

Calvinism Critiqued By a Former Calvinist*

Part One

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For many years, Calvinism was at the heart of my belief system. It was unquestionable that man *could not* believe the gospel. He had a latent and inborn aversion to all things spiritual, even the gracious gospel that the common people heard gladly in Jesus' day (Mark 12:37). Man, I held, was totally unable even to cry out for mercy.

The Fall had rendered him incapable of receiving its remedy. Even his best acts were filthy rags, detestable before God. What was needed was a work of Efficacious Grace—a miracle, in fact—that would remove the heart of stone and bestow saving faith.

This I deemed “sound doctrine.” I elevated above the rabble of non-Calvinists all writers and theologians who championed it. They were somehow more worthy of respect. They had an inherently greater demand on my attention and belief. Clark Pinnock describes a similar attitude he developed in the course of his faith-journey:

Certainly most of the authors I was introduced to in those early days as theologically “sound” were staunchly Calvinistic. . . . Theirs were the books that were sold in the Inter-Varsity bookroom I frequented. They were the ones I was told to listen to; sound theology was what they would teach me.¹

* All Scripture references are from the New International Version unless otherwise indicated.

¹Clark Pinnock, *The Grace of God, The Will of Man*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989, 17.

Any Christian who dissented from my soteriology was “an Arminian,” regardless of whether that person subscribed to the issues of the Remonstrance (or had even heard of them). As with many Calvinists, my spiritual autobiography had two distinct peaks: my conversion to Christ and my subsequent enlightenment into “sovereign grace.”

This faith was highly attractive because of the men who had held it over the centuries. My spiritual pedigree contained some of the brightest lights the faith has ever known: Bunyan, Spurgeon, Edwards, Whitefield, Brainerd and the Puritans. I was in good company.

Years later, however, my interest in Anabaptism and unitarianism took me to writings that were anything but sympathetic toward Calvinism. The psychological reasons for this are understandable. Calvinists have historically been among the most vociferous critics of unitarianism. The charred remains of Michael Servetus in Calvin's Geneva bore testimony to this. For centuries after that despicable crime, Reformed pulpits have rung with denunciations of the “infidel” Socinians and unitarians.

I owe a great debt to the *Racovian Catechism* and the old American unitarians for challenging my thinking on salvation and the nature of man. They helped me see through the bigotry and the intellectual intimidation that long kept me from even peering outside the theological Geneva I was in. Such men as William Ellery Channing, Orville Dewey and George Burnap (though I cannot agree with these unitarians in all areas) moved me to seriously re-examine my beloved “five points.”

The main point at which I first questioned Calvinism is the nature of man in his sinful state. To question this point of the system is to question all of it. The last four points of Calvinism rest squarely upon the first, Total Inability. Once that dogma is removed, the entire superstructure crashes under its own weight.

For those unfamiliar with the five points, I will here briefly define them:

1. Total Inability.

Man has sunk so far through the Fall that he is no longer capable of believing the gospel. He can no more repent and believe than a dead man can rise up and walk. This is all the result of the sin of Adam, who communicated this absolute inability, this loss of free will, to all his posterity.

2. Unconditional Election.

God has, before the creation of the world, selected a portion of humanity

to be saved. This election is irrespective of any foreseen merits or faith. It is only according to the good pleasure of His will.

3. Particular Redemption.

Jesus on Calvary bore the full punishment due his elect, ensuring their final salvation. He did not die for the non-elect, who are excluded and hopelessly reprobated.

4. Efficacious Grace.

God moves upon the helpless sinner before he has a single thought of responding to the good news. Grace renews the spiritually dead will, imparts a new nature and infallibly draws the sinner to Christ. Regeneration, or the new birth, occurs *before* belief in Christ. Faith, in fact, is a gift imparted to the sinner, who is entirely passive in this act.

5. Final Perseverance.

Everyone regenerated by God's grace will persevere and be finally saved. No one who truly begins the life of faith will ever fall away and perish.

This, I believe, is an accurate portrayal of the system, free of caricature. Throughout this paper, many quotes from Calvinist authors should bear this out.

I. TOTAL INABILITY

As stated earlier, the other points rise and fall with Total Inability. They are its logical corollary. In fact, one of the attractive aspects of Calvinism is its remarkable consistency. Each point buttresses the others. That makes it fairly easy to defend. This is especially true if one grants the very first point of Total Inability. The Calvinist knows the battle is nearly won once he establishes this crucial tenet concerning man's nature. For that reason, I will spend much more time analyzing this point than the other four.

Total Inability is said to arise out of man's sinful state, his complete spiritual ruin in Eden. It has left him incapable of doing anything good, or even desiring it. Hence, he is disabled and can neither obey nor even will

to obey any spiritual command—even the invitation to receive Christ. John Calvin sums this up in stark language:

Let it stand, therefore, as an indubitable truth, which no engines can shake, that the mind of man is so entirely alienated from the righteousness of God, that he cannot conceive, desire, or design anything but what is wicked, distorted, foul, impure and iniquitous; that his heart is so thoroughly envenomed by sin, that it can breathe out nothing but corruption and rottenness; that if some men occasionally make a show of goodness, their mind is ever interwoven with hypocrisy and deceit, their soul inwardly bound with fetters of wickedness.²

As for the source of this total corruption of man, there was but one in the mind of Calvin: “the corruption by which we are held bound as with chains originated in the first man's revolt against his Maker.”³ The Fall (not a biblical term for Adam and Eve's sin) was the cause of man's inability to do any good. Every man, therefore, is born unable to respond to God. Calvinist theologian Augustus Strong notes: “Man's present inability is natural, in the sense of being inborn—it is not acquired by our personal act, but is congenital.”⁴

As with our race or eye color, our inability is a state over which we have no control.

The Calvinist, because of his doctrine of Total Inability, denies that man has a free will. All sin-born humanity, without exception, has a will wholly enslaved to doing what is wrong and unspiritual. Boettner explains this:

In matters pertaining to his salvation, the unregenerate man is not at liberty to choose between good and evil, but only to choose between greater and lesser evil, which is not properly free will. . . . As the bird with a broken wing is “free” to fly but not able, so the natural man is free to come to God but not able.⁵

²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. by Henry Beveridge, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprinted 1983, V. 1, 291.

³*Ibid.*, 273.

⁴Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology*, New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1890, 343.

⁵Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957, 62.

1. The Genesis Account

This loss of ability to receive spiritual truth is one of the consequences of original sin, we are told. If this is true, we would surely expect to find some mention of it in the Genesis account. Yet there is no record there of God imposing this curse of Total Inability on man's nature. There are other curses listed. God pronounced the death sentence, which He defined as a return to the dust (Gen. 3:19). Such language obviously denotes a physical death, not a loss of spiritual ability or a death to God.

God decreed the presence of "thorns and thistles" to make toil more difficult (v.18). He told the woman that she must endure great pain in childbearing (v.16). Both of these curses are trivial compared to what would be the most debilitating curse of all: the removal of all ability to respond to God. Of this we haven't the slightest mention. The unitarian George Burnap comments:

If this doctrine is true, God did not tell man the true penalty, neither the truth, nor the whole truth, nor a hundredth part of the truth. To have told the whole truth, according to this hypothesis, He should have said, "Because ye have done this, cursed be that moral nature which I have given you. Henceforth such is the change I make in your natures: that ye shall be, and your offspring, infinitely odious and hateful in my sight. The moment their souls shall go forth from my hand . . . if they are suffered to live, such shall be the diseased constitution of their moral natures: that they shall have no freedom to do one single good action, but everything they do shall be sin" What an awful blot would such a curse be on the first pages of Scripture!⁶

It is true that death passed upon all men through the first Adam. His expulsion from the Garden with its Tree of Life removed him from the source of immortality and made death certain. This is also true of his posterity. But the transmission of Total Inability toward God is nowhere conveyed in the text.

Two primary texts adduced to prove the doctrine of original sin (Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15) say nothing about Total Inability. Nowhere are we told that an invincible tendency to resist God was imparted to the race through the offense of one. If there were a place we would expect to find the doctrine,

⁶George W. Burnap, *Lectures on the Doctrines of Christianity*, Boston and Cambridge: James Munroe and Co., 1848, 131-132.

it would be in one of those passages dealing with the relationship between Adam and his descendants. But there is not a trace of such teaching there.

2. Original Perfection?

The Calvinist doctrine raises a more basic question for our consideration: Where do the Scriptures teach that man had a holy, pure nature that became corrupted and transmitted to his posterity? Calvinists, and most Christians for that matter, assume that God made Adam morally perfect. The London Confession of Faith presupposes this when it says that God "created man after His own Image, filled with all meet perfection of nature, and free from all sin" (Section IV). But where does the Bible convey this bit of information?

It is reasonable to affirm that Adam and Eve were created with an original *innocence*. This, however, is not the same thing as the London Confession's reference to "perfection of nature." Our first parents did lose innocence when they sinned. Their eyes were then opened to good and evil, prompting them to hide from their Creator (Gen. 3:7, 8). But it is another thing altogether to say that they fell from a state of moral perfection to total depravity.

Many of the 17th century Polish Brethren denied that God created Adam either immortal or morally perfect. A document drawn up by Faustus Socinus and others expresses this thought:

As to what pertains to the qualities of Adam before the Fall, it may be asked: (1) Whether or not he was provided with an original justice. This is to be denied; . . . For why did Adam sin if it is as they say? . . . God created nothing perfect. For if He had created anything perfect, it would never have been able to sin and the angels themselves, although by far the most noble of God's creatures, are nevertheless not perfect, because they [some] sinned.⁷

The fact that God called His creation "good" does not mean it was all morally perfect. Barnabas was "a good man" (Acts 11:24) but he certainly was not a morally perfect man. "Good" can simply mean that it was complete and suitable for the divine purpose. Ecclesiastes 7:29 states that "God made mankind upright, but men have gone in search of many schemes." But the word "upright" does not necessarily denote moral perfection.

⁷George Hunston Williams, *The Polish Brethren, Part I*, Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1980, 102-103.

It may be argued that the passages dealing with man's extreme sinfulness from birth prove the Calvinist's point. After all, how could God create beings who "drink evil like water" (Job 15:16) or who are "shapen in iniquity" (Psalm 51:5, KJV)?

While there is no denying the universal sinfulness of man, it should be noted that most of these extreme statements are from prophets and inspired poets who are expressing either outrage or brokenness of spirit. They are bold statements underscoring man's tendency to go astray. This tendency, we believe, was in Adam as well as every man who followed him. There is no exegetical reason to suppose otherwise.

The *Racovian Catechism* notes how the character of people—both good and bad—is sometimes expressed poetically in extreme speech denoting a "from the womb" condition:

David uses a certain hyperbolic exaggeration of which we have an example in his own writings (Psalm 58:3), "The wicked go astray from the womb: they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies." Similar instances are found in Isaiah 48:8, "I knew that thou wouldst deal very treacherously, and wast called a transgressor from the womb." John 9:34, "Thou wast altogether born in sins." And also, in the opposite case, Job 31:18, "From my youth he was brought up with me, as with a father and I have guided her from my mother's womb."⁸

Man is a sinner. Every person has folly bound up in the heart from earliest days (Prov. 22:15). But was Adam any different? *The burden of proof is on the Calvinists to show that he was.* The Scriptures never say so, and it is not our responsibility to prove a negative (a logical impossibility).

This is a serious difficulty. The Calvinist's entire system of soteriology is founded on the grand assumption that Adam was created morally impeccable. He lost perfection through sin and assumed a nature totally corrupted and alienated from God, a nature imparted to all mankind as a curse. But the Scriptural evidence for these contentions is, at best, scant. For the most part, the doctrine is assumed unquestionably. Adam's fall from moral perfection was established by Augustine's polemics against Pelagianism and passed on, without alteration, through the barren centuries of the Middle

⁸*The Racovian Catechism*, republished London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, Paternoster Row, 1818, 327-328.

Ages. Calvin received it *in toto* from his medieval legacy, as has each successive generation of theologians since.

A doctrine that forms such a colossal foundation-stone for the system should have *unequivocal* proof in the Bible. If a theology is based on an unproven philosophic assumption how can the rest of the system be trustworthy? The Calvinist cannot expect us to believe him unless the consistent tenor of Scripture tells us: (1) God made man morally perfect; (2) Adam's sin immediately corrupted him and rendered him unable to respond to God; (3) God transmitted this inability to all his descendants.

3. Total Inability and the Gospel

The Total Inability passed to us makes it impossible for us to comply with the command to believe in Christ. The most obvious fault with this doctrine is that it makes the gospel an unreasonable demand. How can God, who is perfectly just, "command all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30), knowing the command is impossible to obey?

This is a vexing problem for Calvinists. They will often assert that a command does not necessarily imply the ability to keep it. But the statement is certainly not self-evident. If God gives a command and threatens to punish as responsible agents those who do not comply, it certainly *does* imply the ability to obey. Orville Dewey writes:

[I]t would follow that men are commanded, on peril and pain of all future woes, to love a holiness and a moral perfection of God, which they are not merely unable to love, but of which, according to the supposition, they have no conception.⁹

That puts the Calvinist in a conundrum. Man is so corrupt, he *will not* and *cannot* obey even the slightest spiritual command nor can he appreciate or even understand it. Yet, God orders him to believe; He punishes him for not believing. As Judge of the Universe, He justly condemns the sinner for not doing what he from birth cannot do. This seems to many of us to be at loggerheads with God's revealed character.

The Old Testament demands never seemed to be presented as impossibilities for the hearers. Moses said, "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach" (Deut. 30:11). What of

⁹Orville Dewey, *Discourses and Reviews Upon Questions in Controversial Theology and Practical Religion*, New York: Charles S. Francis, 1873, Vol. III, 97.

Total Inability here? Are we to assume that all of the hearers had received the miracle of Efficacious Grace? Moses adds,

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws (vv. 15, 16).

Moses sets life and death before the Israelites for their consideration. There is no intimation there that he was speaking to people utterly incapable of complying with the commands. He presents the prospects of life and death as genuine options for them to ponder.

Joshua urged the Israelites,

Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord (Josh. 24:15).

There is nothing in Joshua's entreaty that suggests the Israelites were all unable to choose the Lord unless they first experienced an inward miracle.

Joshua did say that the people were "not able to serve the Lord" in their present sinful state (v.19). Repentance was in order. They were called upon to make a choice of the heart and turn from their evil ways. Joshua said, "throw away your foreign gods that are among you and *yield your hearts* to the Lord, the God of Israel" (v. 23). Nowhere are we left with the impression that these people were all in a state of Total Inability from birth, innately incapable of yielding as Joshua commanded. Such an idea must be read into the text. The New Testament uses the same language. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached before thousands who had gathered in Jerusalem. Luke writes, "With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation'" (Acts 2:40). Was Peter "pleading" with these people to do something they were impotent to do? He certainly gives no hint of it. Furthermore, Peter's admonition "save yourselves" would probably be viewed as less than orthodox by many Calvinists.

Jesus himself does not seem to have been a believer in Total Inability. We read in Mark 4:11, 12 that he spoke in parables as a judgment against the obstinate Jews. The purpose of parables was to keep his message from entering their ears; "otherwise they might turn and be forgiven" (v.12).

Had those stiff-necked people been allowed to hear the truth straight out, *they might have turned to receive it*. But how? Calvinism tells us that no one can turn and receive the forgiveness of sins because of Total Inability passed from Adam. There must first be an inward miracle of the heart, an "effectual call."

Calvinist preachers will sometimes say that they can never persuade natural men of the gospel no matter how openly, clearly and earnestly they may preach it. It is like presenting a sermon to a corpse—there is no response. Jesus, however, felt it necessary to obscure his message in parables to keep certain people from responding to it. Had he preached the truth openly *they could have turned and been forgiven*. This fact alone is fatal to the Calvinist dogma, for it contradicts the notion that all men have a native inability to believe.

Jesus sometimes "marvelled" at the unbelief of his hearers (Mark 6:6). But if he subscribed to and taught Total Inability, it would have been no marvel at all that men would disbelieve God.

4. The Hardened Heart

Total Inability also seems to oppose the Bible teaching concerning hardness of heart. The Scriptures warn us that those who repeatedly trifle with sin may sear their consciences (1 Tim. 4:2), render themselves past feeling (Eph. 4:19) and enter into a hardening of the heart toward God and His truth. This is not a condition of birth, but seems to be a consequence of repeated sin.

Isaiah speaks of this condition: "Why, O Lord, do you make us wander from your ways *and harden our hearts* so we do not revere you?" (Isa. 63:17). The hardening of the heart which precludes reverence of God is here described as a condition that *has come upon these people*, probably as a judgment for rebellion. But Calvinists tell us that this condition — an invincible anti-God bent — is the birth-condition of all human beings.

In Romans 1, Paul writes of men who are "without excuse" because of the manifest presence of God in the creation. He says, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (Rom. 1:21). Here we see men who *became* futile in their thinking and were *given over to* a darkened state of the heart. The Apostle is not speaking of a condition of birth, but a judgment that came upon them because of willful refusal to acknowledge the Creator.

Calvinists are hard-pressed to show how this judgment condition of darkness differs from their notions of Total Inability—a state they deem universal. Their doctrine states that *everyone is born* hardened toward God, unable to believe or take the slightest step toward Him. But if this is true, why do the Scriptures seem to say this only about *some* people?

Again, Zechariah says of rebellious Zion, “They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the Lord Almighty has sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets” (Zech. 7:12). Here, people *made themselves* insensible to the truth of God, indicating that they were not in this condition from the womb.

There is no denying that all people are born with sinful tendencies and are apt to go astray. This can be established by Scripture and experience. But it is one thing to say that all men have such tendencies and quite another to say that they are unable to respond to God. General human sinfulness differs from Total Inability. To prove the first is not necessarily to prove the second.

5. Alleged Scripture Proofs

Romans 3:10-12

There are several passages of Scripture Calvinists employ to support Total Inability. One of the prominent proof-texts is Romans 3:10-12:

There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.

The Calvinist’s main emphasis is on the fact that “*there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.*” This is supposed to be speaking of a literal condition in which all human beings are born. They cannot so much as seek God or understand Him.

This poetic “outburst,” a quote from the Psalms, has been beaten and shaped on the anvil of theology to give us a notion of Total Inability. But what is the point Paul is here making? Is he erecting the doctrine of human nature and its relation to soteriology? Not at all. His point is clearly set forth in verse nine: Jews and Gentiles *alike* are “under sin.” Sin is not peculiar to lowly Gentiles, but also afflicts the favored Jews. He proves his point by quoting Psalm 14, which at the outset tells the readers it is dealing with “the fool.”

As a poet, the Psalmist frequently bursts into hyperbole, especially when hot with righteous indignation. David is teaching the sinfulness of men, but he does so in an extravagant Hebrew idiom to get the point across powerfully. This is a common poetic device. In verse four, he says evildoers “devour my people as men eat bread.” That, of course, is not literal. David is not laying down a metaphysical doctrine that all men enter this world with a propensity for cannibalism.

This is poetic exaggeration, a common figure of speech not to be read with a slavish literalism. Other Scriptures tell us there *are* righteous men who do good (contrary to a literal reading of Rom. 3:10). Job is a perfect example: “This man was blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil” (Job 1:1). The Bible also tells us of men who sought after God and found Him. In 2 Chronicles 11:16, we read:

Those from every tribe of Israel who set their hearts on seeking the Lord, the God of Israel, followed the Levites to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to the Lord, the God of their fathers.

This is fulfillment of the oft-stated promise that “the Lord is good to those who hope in Him, to the one who seeks Him” (Lam. 3:25). The theme runs through the Bible without the disclaimer that such seeking is impossible without an inner miracle.

1 Corinthians 2:14

Total Inability is also supposed to be taught in 1 Corinthians 2:14:

For the man without the Spirit [or ‘natural man’] does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.

Calvinists will sometimes say, based on this text, that the unregenerate cannot even grasp biblical truths. But is that the idea Paul is articulating? The context does not seem to be dealing with man in his state of birth, but with the various spiritual obstacles *Jews and Greeks* face. It is particularly those who are “natural men,” men who relate to all things outside of a spiritual reference point. The words of 1 Corinthians 2:14 must be understood within the flow of 1:18 through 2:16.

Gentiles esteem the gospel as foolish because of their penchant for philosophical wisdom (1:22). Jews are repelled by the stumbling block of

the cross and their need for signs (1:22, 23). Both groups *generally* have problems that render them spiritually obtuse, driving them to the conclusion that the gospel is foolish.

All of these problems, of course, grow out of human sin. No one would deny that. But Paul is not here making a sweeping theological statement about a Total Inability in every human being. He is speaking generally of those “perishing” opposers — both Jews and Greeks — of the message. The context would certainly favor this interpretation.

Paul in other places makes general statements that we would never make absolute and theological. For example, he writes to Titus: “Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons” (Titus 1:12). The assessment is a quote from “a prophet of their own,” but the Apostle concurs in verse 13: “This testimony is true.” Is it really the nature of every Cretan who enters the world? Wouldn’t all agree that Paul is speaking generally and not absolutely about Cretans?

But what of the mention of the term “natural man” (lit. “soulish man”) in 1 Corinthians 2:14? The Calvinist assumes that which remains to be proved. He insists that Paul means man in his natural-born state. The New International Version bolsters this view by paraphrasing “natural man” as “the man without the Spirit.” But commentators are not agreed on this. William Barclay, for example, writes:

So in verse 14 Paul speaks of the man who is *psuchikos*. He is the man who lives as if there was nothing beyond physical life and there were no needs other than material needs, whose values are all physical and material. A man like that cannot understand spiritual things. A man who thinks that nothing is more important than the satisfaction of the sex urge cannot understand the meaning of chastity; a man who ranks the amassing of material things as the supreme end of life cannot understand generosity; and a man who has never a thought beyond this world cannot understand the things of God. To him they look mere foolishness.¹⁰

“Natural man,” then, need not mean “man in his native state.” The Calvinist here allows his theological presuppositions to drive his exegesis. The term can very easily be understood to mean “that man who relates to life apart from a spiritual paradigm.” Nothing in the text demands that this is a description of every person who enters the world.

¹⁰William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, revised 1975, 28.

Ephesians 2:1

Another classic proof-text is Ephesians 2:1, where Paul says that we were “dead in transgressions and sins.” The reasoning goes like this: Man is born spiritually dead. He, accordingly, cannot receive spiritual truth. Calvinists frequently will refer to man as a “walking spiritual corpse.” You can no more get a spiritually dead man to respond to the gospel than you can get a literal corpse to learn Euclidian geometry. One Calvinist author writes about Ephesians 2:1:

Now it will surely be admitted that to be dead, and to be dead in sin, is clear and positive evidence that there is neither aptitude nor power remaining for the performance of any spiritual action.¹¹

But Paul is not necessarily speaking of “spiritual death” in Ephesians 2:1. Edward White makes an excellent observation:

An almost universal custom has affixed to these expressions what is termed a spiritual sense; namely, that of alienation from God, who is the highest life of the soul, “the strength of our life, and our portion for ever.” Hence have arisen the phrases, “spiritual death,” and the “spiritually dead,” both of them without example in apostolic usage. For there seems little doubt that the mode in which the Scripture terms here referred to are handled in the “apostolic fathers,” more fully represents their real meaning than the modern application. That there is a figure in the Scripture use of the term the *dead*, cannot be disputed. But the question is: Are we to trace the figure in the *tense*, or in the *radical signification* of the terms? We submit that the figure is in the *tense*. The unregenerate men are described as *the dead*, and *dead in sins*, because they are *certain to die*, because they are under sentence of destruction, as men of mere *soul*. Thus the figure of *prolepsis* is employed in Gen. xx. 3: “God said to Abimelech, *Thou art a dead man*, for Sarah, Abraham’s wife. The Egyptians said, *We be all dead men*” (Exod. xii. 33). “All my father’s house *were dead men* before the king” (2 Sam. xix. 28). The figure in each of these instances is that of using the present instead of the future tense. The unregenerate are “as good as dead.”¹²

6. Faulty Application

One great exegetical fault of Calvinism is its tendency to take specific

¹¹Warburton, quoted by Boettner in *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 65, 66.

¹²Edward White, *Life in Christ*, London: Elliot Stock, 1878, 281.

applications of Scripture and make them universal. For example, Isaiah says, “Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness—only wounds. . . .” But the prophet is addressing apostate Israel, not making a theological statement about all men everywhere.

The same is true of the reference to “filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6), the “leopard” incapable of changing its spots (Jer. 13:23) and the antediluvians whose hearts were “only evil all the time” (Gen. 6:5). To take these texts out of their specific, contextual application and make them props for Reformed theology is proof-texting of the worst sort—an unworthy hermeneutic.

The doctrine of Total Inability is not necessitated by the Scripture and should be discarded. Any tenet that portrays God as exacting impossible demands of his creatures and punishing them for not complying is a slander against heaven. Channing notes: “It will be asked with astonishment, How is it possible that men can hold these doctrines and yet maintain God’s goodness and equity? What principles can be more contradictory?”¹³

To be concluded next issue.

¹³“The Moral Argument Against Calvinism,” *The Works of William E. Channing*, Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1889, 461.