

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

Total Depravity: The Walking Dead

Understanding Total Depravity (Part 3)

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Filmgoers are no strangers to a good ghost story. With the advent of motion pictures and television a century ago, screen depictions of ghouls and goblins have scared up profitable returns for Hollywood. Even the classical works of Shakespeare, Dickens, and Wilde—each of whom published tall tales about ghosts—have been made into cinematic masterpieces. From poetical yarns such as *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *The Canterville Ghost*, to more populist and contemporary blockbusters such as *A Christmas Carol* and *Poltergeist*, Hollywood's take on the *undead* has haunted audiences for decades. The notion of wandering spirits portrayed on celluloid never fails to capture our notice at the box office.

But not all ghost stories are spooky; many span a variety of film genres. There are those rare gems that thrive as comedies, such as *Ghostbusters*, starring Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd, while others succeed as suspenseful thrillers like Harrison Ford's *What Lies Beneath*. But seldom does a movie about ghosts arouse our collective romanticism or make a cultural splash like one such film did in 1990. Nominated for five Academy Awards, including Best Picture, the romantic thriller *Ghost*, starring Patrick Swayze, Demi Moore, and Whoopi Goldberg, took the North American box office by storm.

An unapologetic crowd pleaser, *Ghost* follows the spirit of a mild-mannered New Yorker as he attempts to both solve his own murder and say goodbye to his devoted girlfriend. Patrick Swayze stars as Sam Wheat, an investment financier who discovers financial irregularities at work and is promptly murdered in what is disguised as a random mugging. Devastated, his live-in girlfriend Molly (Moore) is incapable of being consoled. As Sam gathers himself in the non-corporeal afterlife, his spirit begins to learn how to reach out to the living, primarily through a seemingly bogus psychic named Oda Mae Brown (Goldberg). After a lifetime of swindling suckers, Oda Mae is as surprised as anyone to learn that her clairvoyant skills are apparently legitimate. Through a series of ethereal encounters with Sam's spirit, she becomes determined to help him on his dual-quest to solve his murder and save Molly from imminent danger.

With its sentimental and sexually charged love story sautéed in the lore of the supernatural, *Ghost* struck a chord with audiences. And after earning a quarter billion dollars at the domestic box office, it went on to become a worldwide juggernaut. The rest, as they say, is cinematic history.

But the success of *Ghost* did not come without theological headaches for the Church. Spawned by the film's popularity, an albatross of hucksters, spinsters, and cultists—most of whom claimed to have the power to channel the dead—set up shop on television hocking their medium abilities for a price. And no shortage of customers—

especially among women—greeted them! Hoping to capture for themselves the mystical romance portrayed by Swayze and Moore on the silver-screen were countless grieving widows eager to make contact with their dead husbands.

Even stranger, séances were suddenly *en vogue* again, as they once were in Houdini's day nearly a century before. And still other thrill seekers started dubious careers as "ghost hunters." Alas, more and more Westerners began to take seriously Eastern mysticism and occultism and, in so doing, legitimized a brand of paganism frowned upon in Scripture (Deut. 18:9-13; Lev. 20:6, 27; Isa. 8:19 cf. 1 Chron. 10:13-14). Proving to be more than just popcorn-fare entertainment, *Ghost* sparked a quasi-religious revival that sent shockwaves throughout evangelical circles for years to come.

At the center of the wreckage left in the wake of *Ghost's* success was the mystery surrounding the human soul. Irreligious people from all walks of life started asking questions once thought taboo by the sophisticated elite: *Do the dead really have the ability to reach out to the living? Is the spirit of man on a quest for good? Moreover, Does man's spirit have the ability to make contact with God?* Sadly, the motion picture industry offered little in terms of sound theological advice. Instead, through films like *Ghost*, they pointed people to eccentric and charismatic mystics who show-boated a gift for gab. It seems virtually everything and everyone was consulted about the condition of the human spirit, except, of course, for the Bible and the God it reveals.

When probing the anonymity of the human spirit, Christians can give confident answers to a skeptical world. The Bible is not silent on the topic. Nevertheless, many Christians stake their ground on opposite ends of the theological spectrum and offer conflicting answers that often confuse sincere inquirers. For example, while both Calvinists and Arminians agree that the art of pagan spiritism is demonic—despite its glamorization in *Ghost*—both sides disagree over the nature of a person's spirit.

Reformed Theology teaches that human beings enter this world spiritually stillborn. They possess neither the ambition nor the cognizance to pursue spiritual matters of a godly sort. In counter distinction, Christians who subscribe to free-will theology maintain that sinners are born spiritually alive, albeit handicapped, and indeed possess the wherewithal to seek reconciliation with God. So which side is theologically accurate? Does reprobate man possess enough life and the necessary resolve to reach out to the living God?

The Bible reveals an apparent conundrum when it comes to the condition of the human spirit. On one hand, it teaches that man's soul was created *immortal* by God (Gen. 2:7 cf. Psa. 49:7-9; Eccl. 12:7; Dan. 12:2-3; Matt. 25:46; 1 Cor. 15:12-19) while on the other hand it teaches that man is born spiritually *lifeless* on account of Original Sin (Eph. 2:1-5; Col. 2:13). To put it simply, man is born spiritually eternal while simultaneously spiritually dead. Herein lies the mystery. We conclude, therefore, that the only sufficient answer is that man's spirit is everlasting in terms of its existence but dead in sin as it relates to its operability. All men, says the apostle Paul, are "dead even while [they] lived" (1 Tim. 5:6). That is to say, in the words of Dr. R.C. Sproul, "To be spiritually dead is to be diabolically alive."¹

If fallen man is spiritually dead, the Calvinist reasons, then it logically follows that he is incapable on his own to seek after, respond to, or believe in his Creator. On balance, because the biologically dead can do neither of these things, it stands to reason that neither can the spiritually dead. Thus, the view one takes concerning salvation will

be determined, to a large extent, by the view one takes concerning Original Sin and its effects on the human condition.

The Calvinistic view of man's spiritual state of being is bleak. The Bible teaches that man's heart is "deceitful and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9) and his thoughts "continually evil" (Gen. 6:5). Man is born "dead in transgressions and sins" (Eph. 2:1-5 cf. Psa. 51:5; 58:3; Col. 2:13) and held captive by his love for iniquity (John 3:19; 8:34). Owing to his spiritual deadness, a sinner will not—and cannot—seek the living God (Rom. 3:10-11). He loves the "darkness instead of light" (John 3:19) and "does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him" (1 Cor. 2:14 cf. 1:18). Blinded by Satan (2 Cor. 4:4), sinners naturally "suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Rom. 1:18) and "their thinking [becomes] futile and their foolish hearts [are] darkened" (v. 21b). They willfully live in disobedience and rebellion while convincing themselves they are in the right (Prov. 14:12).

The post-Fall condition of mankind is referred to in Reformed circles as *Total Depravity*. And it is on this point that the merits of Reformed Theology ultimately rest.

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 he possibly can be. When judged by human standards, for example, we can see an obvious degree of separation that existed between the depravity of Adolf Hitler and that of Mother Theresa. Instead, the word "total" is used to indicate the *whole* of man's being, the sum total of all his faculties—to include his body, soul, mind, will, and heart. The entire essence of man is polluted by iniquity.

But the doctrine of Total Depravity cannot be whittled down to just mean inherent wickedness. It also encompasses disturbing elements such as man's bondage to sin, his oppression by Satan, his spiritual blindness, his spiritual deadness, and his moral inability to accept the gospel. When combined, these six sobering truths—wickedness, enslavement, blindness, oppression, deadness, and inability—define the depravity of man in totality.

The first factor of Total Depravity is *wickedness*: man is innately and pervasively sinful. Contrary to the teaching of the British heretic Pelagius (354-420/440), who taught that human beings are born spiritually innocent or as a blank slate, the Bible teaches that man is steeped in sin from the womb. This is known in schools of theology as Original Sin or Adamic Sin. The scriptural basis for Original Sin is found in Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:22, in which Paul identifies Adam as our federal parent whose transgression in the Garden brought physical and spiritual death to his posterity. Owing to Original Sin, mankind's wickedness is therefore intrinsic.

Scripture teaches that mankind enters the world in a fallen condition. We are sinful "from the womb;" "from birth;" and "from childhood." To the point, Moses tells us that "every inclination of [a man's] heart is evil *from childhood*," (Gen. 8:21 cf. 6:5, emphasis added). Moreover, "Even *from birth* the wicked go astray," writes David, "*from the womb* they are wayward and speak lies" (Psa. 58:3, emphasis added). David implies elsewhere that, like himself, all men are "brought forth in iniquity" and "in sin ... conceived" (Psa. 51:5, NKJV). Human beings, as Paul puts it another way, are "by nature the children of wrath;" born at "enmity with God" (Rom. 5:10; Col. 1:21; James 4:4). We

are “by nature objects of wrath” bent on “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts” (Eph. 2:3).

Like apostate Israel, with whom universal depravity can be easily compared, mankind is a “rebel from birth” (Isa. 48:8) where “everyone is ungodly and wicked, every mouth speaks vileness” (Isa. 9:17b) and among whom “not one upright man remains ... The best of them is like a brier, the most upright worse than a thorn hedge” (Mic. 7:1). Analogous to wayward Judah, sinful men are “eager to act corruptly in all they [do]” (Zeph. 3:7); they “are vile and corrupt, who drink up evil like water” (Job 15:16). “They go from one sin to another,” adds Jeremiah, “they weary themselves from sinning” (Jer. 9:3, 5).

This innate wickedness, which ensconces all men from conception, pollutes a person to the core. In other words, man’s corruption is *total*, infecting every part of him. The penmen of Scripture catalog this truth repeatedly in stark detail, listing the human heart, mind, conscience, mouth, throat, lips, tongue, eyes, feet, and body as collateral damage. Nothing inside or outside a human being remains unmarred by sin.

Solomon lamented, “The hearts of men ... are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts” (Eccl. 9:3). Paul bemoaned that “their minds and consciences are corrupted” (Tit. 1:15), including their “throats,” “tongues,” “lips,” “mouths,” “feet,” and “eyes” (Rom. 3:13-18, 23). He also likened man’s flesh to a “body of sin” and a “wretched ... body of death” (Rom. 6:6; 7:24). Jeremiah added that “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9, KJV). And David lamented that man’s mouth is “full of curses and lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue” (Psa. 10:7). These are but a handful of verses that capture the profound impact of Adamic sin on the human race. Again, man’s entire faculty system—his heart, mind, conscience, mouth, throat, lips, tongue, eyes, feet, and flesh—has been perilously flawed by the effects of the Fall.

Given Scripture’s testimony concerning human reprobation, it is no wonder that the psalmist Asaph rendered the following verdict: “From their callous hearts comes iniquity; *the evil conceit of their minds knows no limits*” (Psa. 73:7, emphasis added). Man’s love for sin, in other words, is boundless. And because this is tragically the case, Jesus took a dim view of those he came to save. In fact, he denounced his disciples—and all of humanity by extension—as transparently “evil” (Matt. 7:11; 12:34; Luke 11:13); comprised of “men [who] loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19). We conclude, therefore, in light of the biblical evidences cited, that what was written of stubborn Israel can be rightly applied to the entire human family: “Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness” (Isa. 1:5b-6).

In the final analysis, Job, Moses, David, Solomon, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Asaph, Paul, and Jesus all bear witness to man’s inborn wickedness and total corruption. It encompasses all that man is, both inside and out. For this reason the Bible concludes, “There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins” (Eccl. 7:20); “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23 cf. 5:12); and “All of us have become like one who is unclean ... and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Isa. 64:6).

The second factor that makes up Total Depravity is *spiritual enslavement*: mankind is in bondage to sin. The Savior revealed this sober truth to a group of self-

righteous Jews who saw themselves as “Abraham’s descendants [who] have never been slaves of anyone” (John 8:33). In arguably the most heated exchange recorded in Scripture, Christ pronounced his ruling against them: “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a *slave to sin*” (John 8:34, emphasis added). His indictment is all-inclusive and couldn’t have been clearer. Every single human being is born genetically enslaved to sin; the strongest evidence for which is that all human beings sin habitually and without regret.

From his own life in particular and from his observations of the world in general, a contemplative Solomon could see clearly the evidence for mankind’s spiritual imprisonment. Enslaved, in bondage, and held captive to their flesh, he wrote of the wicked: “the cords of his sin hold him fast” (Prov. 5:22). To that end, he lamented that the reprobate cannot free themselves from their captivity. “As no one has power over the wind to contain it,” he concluded, “so wickedness will not release those who practice it” (Eccl. 8:8). In other words, there is no parole program available to those imprisoned by sin.

Likewise, the apostle Paul had much to say about man’s bondage. He writes that sinners are “unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin,” whose “sinful nature [is] a slave to the law of sin” (Rom. 7:14b, 25b). A person’s evil nature is his taskmaster, he prefaced earlier, to which “both Jews and Greeks” inevitably submit (Rom. 3:9-12). Men are “foolish, disobedient, deceived and *enslaved* by all kinds of passions and pleasures.” They conduct their lives “in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another” (Tit. 3:3, emphasis added). He reminded the Galatians that “the whole world is a prisoner of sin” (Gal. 3:9) and that, prior to their conversion, they “were in slavery under the basic principles of the world ... slaves to those who by nature are not gods” (Gal. 4:3, 8). The apostle was unflinching when he twice concluded that all men are “*slaves to sin*, which leads to death” and “*slaves to sin* ... free from the control of righteousness” (Rom. 6:16, 20, emphasis added).

On this issue, the apostle Paul had a compatriot in the apostle Peter. Speaking of unregenerate man, Peter wrote, “they themselves are *slaves of depravity*—for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him” (2 Pet. 2:19, emphasis added). Like Simon the Sorcerer who was disgraced by Peter, the final conclusion from Scripture is that all men are naturally “full of bitterness and *captive to sin*” (Act 8:23, emphasis added).

Dr. James Montgomery Boice (1938-2000), a Reformed theologian, radio host, and evangelical speaker, was straightforward in his treatment on man’s enslaved condition. He wrote:

There is no such thing as absolute freedom for anyone. No human is free to do everything he or she may want to do. There is one being in the universe who is *totally* free, of course. That is God. But all others are limited by or enslaved by someone or something ... Since you and I are human beings and not God, we can never be autonomous. We must either be slaves to sin or slaves of Jesus Christ.²

The third factor that makes up Total Depravity is *spiritual blindness*: mankind walks in darkness. God created man to have fellowship with him and to live in light. As such, Adam enjoyed full and free communion with his Creator while tending to his

garden. But when Adam and Eve sinned, their freedom was retarded and their spiritual growth arrested. Since then, Adam's posterity has only been able to hear the voice of God and see biblical truth as God has enabled them. In their natural state, the sons of Adam (all unregenerate sinners) are deaf and dumb to spiritual truth, and "are darkened in their understanding" (Eph. 4:18). They walk in abject sightlessness.

Even more shocking, we learn from Scripture that this burden of blindness under which man labors is attributed to both God and Satan, who apparently work in tandem but toward different ends. The god of this age, Satan, blinds the minds of unbelievers so they cannot understand the gospel, whereas God makes them spiritually blind and spiritually deaf so they cannot turn and believe. This joint-operation is indicative of God's judgment against *Adamic* depravity. Concerning Satan's role, Paul declared:

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

The sad reality concerning man's intrinsic blindness goes beyond the words of Paul in 2 Corinthians 4 and is borne out in Isaiah 6, John 9, and John 12. Even after Jesus had performed countless signs and wonders in their presence, to include healing the blind and raising the dead, the Jewish leadership refused to believe in him. As incontestable as his miracles were, the Jews *would not* nor *could not* accept what they saw. God had yet to shed their chains of degeneracy and grant them eyes to see or ears to hear. This was something the prophet Isaiah had foreseen seven hundred years earlier, which the apostle John took care to recite: "Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?" (John 12:37-38 cf. Isa. 53:1). Their spiritual blindness was compounded by God's divine blindness. John continues:

For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: "[God] has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts" (John 12:39-40).

The Jewish leadership *would not* believe in Jesus because they *could not* believe in him. "Israel's watchmen are blind, they all lack knowledge; they are all mute dogs, they cannot bark; they lie around and dream, they love to sleep" (Isa. 56:10). Like all men shackled by unbelief, they were totally depraved. And in keeping with their depravity, God compounded their innate, satanic blindness with divine blindness. "As it is written," Paul said of the Jews, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear, to this very day" (Rom. 11:8 cf. Deut. 29:4). But, as already noted in 2 Corinthians 4:3-4 and Ephesians 4:18, this spiritual blindness does not belong to the Jews alone. It is universal in scope.

Spiritual blindness reveals the lost man in his fallen state. He cannot see that which is spiritual any more than a blind man can see that which is natural. No person apart from Jesus has been born without this fatal handicap. And only God, through the miracle of the new birth, can open blind eyes (cf. John 9:32). The will of man is

irrelevant. “Ears that hear and eyes that see,” said King Solomon, “the Lord has made them both” (Prov. 20:12).

The fourth factor that makes up Total Depravity is *spiritual oppression*: mankind is under the spell of Satan. As we’ve already noted, “The god of this age [Satan] has blinded the minds of unbelievers so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4). In their state of reprobation, sinners are subject to the prince of darkness; they are shackled under his thumb, as it were. They follow “the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (Eph. 2:2).

The apostle John wrote that “the whole world is under the control of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). Peter said to Cornelius that “all ... were under the power of the devil” (Acts 10:38). Likewise, Jesus made clear to Paul that sinners, at their base level, are fettered under “the power of Satan” (Acts 26:18). Like the Pharisees who were scolded by our Lord on the Mount of Olives, an unregenerate person “belong[s] to [his] father, the devil, and [he] want[s] to carry out [his] father’s desire” (John 8:44). The entire human race, we read in Scripture, is captured in “the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will” (2 Tim. 2:26).

The fifth factor that makes up Total Depravity is *spiritual deadness*. If intrinsic wickedness, spiritual enslavement, spiritual blindness, and demonic subjugation aren’t bad enough, we are told in Scripture that mankind also suffers from spiritual lifelessness. Bringing to mind their former way of life prior to regeneration, Paul reminded the Christians in Colosse: “you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature” (Col. 2:13). To his protégé Timothy he spoke of unbelievers as “dead even while [they] lived” (1 Tim. 5:6). Speaking of the false teachers of his day, Jude cursed them as “twice dead” (Jude 1:12). And to the Ephesians, Paul said:

As for you, you were *dead in your transgressions and sins*, in which you used to live ... *All of us* also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were *dead in transgressions*—it is by grace you have been saved (Eph. 2:1-5, emphasis added).

The unregenerate, according to the New Testament, are in a state of lifelessness and subjection. They live in a continual state of condemnation. No person is excluded. “All of us” says Paul, prior to our regeneration, lived a life devoted to “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts” (Eph. 2:3). This deadness is the universal state of all men apart from Christ. The spiritually dead can no more see spiritual truth or choose Christ than a rotting corpse can play tennis or debate philosophy. Paul sums it up candidly in Romans 5:12: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, *and death through sin*, and in this way *death came to all men*, because all sinned” (emphasis added).

On this point it should be noted that Arminians put forth a couple of reasonable questions to which Calvinist must give answers. If Total Depravity is true and mankind

is innately wicked, enslaved to sin, in bondage to Satan, spiritually blind, and spiritually dead, why does the Bible then teach (no less than fifteen times) that God occasionally hardens the hearts of certain sinners? Isn't it pointless at best and redundant at worst for God to do so if sinners are already spiritually depraved?

The answer, as I see it, is as much philosophical as it is theological. Total Depravity is God's *universal* judgment on *all* mankind in consequence for the federal sin of Adam. Men everywhere incur this all-pervasive sentence at conception. With that being said, while mankind is totally depraved and dead in Adam, it is true that God still providentially hardens *particular* hearts beyond their original depravity. He mindfully does so not because He needs to or because a sinner's natural depravity and spiritual subjugation are insufficient for the task. Rather, in this way God compounds His *universal* judgment with His *personal* wrath. Another way of saying this is that God hands certain sinners over to the full extent of their depravity in personal judgment against them. In the words of Paul, "Therefore God gave them over ... to a depraved mind" whereby they "received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion" (Rom. 1:24-28). Ezekiel prophesied: "I also gave them over to statutes that were not good and laws they could not live by; I let them become defiled ... that I might fill them with horror so they would know that I am the Lord" (Ezek. 20:25-26).

Gary Ridgeway, for example, the notorious Green River serial killer who was apprehended in 2001 and is currently serving a life-sentence in prison without parole, was recently indicted for the 1982 slaying of a 20-year-old woman. Ridgeway received a second life-sentence for the crime. Why? What's the point? Why indict, arraign, and put on trial a convicted criminal who is already serving a life-sentence in prison for other homicides? Why issue a second life-sentence when the first one is more than sufficient for meting out justice?

It boils down to moral principle. While another life-sentence will not change Ridgeway's state of being in any way—he is already behind bars for the rest of his life—his additional sentencing has more to do with morality than legality. As redundant as it very well is, a second life-sentence is, at best, a legal formality. The true intent behind it, however, is to demonstrate society's ethical indignation for the killer *himself*. In other words, beyond the illegalities of his crimes, there is the *personal* indignation society has for the killer. And it is this moral outrage against Ridgeway that instigates further judgment against him, even if such judgment is ultimately superfluous.

And so it is with God hardening the hearts of certain people. Although the human race is collectively and legally imprisoned unto spiritual death because of Adamic sin, God hardens the hearts of certain individuals beyond their depravity out of *personal* indignation. That is to say, whereas Total Depravity is God's *universal* judgment on the human family so the hardening of certain hearts is His *personal* judgment against those who knowingly "suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them" (Rom. 1:18-19). Like issuing a second life-sentence to a convicted felon, God "hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom. 9:18) with the intent "that he might destroy them totally, exterminating them without mercy" (Josh. 11:20).

That God goes beyond man's universal depravity and harden hearts—though seemingly gratuitous—is simply a matter of prerogative rooted in His judgment against *that* individual. It is no wonder, then, that Isaiah lamented: "Why, O Lord, *do you make*

us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you?” (Isa. 63:17, emphasis added). Notice how Isaiah not only laid the blame for Israel’s hardening at the footsteps of a sovereign God but also credited their backsliding to His divine providence. God judged Israel *personally*, in anger against them, by hardening their hearts further.

The testimony of Scripture reveals that man’s spiritual condition is tragically desperate. The human race is instinctively wicked, enslaved to sin, spiritually blind, under the dominion of Satan, and spiritually dead. Man is totally, wholly, and universally depraved. As a result, human beings are actuated by wrong principles. The thoughts of unregenerate man, including his words and deeds, are corrupt because they all flow from a corrupt source that is beyond human repair. Apart from God’s enablement, a sinner *cannot* choose, much less desire, to perform spiritual acts of goodness. He *cannot* generate the love of God in his own heart. And he *cannot* do anything meriting salvation. In short, he is spiritually, emotionally, and mentally powerless.

It is not surprising, then, to learn that King David and the apostle Paul each admitted that not one human being in the history of the fallen world ever voluntarily and willingly “seeks God” (Rom. 3:11 cf. Psa. 14:1-3; 53:1-3). Far from demonstrating any godly inclination, the unregenerate “suppress the truth [of God] by their wickedness” (Rom. 1:18). So while Scripture famously says in John 3:16 that “whosoever” comes to Christ will be saved (a favorite verse for Arminians), David and Paul remind us that “whosoever” ends up really being *no one* at all. Isaiah adds, “No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you” (Isa. 64:7) and “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way” (53:6). Man’s inability and unwillingness to “seek God,” we learn, is not only universal in scope but woefully evident in practice.

I belabor this point for good reason. What we understand about the human condition, prior to regeneration, ultimately determines what we understand about theology. When left in their natural state, men are unable to repent of their sin, ill-equipped to believe the gospel, and powerless to come to Christ. They have neither the ability of will nor the moral inclination to facilitate their redemption. Like Lazarus—who was four days dead in a tomb in Bethany—sinners are spiritually incognizant. They are blinded by Satan, deaf to spiritual truth, and enslaved to the flesh; their minds are darkened by sin and their hearts imprisoned by their satanic taskmaster. This ugly truth behind Total Depravity led Charles Spurgeon to conclude: “As the salt flavors every drop in the Atlantic, so does sin affect every atom of our nature. It is so sadly there, so abundantly there, that if you cannot detect it, you are deceived.”³

Despite the plethora of biblical evidence already noted, it seems Arminians, semi-Pelagians, Pelagians, and anti-Calvinists everywhere protest with extreme prejudice such Calvinistic coloring of Scripture. Each group argues in their own way but to the same end. They reject Total Depravity in favor of *partial* depravity.

Here we reach the ultimate point of separation between semi-Pelagianism and Augustinianism; between Calvinism and Arminianism; and between Rome and the Reformation. Arminianism softens the blow of Scripture and purports that an unregenerate sinner, who is dead in sin and in bondage to wickedness and Satan, has the ability to shed his chains on his own, revive his spiritual vitality, and muster the

required faith so that he may be regenerated afterward. In a very real sense salvation is not so much a gift in this schema as it is a reward for overcoming all of the obstacles inherent to Total Depravity. God takes the initiative, Arminians admit, but men must cooperate and meet God in the middle. Spiritually dead men must work with God somehow to *pre*-regenerate themselves in order to take a mediatory step toward full regeneration. They must willingly respond to common grace by overcoming their inherent wickedness, enslavement to sin, satanic oppression, and their blindness and oblige God in His redemptive purposes. If the sinner refuses to cooperate with the initial pricking of the Holy Spirit, then grace is to no avail.

Why do free-will evangelicals, who have such a high view of Scripture, err so badly on such an important aspect of Christian doctrine? The answer, sadly, is because they subscribe to a defective view of Original Sin and reject God's absolute sovereignty over man in salvation. If man is spiritually dead, helpless, enslaved, and a hater of God who is blind and deaf to spiritual truth (as the Bible clearly teaches) then man cannot cooperate with God at all in regeneration.

How can a spiritually dead person (Eph. 2:1-5)—who hates the way of holiness (John 3:19-21; 8:44), who hates Jesus Christ (John 15:18, 24-25), who dwells in darkness (John 1:4-5), who has a heart of stone (Ezek. 11:19), who is helpless (Ezek. 16:4-6), who cannot repent (Jer. 13:23), who is enslaved to Satan (Acts 26:17-18), and who cannot see or comprehend divine truth (1 Cor. 2:14)—transform into someone who not only understands the truth, but is drawn to it and embraces it? Such a radical, all-pervasive change in a sinner's heart is something that only God the Holy Spirit can accomplish. And this He indeed does through “the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet. 1:23) and “through the word about Christ” (Rom. 10:7).

—Ronald H. Gann

¹ R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?*; (Baker Books, 1997); p. 129

² John MacArthur, *Slave*; (Thomas Nelson, 2010); p. 201

³ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Press, 1985), 21:365 as cited in James R. White, *The Potter's Freedom* (Calvary Press Publishing, 2009); p. 75