

The New Birth

Total Depravity, pt 2

Peter Ditzel

Election and Calling

In the article, "No One Is Good" (which is part 1 of this series on Total Depravity), I asked, "If no one can choose Jesus Christ as Savior, how does He become one's Savior?" Briefly, the answer is, we don't choose Him, He chooses us.

We have no part in this choosing or election. It does not depend on our goodness, our cooperation, or our faith. In Romans 9, Paul is writing of God's calling or choosing or election of Jacob and rejecting of Esau before they were even born: "For being not yet born, neither having done anything good or bad, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him who calls" (verse 11).

To His disciples, Jesus said, "You didn't choose me, but I chose you...I chose you out of the world" (John 15:16, 19). In his second letter to the Thessalonian Christians, Paul writes, "But we are bound to always give thanks to God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth" (2 Thessalonians 2:13). This choosing was from the beginning, even before the foundation of the world: "Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4a).

We can see that because of our total depravity, we are unable to choose God, but He chooses us.

Besides choosing us from before the foundation of the world, God also calls us. How? One aspect of our calling is being called through the Gospel. Reading 2 Thessalonians 2:13 again, along with verse 14, we see Paul telling the Thessalonian Christians that they were called by the Gospel Paul preached: "But we are bound to always give thanks to God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief in the truth; to which he called you through our Good News, for the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." So God chooses us before the foundation of the world, and God makes sure that sometime in our lifetime we are exposed to the Gospel.

Let me take a moment to quote a place in the Bible where the Gospel is summarized. It is 1 Corinthians 15:1-4: "Now I declare to you, brothers, the Good News which I preached to

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you,... For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” This is, of course, only a brief statement, and the phrase “according to the Scriptures” invites us to search for more detail.

The Gospel tells us of Jesus Christ’s sacrifice as our Savior for us. The elect respond by putting their trust entirely in Jesus, by believing. Their belief is not what saves them, but it is the instrument through which they receive the salvation that Jesus has already purchased for them on the Cross. “For I am not ashamed of the Good News of Christ, for it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes; for the Jew first, and also for the Greek” (Romans 1:16). Notice that it is “the power of God for salvation” only to those who believe. Not everyone has the same reaction to the Gospel: “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Corinthians 1:18, *English Majority Text Version*). In other words, to those chosen before the foundation of the world to be saved, the call of the Gospel is the power of God; to the rest, it is foolishness. This is what Jesus meant when He declared, “For many are called, but few chosen” (Matthew 22:14).

But how is it that God’s chosen, who are sinners like everyone else, can exercise faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior?

Remember, the sin of Adam is imputed to everyone, resulting in physical death and spiritual death for all. Without salvation, spiritual death will result in eternal death—eternal separation from God (the second death). Also, all humans are depraved. As Jeremiah observed, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly corrupt. Who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). Depraved humanity stands guilty before God, everyone a condemned sinner. Humans are incapable of righteousness. Because of this corruption from conception, no one can contribute anything to his or her own salvation. If we are to be saved, we need a Savior who can do it for us.

We have inherited a nature that causes us to add our own sins to that of Adam and Eve. “For all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Besides Adam’s sin that is imputed to us, we commit our own sins. The result of these sins is also death: “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). We must not, however, forget the second half of the latter verse: “but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Nevertheless, those chosen for salvation from eternity and called by the Gospel must have a change of their sinful minds before they can believe in Jesus Christ as Savior.

The human dilemma is bleak. We can have no hope of life with God after our mortal bodies cease to function. We need to be saved from the eternal separation from God—eternal death or damnation—that awaits us. Yet due to the sinful nature, the depravity that we inherit from birth, we are utterly unable to contribute anything to our own salvation. What are we to do?

Nothing. Sovereign God must act to save us. He chose His people in eternity. He sent His Son to live a perfectly righteous life for His people and to die for His people. He makes sure

this Good News or Gospel is preached and that His people are among those who hear it. And He gives a new mind to His people, actually giving them the faith to accept Jesus Christ as Savior.

Regeneration, the New Birth

One of the facts of salvation is that nothing initiates from the man or woman. The death of Jesus Christ did not give the world wholesale spiritual understanding. All remain dead in their sins, spiritually blind, and unable to receive the Gospel (1 Corinthians 2:14; 1:18) until God initiates contact with the individual. Paul, writing of Isaiah's prophecy of God's opening salvation to the Gentiles, demonstrates that those who find God do not do so because of their own seeking: "Isaiah is very bold, and says, 'I was found by those who didn't seek me. I was revealed to those who didn't ask for me'" (Romans 10:20). In John 6:44-45, Jesus explains, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up in the last day. It is written in the prophets, 'They will all be taught by God.' Therefore everyone who hears from the Father, and has learnt, comes to me."

How can this occur? "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things have passed away. Behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17). This becoming a new creature is called regeneration. God regenerates those whom He is saving. The regenerated Christian is no longer spiritually dead. He or she has new spiritual life and is a new creation. This is why Jesus referred to regeneration as being born again (John 3:3, 7). It is a spiritual birth that imparts eternal life (John 3:8, 15; Romans 6:22-23).

Those who are born again are the children of God: "But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become God's children, to those who believe in his name: who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). The regenerated Christian actually becomes a member of the family of God with all the rights and privileges of sonship (Romans 8:15-17; 2 Corinthians 6:18; Galatians 3:26; 4:5-7). This concept of sonship is what theologians refer to under the term adoption.

Many churches understand that we must be born again. But what many today wrongly teach is that the sinner is born again after he or she in faith accepts Jesus Christ as Savior. But as we have seen, this is impossible. Believing in Jesus Christ as Savior is a good work, pleasing to God. But the natural, sinful human mind cannot please God; it cannot seek after Him.

Going back to John 1:12-13, notice that one of the three listed ways that we cannot be born again is by "the will of man." This means the individual does not have the free will to choose to be born again.

God regenerates His people as a sovereign act of His will quite apart from their wills. Prior to regeneration, their wills are corrupt because of their depravity. Before one can believe in Jesus as Savior, one must be born again as a new creature with a regenerated mind imparted with faith from God.

When we exercise this God-given faith in the atoning death of Jesus, God justifies us, declaring us “not guilty” and “righteous.” This is because Jesus has taken our sins upon Himself and paid our penalty, and because His righteousness as counted is ours. This gives us a new legal standing before God, and we have peace with Him (Romans 3:28; 5:1; Galatians 2:16; 3:24).

It is important to know that being born again is a change that takes place in us: justification, on the other hand, is a judicial act that takes place outside of us whereby God judges us not guilty because Jesus has paid the penalty for our sins and His righteousness is imputed to us.

In John 3:3, Jesus tells Nicodemus, “Most certainly, I tell you, unless one is born anew, he can’t see God’s Kingdom.” Some people who think we can choose to be born again seem to have forgotten that a baby is entirely passive in its birth—it cannot choose to be born.

In verse 8, likening the Holy Spirit to the wind, Jesus speaks of God’s sovereignty in this matter: “The wind blows where it wants to, and you hear its sound, but don’t know where it comes from and where it is going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.” Notice that “the wind blows where it wants to,” not where people exercising some kind of human-originated faith want it to blow. (A literal translation of the Greek, found in *The Interlinear Greek-English New Testament*, 3rd and rev. ed. [Lafayette, Ind.: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1996] translates John 3:8 as follows: “The Spirit breathes where He desires, and you hear His voice; but you do not know from where He comes, and where He goes; so is everyone who has been generated from the Spirit.” This translation, which still conveys the idea of God’s sovereignty and man’s inability, may very well more closely convey Jesus’ idea. The words for wind and Spirit are the same in the original Greek, as are the words for blow and breathe.)

In Acts 16:14, we read of Lydia, “whose heart the Lord opened to listen to the things which were spoken by Paul.” God had to act first so that she could receive the Gospel.

In Romans 9:15–16, Paul writes, “For he said to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who has mercy.” Neither willing nor running (that is, neither the will of man nor the works of man) determines who will receive God’s mercy. It is the sovereign act of the sovereign God.

God’s sovereignty in the Holy Spirit’s work in regeneration is seen in the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:3–23. A farmer or gardener knows that although some seed may fall on the footpath and be eaten by birds, and some may fall on stony ground where it cannot take root, and some may fall among weeds where it will be choked out and die, only the seed that falls on soil prepared before sowing by plowing to remove the weeds and soften the soil will take root, grow, and produce fruit. The Holy Spirit prepares God’s chosen people so that when they hear the Gospel, it falls on deeply worked “earth” and takes root.

Regeneration does not rid us of our depravity. Upon regeneration, we have new spiritual life that was not there before; where we were once dead spiritually and wholly given over to carnality, we now have life. But while there is no partial regeneration—we are either

regenerated or we are not—we will, as long as we are in this flesh, find ourselves at war against our sinful flesh.

Yet, through regeneration, the Holy Spirit immediately imparts new habits that God will develop in our Christian life. The late Christian philosopher and theologian, Gordon H. Clark, wrote of this:

Now, then, unregenerate humanity sins habitually. Not only are the overt actions sinful, but even those acts which most people would not call sinful, are so because of evil motivation.... Then the Holy Spirit comes upon this individual and instills into him different habits. These new habits, though they may and will develop by practice, are not produced by practice. The Spirit immediately forms the habit for him. Such is regeneration.... The regenerated sinner now has desires and thoughts he never had before.... The Holy Spirit has regenerated us and changed our mind.

Gordon H. Clark, *The Holy Spirit*
Hobbs, N. Mex.: The Trinity Foundation, 1993, 34

What I have said about man's total depravity might sound new to some readers. But it is not new. It is the teaching of the Bible. It was believed and taught by early Christians for centuries, and it was one of the foundations of the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther's book, *The Bondage of the Will*, is a rebuttal of the error that man's will is free to choose good. Luther, who lived in the sixteenth century, understood that man's will, apart from the liberating grace of God, is in bondage to sin.

Also in the sixteenth century, John Calvin wrote in his *Commentary on Romans*, "But let us observe here, that the will of man is in all things opposed to the divine will; for as much as what is crooked differs from what is straight, so much must be the difference between us and God." He also described all humans not regenerated by God as "abominable before God" and "without any spiritual life." In his *Commentary on Titus*, he wrote, "It is therefore the Spirit of God who regenerates us, and makes us new creatures...the Spirit is bestowed on none but those who are the members of Christ." Such teachings that were emphasized for centuries are now rarely, if ever, mentioned.

In the nineteenth century, the well-loved Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon, in a sermon titled "All of Grace," said, "The man believes, but that belief is only one result among many of the implantation of divine life within the man's soul by God Himself. Even the very will thus to be saved by grace is not of ourselves, but it is the gift of God."

I wonder how many people who believe they have been born again have only had a fleshly reaction to an emotional message in church. Churches with altar calls (which, by the way, have no biblical precedent and seem to have been invented in the nineteenth century by the evangelist Charles G. Finney) especially can produce this reaction as they usually hold to the belief that the decision to be saved is up to the individual. Thus the preachers give emotion-

laden messages to try to persuade their listeners to make a decision for Christ “today” or “tonight” and wind up “saving” many people who are as unregenerate when they leave church as when they walked in. (If the Gospel is preached as a part of the message, some may truly be saved, but this would have occurred without the pleading and the altar call with their consequent cost of so many false conversions.)

Contrary to this mistaken belief, being born again or regenerated is a sovereign act of God through the Holy Spirit that takes place in our minds before we even know it. The realization of our being born again may be an emotional experience, but that is only an effect of what has already taken place.

If people were not regenerated by God before believing in Jesus Christ as Savior, they would have a part in causing their salvation. Someone could boast, I was good enough or smart enough to accept Jesus Christ as my Savior. But the Bible says no one can make such a boast:

You were made alive when you were dead in transgressions and sins.... But God, being rich in mercy, for his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)...for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared before that we would walk in them.

Ephesians 2:1, 4-5, 8-10

All humans are totally depraved and unable to earn any merit with God by seeking Him. He chose us (those who are His elect) from before the foundation of the world, He gave His only begotten Son for us, He makes sure we are presented with the Gospel, and He—through a regeneration of our minds that makes us a new creature—gives us the faith to accept the Gospel.

We are truly His workmanship because our salvation is all of His sovereign grace.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ; even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and without defect before him in love; having predestined us for adoption as children through Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his desire, to the praise of the glory of his grace, by which he freely gave us favour in the Beloved.

Ephesians 1:3-6