

TOTAL HEREDITARY DEPRAVITY:

(Part 2)

Is the Doctrine Scriptural?

IN the last issue of "THE STANDARD" we traced the history of the doctrine of total depravity. That study revealed that the idea has been around a long time. Different facets of the doctrine were articulated by Jewish writers long before the birth of Jesus. Augustine, however, is credited with organizing the doctrine much into its present form in the latter part of the fourth century. He and a disciple named Pelagius led a long-running debate on the issue that had far-reaching effects on the church.

As a matter of historical accuracy, it should be noted that this doctrine did not arise from the Catholic Church, although one sometimes hears it credited to that source. One will have no doubt of this fact if he will make a rather simple connection. Augustine died approximately 200 years before the Catholic Church was set up. Catholic historians claim Augustine, of course, and because of the effects of his doctrine, most of us would be willing to give him to them. But then they also claim the apostle Peter, whom we are not willing to deliver to them.

Erroneously attributing this doctrine to the Catholic Church lends weight to their false claim of being the church of antiquity. Augustine was simply a disciple who, on this point at least, went astray and convinced many others of his folly.

The purpose of this article is to examine the scriptural texts that proponents of the doctrine commonly use to prove it. For true disciples, it does not matter who is for or against a doctrine, only whether or not the scriptures teach it.

For the benefit of readers who do not have access to the article in last month's STANDARD, perhaps we should restate briefly that the doctrine under consideration teaches that when Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, he not only became guilty for his transgression, his whole nature was changed. He became so thoroughly corrupt that he was capable of no good impulse toward God. Furthermore, the doctrine asserts, Adam passed that depraved nature on to his descendants. Thus all humans are lost and can do nothing to save themselves. Only by God's choice and His use of "irresistible grace" are souls redeemed. For practical purposes the doctrines of original sin and total depravity are synonymous.

The plan of the following paragraphs is to consider, in the order that they appear in the Bible, the five passages most frequently cited in support of total depravity. Following this, we will note some positive arguments that show the ways Christians are accountable to God for sins.

Job 14:4

The passage noted above reads, "Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? Not one." The question and Job's answer are interpreted to mean that humans, who have sinful natures, could not possibly produce anything except children with sinful natures. Although the statement by all accounts is rather general, that seems a plausible application of the verse.

But is the interpretation given above what the passage really means? The answer is no. When taken in context, the prophet makes a strong statement against total depravity. Look at the first two verses of the chapter. "Man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower and is cut down." Flowers in the scriptures are always symbols of purity. Jesus was called the rose of Sharon and lilly of the valley (Song of Solomon 2:1).

Imagine how these passages would sound if we plugged in the ideas of total depravity. "Man is born like a totally polluted rose of Sharon, then he is cut down into further pollution." No, the prophet is talking about the corrupting effects of the sinful world in which we live. This world can not produce redeemed souls. Even though we are born pure like flowers, we all sin and thus need the purifying effects of the blood of Jesus.

Psalms 51:5

This passage is probably the single most frequently used proof text for total depravity. It says, "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." These statements come from one who, on the surface, certainly sounds like he believes himself to be totally depraved. But again, the context must be considered.

Most scholars believe this Psalm was written when David first became fully convicted of his sin with Bathsheba. If this is true, it should probably be taken symbolically, as an expression of his feelings of guilt and repentance. For example, I have worked with many depressed persons and such individuals

commonly say "My life is a total failure." Most of them would be quick to point out that their statement, while a true reflection of their feelings, should not be taken literally.

But even if taken literally, David's statement does not teach total depravity. As other preachers (i.e. V.E. Howard, in "Hereditary Total Depravity") have pointed out, the psalmist makes two statements: One about himself and one about his mother. "I was shapen in iniquity," means I was born in sin. "Shapen" means born or brought forth. But being born in sin does not mean that David was sinful at the time of his birth. This passage is comparable to Acts 2:8 which talks about people being born in a language or tongue. As everyone knows, this does not mean that children can speak the language when they are born. It means that enough stimulation is present in their environment so that if they follow a natural course, they will speak the language eventually. No one was ever born into an English culture and "naturally" spoke French.

The situation with language illustrates the way a sinful world acts upon humans. Even though one is born pure, the natural course is that all men are tempted and eventually speak the language of sin. The more sinful the world they live in, the more pressure there is on them and the quicker they are likely to be overcome.

"In sin", David said, "did my mother conceive me." In this statement, David simply acknowledges that his own mother was victim of the very effect of a sinful world that he is describing. More specifically, he suggests that the act of his conception was sinful in itself. The Hebrew word for "conceive" is not the ordinary word used for conception and usually denotes animal desire.

Psalms 58:3

This passage states, "The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies." Even a casual reading should enable one to see that this passage does not teach total depravity. Children do not literally speak lies as soon as they are born for a very good reason. They do not speak anything at all at birth or for many months afterward.

The prophet's point is that the sinful world begins to act upon a child as soon as he is born. The more advanced in sin a child's environment, the earlier it acts upon him. One can be sure that the children of ancient Sodom got instilled with ideas of homosexuality at a very early age. By contrast, I did not even know there was such a practice until I was grown. Some children literally get exposed to treatment in the cradle, i.e. neglect or abuse, that makes it easy for them to follow a life of sin.

Several years ago I went into a Nashville ghetto to look for a mother whose son needed treatment. When I parked my car at the curb and got out, a little boy of about five said something to me that I did not understand. Assuming him to be merely chattering, I responded with an absent-minded greeting. But as I walked away, he made the same statement repeatedly, each time a little more firmly. Then it hit me that what this lad was saying in his childish lisp was "Give me that new car or I will beat you up!" When I turned and started toward him, he ran away. That was twelve years ago. He probably would beat me up now.

The little boy described above had acquired the habits of his sinful environment even before he could talk plainly. But he was not born that way. This kind of effect of a sinful world is what David is talking about.

Romans 5:12-19

This set of verses is extensive, so only the key passage, verse 12, will be reproduced here. "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." Paul's discussion of law and grace in this book is admitted by all scholars to be some of the most profound literature in existence. Despite that fact, there is a simple way of demonstrating that the text does not teach hereditary depravity. It teaches that whatever was done by Adam was reversed by Jesus. Notice verse 19 from the Amplified Version. "For just as by one man's disobedience the many were constituted sinners, so by one Man's obedience the many will be constituted righteous." Thus, if Adam gave all men depraved natures, Jesus took it away, so that we do not have to worry about that anymore.

I believe Paul is discussing the consequences of Adam's sin and of Jesus' sacrifice. Those two acts were the reverse of each other. Adam gave the world the opportunity to sin and Jesus gave it the opportunity to be forgiven. Adam led mankind into sin; Jesus leads them out.

Ephesians 2:3

This passage was directed by Paul to the Gentile Christians. It says, "Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lust of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." The argument on this verse goes like this. Paul said you Gentiles who are now saved "were by nature the children of wrath." "We all," meaning all Jewish Christians and others, had our conversation with you (Gentiles) in times past. Thus, all men were evil by nature and are only saved by God's choice and grace. Sounds strong, doesn't it?

But one has to be careful. If we insist that "nature" in this verse means an inherited disposition, which in them was depraved, then we make the Bible to contradict itself. In Rom. 2:14 Paul said that some Gentiles "do by nature the things contained in the law." He also said (Rom. 7:12) that the law was "holy, just, and good." Thus, some Gentiles had natures that produced holy, just and good behaviour. Obviously, not all men are by nature depraved. Hence, the doctrine of total depravity is wrong.

Actually, the word nature in both of these passages means simply "the regular law or order" of a group or society. It has nothing to do with genetic inheritance, good or bad. The word was used in the same way in 1 Cor. 11:14 when Paul said, "Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?" In this case the regular customs of the people agreed with the law of God on men having long hair.

Human laws, customs, and environments are different. Some of them have supported Godly behaviour to an appreciable extent. Others have been so wicked that they promoted very evil behaviour. In no case can the societies of men produce forgiveness of sins.

Two principles

The preceding discussion should have demonstrated that the doctrine of total depravity is without scriptural support. In addition to the fact that it is not taught, it violates two basic principles laid down in the word of God. The first of these is that one is responsible to God only for his own behaviour. He will be rewarded only for his own good works and held accountable only for his own sins. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the

father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him" (Ezk. 18:20).

The principle of individual responsibility is as clearly taught in the New Testament as the Old. Paul said, "So then everyone of us shall give account of himself to God" (Rom. 14:12). The doctrine of inherited sin clearly violates this principle.

The second principle is the innocence of childhood. The Bible teaches that God does not impute sins to those who are not capable of being responsible for their actions. Jesus acknowledged the innocence of children on several occasions, and declared, "of such is the kingdom of heaven." See Matt. 18:3 and 19:4. Surely for the open-minded student no further proof is needed that God does not continue to impute Adam's sin to little children.

In the next article, we will discuss the age of accountability and other factors included in becoming accountable to God.

Sent for publication in the "S.S." by James D. Orten,