

Pastor's Papers | Ronald H. Gann
Theology/Doctrine

Total Depravity: Monergistic Regeneration

Understanding Total Depravity (Part 2)

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The regeneration of physical life is a trademark of Scripture. Certainly no well-meaning Arminian would deny the singlehanded handiwork of God in the various resuscitations depicted in Scripture (cf. Acts 3:15; 13:36-38; 26:8). Only those who espouse ludicrous theology would dare to suggest that Lazarus, Eutychus, Tabitha, and Jairus' daughter, together with the widow's son in Nain, the Shummanite's son, and the son of the Zarephath widow, were raised to physical life because their corpses first willingly believed and then cooperated with the miracles. The science of biology, the laws of hermeneutics, and the *Analogy of Faith*—the rule which stipulates that Scripture interprets Scripture—militate against such nonsense. The dead are not physically capable of believing in or cooperating with anything, nor do they possess the functioning ability to self-regenerate to newness of life. They lack the mental, emotional, and physical stimuli to feel, ponder, or to rationalize; they are powerless to will, want, or desire anything. The dead are *lifeless*. To suggest otherwise is to invite charges of madness.

Calvinism teaches that reprobate man is as much spiritually dead as he is alive biologically. More than just spiritually deaf, dumb, and blind, man's fallen condition is such that he is effectively stillborn. He enters the world handcuffed to corruption and imprisoned to his sin nature, from which there is no escape. In his natural affections, man is unresponsive to the things of God, unable to ascertain any spiritual happenings around him, and completely powerless to turn to God (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14). In short, he is without a spiritual heartbeat.

Man's incurable state of depravity, or terminal diagnosis, is not Calvinistic conjecture or a Reformed rumination, as is so often the charge. It's *Pauline* theology in its bare form. To the Colossians, Paul wrote candidly: "*you were dead in your sins* and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature" (Col. 2:13, emphasis added). Likewise, he declared to the Ephesians:

As for you, you were *dead in your transgressions and sins*, in which you used to live ... we were *dead in transgressions*—it is by grace you have been saved (Eph. 2:1-5, emphasis added).

The wages of sin, we're told by the apostle, is death (Rom. 6:23), and because man is born in sin he is born to death. Man does not become spiritually dead because he sins on occasion, he is spiritually dead because by nature he is sinful. Except for Jesus Christ, that is the condition of every human being since the Fall, including every believer

before he is saved. It is the past condition of believers and the present condition of everyone else.

A person who is spiritually dead has no life by which he can respond to spiritual things, much less live a spiritual life. No amount of pleading, begging, or demanding from God can spark the spiritually dead to newness of life. They are alienated from God and therefore alienated from His life-giving power. Notwithstanding their blasphemies, unregenerate sinners have neither the capacity to engage in, nor the interest to dwell on, spiritual matters. To the point, they are spiritual zombies—the walking dead—who do not know they are dead. They go through the daily motions of life, but they do not possess it. Apart from the monergistic work of the Holy Spirit, a sinner is nothing more than a lifeless corpse—no more capable and no less willing to respond to the gospel than a cadaver. This is the brutal truth of Total.

While virtually all evangelicals admit that man comes into this world dead on arrival, spiritually speaking, there remains a massive disconnect as to the extent of his deadness and what it means in terms of his salvation. The confusion stems from the fact that, in their respective treatments of Ephesians 2:1-5 and Colossians 2:13, Calvinists and Arminians apply different meanings to the word *dead*. This scholastic difference of opinion has survived the better part of five hundred years.

As we have seen, Calvinists understand Paul's use of the term *dead* to be literal in connotation. Man is spiritually incapacitated and unresponsive. He is without a spiritual pulse. The natural man cannot awaken himself to spiritual consciousness any more than Lazarus could awaken himself to physical awareness (cf. John 11:43-44). When Paul writes that sinners are "dead in transgressions" Calvinists take the apostle at his literal word.

Arminians, on the other hand, take a metaphorical approach in their analysis of man's deadness. They do not look upon man as being *really* dead, at least as we understand the term, inasmuch as he is simply separated from God, alienated from righteousness, and sick from sin. As it relates to the severity of Paul's language, Arminians suppose that the apostle used some license with his language; that is, he wrote in poetical, if not hyperbolic, prose to convey the degree of separation that exists between a holy God and rebellious sinners. Man is indeed dead in sin, they admit, but only in the sense of *alienation*, not in the Calvinist sense of lifelessness. Arminians conclude, therefore, that while unregenerate man is sick and alienated, he is not so flat-lined that he is incapable of contributing on his own to the *Ordo Salutis*, and by a faith that is his own. One anonymous blogger, in his attempt to refute Calvinism, put forth the free-will perspective on man's deadness in no uncertain terms:

To be dead in sins means that we are cut off from the relationship with God that is necessary for spiritual life. Our sin separates us from a holy God and causes spiritual death. This is both actual and potential. The sinner is presently "dead" because, in the absence of faith, he is not enjoying life giving union with Christ. The sinner is potentially dead because if he continues in this state he will be forever cut off from the presence of the Lord in Hell (2 Thess. 1:9) ...

The Bible plainly teaches that those who are dead in sin resist the Holy Spirit. Now have you ever seen a corpse resist something? Of course not. So if we adopt the implications of the Calvinistic definition of “dead in sin” then we must deny that anyone who is dead in sin can resist the Holy Spirit or reject the gospel (Acts 7:51; 2 Thess. 2:10; 1 John 4:10; Rom. 10:21). Corpses can’t resist or reject anything any more than they can see or hear anything. This, of course, should tell us something about the Calvinistic understanding of dead in sin. It is not biblical.

Now it is important to remember that Arminians do not deny the need for God’s gracious enabling before a sinner can believe and embrace the gospel. Without divine initiative and enabling no one would ever come to God in faith. We are confident, however, that God is powerful enough to overcome our depravity and there is no need for the [Calvinist] priority of regeneration since there is no strict parallel between the inability of a physical corpse and the inability of those dead in sin. We can therefore accept the biblical teaching of depravity and God’s Prevenient Grace without needing to turn the Bible on its ear in an effort to put spiritual life [regeneration] before faith.¹

As noted by the blogger, Arminians contend that Calvinists go astray in their interpretation of Ephesians 2:1-5 and Colossians 2:13 when they equate spiritual death with biological death. We are told that they are not the same thing and should not be misconstrued as such. That is to say, natural man, while spiritually dead, can still think, talk, reason, laugh, cry, and make decisions in his life that the physically dead cannot. Therefore Arminians infer that the apostle Paul must have had something else in mind (other than literal deadness) when he referred to the unregenerate as “dead in transgressions.” Thus, by interpreting Paul’s words euphemistically rather than literally, Arminians soften the blow of Scripture. Another Arminian writer frames the argument this way:

We cannot assume that the effects of death are uniform for all the forms of death ... Unresponsiveness is really an effect that is unique to physical death and does not occur with spiritual death. ... Calvinists confuse the effects that death has on the body with the very definition of death in general ... [and] assume that part of what it means to die is to lose functionality.

A dead spirit is only “dead” in the sense that God has departed from it, but that does not mean it is unable to make decisions freely including the decision to accept God if such an option were made available by God (such as through the atoning work of Christ Jesus).²

Here we see a spin on words that proves to be a classic case of Arminian doubletalk. “Calvinists confuse the effects that death has on the body,” the writer alleges, “with the very definition of death in general.” Astoundingly, this Arminian writer asks

non-Arminians to suspend all common sense by blindly accepting that physical death differs in definition somehow from general death. To his way of thinking, and in Arminianism by extension, the idea of being dead in sin doesn't really mean dead in function. In physical death a corpse cannot respond or cooperate. It has no power to do either because it is dead. But there is a difference, Arminians tell us, between physical death and spiritual death. A spiritually dead person is still alive organically and, as such, possesses various abilities of function. It stands to reason: If a spiritually dead person can still function biologically he must therefore still have the functional ability in spirit to affirm or deny God's grace in regeneration. This is the standard Arminian refutation to Paul's use of the word *dead* in Ephesians 2:1-5 and Colossians 2:13.

While it true that spiritual death is demarcated from physical death in Scripture (since one is immaterial whereas the other is material), the end result for both is the same. Whether taken literally or figuratively, or when understood materially or immaterially, the word *dead* in the Bible always means dead. The Greek term from which it is translated, in fact, appears 132 times in the *Authorized Version* and 128 times in the *New American Standard Version*. In each instance, and without exception, the term has only one connotation: *lifelessness*. The idea of alienation and separation, on which Arminian tradition rests, never presents itself in any of the scriptural contexts in which the word is found.

So what exactly is the nature of man's deadness? According to *Strong's Concordance*, the Greek word *nekros* (dead), which Paul used in Ephesians 2:1-5 and Colossians 2:13, has both proper and metaphorical meanings—neither of which support the Arminian allusion to separation or alienation. Literally defined, *nekros* means “one that has breathed his last; lifeless; deceased; departed” and “one whose soul is ... without life; inanimate.”³ It is to be in a state of “declension,” says *Vine's Expository Dictionary*, “inasmuch as in that state it is inactive and barren.”⁴ This is the proper or literal use of the word “dead” (*nekros*).

Even more concrete is Strong's metaphorical definition for *nekros*. It carries with it the symbolism of being “spiritually dead; destitute of a life that recognizes and is devoted to God, because [one is] given up to trespasses and sins; inactive as respects [to] doing right; destitute of force or power; inactive; inoperative.”⁵ In other words, while Arminians sidestep the literal meaning of man's spiritual deadness, the metaphorical definition for *nekros* undermines their argument. To be dead in sin, metaphorically, is to be “destitute of force or power;” it is to be spiritually “inoperative.” Likewise, to be dead in sin, literally or properly, is to be “inanimate” and “without life.” In either case, we learn that fallen man's *functional* abilities are dormant!

The Greek verdict is unambiguous. Paul's deliberate use of the word *nekros* teaches that natural man, in his unregenerate state, is a spiritual cadaver whose will is “inanimate,” “inactive,” and “inoperative.” No matter how we cut the linguistic pie—whether taken literally or metaphorically—the word *nekros* likens man's ability to that of a corpse. More than just spiritually alienated or sick, a sinner is *lifeless*. His only hope for salvation rests in the grace of God to first raise him to newness of life and to infuse into him a new will and a renewed mind so that he may receive the salvation that is offered freely in Jesus Christ.

It should be pointed out, however, that Reformed Christians do not deny that alienation from God is a byproduct of Total Depravity. On this point we agree with our

Arminian friends. Indeed, every human being is born into a fractured relationship with their Creator where they are estranged from His merciful love. In fact, Paul said as much in three of his epistles (cf. Gal. 5:4; Eph. 4:18; Col. 1:21). Furthermore, the Old Testament makes clear: “But your iniquities have *separated* you from your God” (Isa. 59:2, emphasis added).

Just as physical death separates the soul from the body so spiritual death, which is of greater significance, separates the soul from God. Like Adam hiding in the Garden (cf. Gen. 3:8), natural man is isolated from God. To conclude, however, that Total Depravity boils down to nothing more than mere separation from God (and to ignore Ephesians 2:1 and Colossians 2:13 concerning man’s deadness) is to stop short of the Bible’s full teaching on the extent of man’s fallen condition.

Calvinism maintains that alienation *and* lifelessness are both derivative of being spiritually dead. The Bible describes spiritual death as a state of being that is separated from its source of life. If something or someone has been separated from its source of life, it dies a pitiful death. Take a fish out of water and it suffocates. Uproot a plant from its bed of soil and it will eventually wither and die. In the same way, separate a sinner from God, from whom the source of all life flows, and the sinner will die, both spiritually and biologically. While the separated parts still exist, the source of its life has departed and he therefore lives a dead existence.

Where Arminian tradition breaks down is its refusal to go beyond the surface teaching of Scripture and to dig deeper into *why* man is separated and alienated from God. Instead of applying the *Analogy of Faith*—which is the rule that stipulates that Scripture interprets Scripture—they go no further than the boundaries of their presuppositions and traditions. While it is certainly true in the broader context of Scripture that man is alienated from God because of his sins, upon closer examination we learn that sinful man is alienated from God ultimately because he is spiritually *dead* in his sins (“inanimate,” “inactive,” and “inoperative”).

My father, for example, passed away in 2009 at the age of 75. His body was eventually cremated and his ashes ensconced in an ornate urn that resides in my mother’s home. It goes without saying that I am now alienated from my father. We no longer enjoy the relationship we once had when he was alive. When I visit my mother’s home and pay my respects to my father’s memory sitting polished on the shelf, he is incapable of dialoging with me. When I whisper a term of endearment in his memory, my father does not answer. When a childhood recollection comes to mind and moves me to mutter, “I miss you dad,” he does not return my call. No matter what I say or do, my dad no longer interacts with me. Why? Are we separated from one another simply because of our individual wills or conduct and behavior? The answer is obviously no. My father is alienated from me, and I from him, because of his *disposition*. In his current state he is nothing more than a pile of ash. He is lifeless. He is estranged from me ultimately because he is not alive.

So it is with the unredeemed and their relationship with God. While sin certainly receives the ultimate blame in Scripture for man’s spiritual separation, the Calvinist understands such a statement to be much more comprehensive than what initially meets the eye. It is the *consequence* of Original Sin—spiritual death—that actually alienates a sinner from God, not just the fact that he practices sin. For this very reason, unless he is

first regenerated, the prayers of a spiritually dead man go largely unanswered by the living God (Prov. 28:9 cf. 15:29; Ps. 66:18; Isa. 59:2; John 9:31).

Preliminary, Preparatory, & Preconditioned Regeneration

While monergism and synergism continue to be a source of contention between Calvinists and Arminians, the debate reaches new plateaus when the particulars of the Reformed *Ordo Salutis* are discussed in greater detail. At issue for many Arminians is *where* and *why* Calvinists place the work of regeneration in the salvation chain. And the same thing can be said in reverse. Calvinists balk at *where* and *why* Arminian's place regeneration in their sequence.

As already noted, Reformed Theology claims that spiritual regeneration is the monergistic work of the Holy Spirit which occurs in the heart of an elect sinner *prior* to his conversion. And this is because unregenerate man, in his bondage, desires sin more than he desires God. He is infatuated with darkness, enslaved to the world, and captivated by wickedness. Consequently, when left to his natural devices, he is incapable of believing the gospel or bending his knee to Christ. He is void of the means (1 Cor. 2:14). The Holy Spirit—in light of Christ's work of redemption—must act independently of the human will in His merciful work of regeneration, or none would be saved. A sinner cannot see the things of God, let alone appreciate God's provision of salvation, unless he is first granted a renewed constitution.

The Lord clearly taught that spiritual regeneration precedes the act of salvation. "I tell you the truth," Jesus said to Nicodemus, "no one can see the kingdom of God *unless* he is born again" (John 3:3, emphasis added). We can paraphrase our Lord's words this way: "Unless a sinner is first spiritually regenerated, he or she cannot even begin to see the kingdom of God, much less believe in it or enter it." Sinners must be raised from spiritual death to new life before salvation is even visible. Only then are they in the irresistible position to believe in Jesus Christ and "see the kingdom of God."

Spiritual regeneration is *not* tantamount to salvation—as many evangelists like Graham and Chafer erroneously preach—but lays the groundwork for it. The apostle Paul implied as much when he said: "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). Reformed Christians understand this verse to say that it is only through the preliminary, preparatory, and preconditioned work of the Holy Spirit that a sinner's darkened mind is illuminated and he is able to profess Christ as the Lord of lords, and *sincerely* mean it (cf. Rev. 17:4; 19:6).

The rationale behind preliminary regeneration is not only commonsensical but is native to orthodoxy and informs much of our historical theology. Various confessions, catechisms, and articles of the faith say so. The 1833 New Hampshire Baptist Confession, for example, reads as follows:

We believe that, in order to be saved, sinners must [first] be regenerated, or born again; that regeneration consists in giving a holy disposition to the mind; that it is effected in a manner above our comprehension by the power of the Holy Spirit, in connection with divine truth, so as to secure

our voluntary obedience to the gospel; and that its proper evidence appears in the holy fruits of repentance, and faith, and newness of life.

Most Arminians balk at this point and reject outright any teaching which dares to suggest that spiritual regeneration is preliminary, preparatory, or a precondition to salvation, to say nothing about being monergistic and devoid of human decision. They flat-out ignore our Lord's teaching to Nicodemus in John 3:3, which we already took care to note, and bypass Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 12:3. As proof of their denial, Dave Hunt and Norman Geisler state the Arminian view succinctly: "[T]hose dead in sin," says Hunt, "can and must believe [first] to be regenerated"⁶ and "Faith is logically prior to regeneration," adds Geisler.⁷ Both men see saving faith as a precondition for regeneration rather than regeneration as a precondition for saving faith. And they are not alone in their analysis. In his commentary on Romans 7, Jacobus Arminius proved to be the trailblazer for this teaching: "Besides," he wrote, "even true and living faith in Christ precedes regeneration strictly taken."⁸

Putting aside the clear teaching of John 3:3 and 1 Corinthians 12:3 for a moment, we must take Hunt, Geisler, and Arminius to task. The Bible teaches emphatically that natural man is besotted with iniquity and comfortably entrenched in darkness; he hates the light and will not come into it (John 3:19-20). And since man's hardened resistance to God is seated in his affections—the inner core of his being—only God, by His grace, can lovingly change, overcome, and disarm man's rebellious disposition. The natural man, apart from the quickening work of the Holy Spirit, will not come to Christ on his own since he is at enmity with God and cannot understand spiritual things. Like Lydia whom "the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul" (Acts 16:14), God must give His elect people spiritual life and understanding whereby their hearts are opened to "respond to the things" of Christ in faith. Only then can and will salvation follow.

To suggest, as Arminians like Hunt and Geisler do, that saving faith comes before regeneration, rather than regeneration before faith, is to put the cart before the horse, so to speak. It is to credit dead men with spiritual abilities that the Bible does not ascribe to them outside the new birth. In the end, Jacobus Arminius, the Remonstrants, classical Arminians, Hunt, Geisler, and today's crop of libertarian believers champion a higher view of fallen man's abilities than do the Scriptures.

While I am grateful for the lasting friendships I enjoy with a number of good-hearted Arminians, many of whom sit under my teaching week after week and whose passion for Scripture I respect, it's difficult for me to remain silent concerning much of what they believe. I have no desire to fracture relationships beyond the strain already evident between Calvinists and Arminians. But it is my earnest passion (as a Christian) and my responsibility (as a clergyman) to confront inaccuracy with truth whenever as I see it, and no matter where it lies or with whom it originates. While we can agree to disagree agreeably over peripheral minutia, we must not shy away from promoting the whole truth of Scripture, especially as it relates to the character and work of God. Thus, it is in the spirit of truth that I ask my Arminian friends: How, exactly, are dead sinners supposed to respond savingly to the gospel—so as to enter into union with Christ—if they are not first regenerated? Where does the spiritual cognizance come from that enables the dead to respond in faith if regeneration has not first occurred?

The answers that are given by a preponderance of Arminians to the foregoing questions, unfortunately, are as theologically muddled as they are philosophically inconsistent. In the end, they leave us with an unsatisfactory view of regeneration that elevates the autonomy of man to unwarranted levels while demoting the freedom of God to unacceptable lows. They leave us with a theological system that wreaks havoc on Scripture and subverts the historical theology of the Church. They leave us with teaching that robs many Christians of the joy of their salvation (since they can never be sure it's secure) while belittling the majestic omnipotence and sovereignty of God. And lastly, Arminians leave us with a belief system that jeopardizes the marvelous work of regeneration by putting it into the hands of reprobate men to finalize. I have no choice, therefore, but to concur with the rather hard words of Presbyterian author Brian Schwertley:

A proper understanding of the new birth is crucial to the Christian faith. An unbiblical view of the new birth will compromise and pervert many other important doctrines (e.g., the doctrines about God, original sin, human ability, predestination, perseverance of the saints, etc.). It is remarkable that most fundamentalists and evangelicals who champion the new birth have completely perverted the doctrine. They have made it dependent on man's choice rather than God's choice. There is no excuse for anyone to misunderstand this doctrine; the Bible is very clear in this area, as we have seen. If you do not believe what the Bible teaches regarding the new birth, then you must repent and submit to Christ's teaching. If you have changed your view of the new birth and yet find yourself in a church that rejects the Bible's teaching in this area, it's time for you to find a new church. Jesus Christ clearly implied that men who did not understand this doctrine were not fit to be teachers of His people (cf. John. 3:10).⁹

At long last, the rickety train of Arminianism can be mapped as follows: (1) dead men must *want* to be saved; (2) dead men must *seek* out salvation; (3) dead men must *self-generate* the faith to believe; (4) dead men must *repent*; and lastly, (5) dead men must *cooperate* with the Holy Spirit by making a free-will "decision" to accept Christ. Only when the foregoing is achieved, so we are told, is the dead sinner *then* made alive in Christ.

The door remains wide open in Arminian theology for unregenerate men to frustrate the sovereign intentions of a thrice-holy God in saving him. The Father may decree a person's salvation, the Son may die to obtain his redemption, and the Spirit may exercise His divine power in bringing conviction and enlightenment. But all of this, Arminian tradition tells us, is not enough to bring about salvation unless the will of the *dead* creature cooperates and perseveres. This is what I refer to as the *anti-evangelion*, or the bad news, of the synergistic gospel. God's predetermined decrees, theoretically speaking, rise and fall under the supposed cooperation of unregenerate sinners.

The differences between the two sides could not be more pronounced. If the Calvinist's take on Original Sin is correct, then the sons of Adam are spiritually dead in *totality*; morally incapable, unable, and unwilling to reconcile with God. Owing to their

deadness, sinners are not free to choose Christ but are enslaved to sin (John 8:34; Rom. 6:6, 16-18). God must therefore do the reconciling on their behalf. And this He has done in eternity past, the Calvinist teaches, by electing unconditionally certain souls to make alive in Christ in order that they may believe in Him (1 Cor. 15:22; Eph. 2:1-5; Col. 2:13). This newness of life includes the spiritual ears to hear and the ability to obey the command of Christ so that, once awakened from the coffin of depravity, the sinner will irresistibly respond like Lazarus and “come out!”

Conversely, if the Arminian’s take on Original Sin is correct, then the sons of Adam are only *partially* dead. They still possess the wherewithal to respond to the gospel invitation by an act of their unregenerate will. They are not only morally capable of igniting the quest for salvation on their own via common grace¹⁰ but are also the final determinate as to whether or not God’s hope of saving them will be realized. And only when sinners respond positively from their self-will and accept Jesus Christ as their Savior are they subsequently regenerated and inducted into the fold of the Elect.

Thus, one side of the camp sees salvation as the work of God alone (monergism), whereas the other views it as an initial work of God that is completed by man (synergism). One side sees regeneration as a precondition for salvation (Calvinism) while the other views it as the result (Arminianism).

The all-too-important issue on the table before us, therefore, is the first petal in the T.U.L.I.P. acrostic—*Total Depravity*. To what degree are men depraved? A proper understanding of the answer is indispensable, for the validity of monergistic regeneration and the biblical view of God’s sovereignty in salvation hang in the balance.

—Ronald H. Gann

¹ arminianperspectives.wordpress.com/2008/05/15/what-can-the-dead-in-sin-do

² dtbrents.wordpress.com/category/what-it-means-to-be-spiritually-dead

³ www.studylight.org/isb/view.cgi?number=3498

⁴ *Vine’s Expository Dictionary*; (Baker Books; 1981); p. 273

⁵ Ibid. www.studylight.org/isb/view.cgi?number=3498

⁶ Dave Hunt and James White, *Debating Calvinism*; (Multnomah Publishers, 2004); p. 79

⁷ Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free* (Bethany House; 2001); pp. 233-234. as cited in James R. White, *The Potter’s Freedom* (Calvary Press Publishing; 2009); p. 91

⁸ As cited as www.arminianchronicles.com/2010/01/arminius-on-regeneration.html

⁹ www.reformedonline.com/view/reformedonline/newbirth.htm

¹⁰ Common Grace is a theological concept in Protestant Christianity, primarily in Reformed and Calvinistic circles, referring to the grace of God that is common to all humankind. It is distinguished from Special grace which, in Reformed theology, is the grace by which God redeems, sanctifies, and glorifies his people. Unlike common grace, which is universally given, special grace is bestowed only on those whom God elects to eternal life through faith in Jesus Christ.