

Total Depravity?

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Summary

The Calvinistic doctrine of Total Depravity, which posits that all humans inherit Adam's sin and are incapable of choosing God, is refuted by the New Testament. Scripture shows that sin only becomes a factor in one's life after they reach an age of accountability, when they are able to understand and obey God's law. Furthermore, the idea that human spirits are stained with sin from conception is unjust and contradicted by the fact that our spirits come directly from God.

Article

The Calvinistic doctrine of Total Depravity maintains that all men have inherited the sin of Adam through their parents. As such, they are morally unable to choose to follow God and be saved because of their own depraved, sinful nature, which extends to every part of their personality. Hence, according to this doctrine, at birth—even prior to birth while still in the womb—every person is stained by Adam's sin and in a lost condition. This distorted thinking led to the necessity of infant baptism in order for a child to be cleansed of Adamic sin, which allegedly adheres to the soul.

Contrary to such thinking, the New Testament plainly disputes the notion of Total Depravity. In the first place, Paul clarified the onset of sin in every human being. Using himself as a prototype,

he explained:

...I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me (Romans 7:7-11).

Paul remained uncondemned and unspotted by sin while in the womb and thereafter following his birth. He recognized that he was not guilty before God prior to the point at which he could understand God's commandments and realize his amenability to keep them. Prior to that point, he was too spiritually immature to be responsible for his actions.

The term rendered "revived".^[1] does not mean that sin existed previously and then reasserted itself. Taking "revived" in that sense would mean that Paul had a period in between that was sinless—which does not support the notion of Total Depravity. When would that have been?

Instead, Paul was saying that, prior to his coming to a realization of his sin and the application of God's law to his life, he was not amenable to God's law and, therefore, not counted sinful by God: "for where there is no law there is no transgression" (Romans 4:15). Practically speaking, for

children there is no law—except the law of their parents. Though children may violate God’s law, e.g., lie to their parents, God’s laws do not apply to children until they reach an age of accountability.^[2] At that point, children reach a level of spiritual maturity and become responsible before God for their behavior.

These observations lead us to draw this conclusion: the very idea that our spirits, in the womb and in post-birth infancy, are stained with sin is an indictment of God’s justice, impartiality, and infinite goodness. Yet, the following biblical affirmations contradict the notion of Total Depravity and exonerate God for such injustice:

1. Solomon forthrightly declared that our spirits came from God Himself (Ecclesiastes 12:7).
2. This bestowal occurred at conception: “Thus says the LORD, who stretches out the heavens, lays the foundation of the earth, and forms the spirit of man within him” (Zechariah 12:1; cf. Hosea 9:11; Luke 1:36).^[3]
3. When Paul addressed the Athenian philosophers on Mars Hill, he declared: “for in Him we live and move and have our being.... Therefore, since we are the offspring of God...” (Acts 17:28-29).

Conclusion: Since our spirits came directly from God at conception, making us the offspring of God, to suggest that the human spirit in the womb and at conception is stained with the guilt of Adam’s sin makes God guilty of creating depraved human beings. But the Calvinistic doctrine of Total Depravity is incorrect. All human beings begin life with a spirit from God that is pure and clean.

Endnotes

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[1] *ἀναζήσεν* from *ἀναζάω* can mean “to revive, in the sense of to become vigorous” and “Metaph. to live a better life”—Charles Robson (1839), *A Greek Lexicon to the New Testament* (London: Whittaker & Co.), pp. 25-26.

[2] Dave Miller (2002), “The Age of Accountability,” <https://apologeticspress.org/the-age-of-accountability-1202/>.

[3] For a discussion of the commencement of life, view this video: Dave Miller (2023), “When Does Human Life Begin?” <https://apologeticspress.org/video/when-does-human-life-begin/>.