

## Some Words About...

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### ***Anthropinos* (human)**

The Greek word *anthropinos* meant “human” (formerly translated “mankind”). In *Jewish Wars*, Josephus questions that when Sennacherib and his army attacked the city “was it by human hands he fell?” In the Septuagint Job challenges God: “is your life human?”

#### **New Testament**

Paul, addressing pagan intellectuals, states the case for monotheism clearly and asserts the absurdity of the idea that we can assist God, or that God needs “some help by human hands” (Acts 17:25). There are things God wants us to do not because God cannot do them or needs help getting them done but because they are activities God has devised as our part in the beatification of the world. There is a constant temptation to express the divine capacity in terms of human capabilities, to assume human limitations when we think of or depict God. When we popularize God, we degrade God. To insist that “God has no hands but our hands” is to commit sacrilege with the best of intentions.

When Paul wrote in Romans 6:15–23 about slavery and freedom, he used language that hit home. Rome was full of slaves. A single Roman citizen might have a thousand slaves. Caesar and Pompey between them captured more than a million slaves, many of whom were brought to Rome in chains. So when Paul spoke of “slaves to sin” and “slaves to righteousness” he was using language that referred to well-known conditions that sometimes were very grim. He explained his reference to slavery by saying “I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh” (6:19).

Paul deals in the second chapter of First Corinthians with his refusal to so spiritualize Jesus Christ as to make his earthly life inconsequential. He begins with “I did not come to you proclaiming the mystery of God in lofty words or wisdom” (2:1) and concludes with “But we have the mind of Christ.” He further points out that he and his partners do not present their message “in words of human taught wisdom” (2:13). He is probably referring to the outlandish variety of orators and philosophers who portrayed Wisdom in esoteric or anthropomorphic categories (saying, for example, that Wisdom bore the Demiurge, the god of Israel). The language of the philosophers might speak of such things as transmigration, aeons, archons, and all sorts of angels, but Paul speaks of grace and peace.

In 1 Corinthians 4:1–5 Paul corrects those who presume to pronounce judgment as coming on some “human-determined day” (4:3). The contrast here is between the Day of the Lord (3:13) and judgment days of one sort or another pronounced by self-appointed prophets. Humans do not have the capacity to pronounce judgment. Paul sees this clearly and carries it to the point of saying that he does not even judge his own actions. Judgment Day must await the coming of the Lord (4:5). And Paul’s description of Judgment Day is vastly different from that of prophets of doom of his day or ours. He says that we shall be praised by God (4:5).

In 1 Corinthians 10:6–12 Paul cites sins with which his readers were familiar. He urges his readers to avoid such sins and points out that they do not face any unhuman temptation (10:13) but that God will be on their side to help them. We are human. The lives we live are human lives; the thoughts we think are human thoughts; the hopes we hope are human hopes. Jesus Christ was human. The incarnation validated the message that God had given humans their humanity and rejoices in it. Sin is unhuman, and even non-Christians recognize that specific sinful acts such as torture and murder are inhuman acts. But the corruption is deep. But God is God.

James, in concord with the Genesis statement that God gave humans dominion over every living thing that moves upon the earth (1:28), points out that every creature “has been tamed by a human” (3:7). And the care that tamed the beasts of the field has extended itself to humanity so that humans work in

concord with the beasts they used to kill and respect creatures they once thoughtlessly destroyed. God in giving dominion also gave responsibility. The beast and the human both belong to God.

Peter urges his readers to “submit therefore to everything human as established by the Lord” (1 Peter 2:13). This is not a blanket endorsement of the status quo but recognition that God uses human institutions for God’s own ends.

### **Today**

From time to time anthropologists discover a new fossil that they say is the ancestor of modern human beings. For example, *Australopithecus afarensis*; they determined that it must have walked upright on two legs, a purely human characteristic. So that’s what it means to be human. When they extrapolate a whole species on the basis of a few bones, I picture some future anthropologist confronted with the bones of a seven-foot basketball player and a three-foot pygmy. We mean different things when we use the word “human.” Those of us who are not scientists have a whole range of applications of the term. Both the cannibal and the vegetarian are human.

Anthropologists aside, there are many descriptions of “human.” Mark Twain’s was “Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.” Seneca said, “Man is a reasoning animal.” (Well, sometimes.) Ambrose Bierce said that man is “an animal so lost in rapturous contemplation of what he thinks he is as to overlook what he indubitably ought to be.” Thomas Aquinas said, “The last end of man and of his deeds and desires is to know the first truth, namely God.” Christopher Morley’s definition was “Human being: an ingenious assembly of portable plumbing.”

But regardless of what the scientist or the philosopher thinks about the human being, being human involves responsibility, vulnerability, and simply ability. Finally, God created humans, both male and female, in the image of God (Genesis 1:29).

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