

CHRISTIAN HUMANISM

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INTRODUCTION

Definition of Terms

In this paper by humanism we mean an appreciation for the dignity of man as originally created and as subsequently restored by God. It is a humanism which regards man as unique in all of creation: he is not a stone, an animal, or even an angel but a man. By Christian we mean to develop that type of humanism which recognizes the necessity for seeing the restoration of man's true greatness as achieved only through the redemptive work of Christ in history.

Among the representatives of a Christo-centric humanism we note the names of Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Francis Schaeffer.

Karl Barth

By the grace of God, therefore, man is not nothing. He is God's man. He is accepted by God. . . . We cannot say and demand and expect too much or too great things of man when we see him as He really is in virtue of the giving of the Son of God, of the fact that God has reconciled the world to Himself in Christ.¹

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to make something of oneself (a sinner, a penitent, or a saint) on the basis of some method or other, but to be a man—not a type of man, but the man that Christ creates in us. It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life.²

Francis Schaeffer

I am convinced that one of the great weaknesses in evangelical preaching in the last few years is that we have lost sight of the biblical fact that man is wonderful. We have seen the unbiblical humanism which surrounded us, and to resist this in our emphasis on man's lostness, we have tended to reduce man to a zero. Man is indeed lost, but that does not mean he

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1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, p. 90.

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, p. 190.

is nothing. We *must* resist humanism, but to make man a zero is neither the right way nor the best way to resist it. You can emphasize that man is totally lost and still have the biblical answer that man is really great. In fact, only the biblical position produces a real and proper humanism."³

THE ESSENTIALS OF A CHRISTIAN HUMANISM

A Recognition of God's Original Design for Man

"The true dignity of man is taught nowhere as effectively as in the Scriptures."⁴ According to the Genesis accounts of creation man alone was created in God's image. In chapter 1 he is presented as that toward which all aims: in chapter 2 that from which all begins.⁵ Having been made in the very image of his creator he has been placed as King over the earth and told to subdue it and exercise dominion over it (Gen. 1:28). Whatever else this concept of the *imago dei* may mean, one thing seems clear, it is bound up especially with his dominion over the rest of creation.⁶ At least one important way in which man was to reflect the glory of his creator was by responsible obedience to the cultural mandate. Moule appropriately states,

The Bible regards it as man's duty to use nature, not to abstain from using it; but that he must use it as a son of God and in obedience to God's will; and that his use or abuse of nature has far-reaching results in the whole structure of the world, inanimate as well as animate.⁷

Psalm 8 speaks clearly of this nobility of man. It is a hymn of praise setting forth the glory of God as it is revealed in the creation and unique position of man, the chief of God's creatures. After the Psalmist asks, "What is man?", the response comes, "Thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet." (RSV).

Now although this psalm has unmistakable Messianic overtones (Matt. 21:16; Heb. 2:6-8), it should be understood that its initial and primary reference was to man as originally created, man in his moral and spiritual uprightness (Eccl. 7:29). But what the "first Adam" (I Cor. 15:45) failed to realize the "last Adam" accomplished. Since the fall the true nature of the original Adam has been manifested in Jesus Christ.

3. Francis Schaeffer, *Death in the City*, p. 80.

4. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms*, p. 100.

5. These two accounts of creation are not contradictory but complimentary. Chapter 1 is an over all account; chapter 2 is a more specialized account of the creation of man—male and female. See E. J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, pp. 120-123.

6. On the meaning of the *imago dei* see G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* and Motoko Iwai, *The Importance of the Reformed Concept of the Imago Dei for the Construction of a Christian Humanism* (unpublished master thesis; Wheaton Graduate School).

7. C. F. D. Moule, *Man and Nature in the New Testament*, p. 2.

Contrary to Barth's contention, prior to the fall such knowledge was and still is obtainable from the Genesis record independently of Christ. We must not ground our anthropology exclusively on Christology anymore than we may our bibliography on Christology.⁸ But if in Psalm 8 "the true dignity of the first Adam is strongly set forth, the whole description obviously finds its fullest realization in Jesus Christ."⁹ This is the point of the writer in Hebrews 2:6-8.

The opening statement of verse 5 is "a comprehensive breathtaking emphasis: 'Thou didst make him lack but little of God.'"¹⁰ Despite the fact that the LXX and AV have substituted the word "angels" for "God" (*elohim*) we would prefer to render *elohim* in its more usual meaning "God"¹¹—though this is an admittedly difficult problem. But even if we were to translate it "angels" man's superior position over the earth is still definitely established.

Erich Sauer properly observes that these words of Scripture "call him to progressive growth in culture."¹² He then well states the implications of this divine call.

Far from being something in conflict with God, cultural achievements are an essential attribute of the nobility of man as he possessed it in Paradise. Inventions and discoveries, the sciences and the arts, refinement and ennobling, in short, the advance of the human mind, are throughout the *will of God*. . . . On the contrary what the Bible rejects, and what is opposed to God, is not culture in itself but the estrangement of millions of its representatives from God, the separation of sinners from heaven, lack of consideration for one's neighbors, the spirit of arrogance and rebellion, in brief, the revolt against the Most High. But the call to be ruler signifies a vocation to advancing civilization and is a God-given regulation in creation.¹³

The central tragedy of a naturalistic or secularistic humanism is its complete elimination of the idea of God and the supernatural. Man as his own god has become the measure of all things.

An Understanding of Man's Fallen State

If we are to construct a truly Christian Humanism we must not only see man in his original unfallen state as an image bearer of God, destined to reflect the glory of his creator through a life of obedience as vicegerent over the earth but we must also see him as one who has rebelled against his Creator and thus made of himself a mad man. Naturalistic or secularistic humanism not only denies the reality of God and the

8. Karl Barth, *CD*, III, 2, pp. 27-54.

9. Leupold, *Psalms*, p. 101.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

11. Mitchell Dahood in *The Anchor Bible Series*, Vol. 16, renders it, "the gods," p. 48. *The New English Bible* renders it, "a god."

12. Erich Sauer, *The King of the Earth*, p. 81.

13. *Ibid.*, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*.

supernatural but it also denies the concept of the utter sinfulness of man. It views *fallen* man as the measure and center of all things and since it focuses on the fallen man this humanism is developed at a fallen stage.

“The sin of man is the pride of man.”¹⁴ It is that act whereby man endeavors to dethrone God and deify himself.

He sins in that he rejects the confidence that God is the source of all goodness and good to man, that the right which God demands from him is that which alone is right for himself, for the maintenance of his life and the fulfilment of his destiny, and that it is the good pleasure of God to demand this right from him. Sin is therefore unbelief—man’s most inward apostasy from that which is most inward and proper to the being and existence and all the works of God.¹⁵

It is the damning error of man that he should believe that in his being in himself, his self-hood, he may love, will and assert himself in such a way as to realize what it means to be truly man. This purely naturalistic humanism is reflected in such a song as “Within You Without You” performed by the Beatles in the album entitled, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. In describing the conflict between selfishness and the supposed selflessness of our true self George Harrison writes:

We were talking—about the love we all could share—when we find it.

To try our best to hold it there—with our love.

With our love—we could save the world—if they only knew.

Try to realize it’s all within yourself—no one else can make you change.

And to see you’re really only very small, and life flows on within you and without you.¹⁶

“Try to realize it’s all within yourself.” But what does the Bible teach is within fallen man? The prophet Jeremiah summarizes the answer forcefully, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). (By the word “heart” here is meant the total nature of man not the emotions as in contrast to the intellect. As Gordon Clark states, “The term *heart* in reality means the self, or with some colloquial emphasis, one’s deepest self.”¹⁷) Thus the prophet would have us to understand that fallen man in his deepest self is devoid of all moral and spiritual virtue; he is totally depraved; that is, the principle of sin inherited by virtue of our fall in Adam, has pervaded every aspect of our being. Sin has drastically effected the functioning of the intellect (I Cor. 2:14), the operation of the will (Rom. 6:17, 20;

14. Karl Barth, *CD*, IV, 1, p. 413.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

16. Robert Heyer, ed., *Discovery in Song*, p. 68.

17. Gordon M. Clark, *Religion, Reason and Revelation*, p. 93.

8:7-8) and the emotions (Prov. 2:14). Man in his fallen state simply does not have *agapaic* love within himself, such is only a gift of God through His Spirit to those who are in Christ (Gal. 5:22).

Koheleth (The Preacher of Old) concluded a segment of his reasoning on the meaning (or perhaps we should say, the meaninglessness) of life by stating, "Behold, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many devices" (Eccl. 7:29). Hengstenberg interprets these words to mean that although God created man in a state which was in adequate correspondence with the divine standard, he has been led into speculations (thinking) which is turned away from God.¹⁸ "Since the fall man has forgotten that he should in the first instance take up a receptive position, in relation to the *another sophia*, and that such a position is the only right one; but instead of that, he goes hunting after his own phanstastic and high-flown thoughts."¹⁹

Since a naturalistic or secularistic humanism does not reckon either with the fact of man's dependence upon his Creator or with the fact of his being a covenant-breaker it can only lead to a tragic disillusionment at the end of the road. Man is completely incapable of finding personal fulfillment and of establishing a social utopia through his own efforts. The most basic human problems cannot be solved through education but only through regeneration. And yet today we are witnessing the revival of a "new humanism."

Walter Starche in his new book entitled, *The Ultimate Revolution*, argues that through the evolutionary process man has at last become *fully* human. With the realization of this fact man may now make great strides in solving his problems through the application of his reason and a breakthrough into the fourth dimension—a breakthrough in which he discovers that God is really within him, that indeed man is really God.

Starke maintains that the significance of Jesus is that He was one man whose advent disclosed the first fully human being. Jesus is the initial representative to the western world and Buddha to the East. Jesus is reduced to a mere man though an ideal man: He is classed along with Buddha. Thus although Starke has a Jesusology it is clearly of an un-biblical nature and therefore his humanism is secularistic, with a tinge of mysticism.²⁰

Radical theology is also decidedly humanistic. In the book entitled, *The Death of God Debate*, William Hamilton is answering a series of thirty-two questions concerning the radical theology states in regard to question four—"Isn't radical theology just another form of humanism?—It is humanism, if humanism means a belief that there are no viable objects of loyalty beyond man, his values, his communities, his life. But

18. Ernest W. Hengstenberg, *A Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, p. 189.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190.

20. Walter Starche, *The Ultimate Revolution*, pp. 13-19.

it is Christian humanism.”²¹ To this answer one can only respond by asserting that although radical theology is admittedly humanism in a new suit it is emphatically not Christian. Again the Jesusology upon which it is based is absolutely foreign to the New Testament picture of Jesus. Only that which accords with the biblical portrait of Christ may be truly called Christian.

An Acceptance of Christ's Redemptive Work

The true dignity of man is realized only in Christ. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews teaches this most clearly in 2:6-9. Verses 6-8a portray the ideal man, 8b the fallen man, and 9 the restored man. The first section sets forth the idea that though man is reduced for a season below the level of angels, he is yet destined to occupy the highest place among the creatures of God. The second section indicates that the present fallen state of man is one in which that ultimate goal has not yet been achieved—“We see not yet all things put under man.” When we ask why this delay in the final fulfillment of God's purpose for man the answer though not given in this immediate passage, is nonetheless clear throughout the Bible. Man refused to obey his Creator. Instead of being a king he became a slave. The third section then shows how fallen man may be restored to his original ideal state and therein achieve God's ultimate purpose. This critical change is wrought by Christ.

William Barclay beautifully summarizes the movement of thought in this passage. He states,

In this passage there are three basic ideas. (i) God created man, only a little less than Himself, to have the mastery over all things. (ii) Man through his sin entered into frustration and defeat instead of mastery and dominion. (iii) Into this state of frustration and defeat came Jesus Christ, in order that by His life and death and glory, He might make man what man was meant to be.²²

The challenge of Christianity is that of a call to man to become a real man in Christ. Man must come to understand not only that there is no necessary conflict between his desire for self-fulfillment and Christianity, but that indeed only Christianity can provide the way to such self-fulfillment. The Christian is one who realizes that Christ is the secret to a meaningful life here and hereafter.

He knows that he must diminish so that God may increase—but more and more he realizes that it is not a question of self-annihilation but of the pure exercise of a freedom which, by opening up man to infinite Love, assures his full development both in time and in eternity.²³

21. Jackson Lee Ice and John J. Carey, eds. *The Death of God Debate*, pp. 214-215.

22. William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, p. 17.

23. Michel Quoist, *Christ Is Alive!*, p. 33.

The message of Christian humanism is that that original image of God which had been hopelessly defaced through sin may now be restored by faith in Jesus Christ. Paul states, "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29). And again, "But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit" (II Cor. 3:18). The challenge of a Christian humanism is forcefully expressed by Michel Quoist, "It is not in being different from men that a Christian is a Christian; it is in being more a man than other men."²⁴

24. *Ibid.*, p. 56.



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