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Reformation
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Classical Pastoral Practice for Today:

Let's Be Human!



Thomas N. Smith

After preaching and pastoring for more than thirty-five years in evangelical churches, I have a suspicion that borders upon a conviction. It is this. Most people within these churches would rather have something other than a human being to be their pastor.

What they would prefer would be something that is not quite an angel but more than a human being—perhaps a whole new and different species of rational being existing between the angelic and *Homo sapiens*.

These people do not like being human themselves. They dislike and are suspicious of the whole human thing. Being human, after all, means messiness. Being human means there is always a mess, or at least the potential for a mess. Human beings secrete, excrete, exfoliate, and expectorate. Human beings make mistakes, fail, change, and fall short of our expectations and their own promises. Human beings violate other human beings, other things that are not human, even their own environment. Human beings soil their own beds and destroy their own living spaces.

Being human means being weak. We are subject to a whole array of physical enemies before which we seem to be walking targets. Against these threats we fortify ourselves with proper diet and exercise, avoiding (or at least trying to) saturated fats

and trans fats, nicotine and caffeine, taking a host of vitamins and medications, trying our best to avoid stress and get seven or eight good hours of sleep in every twenty-four. Even when we are as healthy as a thoroughbred, we are still vulnerable to a host of mental and emotional attackers. Record numbers of Americans are today depressed and more are taking antidepressant medications than at any other time in our recent history. This includes an alarming number of adolescents. Others suffer from more serious mental disorders. Even among the relatively stable a simple dream can ruin a whole, otherwise glorious, day. But mental weakness still plagues even the very healthy. Example: The best of us forget things—sometimes important things like appointments, birthdays, and anniversaries. If we were more than human, perhaps we would not be weak.

But, the truth is even darker. Being human means being fallen. Being human means being sinful. We are idolatrous, culpable to obsessions that can ruin our lives and damn our souls. We are malicious, capable of destroying others, even others whom we love, with words and acts. We are lustful, susceptible to whims and fancies that have the potential to bring chaos into our lives and the lives of others. We are deceitful, vulnerable to breaking promises and sacred vows and violating truth and stable relationships based in truth. Furthermore, when these things damage us, rather than learning from this so that we do not repeat these same things, we tend to inflict others with the same inflictions with which we ourselves have been inflicted. Damaged people damage people. Or, at least, we tend to do so. "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the teeth of the children are set on edge."

All of which argues forcefully for having something other than human beings in the position of teaching God's truth and attempting to heal broken lives with that truth.

Or maybe not. It may be that the desire to get rid of human ministers is akin to "burning down the barn to get rid of rats." It is possible that such a desire is just another form of another human foible: social engineering. If the last century teaches us anything, it is that human beings are not very good

at engineering the lives of other human beings. Perhaps Pascal's sentiment can be applied to this area: "If Cleopatra's nose had been shorter, the whole face of the world would have been altered." Perhaps we had better leave Cleopatra's nose (and the noses of ministers and others of our kind) alone!

After all, a human ministry is God's own idea. Christian orthodoxy would argue (though it would be a very arcane and scholastic argument) that God *could* have created another race of beings, not human but not quite angelic, to be ministers of his mysteries. He could have. He did not. A human ministry, with all its attendant problems, is God's idea. There is no need here for proof-texts. The whole of the New Testament (and the Old) is replete with the idea. The yearning for something different than this, something better, is just another human (and fallen) yearning to out-do God.

But, why would God put such weight of responsibility on such a weak and sinful foundation? The simple answer to this is he *did* so because he *chose* to do so. But perhaps we can suggest a rationale behind his choice and action.

The big answer to this is simply that God's purpose has always been a purpose for human beings, living beings created human in his own image. The world was created as a home place of human beings. When his human sons and daughters revolted against him, rather than damning them as he did the angels who sinned, God chose to redeem them. This is so, even though God seems at times to be in conflict with his very own self over this purpose (Genesis 6:5-7). But, here, as in the whole project, God's grace is finally triumphant in this "conflict" (verse 8). God is in love with the human race and the story of the Bible is the story of this great love. In ways that puzzle theologians, simple Christians and even angels, God's purpose embraces the race *as human*, with all of its attendant weakness and sin. The ultimate expression of this is the crown jewel of Christian orthodoxy: God himself has become eternally human in order to bring the fallen human race back to the creation, back to itself, and back to him! And a subtext to this great meta-narrative is that God has chosen human

beings to be his assistants in this work—as ministers of the Word.

Permit me to suggest another reason for this. Human beings can do it better. If the Incarnation of the Son of God is, in part, about empathy (Hebrews 2:10-18; 4:14-5:10), then God's purpose in making human beings his ministers is part of the same intention. One example is sufficient. Paul argues in 2 Corinthians 1:3-11 that because ministers of the gospel are subject to both the afflictions and comfort of Christ, they are able to impart comfort to afflicted people. They are in this special way made "helpers of your joy" (verse 24). All of whom have been encouraged by another human being saying, "I've been there. I know what you're going through," are glad that angels are not meant to be our pastors.

And there is something else. Because weak, sinful human beings are meant to minister the things of God, God receives all the glory in this exercise. Men can point to the inhibitions of Augustine, the violent nature of Luther, the coldness of Calvin, the arrogance of J.C. Ryle, the gullibility of Billy Graham, the marital failures of Charles Stanley, and thousands of other examples. They are all true, tragically true. They can point to my weaknesses and the weaknesses of those of you reading this article. These also cannot be denied. But, these things do not only prove what the apostle says, they underscore it. "But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power *may be from God and not from ourselves*" (2 Corinthians 4:7). The weakness is there; so is the remaining sin, but the power of God is there as well, not despite these things, but because of them! The result is again, "Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us," and "Let him who glories, glory in the Lord" (Psalm 115:1 and 1 Corinthians 1:31).

What is needed is not a change of agents in the purpose of God, but a radical change in ourselves, in our thinking about being human.

If my suspicion is correct, many evangelicals have a lot of work to do in their theology of creation and man. We must work at ridding ourselves of Platonic and Gnostic thinking about being human. We must recognize that our hostility

toward and disgust at the human condition are not necessarily moral, but theological. We must repent of our reluctance at being human and our revulsion at the humanity of others, including and, perhaps, especially including the humanness of ministers.

It is possible that we need a similar reformation in our Christology. Many evangelicals in my experience hold *docetic* views of Jesus Christ. They are not comfortable with a fully and truly human Jesus. They are fearful of such a view. They are so obsessed with guarding the deity of Christ that they deny his humanity. They use heretical expressions in describing the events of Jesus' life like, "his man *side*" and "his God *side*." The Christ of the Gospels is something and someone more wonderful and mysterious. Orthodoxy holds that everything in the life of Jesus is simultaneously divine and human, up to and including his death. Heresy here may not be simply an intellectual failure. It may be a psychological revulsion from the truth about what it means to be human.

We must, furthermore, radicalize our thinking as to what being human really is. In our present state, in the world as we know it, this means being weak and fallen. It means being subject to weakness and susceptible to sin. Without ever excusing any form of human revolt against God, we must affirm our *human* condition. We must be ready to affirm this while even in redeemed, regenerate persons, sin and weakness prevail. If we wait for people to become perfect before we accept them, love them, relate to them and work with them, we will never even begin.

The same is true in respect to ministers.

Eighty years ago Karl Barth stunned Europe with his representation of the “strange, new world” of the Bible. For two hundred and fifty years Jonathan Edwards has horrified readers with his descriptions of a god who dangles sinners by a spider-thread over the flames of hell. Few have known that this most famous sermon in American history was rather uncharacteristic of Edwards, who was obsessed not by wrath of the divine but by its beauty. Fewer still have known his declaration that those whom terror has driven to religion are probably unconverted. Most have assumed that for Edwards only Christians—and perhaps only Calvinist Christians—had religious truth.

GERALD R. McDERMOTT

When Jonathan Edwards died of a smallpox vaccination on 22nd March, 1758, two months after moving to Princeton as its President, he left a mass of manuscript material, including over a thousand sermons and pieces in various stages of completion.

PAUL HELM