

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



June 3, 2012

Is Man Totally Depraved?

Much of modern Christian theology is based on a flawed understanding of the nature of man. This faulty foundation has in turn spawned a host of other errors.

“The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:7-8).

“But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14).

Beginning with Augustine of Hippo in the early 5th century A.D., the Catholic Church has long embraced the doctrine of *original sin*, the concept that every human born into this world is tainted by the moral failing of our original parents, Adam and Eve. Early Protestant theologians, especially John Calvin, refined this doctrine further, arguing that man is totally depraved from birth, incapable of making right choices in regard to his spiritual condition. As one proponent argues, “Man is totally unable to choose equally as well between the good and the bad” (Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, p. 35). Starting with this foundation of total hereditary depravity, much of Protestant

Christianity today follows a system of theology that emphasizes salvation as entirely an exercise of divine sovereignty, in which man contributes nothing whatsoever to his salvation.

The Biblical support for this theological system is claimed in passages such as our opening texts in Romans and First Corinthians, which state that man “cannot” please God or understand His will. These verses seem to provide an explanation for the universality of sin in the human race: we are fallen creatures because we were born that way.

But this simplistic explanation of the human condition ignores other Biblical evidence that indicates man is not a passive player in this game. Passages such as Joshua’s stirring challenge to “choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve” (Josh. 24:15) and David’s declaration, “I have chosen the way of truth” (Psa. 119:30) make no sense unless they had the ability to make that choice. Jesus said, “If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority”

(Jn. 7:17). He credited us with at least the *ability* to decide whether or not to obey God. Finally, why would God end the Bible with the invitation, “Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely” (Rev. 22:17), if we are all born devoid of any desire to accept it?

Paul’s statements in Romans and First Corinthians must be interpreted in light of this free moral agency. The “carnal” or “natural” man in these verses is not describing all mankind in our natural state, but that class of individuals who *by their own choice* have no interest in spiritual matters. As long as they retain that earth-centered mindset, it is quite true that they “cannot please God,” or even understand what God’s will is. Of course they can’t—they have no interest in such things.

The doctrine of total hereditary depravity and its offshoots have fostered a climate of spiritual laziness among millions, who view salvation as entirely independent of any human effort. We are fallen creatures, yes; but God demands that we accept responsibility for that condition, not blame others.

– David King