

Editorial: The Urgent Need for a Theological Anthropology Today

Stephen J. Wellum

THE AGE-OLD QUESTIONS—What is man? What is our purpose? Do we have any value?—have become pressing and urgent questions today. No doubt, people in every day have wrestled with these anthropological questions. But today, especially in the West, it seems as if these

questions now consume us. Part of the reason for this is due to the so-called “demise” of the Christian worldview in the West and its influence upon our larger society. Prior to the Enlightenment, Christian theology largely shaped our society, but due to the rise of competing “isms,” as represented by the larger categories of modernism and now postmodernism (e.g., Marxism, secular humanism, existentialism, nihilism, deconstructionism, etc.), our culture is now suffering

from a collective identity crisis. What makes this identity crisis even more acute has been the rise of

various technologies alongside these ideological viewpoints which have further questioned our understanding of ourselves. After all, living in a day of test-tube babies, trans-sexual operations, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, and potential human cloning, the question of human dignity, value, and personhood have indeed become pressing. Are we creatures of dignity because we are created in God’s image? Or are we merely animals, by-products of an impersonal evolutionary process, things that can be, technologically speaking, manipulated and re-fashioned for whatever ends we deem best?

This collective identity crisis is best illustrated in the postmodern university (better: “di-versity”) where any Christian or unified view of human beings has disappeared. For example, in the biology classroom, humanity is viewed as nothing more than a “naked ape,” to use the words of Desmond Morris. From the perspective of neurobiology, humans are viewed merely as physical beings which seems to entail that the mind is reducible

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to the brain and that all human behavior, affections, and willing is explained solely in terms of neuro-chemical factors. In other disciplines we find competing images of human beings, but at their core, all of these disciplines attempt to understand the nature of human beings from the perspective of biological and social factors alone. In fact, various negative postmodern thinkers across the disciplines, have specifically questioned the overly optimistic Enlightenment view of human beings as “rational beings” and free and autonomous “knowing subjects.” Instead, they now contend that humans have no fixed nature; there is no “givenness” to us. Rather we are simply finite, malleable, even determined beings conditioned solely by our social-cultural-linguistic backgrounds. In such a situation, it is nigh impossible to sustain any view that human beings are creatures of dignity and value.

From a Christian perspective, this current identity crisis demonstrates both a sad irony and an important lesson. First, it is a sad irony because our present-day confusion, especially in the West, is directly tied to our rejection of the Christian worldview and our refusal to acknowledge that we are creatures of God. Starting in the Enlightenment era up until our present day, it has been fashionable to argue that “we have come of age,” that we do not need to retain the God of Scripture in our thinking in order to understand who we are, or in the famous words of Alexander Pope, “the proper study of mankind is man” not God. But the sad irony of this rebellious approach to anthropology is that, in the end, it leads to futility. It is a perfect illustration of the important truth, “ideas have consequences.” If we try to grasp who we are apart from our Creator, the consequence is not understanding but disaster. Anthropology which seeks to study human beings apart from the Triune God inevitably ends up viewing us merely in terms of impersonal origins, products of matter, motion, time, and chance. And even more: these false ideas never remain theoretical. Inevitably, people act upon what they believe, and it is not

difficult to see the disastrous results of such thinking everywhere around us—e.g., our devaluation of human life in abortion, infanticide, euthanasia; the break-down of the family, gender confusion; false views of human nature as applied to political theory; and the list could be multiplied.

Secondly, there is an important lesson for Christians to learn as well, namely, we will never understand correctly who we are apart from a *theological* anthropology. Scripture and Christian theology rightly affirm that human beings enjoy neither metaphysical nor methodological pride of place: humanity comes second to God, both in the order of being (namely, creation) and in the order of knowledge (namely, revelation). John Calvin develops this point in the opening sentences of his famous *Institutes*: “Without the knowledge of God there is no knowledge of the self.” That is why Christian theology has typically placed our discussions of anthropology after the doctrine of God. Why? Because we only begin to know who we are once we view ourselves in relation to our Creator. In this regard, in contrast to our present-day views of human beings, Christianity affirms at least two crucial truths about us: first, human beings are unique and significant—we have incredible value—because we are created in God’s image. Scripture explains us in relation to a personal beginning (Gen 1:1), namely the Triune God. Second, given the Fall, we who were created to be great are now moral rebels before God and deeply flawed by sin to the very core of our being. That is why the only solution to our problem is nothing less than the sovereign and gracious initiative of the Triune God on our behalf.

In the end, it is a *theological* anthropology which we desperately need today, given the anthropological crisis of our day. That is why we are devoting this issue of *SBJT* to this crucial topic. Our world needs to be confronted afresh with the truth of who we are in light of God’s Word. It is my prayer that this issue will better equip each one of us not only to know the truth but also to practice it, in an increasingly dark and de-humanizing age.