



The
DOCTRINES
— of —
GRACE

RUINED
SINNERS
to
RECLAIM

SIN *and* DEPRAVITY
in HISTORICAL, BIBLICAL,
THEOLOGICAL, *and*
PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

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“In *Ruined Sinners to Reclaim*, twenty-six gifted pastors and theologians have joined forces to bequeath the church a rich, fruitful, and comprehensive survey of the doctrine of total depravity from the perspectives of historical theology, biblical exegesis, systematic theology, and polemics. With sensitivity to the contours of our increasingly secular world, the authors demonstrate how our understanding of total depravity should impact our evangelism, counseling, and preaching in modern contexts. Above all, the authors lead us to the spotless Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. This magisterial work is one of the most definitive treatments of total depravity available in the Reformed tradition.”

Joel R. Beeke, Chancellor and Professor of Homiletics and Systematic Theology, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary; Pastor, Heritage Reformed Congregation, Grand Rapids, Michigan

“As I read through the rich and deep chapters of *Ruined Sinners to Reclaim*, I not only found myself instructed; I also found myself moved again and again by the goodness and grace of God in Christ toward ruined sinners such as I. This book helps us to look squarely at our pervasive depravity and inability to save ourselves from sin’s ruinous grip while also helping us to gaze in wonder and worship at God’s pervasive purity and his power to save.”

Nancy Guthrie, author; Bible teacher

“Reading a book on total depravity might betray a morbid preoccupation with the subject—or worse, confirmation of its existence in the reader! Yet this outstanding collection of essays is a treasure trove for scholars and students alike. Canvassing the historical, biblical, theological, and pastoral dimensions of this much-neglected and much-misunderstood doctrine of Holy Scripture, the Gibson brothers have provided a perspicacious window into the importance of understanding the depth of our ruin, in order to appreciate the glory of our being reclaimed by Christ. From the opening comprehensive introduction by the editors to the closing pastoral chapters, this book is a richly woven tapestry of insights into the extent of our fallenness and the wonder of God’s redeeming grace.”

Glenn N. Davies, former Archbishop of Sydney

“It was Seneca who said that if we desire to judge all things justly, we must first persuade ourselves that none of us is without sin. This excellent book—*Ruined Sinners to Reclaim*—does a superb job of persuading us about the complex nature of sin and the comprehensive salvation we find in Christ, and thus enables us to make thoughtful theological judgments for Christian ministry today. All sections, and many of the essays within, will supply good guidance for weary pilgrims through the Slough of Despond and onward toward the Celestial City.”

Mark Earngey, Head of Church History and Lecturer in Doctrine, Moore Theological College; author, *Bishop John Ponet (1516–1556): Scholar, Bishop, Insurgent*; coeditor, *Reformation Worship*

“As with the first volume in the *Doctrines of Grace* series, *Ruined Sinners to Reclaim* provides depth, breadth, and clarity to its chosen topic. Since, as Calvin rightly put it, nearly all the wisdom we possess consists in the knowledge of God and of ourselves, this volume on sin, its nature, and its effects provides rich and practical wisdom so that we might better know ourselves, and thus know God better, as it plumbs the depths of Scripture and the Reformed theology that naturally wells up from Scripture. There is no other volume available that so adeptly gives us a microscope into the human heart.”

K. Scott Oliphint, Professor of Apologetics and Systematic Theology,
Westminster Theological Seminary

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“Man of Sorrows,” what a name
for the Son of God, who came
ruined sinners to reclaim:
Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Philip P. Bliss (1838–1876)

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Foreword

Is it not a little overkill? All this talk of human depravity? After all, we know now that brains are wired in certain ways, genetics playing their part, along with the chemical soup. Plus, there is nurture, which warps us in all sorts of ways: “the woman you gave me” (or mother, father, etc.). Ultimately, is God not on the hook for all this?

Special revelation—that is, Scripture—represents God’s own account of what he created us to be, how we have all fallen short of his glory, yet are reconciled to him by his own act in history. Nevertheless, general revelation also tells the same truth if we interpret it properly—with scriptural spectacles. The problem is that we do not want the bad news to be as bad as it is, which keeps us from hearing the good news in all its astounding beauty. In our secular culture, “sin” has been “cancelled.” The new *Oxford Junior Dictionary* has deleted sin and other terms related to Christianity and added words like blog, broadband, and celebrity. Already in 1973, Karl Menninger’s *Whatever Became of Sin?* astounded the public, as a psychologist not especially known for his Christian beliefs announced that the avoidance of sin had only exacerbated people’s anxieties. While psychotherapy may alleviate some of the symptoms, Menninger argued, it does not have the methods or sources to provide a deeper account of human guilt. Everyone experiences shame, he noted, and this is the focus of therapy—but it is just a symptom. The root problem is guilt, which used to be dealt with by religious explanations. People could say, “Oh, well, at least that tells me why I *feel* ashamed.” However grim, there was a deeper diagnosis of the condition. That has been forgotten, Menninger observed, leaving people with no sense of solidarity as those who are all “in it together,” sharing a common experience of falling short of the purpose for which they exist.

Liberals and fundamentalists have contributed to this crisis in different ways. Both tend to identify sin with particular acts, whether social or

individual, often emphasizing external factors. While the lists differ significantly, sin is often seen as the result of one's environment. Both sides tend to deflect sin onto outsiders. Too rarely is sin considered something that pervades every individual from conception because of Adam's fall.

The biblical doctrine of sin is far more complex. We are warped throughout not just because of deliberate decisions we have made but because of a common human condition. We are sinners and therefore responsible for our own agency. But we are also sinned against, which means we are also victims of other people's attitudes and actions. And we live in a fallen world that is broken not only ethically but also in our decaying bodies, dementia, and other brain illnesses, such as depression, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, personality disorder, and so forth. To pin sin on any one of these pegs alone is to forget that God created us good and whole creatures in the beginning.

"Total depravity" is one of the most misunderstood doctrines of the Christian faith. Originating as a term no earlier than the twentieth century, it is not a particularly good one. Nor is it peculiar to Calvinism. The classical Augustinian anthropology holds that the whole person, body and soul, is created in God's image and is therefore good—and, at the same time, is wholly depraved. As John Calvin taught against the negative ("Manichean") view of bodily nature as inherently depraved, "It is not nature but the corruption of nature" that Scripture teaches. "Depravity" means a decline from an ideal good. The meal I put in the refrigerator may be wonderful, but if I leave the door open while I am gone on a trip and return to find it moldy, it is *depraved*. Depravity presupposes goodness. Or, to change the metaphor, a drop of poison corrupts the entire glass of water. This does not mean that there is no water left, but that the poison has infiltrated every part of it, such that the water is no longer health-giving.

Based on a host of passages unfurled in this volume, it was the common view from the ancient church to Aquinas and the Protestant Reformers that the whole person is good by created nature *and* also wholly defiled by sin: corrupt not in its intensity (as if there is no good left) but in its extensity. There is no part of us that has not been polluted by the guilt and corruption of sin, no island of neutrality—mind, will, or emotions—to make a safe landing for grace. Instead, God's grace must come to sinners, raising them from death to life. In salvation, God implants no new "spare part," as if we lost something natural, but saves everything that belonged to us by creation. In

fact, he takes it beyond its original righteousness into glorification, immortality, and the impossibility of ever turning away from the Goodness in whom we exist. God's grace liberates the will, mind, and emotions to rest in him.

If we evaluate the alternatives, this biblical diagnosis is severe but also reasonable. Secularists do not have to talk about an ethical "fall" of the human race because they do not think that human beings are uniquely created in God's image and likeness. For us, though, humanity did not trip once upon a time but plunged from the highest position in creation next to the angels. This is one of the problems with the "TULIP" acronym: It starts with the fall rather than with creation.

Thus, total depravity does not mean that we are as bad as we can possibly be, but that the beautiful ways in which we are like God have become weapons to be used against him. We use our reasoning to invent ingenious subterfuges for avoiding the truth; our powerful emotions and imagination to love and invent idols; our excellent skill of deliberation to choose that which harms us; and our elegant bodies to rush toward destruction.

Yet still God gives grace. He never gives up on us. Even the last breath that curses the Creator is a gift of God's common grace. Believers and unbelievers alike enjoy sunsets, romance, families, and the liberal arts and sciences. Surpassing this goodness by far is the saving grace that God gives through the gospel. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son . . ." (John 3:16). God did not "so love" something that was ugly, contemptible, and disgusting. He loved what he had made. Like an artist whose great masterpiece has been disfigured by rogues, God would not quit until he restored the image to even beyond its original glory.

Yet God's work of reconciliation and restoration makes no sense unless we have a robust understanding of the crisis. As in the Christmas carol "Joy to the World," written by the Calvinist hymn-writer Isaac Watts, God's grace in Christ restores everything "far as the curse is found." The redemption is far greater even than the corruption. Justification is greater than forgiveness of guilt; it is being counted righteous before God. Regeneration and sanctification are not merely a return to Eden, but they lead us finally to glorification, which no human but Jesus has experienced.

From this vista—creation to redemption—we are able to interpret the sinfulness of the human race, the fallen world, and our own appetites in proper perspective. I appreciate how the authors in this book engage the

historic Christian tradition but with biblical corrections recognized by the Protestant Reformers. Some readers may encounter for the first time discussions of topics such as *concupiscence* that seem arcane and yet which are essential to contemporary debates over whether not only decisions but also desires should be considered sinful. Once we are safe in Christ's arms, we can confess not only our individual sins but our twisted desires—however influenced by nature and nurture—as truly sinful enemies from which Christ has redeemed us.

The essays contained in this volume will help us navigate the shoals of a negative view of human nature, on the one side; and a recognition that we have all “fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), on the other. For those who worry about where they come from, their fallen condition, particular sins they have committed, and how Christ covers them, this volume will be a rich treasure.

Michael Horton

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Westminster Seminary, California

Preface

In 2013, when *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her* was published, we had no intention of following such a mammoth undertaking with any further editorial projects. The doctrine of definite atonement had always stood out to us as, arguably, the most controversial of “the five points of Calvinism,” and therefore the one most in need of defense and contemporary explanation and application. In the years that followed, however, it became clear that the other doctrines of grace were equally as deserving of careful examination and restatement. This volume, now the second in the series, is the next of four more volumes in what we are calling “The Doctrines of Grace” series, in which we hope, God willing, to treat the theology of the Canons of the Synod of Dort (1618–19) in all their historical, biblical, theological, and pastoral richness for our present day.

The focus of these volumes on the theology that was formulated within Reformed orthodoxy in the seventeenth century is not an attempt to make more of it than we should. Indeed, Richard Muller’s oft-quoted observation about the Reformation provides some wider context to this project:

The Reformation, in spite of its substantial contribution to the history of doctrine and the shock it delivered to theology and the church in the sixteenth century, was not an attack upon the whole of medieval theology or upon Christian tradition. The Reformation assaulted a limited spectrum of doctrinal and practical abuses with the intention of reaffirming the values of the historical church catholic. Thus, the mainstream Reformers reconstructed the doctrines of justification and the sacraments and then modified their ideas of the *ordo salutis* and of the church accordingly; but they did not alter the doctrine of God, creation, providence, and Christ, and they maintained the Augustinian tradition concerning predestination, human nature and sin. The reform of individual doctrines, like justification and the sacraments, occurred within the bounds of a traditional, orthodox, and catholic system which, on the grand scale, remained unaltered.¹

¹ Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:97.

It is certainly possible to argue, when it comes to human nature and sin, that Muller's "maintenance mode" setting for the Reformation requires important qualification. On the one hand, the Augustinian tradition was not simply monolithic at this point, and, on the other hand, the Reformers were soon engaged in conflict with Rome over the doctrine of concupiscence (the faculty of carnal desire) and the remittance of original sin in baptism. The various ways in which the Reformation sought to maintain the Augustinian tradition on sin came, in time, to be contested with Rome as the heirs of the Reformation settled on following Augustine's understanding of sin and grace in his later period. Nevertheless, the conception of the Reformation as a "limited assault" is a helpful one. Not only does it help to locate its theological upheavals within a broader view of the whole of the Christian tradition, but it also helps to moderate the kind of claims some Protestant theologians (in particular) might be tempted to make about the biblical and doctrinal rediscoveries that came to light in the work of the magisterial Reformers. The Reformation was a distinct and definitive doctrinal revolt, but it did not spring up *de novo* nor did it provide a high point of orthodoxy from which there was never any need of further development or refinement.

The Canons of Dort—and the system of Reformed orthodoxy that they represent and that they further repristinated—should, we suggest, be understood in the same way. The disputes debated at the Synod, which were answered with the "Heads of Doctrine" agreed upon by the assembly of Reformed ministers and professors, can in its own way be seen as a "limited assault" (or, better, a "counterassault") on a nexus of theological questions that were receiving aberrant answers at a certain point in history within a definite context. In publishing afresh today on the context, content, and biblical-theological-pastoral implications of that theology, we are claiming that it is beautiful theology with abiding value and confessional significance for the church; what we are *not* claiming is that the Canons of Dort *de novo* provide a climax of orthodoxy that represents the defining moment of the Christian tradition. Rather, the "Heads of Doctrine" formulated by the Synod represent a historically located instance of theological foment revolving around a certain set of matters related to soteriology.

This is the spirit in which we present the essays in this and all the other volumes. In undertaking the task of "The Doctrines of Grace" series, we are seeking to locate the Synod of Dort in its proper place within church history,

such that it is worth stating again that the project is not a presentation of “the five points of Calvinism” or a defense of the “TULIP” acronym, which is so often presented as a summary of the Canons and of Reformed theology. As we stated previously, “It is not that there is no value to such language. But there can be a tendency to use such terminology as the soteriological map *itself*, without realizing that such terms simply feature as historical landmarks *on* the map.”²

With this overall framework in place, then, it is the effort of this volume to trace the historical debates about sin’s debilitating effects, sketch the biblical awfulness of sin’s many forms, engage the theological complexities of sin’s nature and transmission, and meditate on the pastoral realities of sin’s presence in our lives and in the world. We seek to show not only that the doctrine of the total depravity of human creatures is biblical, but that it too, like all the other doctrines of grace confessed at Dort, “comes to us with a textured history, theological integrity, and pastoral riches.”³

Soli Deo gloria.

² David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson, “Sacred Theology and the Reading of the Divine Word: Mapping the Doctrine of Definite Atonement,” in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 43 (emphasis original); cf. also Richard A. Muller, “How Many Points?,” *CTJ* 28 (1993): 425–33.

³ Gibson and Gibson, “Sacred Theology and the Reading of the Divine Word,” 17.

Acknowledgments

This book, more than seven years in the making, has truly been a team effort, and we wish to express our gratitude to all those who have helped to bring it to fruition.

In 2016 Justin Taylor at Crossway was kind enough to entertain a proposal of four more books on the doctrines of grace to follow *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*. He and Todd Augustine have extended grace upon grace as we extended the deadline year upon year. We are also indebted to Jill Carter for her handling of the contractual side of things. It has been a delight, as always, to work with the team at Crossway, and we wish especially to thank Bill Deckard for his expertise in editing this book. We are grateful that he came out of retirement for such an undertaking. It is far the better for his keen editorial eye.

We are grateful to those who provided feedback at various stages of the “Doctrines of Grace” series, from the proposal stage to the finished product; in particular, our thanks to Lee Gatiss, Scott Oliphint, Gray Sutanto, and Garry Williams. We express our deep gratitude to Jiang Ningning, our editorial assistant, who has served in preparing the manuscripts to be compatible with Crossway style. She edited each chapter with care and excellence, saving us a huge amount of work. Thanks also to Jeremy Menicucci for his assistance with the Abbreviations and Select Bibliography.

This book would not have been possible at all were it not for the generous support of a patron couple who covered the cost of a writing sabbatical in Cambridge during which time the vision and proposal were birthed. Their support then, and since, have played a significant role in the publication of this book coming to completion. As devoted Christians who understand the seriousness of sin but also the grace of God in the gospel for unworthy sinners, they have exhibited a heart of sacrificial love in partnering with us.

Their humility is testament to the great Reformation principle that God alone deserves the glory. *Ignoti aliis, sed Deo cogniti.*

Our wives, Angela and Jackie, have endured many years of our talking about a book about sin, and wondering if it would ever see the light of day. Yet they have supported us in various ways, not least allowing us time to work for undistracted periods on the book. We are deeply grateful for their support, patience, and grace, as well as their humor that helps to keep everything in perspective.

Our labors in this volume are dedicated to our fellow ministers and elders in the International Presbyterian Church, our band of brothers, whom we count it a great honor and joy to serve alongside. As under-shepherds of God's flock, they know all too well the mess and misery that our innate corruption makes of all our lives; yet, in season and out of season, they faithfully lead their congregations to the Chief Shepherd, who is able to deal with the penalty, power, and presence of sin in his tender grace. May God keep us all clear in our understanding of sin and depravity so that we might remain faithful in the proclamation of our great and glorious Savior.

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
AUSS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
BDAG	Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
<i>BSac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
<i>BZAW</i>	<i>Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>BZNW</i>	<i>Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>
CD	Canons of Dort
CE	<i>The Correspondence of Erasmus</i>
CR	Corpus Reformatorum, 101 vols. (Halle, Germany: Schwetschke, 1834–60).
CTJ	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
CWE	<i>The Collected Works of Erasmus: Literary and Educational Writings, 1 and 2</i> (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978).
DCH	David J. A. Clines, ed., <i>The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew</i> , 8 vols. (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1993–2011).
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
HALOT	Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, <i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> , trans. and ed. M. E. J. Richardson, 5 vols. (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1994–2000).
HC	Heidelberg Catechism
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IJST	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>

<i>JRT</i>	<i>Journal of Reformed Theology</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
<i>LW</i>	<i>Luther's Works</i> , ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, and H. T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–86).
NAC	New American Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDNTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> , ed. Colin Brown, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986).
NIGTC	The New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	New International Version Application Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NPNF</i> ¹	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 1, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Philip Schaff, and Henry Wace, 14 vols. (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
<i>OE</i>	<i>Opus epistolorum des Erasmi Roterodami</i> , ed. P. S. Allen, H. M. Allen, H. W. Garrod, and B. Flower, 11 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1536).
PG	Patrologia graeca, ed. J.-P. Migne et al. (Paris: Centre for Patristic Publications, 1857–86).
PL	Patrologia latina, ed. J.-P. Migne et al. (Paris: Centre for Patristic Publications, 1878–1890).
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
<i>PRSt</i>	<i>Perspectives in Religious Studies</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> , ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis et al., 15 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974–2006).
<i>TJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
<i>TT</i>	<i>Theology Today</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
<i>WA</i>	Martin Luther, <i>D. Martin Luther's Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimarer Ausgabe)</i> (Germany: H. Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1963).

<i>WABr</i>	Martin Luther, <i>D. Martin Luthers Werke: Abteilung. Briefwechsel</i> , 18 vols. (Germany: Hermann Böhlau, 1966).
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

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INTRODUCTION

“Salvation Belongs to the Lord”

MAPPING THE DOCTRINE OF THE TOTAL DEPRAVITY OF HUMAN CREATURES

David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson

Self-deception about our sin is a narcotic, a tranquilizing and disorienting suppression of our spiritual central nervous system. What’s devastating about it is that when we lack an ear for the wrong notes in our lives, we cannot play right ones or even recognize them in the performance of others. Eventually we make ourselves religiously so unmusical that we miss both the exposition and the recapitulation of the main themes God plays in human life. The music of creation and the still greater music of grace whistle right through our skulls, causing no catch of breath and leaving no residue. Moral beauty begins to bore us. The idea that the human race needs a Savior sounds quaint.¹

The doctrine of total depravity states that, with the exception of the Lord Jesus Christ, all of humanity, from the very moment of conception, share a corrupt human nature which renders us liable to God’s wrath, incapable of any saving good, inclined toward evil, and which leaves us both dead in sin and enslaved to sin. Left to ourselves, we neither want to nor can return to the God who made us, and, without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, we cannot know him as our heavenly Father. Our mind has lost the pure knowledge of God so that we are blind, self-centered, and self-impressed. Our will has squandered its holiness and surrendered its freedom; we are wicked in our rebellion against a good God and his ways, and, more than this, we are enslaved

¹ Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), xiii.

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to our rebellion. Our affections are impure and find delight in what is evil. We do not rejoice constantly in God. It is not that we are as bad as we possibly could be; rather, total depravity simply describes the fact that there is not one single aspect of our constitution that is unaffected by sin's derangements.²

In much the same way as we argued previously with the doctrine of definite atonement,³ total depravity says something essential about the corruption of humanity, but it does not say everything there is to say. Strictly speaking, this doctrine refers to the utter pervasiveness of sin's spread just as it has also become linked in particular historical contexts to the understanding of human inability to respond to God's grace apart from his personal intervention. All these ideas have been contested and are complex in themselves, but undergirding these ideas is the fall of humanity and the doctrine of original sin, which together form the bleak backdrop to all that Christian theology has fought for, argued about, and humbly confessed in its doctrine of creation and of humankind. Total depravity does not exhaust the Christian doctrine of sin; indeed, it is so tightly related to several other facets of sin that this volume widens its scope to consider them as well.

The complexities of our subject have generated objections in every age. The moral philosopher Alfred Edward Taylor called the doctrine of original sin "the most vulnerable part of the whole Christian account."⁴ The tradition itself recognizes the challenge of a coherent account. Herman Bavinck wrote in his *Reformed Dogmatics* that the event of the fall of the first humans "is of such great weight that the whole of Christian doctrine stands or falls with it."⁵ Similarly, for Bavinck, the doctrine of original sin is not only "one of the weightiest but also one of the most difficult subjects in the field of dogmatics."⁶ It is one of the weightiest subjects, because, along with the doctrine of God, it is one of the great presuppositions of the Christian gospel:

² The definition in this paragraph is our own, but it is a composite drawn almost entirely from Articles One and Three of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine in the Canons of Dort, and also from John Calvin's treatment of original sin. See the new translation of the Canons of Dort in W. Robert Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation: The Pastoral Theology of the Canons of Dort* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust, 2019), 127–30; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960); 2.1.8 (1:250–52).

³ David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson, "Sacred Theology and the Reading of the Divine Word: Mapping the Doctrine of Definite Atonement," in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her: Definite Atonement in Historical, Biblical, Theological, and Pastoral Perspective*, ed. David Gibson and Jonathan Gibson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 33–53.

⁴ A. E. Taylor, *The Faith of a Moralist* (London: Macmillan, 1930), 165. Quoted from Hans Madueme, "'The Most Vulnerable Part of the Whole Christian Account': Original Sin and Modern Science," in *Adam, the Fall, and Original Sin: Theological, Biblical, and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), 225.

⁵ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003–8), 3:38.

⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:100.

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save *sinners*” (1 Tim. 1:15).⁷ It is one of the most difficult subjects, because it is so multifaceted. Blaise Pascal said, “It is astonishing however that the mystery furthest from our understanding is the transmission of sin, the one thing without which we can have no understanding of ourselves!”⁸

The doctrine of original sin presupposes and entails other doctrines, such as the nature of man as body and soul and his state of original righteousness before the fall. A right handling of the doctrine of original sin situates it within the framework of a covenant of works with Adam and in relation to God’s law in Eden, before delineating various aspects of the doctrine: the origin of sin (God, man, or the devil?) and the kingdom of evil; the spread of sin (preexistent, realistic, mediate imputation, or immediate imputation?); the nature of sin (a substance, privation of good, negation or nothingness, moral evil or lawlessness?); the scope of sin (body, soul, emotions, mind, and will?); and the effect of sin on the freedom of the will (necessary, contingent, certain?). From this foundation and foreground, we arrive at one specific, significant, and historically influential rendering of sin’s nature and effects, namely, the total depravity of human creatures. But it is the full picture of sin and its derelictions that we are concerned with in this volume.

Stand-alone books on sin are invariably self-conscious and, of course, the unease is understandable. Why might a book of Christian theology be so preoccupied with the *bad* news? The posture adopted in this volume, however, is neither defensive nor embarrassed about the need to stare long and hard at the problem of sin and depravity in the human race. Indeed, some methodological throat-clearing at the start of such a collection of essays is an opportunity for us to reflect a little more on what we have already alluded to: the doctrine of sin requires us to grapple with the tightly interwoven fabric of the whole of Christian theology and to recognize that we will not travel far or well along the road of abundant delight in the gospel without a profound understanding of the plight from which we have been saved. Classic texts such as *Dynamics of Spiritual Life* have shown us that, in fact, a depth perception of sin goes hand in hand in Scripture and throughout church history with the life-giving, restorative,

⁷ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 47: “The two great presuppositions of the gospel are a doctrine of God and a doctrine of man”; John Murray, “Inability,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 83, 88: “Original sin deals with our depravity. Inability deals with the fact that our depravity is humanly irremediable. . . . The only gospel there is is the gospel which rests upon the assumption of total inability.”

⁸ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), section 164 (p. 42).

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reviving work of the Holy Spirit, both individually and corporately.⁹ There is significant precedent for our longing and prayer that the present book might serve as a tool in the hands of God to awaken us afresh to the nefarious nadirs of who we are in our rebellion, precisely so that the stunning splendor of who God is in stooping to save us can be confessed anew. As D. A. Carson puts it,

There can be no agreement as to what salvation *is* unless there is agreement as to that from which salvation rescues us. The problem and the solution hang together: the one explicates the other. It is impossible to gain a deep grasp of what the cross achieves without plunging into a deep grasp of what sin is; conversely, to augment one's understanding of the cross is to augment one's understanding of sin.¹⁰

The weightiness and difficulty of the doctrine of sin, and its interconnectedness to a whole range of other topics in Christian theology, make the case, we believe, for the same argument advanced in *From Heaven He Came and Sought Her*, namely, that church history, the Bible, theology, and pastoral practice need to coalesce to provide a framework within which the doctrine of total depravity is best articulated today.¹¹ This volume is a patient attempt to listen to the past and the faithful cloud of witnesses who have thought long and hard about sin; it seeks to submit itself and the tradition to Scripture as our supreme authority; and it wishes to pursue the systematic and dogmatic integration of church history, exegesis, and theological reflection into a coherent whole that is turned toward God in doxology and toward the church in loving, gracious, truthful, and Christ-exalting pastoral practice. The attempt here, as in the first volume, is an exercise in biblical, theological, and confessional faithfulness, which is never less than the ordering of all that the Bible has to say on sin, while also being much more. Part of the rationale for this methodology is that, without it, mistaken or less than helpful paths present themselves all too easily to the Christian disciple thinking about sin.

Consider, for example, the argument that “the normal Christian life is the victorious Christian life,” advanced in John Stevens’s book, *The Fight of Your Life: Facing and Resisting Temptation*.¹² Written at a popular level for

⁹ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1979).

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, “Sin’s Contemporary Significance,” in *Fallen: A Theology of Sin*, ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, Theology in Community (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 22 (emphasis added).

¹¹ Gibson and Gibson, “Sacred Theology and the Reading of the Divine Word,” 37–41.

¹² John Stevens, *The Fight of Your Life: Facing and Resisting Temptation* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2019).

an evangelical audience, this work is driven by the admirable pastoral aim of helping believers in their battle against sin, seeking to free them from false burdens of guilt and failure. In particular, the desire to provide nourishment for Christian living is evident in the book’s sensitive handling of sexual temptation, both heterosexual and homosexual. It seeks to tackle an “unintended consequence” of the teaching that “we are sinners not just because of the sins we commit, but because of our desires and thoughts.” For Stevens, this theology has had the harmful effect of making “the struggle against sin primarily a battle not to experience certain thoughts and desires.”¹³ He presses a distinction between temptation and sin: “All Christians experience temptation, but temptation is not itself sin. The proper response to temptation is resistance rather than repentance. Experiencing temptation does not make us guilty before God and in need of his cleansing mercy and forgiveness.”¹⁴ It is perhaps fair to say that such a distinction has become commonplace in evangelical theology¹⁵ (although not as commonplace as Stevens might wish, given his own perception of the guilt and shame attached to the teaching he wishes to counter).

It will fall to some of the other essays in this book to explore some of the more substantial responses that should be made to this kind of hamartiology and understanding of fallen human nature; our concern here is simply to register some *methodological* observations that show why the enterprise of this volume is needed.

Stevens is explicit that he sees his book as a challenge both to the “Keswick” teaching of the Wesleyan model of holiness, on the one hand; and the teaching of men like J. C. Ryle and J. I. Packer, who exemplify “the more traditional puritan approach,” on the other. Both positions Stevens regards as representing the “extremes” of biblical teaching on the normal Christian life.¹⁶ Such a viewpoint might be entirely defensible, of course, but what is striking about Stevens’s book is his choice to situate his own argument historically while not offering any engagement with the competing historical positions he is seeking to balance and critique. The impression, unwittingly or not, is that simple biblical exegesis is an adequate antidote to either extreme. By not laying out the biblical exegesis of the positions he is challenging, Stevens presents his own interpretations as

¹³ Stevens, *Fight of Your Life*, 11.

¹⁴ Stevens, *Fight of Your Life*, 20.

¹⁵ See Sam Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay? And Other Questions about Jesus, the Bible, and Same-Sex Sexuality* (Epsom, Surrey, UK: Good Book Company, 2023), 59–61, as one such example.

¹⁶ Stevens, *Fight of Your Life*, 10, 13.

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self-evidently true when, in fact, there are significant and weighty challenges to his thesis lying dormant in the great tradition that precedes his book.

At the foundation of Stevens's argument is a reading of James 1:13–15, a text which he believes “draws a definitive contrast between temptation and sin.” He holds that “These verses make clear that there is a step between temptation and sin, which is captured by the metaphor of giving birth. The desire which is evil has the potential to become sin, but this is not inevitable.”¹⁷ However, what seems self-evident to Stevens is not the case for other readers of the same text. Here, for example, is John Calvin on James 1:13–15:

It seems, however, improper, and not according to the usage of Scripture, to restrict the word *sin* to outward works, as though indeed lust itself were not a sin, and as though corrupt desires, remaining closed up within and suppressed, were not so many sins . . . For he [James] proceeds gradually, and shows that the consummation of sin is eternal death, and that these depraved desires or affections have their root in lust.¹⁸

Stevens appears to have a category of evil human desires that are not yet sinful in themselves, whereas, for Calvin, to conceptualize corrupt desires as not intrinsically sinful seems improper, and not according to the usage of Scripture.

So how is a reader of the Bible to choose between different possible interpretations like these?

The contention of this volume is that the further back in church history a doctrine of sin is willing to reach, and the deeper down into theological precision it is willing to mine, then the further forward it will extend in longevity and usefulness for the Christian church. That is to say, to be truly contemporary, a doctrine of sin is required to retrieve the immense riches from the concepts, categories, and distinctions present in the tradition which can both enrich our exegesis and rescue us from error. For instance, without engaging with it at all, and seemingly unaware of it, Stevens's treatment of temptation wades into the deep waters of the doctrine of concupiscence (literally, the faculty of desire and, in church history, the anatomy of sinful desire), and thereby, in an evangelical Protestant book, actually presents a Roman Catholic position on unbidden and unwanted desires as the straightforward reading of the Bible.¹⁹ Further, the wider

¹⁷ Stevens, *Fight of Your Life*, 26.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of James*, Calvin's Commentaries, vol. 22, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1979), 290.

¹⁹ For more on this, see the essay by Steven Wedgworth in this volume (ch. 21).

biblical theology used by Stevens to buttress his position—the temptations of Eve and of Christ—takes no account of the considerable theological significance of their *unfallen* human natures at the very points where Stevens wishes to press their analogical usefulness to the temptations of the Christian believer.²⁰

But why does all this matter? Recall that Stevens’s aim in his book is explicitly pastoral. He particularly wants to help Christians who experience same-sex temptation to understand that while lusting after a person of the same sex would be sinful, “there [are] no grounds to conclude that a person is sinning merely because they experience unwanted and unencouraged attraction towards people of the same sex.”²¹ The vital significance of such questions is not hard for us to understand in our current milieu and, again, it is possible to argue that Stevens is articulating a view of “same-sex attraction” which has become increasingly popular within evangelical theology. The terms “same-sex attraction” or “same-sex sexual attraction” are now commonly used in contemporary discussion by many evangelicals. Some “same-sex attracted” Christians have chosen to distance themselves from the language of “homosexual” or “gay,” replacing it with “same-sex (sexual) attraction” or “same-sex sexuality” on the basis that the former terms often convey identity and lifestyle while the latter terms convey only the desire or experience of same-sex attraction.²²

However, by treating unwanted and unbidden desires in this way, Stevens ignores the ways in which the theology of the Reformation and the Reformed tradition countered it. Compare, for example, Stevens’s pastoral approach with Girolamo Zanchi’s view of repentance, which is representative of the Reformed tradition:

... repentance is a changing of the mind and heart, stirred up in us through the Holy Ghost, by the word both of the law and the gospel, wherein we grieve from our heart, we detest, we lament, we loath and bewail, and confess before God all our sins, *and even the corruption of our nature* as things

²⁰ For a further extensive critique of Stevens, see the excellent book by Matthew P. W. Roberts, *Pride: Identity and the Worship of Self* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2023), 70–79. For more on the Roman Catholic position on concupiscence and for an alternative rich reading of James 1:12–18, see the sermon by Kevin DeYoung, “When Desire Destroys,” February 28, 2021, <https://christcovenant.org/sermons/when-desire-destroys/>.

²¹ Stevens, *Fight of Your Life*, 31.

²² For example, Allberry, *Is God Anti-Gay?*, 16–17, 120; Ed Shaw, *The Plausibility Problem* (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 35–43. Semantically, however, the distinction fails at a lexical level: “same-sex (sexual) attraction” or “same-sex sexuality” is the same as “homosexual attraction/sexuality,” the word “homosexual” being comprised of “homo” (same) and “sexual” (sex). Also, practically, the distinction is not able to be consistently applied in the church. There are celibate Christians who are happy to use the attribute “gay” to describe themselves, as noted, for example, in Greg O. Johnson, *Still Time to Care: What We Can Learn from the Church’s Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2021); and Gregory Coles, *Single, Gay Christian: A Personal Journey of Faith and Sexual Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017).

utterly repugnant (as the law teaches) to the will of God and to the cleansing, whereof the death of God's own Son (as the gospel preaches) was needful.²³

Because Stevens eliminates the need for repentance in the case of concupiscence, ironically, he provides less gospel hope and comfort, not more, to those struggling with same-sex desires. For he ends up implying that there are parts of our fallen human natures that God's grace does not need to redeem. Of course, Stevens might reject this conclusion, expressed in this way, yet he is explicit that "as human beings we all experience an emotional attraction to rebellion and disobedience which is not itself sin."²⁴ But to distinguish, and then to separate, "emotional attraction" (what others might call "propensity" or "inclination") *toward* sin from sin *itself* is wrongly to separate what is rightly distinguished. Being attracted to sin and sinning are distinct but inseparable parts of the sin-guilt complex. Genesis 6:5 is clear that our sinful nature corrupts all the way down to thoughts and inclinations of the heart, which are described as only evil continually.²⁵ However, Stevens maintains that some unbidden and unencouraged desires do not have an innate corruption that renders us culpable before God. This is, ultimately, to misconstrue original sin and total depravity. This is evident when Stevens says that his book "will assert the twin truths that our temptations are sinful, which gives added motivation for resisting them, but that we are not personally guilty of sin unless we choose to act on them. The sinful desires we experience do not automatically make us guilty sinners."²⁶ But to tie sin (and therefore also guilt) only to the *consent* of the will and not also to the *corruption* of the will, as Stevens does here, is a departure from Protestant orthodoxy. Doing so allows the terminology of "same-sex (sexual) attraction" to become a morally neutral identity marker for the Christian, one in which a propensity or attraction toward sin is no longer classified as sin.

The Reformed tradition, however, has always held that the corruption of nature, which is ours on account of original sin, *is itself sin* as well as the actual transgressions we commit that flow from it: "This corruption of nature, during

²³ Girolamo Zanchi, *De religione christiana fides—Confession of the Christian Religion*, eds. Luca Baschera and Christian Moser, *Studies in the History of Christian Traditions* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2007), XVIII.v (Lat. = p. 330; ET = p. 331). We have modernized the wording for our purposes (emphasis added). Thanks to Matthew Mason for pointing us to this quote.

²⁴ Stevens, *Fight of Your Life*, 33.

²⁵ WSC Q&A 14 is instructive here: "What is sin? Sin is *any want of conformity unto*, or transgression of, the law of God" (emphasis added). To be attracted to sin is to lack conformity to the law of God, and thus is sin. Also, as Gen. 6:5 indicates, to distinguish between propensity and desire is to make a distinction without a difference.

²⁶ Stevens, *Fight of Your Life*, 21.

this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned and mortified; yet both itself and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin” (Westminster Confession of Faith 6.5). The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England similarly say that, through original sin, the desire of the flesh remains in the believer as an “infection of nature,” with the result that “the Apostle doth confess, that concupiscence and lust hath of itself the nature of sin” (Article IX). It is for these reasons that some have seen in the theology of the Canons of Dort the very saving of the Reformation precisely because its theology of grace was now in the crosshairs of an optimistic anthropology which had not sufficiently accounted for human nature.²⁷ Unless original sin and the depravity that extends to our concupiscence are fully in view, then it is possible for grace to “no longer be grace” (Rom. 11:6).²⁸

This contemporary issue shows that our choice of language and terms needs historical awareness, biblical precision, and theological consistency. Our argument is that, as with definite atonement, so the doctrine of sin and depravity in human creatures is neither merely biblical, nor merely a systematic construct with no grounding in the Bible. Rather, total depravity receives its fullest and best expressions as a *biblico-systematic* doctrine that is born from careful exegesis of all the texts where sin is displayed in all its terrible forms, and from synthesis with all other doctrines that are intimately related to it, such as the doctrines of God, creation, anthropology, Christology, and covenant, and that such synthesis is all the richer when it follows contemplation of the tradition that has thought itself clear ahead of us on so many vital matters of definition and distinction. We are seeking in this volume, once again, to provide both a web for holding the doctrine together with all its canonical threads and doctrinal implications so that individual parts can be considered in the light of the whole, and also to provide a map to and through the doctrine of human corruption. Where should we look in Scripture for our doctrine of sin? Who in the tradition should we speak to about what we have found, and what might they say to us in response that could guide our next

²⁷ Note the title of W. Robert Godfrey’s study, *Saving the Reformation: The Pastoral Theology of the Canons of Dort* (see note 2, above).

²⁸ For a full and helpful treatment of these issues in the context of pastoral care for those with same-sex attraction, see “The Ad Interim Committee Report on Human Sexuality” prepared for the forty-eighth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (<https://pcaga.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/AIC-Report-to-48th-GA-5-28-20-1.pdf> [accessed March 10, 2023]). The report rejects the Roman Catholic understanding of concupiscence but also conveys how, properly understood, the doctrine of concupiscence helps those with “same-sex attraction” to know they are not the most heinous of sinners. Even further nuance and clarity in engagement with the AIC Report is available in a helpful article by Stephen Spinnenweber, “Homosexuality, Concupiscence, and the PCA,” <https://heidelblog.net/2022/08/homosexuality-concupiscence-and-the-pca/> (accessed March 10, 2023).

steps? What clues about sin’s origin, nature, and terrible meaning have they left for us as we try to join the dots for the mission of the church in our time and place?

Once again, the overall effect of the volume is meant to be cumulative. Taken together, each essay within each section, and then each section within the book, offers a webbed framework of theological thinking that maps the study of human corruption in the Bible.

Total Depravity in Church History

The series of essays that begins this volume performs a particular service in the early stages of forming the web and shaping the map. Their role is to expose us to the language, concepts, distinctions, and terminology of sin that have been birthed by the Scriptures throughout church history, and to show us clearly the road that others have walked ahead of us. For instance, as Petrus van Mastricht reminds us, “The term *original sin* . . . is not present in the Scriptures but derives from ecclesiastical use.”²⁹ This should no more worry us than the absence of the word “Trinity” from the Scriptures. Instead, viewing church history as “the history of the exegesis of the Word of God,”³⁰ these essays take us beyond the facile “Calvinist vs. Arminian” conception of the history of soteriology and instead lead us through the Patristic, Medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation periods to see how sin has been understood and misunderstood in the theological landscape that we have inherited. Church history affords many examples of varied interpretations of the biblical data: from Pelagians and semi-Pelagians, Arminians and rationalists, Romanists and evolutionists, there has been no era in the history of the Christian church in which the doctrine of sin has not been debated.

One such debate over the doctrine of sin came to a head in the seventeenth century when the Remonstrants, following Jacob Arminius’s teaching, argued that man’s will was free and was not completely enslaved to sin. The response from the Reformed churches of Europe was a robust defense of the doctrine of man’s nature. The Reformed delegates at the Synod of Dort understood the theological connectedness involved in the issue of man’s fallen nature and his inability to respond to the gospel. The “Heads of Doctrine”

²⁹ Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology: The Works of God and the Fall of Man*, vol. 3, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2021), 450.

³⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–75), I/2.681.

and “Rejection of Errors” produced by the Synod refer to the state of man in original righteousness, the image of God, the systemic effects of the fall on the whole man (including emotional and noetic effects), common grace, the propagation of sin from Adam to his race, the inability of man’s will, and the inadequacy of the light of nature and the law to save.

Modern advocates of Reformed theology and the “Five Points” have at times been guilty of neglecting the historical context out of which the Canons of Dort were articulated, while at the same time failing to grasp the interdependence of theological issues involved in the doctrines. Presenting the doctrines of grace as historically dislocated and theologically disconnected robs them of their beauty and power. In particular, it is worth noting how “total depravity” is not a phrase that summarizes just one paragraph of response to the Remonstrants in the Canons; rather, it summarizes seventeen articles in the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine in the Canons of Dort and also the “Rejection of Errors” that accompany the articles, because the issues at stake in the Synod were more far-reaching than solely the teaching of the Remonstrants of 1610. As many have previously argued, and as Lee Gatiss shows in this volume, article three of the Remonstrants on sin is not problematic for Reformed theology when taken on its own and considered at face value, but rather takes on a defective hue when considered in connection with its development in their fourth point on the nature of conversion. In other words, total depravity as a summary statement does the work the Reformed want it to do only when as full a picture as possible is developed.

Total Depravity in the Bible

The doctrines of total depravity and of the total inability of human creatures to save ourselves can seem impossibly stark when stated in abstract theological and philosophical terms. But on turning to Scripture itself we are quickly overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the textual data and its rich variety in depicting what ails us. There are matters of careful definition to be settled, for sure; and there are matters of enormous theological significance that require precision, yes; but the scriptural vocabulary and grammar of sin creates a cascading cacophony of darkness that leaves us in little doubt about the pervasive, inveterate depravity of the human heart: “The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron; with a point of diamond it is engraved on the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of their altars” (Jer. 17:1).

The biblical essays in this volume trace the linguistic data of sin to show its multifaceted nature and power. Sin is named by specific words but also by an attending army of ideas and themes that paint the full picture of its horrors. In the OT three main words for sin appear most frequently: “sin,” with the meaning of missing a mark, failing to hit a target; “transgression,” with the sense of crossing a boundary line set by the divine lawgiver; and “iniquity,” which speaks to the moral pollution of our evil. All three terms occur together in Psalm 51:1–2, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!” From a trinity of words, a picture begins to emerge: “Overlapping in meaning and comprehensive in scope, the three terms function together to teach us that when a person sins, he wilfully fails to attain his created purpose and defiantly rebels against the Lord’s authority, and consequently incurs guilt and liability to punishment.”³¹ The circle widens further in Scripture through both Old and New Testaments. We meet specific words for wickedness, evil, rebellion, infidelity, stubbornness, ignorance, wandering or straying, uncleanness and defilement, unrighteousness and lawlessness, disobedience, and trespass—these terms and more are considered in detail in this volume’s essays tracing sin in the Bible.

However, in many ways, the key contention of this volume’s biblical essays is that words about sin combine to tell a *story* of sin and rebellion, and that it is the unfolding narrative of humanity’s fall from original righteousness in Eden into ruinous rebellion, which paints full the picture of human depravity and corruption in Scripture’s pages. We are not to understand sin merely from etiology but from covenant theology, as William Wood’s two essays show. A true understanding of sin arises from the context of the covenant of works, from the law of God revealed in the garden, and from the doctrine of a holy God, so that it is offending against him, before either injuring or offending my neighbor, which gives to sin its grotesque nature. Sin in the Prophets is a breach of covenant, but it is also conveyed in language of disloyalty and adultery when one of the fundamental metaphors for God’s relationship with his people is taken into consideration: the husband-wife relation of conjugal union. In this way the meaning of sin is played out in

³¹ Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Man and Christ*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 328. Beeke and Smalley further elaborate that the “core of sin is rebellion against God rooted in unbelief toward his revelation” (347); they argue that this takes the form of doubting, distorting, denying, and defying God’s word (347–50).

story form, in the account of our disordered loves, so that sin does not have merely legal definition; it also has relational forms. The cumulative effects of sin's follies are for human creatures to experience shame and disgrace, to be rendered guilty before God and liable to punishment from his righteous and holy hand. Sin's distortion of all that is good sees us grappling with consciences that accuse and condemn us; we live often with horror and fear, and our direction of travel is to flee the presence of God rather than seek to move toward him as a child to a benevolent father. "Sin wraps itself in a cloak, spreads abroad dense fog, waits for darkest night, and moves stealthily."³² Sin's repercussions are our estrangement from God and his abandonment of us to the idolatry we have chosen to pursue.

When these narrative elements of depravity are each studied on their own and then patiently integrated with each other, after listening to the tradition of church history that has reflected on them in depth ahead of us, then, as before with the doctrine of definite atonement, the language of total depravity and, concomitantly, of total inability, emerges as illuminating heuristic terminology to describe "a pattern of judgment present in the texts."³³ This moves us beyond a biblicist reading of biblical texts and toward a biblico-systematic reading, where the words about sin illumine and in turn are illumined by the story of sin, so that by the end of a complete reading of the whole Bible the pervasiveness of sin in the human person is beyond doubt. For instance, we note how the verb "to hear" plays a prominent role in references to sin, so that refusing to hear the divine word makes the God of the covenant out to be evil and his spoken word out to be untrustworthy. The resultant spiritual hardness permeates the human person. "Though the sinner retains his essential faculties as a human being, he loses his spiritual eyes and ears, so to speak, and his inner man becomes dead in disbelief and disobedience. . . . [t]he result is slavery."³⁴

This is one example of how the doctrine of sin's pervasiveness is not reliant on the "sin" word-group alone. It is patterns such as these in the texts that leads contemporary Reformed theologians to follow Augustine in defining sin's center and roots as a preference for sensuality over rationality, pride instead of humility, selfishness in place of love, idolatry above true worship, unbelief eclipsing faith, and rebellion instead of wholehearted and delighted

³² Beeke and Smalley, *Man and Christ*, 325.

³³ The phrase is David S. Yeago's, in his seminal article, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 3.2 (1994): 152–64 (153).

³⁴ Beeke and Smalley, *Man and Christ*, 333.

obedience.³⁵ This panoply of replacements of several divine goods with substitute human evils leads to a truly awful reality: sin is vandalism of shalom; it is spiritual filth and corruption; it leads us to be perverted, polluted, and disintegrated; it is parasitic on the good; it masquerades in deceit as something it is not; it is folly; and it is, ultimately, addictive.³⁶ Little wonder that Augustine argued that “sin becomes the punishment of sin.”³⁷

Total Depravity in Theological Perspective

Given the awfulness of our subject, the self-consciousness many feel in attending so closely and fully to sin leads some to methodological overstatement in defense of the cause. “There is no subject of greater importance to Christian theology than its understanding of the concept of sin and its effects.”³⁸ No doubt such a statement is intended in the same vein as D. A. Carson’s admonition that we will not grasp the glories of our salvation if we have not plumbed the depths of our plight. Yet the truth is that, to make sin the most important subject in Christian theology is precisely to dislocate sin from a truly *theological* perspective.

“Sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4)—what can this mean unless there is a law; but what law and whose law? Reformed orthodoxy in its embrace of sin’s definition as lawlessness “also identified sin’s first motion as unbelief towards God’s word (Gen. 3:1–5).”³⁹ John Webster points us in this direction: “Sin is trespass against creatureliness, but beneath that lies an even deeper wickedness, contempt for the creator in all its forms. . . . Sin humiliates the creature, robbing the creature of the dignity which it can have only as it fulfils its destiny for fellowship with God.”⁴⁰ This means, of course, that “Salvation occurs as part of the divine self-exposition; its final end is the reiteration of God’s majesty and the glorification of God by all creatures. Soteriology therefore has its place within the theology of the *mysterium trinitatis*, that is, God’s inherent and communicated richness of life as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”⁴¹ As Richard Lints says,

³⁵ Beeke and Smalley, *Man and Christ*, 334–343.

³⁶ This presentation is our summary of the format of Cornelius Plantinga Jr.’s argument in *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*.

³⁷ Cited in Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, 33.

³⁸ Gerald Bray, “Sin in Historical Theology,” in Morgan and Peterson, *Fallen: A Theology of Sin*, 163.

³⁹ Beeke and Smalley, *Man and Christ*, 342.

⁴⁰ John B. Webster, “‘It Was the Will of the Lord to Bruise Him’: Soteriology and the Doctrine of God,” in *God of Salvation: Soteriology in Theological Perspective*, ed. Ivor J. Davidson and Murray A. Rae (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 15–34 (19).

⁴¹ Webster, “It Was the Will of the Lord to Bruise Him,” 20.

To put it simply, the eternal God is the starting point for salvation. It is God who saves; it is creatures who are saved. Locating the nature and character of salvation in God in the first place protects salvation from becoming a human project in which God may (or may not) participate.⁴²

In the same vein, Thomas McCall eloquently depicts the bleakness of sin against the backdrop of God’s pure holiness and perfect goodness:

Sin is whatever is opposed to God’s will as that will reflects God’s holy character and as that will is expressed by God’s commands. Sin is fundamentally opposed to nature and reason, and it is ultimately opposed to God. The results of sin are truly catastrophic. Sin wreaks havoc on our relationships with God, one another, and the rest of creation. It is universal in human history and manifests itself in various cultural expressions. Sin is rebellion against our Lord and treason against our Creator—and it is our fault. It wrecks human lives and leaves us vulnerable; apart from the grace that we so readily reject, it utterly destroys us.⁴³

In this volume, the theological essays seek to explore the profound depths of the simple claim that it is a holy God who saves and it is depraved creatures who are saved. How can this best be articulated in a world of competing philosophies of sin (or alternatives to sin), and in a world where such terrible suffering and evil exists that the claim that God is present to save begins to look patently absurd at best or callously cruel at worst? How is Adam’s sin propagated to his offspring? How are we to make sense of individual responsibility and corporate solidarity and federal headship in the complex of issues involved in the proliferation of Adam’s sin to his offspring? Imputation of guilt, transmission of sin, and the distinction between original sin and actual sins, are each areas of significant importance and difficulty.

Amid these challenges, however (and they are all addressed in thoughtful and insightful ways in the essays that follow), it is vital not to lose sight of the fact that a theological account of sin and depravity is fundamentally hopeful and positive, not miserable or defeatist. The ugliness and awfulness of sin is no match for the goodness and beauty of God. Divine providence is neither compromised in part nor undone in full by human intransigence. The picture of God that you will find in these pages gives no space to any form

⁴² Richard Lints, “Soteriology,” in *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 259–92 (284).

⁴³ Thomas McCall, *Against God and Nature: The Doctrine of Sin* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 379.

of mechanistic deism, with the presence of evil best accounted for by God's "mere permission." Instead, we present an understanding of God's nature and attributes which secures divinely ordered justice in the world and sin as a tool in God's hand in the perfect and upright execution of his decree. As Herman Bavinck argues, Scripture shows us repeatedly that God uses sin as punishment for the wicked, as a means of saving his people as well as disciplining and testing them, and as something to glorify his own divine name:

Precisely because God is the absolutely Holy and Almighty One, he can use sin as a means in his hand. Creatures cannot do that; with the least contact, they themselves become polluted and impure. But God is so infinitely far removed from wickedness that he can make sin, as an unresisting instrument, subservient to his glorification.⁴⁴

Indeed, we want to argue that it is precisely this vista of God's glory and the eternal fame of his name that makes the study of sin in Scripture so profoundly important and moving. It is the doctrine of sin that helps us to see the divine majesty for what it is. In confessing that "Salvation belongs to the LORD" (Jonah 2:9), we confess that we are so lost and so unable to save ourselves, but that he is so gracious and so powerful to save. The gospel is the story of human depravity and inability conquered by divine purity and ability, human death overcome by divine life, human corruption countered by divine plenitude. And in it all, sin is not a challenge to divine glory but rather the very means God uses to display his attributes in a way that humbles us and exalts himself. Bavinck's treatment of this reaches beautiful, even poetic, heights in a depiction of God's power and wisdom:

[God] would not have tolerated [sin] had he not been able to govern it in an absolute holy and sovereign manner. He would not have put up with it if he were not God, the Holy and Omnipotent One. But being God, he did not fear its existence and power. He willed it so that in it and against it he might bring to light his divine attributes. If he had not allowed it to exist, there would always have been a rationale for the idea that he was not in all his attributes superior to a power whose possibility was inherent in creation itself. For all rational creatures as creatures, as finite, limited, changeable beings, have the possibility of apostatizing. But God, because he is God, never feared the way of freedom, the reality of sin, the eruption of wickedness, or the power of Satan. So, both in its origin and its development, God

⁴⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:64.

always exercises his rule over sin. He does not force it, nor does he block it with violence but rather allows it to reach its full dynamic potential. He remains king yet still gives it free rein in his kingdom. He allows it to have everything—his world, his creatures, even his Anointed—for evils cannot exist without goods. He allows it to use all that is his; he gives it opportunity to show what it can do in order, in the end, as King of kings, to leave the theater of battle. For sin is of such a nature that it destroys itself by the very freedom granted it; it dies of its own diseases; it dooms itself to death. At the apex of its power, it is, by the cross alone, publicly shown up in its powerlessness (Col. 2:15).⁴⁵

Total Depravity in Pastoral Perspective

In the essays that close out this book you will meet the application of this strong view of God’s sovereignty and providence in the joyful confession that God has used sin to doom itself to death in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. For our ruinous corruption and depravity is so profound that the human being who knows himself or herself truly cries out with the apostle Paul, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom. 7:24). Depravity in pastoral perspective holds that sin is doomed but the sinner need not be. The good news of divine rescue for lost humanity comes to us in all our brokenness and the manifold imperfections of our lives and the perverted loves of our hearts, and it comes to us as a promise and hope of a world made new where “nothing unclean will ever enter it” (Rev. 21:27).

The pastoral essays in the final section seek to provide a consistent application of the volume’s framework for theological thinking. The malady of sin in human creatures is not considered first and foremost through the lens of things we *do* that are wrong and that harm and destroy. Rather, the imputation of Adam’s sin means that human beings sin by trans-liturgical identity choices that mar who we *are* as creatures, and that then, from our pseudo-identities, our actual sins flow. All of life flows from worship, and the greatest of our evils is not what we *do* but whom we *love* and *serve* instead of God. As Beeke and Smalley eloquently express, we reject our filial relationship with our heavenly Father “so that natural self-love descends into the pit of self-deification.” This self-worship distorts the very essence of what it means to be human:

⁴⁵ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:64–65.

The image of God and the covenant with Adam engage man as God's covenant servant according to the threefold office of prophet, priest and king. Sin twists man into a false prophet who refuses to receive God's Word by faith and speaks lies; an unholy priest who pollutes God's worship and seeks after created idols; and a rebellious king who transgresses God's laws and incurs liability to his sovereign retribution.⁴⁶

Our pseudo-prophet-priest-king identities, now lived out in our self-centered narratives with which we create the meaning of our lives, mean that, as David Wells and Al Mohler each argue in different ways, sin is no longer defined by God but by the self; the self is so dominant it has come to eclipse human nature; and psychological shame has come to replace objective guilt.

Yet, wonderfully, the combined effect of all the essays in this book is to point in one direction for the cure of souls: the gospel for sinners is not a command to stop sinning, or an exhortation to sin less, or a warning to flee from sin, as essential and morally upright as all these imperatives are. The greatest movement in pastoral practice is the application of Christology to the maladies of the human person. "But as sin is opposed to God, so also is God opposed to sin. And this fact—grounded as it is in the utter goodness of God—is our hope."⁴⁷ The gospel is that God has sent us the true and the last Adam, in whom there was no sin or deceit in any form; the only Man who ever lived who did not deserve to die, and who offered up to God his sinless body as a sacrifice for sin. "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). The sinless and perfect obedience of the Lord Jesus—the God-*man*—is the hope of a dying world and the comfort of a broken sinner. This volume restates the central confession of Reformed soteriology and the catholic Christian faith, that *God saves sinners* and that *Christ redeemed us by his blood* as "the witness both of the Bible and of the believing heart."⁴⁸ *Soli Deo gloria.*

⁴⁶ Beeke and Smalley, *Man and Christ*, 342.

⁴⁷ McCall, *Against God and Nature*, 381.

⁴⁸ J. I. Packer, "Introductory Essay," in John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (London: Banner of Truth, 1959), 10.

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