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Man's Nature and Destiny: A Christian Theological Approach¹

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It is important to estimate at the start itself the place given to an understanding of man in the total setting of the Christian message. A true and full estimation of man is possible only through a right understanding of the gospel.

The Biblical message centres around the story of the relation between God and man, and this is vividly painted as a very living, active and concrete relation. There is a striking realism in relating God to man because it describes the very nature of God in that relation. We are not to speculate over God the transcendent, who is far-removed from the world in which we live, but we are to count with God as one who is active in creating the world and shaping its destiny. That is the very meaning of Revelation. While we talk of a certain realism in the understanding of God there is an equal sense of realism with which we describe man. He is the other pole related to God in terms of an active, living and concrete relation.

I. MAN'S NATURE AND DESTINY AS IT WAS MEANT TO BE

The creation story in Genesis has an intrinsic value in as much as it points to the original place and purpose for man's creation according to God's own plan and purpose. It was the original purpose of God that while He is active in creation He would so create and shape and guide man that this relationship between the creator and the created world might testify to the harmony and unity of purpose characteristic of this relationship. God has a definite purpose for His creation. It was from His side a clear indication that to be God is to be a creative and active God. Apart from what He does in His creative activity we cannot recognize Him adequately and in a realistic way. The very description necessary for an understanding of God starts with the

¹ A paper read at the Indian Christian Theological Conference held in Madras.

words: In the beginning God created. The key words in Genesis, Chapter 1, are GOD SAID. Without this assurance of God's activity, we shall only be vainly and vaguely speculating about God. In Christian theology every attempt towards the understanding of God starts from a consideration of what He does. On the other hand, from man's point of view, the creation story reveals the essential way in which man is related to God. He is a creature and he is to be related to God as a creature. This creator-creature relationship reveals God as God and man as man.

From this central point we can usefully examine at this stage the implications in the idea of man created in the image of God (Gen. 1: 26).

(1) The image of God in man stands for a tie of togetherness. When we view the Biblical story in its entirety the idea of the covenant relationship seems to be so central. The story of revelation is a spectacular unfolding of the meaning of this revelation in terms of a covenant which God established with man. In that covenant relationship the basic factor is the tie of togetherness. The image of God in man serves to affirm the unbroken nature of the relation that binds God and man together. The concept of *fellowship* is the basis on which we can usefully interpret the idea of the image of God.

(2) The image of God implies that man is not and does not become at any stage God. It is important to emphasize that in the idea of the image is implied a clear description of the nature of God and the nature of man. God is God and man is man. In no other way can either be described. In the relationship with man God does not become less divine because of His association with the finite world, and neither does man become more and more divine because of his relationship to God. God in all that He does remains as the Creator and man in all that he is and does in his relation to God remains as a *creature*. The two cannot exchange places with each other as far as their nature is concerned.

(3) The image of God implies man's importance and worth. Man alone is created in the image of God. This serves immediately as a means of separating man from the rest of the created world and ascribes to him a place of pre-eminence in the created world. It is clearly indicated that there is a wide difference between the value of things created and the creation of man. It is a part of the divine economy that man's place in the created world is for a specific task and function. He is to serve as the custodian or overseer of the created world. He is an agent of God.

II. MAN'S NATURE AND DESTINY AS IT ACTUALLY IS

As the Bible continues the story of God's relation to man or God's revelation to man, the dark chapter is written which registers man's fall as a tragic factor affecting this relation. What is of primary significance is to find out the implications of the Fall for understanding the nature and destiny of man from the point of view of his present state.

(a) *The universality of sin.*—Human nature viewed in terms of its present condition is perverted and corrupt and exposed to a rule inimical to God. The story of sin as one man's disobedience has become representative and typical as every other man's story. That is the ground for Paul saying: 'For there is no distinction; since all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). In the same Epistle Paul has the significant contrast between the first Adam and the second Adam (5:14-18). The story of the Fall is significant more as a pointer to the universality of sin rather than as a solution to the problem of the origin of sin. Christianity is concerned not with the 'how' of sin but with the 'that', i.e. the fact of sin.

(b) *Sin as separation.*—The sting caused by this nature of man in the present condition of his life is in that it separates man from God. Man created for a life of fellowship stands now in a relation broken by sin. As a matter of fact it is wrong to say that man's relation to God is broken. Man is at no point of time unrelated to God. The very fact that he is a creature of God relates him inevitably to the Creator. But now he stands in a false relation to God. In this relation he is met by the wrath of God. Wrath is God's reaction to a relation where man makes himself a stranger or foreigner to God. Yea, the Bible goes further and points out that this relation is in fact a rebellion against God. Man as separated from God aligns himself on the opposite camp and stands in opposition to Him. That is the very nature of sin and the basis for the guilt in human life (Ps. 51:4). Christian theology takes serious note of this factor of personal opposition in sin, and only against this background can the message of man's reconciliation with God have any meaningful relevance.

(c) *Sin as death.*—While the Christian view of man in his fallen nature is thus determined by the slavery under sin, the consequences of sin are portrayed in equally dark colours. The wages of sin is death. The destruction involved in death points to the meaning of separation from God. If sin holds man under its clutches, then the source of life is naturally lost and thus death itself becomes the very opposite of life.

THE RESTORATION

The Christian estimate of man does not stop with the description of man as a sinner. There is another chapter to that story and this chapter makes a further estimate of man in the light of the Incarnation and Atonement of Christ. The description of the natural man as a sinner is valid only up to a certain point. That decisive point Christian theology discovers in its understanding of the person and work of Christ. Man's nature in the here and now is further determined by the centrality of the Cross and Resurrection. In the light of this, man is also described as justified. Man as justified must be again related to the purpose of God for man. The meaning of the relation between God and man in terms

of an unbroken tie is kept alive throughout the redemptive story. God on His side is faithful to His promise that He shall be God and man shall be under His rule. Even in the context of man's estrangement on account of sin, God is faithful to His part in the covenant relationship. Promise of restoration and fulfilment go together. The Cross and Resurrection must be seen as God's decisive moments in His redeeming work. Man as sinner becomes the very object of God's saving love. The estimate in the light of the Cross and Resurrection has important implications.

(1) Christ's saving work is for all. He died for all humanity. All come under the justifying estimate made possible by Christ's death and Resurrection.

(2) Man is a new creature, shaped according to the purpose and destiny of God. His true humanity is hereby restored. The reality of this new humanity is variously described—man is in the new age, he is a new man, he is re-born, he is renewed, he is a new Adam, etc.

(3) Man is both sinner and justified at the same time. The redeeming work of Christ does not mean that man ceases to be a sinner. He continues to be a sinner, but justified by faith. The conflict in life continues. In other words, life in Christ means for the believer an initial victory and the meaning of this initial victory is evidenced as he continues in the struggle to experience the transforming power in a life of faith.

III. MAN'S NATURE AND DESTINY AS IT SHALL BE

The Christian view of man is not confined to this world alone, but man is to be viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*. Man has a double citizenship—in this world of time and space and in the world to come.

Life viewed in the light of eternity therefore brings new light on the meaning of man's nature in terms of the future life.

(i) Life in the hereafter is viewed in terms of perfection. What is grasped partially will be understood in their fullness. What is seen dimly will be made clear then. What is determined by constant conflict and struggle will be perfected without these conditions. Perfection here is more than just moral and spiritual perfection. It is synonymous with glory and the deepest meaning of fellowship with God.

(ii) Human death is a gateway to heaven. The meaning of death itself is changed in the light of eternity. Death is swallowed up in victory. Death is no more destruction, but the starting-point for the life of resurrection. What is sown in corruptibility will be reaped in incorruptibility.

(iii) Judgment in the Christian sense does not start in the future life. Judgment is a crisis created by the very fact of God's confrontation with man. Every meeting-point between God and the natural man is a point of judgment. In the first place it reaffirms in a concrete way that there is universal judgment on sin.

Secondly, for the believers the day of judgment is a day of blessing. Thirdly, it is Christ who has revealed the heart of God as love, who will be in the centre of the judgment.

CONCLUSION

Man's nature and destiny are through and through determined by the fact that God is related to man in terms of an active lordship and His dealings with him are such that he is not left to his own destiny, but guided towards the destiny set by the Creator. Apart from this theo-centric approach our understanding and estimation of man would be either superficial or untrue. But interpreted in the light of God's redeeming work, man's place in the world and his relation to God is one of privilege, opportunity and responsibility. Therefore man as God's creation is to surrender his life as His instrument for carrying out His redemptive purpose in the world. Man as recipient of God's gracious and justifying lordship is to serve as an effective witness to His saving power.