equally bad – some are good people.

[Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 61] – “This doctrine of Total Inability, which declares that men are dead in sin, does not mean that all men are equally bad, nor that any man is as bad as he could be, nor that anyone is entirely destitute of virtue, nor that human will is evil in itself, nor that man’s spirit is inactive, and much less does it mean that the body is dead. What it does mean is that since the fall man rests under the curse of sin, that he is actuated by wrong principles, and that he is wholly unable to love God or to do anything meriting salvation.”

➤ It is not due to his depravity being partial, but because of the influence of God’s common grace.

➤ Even unbelievers do good works because every human being is created in the image of God... Gen 1:26, 27

[Richard Phillips, *What’s so Great About the Doctrine of Grace*, 26] – “This is not to say there is nothing good about us. In fact, we need to emphasize that humankind was created good, bearing the image of God. The most depraved person you will ever meet enjoys the dignity of God’s original glorious creation of mankind. The doctrine of total depravity does not teach that men and women are *worthless*... Though the Bible says men are lost, it does not say they are nothing. Far from it: it is the priceless value of every human soul that defines the tragedy expressed by total depravity. Neither does total depravity mean that little children should never be called “good boy” or “good girl.” It is very possible for totally depraved sinners to do things that are in and of themselves good.”

➤ Restraining... 2 Thes 2:7; Rom 13:1ff; Cf. Rm 1:24, 26, 28 = It is God who gives up (Gk. παραδίδωμι = *paradidómi*) some sinners to vileness.

➤ Blessings... Mt 5:44, 45 = Both the righteous and the wicked participate in the same earthly blessings.

➤ Man even in the natural state has a conscience that responds to good and evil... Rm 2:14f

Point: Even in the apparent goodness of life in the world, there is God to thank, and not man to trust.

Application: Teach Christians to value the good works of unbelievers while recognizing their depravity... Cf. Mt.7:11; 1Pt 3:13

Biblical Presentation:

1. Old Testament

Gen. 6:5 = “*Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*”

1 Kings 8:46 = “*When they sin against You*” (for there is no one who does not sin)

Psalm 14, 53 = The earth full of human sinfulness; no one is righteous... cf.Ecc.7:20

Jeremiah 17:9 = “*The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?*”... cf. Jer 13:23

Isa 53:6; Gen. 6:5; 8:21= Everyone had turned to his own ways that even “the thoughts and imaginations of our hearts are evil continually from our youth.”

2. New Testament

Eph 2:1-5 = “Dead in [our] transgressions and sins” and *by nature children of wrath* – without the life of God in our souls
Eph 4:18; 1 Cor 2:14 = “Darkened in [our] understanding” and “carnally minded” – at enmity with God and incapable of being subject to Him... cf. Rm 8:5-7

Rom 1:30; Jn 3:19 = “Haters of God” and “lovers of darkness”

Titus 3:3; Jn 8:34 = “Slaves” to our sinful nature, captive to a “my will be done” ethic and epistemology.

Mk 7:21, 22 = With hearts that are so twisted with self-centeredness that out of them come “evil thoughts, vulgar deeds, stealing, murder, unfaithfulness in marriage, greed, meanness, deceit, indecency, envy, insults, pride and foolishness”

1 Pet. 4:3-5 = Description of the unconverted life as sinful and blindly ignorant

1 Jn 2:15-17 = Everything in the world: lust of the flesh; lust of the eyes; pride of life; cf. 5:19

Romans 3:10-18 = “*As it is written: None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹no one understands; no one seeks God. ¹²All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one. ¹³“Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. ¹⁴Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. ¹⁵Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶in their paths are ruin and misery, ¹⁷and the way of peace they have not known. ¹⁸There is no fear of God before their eyes.*”

Romans 3:23 = “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*”

Summary: Man’s will is bound by his own sinfulness – not able to choose godly things... 2 Cor 4:4

Question 2: Can fallen man, who is spiritually dead, take any steps for his salvation?

Arminian: The unregenerate man can choose life with God's help.

➤ Man and God are cooperating together in order to accomplish redemption... “*works-based salvation*”

➤ Synergism (Syn = *with; together with*)... i.e. Synchronized justification

Calvinist: An unregenerate child of the devil can never choose good as far as God is concerned... Mt 13:38; Act 13:10

[Phillips, 27] – “Sin has corrupted man’s thinking in such a way that people lack the ability to understand the truth about themselves, God, and the world. This is why Jesus told Nicodemus, “*Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (John 3:3). Until we are saved out of our depraved state, we are blind to the reality of God’s glory and righteousness.”

[Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 338] – “[Therefore] every effort to claim for the sinner the minutest co-operation in this first grace destroys the gospel, severs the artery of the Christian confession and is anti-scriptural in the highest degree... Like a spiritual corpse, he is unable to make a single move toward God, think a right thought about God, or even respond to God—unless God first brings this spiritually dead corpse to life”

Point: Even all our righteousness is as filthy rags in His sight... Isa in 64:6

Rectification: The difference between the words, ‘*may*’ and ‘*can*’

➤ CAN is a word of ability and MAY is a word of permission

John 6:44 = “*No man CAN come except he is drawn by the Father.*”

➤ Every human being on earth has the freedom to believe in the Gospel, but they don’t have the ability to save themselves.

[The Canons of Dort, *Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine*] – “...all people are conceived in sin and born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; [and] without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform”

Conclusion: Until God the Holy Spirit changes the disposition of man’s soul, he will never have faith in Christ, he will never embrace Him and never decide for Him in any redemptive way, he will never truly choose Him because his heart is still bound up in sin – (Sproul)

Challenge:

1. The only way to see the greatness of the gospel is to see first how bad our plight is.

2. God is holy, the more we recognize His holiness, the more we understand our own sinfulness... Lk 15:19f; 18:13, 14

3. Total depravity humbles us – it breeds gratitude

4. This doctrine moves us to evangelize and causes reliance on God

***Understanding the Doctrine of Total Depravity is the ground of a real appreciation of God's grace,
and that leads to Biblical humility (NAE)... Rom 5:20; Eze 36:29-32***

Other References:

¹Eric Holmberg, *Amazing Grace: The History and Theology of Calvinism*, 135, 136

²John Hendryx, *Augustine VS Pelagius in Church History*, 6

Dave Hunt and James White, *Debating Calvinism: Five Points, Two Views*

James Montgomery Boice, *Rediscovering the Evangelical Gospel*

James M. Boice & Philip Graham Ryken, *The Doctrine of Grace, Rediscovering the Evangelical Gospel*