

**Biblical Soteriology:
An Overview and Defense of the
Reformed Doctrines of Salvation**

by Ra McLaughlin

Introduction; and Total Depravity, Part 1

INTRODUCTION

In this work, my intention has been to provide an explanation of the means and mechanisms of salvation as presented in Scripture. I have sought to prove only that Scripture teaches these doctrines, not that these doctrines are true — although I certainly believe that whatever Scripture teaches is true. Because I have not sought to prove the validity these teachings or their interpretations, I have not treated in depth the effects of traditions, pontiffs, councils, and the like on the doctrines currently or historically held by professing Christians. Because of this, and because I have limited the argument to the interpretation of the Scriptures of the Protestant Bible, excluding apocryphal and pseudopygraphal texts, the subject of this work should be considered a Protestant debate.

My main concern has been to demonstrate systematically the opinions and beliefs of the biblical authors, paying particular attention to the grammatical, historical, literary, theological, and cultural contexts of the Scriptures. I contend that: the Old Testament and New Testament authors were doctrinally unified; their convictions were and are discoverable through their writings; and their writings were clearly understandable to the original audiences.

I realize that many profound works espousing opposing doctrines have been written on the subject of salvation, and that many self-consistent arguments have been advanced to support these soteriologies (theologies of salvation). I believe this results not from the ambiguity of Scripture, but from man’s failure to interpret the biblical texts consistently and properly. There is in all of us a tendency to read Scripture in a manner that reinforces what we already believe, and a corresponding tendency to debunk as “unworthy of the God we worship” any interpretation that attacks our own beliefs — especially if those beliefs are foundational to our thinking.

I do not believe that it is necessary to conclude that only one system of theology (the elusive “correct” one) can ever be logically sound. Therefore, I offer the observation that logical soundness alone cannot prove a theology valid. On the contrary, it would seem that the tremendous intellect of many skilled exegetes enables them to wrestle Scripture into many diverse, logically sound interpretations. I have hope, though, that the correct interpretations of disputed passages can be had if diligent and educated readers are willing to commit themselves to discovering the originally intended meanings rather than to defending their existing beliefs.

The theology advocated in this book falls squarely into the camp traditionally known as “Reformed theology” or “Calvinism.” Some of the customary technical terms describing the “five points of Calvinism” can be a bit misleading to modern readers, but I have chosen to retain these terms simply to avoid confusing those who are already familiar with the debate.

The book follows the traditional order of the “five points:” total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. Each section begins with a brief statement of the doctrine at issue, including clarifications of terms, and continues with an introduction to the argument supporting the given doctrine. Next appears a condensed outline of the argument, and then a detailed analysis of the doctrine as outlined. After this, the most common objections to the doctrine are listed, followed by refutations of these objections. There is also an appendix which deals with the debate over the identity of “Israel” in the New Testament. This subject is not covered explicitly in the “five points,” but it must be understood correctly if one is to understand the purpose and mechanics of salvation as the New Testament authors did.

Biblical quotes have been taken from the New American Standard Bible, 1975 edition, unless otherwise noted. I have generally avoided quoting theologians, fathers, commentaries, and sources other than the Bible, even though I have relied heavily on such works in writing this book. I have done so in order to make this work more accessible to the average layperson, and to deflect charges of “guilt by association.”

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

INTRODUCTION TO THE DOCTRINE OF TOTAL DEPRAVITY

The doctrine of total depravity is that as a result of the Adam's sin in the garden of Eden (the fall), every part of every human being has been corrupted by sin. "Total" refers to sin's corruption of every part of man's being — no constituent part of any person has been left unaffected by depravity. "Depravity" refers to the corruption sin wreaks in man. Every part of man's being (body, soul, heart, mind, strength, emotions, intentions, will, inclinations, etc.) has been corrupted by sin. Sin's taint makes every person, and every part of every person, unacceptable before God. Sin's corruption also prevents every person from doing anything meritorious for salvation, and makes every person so hostile toward God that he cannot and will not repent of his sin or accept the gospel.

This does not mean that people are as sinful as they can be (utterly sinful) — people can always be worse than they are. It also does not mean that no one can do anything "good" in any sense of the word. Sinful, fallen people do outwardly good things all the time. For example, they feed their children (Matt. 7:11).

What total depravity does mean is that no one is innocent of sin, and that no one standing on his own merit is righteous in God's eyes (not even infants). It also emphasizes that, as a result of Adam's sin, man is born spiritually dead, having a corrupted nature which desires to sin and which hates God. Since man cannot act contrarily to his nature, man has no ability to do anything truly pleasing to God. Everything man does comes from a heart that hates God, and therefore everything man does is fundamentally unacceptable in God's sight. This is why man in his natural state can never be good enough to save himself, and can never savingly accept the gospel of his own accord.

The guilt that accompanies and flows from total depravity takes three basic forms. First, God holds everyone guilty of the sin that Adam committed in the garden of Eden. This guilt is imputed, or reckoned to every person's account, even though only Adam committed the actual sin. Second, every person is guilty of being actually depraved and corrupted by sin, even though everyone is born in that state. Third, God holds everyone accountable for the sins they actually commit. Because God holds every person accountable for his own depravity and corruption, and for Adam's imputed sin, every person deserves God's wrath. Of course, those who commit actual sins acquire even more guilt, equal in degree to the sin they commit.

INTRODUCTION TO THE ARGUMENT SUPPORTING THE DOCTRINE OF TOTAL DEPRAVITY

The direct cause of total depravity was Adam's first sin in the garden of Eden (the fall). Specifically, this sin was the eating of the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Prior to this sin, Adam and Eve were sinless, just as God had created them. They had no inclination toward sin, they had no inborn hatred toward God, and they were not actually corrupted in any part of their being.

Moreover, they were given relatively few explicit restrictions or laws which they might transgress to incur God's wrath. In Genesis 1:28 they were commanded to be fruitful and to multiply, to fill the earth, to subdue the earth, and to rule over every created thing on the earth. Adam was also to cultivate and keep the garden (Gen. 2:15). The command which man received and which he broke first, however, was the prohibition against eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17).

Even though other laws are not mentioned at this point in Scripture, it is important to remember that Moses wrote Genesis to a people who had known God's general laws for thousands of years before they read Genesis. Other laws existed but were simply not mentioned at this point in the book.

This is readily apparent in the stories of Genesis itself. For instance, while Genesis' early chapters mention no regulations regarding sacrifices to God, God still refused Cain's sacrifice and Cain still sinned in offering it (Gen. 4:5-7). Likewise, Cain sinned in killing Abel (Gen. 4:8-12) and thus received God's curse, despite the fact that nowhere prior to this murder does Genesis record that God prohibited such behavior. The flood provides a tremendous illustration of this principle: man had become so sinful that God destroyed the entire world, even though Genesis nowhere records explicit prohibitions or commands given by God that the people violated. It does imply that man's wickedness was due at least partially to the sons of God taking the daughters of men as wives (Gen. 6:1-3), and to man's evil thoughts and intents (Gen. 6:5-7), but it does not record any actual prohibitions against these activities.

The laws that Genesis mentions explicitly, as well as those that it implies, constituted the stipulations or rules of God's covenant with Adam. Eating the forbidden fruit was a particularly terrible act on Adam's part because it was a willful act of treason against God which violated the terms of the covenant (Hos. 6:7).

Although Eve also ate from the tree (in fact she ate first), it was Adam's sin that caused the depravity of the human race. This is because Adam was mankind's representative

in the covenant. Just as a king's actions may benefit or harm the people who live in his nation, Adam's sin brought a curse upon the human race (Rom. 5:16,18).

The curse affected all humanity (men, women, children, infants), and every constituent part of every person (body, soul, heart, mind, strength, will, emotions, etc.). Its horrible results included: the physical and spiritual deaths of the entire race (Rom. 5:12-14); the actual corruption of the entire human race (Rom. 5:19), including the inability and unwillingness of all to repent or to receive the gospel; the imputation of Adam's guilt to every person (Rom. 5:12-19); and God's condemnation of every person (Rom. 5:16,18).

OUTLINE OF THE ARGUMENT SUPPORTING THE DOCTRINE OF TOTAL DEPRAVITY

I. CAUSE OF DEPRAVITY — THE FALL

A. Initial State of Adam and Eve in Garden Prior to the Fall.

1. Uncorrupted — God created Adam and Eve uncorrupted (not having sinned), but corruptible (capable of sinning).
2. Under God's commandment/law — Adam was told to reproduce, to dominate the earth and everything in it, and to tend the garden. He was prohibited from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He was told the penalty for eating from this tree was death.

B. The Fall — Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

1. Violation of the commandment — The act of eating from the tree transgressed God's law for mankind.
2. Result of the Fall — As a result of the fall, death spread not only to Adam but to the entire human race.
 - a) Death resulted from sin.
 - b) Adam's sin was imputed to all mankind, and therefore resulted in the death of all mankind.

- c) This imputation took place because Adam represented the human race in a manner that paralleled Christ's representation of all true believers when he died on the cross. Man was "in Adam" in the fall just as he was "in Christ" in the atonement.
- d) The imputation of Adam's sin resulted not only in mankind's death, but in mankind's new identity as a fallen, corrupted race of sinners.

II. EXTENT OF DEPRAVITY

- A. Totality of Humanity — The fall had universal repercussions, resulting in the sinfulness and death of every member of mankind.
 - 1. Adults, and people in general — Every person's life without exception is marked by sin.
 - 2. Children — The Bible never excludes children on the basis of their age from general accusations of sinfulness, and it never calls children "innocent." [See also section II.A.1 of this outline.]
 - 3. The Unborn — God holds every human, born or unborn, to the same standard of absolute righteousness. Even fetuses bear Adam's imputed guilt and are actually corrupted by sin.
- B. Totality of Being — Every part of man's being is depraved: his body, flesh, heart and mind are all impure. This does not mean that man is as sinful as he can possibly be (utterly depraved), but only that there is no part of his being which escapes corruption.
 - 1. Heart — Man's heart, which is the seat of his passions and desires, akin to what Paul refers to as the "inner man," is corrupted by sin.
 - 2. Mind — The human mind has been corrupted by sin and is a source of evil desires and rebellion against God. There is quite a bit of overlap in biblical writers' uses of "mind" and "heart," and related words.
 - 3. Body/Flesh — The flesh is not only corrupted prior to salvation, but also after it. It will not to be fully redeemed until it is glorified in the resurrection of the last day. "Flesh" may identify man's physical body and/or the non-corporeal but "fleshly" aspect of his nature.

4. Spirit/Soul — There is significant overlap between the spirit/soul on the one hand, and the heart, mind, and non-corporeal aspects of the body/flesh on the other hand. Man in his natural state is spiritually dead, his spirit/soul being slain and corrupted by sin.

III. RESULTS OF DEPRAVITY

- A. Spiritual Death — Mankind is born without spiritual life, and remains spiritually dead until such time as God decides to give him spiritual life. God's gift of spiritual life is also called "regeneration" or "being born again," and necessarily results in salvation. If man never receives spiritual life from God, he remains spiritually dead all the days of his life.
- B. No Ability or Desire to Repent and Follow God — Fallen man has no ability to perform wholly good acts, no ability to perform works which are truly pleasing to God, and no ability to do anything meritorious for salvation. He can do outwardly good works, but these works come from a heart that hates God, and therefore fail to meet God's righteous standards. Fallen man also lacks any and all ability to trust the gospel or to repent. Such ability must be granted to him by God, and is not something given to mankind at large.
 1. No ability to repent or to do meritorious or truly good works in general — This results from spiritual death, slavery to sin, lack of faith, and lack of favor in God's eyes.
 2. No ability to understand and/or believe the gospel — This ability must be granted to a person by God, and God does not give it to everyone. [See also section IC of the Analysis of the Argument Supporting the Doctrine of Irresistible Grace.]
 3. No desire to repent and/or to follow God — This desire must be granted to a person by God. God does not grant this desire to every person, and never grants it to a person he does not save. [See also section IID of the outline under the Arguments Supporting the Doctrine of Irresistible Grace.]

ANALYSIS OF THE ARGUMENT SUPPORTING THE DOCTRINE OF TOTAL DEPRAVITY (part 1)

I. CAUSE OF DEPRAVITY — THE FALL

A. Initial State of Adam and Eve in Garden Prior to the Fall.

1. Uncorrupted — God created Adam and Eve uncorrupted (not having sinned), but corruptible (capable of sinning).

“And God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day” (Gen. 1:31).

For God to call man very good, man must have been without sin/corruption. Thus, man must have been created uncorrupted. This is reinforced by the fact that God also blessed Adam and Even when he first created them (Gen. 1:28). Moreover, if God were to have created man in a state of sin and corruption, God would be the direct author of sin — an impossibility.

“Then to Adam He said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, “You shall not eat from it”; Cursed is the ground because of you; In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you; And you shall eat the plants of the field; By the sweat of your face You shall eat bread, Till you return to the ground, Because from it you were taken; For you are dust, And to dust you shall return’” (Gen. 3:17-19).

Adam sinned and was therefore cursed by God. Thus, Adam was created corruptible. That he had not been cursed previously implies that he had not been previously corrupted by sin, but had been created uncorrupted.

“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned — for until the Law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come” (Rom. 5:12-14).

By Adam's sin, sin entered into the world. Paul indicated that this took place at a particular point in time, and assumed his audience's familiarity with this time. Since Adam's only sin recorded in the Bible is the eating of the forbidden fruit, this is the only sin with which Paul reasonably could have assumed his audience to be familiar. This indicates that Adam was without sin, uncorrupted, prior to eating the forbidden fruit (sin was not yet in the world). Adam's eating, of course, was a sin, proving that he was created corruptible.

2. **Under God's commandment/law — Adam was told to reproduce, to dominate the earth and everything in it, and to tend the garden. He was prohibited from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He was told the penalty for eating from this tree was death.**

“And God blessed them; and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Gen. 1:28).

God commanded Adam to reproduce, to subdue the earth, and to rule over all the animals.

“Then the Lord God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it” (Gen. 3:15).

That God put Adam in the garden to cultivate it implies that God obligated (or commanded) Adam to cultivate the garden.

“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die’” (Gen. 2:16-17).

God's law prohibited the eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and laid down death as the penalty for transgression.

“And the woman said to the serpent, ‘From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle

of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat from it or touch it, lest you die’” (Gen. 3:2-3).

Whether or not God actually told Adam and Eve not to touch the fruit is not pertinent to this point. The relevant facts are that man understood that he had been commanded not to eat the fruit, and that man knew the penalty for transgressing this law.

B. The Fall — Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

1. Violation of the commandment — The act of eating from the tree transgressed God’s law for mankind.

“When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make one wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate” (Gen. 3:6).

Man did what God commanded him not to do, thereby transgressing God’s law.

“And He said, ‘Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?’” (Gen. 3:11).

God demonstrated His awareness of man’s transgression of the commandment, and confirmed the fact that such transgression had occurred.

2. Result of the Fall — As a result of the fall, death spread not only to Adam but to the entire human race.

a) Death resulted from sin.

“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die’” (Gen. 2:16-17).

The penalty for transgression was death, and transgression occurred. Although God was gracious

toward Adam and Eve so that they did not die that day, they did die eventually as a result of the transgression.

“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12).

Death entered the world because of and through Adam’s transgression of the commandment not to eat the forbidden fruit. Death also spread to others because of sin.

b) Adam’s sin was imputed to all mankind, and therefore resulted in the death of all mankind.

“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned — for until the Law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who did not sin in the likeness of Adam’s offense, who is a type of Him who was to come. But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.” (Rom. 5:12-17).

Death spread to all men because all sinned, that is, sin is the ultimate cause of death. Even Jesus Christ did not die on the cross until sin had been imputed to him (reckoned to his account; see Isa. 53:4-12; 1 Pet. 2:24). Because all die, all must be guilty of sin.

This passage makes clear that the sin which resulted in the death of all people was a single transgression

committed by the single man Adam. The passage also lays the blame (guilt) and punishment (death) for that single sin on every person. Thus, all people die because all people are guilty of at least the single sin that Adam committed.

Paul explained that the guilt for Adam's sin fell on Adam's descendants not by their emulating Adam's sin by violating a commandment, but in the same way that Christ's merit is credited to believers: by imputation.

- c) **This imputation took place because Adam represented the human race in a manner that paralleled Christ's representation of all true believers when he died on the cross. Man was "in Adam" in the fall just as he was "in Christ" in the atonement.**

"Your first forefather sinned, and your spokesmen have transgressed against Me. So I will pollute the princes of the sanctuary; and I will consign Jacob to the ban, and Israel to revilement" (Isa. 43:27-28).

The people were punished for the sins of their spokesmen, or representatives, and for the sin of Adam, their first forefather. This may not seem "fair" to modern readers, but the Bible clearly demonstrates that God finds this kind of treatment legitimate.

"But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of

life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One, the many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:15-19).

Continuing the argument begun in verse 12, Paul argued that the one sin committed by the one man Adam resulted in the condemnation and death of the entire human race: "by the transgression of the one the many died"; "judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation"; "by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one"; "through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men"; and "through one man's disobedience the many were made sinners." Adam's sin was imputed to all mankind, and his single sin resulted in death for all mankind.

While this initially appears unfair, it is actually quite gracious. Adam had a much greater ability not to sin than did later generations, and much less temptation. He was not born into a world where sin ran rampant, where he was subjected to sinful influences from all possible angles. He was not born with a dead spirit (compare Rom. 8:10; Eph. 2:1,5; Pet. 4:6), and he was not born with the indwelling corruption of sin (compare Rom. 7:17-18). Further, he actually walked and talked with God in the garden. Surely, he far surpassed any modern man in theological prowess — he knew the mind and heart of God in a way modern theologians only dream. He also possessed great personal righteousness (he was "very good"; Gen. 1:31). No one but Christ has ever had a personal ability to resist sin that was greater than Adam's. To be judged in Adam is to be judged with the greatest possible leniency. It is like having a heroic champion fight in one's place.

According to this passage, Adam's guilt harms man in the same way that Christ's righteousness benefits those men "who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness." That is, God blames and punishes all mankind for Adam's sin because God imputes that sin to all mankind — just as God imputed the sins of others to

Christ on the cross (Isa. 53:6,8,12; 1 Pet. 2:24), and just as he imputes Christ's righteousness to believers (Rom. 3:21-22; 10:3-4; 1 Cor. 1:30; Phil. 3:9). Christ did not become sinful on the cross — God would not and could not allow his own person to be defiled with sin. Nor could a corrupted sacrifice be acceptable. Rather, the Father imputed sin to Christ in order that he might justly punish the him for the sins of his people. This was also necessary for the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

d) The imputation of Adam's sin resulted not only in mankind's death, but in mankind's new identity as a fallen, corrupted race of sinners.

"For as through one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. And the Law came in that the transgression might increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:19-20).

While most of the passage immediately preceding these verses speaks of the imputation of either guilt or righteousness, and the results thereof, this portion of the text treats the actual qualitative change in mankind. First of all, this passage straightforwardly states that the many actually "will be made righteous." Verses 15 and 16 of this chapter state that the gift of grace already abounded to the many, resulting in their justification. Since the many are already justified, they are already righteous by imputation. Therefore, their being made righteous in the future must be different from the initial act of imputation. This statement would then appear to refer to sanctification and glorification, the processes by which one becomes actually righteous. This is not to say that justification was already applied by the time Paul wrote to all men who ever would be saved, but only that Paul was still talking about those who had already come to faith (continuing his argument from Rom. 3:24ff.).

This reading is strengthened by the contrasted thought in the passage that Adam's sin really turned mankind into a race of sinners. Paul wrote not only that mankind incurred guilt by the imputation of sin, but also that they really had been made sinners. The fact that he went on to say that this sin actually increased with the entrance of the law demonstrates the point. The imputation of Adam's sin did not somehow carry more sin burden with the advent of the Mosaic Law, but the actual commission of sinful transgressions of commandments did increase with the number of commandments.