

FAITH AND THOUGHT

VOLUME 111 • NUMBER 1 • APRIL 1985

*A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation of the
Christian Revelation and modern research*

GENERAL EDITOR: Dr. A. B. Robins



Published for
THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE



by
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

Duncan Vere

Does Man's 'dominion' over nature include the Natural World within himself?

'Man is the link which unites the natural and spiritual worlds.'
James Orr.¹

Despite the balanced statements of Genesis ch: 1 vs. 26 and 28, and ch: 2 vs. 15, the record of Christendom seems to have been one of acceptance of dominion over the natural world rather than of stewardship of it on God's behalf (Gen. 2:15). This seems the more surprising in view of Jesus' consistent references to man's role as being one of a steward, or faithful servant, over God's possessions (Matt. 18:21-35, 20:1-16, 21:23f, 33f; Lk: 19:11-27, 20:9-19). Perhaps the parables have been interpreted in so spiritual a framework that even the clear relevance of the spiritual for the earthly here-and-now has been passed by.

For many cultures, Christian tradition seems also to have feared incursion into the natural world within man. At times this represented no more than a superstition born of ignorance, as the difficulties faced by the early anatomists show. At other times there was an awareness of man's exalted spiritual status, which was seen to forbid in some way tampering with the 'temple of the Holy Spirit'. This did not prevent innumerable weapon wounds, however, nor the dissection of criminals and other classes deemed (quite wrongly) to have forgone human privilege. In scripture, from the start, the text is preoccupied with violent incursions, and the significance of blood in terms of life. Whether impressed by his brother's occupation, or by his father's duty of stewardship, Cain asked, 'Am I my brother's keeper' (or steward, or shepherd)? The answer was that this was indeed the case, at least by implication, and the matters of blood and responsibility for bloodshed, were raised immediately.

Whether some at times have regarded man's body as not part

1. Orr, James (1904), *The Christian View of God and the World*. The First Series of Kerr Lectures, Lecture IV, Andrew Elliot, Edinburgh, seventh edition.

of the natural world, or at others (like the Greeks), taken it to be so entirely part of nature as to be evil or contemptible,^{2,3} scripture clearly states that man's body and mind are within nature (Gen. 2:7, 3:19, Psalm 103:14), but worthy of a respect totally different from that given to other animate creatures because man alone is made 'in the image of God', and man was not 'given' for any purpose to other men (Gen. 1:29, 9:3).

The last century has seen a quiet but deeply significant revolution in man's handling of the natural world within himself. The elements of this revolution are the explosive growth of scientific understanding, so that we now know that most of the illnesses which afflict us have direct parallels throughout the animal kingdom, the growth of effective therapies, which work by chemical or physical invasion of our internal world (e.g. surgery, anaesthesia, antibiotics), and the growth of wealth in the developed world which allows these costly manipulations. But the new therapies are no longer confined to their largely traditional roles. Noting that man can use methods hitherto confined to the conquest of illness to alter bodily shape, to vary the normal state of mind, to change patterns of reproduction, we now find these methods devoted increasingly to non-therapeutic goals. There is no need to attempt a comprehensive list; it suffices to consider the use of drugs in psychopathic offenders, non-therapeutic abortion, breast enlargement by silicone prosthesis, and *in vitro* fertilisation to understand the range of options now open to change *normal* life processes. Respect for the body has again faded, unless an individual chooses to press the matter in court. To mention a rather extreme example, the recent death of a London policewoman by machine gun fire from an Embassy window was described as 'regrettable', but not as grounds for further action by those responsible. The general effect on ethics seems to have been a shift right across from deontology to consequentialism, so that the end justifies the means and no principles are sought.

So, man now regularly invades man in ways which were unforeseen in scripture, apart from a few prophecies whose interpretation is unclear at present. Evangelical Christians thus find themselves faced with an acute problem of Bible interpretation (a hermeneutic problem). In an age where hardly a week

2. Greek Philosophy, man's body in: see *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Inter-Varsity Press (1980), Part I pp.202-203, Part II p.941.

3. Plato, *The Republic* translated by H. D. P. Lee, Penguin Books (1955), p.389. Book X, §608-611.

passes without some novel ethical problem, Christians are in a world where direct commandments are no longer to be found to apply. This situation demands inference of indirect commandments from scripture but begs the question of the *level* at which such inferences should be drawn. So, at the very moment when all look to the church for confident ethical pronouncements, evangelicals find themselves at variance over the simplest problems. This difficulty does not, of course, affect those who take their stand on church tradition, or on a liberal view, for there is no dearth of man-made theory. But how can one rightly divide the word of truth on such matters? Consider for example, only the abortion problem. Some base their view squarely upon the 'life' passages of scripture, and upon human 'personhood' as a *theological* concept, that a man becomes such because he is 'known' as such by God. At the other extreme, others place weight upon God's delegation of decisions to man, and upon the overriding duty of love to a neighbour. They would assert that abortion may well be the lesser evil, a necessary step to resolve a dangerous difficulty which opposes life in its deepest sense. Clearly, the view taken, be it either of these extremes or any between them will rest upon the various weights applied to many passages of scripture. So there are, not surprisingly, many hermeneutic systems, and over them all the need to respond to the inner light of the Spirit. Remarkably, there is in general more agreement on what to do than there is upon why it should be done.

We need therefore to ask two questions, 'what is the basic nature of man's incursion into man', and, 'what can we learn from scripture about *how* to approach such problems in general, rather than seeking solutions to the particular?'

Man's incursion into man has three important aspects—the scope of incursion, man's status as an explorer, and the question of what is 'natural'. The scope of the incursions is surely far broader than it appears to most. It is easy to be shocked and bewildered by a new technique like abortion, *in vitro* fertilisation or brain surgery, without noticing the serious and far-reaching incursions imposed by education, home training, social conditioning, advertising and indoctrination, all of which have been traditional elements of human culture from the start (see e.g. Deut. 6:7, 7:20-25) but have only recently become more flexible, and manipulable through the development of 'mass media'. We believe that 'good homes', schools, universities, foster freedom and cultural advance. So they do, by imposing

restrictions upon liberty. Modern political systems, like the organised worldly church at all times, seek to cultivate beliefs by selective fact-withholding, or discrimination. Selective fact-control is the stuff of war; it provokes and sustains conflict. Perhaps we should concentrate less upon what can now be done to bodies when there is so much wrong that is done to minds. It seems strange to 'third world' people to learn of our preoccupations; a distinguished Nigerian doctor commenting on our children's ward, said, 'in our country, they die in the street'. The problem is that practical procedures, like abortion or brain surgery, reify a problem, focussing attention upon some of its least relevant aspects, just as a broken window can divert attention from the state of heart of a thief. They demand attention because they are very concrete parts of a local situation, which must be dealt with for that reason.

Man is, and always has been an *explorer*; his 'dominion' and survival demand it. But exploration necessitates 'adaptation'. The more rapid the exploratory moves, the more difficult and hazardous adaptation becomes. Sudden exploration may lead to extinction, as may the failure to move as the environment changes. So we now have very clear evidences of this as the diseases of maladaptation. Consider some examples; rapid world travel has altered parasite migrations. Whether one considers influenza epidemics or the spread of schistosome worms in the West Indies, diseases are on the march. Much of the infection now occurring in hospitals stems from the use of antibiotics against other infections. Much of the malaria in South-East Asia is now chloroquine-resistant, and such parasites have now appeared and are appearing in South America and in Central Africa. (In a frivolous moment, one might consider modern medicines as an adaptation on the part of doctors to survive in business!) The 'improved farm' sprayed with insecticide and hedgeless, lacks butterflies and birds. Medical and industrial radiation, and exposure to mutagens have produced enhanced cancer incidence in some places. The three main fatal diseases of men in Britain today are attributable to smoking. Promiscuous homosexuals develop suppressed immunity and then cancers of a peculiarly fatal kind. (The A.I.D.S. syndrome). All have occurred within the last 50 years, a very brief time in planetary history. Thus, the quickening pace of exploration is itself proving to be an incursion, often of a very damaging kind, particularly if one considers wars as an effect of the stresses associated with movement and adaptation.

If there is a 'natural' world, how may it be defined? Is the 'natural' part 'something which hasn't changed recently'? The question matters because 'natural law' has been a mainstay of church tradition in some quarters, having an honourable, if restricted, place in scripture in Paul's theology, especially in passages like Romans ch. 1 and 2 and in 1 Cor. 11:14. It seems to me that natural law has a very restricted value, particularly where one is considering the goodness of unnatural procedures. Consider just one example: circumcision cannot by the wildest stretch be 'natural', but it was ordained of God for ceremonial purposes which included the use of the intact human structure as a symbol of the 'flesh', the natural man who is offensive to God (Jer. 4:4, Col. 2:11). What is more, circumcision has now been shown to be beneficial in preventing cancers in both sexes, a seemingly unlikely conclusion to an 'unnatural' practice.

First let it be said that scripture knows nothing of responsibility for human life being delegated *wholly* to man. The principle that all men, even kings, are to be stewards, or helpers of their brethren under God's command, is clear not only from Genesis 4:9-11 and Genesis 9:1-7, but in numerous other places such as Jeremiah 19:5, 22:3-5, 13-17 and so on. Man is clearly intended to walk in partnership with, and under the express guidance of God in these matters. That God *has* a will for man's conduct is very clear from Jeremiah 18:10 and 19:5. In Genesis, the thought of dominion is always linked with that of responsibility (Gen. 1:3, 6, 26, 27). The thought of relationship is clear in Matt. 4:4, 1:27-28, 2:18, as well as in Gen. 3:9. The 'I'-'thou' aspect of this relationship seems very clear, perhaps beginning with the 'word' of God which called man from the dust in the first place.

If we are to look to scripture for light on a proper approach by man to the human body, where should we look? Let us start with a problem which arose in Corinth, where an abuse of the body may well have stemmed from Greek ideas of contempt for the body.⁴ The remarkable fact is that Paul, in his extended teaching about the body of man in the Corinthian letters uses no less than thirteen pictures or analogies, and adds a fourteenth in his letter to the Romans. They are as follows, with notes on the Greek words used based upon Vine.⁵

4. Coneybeare, W. J., and Houson J. S. (1898), *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, Longmans, London (new editors).

5. Vine, E. W. *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Oliphants, London and Edinburgh, 1940.

	A mould, the form of character to which the body can conform	Romans 8:29 Romans 12:2, Philippians 3:21	
συσχηματίζεσθε συμμορφος	(outward transformation), (inward conformation) The impress of a mould, likeness	1 Cor. 15:49	
εικόνας	The image of Christ, or likeness to Him	1 Cor. 15:49	the word involves the two ideas of representation and manifestation
ναός	A temple	1 Cor 3:16, 6:19	a shrine or sanctuary
σκηνοῦς	A tent	2 Cor. 5:1	a booth, tabernacle or habitation
οικητηριον		1 Cor. 15:53-54	}
ενδυσασθαι	Clothing, clothed upon	2 Cor. 5:3	
ενοικησω	Indwelling	2 Cor. 6:16	an abode (i.e. not just a building)
κατοπτριζομενοι	Reflecting, as a mirror	2 Cor. 3:18	
σπερματων	A seed, falling to the ground	1 Cor. 15: 37, 42-47	
σκευεσιν	Earthen vessels	2 Cor. 4:7-12, 15	a household chattel used for storage
σωμα	A body	1 Cor. 12:1-31	'the instrument of life'
ετίσκηνηση	A 'thorn', damaging the body and enabling God's glory to shine out from it	2 Cor. 12:7-10	lit. 'may dwell upon me'
οσμην	A censer, an odour	2 Cor. 2:14-17	'that which arises from what is instinct with life'
πλαξιν	Stone Tablets	2 Cor. 3:3	'anything flat or broad' to receive a message in writing

Now, why so many pictures; what do they teach? It seems to me that they teach us two fundamental lessons:

(1) We like to study *man* to discover what he is. We use scientific method, we use reason, we use philosophy. There is nothing wrong with that, to give a *human* description of man. But why keep with that alone, where scripture teaches us the *creator's* description of man? This is a transcendent view of man, one which man could never reach without aid or revelation from without himself. Man's highest nature is to be found in God, in what God makes of man as he relates to him. What matters about the tent or temple is who lives within, what matters about the jar or censer is what it contains; what matters about a mirror is the light or image which it reflects, and so on. So, although man's body is indeed of lesser import than man-in-relation-to-God, nevertheless it acquires the highest dignity and value in being that which God can and does indwell, or inhabit.

(2) Every one of the pictures used by Paul is that of a receiver, a receptacle, a carrier of something glorious. They might be termed 'cavitory' models. Just as one can discern the shape and nature of a motor car, even if it has never been seen, by studying the empty, hollow jigs in a motor factory, just as one can discern the character of a fossil from the hollow impress left by it in some shale, so one can discern the true being of man's body from the 'God shaped hole' within it. Man can be filled, and reaches his full entity only when filled by a good or by an evil spirit. Man's body is an agent, a vessel shaped for a master's use. These ideas were not used by Paul alone. The Old Testament view of man as 'the candle of the Lord' (Psalm 18:28, Prov. 20:27, Jer. 25:10) is carried through in Luke 8:16, 11:33-36 and Rev. 2:5.

Now the idea of a 'cavitory' model can be taken further, most clearly seen in 2 Cor. 3:18. Consider a hologram. It is a most remarkable image, for it bears a three-fold relationship to light; it is formed, indeed *informed*, by light; it reflects in unique ways the form of light which gave it birth; and in so reflecting it reveals the character of that light in a play of colours and shapes which identify that light uniquely. Now, is that not what man is seen to be in relation to God in scripture? The very words used are the same; read about holography and you will see how it depends on *information*, *conformation*, *transformation* and *reformation* by, or of, light. A poor hologram will even result in *deformation*. In scripture man is seen as transformed by God's light, informed by God's word, reflecting God's light to others, whilst displaying its nature without the deformation which results from unfor-

given sin. We are back to the 'image of God' in Genesis, defaced but not effaced in the fall, renewed in Christ. This is 'indwelling' by the Holy Spirit, this is 'receiving the kingdom like a little child'. So man's true and highest nature is to be a container, and diffuser of the divine, originated and remoulded by the divine. Hence we have all the 'pots and purpose' scriptures from Jeremiah 17, Isaiah 14, 19 and 23 to Romans 8 and 9, and the thought of 'holy' or 'hallowed', as a vessel set apart for holy use, for a master's use, in Romans 12:1, Ephesians 1:4 and many another scriptures. Note also the 'Christ-in-you' passages (1 Cor. 15:20-23, 45-49; Col. 1:27, 3:16; Gal. 4:19) and the pregnant phrase 'should be' or 'destined for' as used of man (e.g. 1 Pet. 1:15, 16; 2:5-9; 2 Pet. 3:11-12).

How then does all this help us in decisions about how to treat other people? The best that the world can offer, its highest ideal, is the 'Golden Rule'; we should treat others as we do ourselves. There is nothing wrong with that, it is a key scriptural principle; it is central to the ethics of the Old Testament, of Jesus, of the apostles. Anything *less* than that must be wrong! But, I would argue, man has an even higher destiny, a greater personal dignity than even the *comparative* Golden rule would suggest; for if someone despises his own body, as did the Greeks, he is unlikely to respect others more than himself. No, it seems from scripture that our duty is to treat every man, whether old or young, male or female, intelligent and athletic, or mindless and disabled, as a 'candle of the Lord', a potential hologram of Christ. Hence interventions made upon man, whether therapeutic or not, should only be such as are aimed to facilitate and conserve their highest function as a receptacle, or perhaps if you will forgive a word from botany, a conceptacle, of the divine. If further evidence is needed, consider only how Jesus saw in the most degraded, ignorant or misled people, that which they could be by Grace and treated them with an appropriate dignity. This has always been the stamp of Christian mission and action in the world; it is an essential part of love to others.