

DEPRAVITY, TOTAL

A proper definition of total depravity should not focus primarily on the questions of sinfulness vs. goodness or ability vs. inability, but on fallen man's relation to a holy God. Because of the effects of the fall, that original relationship of fellowship with God was broken, and man's entire nature was polluted. As a result no one can do anything, even good things, that can gain soteriological merit in God's sight. Therefore, we may concisely define total depravity as the unmeritoriousness of man before God because of the corruption of original sin.

The concept of total depravity does not mean (1) that depraved people cannot or do not perform actions that are good either in man's or God's sight. But no such action can gain favor with God for salvation. Neither does it mean (2) fallen man has no conscience which judges between good and evil for him. But that conscience has been affected by the fall so that it cannot be a safe and reliable guide. Neither does it mean (3) that people indulge in every form of sin or in any sin to the greatest extent possible.

Positively total depravity means that the corruption has extended to all aspects of man's nature, to his entire being; and total depravity means that because of that corruption there is nothing man can do to merit saving favor with God.

The Bible teaches this concept of total depravity in many places. The Lord recognized good people (Matt.22:10), yet He labelled His own disciples as evil men (Matt. 7:11). The mind is affected

(Rom. 1:28; Eph. 4:18), the conscience is unclean (Heb. 9:14), the heart is deceitful (Jer. 17:9), and by nature mankind is subject to wrath (Eph. 2:3). God sent the flood as a judgment on mankind's depravity (Gen. 6:5). Depravity, according to the Lord, is in the inner being and the root of evil actions (Mark 7:20-23). With a string of Old Testament quotations Paul also shows it is deep-seated, universal and total (Rom. 3:9-18).

Calvinists trace depravity to an inherent corruption of man's nature which was inherited from Adam. Augustine stressed the idea that all were seminally present in Adam when he sinned and therefore all sinned in him. The semi-Pelagian reaction to Calvinism is found today in Arminian theology which denies total depravity, the guilt of original sin, and the loss of freedom of the will, and which affirms involvement in the sin of Adam only to the extent of giving mankind a tendency toward sin but not a sinful nature.

The implications of depravity are especially crucial in relation to salvation. Man has no ability to save himself. He can do good, and make choices, but he cannot regenerate himself (John 1:13). Unless the Holy Spirit enlightens an individual he will remain in darkness (1 Cor. 2:14). Some theologians have labelled this "moral inability," an unclear term, since it implies that depraved people are devoid of morality.

Bibliography

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