Thinking like a Christian
Part 3:

A Call for Christian Humanism

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The novel *The Great Gatsby* ends with Nick Carraway, the narrator, musing on what he calls "the last and greatest of all human dreams." It is that, certainly: the last and greatest, as F Scott Fitzgerald writes; but it is also the first and foremost, the primary dream. Anthropologists and students of myth recognize it as such; even casual readers of the Bible find this same dream tracing its way from Eden to Mount Ararat and beyond to a midnight conversation between a Pharisee named Nicodemus and an itinerant Teacher from Nazareth. This "last and greatest of all human dreams," this first and foremost aspiration, is the dream of starting all over again.

Other similar expressions are in use, such as "turning over a new leaf," "making a fresh start," "creating a new identity," "achieving a new consciousness." The hope contained in these terms is that, somehow—by an act of the will, by a physical uprooting from one location to another, by a deliberate change in behavior—new conditions can be formed that will lead to a happier life.

In specifically Christian terms, this experience is provided for by the new birth—being born again. The gospel offers this hope in spiritual rebirth by faith, regeneration, and renewal. Indeed Christians look back to their time of rebirth; but they can also look forward to a time when God the Creator will fulfill His promise to make everything new, the ἀποκατάστασις ("restoration") of prophecy and apostolic preaching.
Defining Humanism

This is God's plan, to be performed in God's time. But to the God-denying secularist, for whom there is no supernatural dimension, no ultimate power outside this natural sphere, "God's plan" and "God's time" are nonsense. If anything new is to come about, says secular man, it will happen only because human beings themselves achieve it. This certainty, this self-assurance, stems from the belief, declared by Protagoras in the fifth century B.C., that "man is the measure of all things." This is the philosophy of the egocentric self, the vanity that exalts the individual over any other authority. Even his Greek contemporaries—the playwright Sophocles, for instance—recognized the heresy of Protagoras, who also wrote, “About the gods I have no means of knowing whether they exist or do not exist or what their form may be.”

If, then, the concept of God is at best irrelevant, if human ingenuity is all there is to rely on, there is no course open but to establish the supremacy of human values and the legitimacy of human claims to control human destiny. This is the attitude popularly known as humanism; but because that word has been so loosely used and abused in many quarters, the term "secular humanism" may be used. This is the dogma that exalts the human being as the god of this age. For secular humanism is the religion of the contemporary culture. It has its own shrines and cathedrals, its idols and icons, its scriptures and creed, its hymns and bumper stickers. All these proclaim belief in a naturalistic universe defined by time and space, denial of any supernatural or eternal reality, denial of human accountability to a personal and transcendent God. The magazine *Free Inquiry* condenses the creed to a sentence: "Secular humanism places trust in human intelligence rather than in divine guidance."

A serious blunder is being made by well-meaning Christians in the pulpit and the classroom, before television cameras, and in widely read books. This is the common practice of assuming that all humanism is the same as secular humanism, that the historic tradition known as "Christian humanism" is an oxymoron, a contradiction as puzzling as "liberal Republican." To give the proper setting for this point some broad strokes of historical survey need to be made.

The Roots of Biblical Humanism

Christians trace the revelation of truth about God to the his-
historical Chaldean whose willingness to trust the God of the covenant resulted in the righteousness of faith. All believers are the "sons and daughters" of Abraham, his spiritual descendants (Rom. 4:12; Gal. 3:29). But Christians are therefore also heirs of culture as well as heirs of faith. Yahweh's covenant with Abraham did not invalidate the patriarch's need to eat and sleep. His tents prospered, his flocks increased, his wealth and power expanded. Abraham became the associate of kings, as well as being priest of Mamre and Beersheba, the stout-hearted father on Mount Moriah. Furthermore those covenant promises of God were to be fulfilled through an ever-enlarging penetration by Abraham's children. "Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies," said the Lord, "and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me" (Gen. 22:17-18, NIV).

Clearly the call of Abraham to leave the culture of Ur and trek the Fertile Crescent to Canaan was not a call to cultural isolation. It was a call to reestablish an order of living in which God's authority was supreme, a call to thinking and acting on godly principles, a call to living in full obedience and full delight. The same must be true for Abraham's spiritual descendants today. Christians are called not only to the test of faith but also to the blessings concomitant with faith. Believers have inherited the rich legacy that begins with recognition of God and continues through mankind's unique relationship with God as Creator and Lord. From this same legacy springs the revelation in the written Word and the incarnate Word, the doctrine that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). From this legacy of faith, new hope brings dignity to all of life, dissolving the old fear of death; a new regard for all persons—men and women, husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants—eliminating the old bondage to pride and caste. From this legacy a new social order evolves, in which Jesus Christ is Lord. Wherever this recognition obtains, that domain becomes known as Christendom; the cultures that come under the saving knowledge of the gospel combine to form a way of life that may be called a Christian civilization, marked by a consciousness of the Cross and the empty tomb.

From the beginning of Christianity's influence on the Mediterranean world, some 250 years before the Emperor Constantine proclaimed the church as his own, its role as conservator of social and domestic values has been clear. In a culture where the home and hearth were, first, honored in the worship of patron goddesses, then debauched in fornication at temples, Christian apostles and
teachers called for faithfulness in marriage. At the same time, when Gnostic heresy began to infect Christian doctrine with denial of material worth, the writers of the New Testament letters affirmed the goodness of God in nature and the sanctity of all that God had created, including the human body, confirmed by the incarnation, resurrection, and exaltation of God-in-flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. By extension, therefore, Christian doctrine calls for a recognition of the sacramental possibilities in every human act and artifact. For if "culture" may be defined as "the work of men's minds and hands," then within every culture lies the potential for believers to praise God.

The Breadth of Truth

So for all its emphasis on conserving the truths of Jewish and early Christian teachings, Christian doctrine never excluded truth from other sources as well. Paul occasionally made reference to pagan literature (e.g., Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12) in teaching his new message to Greeks familiar with the old ways. Of course Paul was not thereby acknowledging the validity of all pagan writings. He was simply recognizing an element of truth in some of that literature. While God's ultimate revelation of truth is embodied in Jesus Christ, truth is not limited to Christ's few years of earthly life.

Justin Martyr, the second-century apologist, spoke of this truth. Prior to his conversion he had been a teacher, entitled to wear the blue robe marking his profession. After he became a Christian, he continued to wear the robe, having determined that the Logos for which he had been seeking in philosophy was now made known to him in Jesus Christ.

More than 250 years after Justin, at the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo, in his treatise *On Christian Doctrine*, argued against those who would restrict Christians from studying and learning to appreciate the work of nonbelievers. In a passage of sublime insight Augustine wrote, "Every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is his Lord's."

By so recognizing the universality of truth and its divine origin, and by following the examples of both Justin Martyr and the apostles, Augustine established a model for thinking Christians to emulate. But today many Christians seem to have lost much of this breadth of truth. They have become victims of their own narrow and defensive views. Now as never before they need to
liberate their minds and hearts—their intellects and emotions—from all that would enshackle them; they need to become open and free to all that is reasonable and lovely, orderly and inspiring, stimulating to further knowledge and at the same time overwhelming in its awesome beauty. They need to reclaim for God what He has given and they have squandered, offering back to Him what their mind and hands find to do. If thinking Christians were to live each day in full realization that every area of life belongs to God, they would see again the kind of art, literature, education, government, and social order that marked much of Christendom in earlier centuries. The church would experience again culture captured for Christ, culture embraced by Christians throughout every aspect of living, as was the case during the 15th and 16th centuries in Europe.

In the Middle Ages, when infant mortality was high and life expectancy short, when the serf system bore down heavily on most people, when education was limited to a few, the church had little to offer by way of comfort for this life. Its eye was fixed on the prospects of life-to-come, "the life everlasting" of the creed. Human life and human endeavor seemed to count little when weighed against eternal values. Against this bleakness arose the reaction known as the Renaissance, stirred by a revival of interest in ancient Greek and Latin writers whose work had offered a brighter view of human worth.

It is hard for people today to imagine that there was ever a time when books had the same power as the television screen to rule lives and set forth values. But so it was, just as there had also been a time in Athenian society when public discourse determined the highest ethic. The revival in Europe of classical literature asserted human and humane values idealized in love sonnets and sculpture, in painting and fine speech. This preoccupation with the present life became known as humanism, but it was not necessarily Protagoras's kind of rebellion against God's standard of measurement; rather, it was a reaffirmation of the biblical appreciation for human experience lived in a mutually caring and responsible relationship with God the majestic yet loving Father. Certainly it is true that, under the guise of reasserting human worth and individual importance to God, humanism in some of its forms exalted the creature over the Creator; some men renewed Protagoras's agnosticism, raising a battle cry against divine authority. But if some aspects of humanism led to a perverse sense of human autonomy, humanism also led to a breaking of the medieval
church's stranglehold on the free expression of faith, for humanism led to the Reformation.

In the nominally Christian states of Europe the church passed its laws compelling baptism and uniform church attendance, but nothing could compel the spirit to believe or the mind to accept as necessary a God propped up by a human prince. Medieval scholars plodded through their constructs of questions and answers, but could their cold, formalistic reasoning warm men's hearts with the love of God? Could men and women learn to see the goodness and grandeur of God in His works of common grace? What of man's attempts to glorify God in return? Can art and architecture, poetry and song reflect anything heavenly by means of earthly expression? Or, to put the question plainly, can a person be both a Christian and a scholar, a Christian and an artist?*

**Christian Humanists**

An affirmative reply may seem straightforward and obvious today, but it was a radical response when, after A.D. 1300, Dante began writing his epic *The Divine Comedy* in vernacular Italian rather than ecclesiastical Latin; or after A.D. 1400, when Flemish and Italian painters began depicting religious themes by means of realistic figures of common people in familiar settings. Little by little, artists and then scholars began to make the worship and love of God less ethereal, less other-worldly, less spiritual, less remote, less divine—more human! Was this not in keeping with the gospel itself and its doctrine of the Incarnation? Had not God chosen to become human, thereby sanctifying by His very bodily form and substance the life known by human beings?

Little of this humanizing reality, this mystery of God-in-flesh, came through the categorical theology of that time. The gospel was being suffocated by too great a reliance on systematics and dialectics. There were no translations of the Bible in the common European languages. Furthermore, until the advent of Johann Gutenberg's printing press around 1456, access to manuscripts was limited and learning necessarily depended a great deal on rote acceptance rather than inquiry and discovery for oneself.

But by the middle of the 15th century, aided by Gutenberg's invention, ancient texts and scholars who could read them began finding their way into Italy, Germany, and France. Here were men who knew not only the classical poets but also the language of the New Testament and the Eastern Church Fathers. Subsequently a
new interest in learning Greek and Hebrew sprang up, and with
this interest in the Bible's original languages came the translation
of the Scriptures into common tongues.

Three names from this era are important to remember.
Lorenzo Valla (1405-1457), a linguist, goaded theologians into
understanding that their hermeneutics must be based not on their
knowledge of theology but their knowledge of the Bible itself. Next
John Colet (1466-1519), an English priest, founder of St. Paul's
School and dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, gave his Oxford lectures in
1496, on Romans and 1 Corinthians. These were unlike anything
before their time. Instead of turning every line of text into allegory,
Colet actually treated the text as if a man named Paul had written
an important letter to other men and women in a real city called
Rome or Corinth. He brought Paul to life; he brought Paul's readers
and their problems to life; he made the Bible breathe with vitality.

Colet's friend Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536) is the third
name. Erasmus may have been the greatest scholar in history. His
accomplishments were numerous, but among his most important
were these: his translation of the New Testament from the Greek
text; his call for Bible study by everyone, including women; and his
paraphrases of the Gospels and the Epistles, eventually translated
into German, French, and English. Erasmus is responsible for
some of the most profoundly striking statements, as these
instances show:

People say to me, How can scholarly knowledge facilitate the under-
standing of Holy Scripture? My answer is, How does ignorance con-
tribute to it?

Only a few can be scholars, but there is no one who cannot be a
Christian.

To be a schoolmaster is next to being a king. Do you count it a mean
employment to imbue the minds of your fellow-citizens in their
earliest years with the best literature and with the love of Christ, and
to return them to their country honest and virtuous men? In the
opinion of fools it is a humble task, but in fact it is the noblest of
occupations.

All studies, philosophy, rhetoric are followed for this one object, that
we may know Christ and honor Him. This is the end of all learning
and eloquence.8

Thinking in Christian Categories

The commitment of Erasmus and others like him to a pro-
gram of studies so singlemindedly Christ-centered sets him
and other Christian humanists of his time among the forerunners in the search for an authentic integration of faith and learning. Their sense of wholeness in studies and teaching, in art and science, in politics and government, puts to shame many of today's so-called "Christian schools" and "Christian colleges," whose index of forbidden pleasures maybe their highest measure of orthodoxy; whose curriculum and instruction resemble not at all T S. Elliot's understanding that "the purpose of a Christian education would not be merely to make men and women pious Christians....A Christian education would primarily train people to be able to think in Christian categories."9

The Christian humanists of long ago knew how to think in Christian categories. They devoted their lives to serving Jesus Christ by making His Word more accessible. By their example they encouraged artists and musicians to follow their vocations in representing the truth of Scripture in human terms. Of course these men were flawed. Erasmus, for instance, chose to remain a Roman Catholic and debated bitterly with Luther. No doubt many believers today would disagree with Erasmus and Luther too on some points, but is their work to be ignored and their integrity transgressed by today's ignorance?

Peculiarly, television preachers and film lecturers and writers of predigested history books often fail to deal with Erasmus and other Christian humanists. But history is not to be bent to suit one's prejudice; nor does a word like "humanism" lose its primary meaning just because it is adopted by atheistic naturalists. The Ethical Culture Society, the British Humanist Association, and the publishers of Free Inquiry have corrupted the word "humanism," and the nature of "language laziness" is such that, once a word has been commandeered and its usage made familiar, it is all but impossible to redeem that word from corruption and restore its historic meaning. Such corruption is witnessed in the now-standard use of "gay" to mean "homosexual." "Humanism" is another word worthy of redemption.

In a 1972 book, The Way They Should Go, this writer offered the phrase "Christian artists and scholars" as a palliative to anyone who might gag over "Christian humanists." He was too timid to call for a revival of the spirit of Christian humanism by name—Christian humanism as exemplified by saints and singers, artists, and poets since the day of Pentecost. Today this writer hopes to atone for that blunder by issuing a call for Christian humanists, a challenge to thinking Christians everywhere to reclaim for God the life
of the mind, the world of imagination, the things of the spirit. This is a call for Christians to begin enjoying the abundant life promised them—their utterly human and dependent walk with Jesus Christ. To heed this call, Christian educators are needed at every level and in every sphere who understand the legacy of Christian humanism and are not ashamed of their inheritance as modern Christian humanists. Such leaders are needed to point the way to a Christian renaissance.

But while many Christian educators know their purpose, many in the church have grown suspicious of their supposed erudition. What will win them to an enlightened understanding of God's benediction on learning? Only an unremitting allegiance to Jesus Christ revealed in the Word of God. Erasmus—towering thinker that he was—could nonetheless write the following:

I utterly disagree with those who do not want the Holy Scriptures to be read by the uneducated in their own language, as though Christ's teaching was so obscure that it could hardly be understood even by a handful of theologians, or as though the strength of Christian religion consisted in men's ignorance of it.... I hope the farmer may sing snatches of Scripture at his plough, that the weaver may hum bits of Scriptures to the tune of his shuttle, that the traveler may lighten the weariness of his journey with stories from the Scripture. 10

This is the vision of the true Christian humanist.11 At Dallas Theological Seminary, at The Stony Brook School, throughout formal Christian education—wherever Jesus Christ is professed—teachers and students alike should labor to regain that vision of their predecessors. Christians today are challenged to join with Paul and Timothy, with Justin Martyr and Jerome, with Augustine and Alcuin, with Calvin and Knox, with Luther and Erasmus, with Comenius and Milton, with T S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis, with Gresham Machen and Griffith Thomas and Frank Gaebelein—Christian humanists all. May Christians join together in renewed commitment to their treasured task as conservators and proclaimers of the good news.

Editor's Note

This is the third in a series of four articles delivered by the author as the W H. Griffith Thomas Lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary, November 5-8, 1985.
Notes

3 Ibid., p. 161.
4 *Free Inquiry* 1 (Winter 1980/81), cover page.
7 For an expanded treatment of this problem, see E. Harris Harbison, *The Christian Scholar in the Age of the Reformation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956). This writer is happy to acknowledge his debt to Harbison's scholarship. The opening paragraph of his book reads: "The Christian scholar-like the Christian poet, the Christian musician, or the Christian scientist-has always run the risk of being dismissed as an anomaly. What has learning to do with salvation of the soul, or satisfaction of the mind with peace of the spirit? ... Yet the fact is that almost from the beginning of Christianity there have been those who pursued learning as a Christian calling, in the belief that they were following God's will" (p. 1).

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