

Doctrine of Total Depravity

The Sovereignty of God

1. The doctrine of Total Depravity provides a debate over free will and original sin.
2. The debate over free will brings discussion of the place of God's sovereignty with human responsibility.
3. The Westminster Confession of faith of 1646 helps to frame the discussion.

CHAPTER IX. Of Free Will.

III. Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.

4. The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, Chapter 9 Of Free Will, III. repeats these words in total agreement.
5. What these Confessions affirm is that man's freedom, in a certain area, has been wholly lost "to any spiritual good accompanying salvation."
6. Man has not lost his power of choosing, or making decisions, but his moral power to do certain things has been lost.
7. In particular, man has lost his ability to convert himself, or to will on his own, any spiritual good.
8. Herein is the doctrine of total depravity. It translates into moral inability.
9. To understand the concept of moral inability, the Church must return to the days of Augustine (AD 354 – 430) and Pelagius (c. 360 – 418).
10. Augustine advocated the doctrine of the inherit corruption of the soul due to the Fall of Adam who acted as the Federal Representative of humanity.
 - *Romans 5:12 Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned:*
11. Pelagius rejected the idea that the Fall of Adam had any effect on anyone but himself. The seed of Adam sins only by imitation, not by some form of seminal seed of transformation. Adam merely set a bad example.

12. Pelagius said a person can live a perfect life, without grace. Grace may facilitate righteousness, but people can live a perfect life nonetheless.
13. Pelagianism was condemned as heresy by the Council of Carthage in AD 418. The condemnation was ratified at the Council of Ephesus in AD 431.
14. Despite the condemnation of the church, a form of Semi-Pelagianism arose which sought a middle ground between Pelagianism and Augustinianism.
15. This position argued that there was a Fall which affected the whole human race, but not to the point that the free will of man was totally lost. It was damaged, but not destroyed.
16. The corrupt nature has left in it an island of righteousness that reflected man's original righteousness. There remains a power within the will of man that can co-operate with the grace of God, or not.
17. Semi-Pelagianism said that a person needs grace to live a perfect life, but the deciding factor as to whether or not such a life is lived is found in the will of man.
18. Grace is not alone. It is grace, plus the free will of man.
19. Concerning free will, John Calvin said something very important. Calvin said, if you mean by a free will a faculty of choosing by which you have the power within yourself to choose what you desire, then we all have free will. If you mean by free will the ability for fallen human beings to incline themselves, and exercise that will to choose the things of God without the prior monergistic work of regeneration, then, said Calvin, free will is far too grandiose a term to apply to a human being.
20. Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism simply underestimates the stranglehold that sin has upon us.
21. Semi-Pelagianism was condemned at the Second Synod of Orange in AD 529.
22. The importance of the debate opposing Pelagianism, and Semi-Pelagianism, is that it is an affront to the Reformation principle of Sola Gratia, or grace alone.
23. Sin is so rooted in the human heart that only God, by His grace, and by His grace alone, can change the disposition so that man is willing to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.
24. The leopard cannot change his spots, and the natural man cannot act contrary to his nature, which is enslaved to sin.
 - *Jeremiah 13:23 Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.*

25. The question is whether or not fallen man has the moral power intact in his soul to effect a change in his own heart and nature. Can man in his own strength, appropriate himself of the offers of grace extended by God?
26. Or, it is necessary for God to do the initial work of recreation so that man can, at the point of gospel hearing, appropriately respond to the gospel? Must man be regenerated by the Holy Spirit prior to being born again?
27. This regenerating work of the Spirit is called the Divine Initiative.
28. Augustine would argue that before a person comes to Christ, God works unilaterally, monergistically, independently, and sovereignly, to change the soul of the believer, by rescuing the person from the prison house of moral bondage.
29. This work of God must take place, for every person is by nature, dead in trespasses and sin. A person in a state of moral corruption, and death, is unable to resurrect himself.
30. Just like Jesus did for Lazarus, God must come and breathe new spiritual life into the soul.
- *John 11:43 And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth.*
31. A person must be quickened by the Spirit before a person can exercise faith in Christ. This must be done when a person is dead in sin.
- *Ephesians 2:1 And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins;*
 - *Ephesians 2:5 Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved ;)*
 - *Colossians 2:13 And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses;*
 - *1 Peter 3:18 For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit:*
32. No man has the power to come to Christ before God does His work of sovereign grace. This is called Monergistic Regeneration.
33. Herein is the grace of God, since man can do nothing to earn, or deserve this redemptive work.
34. One text that sets forth this great truth is found in the gospel of John.

- *John 6:63 It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life. 64 But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him.*
 - *65 And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.*
- 35.** If it is the Spirit that gives life, if the flesh profits nothing, and if no man can come to Christ except permission is given by the Father, how can the position of Pelagius prevail, according to gospel terms?
- 36.** Until a person is born again, all a person is, is flesh. Such a person walks according to the Prince of the Power of the Air. The flesh profits nothing. It has no innate moral power.
- *John 3:6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.*
 - *Ephesians 2:2 Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience:*
 - *John 6:63 It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life.*
- 37.** Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism insists there is a small island of goodness in the natural man that can do something to profit him, and allows him to obtain eternal life through faith in Christ, of his own free will. Nevertheless, let God be true, and every man a liar (Rom. 3:4).
- 38.** Luther told Erasmus in their dialogues that the “nothing”, in John 6:63, was not “a little something”. Erasmus wanted to hang on to “something” in man for man to have free will and autonomy. Jesus was serious when He said, “the flesh profiteth nothing.”
- 39.** Jesus went on to say that no man can come to Him, except for Divine permission.
- *John 6:65 And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.*
- 40.** The words, “no man”, is a universal negative proposition. The words describe something true about everybody in the class, man, a reference to mankind, both male and female.
- 41.** The word “can”, is crucial. Jesus did not say, “no man may”, come to me. He was referring to ability. Permission is not in view, but ability, or power. No human being has the power, or the ability to do something.
- 42.** There is an inherit lack of power, or ability, for people to come to Jesus.
- 43.** The coming to Christ refers to coming to Christ in faith to embrace Him for salvation.

44. The next word is, “except”, or “unless”. This word speaks of a necessary condition that has to be met before a person can come to Christ.
45. The word “except”, or “unless” points to some essential element that has to take place prior to coming to Christ. What is it that must be given prior to a person coming to Christ?
46. The Biblical answer is this. Power, or ability, must be “given” to a person before that individual can come to Christ. The idea is that God must do something to enable someone to come to Jesus.
47. The essence of freedom is to be able to choose according to one’s own desires or inclination. The natural man chooses not to come to Christ. He chooses to fulfill the lusts of the flesh. He freely chooses not to love God, or obey Christ. What he cannot choose is to act contrary to his nature.
48. Free will is a double edge sword. Free will allows a person to make choices. But free will does not allow a person to be free of itself. It does not have the Royal Liberty of which those who are born again have. Man is a slave to his own desires. The nature of man does not allow him to desire the things of God. Therefore, people freely reject Him.
49. This is why Total Depravity speaks of Moral Inability, and not Natural Inability. Man does not have the moral power to do right in the eyes of God, apart from the sovereign work of grace, which begins with the Divine Initiative.
50. In matchless grace, God converts a person, in sovereign grace, so that the lusts of the flesh are arrested, and the heart freely longs to come to Christ. God gives power and ability to come to Christ, in faith, for salvation and sanctification.
51. When a person is changed, the individual has a new power to love God. He is free from spiritual bondage. There is a spiritual resurrection in the heart. This is the new birth.