

5 Points of Calvinism #2-The Total Depravity of Man sermonaudio.com

The Five Points of Calvinism

By Rev. G. I. Williamson

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Covenant OPC
9340 W 147th Street
Orland Park, Illinois 60462

Website: www.covenantop.com
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/covenantopc

A brief summary of what the Reformed faith is all about, I think I would quote the last stanza of the Psalter version of Psalm 62. This is what it says,

"For God has spoken o'er and o'er,
And unto me has shown,
That saving power and lasting strength
Belong to him alone."

You might say that's what the whole Reformation was all about, that little word "alone." Is it Christ and Mary or Christ alone? Is it the Bible and tradition or is it the Bible alone? Is it faith and works or is it faith alone? You see, the church at the time of the Reformation had become an "and" religion, and that's what the Reformation was all about. It went back to that simplicity which says to God alone be the glory, because our salvation comes only from him. Now that's the central idea of the Reformed faith, and everything else, really, is a subordinate part thereof and so we are going to look for a while tonight at the doctrine of man's total depravity.

Now this is not first in the Canons of Dort, one of the great confessions of the Reformation that we are following in this series of messages, and that's not because I have a quarrel with the order that they follow. They follow what you might call a theological order, and there's nothing wrong with that. But I believe there is some value in starting where the Bible starts, and you know if you go back to the book of Genesis, that's where it starts. The first few chapters of the book of Genesis are all about the doctrine of total depravity. We read the story of creation, and then we are told about the fall of man. Then for the next several chapters we see the unfolding of man's desperate condition in the early history of the world.

Have you ever asked yourself the question: why didn't God institute the authority and the office of civil magistrate before the flood? Why did he wait until after the flood to say, "Now, from now on, whoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed," which is the foundation of the power of the civil magistrate to whom God has given the sword to punish iniquity? Did you ever ask yourself the question: why was it that God did not institute a visible church with ordinances to mark it by way of visible distinction from the

world before the flood? You had believers before the flood, but you had no visible instituted church, why didn't God do that? Well, one reason at least was that God wanted to have us understand very clearly what is in man. God knew what was in man. The Bible says that God looked down from heaven and he saw that every imagination of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually. Then once, historically, God allowed this vileness of the human heart to erupt, as it were, and to work itself out in society and in the world in such a way that the Bible says by and by it came about that the whole world was filled with lawlessness. So I want to go back and begin at that point, because historically and even psychologically that's where you have to begin. You can never talk to a man meaningfully about the sovereignty of God or about election or about the atonement of Jesus Christ until he first knows something about himself, about his own fall, his own depravity and his own need and so we're going to first look at this doctrine of man's total depravity.

Now what do we mean when we say that man is totally depraved? Well, we mean in the first place that man is a fool, and, you know, that's a very interesting word in the Bible. The root of that word is applied to some strange things like a dead corpse or a bottle that is used to put wine in. You know what a bottle that was used to put wine in was in the ancient world, don't you? It was the emptied hide of a sheep or something like that. They would take all of the contents out of it and then they would sew it up and they would put the contents inside of it. And if you saw one of them laying over there on the grass somewhere from a distance, you might say, "Well, look at that, there's a sheep over there." You'd walk over there and you'd pick it up and you'd say, "Well, that's no sheep, that's just an empty sheepskin." And that's really the fundamental concept of "fool," and that's what man is. He's just an empty shell of what he was when God created him.

You might liken man as he is today to the ruins of that beautiful ancient city of Athens, Greece. I don't know if any of you have ever seen Athens, Greece, but you can stand off at a distance even today and you can look at the city of Athens, you can see the Acropolis there and the Parthenon, all those magnificent buildings that the ancient Greeks built upon that kind of table-like flat surface there in Athens, and from a great distance it still looks rather impressive. But you know, if you get up close, everything is in ruins. The whole thing is in ruins. There's not one stone there that is not crumbling and falling apart and showing the ravages of destruction. And that's exactly what is true of man's nature since the fall. You look at him from a distance and, yes, there is something there that reminds you of the nobility of his creation, there is something there that makes you realize that he really was made in the image of God, even yet. And yet when you really get up close and examine him, as God does here in Psalm 14, you see it says, "The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men To see." Well, if you examine him in that light, the way God examines man, well, then you find that he's just an empty shell of what he once was.

Now, the reason for this is that man has alienated his own heart from God. A lot of people read this Psalm and they think, well, this is talking about atheists, but there aren't very many atheists. There are not many people who say there is no God, but that's not what the Psalm says. The Psalm doesn't say, "The fool has said there is no God." What is recorded here to say is this, "The fool has said in his heart that God does not exist." The

true God, in other words, does not exist as far as the fool is concerned. He may not say that with his mind, he may not say that with his lips, but in his heart that's what he says. "The God of the Bible doesn't exist," that's what he says, and he says it in his heart.

Now the very thing that the psalmist is talking about is explained for us by the Apostle Paul in Romans 1, where he says this: even though they knew God, they did not honor him as God. A little later on he says they did not like to retain God in their knowledge. It made them uncomfortable. They did not like it. So professing themselves to be wise, they became fools. You notice he uses the very word from Psalm 14, they became fools. Professing themselves to be wise, mind you, they became fools. Well, what did they do? They exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. If you know anything about the ancient world, you'll know that they called those things gods. So they didn't say there is no God at all. No, what they said is, "Well, the God of the Bible, he doesn't exist." So they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and they worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.

Now that's the story of man's total depravity. It begins in an alienation of the heart from the true and living God, and because man was made in the image of God, when he turns away from God he falls into ruins, same as your image falls into ruins when it's separated from you. You stand in front of a mirror and you can see your image. You walk away, your image falls into nothingness. And that's exactly what has happened to man, and then the result of that is that man becomes corrupt and does abominable deeds.

Paul described it in Romans 1, this way: because they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them up. Gave them up to what? Gave them up to a reprobate mind so that they would do all these evil things. And then there in the latter part of Romans 1, Paul tells us what those evil things were, and it's like going down into a dark sewer. You go down lower and lower until you come down to that place where he says and they even gave up the natural use of the women, the men did, and the women gave up the natural use of the men, and they burned in their lust one for another, and then you had the whole homosexual gay movement that we see in society today.

Now, it wouldn't be so bad, you know, if you could look around and say, "Well, it's true, we have some people like that, and that's too bad, but thank God there's a lot of people that are not like that." That would be good news, wouldn't it? Perhaps it wouldn't even be so tragic if you could look around and you could say, "Well, there's a lot of people like that, but thank God there are still some who aren't like that by nature." But that wasn't true either, and that's why the world became like it did in the days of Noah. Why was the whole world filled with vile things and with violence and evil? The answer is because there aren't any good people in it.

Now the Lord looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there were any who understood, to see if there were any who were seeking after God. That's what the psalmist says and what was the verdict? What did God find? Did he find any that were good? No. Not any? No, not even one. Did he find anyone there in the world, the whole world, that was seeking after God? No, not even one. And so the doctrine of man's total

depravity doesn't mean, as people sometimes imagine, that everyone in the world is as far gone as possible. No, that's not true. That wasn't even true before the flood. There are a lot of things that held back the tide of lawlessness and iniquity in the heart of man. For one thing, they remembered the garden of Eden. They remembered the cherubim with the flaming sword. They remembered a lot of things that put the brakes on them. Then, of course, there were the godly in the world, and they had an influence, too, like the salt of the earth has an influence today. There were a lot of things, in other words, that held back the tide of iniquity in the world but the bolder ones, as you well remember from those early chapters of the book of Genesis, they were always going a little bit further, and so as the generations passed, it was a downward trend until the whole world manifested this corruption.

So when we speak of the doctrine of total depravity, we don't mean that every man, your neighbor and mine, no matter what his name is, no matter what his background is, is as far gone as possible. We don't mean that. If you look at the ruins of the city of Athens close up, you'll find that some of the stones are not nearly as bad as some of the other ones. Some of the buildings are not in as bad a state of ruins as the other ones. And if you look around you today in society, some people are not as far gone as others, there's no doubt about that, and there are a lot of reasons for that, but the point is, they are all in ruins, every last one of them. There's not one single exception.

And it also means not only that every individual member of the whole human family is in a state of ruins, but it also means that every single part of every human being is also in ruins. That was what the great argument was about at the time that the Canons of Dort were written. The Arminians said, "Well, it's true that man has fallen, it's true that he's sinful, but there's one thing that didn't suffer in the fall, and that's man's free will." That would be like going to the ruins there of Athens and finding one little building that wasn't even damaged, just perfect, thousands of years later, just perfect. Well, that's not true. You can't even find one stone there on the hill of Athens that's not in ruins, not a single one and there's not one part of you or me by nature that is not ruined by the fall of man. The heart is, the mind is, the will is, the body is, every single part of human nature lies in ruins and today we are seeing this very clearly.

In the nineteenth century, throughout the Western world, there was a great day of joy when men heard about the novelty of the doctrine of evolution. When Charles Darwin wrote "The Origin of the Species," it was an immediate bestseller. It was a sellout. Men couldn't get on the bandwagon fast enough of this new doctrine of evolution. Do you know what they were doing? They were becoming fools. They were saying in their heart, "There is no God." Now, they may not have said it with their mouth. A lot of them didn't. They may not have realized in their minds that that's what they were doing, but that is what they were doing. They didn't like to retain in their knowledge the God of the Bible, the holy God who created them and one day was going to judge them, so they exchanged that God, and the interesting thing is that you can very well describe the theory of evolution in the very words of Paul, because when you turn away from the living God and you say, "Well, he didn't make me," what do you do? What do you say? Well, you say, "The God that made me is the process of evolution, corruptible man and birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures." And that's exactly what the vast majority of

people today in the Western world believe. God didn't create them, evolution did, and evolution is just exactly today what it was in the ancient world in principle. When Paul talks about those people worshiping corruptible man and birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures, he's talking about the gods of the Egyptians, for example, and they were simply symbolic representation for the forces of nature. Do you see how far we've advanced in our modern age?

Well now, when they adopted this doctrine of evolution in the West, a lot of people said, "Don't worry, it's not going to bring any great change in the traditional Christian moral values. We can still hold on to our system of morality, even though we don't have the Christian doctrine of God and creation and the fallen and all that. We don't have to have that. We can still hold on to this Christian morality." But they were wrong and do you know why they were wrong? Because the heart of man is desperately wicked, just like the Bible says it is, and because when man doesn't like to retain God in his knowledge, God gives man up. He gives him up to what? He gives him up to his own nature, to a reprobate mind and heart. And God says, "All right, you don't want Me? I'll leave you to yourself. I'll just let what's really in you just come right up out of you." And all over the Western world today, that's exactly what we're seeing. Way underneath all the argument about abortion and all these other things, this is the fundamental thing and I can tell you this, a hundred marches on Parliament is not going to help, and all kinds of superficial movements that just deal with the symptoms is not going to help. Nothing is going to help unless we get back to a biblical view of God and creation and man and that's got to go through the churches and from the churches back into society.

And you know, one of the things that becomes more and more astonishing to me is how anyone can read the daily newspaper without becoming Reformed, 100 percent Reformed. Every day that I open my evening post and I read what's written there in the evening post, I say how can any man with eyes in his head read the paper tonight without seeing that man is totally depraved? You read about some little child being molested and murdered down near Christ Church by somebody in society, and the humanists say, "Well, he's sick." And the Bible says he's sinful, he's wicked. And you read over and over again, day after day in your newspapers, an avalanche of evidence that the Bible's right, that this is true, man is an empty shell of his former glory. His heart is desperately wicked. It is true that man goes astray as soon as he's born, speaking lies. It is true that the heart of man is desperately wicked. Who can know it? And it is true that man drinks iniquity like water. You know how much you like a drink of nice, cool water on a hot day? That's what the Bible says about man. He likes sin like that. He just loves a great big drink of it and we're seeing the evidence of this all over again today. David saw it. Paul saw it. And if God has enlightened you, you can see it, because the evidence is simply devastating in our culture and society.

Well now, he goes on to ask this question: do all the workers of wickedness not know? And I think that is a tremendously important question. Do the people today in New Zealand society who are drinking iniquity like water and who are doing everything they possibly can to break down all that remains of a traditional Christian morality in our culture and society, seeking to destroy every last barrier of Christian morality and the standards of society, don't they know what they are doing? There was once a time when

this was hotly debated, because we usually then in those days talked about the heathen nations. Now they were way over on the other side of the world, and in people's minds they were people who had never heard the gospel. For thousands of years they had no contact with the revelation of the Bible, and here they were living in darkness and in sin, and people said, Well, surely it isn't their fault. Surely God wouldn't condemn them for that. That's not their fault. They don't know any better." And there was an element of truth in that statement. You remove people from the light for 20 generations, and the people at the end of that line, people 20 generations away from the light, they are born in complete darkness and ignorance, and they don't know in the same sense that they did at the beginning. But you know, the Bible says all men historically have had contact with the truth. They all knew the truth back in the beginning from Adam, because they all came from Adam's family. They all knew the truth again right after the flood, because all men came from the family of Noah. And if they are in darkness, it's because they did exactly what it says in Romans 1, they didn't like to have God in their knowledge and so they exchanged the truth of God. That's been going on in all of the nations and cultures of the earth.

But today we can see what is really the case so vividly, because we know that the people in our society do know. You think Brian Edwards doesn't know what he hates? Of course he knows. He knows very well what he hates. He hates the Christian faith, especially biblical Christianity, and he would love to destroy it and smash it completely. But he knows. Don't you ever think he doesn't. And a lot of the people who are leading the way, you might say leading the demolition teams right here in New Zealand today, seeking to destroy the standards of culture, morality, and so on, they know what they are doing. And so the psalmist was right when he says, "They eat up my people as bread." There are people in New Zealand today that would just love to destroy you and me and all that we stand for, if they could only do it and they know very well what they are doing.

That's the situation in the world and so we can't say, "Well, these poor people, they are really helpless, innocent victims, and God hasn't been fair to them. And if God judges them, well, he's not being fair to them." That's not true, you see. The horrible thing about man's depravity is that it's deliberate, and there's no excuse for it. That's what Paul tells us again in Romans 1, they are without excuse because when they knew God or knowing God, they did this. They didn't like to have God in their knowledge. That's what's so plainly evident today throughout our culture and society.

And then in verses 5 and 6 he says something else very significant, "There they are in great dread. Because God is with the righteous generation. You would put to shame the counsel of the afflicted, but the LORD is his refuge." Now, why are these people who are hell-bent on their own destruction and the destruction of everybody else with them, and that's true, you know, Paul says they not only know the judgment of God but they take pleasure in those who do iniquity with them. Knowing the judgment of God, they not only do the evil thing, but they take pleasure in those that do them. But why is it that in the midst of it all, they are in great dread?

I don't know how many of you saw this recent television replay of the World at War, in which they showed the terrible things that happened in Nazi Germany in the Second

World War when they decided to eliminate the Jewish race from the face of the earth. You may remember that in that very moving account, there was a man who was actually standing beside Himmler, the head of the SS, the hated secret police of the Nazi regime, who went out one day to watch them executing some of these helpless victims. And he stood there beside this great open pit where there were a great many people about ready to be machine-gunned to death. They opened fire and began to mow them down, and this eyewitness said that Himmler began to tremble violently. So why did he do that? Why did he begin to tremble violently? Well, I can tell you why he began to tremble violently and that is because he knew down deep in his heart and soul, he knew that the true God exists and that he is answerable to him, and so he was suddenly filled with fear and dread. And that's true today. It doesn't matter what people say, it doesn't matter how much they may cover this over, down deep at the foundation of their existence there is a knowledge of God and a fear of God that no man can completely eradicate, and the reason he can't eradicate it is that he was made by God and God made him in such a way that he can never escape from the pressure of his own conscience and the witness of God to him through it.

So we have to say, no, there's no excuse. Not only is man lying in ruins, not only is every part of his nature sinful, not only is there a constant downward trend, but it's deliberate. It is deliberate, it is sinning against the light, and so no wonder the Bible speaks of this thing in the heart of man as being like the poison of serpents because that's what it is. And that's true of you and me, as it is of all other human beings by nature. And it's true of your children and my children, every single one of them, by nature. Oh, about this time you may say, "Boy oh boy, this is a very gloomy sermon. You've got me so depressed, I'm really going to have a hard time this week. Wouldn't it be better to reject this terrible doctrine of man's total depravity and go along with the humanists and take an optimistic view of human nature?" Well, go ahead, if you want to finish the destruction of the church and the nation. If you want to knock down all that remains and smash it completely, go ahead, because that's exactly what's done it. The thing that has destroyed our culture to the point that it is now in a very dangerous condition is a false doctrine of man. All you have to do is say man is basically good, perhaps imperfect, but don't forget evolution is like an escalator, it's always going up, it's getting better and better, just say that long enough and you'll destroy it all right because you'll teach man that he doesn't need to cry out to the living God. Then he doesn't have to ask the God of heaven for mercy. He doesn't have to cry out, out of the horrible pit and out of the miry clay, "O God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" And the Bible says that's the only place that man can ever find salvation.

David looked around and he saw all of these things and he realized the magnitude of the problem, so what did David do? Did he say, "Well, I just can't stand it, this is too dark a doctrine"? No, he didn't say that. He says, "Oh, that salvation will come out of Zion. Oh, that God will look down out of heaven and do something about the terrible situation." And you know, that, to me, is the great encouragement today. When I came out of the seminary 26 years ago, things were worse than they are today because to my knowledge all over the Western world today there are individuals and small groups of people who are at last crying out of the horrible pit and they're saying, "O God, have mercy!" There are people all over the Western world, I don't know how many there are and they're

certainly not in great mass meetings, it's nothing like that, God doesn't work that way, you see, but there are people all over the Western world today who are saying, "What we need is the God of the Reformation, the sovereign God who can reach down into our hopeless, our totally hopeless situation and lift us out of it again."

And that's the wonderful thing about the true and living God because, you know, history says that over and over again when things get bad enough that man does cry out, then there's hope. 430 years the children of Israel were down in the land of Egypt and when things got bad enough and their bondage felt terribly cruel to them and they were really in a helpless and desperate condition, then the Bible says they cried and God sent them a deliverer. And then they began to believe in the goodness of man and one day they were carried away into captivity, into Babylon, and then when they were really desperate and they were down and out, as we might say, and they realized there was no help in man, they cried to God, and what happened? Well, he sent deliverers. When you go back to the time of the Reformation, things really were desperately bad in Europe, you have no idea, they were worse then than they are today in many ways, far worse, and even the church was in such a terrible condition that people were really despairing, and then men like Martin Luther finally on their knees cried out to God and they said, "Lord, there's no hope except in Your soft..."