

October 11, 1964  
Ephesians 4:17-24

Norman S. Ream

### THE MEANING OF MAN

"....lay aside that old human nature....  
be made new."

-Ephesians 4:22

Many people all around the world today are anxious, and with good reason. They are anxious about the future state of mankind and world which it inhabits. Especially during the current political campaign have we heard much conversation concerning nuclear weapons and a mysterious red button which some national leader may conceivably push and which would thereupon result in the destruction of the world.

If our anxiety is caused by fear for our own future and the security of our own personal situation, then it is a dissipation of human energy, and we ought to heed the admonition of Jesus, "Be not anxious." This is God's world and man will not take it or human life out of God's hands. If, however, our anxiety concerns the basic nature of man and whether or not that nature would sink to the level of self-destruction and racial suicide, then some anxiety at that point is certainly in order. We ought to be concerned about the nature and meaning of man's life and its future on this globe.

It is indeed a very serious business, but the situation is somewhat analogous to the story told by Thomas Carlyle. He one day complained to a neighbor because the latter had a cock which would crow at night and awaken him. The neighbor, however, replied to the complaint that the cock only crowed three times a night and that should not bother anyone. Carlyle replied that it wasn't the crowing that bothered him, it was the suffering and agony he endured waiting for the cock to crow!

As is always the case, many people are anxious and afraid concerning things that have never happened and never will happen. No Christian need anxiously concern himself about the future of this little globe called Earth. That is and always will be in the hands of God. But there is real reason to concern ourselves about the nature of the man who inhabits this globe and what has happened and is happening to that nature. In short, no perceptive person can help but be concerned about the meaning and destiny of man's life on earth.

There is another story which is indicative of our position. It concerns Abraham Lincoln and the time he was approaching the Fox River. He came across a Methodist circuit rider who traveled all about the country in all kinds of weather. Lincoln questioned him and he replied, "Yes, I have crossed the Fox River many times in all kinds of weather, but I have one rule with regard to the Fox River -- I never cross it until I come to it."

There are many things about which we ought not be anxious, and we lay waste our powers in being anxious about them, but there comes a time when we

are face to face with a problem or a dilemma which must be confronted, a time when we come to a river that must be crossed. This year of our lives may very well be such a time. It is inevitable that more and more nations will gain the knowledge and capacity to produce nuclear weapons. How will those weapons be used? Will man destroy his own kind? Will the universe witness for the first time, so far as we know, the destruction of a planet by its own inhabitants?

Now, although every minister ought to be something of a prophet, no minister knows the final answers to all these questions. All I can do and all I would attempt to do is to share with you my personal faith -- my faith in God and my faith in man. I cannot conceive of any national leader or candidate for national leadership purposefully attempting the destruction of the world. Only a mad man would do that, and the electorate cannot determine who in advance is most likely to go mad -- that is a question for the analysts. I believe in God and I believe in the future of man, and regardless of what experts may say I do not believe man can be obliterated from the face of the earth. He clings to life too tenaciously. He belongs on this planet and he will continue on it for untold ages to come. Heaven may be his destination but his life in Time belongs here. Already we are reading about a medicine which will protect him against the harmful effects of radiation. Mankind will endure. Of that I am certain.

## II

You have a right, nevertheless, to ask upon what I predicate such a faith. Let me call as my first witness for the defense the Apostle Paul. Let me refer you to his letter to the Church at Ephesus. Although the situation for that early Christian group was much more parochial than ours today, they did face the same evil and corrupt nature of man as we must face. There were those who would stop at nothing to destroy them. In the face of this danger, Paul did not ask those early Christians to go out into the world and condemn it. He asked the Christians to use the power of the Holy Spirit within themselves to change and strengthen their own lives. We Christians today are much too busy doing the former, and one sees within the ranks of organized Christianity much too little of the latter. Read the Christian literature of our day and, almost exclusively, it is addressed to the world in terms of condemnation. There is very little addressed to the Christian community itself admonishing it as Paul admonished the first century Christians to, "Lay aside that old human nature....and be made new." It is far easier to condemn and criticize the world than to take a good hard look at ourselves and face up to our own failures in the service of God. Too much of the time we don't want to be made new men, we are very fond of the old man.

But it is, nevertheless, my own faith and conviction -- and my thesis this morning -- that man has through the ages slowly and toilsomely been becoming a new and better creature. There has been progress. I have faith to believe that that progress will continue and one day there shall be a world in which men will

have beat their swords into plowshares and their nuclear weapons into instruments of human utility. I am not, I hope, a blind optimist. I do not see this progress being made without great toil and struggle, but deep in my heart I feel as confident as was Desiderius Erasmus when he exclaimed, "Immortal God! What a world I see dawning! Why cannot I grow young again?"

### III

Now, let us talk for a few minutes about this idea of progress. Strange as it may seem, it is a relatively new idea in human history. There was no such idea existent among the ancient Greeks and Romans. For them, man and his society was a completely static and unchanging thing. The centuries rolled by with no changes or improvements in the way men lived. It was not really until the 17th century and the writings of Rene Descartes that any idea of progress in human society began to influence the thought of man. Descartes emphasized two things -- the supremacy of reason and the inflexibility of natural law. He then insisted that man could and was progressing relentlessly toward some future state of perfection. This idea has attracted man in greater or less degree ever since. It has, to be sure, received some crushing blows; one when Galileo revealed that the sun was not the center of the universe, another when Darwin demonstrated that man had a very humble pedigree. It was, nevertheless, accepted that man was continually evolving.

One danger, however, which has continually marked man's development, is the naive assumption he has often held that any change is progress. There has been a lot of talk during the past few years about certain people wanting to turn back the clock, but if a clock is wrong is it not more wise to stop it and turn it back to where it is right than to let it go on being wrong? Very often change itself can be retrogressive and to do nothing would be better than to do anything just for the sake of change.

Man is indeed evolving. There is a far off divine event and goal, but, we are required to ask, is that goal necessarily good? Is change synonymous with progress? Darwin was himself optimistic. He believed in an inevitable progress toward some perfection. It is our conviction now, however, that progress is cyclic. Man has not fallen once but many times. He progresses and he retrogresses. He stumbles and falters, then he forges ahead to new triumphs for the human spirit. My own conviction is that man in general is a basically better, finer spirit today than at any time in the past, and that there will be a future for man that will reveal him to history as a vastly greater spirit than he now is.

The famous French scientist, Pierre du Nouy, argues in his book, Human Destiny, that Jesus and other great spirits like him were prototypes, or forerunners of man as God intended him to be. This I do believe, and Jesus himself indicated the same conviction when he insisted, "Greater things than I have done ye shall do." The power of God working in man is unlimited.

Page 4

## The Meaning of Man

But man's response is the important thing. He must take the initiative which will make it possible for God's spirit in him to put aside the "old human nature....and be made new."

And so I am both an optimist and a pessimist. I am pessimistic about much that man has created because he has created without a due sense of the divine and the eternal within himself and his creation. Many of his institutions, I am afraid, will crumble and fall. With their fall shall come inevitable suffering and agony. But man himself will stand. Man will grow and mature, for this is the divine meaning and purpose of his life. Behind it all stands God keeping watch above his own and nothing shall ever separate man from that love.