

BORN SINFUL?

The Calvinistic Doctrine of Total Hereditary Depravity
By Denny Wilson

The Bible declares, *“There is none righteous, no not one”* (Romans 3:10). *“...For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23). *The consequence of our sin is death* (Romans 6:23). Sin occurs when we violate the commandments of God: *“Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law; for sin is the transgression of the law”* (1 John 3:4).

God’s word is our guide in all that we do as individuals and as the church. When we fail to keep the will of God, we have sinned. Therefore, one who has not reached the mental maturity to be able to understand God’s will and be able to control their actions has not sinned. Unfortunately, there is a doctrine that is being taught in the world that declares that everyone is born a sinner, guilty of sin from birth. This destructive doctrine is sometimes called Total Hereditary Depravity.

“Augustine taught that, because of the fall of Adam, all humanity, even infants, are totally depraved. According to Augustine, this condition destroyed the human will and left men in the position of being helpless servants of sin.”¹ Easton’s Bible Dictionary declares, “Our first parents being the root of all mankind, the guilt of their sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature were conveyed to all their posterity, descending from them by ordinary generation” (1090). F.W. Robertson stated, “In our best estate and in our purest moments there is something of the Devil in us, which if it could be known, would make men shrink from us.

The germs of the worst crimes are in us all.” It has been said by those who support this erroneous doctrine that each person is born with the “original sin” of Adam, making each of us a sinner from birth. A passage that is used by proponents of Total Hereditary Depravity to support their doctrine (though falsely applied) is (Psalm 51:5) David wrote, *“Behold, I was sharpen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.”* Regarding this passage, John Calvin (from whom the term “Calvinism” is derived) wrote, “He (David) now proceeds further than the mere acknowledgement of one or of many sins, confessing that he brought nothing but sin with him into the world, and that his nature was entirely depraved. He is thus led by the consideration of one offense of peculiar atrocity to the conclusion that he was born in iniquity, and was absolutely destitute of all spiritual good . . . we are cherished in sin from the first moment that we are in the womb” (Calvin’s Commentaries).

Did David mean that he was born with “original sin,” that he was a sinner from birth? Regarding this question, Brother B.J. Clarke offered three possible explanations to the understanding of the passage:

1) David is simply saying that he was born into a world of sin.” Yet, one could be born into a world of sin without being born a sinner.

2) It is also possible that David considers himself to be “shapen in iniquity” because of the sins and sinful activity of his ancestors (Genesis 38:13-20; Deuteronomy 23:2 – Judah and Tamar).

3) A third interpretation of the passage is that David was using poetic language (hyperbole) to express his deep anguish over his sins (in regard to Bathsheba and Uriah). With regard to this third possibility, Carl Garner wrote, David expounds upon and confesses the depth of his sinfulness. Such sin as had been committed did not deserve forgiveness. Such consequences of sin could only come from one who had been surrounded by sin and influenced by iniquity for too long. Like a stain that has been “set” in a garment, he recognized that he had given “place” to the devil (Ephesians 4:27) . . . David overstates the expression of his sin to show that he is confessing and not hiding his wickedness.² Psalm 51:5 does not declare that David was born a sinner and there are reasonable options for the interpretation of the passage.

The Bible teaches that each person is responsible for his/her own sins. *“Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee”* (Ezekiel 28:15). “Perfect”—what a wonderful way to describe a newborn! Each child is born into this world pure and free from sin. Children do not inherit the sin of their parents. *“The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him”* (Ezekiel 18:20). “Sin is by definition, individual in will be addressed particularly in this month’s article by Ted J. Clarke, “Can Just Anyone Be Saved?” and next month’s article by Chris Perry, “Can Man Resist the Grace of God?”

Conclusion: Sometimes people speak of a “harmless misunderstanding.” There is nothing harmless about Calvinism. It is blasphemous and it is self-condemning. In this series of articles, the reader will find the tenets of Calvinism honestly examined in the light of Scripture. It is our hope that the reader will as well examine those things that are said within these pages in the light of Scripture. *“Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil”* (1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

1 F.W. Mattox, *The Eternal Kingdom* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light Publishing Company, 1961), p. 259.

2 Audin, *Life of Calvin*, Ch. 36.354; quoted by Philip Schaff, *The History of the Christian Church* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002 printing), 8:493.