

# “T” – Total Hereditary Depravity True or False?

## Bible Answers About Denominations

The entire system of Calvinism (see the tract “What Is Calvinism?” for a general explanation of Calvinism) is built upon the assertion that man is totally depraved by reason of inheriting such a nature from Adam. This doctrine is the theological notion that from Adam onward, all mankind has inherited the guilt of the first man’s original sin, hence, we come into this world totally depraved, i.e., completely wicked. John Calvin wrote the following:

*“All of us, therefore, descending from an impure seed, come into the world tainted with the contagion of sin. Nay, before we behold the light of the sun we are in God’s sight defiled and polluted....We thus see that the impurity of parents is transmitted to their children, so that all, without exception, are originally depraved. The commencement of this depravity will not be found until we ascend to the first parent of all as the fountainhead. We must, therefore, hold it for certain, that, in regard to human nature, Adam was not merely a progenitor, but, as it were, a root, and that, accordingly, by his corruption, the whole human race was deservedly vitiated.”*

This idea is not found in the Bible; rather, its roots reach only to the apostate era of the post-apostolic age. Origin (185-253 A.D.) taught that infants are polluted by sin “though the life is but the length of one day upon the earth.” Cyprian (200-258 A.D.) defended infant baptism on the ground that the child “by its descent from Adam” receives “the infection of the old death.” The dogma of “original sin” (as the doctrine is known in Roman Catholic circles) was championed by Augustine (354-430 A.D.) and confirmed by the Council of Carthage in 418 A.D. The Protestant version was popularized by the Swiss reformer, John Calvin (1509-1564 A.D.) and has thus been adopted by much of Christendom.

To begin with it should be noted that nothing is said in Genesis 3 about Adam and Eve’s act of disobedience changing their nature. It changed their location; they were expelled from the garden. But there isn’t any evidence that the sin imparted a depravity to Adam’s soul that would be passed down to all succeeding generations of humankind.

The Bible teaches that the “soul” of man is not inherited; it is created by God. The writer of Hebrews speaks of “fathers of our flesh” and the “Father of spirits” (Heb. 12:9). The wise man wrote, “then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it” (Eccl 12:7 NAS). Zechariah declared that it is God who “forms the spirit of man within him” (Zech 12:1). Paul stated that “we are the offspring of God” (Acts 17:29). If it is true that man inherits sin, from whom does he receive it? Is it imparted unto him by the Father of spirits or by his fleshly father? Surely, no one would argue that God imparts a sinful nature unto His spiritual offspring. That leaves only the

fathers of our flesh as the possible transmission of the sinful nature. Please consider the force of the following passages:

"Fathers shall not be put to death for {their} sons, nor shall sons be put to death for {their} fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin" (Deut 24:16 NAS).

"Yet you ask, 'Why does the son not share the guilt of his father?' Since the son has done what is just and right and has been careful to keep all my decrees, he will surely live. The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous man will be credited to him, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against him" (Ezek 18:19-20).

Language could not be plainer. According to God's word, there is no imputation of sin transmitted from the father to his offspring. Since the "soul" of man is not inherited, but is created directly by God then it must be as pure as the Source from whence it comes. Furthermore, it is universally acknowledged that acquired characteristics are not inherited. But sin is an acquired trait (Adam certainly did not inherit his sin from God!). Therefore, sin is not inherited.

The Bible teaches that the practice of either good or evil is a matter of choice. Isaiah declares "that he may know to refuse the evil, and choose the good" (Isa 7:15). Human sinfulness commences in that period of life that is called "youth" not from birth. The Lord said, "for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen 8:21). Jeremiah wrote, "We lie down in our shame, and our confusion covereth us: for we have sinned against the LORD our God, we and our fathers, from our youth even unto this day, and have not obeyed the voice of the LORD our God" (Jer 3:25). This is the reason we will stand before God to be judged on the basis of our own personal deeds and not for an evil nature inherited from Adam (2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:12).

The Bible does not view little children as totally corrupt sinners. On the contrary, they are consistently held up as models for those who would aspire to enter the kingdom. In Matthew we read, "At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:1-3). Jesus also said, "Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 19:14).

A proper definition of sin will demonstrate the absurdity of total hereditary depravity. Sin is not something we inherit, but rather something we do. It is an action, a transgression of the law (1 Jno. 3:4). Sin is a failing to do what we are capable of doing (James 4:17). How can a baby transgress God's law or commit sin by not doing what he/she is incapable of doing?

We must not confuse suffering the consequences of Adam's sin as equivalent to suffering the guilt of Adam's sin. Children of alcoholic fathers and mothers often suffer the consequences of their parent's actions. But who would charge that the children are actually guilty of their parent's transgressions? We do suffer the consequence of Adam's sin, physical death (Rom. 5:12; 1 Cor. 15:22). The context of both of these passages has to do with physical death, not spiritual death. As a consequence of Adam's sin, we shall all die physically (Heb. 9:27). However, as a result of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, we may live again. The doctrine of Total Hereditary Depravity is clearly contrary to Scripture.

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