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Total Depravity or Total Inability

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The view one takes concerning salvation will be determined, to a large extent, by the view one takes concerning sin and its effects on human nature. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first article dealt with in the Calvinistic system is the Biblical doctrine of total inability or total depravity.

Biblical Support for the "Five Points" of Calvinism¹

1

When Calvinists speak of man as being totally depraved, they mean that man's nature is corrupt, perverse, and sinful throughout. The adjective "total" does not mean that each sinner is as totally or completely corrupt in his actions and thoughts as it is possible for him to be. Instead, the word "total" is used to indicate that the *whole* of man's being has

¹ The question of supreme importance is not how the system under consideration came to be formulated into five points, or why it was named Calvinism, but rather *is it supported by Scripture?* The final court of appeal for determining the validity of any theological system is the inspired, authoritative Word of God. If Calvinism can be verified by clear and explicit declarations of Scripture, then it must be received by Christians; if not, it must be rejected. For this reason, Biblical passages are given below in support of the five points.

After each point has been introduced, some of the more important verses in which it is taught are quoted. All quotations are from the *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible. In each case, the italics within the verses are ours. Apart from the remarks contained in the headings under which the verses are given, there are no explanatory comments as to their meaning. This procedure was necessary because of the limited design of this introductory survey. To compensate for this, we have recommended a number of works in Part Three which deal with these as well as with many other passages of Scripture related to Calvinism.

Although the "five points" are dealt with below under separate headings, and texts are classified in support of each of them individually, they must not be evaluated on a purely individual basis. For these five doctrines are not presented in the Bible as separate and independent units of truth. On the contrary, in the Biblical message they are woven into one harmonious, interrelated system in which God's plan for recovering lost sinners is marvelously displayed. In fact, these doctrines are so inseparably connected that no one of them can be fully appreciated unless it is properly related to, and viewed in light of the other four; for *they mutually explain and support one another*. To judge these doctrines individually without relating each to the others would be like attempting to evaluate one of Rembrandt's paintings by looking at only one color at a time and never viewing the work as a whole. Do not, therefore, merely judge the Biblical evidence for each point separately, but rather consider carefully the collective value of the evidence when these five doctrines are viewed together as a system. When thus properly correlated, they form a fivefold cord of unbreakable strength. (Steele, D. N., Thomas, C. C., & Nicole, R. (1963). *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended and Documented* (p. 24). The Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co.)

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been affected by sin. The corruption extends to *every part* of man, his body and soul; sin has affected all (the totality) of man's faculties—his mind, his will, etc.

As a result of this inborn corruption, the natural man is totally unable to do anything spiritually good; thus Calvinists speak of man's "total inability." The inability intended by this terminology is *spiritual inability*; it means that the sinner is so spiritually bankrupt that *he can do nothing pertaining to his salvation*. It is quite evident that many unsaved people, when judged by man's standards, do possess admirable qualities and do perform virtuous acts. But in the spiritual realm, when judged by God's standards, the unsaved sinner is incapable of good. The natural man is enslaved to sin; he is a child of Satan, rebellious toward God, blind to truth, corrupt, and unable to save himself or to prepare himself for salvation. In short, the unregenerate man is DEAD IN SIN, and his WILL IS ENSLAVED to his evil nature.

Man did not come from the hands of his Creator in this depraved, corrupt condition. God made Adam upright; there was no evil whatsoever in his nature. Originally, Adam's will was free from the dominion of sin; he was under no natural compulsion to choose evil, but through his fall he brought spiritual death upon himself and all his posterity. He thereby plunged himself and the entire race into spiritual ruin and lost for himself and his descendants the ability to make right choices in the spiritual realm. His descendants are still free to choose—every man makes choices throughout life—but inasmuch as Adam's offspring are born with sinful natures, they do not have the ABILITY to choose spiritual good over evil. Consequently, man's will is no longer free (i.e., free from the dominion of sin) as Adam's will was free before the fall. Instead, man's will, as the result of inherited depravity, is in bondage to his sinful nature.

The Westminster Confession of Faith gives a clear, concise statement of this doctrine. "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 good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto."²

A. As the result of Adam's transgression, men are born in sin and by nature are spiritually dead; therefore, if they are to become God's children and enter His kingdom, they must be born anew of the Spirit.

1. When Adam was placed in the garden of Eden, he was warned not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil on the threat of immediate *spiritual* death.

² Chapter IX, Section 3.

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- Genesis 2:16, 17: And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall *die*."
2. Adam disobeyed and ate of the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3:1–7); consequently, he brought spiritual death upon himself and upon the race.
- Romans 5:12: Therefore as sin came into the world through one man [Adam, see vs. 14] and *death* through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned.
 - Ephesians 2:1–3: And you he *made alive*, when you were *dead* through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were *by nature* children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.
 - Colossians 2:13: And you, who were *dead* in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, *God made alive* together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses.
3. David confessed that he, as well as all other men, was born in sin.
- Psalm 51:5: Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.
 - Psalm 58:3: The wicked go astray from the womb, they err from their birth, speaking lies.
4. Because men are born in sin and are by nature spiritually dead, Jesus taught that men must be born anew if they are to enter God's kingdom.
- John 3:5–7: Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot *enter* the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, '*You must be born anew.*' " Compare John 1:12, 13.
- B. As the result of the fall, men are blind and deaf to spiritual truth. Their minds are darkened by sin; their hearts are corrupt and evil.

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- Genesis 6:5: The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that *every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*.
 - Genesis 8:21: ... the imagination of man's heart is *evil* from his youth ...
 - Ecclesiastes 9:3: ... the *hearts* of men are *full of evil*, and madness is in their hearts while they live ...
 - Jeremiah 17:9: The *heart* is *deceitful above all things*, and *desperately corrupt*; who can understand it?
 - Mark 7:21–23: “For from within, *out of the heart of man*, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man.”
 - John 3:19: And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and *men loved darkness* rather than light, because their deeds were evil.
 - Romans 8:7, 8: For the *mind* that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; *it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot*; and those who are in the flesh *cannot please God*.
 - 1 Corinthians 2:14: The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and *he is not able to understand them* because they are spiritually discerned.
 - Ephesians 4:17–19: Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; they are *darkened in their understanding*, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, *due to their hardness of heart*; they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness.
 - Ephesians 5:8: For once you were *darkness*, but now you are light in the Lord ...
 - Titus 1:15: To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; *their very minds and consciences are corrupted*.
- C. Before sinners are born into God's kingdom through the regenerating power of the Spirit, they are children of the devil and under his control; they are slaves to sin.
- John 8:44: You are of *your father the devil*, and *your will* is to do your father's desires.

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- Ephesians 2:1, 2: And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, *following the prince of the power of the air*, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.
- 2 Timothy 2:25, 26: God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, and they may escape from *the snare of the devil*, after being *captured by him to do his will*.
- 1 John 3:10: By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the *children of the devil*: whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother.
- 1 John 5:19: We know that we are of God, and the whole world is *in the power of the evil one*.
- John 8:34: Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, every one who commits sin is *a slave to sin*."
- Romans 6:20: When you were *slaves of sin*, you were free in regard to righteousness.
- Titus 3:3: For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, *slaves to various passions and pleasures*, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by men and hating one another.

D. The reign of sin is universal; all men are under its power; consequently, none is righteous—not even one!

- 2 Chronicles 6:36: ... for there is *no man* who does not sin ... Compare 1 Kings 8:46.
- Job 15:14–16: What is man, that he can be clean? Or he that is born of a woman, that he can be righteous? Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones, and the heavens are not clean in his sight; how much less one who is abominable and corrupt, a man who drinks iniquity like water!
- Psalm 130:3: If thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, *who could stand?*
- Psalm 143:2: Enter not into judgment with thy servant; for no *man living* is righteous before thee.
- Proverbs 20:9: *Who* can say, "I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin"?

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- Ecclesiastes 7:20: Surely there is *not a righteous man on earth* who does good and never sins.
 - Ecclesiastes 7:29: Behold, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices.
 - Isaiah 53:6: All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way ...
 - Isaiah 64:6: We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
 - Romans 3:9–12: What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; for I have already charged that *all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin*, as it is written; “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; *no one does good, not even one.*”
 - James 3:2, 8: For we all make many mistakes, and if any one makes no mistakes in what he says he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body also ... but no human being can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.
 - 1 John 1:8, 10: If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ... If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.
- E. Men left in their dead state are unable of themselves to repent, to believe the gospel, or to come to Christ. They have no power within themselves to change their natures or to prepare themselves for salvation.
- Job 14:4: Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? There is not one.
 - Jeremiah 13:23: Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then also you can do good who are accustomed to do evil.
 - Matthew 7:16–18: You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, *nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.*
 - Matthew 12:33: “Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit.”

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- John 6:44: *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.*
- John 6:65: And he said, “This is why I told you that *no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.*”
- Romans 11:35, 36: “Or *who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?*” For *from him and through him and to him are all things.* To him be glory forever. Amen.
- 1 Corinthians 2:14: The *unspiritual man* does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God, for they are *folly to him, and he is not able to understand them* because they are spiritually discerned.
- 1 Corinthians 4:7: For who sees *anything different in you?* What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, *why do you boast as if it were not a gift?*
- 2 Corinthians 3:5: Not that we are *sufficient of ourselves* to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is *from God.*

For further Biblical confirmation that men are unable of themselves to do anything toward gaining salvation, see the Scriptures given below under Point IV on Efficacious Grace. Note especially those verses which state that GOD *gives* faith, *grants* repentance, *creates* a new heart within the sinner, and other similar expressions.³

³ Steele, D. N., Thomas, C. C., & Nicole, R. (1963). *The Five Points of Calvinism: Defined, Defended and Documented* (pp. 24–30). The Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co.