

# Depravity Defined

by Daniel Steele

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*The sermon critiques the author's definition of 'depravity' and argues that it is inconsistent with Christian theology and the Bible.*

**Scripture:** Romans 6:6, Philippians 1:6, 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 12:14, 1 John 1:7

**Topics:** "Original Sin", "Entire Sanctification"

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## Description

Daniel Steele preaches against the use of the term 'Original sin,' advocating for the term 'hereditary depravity' instead. He challenges the idea that depravity continues until the resurrection, emphasizing the need for entire sanctification and the completion of Christian character in this life. Steele critiques the belief that depravity inheres in the spirits of believers even after death, questioning the necessity for its continuance and highlighting the importance of purging all remnants of depravity through sanctification.

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## Transcript

THE author of Growth in Holiness has great aversion to a phrase in the Articles of Religion of his own Church, "Original sin." Even contempt seems to mingle with his abhorrence. Hear him:

In the light of the truths now enunciated, it will, we trust, be fully seen how unphilosophical, inaccurate, and in every way objectionable is the antiquated phrase, 'Original sin.' It is quite time that this misbegotten and utterly misleading term, together with its partners, 'birth sin' and 'inbred sin,' was dismissed to the museum of theological curiosities, where alone at present it belongs.

Since "original sin" is not a biblical phrase, and since it always needs to be declared guiltless when used by Arminians and modern Calvinists, it would be both convenient and edifying to use another term. I would substitute "hereditary depravity." Many, in modern times, have substituted "depravity." We find no fault with the author under review for doing the same. But with what meaning does he use it? It might be asking too much to insist that it should mean all that original sin means minus voluntariness and guilt. This, then, would be the definition: "The corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually." We believe that this is not too dark a description of fallen human nature. But since it has an archaic sound, and its literary form may be modernized and improved, it would be natural for a writer whose only aim is the truth to turn to his dictionary and find a definition in which the reputable use of the whole English-speaking world is crystallized thus by Noah Webster:

DEPRAVITY: The state of being depraved or corrupted; a vitiated state of moral character general badness of character; wickedness of mind or heart; absence of religious feeling and principle.

This definition would compel an orthodox writer, who believes that death ends probation, to teach the total elimination of depravity before death, or, at least, at death, and not at the resurrection of the just. In other words, it would require belief in entire sanctification and the completion of Christian character this side of the grave. On this point both branches of orthodoxy agree, Calvinism and Arminianism.

Now, if a religious teacher should attempt to prove that depravity "cannot be absolutely removed in this life," but must continue "till glorification," it is certain that he could not use Webster's definition, which the whole English-speaking world approves. He must invent one of a much milder type, a depravity which does not soil the white robe of St. John while, in the intermediate state, he walks arm in arm with Christ, and is called worthy, and which does not falsify the assertion of St. Paul, "To depart and to be with Christ is very far better." For our author astonishes us when he says: "We deny that the removal of all depravity in this life is one of the gifts of God to us;" "All depravity cannot be absolutely removed in this life."

This is his formal definition:

Depravity is that abnormal or disordered condition of human nature wherein we are no longer in harmony with God or with ourselves, as we were originally made, but have so strong a leaning toward self-indulgence that we are easily brought into disobedience to the divine commands.

There are several defects in this definition of a term substituted for original sin.

1. There is no hint of its Adamic origin. It could have been expressed in this one word, "hereditary." In justice to the author, it should be said that this idea is admitted in his discussion. Its absence from the formal definition gives it a Pelagian aspect.

2. Again, it will be noted that there is a studied avoidance of any term expressive of inherent taint requiring purging, such as is expressed in the standard definition quoted, in the terms "corrupted," "vitiating," and "badness." There is absent the idea that human nature is in ruins. This gives the definition the appearance of modern liberalism, which teaches that the evil in human nature is only skin deep, and is readily cured in the lavatory of Boston culture, as I have heard the poet Saxe sing

Who's born in Boston needs no second birth.

It is unjust to the public to void a term of its fundamental and essential meaning and then use it in its emasculated signification, although you give notice of the robbery you have committed. It is too much to ask the public to forget the established meaning accepted by the English-speaking races and to learn the novelty invented by a solitary individual.

The public will not accept any such innovation. If he should say that depravity, in his definition, is predicated of the body as well as the soul, we reply that if he will look in his dictionary again he will find that "depravity is a term that applies only to the mind and heart." Cicero insists that the same limitation pertains to pravitas, from which depravity is derived. It is a perversion of good English to speak of the depravity of a corpse. If, therefore, Christians have depravity till their bodies are raised and glorified, it must inhere in their disembodied spirits. The agency of the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, it seems is insufficient to purify them in this life and in the life to come, between death and the sounding of "the trump of God." Where is the scriptural proof that the Holy Spirit will cleanse our spirits then? Where is the proof

that the dead in Christ will need any such office of the Spirit? What are we to understand by "the spirits of just men made perfect? " The Greek assures us that the meaning is not that the spirits were perfected after departure from the body, but that we shall come to the spirits of perfected just men, perfected in this life. If it is said that Christ at his second coming will eliminate the taint of depravity, we ask for the proof text which teaches that he will dishonor the Spirit to whom he has committed the sanctification of believers, by depriving him of this office and by himself becoming the sanctifier. I have yet to find the first Scripture proof of either the justification or the sanctification of a soul after the second advent of Christ. This is our standing challenge to premillenarians of every stripe.

3. This definition voids the term of all moral significance. Methodism teaches that no offspring of Adam is born in guilt because of the redemptive work of the second Adam, whose atonement unconditionally avails to cover all entailed evil. We teach that God, in the atonement, has begun to save the entire race, and that he will fail of his gracious purpose only where he is obstructed by human wills persistently rejecting his Son. We teach that infants are saved through the atonement purifying their natures. There is no hint in this definition of anything needing the cleansing efficacy of the atonement. The discussion limits it to actual sin. I infer from this book that half of the human race -- for half die before they are twelve months old -- will be saved on the ground of natural justice, wholly independent of the atonement, not needing the Sanctifier procured by the blood of Christ, and that they will not be found in the company of the bloodwashed, nor will their voices be heard in the new song in which this strain of praise to the Lamb is the loftiest: "Thou hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation."

The author says:

We inherit a germ of evil; our moral nature is wrong or wrung or twisted.

This is orthodox. But what power is there in the Gospel that will straighten out these moral kinks and destroy this germ of evil? There is no such power in this world, nor in the world to come, till the resurrection. The statement that the atonement covers only voluntary sin excludes dying infants from its benefits. For the continuance of depravity till the resurrection Drs. M. Raymond and D. D. Whedon are quoted. The former speaks only of the physical and intellectual effects of the fall, and not of proneness to sin; and probably the context would show that this is the meaning of the latter, and that both agree with R. Watson that

entire sanctification, or the perfected holiness of believers, is our complete deliverance from all spiritual pollution, all inward depravation of heart, deliverance from all inward and outward sin.

In Dr. Whedon's note on 2 Cor. vii, 1, he says:

We may note that a perfected holiness is here represented as a possible attainment; that it is the result of a properly directed activity; and that its attainment is not to be delayed until death, but is to be realized and possessed during the Christian's life.

This indorses John Wesley's doctrine, and manifestly contradicts the idea that depravity continues till the resurrection, an error which Dr. Whedon's name is brought forward to sustain. The necessary continuance of depravity till glorification is argued from the intimate connection of mind with matter. Bishop Brooks is quoted as saying:

Every man has in his bodily constitution the physical basis of the most subtle and transcendent parts of his profoundest life. There is a physical basis to his most spiritual life . . . . A man thinks well and loves well and prays well because of the red running in his blood.

Of course, others are prayerless, curse, and swear because the red in their blood is lacking. This is surrendering human freedom and moral accountability to the determinism of materialism, already exploded by Balfour and other recent writers. This is the acceptance of the waning fatalism of Herbert Spencer, Huxley, and Buckle; in order to prove the falsity of Wesleyan Christian perfection. It is more than orthodoxy can afford to yield. It betrays Christianity to what Carlyle calls "the dirt philosophy."

I am addressing a company who cherish the orthodox and very comforting belief that between death and the resurrection we shall be in conscious bliss in Paradise, the antechamber of the heaven of the glorified saints. According to the teaching of this book we must still have depravity inhering in our spirits or in our confined dust, or in both. If in our dust, will our spirits be perfectly void of depravity or will it still cling to them? This is a question in which I feel a personal interest, for I am expecting soon to travel out of the body and to be at home with the Lord. Several questions arise. Will my post-mortem depravity be fixed in amount, or will it be capable of increase? If so, I may be overcome by it, fall into sin, and in the resurrection arise not with the just but with the unjust.

On the other hand, if it is capable of decrease, what helps shall I have to hasten this minimizing process, and what promises can I plead? What motive will prompt and sustain my endeavor when I know that it is a task that will not be accomplished by all my efforts, it being set down in God's almanac as an event that will take place on the morning of the resurrection, and then only.

But if the author means that death is an effect of sin, and that we will not attain perfect manhood till soul and body are reunited in the glorified body, as we all believe and teach, why not say so in terms that everybody can understand? Why scare good people with this bugbear of depravity continuing till the resurrection? From the frequency with which the author reiterates this proposition of the continuance of depravity till the last gravestone of the righteous is overturned, we infer that it is with him a favorite and delightful topic of contemplation. But this is a natural sequence of his rose-colored view of depravity as

a derangement, that is all -- a change in the relative order of strength, a disturbance of the equilibrium, a different combination of the same things, no addition or subtraction being required for the restoration of the full image of God.

The consciousness of every believer sooner or later testifies to the felt need of both subtraction and addition. He feels that the old man inside, though bound by regeneration, is still capable of making much trouble, and there is a fear lest he may break his chains and grasp his scepter again. He feels that heaven and hell are having a Gettysburg battle within him and longs for auxiliary troops on the right side, and for the destruction of the evil forces.

In proof of the doctrine that there is always, after every sanctification, a residue of depravity left hidden away from consciousness to be purged out at some future time when discovered, so that there is "less and less of self " but never complete extinction of the self-life, a familiar verse of Miss Havergal is quoted:

Perfect, yet it floweth

Fuller every day;

Perfect, yet it groweth

Deeper all the way.

This beautifully illustrates the growth of the spiritual life after the destruction of proneness to sin and the crucifixion of self. The rest of the stanza implies:

Like a river glorious

Is God's perfect peace,

Over all victorious

In its bright increase.

This hymn was written eleven months after her experience of the complete cleansing of her heart thus beautifully described:

'The blood of Jesus Christ his son cleanseth us from all sin.' I see it all and I have the blessing. It has lifted my whole life into the sunshine to which all my previous experiences were but as pale and passing April gleams compared with the fullness of the summer glory. It was on Advent Sunday, December 2, 1873, I first saw the blessedness of true consecration as a flash of electric light.

This was the golden milestone of her Christian life. Two months after this she wrote the consecration hymn,

Take my life, and let it be

She had already realized her aspiration --

None of self, but all of Thee,

If any reader wishes to see how wide of the mark the author of this book is in quoting this angelic poetess to disprove entire sanctification in this life, let him read the following stanza, written in 1877:

I know the crimson stain of sin,

Defiling all without, within;

But now rejoicingly I know

That he has washed me white as snow,

I praise Him for the cleansing tide,

Because I know that Jesus died.

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