

THE MEANING OF DEPRAVITY:
HOW THE MAJORITY OF SOUTHERN BAPTISTS INTERPRET IT

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How do most Southern Baptists interpret the word "depraved," particularly with reference to the depravity of mankind as discussed by the Apostle Paul in Rom. 1:28? The Greek word Paul employs is *adokimos*, which is routinely translated depraved (NASV), base (RSV), and reprobate (KJV).

While word studies are necessary and helpful, they are rarely the final court of appeal when one is engaged in biblical interpretation, which is known as hermeneutics. Southern Baptists have long championed the grammatical-historical method of interpretation, recognizing that word definitions are simply one of several integral elements to be included, along with other components, in order for sound interpretation to occur. Most would agree that the single most important element in the interpretive process is context.

Generally speaking, there are two schools of thought regarding human depravity. The first says mankind's mind was damaged as a result of Adam and Eve's sin. The second says mankind's mind was not only damaged, but that it was also destroyed such that it became totally depraved and incorrigibly unreliable as a result of Adam and Eve's sin.

The late John P. Newport, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy of Religion, Emeritus, Southwestern Baptist

Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas, representing evidential apologetics and the dominant Southern Baptist position, argued that humans can indeed grasp knowledge about God despite being hampered by finiteness and sin.¹ Conversely, Cornelius Van Til, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, teaches that, because of the destructive effects of sin, unsaved mankind cannot understand the world as it really is. Even though God has shed his light throughout the created order, the minds of unsaved humanity are so radically darkened in sin that they cannot see spiritual truth;² yet, the Holy Spirit will enable the "elect" and only the "elect" to respond to the Gospel. On his own, man is so totally depraved, says Van Til, he cannot even respond affirmatively to God. This definition of depraved uses the word "totally" and means precisely that. Proponents of this view contend that mankind's reasoning capabilities were utterly destroyed, not merely damaged, such that God must do everything in order for one to be saved; he must even orchestrate the response of the individual.

As stated above, context is the key hermeneutical (interpretive) element. Romans 1:24-32 clearly discloses that

¹John P. Newport, *The New Age Movement and the Biblical Worldview: Conflict and Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 601.

²Ibid.

people, long after Adam and Eve, did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer (v. 28). "Exchanging" (v. 24) means they tested God at first and had knowledge of him, but consciously rejected truth and enthusiastically received lies. A description such as this accurately summarizes an individual's life as one which becomes hardened by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:13); the heart does not start out this way. Paul concludes that intentional casting down of God in the mind (v. 28) results in depravity. This means that anarchy and chaos come from a mind that removes God from its knowledge. In estrangement from God, speculation displaces perception, and most are keenly aware that religious speculation is legion in today's world. It is at this point that one is given over to do what is improper, and Paul unswervingly denounces homosexuality as improper (vv. 26-27), citing this sinful activity as one classic example of depraved individuals who have been turned over to the darkness of unrestrained impulses.

Still, a depraved mind, even that which manifests itself in the vilest of ways, is not such that it cannot respond to God's grace. Van Til's concept of all people being born with his definition of a totally depraved mind due to Adam and Eve's sin simply does not square with the contextual definition presented by the Bible in this passage of Scripture. Depravity does not erase innate (inborn) knowledge of God, nor does depravity render

one unable to respond to God's grace. While it is true that all have sinned and fall short of God's splendor and perfection (Rom. 3:23), and in this sense all have mind's damaged both by Adam and Eve's sin and one's own sin, the human mind is not destroyed such that it cannot respond with faith in Christ Jesus, thus accepting God's provision of grace. Sadly though, many show no interest in God's grace until tasting of sin's disgrace. This is unquestionably the majority interpretation among Southern Baptists, and throughout the evangelical community as a whole, regarding the biblical meaning of depravity.