

PREPARATION

Take time to look at the chapter titles for chs 1-5. This section sets out Calvin's doctrine of the presence and effects of sin in human nature. We usually refer to this as 'Total Depravity'. However, not everyone thinks that 'total' is an appropriate term because it tends to make us think that people are as bad as they can possibly be. This is evidently not the case because all who go to hell will be worse there than they are here.

'Total' when it is used with 'depravity' means that no aspect of human nature is unaffected by sin. The effects of sin are seen throughout our lives. Whatever we do is corrupt in some way, either because it is an act of rebellion or defiance against God, or it falls short of God's standards or both. Even if we think of an individual action as 'good' it will be traceable to corrupt motives.

I recommend David Calhoun's Worldwide Classroom lecture for an overview of these chapters.

If you want some experimental (and amusing) evidence for Calvin's claim that human beings are unbelievably prone to flattery, try putting 'how many people think they are above average' in an internet search engine such as Google.

EXPLORATORY

1. What, *valuable precept*, ought we, *more diligently...avoid applying perversely?* (241, 2)
 - a. *...knowledge of self*

In what way have, *certain philosophers*, fallen foul of this requirement?

- a. *...certain philosophers, who, while urging man to know himself, propose the goal of recognising his own worth and excellence. And they would have him contemplate in himself nothing but what swells him with empty assurance and puffs him up with pride [Gen 1:27].*

How are we to practice the diligence required to keep us from copying this error? (242, 7ff & 13ff)

- a. *...first...considering what we were given at creation and how generously God continues his favour toward us*
 - b. *Secondly...call to mind our miserable condition after Adam's fall.*

What will we learn from reflecting on, *what we were given at creation?* (242, 9f)

- a. *...how great our natural excellence would be if only it had remained unblemished.*

How can we call to mind the thought of our original excellence without becoming proud? (242, 11ff)

- a. *...bear in mind that there is in us nothing of our own, but that we hold on sufferance whatever God has bestowed upon us. Hence we are ever dependant on him.*

What should be the effect of calling to mind our miserable condition after the fall? (242, 14ff)

- a. *...the awareness (of our miserable condition after Adam's fall), when all our boasting and self-assurance are laid low, should truly humble us and overwhelm us with shame.*

Calvin has already asserted that, *certain philosophers*, err in that they would have us contemplate in ourselves nothing but what swells us with empty assurance and puffs us up with pride (242, 4ff). What, in Calvin's view, should we think of as, *the great nobility of our race (which distinguishes us from brute beasts)?* (242, 16ff)

- a. *...in the beginning God fashioned us after his image [Gen 1:27]*
- b. *...we have been endowed with reason and understanding so that, by leading a holy and upright life, we may press on to the appointed goal of blessed immortality.*

How will we know if we are calling these two things to mind properly? (242, 28)

- a. *From this source arise abhorrence and displeasure with ourselves, as well as true humility; and thence is kindled a new zeal to seek God, in whom each of us may recover those good things which we have utterly and completely lost.*

2. What is the alternative to advancing in true self-knowledge? (243, 28)

- a. Being *...plunged into the worst ignorance.*

What does, *God's truth* require us to seek in examining ourselves? (242, 35ff)

- a. *...it requires the kind of knowledge that will:*
 - i. *...strip us of all confidence in our own ability;*
 - ii. *...deprive us of all occasion for boasting;*
 - iii. *...lead us to submission.*

Why is it, *more pleasing*, to us to, *weigh our good traits rather than to look upon our miserable want and dishonour?* (242, 43ff)

- a. *There is, indeed, nothing that man's nature seeks more eagerly than to be flattered.*
- b. *...since blind self-love is innate in all mortals, (we) are most freely persuaded that nothing inheres in (us) that deserves to be considered hateful.*
- c. *...even with no outside support the utterly vain opinion generally obtains credence that man is abundantly sufficient of himself to lead a good and blessed life.*

There are those who take a *more modest attitude*. What do they concede? (243, 9f)

- a. *...something to God, so as not to appear to claim everything for themselves*

Nonetheless, those who take this *more modest attitude* still go astray. How do they do this? (243, 11ff)

- a. *...they so divide the credit that the chief basis for boasting and confidence remains in themselves.*

(We are familiar with the two labels, 'Calvinism' and 'Arminianism'. The term Arminianism would have been unknown to Calvin, as Arminius was not born until 1560, only four years before Calvin's death.

We generally think that the issue at stake in the Calvinist/Arminian debate is predestination but this is really more of a by-product of the way we answer the central questions, which are what has man now become as a result of the fall, how does that differ from what we were originally and how can we, now that creation is under a curse, live Christlike lives? From early times, there had been those who insisted that men and women had not lost the ability to turn, unaided by any form of divine intervention, to God and to live in obedience to his will. In other words, we retain enough spiritual life to save ourselves, along with the responsibility to exercise it.

This position originally became identified with Pelagius, a highly persuasive ascetic Christian from the 4th and 5th Centuries, originally from Britain or Brittany. Hence the name by which it is frequently known – Pelagianism. Pelagius was condemned as a heretic, meaning that most of his writings have become lost and that we rely on his opponents, principally Augustine, for descriptions of his views. Pelagius was accused of teaching that God's involvement in our holiness was limited to teaching us his law. Further involvement on God's part was neither available nor required. Observing his 'Christian' contemporaries, Pelagius was shocked by their lack of morality, tracing this to their views of the role played by God's grace in producing holiness [sound familiar?]. It is said that he found Augustine's words: *Give me what you command and command what you will*, which are quoted approvingly by Calvin, particularly offensive because in his view they implied that we are no more than automatons.

Pelagianism exists in more than one form. Pelagius's opponents ascribed a particularly strong view to him. A more moderate view, that says we need God's grace to live a holy life but that the operation of grace depends on our co-operation, is known as semi-Pelagianism. Probably in most cases the Arminianism that we encounter is semi-Pelagian.

We must never lose sight of the fact that, for Calvin, the **whole** point of religion is that it should produce in us conformity to Christ. How will that conformity take place? Am I to exercise my own willpower in order to produce holiness, with God's involvement being limited to that of teacher (Pelagianism)? Or does virtue require the grace of God *combined with* my willingness to co-operate (semi-Pelagianism)? Alternatively, am I to rely *solely* on God's transforming power? Is it somehow a combination of all three? If I am to rely solely on God's transforming power does that mean that any failure on my part to be Christlike is God's fault, not mine?

So, there are really a lot of practical consequences bound up in how we view the fall and its results.

The need for, and the role of, predestination becomes clearer as we answer these questions.)

3. In what respect does God's truth, *agree with the common judgment of all mortals*, and in what respect does it disagree? (243, 30ff)
 - a. *God's truth, therefore, agrees with the common judgment of all mortals that second part of wisdom consists in the knowledge of ourselves;*
 - b. *...yet there is much disagreement as to how we acquire that knowledge*

What, *according to carnal judgment*, are the marks of true and thorough self-knowledge? (243, 34ff)

- a. Confidence in our own *...understanding and uprightness*
- b. Boldness born of this confidence in our own *...understanding and uprightness*. This boldness shows itself in:
 - a. Urging ourselves to *...the duties of virtue*
 - b. *...declaring war on vices*
 - c. Endeavouring to exert ourselves with all our ardour toward the excellent and the honourable.

What, according to *the standard of divine judgment*, are the marks of true and thorough self-knowledge? (244, 1ff)

- a. We find, *nothing to lift (our) heart(s) to self-confidence*, to the extent that we become, *utterly deprived of all such assurance*, leaving *nothing to (ourselves) with which to direct (our lives) aright*.

In this far from encouraging state, what would God have us call to mind in order that we might be truly aroused to *a zeal for righteousness and goodness*? (244, 6f)

- a. *...our original nobility, which he had bestowed upon our father Adam*

How does this recollection *arouse in us a zeal for righteousness and goodness*? (244, 8ff)

- a. *...we cannot think upon either our first condition or to what purpose we were formed without being prompted to meditate upon immortality, and to yearn after the kingdom of God.*

How can we think about our original endowments, status and purpose without being lifted up with pride? (244, 13f)

- a. *For what is that origin? It is that from which we have fallen.*
- b. *What is that end of our creation? It is that from which we have been completely estranged*
- c. *...sick of our miserable lot we groan, and in groaning we sigh for that lost worthiness*

What two-fold division does Calvin propose to help us get things clearly ordered in our minds? (244, 20ff)

- a. *...let us divide the knowledge that man ought to have of himself:*
 - a. *First, he should consider for what purpose he was created and endowed with no mean gifts*
 - b. *Secondly, he should weigh his own abilities – or rather, lack of abilities.*

What effect will considering *for what purpose (we were) created and endowed with no mean gifts*, produce? (244, 22ff & 27f)

- a. *By this knowledge (we) should arouse (ourselves) to meditation upon divine worship and the future life.*
- b. *The first consideration tends to make (us) recognise the nature of (our) duty.*

What effect will weighing our *own abilities – or rather lack of abilities*, produce? (244, 25ff & 28f)

- a. *When (we) perceive this lack (we) should lie prostrate in extreme confusion, so to speak, reduced to nought.*
- b. *The second consideration (tends to make [us] recognise) the extent of (our) ability to carry it (ie, our duty) out*

The Institutes opens with the assertion that almost all that we need to know can be summed up under two headings – the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves. Book 1 has really been taken up with the knowledge of God that we, as creatures, would acquire from creation if sin had not entered in. He turns in Book 2 to the knowledge of ourselves.

In acquiring self-knowledge it is important that we do not flatter ourselves. Remembering what we were originally created with and what we were originally created to be and comparing ourselves as we now to that high standard is the way to avoid self-delusion and pride.

The remainder of Book 2 is taken up with an examination of the processes whereby our present condition came about and is perpetuated from generation to generation.

4. Calvin opens this section by asserting that *God so severely punished Adam's sin*, noting that *...Adam's desertion...enkindled God's fearful vengeance against the whole of mankind*. What has he written thus far in this section that indicates how severely Adam's sin was punished? (243, 38ff)

- a. *...he who scrutinises and examines himself according to the standard of divine judgment finds nothing to lift his heart to self-confidence. And the more deeply he examines himself, the more dejected he becomes, until, utterly deprived of all such assurance, he leaves nothing to himself with which to direct his life aright.*

...we must consider what kind of sin there was in Adam's desertion. What kind of sin was there in it? (245, 19f, 24, 25, 28ff, 34, 35f, 36ff, 43ff; 246, 2f, 10)

- a. *...pride was the beginning of all evils*
- b. *...unfaithfulness*
- c. *...disobedience*
- d. *...the first man revolted from God's authority because:*
 - a. *...he was seized by Satan's blandishments*
 - b. *...contemptuous of truth, he turned aside to falsehood*
- e. *Holding ...God's word in contempt*
- f. *Unfaithfulness...was the root of the fall*
- g. *...thereafter ambition and pride, together with ungratefulness, arose*
- h. *Adam by seeking more than was granted him shamefully spurned God's great bounty...To have been made in the likeness of God seemed a small matter to a son of earth unless he also attained equality with God – a monstrous wickedness!*
- i. *...it was not simple apostasy, but was joined with vile reproaches against God...assented to Satan's slanders, which accused God of falsehood and envy and ill will.*
- j. *Lastly, faithlessness opened the door to ambition...ambition was the mother of obstinate disobedience*
- k. *...he...disbelieved God's Word.*

As far as human behaviour is concerned, what has been the long-term consequence of Adam's rebellion? (246, 3ff)

- a. *...as a result, men, having cast off the fear of God, threw themselves wherever lust carried them.*

Had God equipped Adam and Eve to face temptation? (246, 10ff)

- a. *Here, indeed, was the best bridle to control all passions: the thought that nothing is better than to practice righteousness by obeying God's commandments; then, that the ultimate goal of the happy life is to be loved by him.*

5. How does Calvin define spiritual life? (246, 16f)

- a. *...it was the spiritual life of Adam to remain united and bound to his Maker.*

In what did the death of Adam's soul consist? (246, 17)

- a. *...estrangement from him.*

What part of man died? (246, 18, 27)

- a. *...his soul.*
- b. *...the heavenly image*

Who and what suffered in consequence of Adam's sin? (246, 18ff, 24ff, 32f)

- a. *...he consigned his race to ruin by his rebellion...*
- b. *...he perverted the whole order of nature in heaven and on earth.*
- c. *...the curse...is spread to all his offspring*
- d. *...all the regions of the world*
- e. *...he also entangled and immersed his offspring in the same miseries*

How do we know that nature has been affected? (246, 20f)

- a. *"All creatures," says Paul, "are groaning" {Rom 8:22}, "subject to corruption, not of their own will" [Rom 8:20].*

Is it just that the whole creation is cursed as a result of man's sin? (246:22ff)

- a. *...there is no doubt that they are bearing part of the punishment deserved by man, for whose use they were created.*

What conclusion does Calvin draw from the fact that the material creation suffers as a result of Adam's fall? (246,24ff)

- a. *Since the curse, which goes about through all the regions of the world, flowed hither and yon from Adam's guilt, it is not unreasonable it is spread to all his offspring.*

Was God just to curse everything and everybody in this way? (246, 26)

- a. *...it is not unreasonable*

How does Calvin describe the punishment suffered by Adam and all his offspring? (246,29ff)

- a. *...in place of wisdom, virtue, holiness, truth and justice...there came forth the most filthy plagues, blindness, impotence, impurity, vanity and injustice.*

Calvin now alludes to a controversy that has existed among Christians for many centuries. What is it? (246, 34f)

- a. *...inherited corruption, which the church fathers termed, "original sin"*

Are we meant to understand from the fact that sin is original that it existed in us from the beginning? What did the church fathers mean by 'sin' in this phrase? (246, 35f)

- a. *...the depravation of a nature previously good and pure.*

Why does this contention exist? (246, 37ff)

- a. *...nothing is farther from the usual view than for all to be made guilty by the guilt of one, and thus for sin to be made common.*

Pelagius was a powerful opponent of the Biblical doctrine. Wherein did his error consist? (247, 3f)

- a. *Adam sinned only to his own loss without harming his posterity.*

Had Satan succeeded in his aim of covering up the disease of original sin, what would he have achieved? (247, 5f)

- b. He would have rendered it incurable.

How did Pelagius attempt to get round Romans 5:12? (247, 8f)

- a. *Pelagius quibbled that it (sin) was transmitted through imitation, not propagation.*

What does Romans 5:12 really teach, contrary to the teaching of Pelagius? (247, 10f)

- a. *...we are corrupted not by derived wickedness, but that we bear inborn defect from our mother's womb.*

What words of David agree with Romans 5:12? (247, 16f)

- a. *David confesses himself to have been "begotten in iniquities, and conceived by his mother in sin" [Ps 51:5]*

What was David's reason for saying this? (247, 18f)

- a. *...he does not reprove his father and mother for their sins; but, that he may better commend God's goodness toward himself, from his very conception he carries the confession of his own perversity.*

In what way do we share in this same status with David? (248, 1ff)

- a. *...all of us, who have descended from impure seed, are born infected with the contagion of sin. In fact, before we saw the light of this life we were soiled and spotted in God's sight.*

6. How does the apostle Paul make it clear that Adam was not only the progenitor of the human race but also its root and that his corruption and the curse that came upon creation as a result of Adam's rebellion involved us all? (248, 13)

- a. *...from a comparison of Adam with Christ*

If the Pelagians are correct in asserting that our guilt arises from our imitation of Adam rather than from his rebellion what would be the implication for how we come to participate in the righteousness of Christ and all the blessings that flow from that? (248, 18ff)

- a. *Then (would) Christ's righteousness benefit us only as an example set before us to imitate. Who can bear such sacrilege?*

Does Christ's righteousness, and thereby life, come to us by our imitation of Christ? (248, 20ff)

- a. *...it is beyond controversy (according to Romans 5:12 and 5:19, which Calvin quotes later) that Christ's righteousness, and thereby life, are ours by communication*

248, 22f What was lost in Adam and can only be recovered in Christ? (248, 21)

- a. *...righteousness, and thereby life*

What crept in through Adam, only to be abolished in Christ? (248, 23)

- a. *...sin and death*

How does Calvin sum up the parallels between Adam and the Lord Jesus? (248,27ff; 249, 14ff)

- a. *Here, then, is the relationship between the two: Adam, implicating us in his ruin, destroyed us with himself: but Christ restores us to salvation by his grace.*
- b. *Christ himself, our heavenly judge, clearly enough proclaims that all men are born wicked and depraved when he says that, "whatever is born of flesh is flesh" [John 3:6], and therefore the door of life is closed to all until they have been reborn [John 3:5].*

7. There is a debate between Traducianism and Creationism – the two possible views (for Christians) of the origin of individual souls. However Calvin makes clear in 249, 26ff that we should be concerned about more important things, more practical things, than such debates.

(If you want to familiarise yourself with this controversy, the footnotes on pp 191 and 249 sum up well the two positions and Calvin's own creationism.)

Rather than being distracted by obscure and probably unanswerable questions about the creation or derivation of the soul what should we focus on if we want to promote piety? (249, 22ff)

- a. *With this we ought to be content: that the Lord entrusted to Adam those gifts which he willed to be conferred upon human nature. Hence Adam, when he lost the gifts received, lost them not only for himself but for us all.*

On whose behalf did Adam receive the gifts that constituted the image of God? (250, 2f)

- a. *...they had not been given to one man but had been assigned to the whole human race.*

What two pictures does Calvin use to describe the loss of those gifts by Adam?

- a. He was *despoiled*. (Spoil is goods taken from an enemy as a result of overpowering him. The picture here is of Adam being overpowered and robbed by his enemy Satan. The image, although a good one, breaks down in that Satan was not in any way enriched by those things that Adam lost.)
- b. He was *...infected with sin*.

What consequences for humanity ensue from each of the above analogies?

- a. *...human nature was left naked and destitute.*
- b. *...contagion crept into human nature.*

From what constituent parts of man does the contagion transmitted from parent to child **not** arise? (250, 13)

- a. *...the substance of the flesh or soul*

To what does the contagion in each of us owe its origin? (250, 14f)

- a. *...it had been so ordained by God that the first man should at one and the same time have and lose, both for himself and for his descendants, the gifts that God had bestowed on him.*

Let's recap at this point. So far we have seen the importance of:

- a. Understanding ourselves as sinners by nature;
- b. Tracing the origin of our sinfulness back to the very first sin committed by Adam in the garden of Eden and our relationship to that sin because of our relationship with Adam;
- c. The complexity and enormity of that first human sin;
- d. We are now spiritually naked, destitute and infected with contagion;
- e. The transmission of those characteristics is universal, proceeding not from our physical relationship to our parents but from God's ordination, that Adam should be endowed with and lose the image of God not just for himself but for all who descend from him.

8. In what way is Calvin going to build on the above foundation in this section? (250, 31)

- a. *...let us define original sin*

Bypassing the definitions given by others, Calvin goes straight to his own.

What are the two characteristics of original sin? (251, 3)

- a. *...a hereditary depravity...of our nature*
- a. *...a hereditary...corruption of our nature*

Where, within us, can these two characteristics be found? (251, 4)

- a. *...all parts of the soul*

What are the two consequences of original sin for us? (251, 4ff)

- a. Each of us is personally *liable to God's wrath*;
- b. Original sin *...brings forth in us those works which scripture calls "works of the flesh" [Gal 5:19]*

What two things must we distinctly note? (251, 12ff & 39ff)

- a. *First, we are so vitiated and perverted in every part of our nature that by this great corruption we stand justly condemned and convicted before God, to whom nothing is acceptable but righteousness, innocence, and purity.*
- b. *Then comes the second consideration: that this perversity never ceases in us, but continually bears new fruits – the works of the flesh that we have already described – just as a burning furnace gives forth flame and sparks, or water ceaselessly bubbles up from a spring.*

Sticking with the first notable thing, which is the corruption of our nature, Calvin says that we are not to understand this simply as though we, guiltless and undeserving, somehow bear the guilt of Adam's offence. How, then, was Adam's transgression the fall of the entire human race, why is Adam *said to have made us guilty*? (251, 20f)

- a. *...we through his transgression have become entangled in the curse*

As well as brining us into a state deserving of punishment, what else has Adam bequeathed to us? (251, 22ff)

- a. *...a contagion imparted by him resides in us, which justly deserves punishment*

How does Calvin understand that part of Romans 5:12 that says that *"death has spread to all because all have sinned"*? (251, 29f)

- a. *...they have been enveloped in original sin and defiled by its stains*

What does this help to explain with regard to infants? (251, 30ff)

- a. *...infants...are guilty not of another's fault but of their own.*

What, precisely, are they guilty of? (251, 33ff)

- a. *...even though the fruits of their iniquity have not yet come forth, they have the seed enclosed within them. Indeed, their whole nature is a seed of sin; hence it can only be hateful and abhorrent to God.*

Turning now to the second notable thing, how does it help us with the objective of this section, which is to define original sin (250, 31)? (251, 43ff)

- a. *...those who have defined original sin as "the lack of the original righteousness, which ought to reside in us," ...have...not expressed enough its power and energy.*

What concept, expressed by the word, *concupiscence*, does Calvin prefer? (252, note 16)

- a. *The law of sin in our sinful flesh.*

9. What constituent parts of Adam's nature were involved in the first sin? (252, 15ff)

- a. Adam's:
 - i. *...appetite*
 - ii. *...mind*
 - iii. *...the depths of his heart*

Paul, in his discussion of a corrupt nature condemns – what? (253, 6ff)

- a. *...the inordinate impulses of the appetites*
- b. *...the mind...given over to blindness*
- c. *...the heart to depravity*

The remedy for sin and its outworking in our lives is described in a way that shows it has infected us extensively. What words are used for the remedy? (253, 10 & 17)

- a. *...renewal*
- b. *...transformed in newness of mind*

How does Calvin regard the mind, prior to its being taken over by sin? (253, 18f)

- a. *...that part in which the excellence and nobility of the soul especially shine*

10. Footnote 19 on p253 suggests that Calvin may have in mind in this section the Libertines. The Libertines were those in Geneva who opposed the Reformation under Calvin. They were a thorn in Calvin's side throughout his time in Geneva, actually succeeding in having him exiled from the city in 1538. They were very influential in the city councils up to 1555. They are strongly implicated in Servetus's arrival in the city in 1553, possibly hoping that he would unseat Calvin and take his place.

What do we learn about the position of the Libertines from this section's opening sentence? (253, 28f)

- a. They used the reformer's view of human nature to suggest that God was responsible for their behavior.

How does Calvin sum up their method? (253, 30ff)

- a. *They perversely search out God's handiwork in their own pollution, when they ought rather to have sought it in that unimpaired and uncorrupted nature of Adam.*

When confronted with this charge what further position did the Libertines have recourse to? (253, 36f)

- a. *God could have provided better for our salvation if he had forestalled Adam's fall.*

What considerations does Calvin produce, in response to this statement? (253, 37ff)

- a. *Pious minds ought to loathe this objection because:*
 - i. *It manifests inordinate curiosity;*
 - ii. *...the matter has to do with the secret of predestination*

How do we avoid making God responsible for our sins? (254, 4f)

- a. *Let us accordingly remember to impute our ruin to depravity of nature, in order that we may not accuse God himself.*

11. In this section Calvin further clarifies precisely what he means by sin being in our nature.

Why is it impossible that God could have created mankind under his wrath? (254, 25f)

- a. *How could God, who is pleased by the least of his works, have been hostile to the noblest of all his creatures?*

FOR REFLECTION

1. If we are reading these Q&As we probably share Calvin's view of God's truth (242, 34). Do we conform to what God's truth, *requires us to seek*, as far as our self-knowledge is concerned?
2. Why is it important to start to know ourselves by considering what we were when created before considering what we are now?
3. 1 Corinthians 7:14. What does 'sanctified' mean in this verse?
4. Calvin speaks of those who, failing to recognise that humanity as it now exists is not the same as humanity as originally created, effectively make God, as creator, responsible for all human behavior on the premise that all behaviour arises from inbuilt principles. In what areas of current behaviour analysis can we see this approach at work?