trolled by the eternal love of God. When we see social relationships controlled everywhere by the principles which Jesus illustrated in his life—trust, love, mercy, and altruism—then we shall know that the kingdom of God is here. To say what this society will be like in exact detail is quite hard for us to picture, for it runs so counter to the practices of our present social life. But we can rest assure that it will be a society governed by the law of love.

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9. Brown, Beliefs That Matter, p. 59: “Here we are left in no doubt as to Jesus’ meaning. Whether it come soon or late, by sudden crisis or through slow development, the Kingdom of God will be a society in which men and women live as children of God should live. When we see social relationships everywhere controlled by the principles which Jesus illustrated in his own life—the principles of trust, of love, of generous and unselfish service—we shall know that the Kingdom is here.

“What this society will be like in detail, it is hard for us to picture, for it runs so counter to the ideals and practices which still dominate much of our social life.”

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

“How Modern Christians Should Think of Man”

[29 November 1949–15 February 1950]
[Chester, Pa.]

In this paper, written late during the second term of Davis’s Christian Theology for Today, King begins to depart from theological liberalism, balancing neo-orthodoxy and liberalism to express his understanding of humanity and religion. For example, he acknowledges elements of determinism in human experience in one section of the paper but stresses the roles of sin and choice in an individual’s life in another. He cites personal experiences of racism to show the “vicious” potential of human beings, but, following liberal theologians, King also praises the “noble possibilities in human nature” when people choose to fight this evil. The reference to racism marks this paper as more personal than others King wrote for this course.
In writing a paper on how modern Christians should think about man I find myself confronted with a difficulty. This difficulty is found in the fact that my thinking about man is going through a state of transition. At one time I find myself leaning toward a mild neo-orthodox view of man, and at other times I find myself leaning toward a liberal view of man. The former leaning may root back to certain experiences that I had in the south with a vicious race problem. Some of the experiences that I encountered there made it very difficult for me to believe in the essential goodness of man. On the other hand part of my liberal leaning has its source in another branch of the same root. In noticing the gradual improvements of this same race problem I came to see some noble possibilities in human nature. Also my liberal leaning may root back to the great imprest that many liberal theologians have left upon me and to my ever present desire to be optimistic about human nature.

In this transitional stage I must admit that I have become a victim of eclecticism. I have attempted to synthesize the best in liberal theology with the best in neo-orthodox theology and come to some understanding of man. Of course I must again admit that the insights which I have gained from neo-orthodox theology about man are quite limited. Its one-sided generalizations are by no means appealing to me. However I do see value in its emphasis on sin and the necessity of perpetual repentance in the life of man. I think liberal theology has to easily cast aside the term sin, failing to realize that many of our present ills result from the sins of men. With these prophylactic concerns in mind we may turn to a more detailed discussion in which I shall list what seems to me the most important things that modern Christians should believe about man.

1. Man is neither good nor bad by nature, but has potentialities for either 

It is a mistake to look upon man as naturally good or naturally bad. Any one-sided generalization about
man, whether it be a doctrine of original sin or a romantic idealization of man, should be rejected. Unfortunately, we too often find in the modern world this tendency to overemphasize the goodness or the badness of man. On the one hand we find it in neo-orthodox thought, particularly Barthianism. Here the view is posited that man was once completely good, made in the image of God. This complete goodness, however, was lost in the fall when man misused his freedom. Not only was his goodness lost, but the once present image of God was also totally effaced, leaving him totally helpless in his desire for salvation. Any such generalization about man is preposterous unless it be merely an inaccurate way of stating the fact that man sins on every level of moral and spiritual achievement.¹

On the other hand this tendency to generalize about man is found in extreme liberal and so-called religious humanistic circles. Here there is the strong tendency toward sentimentality about man. Man who has come so far in wisdom and decency may be expected to go much further as his methods of attaining and applying knowledge are improved. This conviction was put into a phrase by an outstanding Humanist: “The supreme value and self-perfectibility of human personality.”² Although such ethical religion is humane and its vision a lofty one, it has obvious shortcomings. This particular sort of optimism has been discredited by the brutal logic of events. Instead of assured progress in wisdom and decency man faces the ever present possibility of swift relapse not merely to animalism but into such calculated cruelty as no other animal can practice.

It seems that we shall be closest to the authentic Christian interpretation of man if we avoid both of these extremes. As seen in the life and teaching of Jesus, humanity remains conscious of its humble dependence upon God, as the source of all being and all goodness. “There is none good save one, even God.” Yet in his dealing with even the worst of men, Christ

² The quotation should end with “self-perfectibility of human personality.”
constantly made appealed to a hidden goodness in their nature. The modern Christian must believe that lives are changed when the potential good in man is believed in patiently, and when the potential bad in man is sought to be overwelmed.4

3. Man as a Finite Child of Nature

Every modern {Christian} should see man not only as a being made in the image of God, but also as a finite child of nature. He is subject to the laws of nature both in his growth and in many of his actions. So that when we speak of the freedom of man, it is quite obvious that it has a limit. On every hand “human freedom is mixed with natural necessity.” This idea affirms that in many instances the laws of nature interfere with the higher life of man. Man is not only a victim of his own sins, but he is a victim of nature. Moreover, he is a victim of the blindness and cruelty of his neighbors. This is a liberal emphasis which must not be lost in the modern world, for it takes into account those non-moral sources of evil which often interfere with man and his salvation.*4

The modern Christian should never lose faith in rationality as one of the supreme resources of man. It is the mind of man that distinguishes him from his animal ancestry. Through memory man is able to

3. Walter Marshall Horton, “The Christian Understanding of Man,” in *The Christian Understanding of Man*, ed. T. E. Jessop et al. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1938), p. 240: “We shall be closest to the authentic Christian interpretation of man’s higher nature if we avoid both of these extremes. As seen in the life and teachings of the Christ Himself, divine humanity remains conscious of its clear distinction from God, and its humble dependence upon Him, as the source of all being and all goodness. ‘There is none good save one, even God.’ Yet in His dealing with even the worst of men, Christ constantly made appeal to a hidden goodness in their nature, . . . Lives are changed, when the potential good in man is believed in, patiently, in the face of repeated rebuffs.”

4. Bennett, “Christian Conception,” p. 195: “*Man Is a Finite Child of Nature:* It is a mistake to look upon man only as a being made in God’s image and as sinner. Man is also as a finite child of nature, subject to the laws of nature which often interfere with his higher life just as they are also the means of his growth . . . a victim of his own sin . . . and a victim of nature. One of the most important elements in liberal thinking about man and his salvation is that emphasis has been placed upon these many non-moral sources of evil. . . . Man is . . . a victim of nature and of the blindness and cruelty of his neighbors.”
interpret the present and forecast the future in the light of the past. Moreover, man is able to think abstractly. He can delve into the eternal aspects of reality. By empirical science he can grasp many facts and aspects of the concrete world. It is the rational element in human nature which serves as a check on false thinking, and without it we would have no way to be protected against false revelation.

It must be admitted, however, that this higher aspect of man's nature is a peril as well as a supreme gift. It often serves to create pride and self-sufficiency within man.5 It is at this point that many neo-orthodox theologians speak of "the pride of reason."* But here it is well to emphasize the fact that reason rightly used remains the prize gift of man.

4. Man as a Free and Responsible Being

Any form of mechanical determinism is outside the orbit of the Christian tradition. Man is a free and responsible being. The Kantian "I ought therefore I can" should stand out as a prelude in the modern Christian's thinking about man. There have been attempts in theological thinking, specifically Calvinistic and contemporary Barthian thought, that {to} maintain that man is a responsible being yet lacking freedom. But such thinking leads us into needless paradoxes. How can there be responsibility with no freedom? The tendency in liberal theology has been to affirm that man is free and then to deny that his conscious purposes are predestined by God.6 This seems to me a more logical mode of thought. We must believe that man has the power of choosing his supreme end. He can choose the low road or the high road. He can be true or false to his nature.

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5. Bennett, "Christian Conception," p. 196: "Man Is a Rational Being: . . . His memory enables him to interpret the present and forecast the future in the light of the past. He can understand many of the eternal aspects of reality through his grasp of abstract thought and he can by empirical science understand large areas of the concrete world. . . . these higher aspects of man's nature are the source of his greatest temptations as well as his greatest gifts. . . . reason tempts man to be proud and self-sufficient. . . . without [reason] we have no protection against false 'revelations.'"

6. Bennett, "Christian Conception," pp. 196–197: "The tendency in liberal theology has been to affirm this kind of freedom and then to deny that our conscious purposes are predestined by God."
5. Man as a Sinner

The view that man is a sinner is basically a neo-orthodox view, and one that the modern Christian should not so easily overlook. I realize that the sinfulness of man is often over-emphasized by some neo-orthodox theologians, but at least we must admit that many of the ills in the world are due to plain sin. The tendency on the part of some liberal theologians to see sin as a mere "lag of nature" which will be progressively eliminated as man climbs the evolutionary ladder seems to me quite perilous. I will readily agree, as stated above, that many of man's shortcomings are due to natural necessities, but ignorance and finiteness and hampering circumstances, and the pressure of animal impulse, are all insufficient to account for many of our shortcomings. As Dr. Horton has cogently stated, "we have to recognize that we have misused man's kingly prerogative as a rational animal by envisaging and pursuing ends that are unworthy of pursuit; and we have misused man's prerogative as a social animal by making others bear the burden of our selfishness."*

We must come to see that every human good has its own form of corruption. Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr has pointed out with great illumination how men sin through intellectual and spiritual pride. The world is full of examples of such sin. So that the modern Christian must see man as a guilty sinner who must ask forgiveness and be converted.9

6. Man as a Being
in need of Continuous Repentance

Repentance is an essential part of the Christian life. Through repentance man is converted and brought into fellowship with God. Repentance as seen in the New Testament—the turning away from a life of sin because of a change of mind in which a new and bet-

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7. Horton, "Christian Understanding," p. 296: "... that ignorance, and finiteness, and hampering circumstance, and the pressure of animal impulse, are all insufficient to account for it."
8. Bennett, "Christian Conception," pp. 199–200: "Every human good has its own form of corruption. Reinhold Niebuhr has written with extraordinary illumination concerning the ways in which men sin through intellectual and spiritual pride... The world is full of examples of the corruption."
9. Horton, "Christian Understanding," p. 296: "We are guilty sinners who must ask forgiveness and be converted."
The standard of life has been accepted—is something that may occur again and again in a man's experience. The habit of perpetual repentance enables us to grow; it helps us to keep our conscience awake; it preserves us from the sin of self-righteousness; it helps us to concentrate on our sins, rather than the sins of others. Repentance is in fact to any man an inestimable privilege. As Dr. Clarke laconically states: "Perpetual repentance is simply perpetual fellowship with Christ. Performed once or a thousand times, it is a most precious act of moral unity with Christ the Savior."

In this discussion I have tried to put down six elements that should enter into the modern Christian's doctrine of man. I have tried to show that there are some insights about man to be gained from both liberal and neo-orthodox thinking. However, it is clear that all one-sided generalizations about man must be rejected, whether found in liberal or neo-orthodox thinking. Such doctrines are misleading and they detach man from the understanding of his origin, place, and destiny.

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11. Bennett, "Christian Conception," p. 203: "The habit of continuing repentance enables us to grow; it keeps the conscience awake; it helps to preserve us from self-righteousness. It may keep us from the . . . tendency to concentrate upon the sins of others."

12. Clarke, *Outline of Christian Theology*, p. 403: "Repentance is in fact to any man an inestimable privilege."

13. Horton, "Christian Understanding," p. 241: "When will modern man return to this understanding of his origin, place, and destiny?"