

The Doctrine of Man

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For several centuries now, man never tired of studying himself and his behavior. Biologist and medical researchers are learning more and more about the marvelously complex functioning of the human body. Psychologists have gained important insights about human behavior and its link to the mind and central nervous system. Sociologists have documented the impact of peer groups and the institutions of society on human conduct. Anthropologists have gathered information about the values of many cultures and have compared their life-styles.

Political and economic systems like communism, socialism, capitalism, and democracy are grounded in a set of beliefs about the nature, motivation, purposes, and destiny of humankind. Likewise, poets, authors, playwrights, philosophers, and theologians operate with a mental image of humankind.

In the midst of this attention to humankind, many have lost sight of and failed to give attention to the Christian doctrine of man. Secular theories have been in vogue. As with all fads, one theory after another has achieved prominence only to be challenged, discredited, and replaced.

Most images of man, religious and secular, attempt to answer the following questions about man.

1. What is the origin of humankind?
2. What is the nature of humankind?
3. What causes human conduct?
4. What is the source of man's problems?
5. What is man's condition?
6. What is the solution to his problems?
7. What is the purpose of human existence?
8. What is the destiny of man?

By way of example, here are some of the diverse answers to the third question. Our actions are determined by our genetic makeup and the chemistry of our bodies. Our actions are determined by stimuli received from our social environment. Our actions are the result of the pursuit of our economic interests. Man is a free moral agent; his actions are the consequence of his rational choices. Many other answers could be cited, but these illustrate the varied beliefs about man's nature and conduct which are subscribed to in our world.

There are at least four reasons why the doctrine of man is of paramount importance. First, the great ideological battle between the East and West centers on conflicting images of man and of ultimate reality. Communist ideas about the nature, conduct, purpose, and destiny of man are in conflict with Christian views. Second, the laws and norms of any society are grounded in its understanding of the nature of God and man. Consider in statutes concerning child abuse, capital punishment, or rape. These are framed with a doctrine of man in mind. Third, the way one person treats another grows out of what he believes about God and man. Finally, the feelings a person has about himself as a person are rooted in his doctrine of man.

If you will reflect on the four points just made, you will agree that the two most important sets of beliefs we hold are the doctrine of God and the doctrine of man. These beliefs affect many other beliefs and practices. Therefore, our task of answering the eight questions raised previously is a critical one. What response do Baptists and other Christians make to the eight questions? A brief, succinct reply is found in our most recent statement of faith, “The Baptist Faith and Message.” In answering the eight questions we will draw on it and on the Scriptures. As you study these answers compare them to the answers you hear at coffee break, on the golf course, at the dinner table, at the board meeting, in the courtroom, on your favorite TV shows, on the Saturday morning cartoons, from the pulpit, or in the classroom.

1. What Is the Origin of Mankind?

“The Baptist Faith and Message” statement responds to this question with these words, “Man was created by the special act of God, in His own image, and is the crowning work of His creation.” This statement finds its biblical basis in Genesis 1:26-30; 2:5,7,18-22. This statement is in contrast to a secular position that seeks the origin of man in the blind processes of evolution. This view holds that humankind just happened by chance.

For more than a century the traditional understanding of the biblical statement about the origin of man has been under attack. Archaeologists have found evidence of mankind’s existence far earlier than had been thought possible by using the biblical chronology. Critics have cited similarities between the biblical and the Babylonian accounts of creation. Others claim to find two distinct accounts of creation in Genesis (1:1 to 2:3 and 2:4-25).

How have Christians responded to this questioning of their traditional interpretations? Many have turned a deaf ear and have held tenaciously to the old view. Others have attempted to harmonize these findings with the biblical account. Still others have asserted that the evidence is inconclusive. They declare that their faith is grounded in the life, work, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They do not concern themselves with the historical accuracy of Genesis 1 and 2. Rather, they affirm the theological truth of the Genesis account and of the faith statements cited. Because of their faith in Jesus they can readily affirm that God created humankind in his own image as the crown of creation. They do not think the mechanics are important. They contend that the Bible deals with “who” and “why” questions. They are willing to leave the “how” questions to science.

Whatever response one makes, we can surely agree that man is a special creature of a powerful, purposive God. This affirmation is the foundation to the Christian response to the other seven basic questions about man.

It is also the basis for affirming the dignity and worth of humankind. Any view of humankind that is not grounded in the belief that man was created in the image of God is placed in a logically untenable position if it attempts to affirm the worth and value of mankind. How can a person have intrinsic worth if he is a product of chance? The door is wide open to tyranny, abuse, and exploitation. The source of worth must be the Creator. True humanism is Christian humanism.

The same is true of human rights. Any statement of man’s essential and inalienable rights must find its foundation in the act of man’s creator. God grants us rights. Neither worth nor rights can be conferred on humankind by the blind chance of evolution. Any theory, doctrine, or

image of man that does not begin with the creative act of God is destined to have a low view of man. The strength of the Christian doctrine of man is that it declares that man was created by God in his own image.

2. What is the Nature of Humankind?

The Genesis story tells of God forming man's body from the "dust of the earth," just as he formed the animals (Gen. 2:7,19). The *body* is a wondrous creation. Not only do its many parts normally work in harmony, but is also equipped with drives that assist in its maintenance and with senses that help it enjoy its surroundings.

Man also has a *mind* that helps him recall what he has experienced in the past and projects himself into the future. With his ability to reason he can solve problems and pursue goals (Gen. 3:1-6). He can create, invent, and discover. Mind and body are closely tied, and consequently emotions sometimes rule logic.

A third quality of man's nature is the *conscience*. Man has an inborn sense of oughtness. Through a process called enculturation, specific content (the norms and values of one's culture) is given to the conscience. Man can use his conscience to evaluate his motives and actions as being right and wrong, good or bad (Gen. 3:1-7).

Further, man is endowed with a *will* or volition. This is a capacity to organize one's resources to pursue a goal or to flee danger (Gen. 3:1-6).

But if God had given man only body mind, conscience, and will, he would be little different from certain animals. Two other statements of Genesis become important for us here. Man was created in the image of God (1:26). God breathed into man "the breath of life" and "man became a living soul"(2:7). Theologians have long debated what these statements mean, but certainly they suggest man's unique spiritual qualities (John 4:24). Although as flesh man is a creature of time and space, in his spiritual dimension he, like the wind, transcends these limits. Man can communicate with God, spirit to spirit; we can experience a vital closeness with others; we can even take a critical, reflective look at ourselves.

A note of warning: Remember that man is a totality, a unity. Flesh and spirit are both parts of the whole person. Both have vital functions. For the body and the spirit of a man to be in conflict is abnormal and unnatural (Rom. 7). Be careful of the error the Greeks, who split the person into parts.

Five characteristics are universally present in normal people—body, mind, conscience, will, and a spiritual dimension. That is not all. When one considers the nature of God's personhood, he finds that God is characterized by greatness, goodness, love, and freedom. It seems to follow logically that if man was created in "the image of God," in his original state, that time prior to the fall into sin, man was also great, good loving, and free. These qualities were demonstrated by man's dominion over the animals, his early acceptance of God's commands and his dependence upon him, his sociability, and even his ability to make the terrible choice to disobey God. Later we'll consider how these qualities were defaced, misused and abused by sinful man. Then we will learn that God plans for the restoration of these qualities.

One final point needs to be made about the nature of humankind. Genesis 2:18-24 states beautifully that man needs to be with others, has sociability. Man is created to have fellowship and to live in cooperative harmony with others.

Although we share a common nature, we develop into distinct persons. Each body is different in small ways from any other. So is each social environment, each set of relationships, and each stream of experiences different. Each biography is unlike any other. This is true because of the character of human conduct.

3. What Causes Human Conduct?

This is the question on which the social and behavioral sciences have focused. In this they build on and respond to a long and rich tradition of inquiry in philosophy, literature, and in theology.

Is it possible for man to be a totally rational being who logically chooses his course of action in terms of universally valid values and goals? Or is man more like a rat who runs through a maze, his choices already determined by rewards and punishments built into the system?

Midway between these rationalist and behaviorist theories of human conduct lies a third view. It sees man as more like the actor in a play who finds the stage set already in place and the plot sketched out, but who can exercise some freedom of choice in how he plays out his roles and in the goals he seeks for himself in and beyond the role. This approach, intentionality, sees man as determined yet free.

Study the account of one of the first important acts of man, noting which of these three theories best explains it. Read Genesis 3:1-7. Eve's choice was not absolutely predetermined. She might have chosen not to disobey God. On the other hand, her choice was not absolutely rational and free and unaffected by her surroundings. She was influenced, pressured, and appealed to by a skillful tempter. Apparently, God thought she was free to choose, because he held her responsible (Gen. 3:14-19) as he punished her. Standing as we do on the other side of the Fall, we live in a corrupted society peopled by sinful persons. We might even claim that our situation is more desperate than Eve's. Yet God still holds us responsible for our conduct. We are without excuse (Rom. 3:8-23). It seems that what happened is most like the explanation offered by intentionality.

Actually, human conduct can be divided into two broad categories. One is immediate response to the demands of the present situation, as in the case of Eve's temptation. The other is the type of activity in which one plans and pursues a project. There is a sense in which the actor can express greater freedom in the second type of conduct. It is likely that he will have more options open to him.

Conduct involves five steps. First, one evaluates the situation. An evaluation is an interpretation in terms of one's priorities and values. In Eve's case, her evaluation was influenced by another, the serpent. Second, one considers his options or alternative courses of action. Third, one may play through each option mentally to see what its probable consequences might be. This would lead to a reevaluation and the choice of an appropriate or fitting act (response of project depending on which type of act it is). Fourth, the act is done. Fifth, the actor evaluates the rightness or wrongness, the goodness or badness of his act. He may learn from his evaluation and may perform more effectively when he encounters a similar situation.

For the Christian, it follows from this bare outline of human conduct that all conduct has a moral dimension. The Christian believes that he is responsible not only for the consequences of his acts but also for his evaluation of the situation and for his awareness of and choice of

options. This means that his values must be those that God holds and that his priorities must conform with the will of God.

4. What Is the Source of Man's Problems?

Although man was intended by God to live in harmony with others, bonded by acts of cooperation and love, when one looks about himself or within himself, he finds hate, envy, greed, pride, selfishness, and violence. What happened?

Sin! Genesis 3 and 4 tells the story. The intended relationship between God and Man is one of trust and obedience. But the serpent encouraged Eve first to distrust and then disobey God. And she did. And Adam did. And so did their children, and their children's children. Soon man's activities and relationships could be characterized by God as evil and violent (Gen. 6:11).

Most, if not all, sin is characterized by selfishness. Selfishly, Eve and Adam wanted to define good and evil for themselves—certainly an act of disobedience and rebellion. Selfishly, Eve and Adam wanted to be on a level of equality with God—certainly an act of pride. Selfishly, Eve and Adam wanted to taste of the fruit because it looked so tasty—certainly an act of lust. And when their son Cain made a sacrificial offering to God, he brought not his best but his excess (Gen. 4:3)—certainly an act of sloth.

Note how man's nature became infected by sin. Bodily drives are misused. The mind plots evil. Conscience is ignored. The will pursues disobedience. Soon the spirit of man turns to the worship of false gods. The qualities of character are perverted. Man tries to make himself great (Gen. 11:4). He wants to define good for himself (Gen. 3:1-6). He perverts love (Gen. 6:1-4). And, of course, he trades his freedom for enslavement to sin (Gen. 6:11). The character of social relationships has changed (Gen. 4:9-10). Man may not be totally depraved as the older theologians put it. But depravity has permeated every aspect of his nature.

A second point can be made about the sins reported in Genesis 3 and 4. The things desired are not wrong. The problem lies in the way they were sought. We must know good from evil. But let us depend on God to define it for us. Jesus taught that we are to be perfect, like our heavenly Father (Matt. 5:48). However, it is a likeness of a child, not a usurper. Even Jesus recognized his subordination to God the Father (Luke 2:49; Phil. 2:6-11). God created us and the world so that we might appreciate its beauty. He gave us senses and bodily drives for our protection, our maintenance, and our enjoyment of life. But we are to master these drives and senses, not they us. The Christian life is a mixture of pleasure and discipline. Neither must be inordinate. And God expects us to rest. He did. But often our resting slips over into sloth. When we fail to carry out God's commands and his will for our lives, we fall into sin.

To comprehend this point more fully, study the temptations of Jesus as recorded in Matthew 4:1-11. Approaching Jesus after a long fast, Satan appealed to the hunger drive. But Jesus responded by quoting Scripture, indicating his total trust in and obedience to God. Jesus refused to be greedy and slothful. A second time Satan tempted Jesus to do something spectacular—throw himself off the pinnacle of the Temple and escape injury by the intervention of angels. Again, Jesus demonstrated his trust and obedience. No sloth or pride for him. Satan tried once more. He offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world if he would only bow down to him.

But Jesus would not be motivated by greed. He would not rebel against God. He continued to trust and obey.

As in the case of Eve and Adam, the temptation is to take a shortcut to a good goal. Rather than trusting and obeying, one is tempted to take things into his own hands, to achieve a good goal in his own way by a timetable he devises for himself. Here is the source of man's problems. Few of us are openly bad. We are adept at justifying our actions and making them appear right and good. As we evaluate the situation and consider our options, we use selfish values. Our conduct is characterized by selfish acts (which we have rationalized and justified for ourselves) rather than doing what God wills, the way he wills it, when he wills it.

Two more important points about man's problem can be drawn from Genesis 3 and 4. First, once a person fails to trust and to obey God and starts down the path of a sinful shortcut, he soon faces problems he had not anticipated. Adam and Eve became aware of their nakedness. But when they attempted to deal with this by making clothes, by hiding, and by blaming each other, they simply compounded the problem. When Cain learned that God was pleased with Abel's offering but not with his, he compounded the problem by murdering his brother. This is the way of sin. Rather than dealing with the problem, man, in pride and selfishness, blames others, attacks others, and tries in many wrong ways to extract himself from the mess he is in.

The final point to be made from Genesis 3 and 4 is that God continued to love humankind even after their failure to trust and obey. He mercifully met the needs of Adam and Eve for clothing and of Cain for protection. Further, he set in motion his plan for redemption of mankind and the restoration of his nature.

5. What Is Man's Condition?

Hospitals report on the condition of their patients with words like *critical*, *serious*, and *stable*. Man fails to trust and to obey God. He is a sinner. This is a critical condition? Why?

First, man is estranged from God. No longer do God and man walk as friends in the Garden. Man is driven East of Eden. There he wanders still further from God. He becomes a rebel who seeks to glorify himself (Gen. 11:1-4).

Second, he is estranged from his neighbor. He kills, hurts, cheats, and lies to his neighbor. He covets his possessions. His neighbor responds in kind. Strife and violence are commonplace.

Third, he is estranged from the natural environment. Gaining sustenance is no longer easy. Man abuses his authority over the natural order. He "fouls his nest."

Fourth, man is estranged from himself. His essential nature is damaged and defaced. He does not like himself. He foolishly demonstrates this by drinking alcohol, taking drugs, going insane, committing suicide.

Man's condition has grown still more serious as he has tried to cure himself with his own home remedies. Ideologies, philosophies, false religions, drugs, psychologies, rituals, pleasures, and fads have been advanced as a cure to man's fourfold estrangement. All of no avail. In fact, the false cures usually leave the patient in a worsened condition because they blind him to the true balm.

6. What Is the Solution to Man's Predicament?

The cure for man's condition will be treated more fully under "The Doctrine of Sin and Salvation." But to round out the Christian doctrine of man, we must consider the subject briefly.

Through the years since man's Fall, God has dealt with him through covenants, first with Noah and then with Abraham and his descendants. God promised to bless Abraham and his seed if they would trust and obey him (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:1-21; 17:1-16).

In Jesus, God graciously has offered an even better covenant (Heb. 8-10). It is one that deals with our problem of estrangement. Jesus provides reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:13-21). It is a covenant where we meet God in love (Heb. 12:18-29). To enter into this new relationship with God, man is instructed to trust (John 3:16) and to obey (John 14:15-17; 15:10-12). This means, on the one hand, that we believe that God is great enough to do the things he has promised to do in our covenant and that he is good enough or trustworthy enough to do them. On the other hand, it means that we are to obey God's commandments. The most basic of these is to love by seeking the well-being of others (John 15:10-12; 1 John 2:7-17). Love is a distinctive quality in the life of the Christian.

From man's point of view, the solution to his problem is to accept the covenant of grace offered to him by Jesus and in this relationship to learn to trust and to obey God. As he does this, God begins to work in him the miracle of restoration of his true nature. This is the goal of the cure.

7. What Is the Purpose of Human Existence?

Based on the discussion thus far, let us see if we can outline God's purposes for humankind. First, God created man for fellowship with himself and with others. Love was to be the bond of fellowship. One of the terrible results of sin is that it destroys fellowship. The great God has come to us in love to restore the fellowship.

Second, God created us to be responsible. Being his deputy is a serious task and a great honor. Sin causes us to act irresponsibly. In reconciliation we affirm our sense of responsibility to God and his will. We become truly good.

Third, God willed for us to be free and fearless. God willed many exciting adventures for us. But sin made us slaves (Rom. 5-7). However, Jesus came to set us free. The truth of the gospel is that in the cross Jesus defeated Satan and in the resurrection he overcame death and offered us a covenant of grace in which we participate in his victory (1 Cor. 15).

Fourth, God willed that humankind have a sense of worth and dignity. He created us in his image. He invites us to be his children. But sin makes us children to the devil. So Christ's saving work pays for our redemption and provides for our adoption so that we can become "joint-heirs" with him (Rom. 8:10-17).

Another point is in order. Thus far we have noted only how sin frustrated the purpose of God for man. Yet we know that God normally brings good out of evil (Rom. 8:28). Is there any way in which God's purposes were enhanced by our sin and estrangement? Certainly those who have responded to God's grace by trusting and by obeying him have a greater appreciation of our fellowship with him, a stronger motivation to do the right, a truer understanding of our freedom, and a more realistic understanding of our dignity and worth. Like a vessel that has been broken

and glued together, we are the stronger for the repair job. This is the point that Paul made in Romans 8.

8. What Is the Destiny of Man?

For the present we live in a world characterized by estrangement and all the acts that anger God. It seems that a victory for righteousness and justice in one realm is counterbalanced by the eruption of sin and evil in another. As our capacity for good grows, our ability for evil also grows. Strife, violence, abuse, injustice, lying, exploitation, and theft are growing.

Against the foreboding darkness of the previous paragraph there is a glimmer of light—a hope for some, yet an even worse fate for others. Christ is coming again. He will judge humankind. Those who have trusted and have obeyed will be rewarded. Those who have not will be punished (Matt. 25:31-46). And Christ will establish a just and righteous kingdom—one where relationships are characterized by love.

Further, an eternal home is promised to us. In Revelation 22 the Bible comes full circle. Estranged man was driven from the Garden and barred from the tree of life. But at the end of time those who have trusted God and have obeyed him will find themselves in heaven. Their access to the tree of life will be restored. There we will experience a fuller and a more complete fellowship with God. And we will sit down to a fellowship diner with the Lord.

This is the overall scenario of history. This is the destiny of the redeemed. But what of our individual destinies? What effect do we have on them? Our choices and our acts affect our own destiny, the destiny of others, and the course of history.

Of course, the most significant decision is to trust and to obey God by choosing Christ as Lord of your life. But the choices of whom you marry, what job you take, where you live, what church you attend, how many children you have, how you rear them, when and where to witness of your faith to another, and many other decisions will have impact on the lifetime and eternal destiny of persons. Further, some will hold positions of greater power. Their decisions will affect not only others but institutions as well. Make your choices prayerfully.

Another point should be made about our destiny. Those who choose to respond to God's choice of them by choosing him will experience and will enjoy perfection. Fulfillment of Jesus' command to be perfect even as God is (Matt. 5:48) is the goal we seek, although we will never attain it in this age. As good as we may be, selfishness is always creeping in and pride often follows. The sincere Christian experiences real pain because of his imperfection. Conversely, his awareness of the sinfulness of his best acts makes him glory in the mercy of God who pardons him and treats him as justified, as though he were already perfect. Nevertheless, the Christian looks forward to the day in the "peaceful kingdom" when he and others, social institutions, and all of nature will be perfected.

Knowing something of how corrupt and how imperfect mean and institutions are, it boggles the mind to imagine how God will accomplish this. But having witnessed his mighty acts of old, we can trust in his power and integrity. God will keep his promises to perfect us, our relationships, necessary institutions, and the whole of creation.

Conclusion

We have sketched briefly a Christian response to eight questions about humankind. As you study these responses, compare them to the ones you hear in your everyday secular world. This can help you become more aware of the significance of the Christian doctrine of man. Your awareness of this doctrine can assist you to be a better witness, to live a more Christian life, and to work for a society that draws on the Christian doctrine of man to inform its law, structures, and its practices.