

Thinking Through Calvinism

Part 2: Total Inability/Total Depravity



The Five Points of Calvinism

T. Total Depravity

U. Unconditional Election

L. Limited Atonement

I. Irresistible Grace

P. Perseverance of the Saints



Total Depravity



Total Depravity's Importance

“If one embraces this aspect of the T in TULIP, the rest of the acrostic follows by a resistless logic.

One cannot embrace the “T” and reject any of the other four letters with any degree of consistency” (emphasis added).

R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology? Understanding the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 128.



What is Total Depravity?

-The Free Grace Definition-

“Man’s depravity means that even in the best of men, a person’s altruism always contains an element of improper motive. No one performs good acts entirely or even primarily out of perfect love for others or for God. There are always other motivations lurking in the background: the preference of one’s own self-interest or of some other object less than God.

Thus, even the good is tainted.”

Joseph C. Dillow, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings*, 4th Edition (Houston, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2017), 984.



What is Total Depravity?

-A 2nd Free Grace Definition-

“Total depravity does not mean that everyone is as thoroughly depraved in his actions as he could possibly be, nor that everyone will indulge in every form of sin, nor that a person cannot appreciate and even do acts of goodness; but it does mean that the corruption of sin extends to all men and to all parts of all men so that there is nothing within the natural man that can give him merit in God’s sight.”

Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine*
(Chicago: Moody Press, 1972).



What is Total Depravity?

-The Calvinist Definition-

“The phrase total depravity is commonly used to make explicit the implications of original sin. It signifies a corruption of our moral and spiritual nature that is total not in degree (for no one is as bad as he or she might be) but in extent. It declares that no part of us is untouched by sin, and therefore no action of ours is as good as it should be, and consequently nothing in us or about us ever appears meritorious in God’s eyes. We cannot earn God’s favor, no matter what we do; unless grace saves us, we are lost.”

J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), 83–84.



Points of Agreement

- Corruption extends to every part of man (mind, will, emotions, actions).
- Every “good” work that man would do gains no merit before God.
- Therefore, man is unable to save himself from an eternity in the Lake of Fire (Rev 20:11-15).



But Packer takes it one step further...

“Total depravity entails total inability, that is, the state of not having it in oneself to respond to God and his Word in a sincere and wholehearted way (John 6:44; Rom 8:7–8). Paul calls this unresponsiveness of the fallen heart a state of death (Eph 2:1, 5; Col 2:13), and the Westminster Confession says: ‘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’ (IX. 3).”

-Packer, Concise Theology, 84.



Two things should catch our attention:

First, are the Scripture references provided being interpreted in context?

Let's look these up:

-John 6:44

-Romans 8:7–8

-Ephesians 2:1, 5

-Colossians 2:13

Second, notice the appeal to the Westminster

Confession: “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’ (IX. 3).”



Another Calvinist Explanation

“Those who... accept the classic Reformation notion of total depravity... would be quick to assert that no people, in their deadened sinful state, are able on their own to believe in Christ. Anyone who comes must be drawn previously by the Father. All who come must have God’s grace administered to their hearts, giving them the ability they otherwise would have lacked of believing in Christ.”

Bruce A. Ware, “Effectual Calling and Grace,” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, edited by Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 215.





“[B]ecause of human depravity, there is nothing in a fallen, reprobate sinner that... is capable of responding in faith.”

John MacArthur

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For the Calvinist...

total depravity = total inability

The Reformed conviction is that God must give man the ability to believe in Him.

Q: Why does this matter?



A: Because the Calvinist believes that God still holds an unbelieving person accountable for their unbelief, even though they cannot believe without God making it possible.

total depravity = total inability



Total Depravity = Total Inability

Calvinist Explanation:

“Some might try to use total inability as an excuse, saying ‘I won’t believe in Jesus, because I cannot.’ But Scripture does not warrant that excuse.

Total inability is not physical or psychological.

We are physically and mentally able to believe in Christ. The inability is moral, an inability to do the right thing. That is an inability for which we are responsible.

It cannot be used as an excuse.”

John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord: An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 112.



Total Depravity = Total Inability

The Calvinist perspective of this doctrine brings two questions to the forefront.

1. What do the Scriptures mean by “dead?”
2. Since the Bible teaches that man is “dead,” how can he be made “alive?”



What do the Scriptures mean by “dead?”



What do the Scriptures mean by “dead?”

Turn to Ephesians 2:1

For the Five-Point Calvinist, spiritual deadness speaks to an “alienation from God, the destruction of the positive, active desire to do what is right in God’s sight, and most importantly, the ability to do what is good and holy.”

James R. White, *The Potter’s Freedom: A Defense of the Reformation and a Rebuttal to Norman Geisler’s Chosen But Free* (Calvary Press Publishing, 2009), 83.



What do the Scriptures mean by “dead?”

For the Five-Point Calvinist, spiritual “deadness” is likened to physical deadness, being unresponsive in any way and lacking any spiritual animation or ability.



What do the Scriptures mean by “dead?” -The Biblical Evidence-

Nekros- n.-“dead person, corpse,”
adj.- “dead”

LXX- occurs 60 times- “one who has died, corpse, state of death” (Gen 23:3-15), also “passed away” (Deut 14:1).

Nekroō- v.- active- “kill, put to death,”
passive- “die”

“Numbers 19 draws a boundary between the sphere of death and that of life. Those who come directly or indirectly in contact with the dead are unclean, i.e., separated from Yahweh.”

Verbrugge, NIDNTT, 384.



What do the Scriptures mean by “dead?” -The Biblical Evidence-

- 129 instances in the New Testament
- God “raised Him from the dead” (Eph 1:20), speaking of Christ, who was separated from His fleshly body but did not cease to exist.
- Jesus is also declared to be “the firstborn from the dead” (Col 1:18) which assumes that there are more.
- Paul declares those believers who had already physically died as “fallen asleep” (1 Thess 4:14, c.f. 4:16).
- Jesus declares “she is not dead, but sleeping” (Luke 8:52).
- “Dead Faith” is faith that is separated from works (Jas 2:17, 26).



What do the Scriptures mean by “dead?” -The Biblical Evidence-

The fact that “dead” never refers to a total inability and always means separation is a fact all throughout the Bible regardless of what type of “deadness” is being considered.



5 Kinds of Death in Scripture

		WHEN	CAUSE	DESCRIPTION	SCRIPTURE	REMEDY
1	SPIRITUAL	At conception	Original sin	Separation from God spiritually	Gen 2:17; Eph 2:1; Col 2:13; John 5:24	Being born again by faith alone
2	PHYSICAL	At physical death	Curse of sin	Separation of the soul and spirit from the body	Heb 9:27; James 1:15; 1 Thess 4:16	Being born again by faith alone
3	ETERNAL	At physical death	Dying in unbelief	Separation from God eternally	John 8:24; Rev 20:14-15; Matt 25:46	Being born again by faith alone
4	CARNAL	At various times in the believer's life	Sin in the believer's life	Separation from fellowship with God	Rom 8:6; Rev 3:1; 1 John 3:14	Confession of sin (1 John 1:9)
5	POSITIONAL	At the moment you get saved	Being placed in Christ	Separation from your unregenerate self	Gal 2:20; Rom 6:3-11	It is the remedy!

What do the Scriptures mean by “dead?” -The Biblical Evidence-

Speaking about the book of Ephesians, Anderson notes that:

“Chapter two begins with our **Position before** we were baptized by the Holy Spirit into Christ. We were dead in sin. This kind of death is not talking about a spiritual corpse but rather a spiritual separation. Our human spirits were separated from God.”

David R. Anderson, “The Nature of Death—Ephesians 2:1,” in *A Defense of Free Grace Theology: With Respect to Saving Faith, Perseverance, and Assurance*, ed. Fred Chay (Houston, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2017), 568; see also Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1994), 56.



What do the Scriptures mean by “dead?” -The Biblical Evidence-

Acts 10:2

Cornelius who was listed as “a devout man and one who feared God with all his household, and gave many alms to the Jewish people and prayer to God continually.”

It was not until Peter said that “everyone who believes in Him [Jesus] receives forgiveness of sins” (**Acts 10:43**) that “the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message” (**Acts 10:44**).



What do the Scriptures mean by “dead?” -The Biblical Evidence-

Q: What had triggered this change among these
“dead” Gentiles?

A: Their hearing of the Gospel and their subsequent
response by believing in Jesus Christ.



What do the Scriptures mean by “dead?” -The Biblical Objections-

According to **Romans 3:10-18**, men are:

- “unrighteous” and without understanding (v.10b-11)
- “turned aside,” “become useless,” and does no good (v.12)
- vile speech (v.13-14)
- reckless and violent, destroying everything before them, forsaking all peace, and living without a fear of God (v.15-18)

Free Grace Theology agrees with every
one of these points.



What do the Scriptures mean by “dead?” -The Biblical Objections-

But **Romans 3:10-18** does **NOT** say that man is unable to respond to God seeking him!

“Many appeal to this verse to prove man’s total inability...

The difference between seeking and responding is huge.

Paul categorically states that unbelievers do not seek God.

They are not the initiators of reconciliation toward God.

God seeks and God initiates. The fact that man does not initiate seeking toward God does not negate the idea of unbelievers responding to God’s seeking of them.”

John H. Niemelä in Zane C. Hodges, *Romans: Deliverance from Wrath*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2013), 90, fn 4.





Since the Bible teaches that man is “dead,” how can he be made “alive?”

This subject is known as the
ordo salutis in theology.

This is a Latin phrase that means
“the order of salvation.”



**How can man
be made “alive?”
-The Calvinist
Perspective-**



Total Inability in a Moral Sense

“The moral ability lost in original sin is therefore not the ability to be outwardly “moral,” but the ability to incline oneself to the things of God.”

R.C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology*, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 128–129.

How can man be made “alive?” -The Calvinist Perspective-



Let's read Ephesians 2:1-5.

“To be dead in sin is to be in a state of moral and spiritual bondage. By nature we are slaves to sin. This does not mean that the fall has destroyed or eradicated the human will. Fallen man still has all the faculties to make choices. We still have a mind and a will. The problem is not that we cannot make choices. Natural men make choices all the time. The problem is that, in our fallen condition, we make sinful choices. We make these choices freely. We sin precisely because we want to sin, and we are capable of choosing exactly what we want to choose.”

R.C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology*, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 130.

**How can man
be made “alive?”
-The Calvinist
Perspective-**



“If we still have a will, why are we unable to convert ourselves or even prepare ourselves for conversion?
The simple answer is this: because we do not want to.
We have no desire for the righteousness of God, and
free choice, by definition, involves choosing what we
desire.”

R.C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown: The Heart of Reformed Theology*, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 130.

**How can man
be made “alive?”
-The Calvinist
Perspective-**



“Though Jonah’s call was to a particular ministry and not to salvation, the principle is the same. For nothing can take place spiritually in a person’s life until God on the basis of his own determination calls that person to him. It would be foolish for a preacher to enter a funeral home to encourage the corpses to lead an upright life. The corpses are dead. If the words are to have any purpose, the corpses must first be made alive. After that they can respond. In the same way, the call to discipleship must begin with the act of God in making a spiritually dead person alive. The choice to do that is not with the one who is spiritually dead but with God who alone is able to give life.”

James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive & Readable Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 510.

How can man be made “alive?” -The Calvinist Perspective-



According to the Calvinist, what must happen for a person who is:

- morally corrupt,
- a corpse,
- choosing only bad things because of their sinful desires, and
- totally unable to respond to God in any way to be saved, receiving eternal life?

**How can man
be made “alive?”**

**-The Calvinist
Perspective-**



-Calvinist Answer-

Regeneration Must

Precede

Personal Faith

**How can man
be made “alive?”**

**-The Calvinist
Perspective-**



Regeneration Must Precede Personal Faith

Regeneration- “Born Again/From Above”

Jesus answered and said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

John 3:3

**How can man
be made “alive?”
-The Calvinist
Perspective-**



Regeneration Must Precede Personal Faith

“Spiritually dead people do not suddenly develop faith, causing God to regenerate them. Rather, faith is the fruit of the regeneration God performs in our hearts: “Even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ” (Eph. 2:4b)* [sic]. We are born again (regenerated), then we come to faith, then we are justified, and then we begin to undergo the lifelong sanctification process (Rom. 8:30). All these events comprise the whole complex of the Christian life.”

*(This reference should be Eph 2:5b)

R. C. Sproul, What Does It Mean to Be Born Again, Vol. 6, The Crucial Questions Series (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2010), 37–38.

**How can man
be made “alive?”
-The Calvinist
Perspective-**



Regeneration Must Precede Personal Faith

Turn to **John 1:12-13**.

“Seems at first sight to imply that faith is the condition of regeneration, and therefore prior to it. But if ἐξουσίαν (exousian) here signifies the ‘right’ or ‘privilege’ of sonship, it is a right which may presuppose faith as the work of the Spirit in regeneration—a work apart from which no genuine faith exists in the soul. But it is possible that John means to say that, in the case of all who received Christ, their power to believe was *given* to them by him.”

Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*
(Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907), 825.

**How can man
be made “alive?”**

Regeneration Must Precede Personal Faith

Some good questions to ask the Calvinist are:

How can one possibly be ‘made alive’ apart from
having believed in Christ?

Would this not draw concerns about the one who dies
in an “intermediary” state?

Where would they spend eternity?



How can man be made “alive?”

Regeneration Must Precede Personal Faith

“The circumstances in which the will functions bear on whether the person can choose this or that alternative, and that is where depravity gets involved.”

Illustration: “A person in prison, for example, has not lost the capacity to walk the streets unchained, but his circumstances curtail his ability to exercise that capacity at the time. Just so, depravity limits our choices without losing the constitutional capacity to choose.”

Robert E. Picirilli, *Free Will Revisited: A Respectful Response to Luther, Calvin, and Edwards* (Eugene, OR: WIPF & Stock, 2017), 5.

Q: Does the unregenerate man not retain the “constitutional capacity” to choose?



**How can man
be made “alive?”**

**-The Calvinist
Perspective-**

-Free Grace Position-

Regeneration Cannot

Precede

Personal Faith



**How can man
be made “alive?”**

**-The Biblical
Evidence-**

Regeneration Cannot Precede Personal Faith

What does the Bible teach us?

Turn to Romans 10:14-17

What does the Bible say about “faith?”



**How can man
be made “alive?”
-The Biblical
Evidence-**



Regeneration Cannot Precede Personal Faith

Look up the following passages:

- John 3:14-15
- John 5:24
- John 11:25-26
- Ephesians 1:13
- 1 Peter 2:23

What does the Bible teach us?

**How can man
be made “alive?”
-The Biblical
Evidence-**



Regeneration Cannot Precede Personal Faith

Where did the Calvinist *ordo salutis* come from?

“In the fifth century, Augustine connected the cause-and-effect relationships between human inability and divine sovereignty in salvation, specifically in terms of regeneration.”

Steven J. Lawson, *Pillars of Grace (AD 100–1564)*, Vol. 2, *A Long Line of Godly Men* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2011), 21.

Do we remember the issue surrounding this conclusion?

**How can man
be made “alive?”
-The Biblical
Evidence-**



Regeneration Cannot Precede Personal Faith

Where did the Calvinist *ordo salutis* come from?

The Early Church Fathers (known as the Patristics, AD 100-AD 400) had erroneously concluded that water baptism was necessary for the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit. They had abandoned “faith alone in Christ alone” as taught by the Apostles.

Augustine concluded that God unconditionally predetermined some for Heaven and the rest for Hell.

**How can man
be made “alive?”
-The Biblical
Evidence-**



Regeneration Cannot Precede Personal Faith

Where did the Calvinist *ordo salutis* come from?

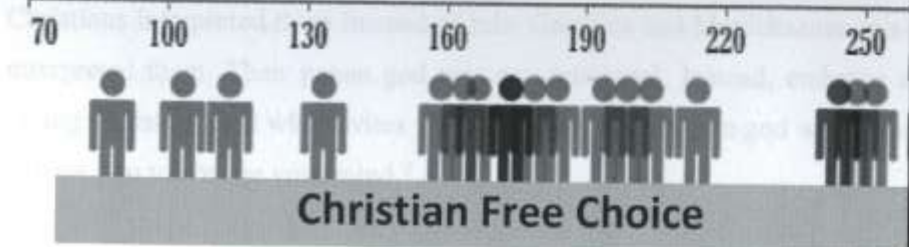
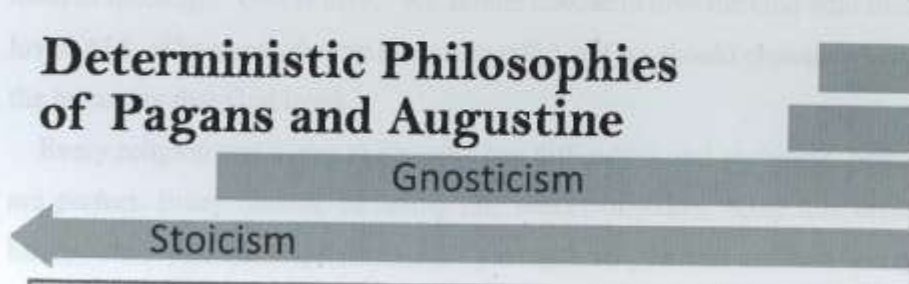
He was the first one to do so.

The historical record shows from the time of the Apostles to AD 412, no one had believed or taught that God only chose some for Heaven and others for Hell.

“All prior authors taught God had already provided grace to all helpless humans in the person of Christ. Humans only needed to accept God’s gift of salvation in Christ through their own residual God-given divine image (i.e., free choice).” –Ken Wilson, p. 106.

Timeline Chart for Determinism versus Free Will

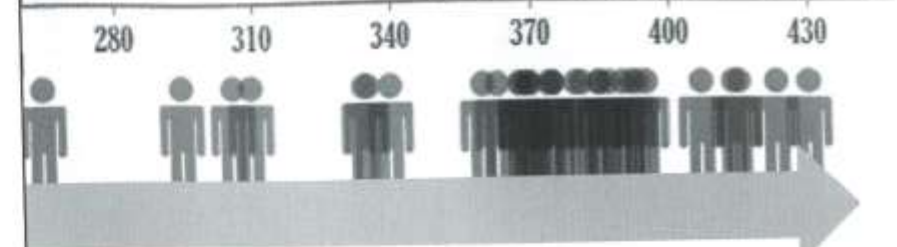
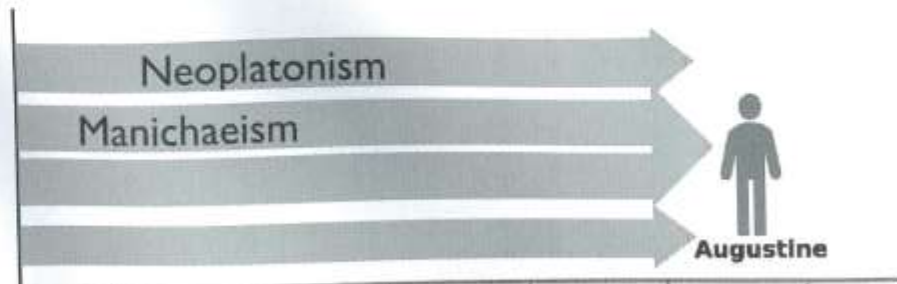
Deterministic Philosophies of Pagans and Augustine



- | | | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Clement of Rome* | Justin Martyr | Clement | Novatian |
| Ignatius of Antioch* | Aristides | Tertullian | Julius Africanus |
| Epistle of Barnabas | Tatian | Bar Daisan | Cyprian |
| Shepherd of Hermas* | Hegesippus | Calus | Origen of Alexandria |
| | Melito of Sardis | Hippolytus | |
| | Theophilus, Bishop of Caesarea | | |
| | Irenaeus | Gregory Thaumaturgus | |

Unanimous Free Choice of Early Christianity (Rejected Determinism)

* Three of the earliest of the fifty-three merely suggest Free Choice



- | | | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| Methodius of Olympus | Hilary of Poitiers | Jerome |
| Arnobius of Sicca | Epiphanius of Salamis | Pelagius |
| Lactantius | Ephrem the Syrian | Theophilus of Alexandria |
| | Marcellus of Ancyra | Theodore of Mopsuestia |
| Hegemonius/Pseudo-Hegemonius | Gregory Nazianzen | John Cassian |
| Maximus, Bishop of Jerusalem | Basil of Caesarea | John Chrysostom |
| Eusebius of Caesarea | Ambrosiaster | Rufinus of Aquileia |
| | Gregory Nyssen | |
| | Gaius Marius Victorinus | |
| | Athanasius | |
| | Tichonius | |
| | Pseudo-Macarius | |
| | Cyril of Jerusalem | |
| | Nemesius of Emesa | |
| | Macarius of Egypt | |
| | Diodore of Tarsus | |
| | Rufinus of Syria | |
| | Ambrose of Milan | |
| | Didymus the Blind | |

Total Depravity/Total Inability -Conclusion-

Calvinism

- ▶ Man is not only depraved but unable to respond in any way to God.
- ▶ Inability- Spiritual “Deadness” is likened to physical deadness (a corpse).
- ▶ God holds man responsible for his choices, though he is unable to respond.

Free Grace

- ▶ Man is depraved and does not seek God.
- ▶ Separation- Spiritual “Deadness” means man is separated from God due to sin.
- ▶ Man is responsible and is able to respond to God’s seeking of him.



Free Grace Theology

1. Good works are not required to spend eternity with God in any way. One is saved by faith alone.
2. Faith alone provides eternal security and assurance for the believer, exalting the work of Christ over the performance of the believer.
3. Human free will remains despite the fall (God does not give us the gift of faith).
4. God loves every human equally and Christ died as the propitiation for every human.

Where a system is found to be inconsistent with the Scriptures, it should be readily abandoned in favor of where the text leads.