

"Truly Human"

Tony Campolo for many years has gained worldwide recognition as an educator, author, and Christian evangelist. In his book *A Reasonable Faith – Responding to Secularism*, he tells how teaching sociology at the University of Pennsylvania helped shape his theology. In relating to sharp students skeptical of Christianity and the Church, one issue seemed to always get their attention. It is when he would ask, "What does it mean to be human? How can authentic humanness be achieved?"

He relates one special encounter. It was late Thursday afternoon, that drowsy time of the day when most of the students were checking the time waiting for the class to end. When he asked the class, "What is it you want out of life?" the class suddenly perked up.

One student stood up, and began to blurt out: "We all want to be human...we don't know how to become human and nothing that I've heard in this class up to now has provided any hints." Tony responded, "Well what do you mean by 'human'? What are the traits of humanness? Can you give me some idea of what it is you want to achieve? How can I tell you how to become human when you haven't told me what humanness is?"

"Come off it," the student shot back. "Everybody knows what it means to be human! It means to be loving, infinitely loving; sensitive, infinitely sensitive; aware, totally aware; understanding, completely understanding; forgiving, graciously forgiving. I could go on, but everybody here knows what I'm talking about when I say 'humanness' and so do you, so quit putting me on." Thus began a dialogue with Tony and a group of students that continued in that student's apartment late into the night.

Isn't one of the most crucial (and practical) questions we face: How can we be truly human? So many of the problems we live with have to do with our inhumanity to one another – our inability to relate to one another in a human (or, humane) way. We criticize and put each other down. We take advantage of someone who's weaker. We argue and fight with someone who has a different view than we do. We're chained to self-interest and a "me first" attitude.

Whether we're talking about labor-management relations, nations warring against nations, husbands and wives fighting, church people split into factions, or political opponents demonizing each other, it all has to do with whether or not we are truly human. It's not an abstract question, unrelated to life: How can I be fully human? How can I reach my potential and become a loving, caring human being? How can I help others achieve their human potential, rather than stripping them of dignity and self-worth?

The gospel of Jesus Christ addresses this question of how we can achieve authentic humanity, authentic personhood. Tony Campolo writes about this: "I think the Gospel is about becoming human. I think that Jesus came into the world primarily to deliver us from our dehumanizing behavior and tendencies, and to make us into the human beings that He willed for us to be when He created us. I think that being saved is realizing our potentiality for humanness rather than becoming otherworldly persons who find being homo sapiens a real drag. In short, I believe that Christianity is about achieving humanity."

Quite a number of years ago prominent Lutheran pastor, Dr. Wallace Fisher, wrote a book titled *Can Man Hope To Be Human?* It is a fundamental question of our existence!

But wait a minute. Isn't the problem often that we are *too human*? Like somebody does something wrong and we say, "Well, we're all human, you know."

Doesn't Scripture say we are to be more godly, more Christlike? 1 Timothy 4:7 says, "Train yourself to be godly." That's pretty plain! 2 Peter 1:3-4 tells us, "His divine power has given us everything we need for a *godly life*...through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them *you may participate in the divine nature*...". Romans 8:29: "For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to *become like his Son*." And 2 Corinthians 3:18 says followers of Jesus "are being transformed *into his (Christ's) image* with ever-increasing glory."

Now these Scriptures are true! When we trust Christ to be our Savior and surrender our life to Him, He comes and lives in us. Christ's Spirit (the Holy Spirit) resides in us. We do become "partakers of the divine nature", as it says in 2 Peter 1:4.

But if I'm more godly, more like Jesus, what will I be like? Is there any way of knowing how a person acts if God is in their life and controlling them? Yes there is! It tells us in Galatians, chapter 5. "But the fruit of the Spirit (God blossoming inside me) is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23).

Notice, these are admirable *human* qualities? But don't they also describe *God*! Love (the Bible says "God is love"), peace (God is called the God of peace in Scripture), patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness (God is faithful), gentleness? And isn't that what *Jesus* was like!

Are you with me, here? *The more godly I become, the more authentically human I will be.* Isn't that weird! It seems counterintuitive. It took me many years – as a Christian – even as a pastor – to get this! *The more godly I become, the more authentically human I will be!*

In less than 2 weeks we will be celebrating Christmas, the birth of Jesus. The Incarnation. *God* coming into *human form* in the person of *Jesus*. In Jesus we find the perfect blend of humanity and divinity. It's easy to think that His godly nature was in opposition to His human nature, but not so. Jesus was 100% God – completely divine. Yet no one ever lived a more authentic human life: *totally compassionate, free of pretense, fully aware, incredibly forgiving, limitless in understanding.*

If all that I've said is true, then certain things will follow. First, ***God's goal for us is not that we be more religious, but that we be more human.*** Jesus always seemed to be locking horns with people who were religious. He was constantly opposed by religious leaders like the scribes and Pharisees, who devoted their lives to keeping religious rules, regulations, and rituals. Jesus honored and obeyed God's commandments, and observed Hebrew religious traditions, but He was more interested in *people* than *religious rules*. For instance, the religious leaders considered

people who weren't as religious as them as "sinners" – to be shunned, scolded, condemned. Jesus, however, had a way of helping these people see themselves as someone who was valued and loved.

I look back over my earliest years as a pastor. I had this vision of what "real Christians" ought to be like, and the standards were high. Nothing wrong with that. But I spent a lot of time and energy judging the people who didn't measure up to these standards. I was just like the scribes and Pharisees. Slowly, over many years, I had to shift from that attitude to simply caring about people, and treating them as persons of worth. This has been a lifelong learning process for me.

Jesus did not come to make us more religious, but to help us be more human and humane.

If becoming more godly and more like Jesus means we become more authentically human, then too: ***to be a Christian, and become more godly, means not the eradication of our personality, but the enhancement of our human personality.*** I think a lot of people get the impression that if you're going to follow Jesus and be a Christian, somehow you'll become this other-worldly type person who's only half interested in this world. It's as if the color is drained out of your personality, and you become kind of a dull religious shade of gray. Like it's said of a man who became a Christian: "Joe used to be so full of life and fun to be around; but now since he got converted he's so straight-laced and rather boring." Or, "Tracy used to be so sweet and warm-hearted; but since she became a Christian she just seems to be so moral and judgmental."

Some people think if you're a follower of Jesus, trying to live a more godly life, you'll have to put your sexual feelings in the freezer, cool all your passions, dispense with loving sports or enjoying parties or relishing working in your garden. Well, if any of the above is true, chances are, you've put your faith in the wrong Jesus!

Becoming more godly, growing to be more like Jesus, doesn't mean the *elimination* of our desires and emotions, but the *purifying* of them. When we're growing as a Christian, God does not *strip* us of our unique personality, but He *highlights* it and *enhances* it. This is a fulfillment of Jesus' promise that He came so that we can have *life*, and have it *more abundantly*.

Finally, if becoming more godly actually means we are more authentically human, ***this gives us insight into what sin is.*** *Goodness* is that which *enhances* the humanness of the individual; *evil* is anything that *diminishes* one's human dignity. Another way to say it is that *evil* is when I treat a person as an *object or thing*.

Some years ago I was at a Philadelphia Flyers hockey game. This very thin kid, perhaps in his late teens, was coming through the stands selling popcorn. He had on this silly yellow and orange uniform. He was struggling to carry this huge tray of big popcorn containers. Some young guy in the stands, with an oversized ego, walks up and yells to get the vendor's attention. He demands in a mocking, arrogant tone, "Hey, popcorn man." I felt bad for the boy selling the popcorn. The whole thing was demeaning. The boy, working hard to make some money, merely becomes "popcorn man."

It can happen in our Christmas giving. We have our Christmas list. We buy something so we can check this person off our list. Done! Or, we have to buy another gift or two for some so we can even it out, or bring the amount spent up to the limit we set. Sometimes it would be better to buy one thoughtful gift that expresses something warm and special, rather than just buying something to finish that person off our list.

In one small rural church I served it was the Sunday before Christmas. The Sunday School Superintendent was walking around with perhaps 4 or 5 envelopes - Christmas gifts for the church staff. He quickly walked up to me, grabbed the right envelope, said a hasty "Merry Christmas", then went right on hunting for the other recipients. While I was thankful, it kind of made me feel devalued. I felt like saying, "You can keep your stupid gift."

Much of the suffering and turmoil in the world is the result of our failing to treat other people as persons of value, with respect.

There's no reason in the world why a black person should not be valued as a person of sacred worth, just as much as anyone else. What is more simple than realizing that the color of a person's skin doesn't define who that person is on the inside. Christians and the Church ought always to be leading the pack in putting aside racial prejudice.

Christians differ on how we view gay people, and how we interpret what Scripture says about homosexuality. But if we are growing into the likeness of Christ, we're going to see gay people as persons – persons of worth, and not just attach labels to them.

I've held to a pretty conservative view of homosexuality. I grew up with strong prejudices against gay people, much misinformation and many misconceptions. Some years back, Nancy and I developed a friendship with a gay couple in a church I served. Delightful men. Committed Christians. I often joked to Nancy that getting to know them shot my theology to bits! I'll never forget in a meeting one of the gay partners shared how they had experienced rejection by churches. With deep emotion he said if this happened one more time, they would be done with church. Whatever our view on homosexuality, or our interpretation of Scripture, if we can't see these men and women as people to be loved and valued, we have missed the Spirit of Jesus.

It's really weird. The more *godly* we become, the more *human* we become. We see this exquisitely in Jesus. No one was more divine than Jesus. Yet no one was more truly human than Him - compassionate, forgiving, fully alive, free of pretense.

Can we remember this sentence: *In Jesus, everything that God is was revealed; and everything that we humans are supposed to be was fully realized.*

*Harry L. Kaufhold, Jr.
Community United Methodist Church
December 13, 2020*

