

# THE PROBLEM OF BEING HUMAN

The Bible tells us how God, the creator of all things, has concerned himself with the human problem and how he has acted in history to bring order, peace and harmony to human beings. It tells the story of how God has chosen to gather a holy covenant people to himself who will live under his rule and who will be the means by which his redemptive purpose will be brought to all men.

The Bible is not concerned with religion in general, but it tells us how God has spoken to particular men and women, in particular times and places, and how these people believed God and obeyed him and were gathered by him to be his people who are called to serve him and to bring his blessing to all nations.

Abraham is the prototype of the perfect responder to God's call. He believed and obeyed God, left his home and country and religion, and went forth "knowing not whither he went." The story of Abraham introduces us to the tension that is found everywhere in the Bible between religion and faith. The people of the Chaldean city of Ur had a sophisticated religion that was an integral part of their culture. But when Abraham heard God's call he left this city and its cultural religion. When Abraham first heard God's call he was not circumcised; he was not a Jew; the law that was given to Moses did not come until more than four centuries later.

Abraham is not portrayed in the Bible as the typical religious man--homo religiosus--but he is portrayed as the man of faith. He turned from the religion of his city and country to heed the voice of the invisible God. The people of God who look to Abraham as their father have a name for God. He is called the God of Abraham. The voice that spoke to Moses from the burning bush identified himself as "the God of Abraham." When Moses asked what name he should give to the voice that spoke to him in the bush, God answered: "Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel . . . the God of Abraham . . . has sent me unto you."

The prophets of the Old Testament are the speakers of a word from God to God's people. Their message is a call to hear God and believe and obey him. It is the prophets who keep alive the tension between faith and religion. Of the prophets, Hendrik Kramer says, "Theirs is the most trenchant criticism of religion ever given."<sup>(1)</sup> The word of God came to the prophet Isaiah saying: ". . . look unto the rock from whence you are hewn, . . . Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you: for I called him alone, and blessed him. . . ." (Isaiah 51:1 & 2)

The prophets are the spokesmen for the God who is concerned with the problem of man, and they frequently remind the Hebrew people that preoccupation with religion is not pleasing to God, and that men can be excessively religious but at the same time act unjustly toward their fellowmen. E. W. Heaton says of the Old Testament prophets that, for them, "Righteousness was not a duty imposed by religion; it was religion, the way, that is to say, of knowing and serving God."<sup>(2)</sup>

We are dealing here with the problem of man and we will try to express this in terms of human experiences. The human problem is really several problems and they all have to do with human relationships.

The first of these is the difficulty men have in relating to their natural environment. This problem is more acutely felt today than at any time in human history. The abuse of natural resources can have dire consequences for man and for all God's creatures on the earth. In recent years certain ecologists have been putting the blame for the threatening ecological disasters on the Hebrew-Christian ethic, which it is alleged, acts upon the assumption that because God has given man

dominion over the creatures this gives him license to destroy and consume the creation, even if this involves breaking the cycle of nature. Others, like van der Post, tell us that the animistic religion of primitive peoples brings them closer to a wise use of their natural surroundings than that of the peoples influenced by Judaism and Christianity. But this is a very gross misunderstanding of the Hebrew-Christian ethic. After visiting the new Quaker plantations in America, George Fox became concerned about the right use of the natural abundance in these lands and he wrote an epistle "To Friends in Pennsylvania, East and West Jersey," to be read "in all your assemblies," reminding them that the dominion that God had given man over the creation is conditional, and that it must be exercised under God's guidance and by His wisdom. He tells them that "the Lord said unto the children of Israel (Lev. 36) that if "they were obedient and kept His commandments, He would give them their rain in due season and the land should yield her increase . . . and you shall eat your bread unto the full, and shall dwell in the land safely . . . and I will give peace in the land . . . but if you be disobedient then . . . the curse will come upon you in city and field (Deut. 28:16) . . . And the Lord will send his vexations and rebukes on all thou sets thy hands unto (Deut. 28:20) . . . and the heavens that are over their heads shall be iron; and the earth that is under thee shall be as brass; and the Lord shall make the rain of the land powder and dust (Deut. 28:24) . . . and thou shalt carry much seed into thy field, and shall gather little in; for the locust shall consume it.(Deut. 28:38) because thou hearkenest not to the Lord God to keep 'his commandments. . . . But they that diligently hearken to the Lord their God, and obey and serve him in truth and righteousness he blesses them in the city and in the field. . . (Deut. 28:3)."(<sup>3</sup>)

Of course, some of the Israelites (and some Christians as well), have taken this to mean that piety brings prosperity to the individual. But surely the broader meaning is that God intends all His creatures to live in harmony and that where men order the creation by God's wisdom, this preserves the order and harmony and balance of nature. Fox says that the wisdom of God "preserves the creation and is not destructive."<sup>(4)</sup> and he further declares: "What wages doth the Lord require of you for his earth that he giveth you . . . but that you give him the praises and honor, and the thanks and the glory, and not that you should spend the creatures on your lusts, but do good with them, you that have much, to them that have little; and so honor God with your substance; for nothing brought you into the world nor nothing you shall take out of the world but leave all creatures behind you as you found them, which God hath given to serve all nations and generations, and so you have food and raiment . . . be content."<sup>(5)</sup>

Another problematic area is that of the relations of human beings with each other. Again, we are now living in a time when man's social life is in great disorder on every level from family to nation.

A third perennial segment of the human problem is man's difficulty in finding his true self. This is especially so in this age when men have been preoccupied with gaining knowledge of the objective universe while they remain strangers to themselves, and so become the victims of many psychic disorders. A whole army of professional analysts have sprung up to whom people go for help in finding themselves. I am told that many people go to California for no other reason than to "find themselves." This quest for identity is a conspicuous feature of this age in which men have become alienated from God, and so experience a sense of lostness. "Man," says Emil Brunner, "who cannot avoid desiring to understand himself . . . can only understand himself in the light of faith in the creator revealed in Jesus Christ."<sup>(6)</sup> And Fox says, "God almighty open your understandings . . . that you may see yourselves."<sup>(7)</sup>

There is no true self-knowledge that is not based on God knowledge. In other words, the key to all the flawed relationships is the broken relationship with the Creator. He is ready to give us the gospel that is the answer to all our human problems and the gift of faith by which we may receive it. But instead, men devise religions of their own making. The "pure religion" that Fox speaks of is the way that God has revealed [himself] through the fathers and the prophets and finally through His Son, Jesus Christ.

In this present age, we have separated these human problems and undertaken to deal with them by means of the mental disciplines of economics, ecology, sociology, psychology, and the like. But God's revelation in the Bible tells us that these are really all one problem. Because men have not accepted their creaturehood and because they have not sought to order their lives by the wisdom that comes from God, they have become alienated, not only from God, but from each other and from the world of nature and from their own true selves. The reason why men are beset with so many problems is that they have become "strangers from God" and so are "wandering in strange paths in a dark world."<sup>(8)</sup> The key to all these problems is what Fox calls "[coming] to God again."<sup>(9)</sup>

Judaism and Christianity witness God's self-revelation in history through his words and deeds. This self-revelation is the answer to man's problematic condition. This good news from God began to be communicated to Abraham. Paul was able to say in Galatians (3:8) that the gospel was preached to Abraham. From Abraham to Jesus Christ, God is saying something to men. In Abraham, it is the promise of universal blessing. In Jesus Christ, it is the universal answer to the problem of man. But these two prophetic faiths, insofar as they have been transformed into complex systems of religion, have become increasingly remote from the human problem. Thus they stand in relation to the gospel of God as do the other religions of the world, that is, as leading man away from the faith of Abraham and the God of Abraham.

God is not calling men to be religious, or to be concerned about religion, but He is calling men to a hearing-and-obeying relationship to Himself. Jesus said, "I came that you might have life." (John 10:10) He is not calling us to some particular kind of life, such as "spiritual life" or "religious life," but to life itself--the life that God intended for man in the beginning--the life that seeks counsel of God and obeys God and bears the image of God. Fox says, "the gospel makes a man to be a man." He doesn't mean that the gospel increases masculinity, but he means that men and women come to the fullest realization of their humanity by receiving Christ as their teacher and knowing him as the saving word through whom all human beings will be gathered to God again out of the captivity to sin caused by disobedience.

At the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus claims to have been sent by God to bring deliverance to the captives. Fox says that the Devil "hath imprisoned his people and brought them into the pit," but that Jesus Christ "the covenant and Messiah brings the prisoner out of the pit . . . and he is called a savior."<sup>(10)</sup> Human beings are prisoners and captives because they seek to order human affairs without divine help. The religions of the world sometimes minister to that "Adamic religiousness" which is a universal human trait, and they sometimes concern themselves with some part of the human problem. They do not answer the human problem but they are part of the problem. They do not lead to wholeness. They do not make a man to be a man.

Fox's encounter with the "Christian religion" led him to the conclusion that it had lost touch with the human problem. It had ceased to be the means of bringing men to that saving word that "brings the prisoner out of the pit." According to prevailing standards the "good Christian" was not neces-

sarily a good human being. He could be a man of faith and at the same time a man whose actions were not less contributory to the disorder, confusion, and misery in the world than the actions of a man of no faith.

Fox's criticism of the Christian religion was similar to the prophets' criticism of the Jews' religion. The prophets are proclaiming that God is not interested in correct religious belief and practice. They are calling people back to the primal word--the word that was spoken to Abraham and Moses. Fox is in the best tradition of the prophets when he says that the pure religion "is not of man's making, but comes down from God."<sup>(11)</sup> He says, "all religions, ways, worships are in bondage and in slavery that are not made free by the Truth."<sup>(12)</sup> He is calling men back to the primal word, Jesus Christ, who ends the law because he Himself is the present, living teacher of righteousness to God's people in the new covenant. In an epistle addressed "to the household of faith," he refers to Paul's exhortation to the Roman Christians to "walk in the steps of the faith of Abraham . . . these were holy steps and [these] are a holy people that walk in the steps of the faithful Abraham, and of Christ, and the Apostles, and these have the pure religion."<sup>(13)</sup>

What Fox calls the "pure religion," which he sees as something generically different from "the world's invented seats of religion," is not only that by which God reconciles men to himself, but it is also the means by which the manifold human problem is resolved. Man cannot relate to his natural environment, nor to his fellow men, nor to himself because he has wilfully and rebelliously refused to take counsel with the Creator and to come into obedience to his word. Jesus Christ is that word. His word is a saving word because it is through hearing and obeying him that deliverance comes to the captives and the prisoner is brought out of the pit. Fox says, "God is the author of salvation, who sent His Son into the world to be a . . . redeemer."<sup>(14)</sup> "Jesus Christ is restoring by His power . . . all things into its place, as they were in the beginning."<sup>(15)</sup>

The pure religion of which God is the author is the only [viable] solution to the problem of being human. God comes to us in Jesus Christ, not only to pardon and forgive us, but to bring us out of the human predicament. Without Jesus Christ, the word that comes from God, man is in moral confusion and social disorder, and is unable to be at peace with his environment or with himself. The answer to the problem of being human is not religion but faith--the faith of which Abraham is the great prototype and exemplar.

George Fox saw the institutions of the "Christian religion" as failing to channel the good news from God to perishing man. Insofar as they do fail, they circumvent the purpose of God in sending Christ into the world. When he spoke of the "world's invented seats of religion," he was not excluding, or making an exception of, "the Christian religion." He saw that people who make a profession of Christianity did not seem to be given more power to cope with the human problem than did people making no profession of faith in Christ. He saw that they were morally confused and morally impotent, and that their behavior was determined by the standards and mores of a corrupt society. He saw that "the Christian religion" did not lead to the gathering of a church that learns together, obeys together, and suffers together. He saw that what was needed was a new foundation. And he saw that over and against "the religions of the world which are vain," is the word that God has spoken, a word which is good news to all men. This is the good news that was preached to Abraham, and it is the everlasting gospel that John, in Revelations, tells us was to be preached to "every kindred, tongue, and nation.

## REFERENCES

- (1)--- Hendrick Kramer, Religion and the Christian Faith, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1957), p.40.
- (2) --- E. W. Heaton, The Old Testament Prophets, 1958, p. 115.
- (3) --- George Fox, The Works of George Fox, (Philadelphia: Marcus T. Gould; New York: Isaac T. Hopper, 1831), Vol. VIII, p. 295-296. Based on Lev. xxvi and Deut. xxviii).
- (4) --- Fox, Works (1831), Vol. III, p. 148.
- (5) --- Fox, Works (1831), Vol. IV, p. 321.
- (6) --- Emil Brunner, The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption, (London: Lutterworth, 1952),p. 70.
- (7) --- Fox, Works (1831), Vol. IV, p. 38.
- (8) --- Fox, Works (1831), Vol. VII, p. 218.
- (9) --- Fox, Works (1831), Vol. I, p. 310. (See also Vol. VII, pp. 176, 282.)
- (10) --Fox, Works (1831):Vol. IV, p. 295.
- (11) --Fox, Works Vol VII, p. 324.
- (12) --George Fox in Headley Mss.: p. 315, Cat. No. 8, 90F.
- (13) --Fox, Works (1831): Vol. VIII, p. 228, (Epistle 382).
- (14) --Fox, Works (1831), Vol. III, p. 465.
- (15) --Fox, Works (1831), Vol. VII, p. 218.

## APPENDIX

### QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

#### CHAPTER 1

**Question 1:** It seems to me that the ecologists are right who say that the people with animistic religions seem more reverent and respectful for the natural world than those from Judaism and Christianity. Would you comment on this, please?

**Lewis Benson:** The outstanding characteristic of animistic religions is fear of the creation. That is, creation can put the "double whammy" on you if you don't treat it right. So, there's a difference in motivation. But we should recognize that simple societies sometimes make a wiser use of the creation: Eskimos, for instance, are very concerned about leaving the creation as they found it. There isn't much creation up there in the north and you can use it up awfully fast if you don't put back what you take away. That is, you can soon see the results, whereas, in a place like New Jersey or Pennsylvania, it may take a couple of hundred years to see the results. So I would certainly think that the knowledge of how primitive peoples deal with their natural surroundings is something which can be of some help to us but we have to take other factors into account.

This problem of our relation to the natural environment is probably one which will hit people in this generation more than any of the others, and we can hardly predict or imagine what might happen, but there are possibilities in the minds and imaginations of modern people of what could happen to the world and to human beings as a result of wrongly using the natural universe. Well, this will be a big concern, and the Christian people are not all strip miners and some are very concerned about this. There has been a Christian committee set up and they're going to solve it all by committees, and whenever any industrial or mining project is contemplated, the object is to make it known that there is a committee with the seal of approval of the National Council of Churches that is ready to examine it. And if they give the OK, it means that God has his finger in the pie and there's no use opposing it any longer. Well, this is one way of doing it. (I forget the name of the committee. I read about this about five years ago). I suppose they're still going. It's a very noble thing. They weigh all the pros and cons they know and then they say, "Go ahead."

Well, it's very doubtful in my mind whether the great disasters that threaten us will be averted by this means. I don't think that modern Quakers or ecologists know that Fox was concerned about it. But of course he wasn't aware of the problems in the terms that we are now aware of them at all. For Fox, using up the creation in a wrong way meant using it up for one's own pleasure. But he didn't have a philosophy of the non-use of the creation either, such as you find in ascetic religions and in Hinduism. He says, "Use all the creatures to God's glory by God's wisdom." That meant it isn't a sin to have turkey for dinner or something like that. It meant creatures are not something we are forbidden by God to use, but we are to use them with God's wisdom to God's glory. That will cut out a lot of misuse of the creation if you faithfully follow it out. And I think this is what we need more than anything else, the sense that this creation that we're supposed to use wisely was created by God. He is the author of this and actually we can't use it wisely or rightly except with his help, with

his wisdom. He didn't put us here and say, "Now I've created this but it's up to you from now on--you're responsible." He's still responsible and we can only use it to the best advantage of mankind and God's glory if we seek counsel from God as to how to use it. This, I think, is an exercise in which we're all at square one. I don't know of any great advantages that have been made in this direction in this generation.

What ecologists say about the Judaio-Christian ethic is a misunderstanding of it. That is, God's command to men to have dominion over the creation is not unconditional. But it is conditional, and neither the Jews nor the Christians have observed this condition. They have not sought the counsel of God. They've just gone ahead and used up the creation.

**Question 2:** Could you mention one or two places in the record of Fox's teachings where he developed this idea of using our dominion over the world subject to God's command?

**Lewis Benson:** Well, as I said in the text, his epistles to America after he'd been over here said that he was scandalized by the way the American Quakers were simply using up the natural resources as if there was no tomorrow. He was also scandalized by the way they were using other human beings because there was human slavery among the Quakers. This was at its worst in Barbados where he found terrible social conditions among the Quaker-owned slaves and he wrote to these people.

The epistle that I read from is # 407 from the Collected Epistles of George Fox. So you can find that in any edition. The long quotation about how the man of God was to be obedient and keep God's commandments if he was to live in harmony with his natural creation, that was a quotation by George Fox from Leviticus 26, and he quotes it also in his epistles in the 1831 edition, vol. 8, page 295. I don't have much more in my notes on this subject because it isn't a subject that was considered urgent in Fox's time.

**Question 3:** I would like further clarification of a quotation from George Fox about Christ restoring things to the state in which they were in the beginning.

**Lewis Benson:** The word "restore" is a word that occurs again and again in Fox. "Restore all as it was in the beginning." This gives a sense of time. There was a beginning in which things were good. There was a middle in which things got bad, and there's an end when we restore it to the original good. It's a kind of time sequence.

The Bible chooses to speak about the nature of man and how he is related to his creator in the story of Adam and Eve. Well, maybe this is the very best way to deal with this subject. It has illuminated the nature of man more fully, more brilliantly than any other words that have ever been produced. And this is certainly the view of man that Fox starts with, that is, what you find in the first part of Genesis. When he speaks of being restored to the beginning, he means being restored to the state that Adam and Eve were in before they fell. After all, Darwin hadn't been born yet, and there's a lot of water that's flowed under the bridge that's conditioned our minds and created difficulties for us. But is there truth [possibly "there is truth"] in what he says, because actually his message about Jesus Christ is a message about how God has sent his son into the world to bring

## THE PROBLEM OF BEING HUMAN

back into the land of man the same harmony and perfection that God intended for man in the beginning, that is, when he created him. So, there isn't much evolutionism in Fox's gospel preaching.

Fox's basic assumption is that men and women were created to both order their lives, order their individual lives and their life together, by taking counsel with God. And Fox says that everything that is wrong in human life is a consequence of men not taking counsel with God. Men were created to take counsel with God. When they don't do it, then everything in their lives goes sour--their social relations, their relations with their environment, their relations with themselves, their relations with God, everything goes sour. And this is what's happened; this is the fall.

Human life as we know it today is not organized by the wisdom of God. We also know that there are terrible consequences that have been and are to come as a result of this. You can't get away with not taking counsel with God. This is what the prophets were sent to tell men, and this is why Jesus Christ was sent; not just to tell them but to be the word that would bring them back into this relation of dependence on God for his wisdom and counsel.

I think to say something about Fox's understanding about the nature of man would illuminate this question. He sees the "image of God" as something which is a human characteristic when men and women live in dependence upon God and seek counsel with God. Insofar as they do this, insofar as their life-style, their inner life is conditioned by constantly seeking to be taught by God, insofar as they do this, they bear the image of God. When they stop doing it, they lose the image of God. Now Fox says over and over that God sent Jesus Christ into the world to restore this image of God. That is, to bring us back into a relationship of dependence and of listening to a teacher, and of obedience to the creator and to his son who was sent for that purpose. [Editor's note: see Works, Vol. II, P. 175 and Vol. VIII, P. 14.]