

“What Is Man?” Sermon  
at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

[11 July 1954]  
Montgomery, Ala

*In this handwritten and dated version of a sermon King had been developing since his seminary years, he stresses that all people are created in God's image and bear a responsibility to live accordingly.<sup>1</sup> King draws upon Harry Emerson Fosdick in calling*

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<sup>1</sup> King indicates on the folder containing this sermon that he preached this sermon at Dexter on 9 July 1954, a Friday. He may have erred on the precise date he delivered the sermon, which according to the *Montgomery Examiner's* 15 July report of the Men's Day service, occurred on 11 July 1954. For early uses of this sermon title, see King, Sermon Introductions, 30 November 1948–16 February 1949, and “Radio Sermons,” 26 July 1953–6 September 1953, pp. 84 and 136 in this volume, respectively. King's personal library contained a copy of Crozer professor Edwın Ewart Aubrey's *Living the Christian Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1939), which King annotated. He underlined the following portion of the preface: “What is man?” becomes an acute problem once again, and its answer lies outside the descriptions of the average psychological textbook, greatly as these contribute to our understanding of the ways in which men express themselves” (Aubrey, *Living the Christian Faith*, p. viii). King later published a version of this sermon in his 1959 book *The Measure of a Man* (Philadelphia: Christian Education Press, 1959), pp. 1–18 and in his 1963 sermon collection (King, “What Is Man?” in *Strength to Love*, pp. 87–92).

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for "a church that shall be a fountainhead of a better social order We can talk all we want to about saving souls from hell and preaching the pure and simple gospel, but unless we preach the social gospel our evangelistic gospel will be meaningless "

"What is man that thou art mindful of him?"<sup>2</sup> This question flowing from the lips of the Psalmist is one of the most important questions facing any generation The whole political, social and economic structure of any society is largely determined by its answer to this pressing question Indeed, the conflict which we witness in the world today between totalitarianism and democracy is at bottom a conflict over the question, what is man?—whether man is a cog in the wheel of the state or whether he is a free creative being capable of facing responsibility

In our generation the asking of this question has grown to extensive proportions But though there is widespread agreement in asking the question, there is fantastic disagreement in answering it A few modern thinkers would probably agree with the writer of yesterday who spoke of man as the supreme clown of creation Others would probably share the materialistic thinking of the recent writer who described man as "a chemical laboratory driven about by sex impulse "<sup>3</sup> Others would probably join in with the optimism of Shakespeare's Hamlet

What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason how infinite in faculty In form and moving how express and admirable In action how like an angel in apprehension how like a God the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!<sup>4</sup>

Still others would agree with [Thomas] Carlyle in saying,

There are depths in man that go to the lowest hell, and heights that reach the highest heaven, for are not both heaven and hell made out of him, everlasting miracle and mystery that he is <sup>5</sup>

And so we can see that the attempt to answer the question—what is man—has brought about many answers For the moment let us turn to this significant question and see what we can do in terms of answering it Our answer will obviously be conditioned by the Christian doctrine of the nature of man <sup>6</sup>

Let us begin by stating that man is an animal with a material body This is some-

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2 Cf Psalm 8 4

3 King may be referring to Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, trans R B Haldane and J Kemp (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948), 3 314 "Indeed, one may say man is concrete sexual desire, for his origin is an act of copulation and his wish of wishes is an act of copulation, and this tendency alone perpetuates and holds together his whole phenomenal existence "

4 Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 2, sc 2

5 Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (1837)

6 King submitted an outline entitled "The Nature of Man" as part of an assignment based on William Newton Clarke's *An Outline of Christian Theology* (1898) for George W Davis's course at Crozer called Christian Theology for Today The outline parallels his points in this sermon (see King, "Six Talks in Outline," 13 September–23 November 1949, in *Papers* 1 242–243)

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what obvious, but nevertheless it should be stressed. Man is properly a part of animated nature and cannot disown his kinship with the earth and the creatures that live upon it. No one can doubt the fact that the organization of man's body resembles the bodies of animals in general. And like all other animals man is dependent on his environment for food, raiment and shelter.

This means that man's body is significant. This is what distinguishes Christian from Greek thought. And so because man is an animal with a material body, we must forever be concerned about his material well being. To often have we talked about the primacy of the spiritual with little concern for the material. It might be true that man cannot live by bread alone, but the mere fact that the alone is added to the passage implies that man cannot live without bread.<sup>7</sup> My friends man is body as well as soul, and any religion that pretends to care for the souls of people but is not interested in the slums that damn them, the city government that corrupts them, and the economic order that cripples them, is a dry, passive do nothing religion in need of new blood. As I look at the economic and social injustices existing in our world, I plead for a church that shall be a fountainhead of a better social order.<sup>8</sup> We can talk all we want to about saving souls from hell and preaching the pure and simple gospel, but unless we preach the social gospel our evangelistic gospel will be meaningless. Man is an animal with a material body, and he who overlooks this is overlooking an essential part of man's nature.

Yet we cannot stop here. Man is more than an animal. Man is more than flesh and blood. Some year ago a chemist attempted to determine the worth of man in terms of material value. The results of the study revealed that in terms of the markets of that day man was worth only 99 cents in ~~terms of~~ material value. This simply means that the stuff of man's bodily make-up is worth only 99 cents.<sup>9</sup> (I guess now that the standards of living are a little higher man is worth a little more). But is it possible to explain the whole of man in terms of 99 cents? Can we explain the literary genius of a Shakespeare in terms of 99 cents? Can we explain the artistic [*genius*?] of a Michelangelo in terms of 99 cents? Can we explain the musical genius of a

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7 This phrase is found in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, for example, see Deuteronomy 8:3 and Matthew 4:4.

8 Fosdick, "Christianity's Stake in the Social Situation," in *The Hope of the World*, p. 25. "I plead instead for a church that shall be a fountainhead of a better social order. Any church that pretends to care for the souls of people but is not interested in the slums that damn them, the city government that corrupts them, the economic order that cripples them, and international relations that, leading to peace or war, determine the spiritual destiny of innumerable souls—that kind of church, I think, would hear again the Master's withering words: 'Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!'"

9 Fosdick, "There Is No Death," in *Successful Christian Living* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1937), pp. 265–266. "Certain chemists, we are told, with a flair for statistics, figured out the chemical constitution of an average man and put the result into easily understandable terms, thus: An average man contains enough fat to make seven bars of soap, enough iron to make a medium-sized nail, enough sugar to fill a shaker, enough lime to whitewash a chicken-coop, enough phosphorus to make twenty-two hundred match ups, enough magnesium for a dose of magnesia, enough potassium to explode a toy cannon, together with a little sulphur. And the chemists figured that at market rates then current these chemical elements could be obtained for about ninety-eight cents. That's what we are made of. That's what all our seers and prophets, the great musicians, the great poets, the great leaders of the race, have been made of, about ninety-eight cents worth of chemical materials." King annotated a copy of this book and kept it in his personal library.

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What Is Man

1. Animal - part of the physical universe
2. Mind -
3. Social animal -
4. His power to philosophize  
He transcends the natural order.

II Man claims unconditional freedom

*There is no limit*

1. Is there a limit to man's freedom?
2. The attempt to secure right things in a wrong way -
3. Desire to be God

III the individual sin becomes a social sin.

King writes a brief outline for "What Is Man?" the opening page of his copy of Reinhold Niebuhr's 1932 book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.

Beethoven in terms of 99 cent? Can we explain the spiritual genius of Jesus of Nazareth in terms of ninety nine cents? Can we explain the ongoing processes of our own ordinary lives in terms of 99¢. My friends there is something in man that cannot be calculated in materialistic terms. Man is a being of spirit. This is ultimately that which distinguishes man from his animal ancestry. He is in time, yet above time; He is in nature, yet above nature. He is made to have communion with that which is eternal and everlasting. We cannot imagine an animal writing a

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Shakesperian play We have never seen a group of animals sitting down discussing intricate problems concerning the political and economic structure of a society We have never come across a group of animals [*strikeout illegible*] speculating on the nature and destiny of the universe. But man, that being that God created just a little lower than the angels, is able to think a poem and write it, he's able to think a symphony and compose it <sup>10</sup> He's able to imagine a great civilization and create it Through his amazing capacity for memory and thought and imagination, man is able to leap oceans, break through walls, and rise above the limitations of time and space Through his powers of memory man can have communion with the past, through his powers of imagination man can embrace the uncertainties of the future

Along with this strong intellectual capacity in man, there is a will Man has within himself the power of choosing his supreme end Animals follow their natures But man has the power of acting upon his own nature almost as if from without, of guiding it within certain limits, and of modifying it by the choice ~~of~~ [*strikeout illegible*] of meaningful ends Man entertains ideals, and ideals become his inspiration Man can be true or false to his nature He can be a hero or a fool Both possibilities, the noble and the base alike, indicate man's greatness

All that has just been said concerning the spiritual element in man gives backing to the Christian contention that man is made in the image of God <sup>11</sup> Man is more than flesh and blood Man is a spiritual being born to have communion with the eternal God of the universe God creates every individual for a purpose—to have fellowship with him This is the ultimate meaning of the image of God It is not that man as he is in himself bears God's likeness, but rather that man is designated for and called to a particular relation with God This concept of the image of God assures us that we, unlike our animal ancestry and the many inanimat objects of the universe, are privileged to have fellowship with the divine

Now we must admit that through our sinfulness some of the image of God has left us God's image has been terribly scarred by our sin In our modern world we have tried to get away from this term sin We have attempted to substituted for it high sounding psychological phrases and other explanation that will relieve us of responsibility But my friends whether we want to accept it or not man is a sinner in need of God's divine grace Whenever a man looks deep down into the depths of his nature he becomes painfully aware of the fact that the history of his life is the history of a constant revolt against God "All we like sheep have gone astray"<sup>12</sup> Every nation, every class and every man is apart of the gonewrongness of human nature Of all the silly, sentimental teachings which have ever characterized any generation the denial of human sin is one of the worst

Yet man is not made to dwell in the valleys of sin and evil, man is made for ~~for~~ that which is high and noble When I see how we fight vicious wars and destroy human life on bloody battlefields, I find myself saying "Man is not made for that "

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<sup>10</sup> The phrase "a little lower than the angels" is found in both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, for example, see Psalm 8 5 and Hebrews 2 7

<sup>11</sup> Cf Genesis 1 27

<sup>12</sup> Cf Isaiah 53 6

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When I see how we live our lives in selfishness and hate, again I say "man is not made for that" When I see how we often throw away the precious lives that God has given us in riotous living, again I find myself saying "Man is not made for that My friends man is made for the stars, created for eternity, born for the everlasting. Man is a child of the almighty God, born for his everlasting fellowship "What is man that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast crowned him with glory and honour Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thou hands, thou hast put all things under his feet All sheep and oxen, yea and the beasts of the field The fowl of the air, and the fish of sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the sea "<sup>13</sup> This is man's kingly prerogative Who this afternoon will rise out of the dark and dreary valleys of sin and evil, realizing that man's proper home is in the high mountain of truth, beauty and goodness, yea even where God the eternal dwells forever

Preached at Dexter, July 9, 1954

AD CSKC Sermon file, folder 22, "What Is Man?"

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<sup>13</sup> Cf Psalm 8 4-8