

BEING HUMAN

DOCTRINE COMMISSION REPORT AUGUST 2003

Being Human is the fourth in a series of Doctrine Commission reports stretching back to 1987. Having dealt with the doctrines of God, the Holy Spirit and Salvation this report turns to consider what it means to be human.

This report shows the growing influence of broad evangelicalism on the Church of England. There is much more of a sense of the need to engage with scripture than was evident in those reports produced in the liberal heyday.

There are seven chapters the first of which is an introduction to the theme of what it means to be human. This is followed by a detailed and particular treatment of the theme in scripture. Then come four chapters exploring particular aspects of what it means to be human today – power, money, sex and time – with a final chapter bringing some of the themes together.

The report is generally good and has a lot of thought provoking material within it. It will prove a useful resource for those looking at anthropology (the doctrine of man). Moreover on a theme such as money, where preachers tend to concentrate on giving, there is much to broaden out reflection on what the scriptures teach.

The opening two chapters set the scene and provide the methodology for the report. In common with several other reports in recent years it is deemed necessary to have a theme that is then expounded and applied. This practice can be infuriating because once the theme has been developed it is this which drives the later analysis and conclusions. Sometimes theme can seem reasonable but it is then applied ruthlessly so that the conclusions reached are at odds with Scripture. In general *Being Human* appears to have avoided this temptation. The chosen is 'wisdom' and this is fully explored at the beginning. However, this model does not dominate the four chapters that follow rather they seek to engage scripture generally. Indeed, the first and final chapters appear to me to have a different authorship to the others (which no doubt – as always with form criticism – tells you more about my understanding than the authors').

Flaws in basic approach

In the light of the above two specific points ought to be noted. First, whilst it handles scripture extensively it certainly does not accord to it the status which Anglican doctrine requires. For example in the opening chapters we are presented with scripture as being the words of men. So we are told that Anglicanism is 'nourished by the Bible and its wisdom' (p7) and that 'The wisdom that the Spirit gives is nourished by Scripture understood through tradition and reason.' (p12) These statements do not amount to the Anglican position that scripture is normative, the ultimate rule for the church. The reason for this stance is that the report does not acknowledge scripture as a divine work, the Word of God. Thus the report claims 'the fact is that scientific advances are not foreseen as possibilities in Scripture...' If God is the ultimate author of scripture this statement amounts to saying that God did

not foresee scientific advances! When we start to apply scripture, in particular to the area of sexuality, the idea that the world has developed beyond what God ever imagined possible has serious practical implications, let alone theological ones.

Secondly, the report blithely assumes that we as human beings have evolved over billions of years and indeed states so (p6). There is much in the report that follows about the fact that we are created and indeed about the reality of our human nature as fallen. This is clearly a model that many in the churches accept but it is not the most obvious reading of Scripture. On the face of it Scripture states that the first human beings were created almost instantaneously by the simple command of God, that death and decay are the result of the fall. On this model the present genetic diversity is the result of development (evolution) over only a few thousand years. Surely, the report ought to at least recognise that this is the model presented in Scripture and held by the majority of the Church for most of its history.

Although the themes that follow are eye-catching and clearly both important and relevant, the report pays far too little attention to sin and death or even to the hands-on relationship of God to mankind. This weakness is in sharp contrast to most works of systematic theology.

Detailed outworking

The detailed chapters deal with power, money, sex and time. Each of these has much good and thought provoking material. Having read some of the initial media reports it appears that the journalists could not resist the temptation to turn first to the chapter on sex. This must be infuriating to the authors but rather illustrates what they say about sex in our society today.

Power:

The chapter provides a useful survey of some of the themes surrounding power both in terms of its use and abuse in the world and in the Church. The report suggests that within the Christian community those who have power, and some will, must hold it with saintliness and humility. There is no mention or treatment of the claims of the Papacy although what they say would seem to imply that such claims are totally wrong. Also, there is nothing said about the captivity to sin and the power this has over us, nor indeed about the power of the gospel for salvation.

Money:

The treatment on money is good not least because it explores many themes about money, rather than our attitude to it, which we generally ignore. Usually preachers only preach on this theme in relation to giving. There is particular treatment about debt (or credit) and the impact that this has on lives. This is timely but there is not much in the way of suggestions as to how this might be changed or indeed, whether the authors would wish to see changes in legislation.

Sex:

This chapter appears to set out a good case for faithful, lifelong union and to do so primarily from the scriptures. In the current 'debate' about homosexuality the report sides with those who believe that a debate is necessary although it claims not to be taking sides. We then see the impact of the treatment of scripture. First, those passages on homosexual practice, which have generally been seen as fairly plain to Christians, are said to be an open question. Thus we are in the hands of the experts as to how

we can understand what God said. Moreover, because Scripture is not normative, nor God's Word for all time, the view is allowed which says that our understanding has developed and so now homosexual practice may be acceptable. Although they state bluntly at one point that paedophilia is a sexual disorder no attempt is made either to justify this or explain why the same may not be said of bestiality, homosexuality or even adultery.

Time:

It is perhaps surprising that time should feature at all but the report draws attention to the fact that so much of what it means to be human is shaped by the reality of time. Again this is a useful and thought provoking treatment although I was at a loss to understand why on page 112 Stephen Hawking appears to be treated as a greater source of knowledge than God about how and when the universe came to be. Again, however, if this report were being driven by scripture rather than being a series of scriptural reflections on the issues, I would have expected to see more about the shortness of time and the urgency, evident in scripture and the history of the Church, that people respond to the gospel today.

Overall the report has much that is thought provoking and provides some useful biblical treatment of the issues. There is much that can be of help in studying these issues and indeed in providing material for preaching on particular subjects. The report's failing is that whilst it engages fairly well with scripture it is not driven by a biblical agenda and does not treat the Word of God as God's word. This means that scripture provides insights but we are always free to explain away or develop from those parts that don't fit so well with what we want to believe.

*David Phillips,
General Secretary, Church Society
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