

ARE CHILDREN TOTALLY DEPRAVED?

(Part 1)

FOR many readers of this journal, the title of this article will seem to pose a useless question. Their minds are already settled on the matter. We have been schooled in the statements of Jesus that express a loving attitude toward children. "Come unto me", he called to them; and to his disciples "forbid them not". (Mk. 10:14) His feuding followers were warned "except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 18:3) To us, those statements are incompatible with the notion that children are depraved in heart and mind and capable of no good impulse toward God.

But for a very large segment of what is called the Christian world, the matter is quite different. They refer to a different set of scriptures that, to them, sound equally authoritative in showing that at the time of the original sin, man's pure, "image of God" nature was changed to one of thorough-going corruption. Furthermore, they believe that depraved nature was passed on to Adam's posterity. Thus, little children must be saved from this inherited sin through baptism, or they too shall be lost.

I gained a new respect for the complexity of this doctrine when several months ago I studied the question and decided to write a series of articles about it.

I am still completely convinced the doctrine is wrong, but I am now convinced after having waded through a complex (and at times boring) history of how the belief system developed in the religious world, and after considering at length the texts that are believed to support it. Most Christians would be surprised at how long the idea has been around and at some of the people who have privately worried about it. Alexander Campbell put a note in his diary on January 15th, 1809 wondering if he were not totally depraved.

In this article I will develop two lines of thought. The first will be to explain the doctrine and show some of the ramifications of it. The second will be to briefly trace the history of the idea. "Those who are ignorant of history are destined to repeat it", at least so wise men have said. That may not be as true in religion as it is in social and political matters. It definitely will not be true if men will allow themselves to be guided by the word. Nevertheless, a knowledge of history is helpful in nearly any situation.

Two additional articles will follow this one. In the next one we will discuss the biblical references that are supposed to teach the doctrine of total depravity. The third and last article will discuss when and how children do become accountable to God.

The Doctrine and Its Ramifications

Generally, proponents of total depravity believe that before the fall Adam and Eve had special spiritual powers that enabled them to relate appropriately to God. When they sinned, they lost these special gifts, and got in their place a nature so corrupt, so alienated from God that it guaranteed their rebellion against His will. Thus, there is a negative and a positive side to the doctrine: the loss of a special righteousness, which is sometimes referred to as "deprivation", and the gaining of a perfectly corrupt nature, or "depravation". Adam's passage of this nature on to his descendants accounts for the universality of the tendency to sin.

There are various explanations of how Adam passed his evil nature on to posterity and why God is just in holding all mankind guilty for Adam's sin. One view, called the seed theory, holds that the human race was present in Adam at the fall. Adam was the seed of the human race. As the oak tree is present in the acorn, it is said, we were all there in him and, in that way, partakers of his sin.

A second view asserts that Adam was a "representative" of the human race. In the same way that an ambassador acts for a government, Adam was empowered to act for us. Furthermore, it is argued, he was a "fair" representative, and did exactly what we would have done had we been there. Thus, again, we are all guilty. Both of these views see God as dealing with the whole human race as a unit.

A third and more simple explanation says tersely that Adam fell and became a sinner. It is a universal law of nature, so the argument goes, that like begets like. Since Adam was a sinner with a depraved nature, he could not possibly beget anything but sinners with depraved natures.

Since my purpose at this point is simply to explain the doctrine, no attempt will be made here to evaluate the credibility of these assumptions. One can see, however, that a belief like that just described would have far-reaching implications. For one thing, if children are sinners because of Adam, then infant baptism is required to keep them from being lost. Furthermore, if humans have no power of their own to do anything except rebel against God, then an

irresistible grace on God's part will be required to save them. If God's grace is irresistible, then man could not refuse it and man has lost his freewill. If man has no freedom to obey God on his own, then the saved and the lost must be so because God predestined it that way. The doctrines of infant baptism, lack of moral freedom in man, irresistible grace, and predestination all have their roots in the conception of the original sin. The validity of all of them stands or falls on the same basis.

History of the Doctrine

Even the most knowledgeable and ardent proponents of the doctrine of total depravity agree that it was unknown in the early church in its present form. Many Christians assume it began in the middle ages with reformers like John Calvin. It was developed, however, much earlier than that.

Some religious historians trace unconnected parts of the doctrine to Jewish literature many years prior to Christ. The Hebrew book called WISDOM, for example, speaks of the "actuality of transmitted depravity". But these writers believed the source to be Cain and his descendants. A little later, the BOOK OF THE SECRETS OF ENOCH referred to original sin derived from Adam. Other parts of the doctrine described above are not included in their views. Irenaeus, who was born about A.D. 140, believed the fall of Adam was a collective deed of the race, but he went no further than that. Origen (A.D. 185-254) supposedly taught an inborn guiltiness of sin. His view did not relate it to Adam. He thought the paradise story was an allegory about how each man had fallen from the grace of God in some previous existence.

Augustine (A.D. 354-430) is credited with the first organized doctrine of original sin and total depravity. In fact, he and another Christian philosopher, named Pelagius, debated the question in a way that might have taken place in Oklahoma City. Pelagius affirmed the freewill of man by arguing "If I ought, I can". The controversy stirred up by these two men rocked the church in the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

The "psychologist" in me always looks for what motivates a man, and there is plenty in the background of Augustine to intrigue the student of human behaviour. His teachings that "every man is in the power of the devil" were probably more reflective of his own exceptionally sensual personality in his early years than of ideas gleaned from the scriptures.

The controversy over the original sin seems to have rather subsided after the death of Augustine and Pelagius. It was resurrected by John Calvin, Martin Luther and other reformers in the late 15th and early 16th centuries in their fight with the Catholic Church. These men used it particularly to combat the Roman doctrine of meritorious works that was so much abused in their time. Total depravity came to be seen as one of the five major tenets of Calvinism. It is in the teachings of the denominations influenced by Calvin and others that we most frequently meet the doctrine today. Among others, those are Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Congregationalists, and Methodist.

In the next article we will examine the scriptural references usually used to support the doctrine of total depravity.