

DEPRAVITY

Perhaps the most frequent mockery of Calvin, and hence of Puritans (our spiritual forebears), is aimed toward the teachings and sayings that might be lumped together under the title, “The Depravity of Man.” People don’t like to be called “depraved,” and, while we may each know some individuals we would consider depraved, we certainly don’t consider it fair or accurate for someone to put *us* into that category. We make mistakes, and it is uncommon for any of us to consider ourselves perfect, but neither do we think of ourselves as depraved.

It should not particularly surprise us that there are those who like to pick up on a word or phrase and, without any interest in where it comes from or what it really means, use it as a springboard for their anger toward religion in general and Christianity in particular. That very phenomenon is strong evidence for some of Calvin’s conclusions, though not exactly in the way these same people might think. In any case, Calvin was no Calvinist any more than Jesus was a Christian, at least not according to most popular conceptions of such things. And while I have no intention of teaching you Calvinism in one night or persuading you to love the word “depravity,” you ought to know more than most folk do about such things.

So it is true that “depravity” means wicked, or perverse; moral corruption; distorted, crooked. But behind the current definitions, you can still feel the *bondage* - yes? Something has been taken away. There is no depravity until we are depraved - that is, deprived of something. There is a distortion; the rightness has been taken away. In theological terms, the rightness - the glory of God, the rightness with which we were created - has been distorted or twisted until we are deprived of it.

I suspect there are some among us who would not find it hard to go along with the notion of “The Depravity of Man” just from thinking of some of the devastating experiences and situations we have lived through in the last one hundred years. If so much death, torture, disease, and starvation could be attributed only to natural causes, we might still conclude that we live on a depraved planet. But a very high percentage of the devastation is not only perpetrated by fellow humans, but perpetrated on purpose. EVIL. The Seven Deadly Sins run rampant. There is no family, church, company, government, organization, or group anywhere

on earth that is not crippled in some fashion by the Seven Deadly Sins. And that means that nothing anywhere on earth is running anywhere near to its rightful design, or according to God's plan. Depravity means we are not living according to our design - we are not matching the glory in which we were created. In short, we are in rebellion, estranged, alienated - running by our own will and way rather than by God's. There can be many reasons for this depravity, this veering off the Path: ignorance, fear, loneliness, pride - and all the situations and circumstances that lead to such things (bad environments, accidents, betrayal, pain, loss, poverty, and so on). To be sure, none of this would be happening if God had not given us "free will." On the other hand, none of the value of what God designed and created would have any meaning without free will.

Stalemate. If God grants the potential for glory and love and character and purpose without the possibility of rebellion or self-will or evil choices, then it means nothing. On the other hand, no matter how high the purpose and potential, how can individual human beings make right choices all the time - from the very beginning - when we have had no chance to learn or understand or experience or comprehend consequences? Even if you don't like my reminding you that this world is "boot camp" (our training ground for the life dimensions to come), you would have to expect *some* mayhem, wouldn't you, when introducing creatures of free will to LIFE, no matter how great their purpose, their destiny, and their design?

So what have we got against the concept of depravity? "*Perverse and foolish oft I strayed*" I don't have any trouble identifying with that, do you? (*Pilgrim Hymnal*, "The King of Love My Shepherd Is") There are a lot of people whom we love even though they are not perfect. It doesn't feel good or right to call them depraved, even if they do sometimes lie, cheat, hoard, screw, get angry, or fail to perform in ways we think would be more appropriate. Okay, so they *are* depraved, but we don't want to talk about it or think of it in that way. They also do some very wonderful things - doesn't that count too? Yes it counts, but does it cancel out the other?

So you see, it is possible to be full of love, and enthusiasm for life - full of gratitude and even joy - and still be very aware of The Depravity Of All Mankind. And in fact, a great many Calvinists and Puritans were exactly that. They had great regard for their own lives and the lives of

those around them, yet at the same time they felt a conscious awareness of the gap between us as we are and the glory of God.

The real difference between us and them, I suspect, is that we don't think about the glory of God as much as they did. "*All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.*" (Romans 3:23) That does not mean we have failed to *be* God. It means we have not come close to God's design for us - to the pattern and possibilities that God has actually built within us. We are not what God made us to be. And the full force of that statement is not merely that we fall short of what it would be wonderful for us to be. It's much worse than that: We are made truly wonderful, yet we are not living by our true design. Something is being allowed to corrupt, sidetrack, reduce, spoil, and warp us.

Isn't it interesting that the concept of our depravity is built on the assumption that we are created truly wonderful? If you aren't much to start with, depravity isn't relevant. "You were born a piece of crap and you'll always be a piece of crap." There is no depravity in that. Depravity is the amazing claim that something has gone terribly wrong. Most of all, depravity is the Puritan's awareness that God is incredibly wonderful but that, in our present condition, we are not matching that glory - we are not beings of character or behavior that fit in the Kingdom or company of God. In short, Calvinism (Puritanism) did not think itself inferior to what was going on around it in this world. But thinking of the majesty, purity, beauty, love, kindness, truth, and purposes of God, the Puritans realized they had a real problem: They knew they fell far short. They were a long way from home, and not just in time or distance. The quality of life, love, thinking, and intention was way below what it needed to be ... what it wanted to be ... what it was designed to be. A society that spends very little time thinking about the glory of God cannot comprehend what the Puritans meant by "depravity." We think it was some kind of inferiority complex, and it was - but not anything close to what we mean by that term. We think they felt unworthy, and they did - but not in any way close to what we imagine by that phrase.

When I start to sense and realize the great distance between where we are and what we are designed to be, it makes me want to weep - not from mere sadness, but from a great and powerful longing. If it does not make you want to weep for longing, I feel really sorry for you. Depravity is bad enough, but intentionally blind, deaf, and dumb as well?

Which brings us to our second point. Awareness of the depravity - the contrast, the awareness of our loss and lack - to the Puritans, that was the beginning of spiritual awakening, the beginning of real LIFE.

If the stars do not call to you, if love does not scorch you, if you are not compelled and humbled by what you lack, then what kind of conversation can the Holy Spirit possibly have with you? We say we're so tired of correction and challenge; we want to be accepted the way we are, be told we need to make no more improvements, wallow in "unconditional love." Really?! What does that lead to? What could be more insulting? Notions of depravity never led to discouragement, depression, or despair like the modern notions of "I'm OK, You're OK" do. Notions of depravity led to real hope: maybe we really do need God! And the spiritual transformations were not merely pious on the inside, though that was the driving force, and far more powerful than most folk in our culture seem to comprehend. The spiritual transformations led to outer effort, the so-called "Puritan work ethic": we are here to accomplish, to build, to achieve, to settle for nothing less than God's Kingdom realized in us and around us.

Of course, humanity is still depraved, and we still live in a broken world. But what difference does that make to the awakened? They will live for what they have seen and felt and come to realize is a deeper, greater, unconquerable TRUTH. And long after our brief training ground here, this drama and pilgrimage will go on into eternity. You cannot discourage a Puritan. Oh, they have their bad moments of course, but you cannot discourage a Pilgrim - not in the long run. Or a real Christian, either. I mean, if they are not afraid of death, what are you going to do to them? They sing things like, "*This world is not my home, I'm just a-passing through ...*" (*Pilgrim Hymnal*, "He Who Would Valiant Be") Who wrote the hymn we just sang? John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress* - the book that used to be called "the New Testament of the common people."

ASHES

Not everybody uses the ashes of Ash Wednesday in the same way. Some are conscious mostly of our sorrow for crucifying Jesus. Some are aware of promises - declarations made on Palm Sunday and not kept. Some are aware of personal and private sins - errors, mistakes, blunders, things withheld, things not done for Christ. Some just wallow in a private, personal "Slough of Despond," as Bunyan called it, with no particular desire or expectation of ever getting out of it. Some say they feel "like worms" in contrast to the glory of God. But watch their lives before you judge their phraseology. Moses was "meek," but only before God. Puritans were depraved, but only in contrast to the glory of God. And it never meant they were content to stay that way. It meant they really wanted to be open to, respond to, and trust the mercy and grace and providence of God in Christ Jesus their Lord. They named it "depravity" and didn't like it! We leave it unnamed and seem halfway content to settle for it. Contentment is for cows, and unrepentant sinners.

In any case, that's what the ashes mean to me: sorrow, shame, longing; awareness of depravity, awareness of the gap; a great hunger to get closer both to my Lord, and to who I really am. Those two always somehow go together, don't they - getting closer to our Lord, and getting closer to who we really are. *"He who loses his life for my sake, will find it."*

PRAYER

I am sorry, Lord, that I am so far away from what You made me ... so far away from knowing and loving You ... so far away from obeying and pleasing You. And somehow the road toward You - the road toward our true HOME - always starts afresh with awakening, and with sorrow and repentance. These are the ashes, the symbols of what isn't working - of what is burnt out, used up, wasted, destroyed, crooked, bent, distorted. We come to You with ashes, and You give us New LIFE: unimaginable forgiveness, and mercy, and grace. If we come to You with anything else, at least in the beginning, You just wait ... wait for us to awaken. May we not be asleep this night. Amen.

SERVICE OF ASHES

I know the tradition, though I don't always follow it very closely. The tradition is to take the palms of Palm Sunday and burn them, then use them for the ashes of repentance the following Ash Wednesday (because we didn't really mean our *hosannas*). The priest puts them on your forehead with his thumb, making the sign of the Cross and saying, "Remember that you are dust ... and to dust you shall return." Or, "Remember that you are mortal."

I think that is very meaningful. But I use charcoal, a more refined and broader ash. Sin is deeper and broader than Palm Sunday, and sometimes we do mean *hosanna* and yet still are not beyond our own depravity, never mind the depravity all around us. And it is good to remember that we are mortal, but I have a much harder remembrance for us - one that breaks our hearts, and causes true repentance if we hear it and believe it: Remember that you are created a true child of God's. Remember that you are created in the glory of God.