

What Is Man?*

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In biblical history the Lord gives us, not only the definitive revelation of Himself but also the conclusive revelation of man. That is to say, divine revelation addresses not only the question, “Who is God?” but also the question, “What is man?” I suggest it is useful for Christians to reflect on the unique character of the Bible’s answer to this question, because we take our biblical anthropology so much for granted that we fail to count it among those things that many

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prophets and kings have desired to see but have not seen them.

Without divine revelation there are all sorts of theories about man, and in fact the Christian Gospel was obliged to contend with certain of those theories.

One such theory, for instance, claimed (and still does) that “human nature does not change.” This theory is understandably attractive, because it provides a sense of universality among human beings and a sense of continuity throughout history. Indeed, as applied to a specified, narrow range of human experiences, we can even call it true.

Yet, if we adhere to the full anthropology of divine revelation, it is strictly speaking not true that “human nature does not change.” Indeed, it is the very business of divine revelation to cause human nature to change.

First, humanity begins with an act of change by the very fact of its creation. Thus, St. Gregory of Nyssa, in one of the Christian Church’s earliest attempts at a systematic theology, wrote of creation in general, “everything that exists through creation

is connected with change inasmuch as existence itself originates in change, the non-existing passing into existence by the divine power” (*Oratio Catechetica Magna* 6). Lest we imagine that this general principle of change in creation does not pertain to humanity as such, St. Gregory writes elsewhere of the creation of man, “the created nature cannot exist without change, because its very transition from non-existence to existence is a kind of motion and change of non-being altered into being by the divine will” (*De Opificio Homini*s 16.12).

Humanity takes its rise, then, not from a fixed *esse* but from a dynamic *feri*; human nature is a becoming more than a being. It is not locked into a defining set of rigid conditions. On the contrary, human nature always bears within itself the “becoming” that marked its very origin. Man has an essentially changeable nature.

Obviously it is impossible for humanity to “remember” that primeval transition from nothing to something, any more than an individual man remembers his own entrance into being. We know of this

mystery of our creation only because it is revealed to us.

Second, this mystery of our original “becoming” is revealed to us in yet another act of becoming, that divine intervention in which our human nature is further altered—namely, our adoption in Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, whereby we declare “Abba, Father” and “Jesus is Lord.”

Our human nature itself is altered by that divine act that makes us sharers in the glory of the Lord, “being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18). This is the alteration of our humanity whereby we “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4), and this is what it means to be “born again.”

The man who has not been thus reborn remains ignorant of the very conditions of his first birth. Until he passes through this second “becoming” (*genesthe*—2 Peter 1:4), man is deceived even about his own humanity. He imagines human nature to be defined, closed, sufficient, and unchanging, but it is no such

thing. The true destiny of human nature is not determined by man's first creation but by the renewal of his being in Christ.

As a sharer in the divine nature, the human being is made a child of God, so when he addresses God as "our Father," it is no metaphor, no figure of speech. His nature itself, always open to change, has been transformed by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. He is truly God's child. He now regards God through the eyes of Christ and addresses God with the voice of Christ.

This is divine revelation's further answer, then, to the question, "What is man?" In his rebirth, man's very nature has been subsumed into the life of God, sharing by divine grace (*energeia*) in Christ's relationship to the Father, a temple of the Holy Spirit, a partaker of the divine nature.



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