

THE
CHRISTIAN
DOCTRINE
of MAN

William Hordern



THE RENEWAL OF THE MIND

Theology,
doctrinal
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THE RENEWAL OF THE MIND

With the title "The Christian Doctrine of Man", we present the second in the new program series under the caption "The Renewal of the Mind". Already available in this series is "The Ecumenical Movement". These topics are recommended for use in discussion groups and as a resource for program meetings as well as for individual reading and study.

Other titles which will appear soon are:

The Sacrament of Baptism

by Earl T. Knaus, Jr.

The Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

by John Vannorsdal

The artist for the cover of this program series is Corrine (Mrs. Morris) Niedenthal. She offers this explanation of her artwork:

God's desire is that man be not conformed to this world, but be transformed and grow by "the renewal of the mind," surrendering himself into the hand of God and growing in Christ who sacrificed Himself on the Cross. (Held in the Hand, the symbol of God, is man, shown in a series of growing forms, with the Cross of Christ at the heart.)

Burnice Fjellman,
Program Secretary

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THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF MAN

The writer of the eighth Psalm asks, "What is Man"?, and it is a question that has always haunted men. Man is a strange creature, the only animal who knows that he is an animal, the creature who creates civilizations. The mind of man has scanned the heavens and sent satellites out into space and yet his whole life can be snuffed out in a second by the thrust of a knife. He has come close to conquering all of nature but he cannot seem to conquer himself, and thus he faces the threat of destroying himself.

This is no academic question; our views on many subjects, from politics to child training, will revolve around the answer to it. For example, a primary political problem is whether man is a creature who should be used by the state or whether he is a being who deserves always to be treated as an end in himself. If man is to live fully and fruitfully he must decide who he is.

There are many ways in which man tries to discover who and what he is. The social sciences are busily engaged in analyzing man in both his social and individual aspects. But man can never be known as atoms and frogs are known, and so he finds that novelists, artists, and dramatists also contribute to his understanding of himself. The Christian can and ought to learn from all of these, but in the last analysis he is convinced that to know who and what man is, he needs to see man in his total environment, That is, he must see where man fits into God's plan.

The Christian understanding of man revolves around two biblical persons, Adam and the Second Adam, Christ (see Romans 5:12-21).

Adam symbolizes man as he is, man in his life separated from God. In Christ, we believe, God has re-edited man, He has revealed to us what He intended man to be. If we look only at Adam, that is, if we study man as we now find him, we see man only in his fallen state. If we look only at Christ we become utopian about man, failing to see that man is no longer what God intended him to be.

The Genesis story of Adam and Eve is a profound description of man as we find him. Man, the story tells us, was created in the image of God. Theologians have debated wherein the image of God is to be found. Some find it in man's reason and certainly this is part of the answer. As a rational being man can "think God's thoughts after him", man can understand and manipulate nature. It is reason that gives man dominion over the other creatures (Genesis 1:28). Some have found the image of God in man's moral nature; man can know right from wrong, he can make moral decisions. Some have found the image of God in man's creativity. Whereas the animal world seems bound by its laws, so that a beehive follows the same pattern century after century, man creates new civilizations; he creates art, poetry, and he invents the new. Truly there is something Godlike in the power of man to create.

The image of God no doubt includes all of these elements, but it cannot be identified with any of them. Primarily, the image of God means that man has been created for fellowship with God. Man can speak with God. When God addresses man, man has the ability to answer. If we turn for a moment from Adam to Christ we see this image as it should be. God is at the center of Christ's life; Christ lives His life in complete harmony with God's will. That man is created in

the image of God means that man was created to live with God at the center of his life. This is why Augustine could say that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.

But precisely because man is created in the image of God, he is tempted, he is not satisfied to be in the image of God, he longs to be equal to God. And so the serpent tempts Eve by telling her that if she will eat from the forbidden tree she will become like God (Genesis 3:15). This is man's original sin, that is, the sin from which all other sins flow. Instead of living in harmonious relationship with God, man strives to take God's place, he puts himself at the center of life. When man puts himself at the center of his life he can no longer love his neighbor as himself. He puts his own will first, he considers that his interests are more important than those of his neighbors. From this results racial superiority, the priority on money, the desire to rule over his fellow-men, and so on through the countless expressions of man's inhumanity to man.

When man falls the whole of his life is corrupted. Instead of using his reason to understand his place in God's world, man uses it to exploit the world. No longer do we cheer at the advances of science; we tremble as new and more terrible weapons of destruction appear. Man's moral nature is perverted as man tries to force his neighbor to be like him. Propaganda, brainwashing, advertising flow forth from man to confuse his fellow-man's sense of moral values. Man, who was given the power of moral decision in order that he might do the right, now uses it to do the wrong. Instead of looking to God to find moral direction for life, man tries to be "other-directed", that is, he follows the crowd, he conforms, and finds his moral guidance in what others are doing and expect him to do.

Fallen man continues to create, but now he creates a Buchenwald, a dictatorship of the Proletariat, and a Little Rock.

If the fullness of the image of God is found in man's capacity for fellowship with God, it is not strange that it is here that man is most deeply perverted in this fall. Fallen man does not want fellowship with God; he wants to use God. And so man turns to idolatry; he creates a god in his own image and worships that. While Moses goes up into the mountain to receive the Commandments of the true God the people are busily engaged in creating their own gods. This restless activity has never ceased. Although we have no graven images in our rooms we still have them in our hearts. We have cut God to fit our pattern, we have called Him "The man upstairs", we have insisted that He is always on our side. God becomes the Cosmic Magician who will fulfill all of our desires. With our lips we call upon the God of Jesus Christ, but with our hearts we worship the god who will give us all of the things we most desire—wealth, popularity, peace of mind, success, and victory.

In other words, fallen man is a sinner. This does not simply mean that man commits sins; of course he does that, but it means that man is distorted at the center of his very being. Curvature of the spine is a serious physical illness, but man suffers from the worse disease of the curvature of the spirit: he is curved in on himself instead of looking to God. And in this situation man is caught and trapped, he has lost the freedom of his will, he cannot roll up his sleeves and change the direction of his life. Every effort that man puts forth to change himself simply results in making him more self-centered. If he does improve himself he becomes proud of his achievement and falls into the deep-

er sin of thanking God that he is not like other men. It was this situation that called from Paul that agonized cry, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24).

If this were all that we had to affirm about man, we would have to say that the pessimism of the modern existentialist writers is unduly optimistic. Actually, some of our modern novelists and playwrights have done a better job than the theologian in drawing the picture of man's problem. Man, alienated from the source of his being, stares at us from the pages of most modern novels, and in them there is no one to deliver him.

But Christ, the second Adam, does not simply reveal what man was meant to be. If Christ came to us, living the perfect life, teaching the Sermon on the Mount, and that were all, there would be no good news in Christianity. For who can live up to this standard? But the real message of Christ is that the deliverance has come. What man could not do for himself, God has done in Christ. The chains that bound us in sin have been broken, our separation from God has been bridged over from God's side. We who left God have been pursued by God until he has found us again. Now we know who man really is: he is the creature whom God so loved that for his sake God gave His Son.

Christ's love breaks through our self-centered existence and pulls us out of ourselves. Because God has first loved us we are empowered to love Him. And when we are thus taught to love we find a new ability to love our neighbor as ourselves. But this is no easy or simple victory; we are forgiven, we are restored to the fellowship with God for which we were created, and yet tragically we need to be restored and re-

forgiven every day of our lives.

And so in the two Adams we see who and what we are. We are not a little mud and a handful of sand that has luckily received the electrical spark of life. We are made in the image of the Creator Himself. And yet, in the moment we become proud of this fact we try to become like God Himself. We use the very capacities that God gave us to serve Him in order to plunge ourselves and the world into chaos. But God has so loved us that He would not forsake us and, at the greatest cost to Himself, He has taken our sin upon Himself. If God so loves both my neighbor and myself, can I fail to love my neighbor even as God loves me? Henceforth, I know who man is and I must treat man, in myself and in my neighbor, as one for whom Christ has died. No political system, economic system, or ecclesiastical system that denies this can have our allegiance.

QUESTION:

"The Christian supports democracy because he believes that the intelligence, value, and dignity of man give him the right to determine his own affairs."

"The Christian supports democracy because, knowing the sin of man, he does not believe that any man or group of men is good enough to be trusted with unchecked power over others."

Which view seems to you to be correct and why?



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About the author

Dr. Hordern is professor of systematic theology at Garret Biblical Institute, Evanston, Illinois. A native of Saskatchewan, Canada, Dr. Hordern received the B. A. degree from the University of Saskatchewan, Canada, the B. D. degree from St. Andrews College, Saskatoon, Canada, and the S.T.M. and Th.D. degree from Union Theological Seminary, New York. Before coming to Garrett, Dr. Hordern had served as assistant to the pastor, St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Richmond Hill, N. Y., and as assistant Professor of Religion at Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pennsylvania.

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