

The Issue of One's Ability to Believe: Total Depravity/ Inability

by George E. Meisinger

Introduction

A helpful article on human depravity appeared in the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*. The author began by saying:

The evolution of doctrine due to continued hybridization has produced a myriad of theological persuasions. The only way to purify ourselves from the possible defects of such “theological genetics” is, first, to recognize that we have them and then, as much as possible, to set them aside and disassociate ourselves from the systems which have come to dominate our thinking. In other words, we should simply strive for truth and an objective understanding of biblical teaching.¹

This evaluation is appropriate because of a pervasive tendency to accept a theological system—whether Orthodox, Roman, Reformed, or Arminian—and then make each biblical verse fit one’s pre-arranged categories.

When we take up the subject of depravity, there are three theological systems at work.

Three Views

The following will give perspective.

1. Pelagianism,² a theological system founded by Pelagius (ca. 354–418), has three foundational tenets:
 - (a) Adam’s sinful nature transfers to his posterity
 - (b) justifying grace is not given freely, but according to merit
 - (c) after water baptism, sinless perfection is possible

Pelagius rejected Augustine’s assertion that man is unable to earn salvation, i.e., that man is totally depraved.

Ability must be present if there is to be obligation, [Pelagius] argued. If I ought to do something, I can. Pelagius argued that the will, rather

¹ Anthony B. Badger, “TULIP: A Free Grace Perspective Part 1: Total Depravity,” *JOTGES* 16 (Spring 2003): 35.

² J. D. Douglas and Philip W. Comfort, eds. *Who’s Who in Christian History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1992; electronic reprint, Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

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than being bound over to sin, is actually neutral—so that at any given moment or in any situation it is free to choose the good and do it.³

Where the gospel of grace is freely preached to the sinner, what ultimately determines whether he or she will be saved is not the supernatural working of the Holy Spirit within but the person's will which either receives or rejects the Savior.⁴

2. Semi-Pelagianism holds that Adam's fall weakened man's powers, but did not destroy them. It also holds that "the human will cooperates with unmerited divine assistance in believing."⁵

Semi-Pelagianism . . . [hovers] midway between the sharply marked systems of Pelagius and Augustine, taking off the edge of each, and inclining now to the one, now to the other. . . . Its leading idea is that divine grace and the human will jointly accomplish the work of conversion and sanctification, and that ordinarily man must take the first step. It rejects the Pelagian doctrine of the moral [s]oundness of man, but rejects also the Augustinian doctrine of the entire corruption and bondage of the natural man, and substitutes the idea of a diseased or crippled state of the voluntary power. It disowns the Pelagian conception of grace as a mere external auxiliary; but also, quite as decidedly, the Augustinian doctrines of the sovereignty, irresistibility, and limitation of grace; and affirms the necessity and the internal operation of grace with and through human agency, a general atonement through Christ, and a predestination to salvation conditioned by the foreknowledge of faith.⁶

3. The Augustinian-Reformed position holds that man is unable to turn to God (Total Inability).

Augustine argued that there is an inherited depravity as the result of which it is simply not possible for the individual to stop sinning. His key phrase was *non posse non peccare*. It means that a person is not able to choose God.⁷

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1981), 208–209.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁶ Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (1910; reprint Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980; electronic reprint; Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

⁷ Boice, *Foundations*, 210. Note: Actually *non posse non peccare* does not mean "not able to choose God," but "not able not to sin."

One may ask, “Is it not true that anyone who wills to come to Christ may?” The Augustinian-Reformed camp replies:

The answer is that, of course, this is true. But it is not the point. Certainly, anyone who wills may come. It is this that makes our refusal to come so unreasonable and increases our guilt. But who wills to come? The answer is, no one, except those in whom the Holy Spirit has already performed the entirely irresistible work of the new birth so that, as the result of this miracle, the spiritually blind eyes of the natural man are opened to see God’s truth and the totally depraved mind of the sinner is renewed to embrace Jesus Christ as Savior.⁸

Boice contextualizes the debate regarding the extent of depravity.

How far did man fall when he sinned? Did he merely stumble? Did he fall part way, but nevertheless not so far as to render himself hopeless? Or did he fall totally, so far that he cannot even will to seek God or obey him? What does the Bible mean when it says that we are “dead in trespasses and sins”? Does it mean that we really are dead so far as any ability to respond to God or to choose God is concerned? Or do we still have the ability at least to respond to God when the offer of salvation is made to us? If we can respond, what does Paul mean when he says that “no one seeks for God” (Romans 3:11)? What does Jesus mean when he says that “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44)? On the other hand, if we cannot respond, what is the meaning of those many passages in which the gospel is offered to fallen men and women? How is a person to be held responsible for failing to believe in Jesus if he or she is unable to do it?

Clearly, the Reformed theologians suppose that the Bible teaches total depravity: unbelievers cannot believe. Thus, their logic compels them to devise a doctrine of Total Inability and its logical outcome, the doctrine of Irresistible Grace. For example, one Reformed author surmises, “God specifically denies that the lost can believe or do anything pleasing to Him.”⁹ Later he adds, “Scripture is saying that the lost do not want to believe and that they cannot.”¹⁰ He quotes passages that establish that unregenerate man does not know the gospel or please

⁸ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁹ Curtis I. Crenshaw, *Lordship Salvation: The Only Kind There Is* (Memphis, TN: Footstool, 1994), 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

God. He utterly fails, however, to validate that man lacks an ontological ability to believe for eternal salvation.

Martin Luther wrote a foundational book on the doctrine of depravity in December of 1525: *The Bondage of the Will*.¹¹ It was a heated response to Erasmus' defense of human free will. Luther's influence on this subject in Protestant theology is difficult to overestimate, as the following quotation from a contemporary theologian attests:

The Bondage of the Will is the greatest piece of theological writing that ever came from Luther's pen In its fertility of thought, its vigour of language, its profound theological grasp, and the grand sweep of its exposition, it stands unsurpassed among Luther's writings.¹²

From a theological point of view, the subject of Total Depravity/Inability is significant. R. C. Sproul, a popular defender of Reformed Theology today, related a story about a college class he had taught. When he covered the subject of "man's moral inability there were howls of protest." He concluded, "If they really accepted the biblical view [i.e., Reformed view] of human corruption, the debate about predestination for all intents and purposes was already over."¹³ Thus, Sproul holds that Total Inability is a crucial underpinning of his theological system.

Sproul's thinking has roots that go back to Martin Luther. After expending much ink in his attempt to dismantle Erasmus' teaching, Luther says:

We come now to the last part of this book, in which, as I promised, I am to bring into the field my own resources against 'free-will'. Not that I shall bring them all; who could do that in this small book, when the entire Scripture, every jot and tittle of it, stands on my side? And there is no need; for 'free-will' lies vanquished and prostrate already. Twice have I overthrown it: first, by proving that all that it thought made for it actually stands against it; then, by showing that the arguments which it sought to refute still continue impregnable. And, even were it as yet unconquered, no more need be done than to lay it low with a single stroke or two; for when with one weapon you have

¹¹ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, 39.

¹² J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston, "Historical and Theological Introduction," *The Bondage of the Will*, by Martin Luther, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Revell, 1997), 40-41.

¹³ R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1987), 105.

dispatched your enemy, there is no need to go on hacking him with many more.¹⁴

Luther cannot be accused of lacking conviction. Considering the fact that the sizeable forces of Pope Leo X (and his immediate successors) and of King Charles V daily sought his life, Luther's fervent adhering to the Word is admirable. Though he may not have handled correctly all aspects of it, he held fast in the face of severe persecution.¹⁵ Most, if not all, of the Reformers were serious students of the Word with deep-seated conviction. Thus, to engage them in debate effectively requires serious academic pursuit and steadfastness.

How did the research for this article proceed? (1) Both ancient and modern theologians were consulted, e.g., Berkhof, Buswell, Calvin, Erickson, Grudem, Hodge, Luther, Sproul, etc. (2) Next the particular passages these theologians most employed to develop the doctrine of Total Depravity were examined in their context. (3) Finally, interpretative judgments were made as to whether the passages actually support the doctrine of Total Inability. The results emerge in what follows.

In this writer's experience, it seems many do not understand the doctrine of Total Inability, let alone its intricacies.¹⁶ In what follows, we will examine the proof texts Reformed theologians use to support their position on the subject. Finally, this article examines passages that validate a God-given human ability to believe.

The Nature of Inability According to Reformed Theology

What Total Inability is *Not* According to Reformers

By Total Inability Charles Hodge does not mean the loss of any faculty of soul, e.g., mentality, volition, conscience. Nor does he imply the loss

¹⁴ Luther, *Bondage*, 273.

¹⁵ My comments do not condone Luther's failures, such as his involvement with the Peasants' Revolt and massacre in the spring of 1525 or his anti-Semitism, which has fueled centuries of European persecution of the Jews.

¹⁶ The CTS doctrinal statement holds that unregenerate man is totally alienated from God; thus, all people require God's free grace to grant them eternal salvation. However, we consider it bad doctrine to say that non-Christians lack volitional ability toward God. Having said that, we also hold that whatever ability man has—an ability this article seeks to establish—does not give him merit in God's eyes nor eternal salvation.

of free agency,¹⁷ liberty of choice, or power of self-determination.¹⁸ He adds that Total Inability is not mere aversion to what is good, as though inability is merely an emotional phenomenon.

Erickson says that total depravity is not being

. . . totally insensitive to matters of conscience, of right and wrong. For Paul's statement in Romans 2:15 says that the Gentiles have the law written on their heart, so that "their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them."¹⁹

Furthermore, Erickson states that total depravity does not mean "that the sinful man is as sinful as he can possibly be" or that "the sinner engages in every possible form of sin."²⁰

Martin Luther, though not in all ways akin to Calvinism, argued that man's will is free in matters that pertain to this life, but not in matters pertaining to God:

Man's will may be called a free will, not in relation to that which is above him, that is to say, to God; but with respect to that which is below, that is, to the things of the earth. As regards my property, my fields, my house, my farm, I can act, do, and manage freely. But in the things of salvation, man is a captive; he is subjected to the will of God, or rather of the devil. Show me but one of all the advocates of free will (he exclaims) that has found in himself sufficient strength to endure a trifling injury, a fit of anger, or merely a look from his enemy, and bear it with joy; then—without even asking him to be ready to give up his body, his life, his wealth, his honour, and all things—I acknowledge you have gained your cause.²¹

Standing before Charles V and the Protestant princes during a council at the Palatine Chapel (June 25, 1530), Luther said:

As regards free will . . . we confess that man's will has a certain liberty of accomplishing civil justice, and of loving the things that reason comprehends; that man can do the good that is within the sphere of nature—plough his fields, eat, drink, have a friend, put on a coat, build a house, take a wife, feed cattle, exercise a calling; as also he can, of

¹⁷ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1872; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 2:260.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:263.

¹⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 628.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 628.

²¹ J. H. Merle d'Aubigné, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 416.

his own movement, do evil, kneel before an idol, and commit murder. But we maintain that without the Holy [Spirit] he cannot do what is righteous in the sight of God.²²

What Total Depravity Is According to Reformers

Charles Hodge says that Total Inability means lack of power to discern spiritual things because of the corruption of man's whole nature, corruption by which sin has blinded his understanding and perverted his feelings.²³ "Sin is a matter of the entire person."²⁴

Grudem adds:

If we still have a Total Inability to do any spiritual good in God's sight, then do we still have any freedom of choice? Certainly, those who are outside of Christ do still make voluntary choices—that is, they decide what they want to do, then they do it. In this sense there is still a kind of "freedom" in the choices that people make. Yet because of their inability to do good and to escape from their fundamental rebellion against God and their fundamental preference for sin, unbelievers do not have freedom in the most important sense of freedom—that is, the freedom to do right, and to do what is pleasing to God.

The application to our lives is quite evident: if God gives anyone a desire to repent and trust in Christ, he or she should not delay and should not harden his or her heart (cf. Heb. 3:7–8; 12:17). This ability to repent and desire to trust in God is not naturally ours but is given by the prompting of the Holy Spirit, and it will not last forever. "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts" (Heb. 3:15).²⁵

Hodge reasons that the condition of inability is *of our nature* and thus lies below our volition, beyond volition's power, controlling our affections and decisions.²⁶ Moreover, inability arises from the blindness of our minds.²⁷ Depravity applies only to the things of the Spirit or things connected with salvation. Thus, man may do good works that conform to

²² Ibid., 564.

²³ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:261.

²⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 628.

²⁵ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity; Zondervan, 1994; electronic reprint, Oak Harbor, WA: Galaxie Software, 2002).

²⁶ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:261.

²⁷ Ibid., 2:263.

the law yet do not please God.²⁸ Inability, according to Hodge, is a natural condition in the sense that it arises out of man's present fallen state. It is not natural, however, in the same sense that mentality, volition, and conscience are natural.²⁹

Inability, according to Reformed theologians, "is natural as well as moral. It is as complete, although different in kind, as the inability of the blind to see, of the deaf to hear, or of the dead to restore themselves to life."³⁰ Accordingly, Boice surmises that Total Depravity is "the doctrine that the unregenerate can never do anything to satisfy God's standards of righteousness and, in fact, do not even try."³¹

Erickson recaps as follows:

Total depravity means that the sinner is completely unable to extricate himself from his sinful condition. . . . The sinner cannot alter his life by a process of determination, will power, and reformation. Sin is inescapable. . . . The unregenerate person is incapable of genuinely good, redeeming works; whatever he does is dead or ineffective in relationship to God. Salvation by works is absolutely impossible (Ephesians 2:8–9).³²

Proofs Offered for the Doctrine of Inability

Occasionally, some contend that Scripture nowhere implies that fallen man has the ability by himself to turn to God. This is a mere argument from silence. Neither does Scripture say that man cannot turn to God—at God's initiative, in response to the convincing ministry of the Holy Spirit (a ministry that may well be resistible).

To defend the depravity of man in his entire being (often centering on man's volition), Erickson claims that the following proof texts confirm that Total Inability permeates four aspects of man's being:³³

- The body (Romans 6:6, 12; 7:24; 8:10, 13)
- The mind (Romans 1:21; 2 Corinthians 3:14–15; 4:4)
- The emotions (Romans 1:26–27; Galatians 5:24; 2 Timothy 3:2–4)
- The will (Romans 6:17; 2 Timothy 2:25–26)

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 2:264.

³⁰ Ibid., 2:267.

³¹ Boice, *Foundations*, 518.

³² Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 630–31.

³³ Ibid., 628–29.

Theologians also offer as proof texts for their doctrine of Total Depravity / Inability a number of verses. Passages with a shorter treatment are in the appendix; those with a fuller treatment follow:³⁴

John 1:13

Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

A man is not born of blood (i.e., because of a human blood tie, such as that of the Jews to Abraham), nor of the will of the flesh (personal volition), nor of the will of man (another person's volition, possibly that of one's father), but of God. Thus, regeneration is rooted in God, not man. Luther argues this means that "'free will' avails nothing here."³⁵

We should ask the question, "free will avails nothing in what sense?" John says that no one is born again because of his or another's choice. Verse 1:13 clarifies, saying, not that man cannot believe, but that the Lord alone initiates and provides the new birth in consequence of one's faith in Jesus Christ. Put otherwise, no man decides to be born again and so it happens. Instead, the non-Christian simply believes and then God grants him the authority to become a child of God. Without any human expression of planning or deciding, God then brings about the new birth in the believer.

Furthermore, preceding verses, 1:6–11, reveal that God sent John the Baptist to witness to the Light (Christ) *that all through him might believe*. In spite of John's clear and faithful witness to the Light, Christ's *own did not receive Him*. Why? Some conclude that they rejected the Lord because of Total Inability; they could not help themselves. Such a conclusion fails to give due weight to 1:12, which indicates that man *can* "receive"—the antithesis of "not receive" or reject (1:11). The implication is that man may cease to reject and thus receive, or *believe in His name*. The ability exists.

Furthermore, the author both immediately before and following 1:12–13 deals with actual historical realities, not hypothetical ideas. Thus, it makes sense that when he says one may receive and believe, he does not speak hypothetically, but of what one may actually do.

³⁴ Besides the passages already cited from Erickson, Grudem, and Hodge, see James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 2:138–39, and L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 246–48.

³⁵ Luther, *Bondage*, 303.

John 6:44–45

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'And they shall all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me.

Luther interprets it this way:

Here, indeed, he declares, not only that the works and efforts of 'free-will' are unavailing, but that even the very word of the gospel (of which He is here speaking) is heard in vain, unless the Father Himself speaks within, and teaches, and draws. 'No man, no man can come,' he says, and what he is talking about is your 'power whereby man can make some endeavour towards Christ'. In things that pertain to salvation, He asserts that power to be null."³⁶

True, Jesus affirms that the Father “draws” (ἐλκύω) and that unless He does, no one comes to Christ. A normal reading of the passage does not lead us to the conclusion that He draws irresistibly and necessarily because of human Total Inability.

Someone might argue that the act of election, which occurred in eternity past (Ephesians 1:4), is the cause behind the drawing of John 6. Seeing a causal relationship between election and drawing is one theological way to connect the dots, but not the only way. We should observe, however, that John 6 simply talks about something present—about drawing—thus the means of one coming to the Father is in view, not the fact of election in eternity past.

We must ask, What is drawing? What does *the Father . . . draws him* mean? Verse 6:44 states that God draws those people who come to Christ and whom God will resurrect. Thus, everyone whom the Father resurrects, He first drew. The verbs are “draw,” “come,” and “resurrect.” The ideas of “come” and “resurrect” are not difficult to grasp, for “come” is man’s response to God’s initiative, and “resurrect” is God fulfilling His promise to those who believe (John 11:25–26).

What about “draw”? It is very important to note that in 6:45 Jesus quotes from Isaiah 54:13. Such quotations normally serve to prove or elucidate what one is saying. Accordingly, Jesus clarifies what He means by “draw,” or how it is that God draws people to Himself, thus bringing the elect into union with Christ. How does God draw people? The quotation from Isaiah says that *they all shall be taught of God* (54:13).

³⁶ Ibid., 310–11.

Thus, “taught” clarifies or answers the question “how does the Father draw people?” He draws through the teaching of His Word. Moreover, Jesus builds on the Isaiah quotation, saying, *everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me* (6:45b). Then continuing through 6:58, Jesus works to teach and persuade all of them—to make them hear and learn—even though some are not elect (cf. 6:64).³⁷

That “draw” does not require the sovereign compulsion proposed by some, the apostle further suggests by his use of the verb in John 12:32.³⁸ Here Jesus says, *I, if I am lifted up from the earth* [speaking of His death, 12:33], *will draw all peoples to Myself* [πάντας ἑλκύσω πρὸς ἑμαυτόν]. “All peoples” includes the unbelievers of 12:37–40, many of whom would not believe. Since both chapter 6 and 12 speak of drawing people to Jesus, and the latter states that He would draw all peoples to Himself, it appears implicit that some degree of ability to respond exists.

Luther’s conclusion on this passage is interesting, for it seems to be similar to the exposition above.

But the ungodly does not ‘come’, even when he hears the word, unless the Father draws and teaches him inwardly; which He does by shedding abroad His Spirit. When that happens, there follows a ‘drawing’ other than that which is outward; Christ is then displayed by the enlightening of the Spirit, and by it man is rapt to Christ with the sweetest rapture, he being passive while God speaks, teaches and draws, rather than seeking or running himself.³⁹

Sproul seeks to defend human inability from a later verse in John 6.⁴⁰

And He said, “Therefore I have said to you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father.” (John 6:65)

His exposition points out that “no one” is all-inclusive, allowing for no exceptions. He then focuses on “can,” asserting that it denotes ability, not permission. Accordingly, Sproul renders the statement to mean, “No one is *able* to come to me.”⁴¹ He next comments on the word “unless,”

³⁷ James 1:17–18 throws light on the subject: all good gifts, such as the free gift being drawn to the Lord, are from the Father. He regenerates those who receive the gift that “the word of truth” reveals.

³⁸ Michael Thompson, professor of Old Testament Literature and Exegesis at Chafer Theological Seminary, called my attention to this verse.

³⁹ Luther, *Bondage*, 311.

⁴⁰ R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1987), 67–71. This appears in a section titled “Jesus’ View of Moral Ability.”

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

which “refers to what [Jesus] calls a *necessary condition* that must happen before something else can happen.”⁴²

The meaning of Jesus’ words is clear. No human being can possibly come to Christ unless something happens that makes it possible for him to come. That necessary condition Jesus declares is that “it has been granted to him by the Father.” Jesus is saying here that the ability to come to him is a gift from God. Man does not have the ability in and of himself to come to Christ. God must do something first.⁴³

Sproul then asks, “Does God give the ability to come to Jesus to all men?” He admits that the Reformed view answers “no,” for in their view God grants such ability only to the elect.

Sproul seeks to defend this view, but how? He says, “the key word here is *draw*,” and hangs his case on it.⁴⁴ He rejects the notion that “draw” means “woo” or “entice,” since that leaves the door open for human ability. To counter such a meaning, he appeals to Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, which defines “draw” as compel by irresistible superiority. Sproul concludes that the word means “to compel.” To buttress his position, he turns to James 2:6 and Acts 16:19, where “drag” does carry the nuance of “compel.” It is not contested that this Greek verb has a semantic range that includes the idea of coercion.

As shown above, however, in John 12:32, John does not include the notion of coercion the five times he uses the verb:

- Chapters 6:44 and 12:32 were discussed above; compulsion is not in view.
- In 18:10, Peter *drew* his sword; who would say that Peter compelled or coerced his sword?
- In 21:6 and 11, the verb speaks of Peter dragging in his fishing net. Did he coerce his nets? Did his nets have volitional ability to resist him?

Obviously, where inanimate objects are in view, compulsion should not be posited as part of the verbal idea. Where people are in view, Peter’s usage does not suggest coercion.

Sproul’s case fails, not because he has invented a non-existent nuance for ἐλκύω, but because he (a) moved away from John’s meaning in the immediate context of John 6:44–45 and (b) leaped outside of

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 69–71.

John's usage altogether to gather in a meaning for "drag" that obviously suits his theological system. Such a hermeneutical practice may be characterized as theological eisegesis.

Acts 13:46–48⁴⁵

Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us: 'I have set you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be for salvation to the ends of the earth.'" Now when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and glorified the word of the Lord. And as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.

Verse 13:46 says some "rejected" the gospel, thus forfeiting an opportunity for everlasting life. The verse, however, does not say rejection was all they could do. Acts 13:48 says, *as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed*. Two questions are pertinent here:⁴⁶

1. *When* were they appointed?
2. By *whom* were they appointed?

The Calvinists' point of view is that people can believe only if God had appointed them to eternal life in eternity past. Therefore, a person's ability to believe is conditioned on a divine appointment (election). Moreover, *as many as* God appoints, they will all believe because if God is sovereign, Reformed theologians assert, He must bring to pass what He plans; not to do so is failure—and a sovereign and immutable God cannot fail.

Luke does not explicitly reveal *who* appointed to eternal life the ones who believed. Not wanting to leave the subject unexpressed, theologians—appealing to their theological system—identify God as the

⁴⁵ William Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000; electronic reprint, Oak Harbor, WA: Galaxie Software 2002), 991, s.v. τάσσω, 1.b., "τάσσειν τινά εἰς assign someone to a (certain) classification, used also w. an abstract noun . . . pass. belong to, be classed among those possessing ὅσοι ἦσαν τεταγμένοι εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον (Acts 13:48)."

⁴⁶ Dr. John Niemelä, professor of New Testament Literature and Exegesis at Chafer Theological Seminary, suggested these questions.

subject of appointment. We may ask, Does immediate context suggest a subject other than the one favored by theologians?

In 16:45–46, the Jews *opposed the things spoken by Paul*, leading the apostle to announce, *since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles*. Their problem was self-judgment: *judge yourselves unworthy* indicates that in effect they appointed themselves, not to eternal life, but to its antithesis, eternal or second death. Keeping the two questions in mind, then, they judged or appointed themselves to unworthy status when they rejected the preached message.

Remaining consistent with what the passage reveals, what about *as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed*? Those appointed to eternal life were those who *were glad and glorified the word of the Lord*. They did not oppose but freely welcomed the gospel. Keeping the two questions again in mind, they appointed themselves by their positive response to the preached word—by belief—with the result that they received eternal life.

Context does not support total inability. To the contrary, it shows *unbelievers* gladly seeking the Lord. Moreover, the answer to the question “who was appointed to eternal life?” in 13:48 is Gentiles to whom Paul and Barnabas preached in 13:46 and who—as non-Christians—showed themselves positive to the gospel (for *the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them*). Luke’s account is clear: these unbelieving Gentiles hungered for truth, ceased opposing it, and once exposed to Paul’s preaching, welcomed it. These unbelievers begging to hear the truth positioned or appointed themselves to receive gladly the truth resulting in eternal life.

Acts 26:14

And when we all had fallen to the ground, I heard a voice speaking to me and saying in the Hebrew language, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.’

Verse 26:14 says that it was hard for Paul to kick against the goads. He did so while an unbeliever. That is, Paul’s persecution of Christians and the gospel they believed and proclaimed had become *hard* for him. Why? Apparently because the Creator designed man to respond to truth,⁴⁷ not to reject truth as Paul did. Given that the unbelieving Paul (Saul) kicked, Total Inability is not in view. Accordingly, though it is hard to resist the truth, it is possible. Resisting truth presupposes that one understands it; a person’s thinking is not so muddled or depraved that the preached message is incomprehensible—especially if the

⁴⁷ *Behold, You desire truth in the inward parts* (Psalm 51:6).

convincing ministry of the Holy Spirit to the *world* is taken into account (John 16:8–11).

Paul's testimony is that he understood the gospel of God's grace, though strongly opposed it. Ultimately, as the record in Acts shows, he ceased to resist, thus opening himself to receive the gospel message that promises eternal salvation to those who believe in Jesus Christ for it.

The argument to stop resisting implies that the unregenerate Saul had "free will." Jesus's words can (and should) be seen as an APPEAL to Saul's free will.⁴⁸

Romans 1:18ff

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness . . . who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them. (Rom. 1:18, 32)

Luther rightly argues from this passage that all men are under God's wrath and therefore merit God's judgment. However, he does not stop there. He infers man's inability: "Where now is the power of 'free-will' to endeavour after some good?"⁴⁹ The force of his argument is that all men are under divine wrath and cannot please God, and since believing would please God, no man can believe. Furthermore, if one cannot believe, bondage/inability is the inescapable conclusion.

However, to be able to do nothing that merits God's praise is one thing. To infer from this fact a doctrine of ontological, volitional inability goes beyond what the text says. Romans 1 says that man does not please God, not that he cannot please God because of inability. It seems that drawing such theological inferences to tidy up logical loose ends results in more problems than solutions. Better to leave a loose end than to draw an inference that clashes, in this case, with many texts revealing volition.

Romans 7:18, 24 (cf. Galatians 5:17)

Some marshal these verses to support the position that unbelievers are paralyzed with inability. Luther⁵⁰ argues that since Christians experience a great inner warfare between the Holy Spirit and their flesh, it is foolish to think that non-Christians, who do not have the indwelling Spirit, can

⁴⁸ Comment by Steve Dolson-Andrew in email correspondence, March 1, 2005.

⁴⁹ Luther, *Bondage*, 273–78.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 313.

exercise free will in matters that pertain to eternal salvation. Nichols makes the following observation:

Old Testament saints did not have the indwelling Holy Spirit. Does it follow that they could not exercise free will even after salvation? This seems to put the Calvinist in a bit of a bind, particularly if he is dispensational.⁵¹

As all Scripture, Romans 7 and Galatians 5 should be interpreted contextually. Since these passages describe a believer⁵² struggling with his flesh (sin nature)—sometimes winning and sometimes losing in this struggle—obviously believers are not paralyzed with inability.

It makes more sense to argue that if believers who still possess a sin nature, and who may quench and grieve the Holy Spirit, have volition to do right or wrong, then unbelievers with the same nature may do the same—not to merit or earn eternal life, but to position themselves to receive eternal salvation.

1 Corinthians 2:14

But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Here is a plain statement that the natural man *cannot know* (οὐ δύναται γινῶναι) the things of the Holy Spirit. Calvin comments that the apostle

teaches, that it [man's inability to understand the things of the Spirit God] is not owing simply to the obstinacy of the human will, but to the impotency, also, of the understanding, that man does not attain to the *things of the Spirit*. Had he said that men are not *willing* to be wise, *that* indeed would have been true, but he states farther that they are not *able*. Hence we infer, that faith is not in one's own power, but is divinely conferred.⁵³

⁵¹ Timothy R. Nichols, instructor at Chafer Theological Seminary, personal e-mail correspondence, February 28, 2005.

⁵² Several factors indicate that in Romans 7 Paul speaks of himself as a believer: e.g., he says that the law is spiritual and that he agrees it is good (7:14, 16); he hates sin (7:15); he *wills* to do God's will and delights in the law of God (7:21–22); he knows that Jesus Christ is the solution to the power of sin in his life (7:25a); and (e) he serves God with his mind (7:25b). These are not true of unbelievers, but only of believers.

⁵³ John Calvin, *Commentary to the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, Calvin's Commentaries, trans. and ed. Thomas Timme (London:

In his *Institutes*, Calvin further says:

“The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, for they are spiritually discerned,” (1 Cor. 2:14.) Whom does he mean by the “natural man”? The man who trusts to the light of nature. Such a man has no understanding in the spiritual mysteries of God. Why so? Is it because through sloth he neglects them? Nay, though he exert himself, it is of no avail; they are “spiritually discerned.” And what does this mean? That altogether hidden from human discernment, they are made known only by the revelation of the Spirit; so that they are accounted foolishness wherever the Spirit does not give light. The Apostle had previously declared, that “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God has prepared for them that love him;” nay, that the wisdom of the world is a kind of veil by which the mind is prevented from beholding God, (1 Cor. 2:9.)⁵⁴

Charles Hodge adds:

We must know God in order to love Him. This is distinctly asserted by the Apostle in 1 Cor. ii. 14. He there says, (1.) That the natural or. unrenewed man does not receive the things of the Spirit. (2.) The reason why he does not receive them is declared to be that they are foolishness unto him, or that he cannot know them. (3.) And the reason why he cannot know them is that they are spiritually discerned. It is ignorance, the want of discernment of the beauty, excellence, and suitableness of the things of the Spirit (*i. e.*, of the truths which the Spirit has revealed), that is the reason or cause of unbelief. So also in Eph. iv. 18, he says, The heathen (unconverted men) are “alienated from the life of God, through the ignorance that is in them.”⁵⁵

What is happening in 1 Corinthians 2? Chapter 2:14 mentions “the natural man” (ψυχικὸς). Who is he? The verse identifies him as (a) one to whom divine revelation is “foolishness” (μωρία), and (b) as one without the ability to receive or know spiritual things.⁵⁶ According to 1:18, *the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing*. Thus, a

for Harifon & Byfhop, 1573; electronic reprint, Oak Harbor, WA: Galaxie Software, 2000).

⁵⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, trans. and ed. Henry Beveridge (London: Wolfe and Harison, 1561; electronic reprint, Oak Harbor, WA: Galaxie Software, 2002).

⁵⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Oak Harbor, WA: Logos, 1997.

⁵⁶ οὐ δέχεται τὰ τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ θεοῦ . . . καὶ οὐ δύναται γινῶναι.

“natural man” includes any person who is perishing—who has not believed on Jesus Christ for eternal salvation and is without the indwelling Spirit. Reinforcement that unbelievers are in view is that a natural man stands in sharp contrast to those who have the Spirit (note the emphatic *we* in 2:12). Jude 19 also states that the natural man⁵⁷ does not possess the Holy Spirit.

Those who have the Spirit are able to *receive* the things freely given by God, whereas a natural man is *not able* to receive or know the things of God’s Spirit. “Receive” denotes personal approval or persuasion shown by actually accepting as true what is revealed.⁵⁸ Though a natural man may get an understanding of the ideas a text presents, yet he walks away convinced it is not for him or not true. He is unable, on his own, to welcome divine revelation. I once heard an atheist Marxist professor give a very clear exposition of Romans 3–4, especially the doctrine of justification by faith. He concluded with a wave of the hand, dismissing the content as one Jewish rabbi’s religious thoughts. The professor was unable to “receive” it.

Unbelievers are not the only people who are unable to receive God’s truth, for an additional category of persons surfaces in two ways. Paul emphasizes the Holy Spirit throughout verses 2:10–14: the Spirit reveals / illuminates truth (2:10–11); God gave the Spirit that we might know the things freely given (2:12); and authentic communicators of the word trust what the Spirit teaches in written revelation and that is what they teach (2:13). The point is that apart from the teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit in one’s life, one learns nothing—whether believer or unbeliever.

In chapter 3:1–4, the apostle states that some believers *are not able* (ἀλλ οὐδὲ ἔτι νῦν δύνασθε, 3:2) to receive the truth because of carnality. The point is that though the Holy Spirit indwells them, their carnality quenches the Spirit so that He does not teach them.

Accordingly, a natural man is any person (believer or unbeliever) who does not experience the teaching ministry of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Apart from such divine illumination one is *unable to know* the things of God, defined by context as (a) *the things which God has prepared for those who love Him* (2:9), (b) the deep things of God (2:10b), and (c) the things God has “freely given” to His people (2:12). What the Lord has freely given is the wisdom of God that the rulers of the age do not understand—divine revelation that eye has not seen, nor

⁵⁷ In Jude 19 the NKJV translates ψυχικὸς as *sensual persons . . . having not the Spirit*.

⁵⁸ BDAG, 221, s.v. δέχομαι.

ear heard, nor has entered into the heart of man (2:7–8)—encapsulated as the *mind of Christ*, God’s word in black and white (2:16).

Paul’s point is that because of a natural man’s disconnect from the Spirit, he is unable to know the things of God. This is not an ontological or inherent issue, but a matter of not yet being rightly related to the Holy Spirit whether by the new birth or, in the case of Christians, by having all sin confessed.

It must be concluded that Calvin’s inference from 1 Corinthians 2:14 “that faith is not in one’s own power, but is divinely conferred” is not only unnecessary, but is in fact at cross purposes with Paul’s argument.

Hebrews 11:6

The author says that without faith it is impossible to please God. Even if taken in a general sense, applying it to believer and unbeliever alike, the verse says nothing about ability. Strictly speaking, context speaks of what a believer must do to please God and does not give insight into the ability or inability of unbelievers.

Summary

The Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes the doctrine of depravity in this way:

Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation; so as a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto.⁵⁹

This writer would not argue against man’s fall into a state of sin, or that man by his own strength is unable to convert himself. Apart from the past (the Cross) and present work of God, no man would be eternally saved. The question is, what is that present work? Those who hold to Total Inability reason that God first regenerates a man, irresistibly drawing him into eternal salvation. Logic compels such a conclusion when one begins with the premise of Total Inability. We should argue against the unfounded belief that man has lost all ability of volition to seek after God—a belief built on *non sequiturs* flowing from the above passages and others with even less to commend them.

⁵⁹ Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), IX, 3.

Passages That Show Man's Ability / Volition toward God

If Anyone Wills (John 7:17)

If anyone wills (ἐάν τις θέλη) to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.

Jesus addresses a crowd that includes many who are hostile to Him: some seek to kill Him (7:19), others accuse Him of having a demon (7:20), and still others hate Him (7:23). Nevertheless, the Lord makes a straightforward statement, which clarifies that if anyone *wants* to do God's will, he will discover it as from God. The sequence involved is uncomplicated. Steve Dolson-Andrew lays out the chronological order this way: A person "wants" to do God's will, then he "understands" that the doctrine is from God, then he believes the doctrine.⁶⁰ The Lord's teaching reveals human ability, not inability, to seek God's truth.

Cornelius (Acts 10)

Does Luke's narrative regard this Roman Centurion as a Christian or as a non-Christian when Peter first comes to his house? One option is that he was an unbeliever still without eternal life; the other is that he has believed in the Messiah for eternal life at least long enough before Peter's arrival to account for his extraordinary reputation in 10:2. Which is it?

To answer this question, it is helpful to see how Luke identifies believers from the Dispensation of Israel who transition into the Church Dispensation. In Acts 19, while visiting Ephesus, Paul discovered *about twelve men* (19:7) who were believers (19:2), having been disciples of John the Baptist (19:3). They were, thus, born-again, possessing eternal life, and having a guaranteed place in heaven. Between the time of John's ministry and Acts 19, on the Day of Pentecost, began the baptizing ministry of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2; cf. 11:15–16) by which God had introduced a new entity into human history called the Body of Christ, or Church (Colossians 1:18). Though true believers, these twelve men were part of the older Dispensation of Israel. Paul desired to see them transition from the old to the new, from a status in Israel's temporarily non-operational place in history to a status in the Body of Christ. Therefore, he laid hands on them, and *the Holy Spirit came upon them* (19:6). Acts 11:15–16 teaches that the coming of the Holy Spirit on believers is tantamount to being baptized with the Holy Spirit that now

⁶⁰ Sequence pointed out by Steve Dolson-Andrew in e-mail correspondence, March 1, 2005.

identifies them with the Church. The point is that Luke clearly identifies the twelve as already believers when Paul arrived. Paul did not evangelize them, but rather introduced them into God's new plan for believers in the new Church Dispensation.

Luke does not, either before or at Peter's arrival, identify Cornelius as a believer. Moreover, it is a mistake to conclude that the Centurion is a believer merely because of the positive statements made about him. Many moral unbelievers live lives that are praiseworthy—sometimes more praiseworthy than those of believers! What Luke's account does say about Cornelius and *belief* should be taken seriously. That is, Cornelius did not *believe* for the *remission of sins* until Peter arrived and preached the gospel (10:34–48; cf. 10:43 with 11:17). Cornelius believed *during* Peter's preaching, not before. The moment of gospel presentation became the centurion's pivot point from death to life, darkness to light. Luke clearly defines the moment of gospel hearing as the moment of the Centurion's new birth. Peter reports that Cornelius was instructed to call for the apostle so that Peter might tell him the words by which he and all his household would be saved (Acts 11:14).

Now, though not a believer, this Centurion was not like a cadaver, unable to respond to God. To the contrary, Cornelius the non-Christian was *a devout man and one who feared God and he gave alms and prayed to God always* (10:2). He received revelation from God, understood, and obeyed it (10:3, 22); in addition, the Lord recognized his prayers and alms (10:4, 31). Here was a man with a strong sense of God-consciousness, and the Lord worked in him to bring him to faith in Christ. His prayers and alms did not eternally save him, but his seeking postured him to believe the gospel when he heard it preached.

There is nothing in this chapter to suggest that Total Inability was Cornelius' condition. In fact, it is difficult to say he was crippled toward God, let alone "dead" in the way eisegetes contend. The Centurion was able to hear and believe the gospel. As those in Acts 28:24, he and his family became persuaded of the gospel, at which instant God eternally saved them. Romans 10:17 reveals that *faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God*. The word came by Peter's preaching, Cornelius heard, and while hearing the word, believed. The Holy Spirit worked through Peter's preaching to persuade Cornelius of the truth of the Gospel.

These indications from Acts 10 expose the erroneous conclusion of a modern commentator:

Spiritual death is exactly like that [a dead unresponsive baby].
Unregenerate sinners have no life by which they can respond

to spiritual stimuli. No amount of love, beseeching, or spiritual truth can summon a response. People apart from God are the ungrateful dead, spiritual zombies, death-walkers, unable even to understand the gravity of their situation. They are lifeless. They may go through the motions of life, but they do not possess it. They are dead even while they live (cf. 1 Tim 5:6).⁶¹

Cornelius was hardly lifeless, ungrateful, and unresponsive to spiritual stimuli. Such an invalid conclusion is driven by an equally invalid theology, not the clear evidence that emerges from the biblical record of Cornelius' experience.

We may conclude that man, who has been made in God's image, can act freely in accord with his nature, even in his fallen state [as Cornelius did!]. Our fallen human nature has residuals of the image of God and is also inclined away from Him. This doesn't mean that we cannot do right things, nor does it mean that we cannot believe His message. To argue 1) that unregenerate man lacks the ability to meaningfully hear the propositions of the gospel message and 2) to insist that he cannot understand the implications and consequences of unbelief, is to render useless any and every gospel message to the sinner. To say that the sinner, even though he hears the message of eternal life is innately unable or unwilling to believe in Christ is to deny that unregenerate man has a sense of self-preservation. But self-preservation seems to be a given among mankind as well as lower forms of animal life. The point is that if a person is able to understand propositional gospel assertions and to respond in such a way that preserves his life by believing, there would be no practical reason to evangelize the lost.⁶²

Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4–15, esp. 12)

Luke 8:12 reveals that the devil works to snatch the gospel out of unbelievers' hearts *lest they should believe and be saved* (ὅνα μὴ πιστεύσαντες σωθῶσιν). The normal way to understand the "lest" (*hina* + negative) clause is to see the devil working to snatch the gospel out of the minds of unbelievers precisely *because* they have the ability to believe. The grammatical construction presupposes the hearers' ability to believe, which Satan comprehends. Thus, the devil labors to snatch the gospel from the hearts of non-Christians, so that they will not believe.

⁶¹ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 65.

⁶² Badger, *TULIP*, 55.

Accordingly, it is not that the unregenerate ontologically cannot believe, but that they will not believe, so long as Satan plucks the Word from their hearts.

The God of This Age (2 Corinthians 4:3–6)

But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

This important passage reveals that the devil throws a veil over the minds of non-Christians, effectively blinding them to the truth. Why? *Lest the light of the gospel . . . should shine on them* (εἰς τὸ μὴ αὐγᾶσαι τὸν φωτισμὸν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου). Why does the devil exert himself to prevent unbelievers from comprehending the gospel? Because he knows that *the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes . . . from faith to faith* (Romans 1:16). He knows that people must know the gospel to believe, for one cannot believe what one does not know! One's faith in its message results not only in eternal salvation, but also in the satanic kingdom losing another citizen (cf. Colossians 1:13). Therefore, Satan strives to obstruct people from understanding the truth. His blinding work leaves man in a state of spiritual darkness, ignorant of the gospel.

**The Unbeliever's Obedience
(Romans 6:17)**

But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered.

All students of the Word accept that no one has saved himself. Therefore, thanking God is an appropriate response of the saved person to the One who planned, executed, and applied eternal salvation.

Romans 6:17 reveals that the Roman Christians had turned their lives as it were from death to life, from darkness to light. The apostle reminds them of their past in slavery to sin and in bondage to temptation and lust! This is how all people start out in life. No one begins with the potential of choosing to be good—that is, *good* in God's eyes. The fact of an unbeliever's slavery to sin is evident in the following verses:

- 6:6, where the believer is said no longer to be a slave of sin, implying he once was as an unbeliever.
- 6:7 states that a believer is “freed from sin,” signifying that in his unregenerate state he was not free.
- 6:14 pointedly says that *sin shall not have dominion over you*, which it previously did.

Unbelievers are slaves to sin, though they may do good deeds. They may contribute to humanitarian causes, be good Samaritans and fine husbands, wives, or parents. However, they do not have the right motive: the glory of God. Nor do they have the right enablement: the indwelling Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, even though unbelievers cannot do good works that please God, they can obey. Note the next clause.

Yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered.

This is a key verse for a biblical understanding of depravity. Paul says, “you obeyed from the heart,” meaning that they obeyed not merely superficially, or formally, “but with inward commitment.”⁶³ “You” denotes the Roman believers in their previous state as unbelievers. Note:

- In 6:19, Paul contrasts what they were with what they may now become (οὕτως νῦν).
- The same clause appears in 6:20, but with the addition of “when” (ὅτε).
- In 6:21, the apostle further contrasts what was true of them then (τότε) as unbelievers with what is now (νῦν) true of them as believers.
- Then in 6:22, with an emphatic “but now” (νυνὶ δὲ), Paul urges them to become what the grace of God makes possible, though not inevitable or necessary.

The point is that Romans 6 urges Christians to embark on the liberating pilgrimage of the Christian way of life by reminding them of the enslaving and embarrassing lifestyle they had as non-Christians and by pointing out that their liberation from sin and from the Law can make them also productive as instruments of righteousness.

A clear implication of this passage should not be ignored: It was when they were unbelievers—before the old man was crucified, before the body of sin was stripped of its tyrannical power, when they were

⁶³ Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:324.

slaves of sin, and when they were dominated by the body's lusts—it was *then* that they obeyed (6:17).

In their unregenerate state, they obeyed from the heart. Their obedience was real and, thus, acceptable to God. The gospel had persuaded them and they obeyed it; i.e., they obeyed the command, *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved*.

What did the Roman unbelievers obey? “That form of doctrine” (τύπον διδαχῆς) speaks of a “pattern,”⁶⁴ of teaching.⁶⁵ This “pattern of teaching”⁶⁶ is New Testament revelation, in a context of grace, which enables one to grow in obedience to Christ. However, unbelievers have only one command to obey: to believe in Jesus Christ for eternal salvation (Romans 3:21-22).

To sum up, as believers have the ability to obey or disobey God's word, so unbelievers have an ontological ability to believe or obey God's word, that is, the gospel. They may or may not. Nonetheless, every believer obeyed the gospel while still an unbeliever.

Eternal Salvation: God's Free Gift (Ephesians 2:5–9)⁶⁷

Ephesians 2 begins with a straightforward assertion that unbelievers are dead in trespasses and sins, which is a much-loved proof text of Total Inability advocates.⁶⁸ To them, “dead” means that each unbeliever is without any ability to turn to God, let alone to believe in Christ. They wax eloquent about how a cadaver, arms and legs bound up tightly in grave clothes, can do absolutely nothing to help itself. However, the clause *dead in trespasses and sins* does not rule out man's ability to respond to God's initiative. Why?

⁶⁴ Cranfield says, “‘Pattern of teaching’ . . . is . . . the pattern consisting of teaching (appositive genitive), which is to mould the lives of those who have received it” (Ibid.).

⁶⁵ BDAG, 1019, s.v. τύπος, “a kind, class, or thing that suggests a model or pattern, *form, figure, pattern* . . . τύπος διδαχῆς *pattern of teaching* Ro 6:17.”

⁶⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed. R. V. G. Tasker, (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1963), 142, says it is “the body of teaching which Paul elsewhere calls ‘the tradition’ or ‘the traditions’” (cf. 1 Cor. 11:2; 2 Thess. 2:15; 3:6).

⁶⁷ For a thorough study of Ephesians 2:1–10, see Timothy R. Nichols, “Reverse-Engineered Outlining: A Method For Epistolary Exegesis,” *CTS Journal* 7 (April–June 2001).

⁶⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 915.

1. Immediate context explains being dead by two clauses in 2:2: *walking according to the course of this world-system* and *walking according to the prince of the power of the air*. Thus, being dead in sins has to do with an unbeliever's walk—following a lifestyle dictated by the pagan and humanistic philosophies and by the doctrines of demons. The apostle says nothing about whether one is able to respond to God, or to believe.
2. Paul later elaborates on “dead” as being “alienated from God” (2:12), i.e., separated from the Source of spiritual life. Unbelievers are spiritually dead, though physically alive—but spiritual death or alienation does not necessitate Total Inability.

When Paul says that people are in their human situation dead but made alive in Christ (Ephesians 2:1), he must mean that they were spiritually dead, i.e., their spirits did not enjoy a living relationship with God. To be made alive means to be quickened in spirit so that they enter into living fellowship with God.⁶⁹

When Paul says that outside of Christ people are dead (Ephesians 2:1), he must mean spiritually dead. He cannot mean that unredeemed people have no spirits—that spirit is a gift of the new life in Christ. That men and women are dead in their spirits means that they are not living in fellowship with God. That they have been made alive means that they have been brought into fellowship with the living God.

This is affirmed in a verse whose exegesis is disputed, but which bears full and lucid meaning in this context. “If Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness” (Romans 8:10).⁷⁰

3. Also in John 5:28–29, Jesus says, *Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live*. In other words, those who were dead in their trespasses and sins and physically died in that condition will hear the voice of the Son of God. Surely, if they can “hear” then, they can hear now.
4. The apostle declares eternal salvation to be the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8–9). *That* (τοῦτο, neuter, 2:8), following the normal rules of Greek grammar, does not refer to either “grace” or “faith,”

⁶⁹ Ladd, *Theology*, 505–6.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 535.

both of which are feminine.⁷¹ Instead, *that* refers to the concept of a by-grace-salvation, for the neuter *that* “regularly takes a conceptual antecedent.”⁷² Thus, Paul does not teach here that unbelievers have no ability to believe, so that God must give them faith as a sovereignly bestowed gift.

5. The clause *by grace you have been saved* in 2:5 is expanded in 2:8: “by grace you have been saved *by faith*.” So, what is the manifestation of God’s grace in 2:5? It is God’s gracious gift of eternal salvation consisting of three parts: Christians are (a) *made alive together with Christ* (2:5b), (b) *raised up together* (2:6a), and (c) *sit together in the heavenly place in Christ Jesus* (2:6b). These three parts are a digest of God’s grace gift of eternal salvation. Moreover, and this fact is crucial, 2:8 teaches that one receives the gift “by faith.” If one is “made alive” by means of faith, then faith precedes life, or regeneration. Accordingly, the doctrine of Total Inability is a terrible skewing of the text. Ephesians 2 says nothing about God supernaturally imparting “faith” to the elect because of their Total Inability. To the contrary, Ephesians 2:1–9 declares that man receives new life and a heavenly position in Christ *by faith*—by exercising an ontological ability to believe or to be persuaded of the gospel.

Summary

The Creator possesses volition and has created man in His image; thus, it is not surprising that man too has a degree of volition. The fall of man negatively affected man’s being, but the Scripture does not suggest that this negative impact left man ontologically unable to respond to God—to make choices that position him to welcome or reject the gospel.

Like Paul did when he was an unbeliever, one must choose to stop kicking against the goads in order that the Holy Spirit may convince him of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:9–11). Such a positive exercise of volition postures a person to receive the gospel of free grace. The lost sinner thus needs the Spirit’s persuasion of the truth to be eternally saved, but that assistance is not regeneration before the moment of saving faith. The needed assistance, again, is the Spirit’s conviction—

⁷¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 3:216–17, links “faith,” not with salvation, but with the “gift of God.”

⁷² Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 334–35.

the opening of one's eyes—that one may welcome the truth of the gospel.

Badger offers this conclusion:

Man is rightly considered to be dead in sin, and by nature the child of wrath, but he still retains the image of God in his being. That image seems to carry with it an ability to believe the gospel (appropriate God's grace channeled through the message of the cross) and, by faith alone, obtain eternal life. While man is unwilling to come to God and/or earn His favor (Jer 17:9–10), he can approach Him by faith ... Since man can do that which is according to his nature [in God's image], and since his nature carries with it an innate ability for self preservation and a desire for same, it follows that man may consider the claims of the gospel and believe the message. . . . One may not reasonably argue that since man is inclined to do nothing to glorify God in his fallen state, but act only in a selfish way, his motive to believe is insufficient to attain God's approval. Man is not saved by his good motives, desire to glorify God, or any other meritorious deed. He is saved when he comprehends the consequences of his desperate fallen condition and, perhaps even selfishly and fearfully, believes in Christ alone as his only hope of eternal life. Believing in this way could by no stretch of imagination be considered meritorious. If anything, it is seen as just the opposite. It is in this context that God's grace shines for His glory.⁷³

Afterthought: Total Inability and the Mind (*nous*)

Numerous passages point out that the effects of Adam's fall affected man's ability to comprehend the things of God. The following are some examples of such impairment:

The LORD said in His heart, "I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." (Genesis 8:21)

And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting. (Romans 1:28)

The natural man [whether unbeliever or carnal believer] does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:14)

⁷³ Badger, *TULIP*, 60–61.

And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind.
(Colossians 1:21)

From such verses, some theologians draw the conclusion that the unbeliever's thinking processes are so depraved that he cannot come to know the gospel, let alone believe it.

The passages above under the heading "Texts That Show Man's Ability / Volition Toward God" reveal a genuine ability. Through creation, God reveals something of Himself to man, which man can comprehend (Psalm 19; Romans 1). God also reveals something of His moral code and implants an intuitive sense of eternity in man's heart (Romans 2:15; Ecclesiastes 3:11). Thus, depravity, though real, does not extend to blinding men to the external and internal pointers to Himself which God has given to the world.

However, the devil is busy plucking the seed of the gospel out of unbelievers' minds, and positioning a veil of darkness over their hearts, thus removing from their minds the content of what one must believe to receive eternal salvation.

The Holy Spirit frustrates the devil's evil attempt to obstruct man from faith in Christ by penetrating satanic darkness with the truth, persuading unbelievers of the gospel of free grace. Having comprehended the truth, a non-Christian may believe (Acts 16:31), or obey (Romans 6:17), thus receiving eternal life.

Conclusion

The doctrine of ontological Total Inability badly misses the mark of sound doctrine. Properly understood, man's inability is that he cannot believe the gospel because he does not *know* the gospel. He cannot welcome the gospel until someone communicates it to him, accompanied by the Spirit's illuminating or convincing ministry (cf. Romans 10:14). The business of persuading volitionally free people of the truth is the Holy Spirit's ministry to the whole world (John 16:9–11).

Appendix

Brief Exegesis of Other Key Passages

John 3:5

Jesus answered, Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

The verse states what is prerequisite for entering the kingdom of God; it does not describe the ontological condition (ability or inability) of those who enter. To the contrary, in light of 3:15–16, 18, and 36, it appears that Nicodemus *could* believe, if he would.

John 15:4–5

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

Without Him, Jesus says, believers can do nothing acceptable to heaven and thus deserving of eternal reward. Christians can do good or righteous things in the energy of the flesh that truly help others, yet without His enablement, these good works add up to burnable “wood, hay, and stubble” (1 Corinthians 3:12, 15), or “filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6). The context of John 15 neither supports nor denies the unregenerate person’s inability to believe because it speaks of believers who need to mature to “bear much fruit” (15:8). Unbelievers are not in view.

Romans 3:10–18

There is none that seeks God . . .

Some contend that the only Seeker today is Christ, who seeks sinners (Luke 19:10).⁷⁴ However, Romans 3 describes what is true of man (non-seeker) and, thus, he is guilty (cf. 3:19). Clearly the passage says none seeks, but it does not say that no one may respond because of an inherent inability. As a rule, man left to himself does not seek God, but when Christ seeks Him, intervening in his life through the Spirit’s conviction, all may and many have believed.

Romans 8:7

This verse says that the carnal mind is enmity against God and speaks of what may be true of a believer’s walk. A Christian’s progressive sanctification is the subject of the context, not an unbeliever’s total depravity.

Romans 9:16

So then it [God’s choices, or election, cf. 9:11] is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.

This passage talks of God’s choice of national Israel to a unique place in human history. Thus, this passage is important for understanding one aspect of election—the election of Israel—but does not add light to the topic of inability.

⁷⁴ Luther, *Bondage*, 278–284, argues vigorously that this passage supports the bondage of the will for he asserts that to say “man does not seek God, is the same as saying: man cannot seek God” (Ibid., 281). This is an exercise in *non sequitur* because it does not follow that since man does not seek God, he cannot. We agree that man does not as a rule, but we should not conclude that the reason man does not is because of Total Inability—this goes beyond what the Scripture says.

This passage contributes nothing to the subject of soteriology, or eternal salvation, of individuals or the Church.

2 Corinthians 3:5

Paul says that our sufficiency is of God, speaking of a believer's ability to serve, not of an unbeliever's inability to appropriate eternal salvation.

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