

What does it mean to be a human being?

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“What does it mean to be a human being?”

There are many different ways of looking at this question. I want to start by sharing three stories from my life that will help make things a little more concrete.

When I was in university for my undergrad, I worked at a restaurant in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan called The Granary in the glorious position of dishwasher. There were a couple other young guys that cycled through the job while I was there. One day an older gentleman came in by the name of Yan. Yan had been in graduate school in China working on his PhD in Reproductive Technology. As I talked with Yan, he brought up an experiment he had been involved with. It was—forgive me for this—an experiment where they grew a human testicle on the back of a mouse. Yan’s understanding of what it meant to be a human being made me pause and ask, “Are human beings simply material we can take apart and put back together as we like?”

Another time, my wife Heather, the kids, and I went to the Tyrrell Dinosaur Museum in Drumheller, Alberta. As we were walking through it, we came to this little area set up for kids. There was a TV playing a video about evolution. It talked about evolutionary cycles and, in particular, about cataclysmic species death. The presentation explained that evolution would go up to a certain point and then there would be this cataclysmic event. Almost everything would die off and whatever remained would have to start all over again. Then they described people, human beings, today, saying that we were at the top of one of those cycles and were just waiting for a cataclysmic event to wipe

us all out! It was probably the most jaded thing I have ever seen in a children’s video! The Tyrrell Museum’s understanding of what it meant to be a human being made me ask, “Is a human being a meaningless accident?”

Lastly, an observation. We watch a lot of kids’ shows in my house and, if you pay attention, there’s almost an omnipresent moral to these shows (it’s in adult shows too). The moral is that “friends are the family you choose.” Behind this moral is a belief that choice triumphs over flesh and blood. What is a human being in this context? A being of nothing more than free choice.

Now let us go to the words of our Creator to find the answer, starting at the very beginning in Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’” The Bible defines human beings as the deliberate creation of God. By making us in his image, God gives humanity a unique position and relationship to himself that is distinct from the rest of Creation. Two important words were used in that verse to describe humans: “Image” and “likeness.” The word for “image” in the original Hebrew has a concrete sense to it, like a physical representation, a statue, whereas “likeness” has a more abstract sense to it. Both speak therefore of a special connection to God, consisting of a special quality within human beings and a unique relationship to God.

After the Fall into sin, we lose the image of

God, in a sense, and need it to be renewed. In Colossians 3:9-10, Paul talks about putting on the new self. “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” Paul says that to be renewed after the image of his Creator is to be renewed in knowledge; that being made in God’s image means that mankind’s thinking corresponds to God.

In Ephesians 4:22-24, Paul teaches: “...to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” Being created in the image of God means to be created in righteousness and holiness. Therefore, the image of God consists of a moral likeness to God. And so we have God’s phrase in Genesis, “it was very good.”

Genesis 1:27 says, “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” There’s a poetic emphasis on God’s creation of human beings in this tiny verse when he says “he created us” three different times. This is not something to rush over just because we are used to hearing it. To be a human being is to be the deliberate creation of God! In this passage, we also have highlighted for us the unity of humanity as image bearers given to us in the phrase, “in the image of God he created him.” The singular pronoun, “him,” refers to the collective whole of humanity. All of humanity was created in the image of God.

We also have in the next phrase, “male and female he created them.” In the original language, we have a plural pronoun: “them.” There is a distinction given to the image bearers of male and female. We see that by God’s deliberate intention, humanity is a unity created in the sexual distinctions of male and female. Those distinctions are not something humans made up, but are real distinctions established within humanity by our loving Creator before the Fall into sin. It is “very good” then to be human: to be a creation of God, in a special relationship with God, created in his moral image, and created as a sexual being either male or female.

In Genesis 1:28-29, God gives humanity a special relationship to Creation by blessing them and promising a life of plenty. He gives humanity purposes resulting from their status as the image bearer: they’re to fill the earth, they’re to subdue the earth, and they’re to rule over

God’s Creation. Before the fall, God declared that humanity and Creation were “very good,” that is, without sin, corruption, or death. Human beings were good in their relationship with God, good in their relationship with themselves, good in their relationship with each other, and good in their relationship with the earth. Humanity as image bearers, with the embodied distinction of male and female, were very good. And, as we also see in this text, God expresses delight over humanity and his Creation. Humanity was in no way a burden to God; he delighted to create us.

In Genesis 2:7, we see God’s creation of man and woman as persons: “Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” God is intimately involved in the creation of Adam’s person. The word “formed” has with it the idea and the image of a potter making pottery. My mother-in-law loves pottery. She has her own wheel, and her own kiln; consequently, I have learned more about pottery than I had thought possible. When we think of pottery, we think of potters taking time, and with great skill and effort, shaping and piecing together clay to make beautiful vessels. That’s the image we have of God forming Adam.

Adam is also not described as a body who is then given a soul, but he is described as a non-living person who then has life breathed into him by God himself. This shows us that Adam’s body is not considered less holy or righteous than say his soul, rather, it is the whole of Adam, so lovingly created and given life, that God calls “good.”

We see equal care on God’s behalf in the process of making the woman (Gen 2:21-25). She is called a “suitable helper,” which has in mind the idea of someone who fits properly and rightly opposite to Adam. The scripture uses the verb “to build” in the original, to describe God’s creation of her. Both verbs “to form” for Adam, and then “to build” for Eve, imply a caring and intentional approach to the hands-on work of God.

Genesis 2:22-24 is understood to be the first wedding ceremony, where God is both the officiant and the giver of the bride. It says, “Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,’” a person corresponding to Adam’s nature. This passage also introduces new terms for male and female. It uses the words “ish” and “ishah,” man and woman, which are also used for the terms husband and wife. We see in these passages not only God’s gift of

sexuality, but sexuality enclosed within the gift of marriage. We also see the gift of the distinct callings of husband and wife, ish and ishah, which serve as the means through which males and females are to fill the earth. And in their original very good state, the man and the woman were unashamed in their nakedness.

After looking at humanity in its very good state, with its design and purposes and relationship to God, we now look at the loss and frustration of those things resulting from the Fall. Genesis 3:1-13 outlines the temptation, the sin, and the shame they experienced for their disobedience. We see that Eve doubted God’s command, believing the serpent’s word over God’s word and taking the fruit. Her husband was with her and also took and ate it following the same pattern. In doing so, Adam and Eve experienced a break in their relationship with God. Because they were afraid, they experienced a break in their relationship with themselves. They suddenly felt shame, they experienced a break in their relationship with each other and in their relationship to the earth.

In that moment, our first parents lost the moral image of God; they lost fellowship with God. That special relationship to him had been damaged. Their wills, actions, and desires were no longer in line with his. Adam and Eve did not cease to be human because of this, but they did not retain the fullness of the image. Scripture speaks of the way humanity retains the image of God but also needs renewing in it. In Genesis 9:6, God speaks to Noah and his descendants after the flood. “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” And in James 3:9, James is speaking about the tongue and he says, “With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God.”

In some sense the image is retained, as God still assigns value and offers protection to his human creatures, however, there is still the need to be renewed in the image of God because of the Fall. We are not like God as we should be, as his image bearers in holiness and righteousness. In Genesis chapter three, the purposes once given as the result of the image of God are now frustrated. Childbearing, filling the earth, is now cursed with pain. The relationship between the sexes is cursed with conflict. Subduing the earth and the blessing of food is cursed with painful toil. Humanity is cursed with death; Adam will return to the dust from which he was taken. That death is physical as well as spiritual (“you were dead in the trespasses and sins” [Eph 2:1]), and it is

eternal doom. Humanity had lost their harmony with the will of God. In fact, being bound in will against God’s desires, humanity became subject to sin. They lost their true knowledge of God.

In Romans 3:10-18, we see a description of humanity in God’s sight: “As it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.’ ‘Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.’ ‘The venom of asps is under their lips.’ ‘Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.’ ‘Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.’ ‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’”

Stop and consider how much of a change there has been between Genesis one and Genesis three. To go from this special being, created in a special relationship with God, and how all of that is now gone. To be corrupted by sin is now, post-Fall, a part of what it is to be human; it is the shared experience of humanity. It is not a part of God’s original intention or design for human beings, but every one of us inherits that sin from our parents. In our natural state, we are in rebellion against our Lord, and we are broken in his world.

But also important is Genesis 3:15, the promise to the serpent. The Lord says, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” God promises this offspring, this seed, this Son, to Adam and Eve, who would bring an end to all the corruption and destruction that the Fall has caused within their lives. God promises to preserve and to deliver humanity back to that special relationship they had with him through the work of the Son. And that brings us to humanity redeemed, explained in John 3:16-18, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

In the fullness of time, Christ was sent to reconcile humanity back to God. To save them, to make them whole again, to restore to them the fullness of the image of God, to grant them a righteousness that is by faith. And so we come



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again to our passage in Colossians 3:9-10, where we find this renewing of the image of God. Speaking to those whose faith is in Christ, Paul says, "Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." As we live by faith in Christ, we human beings are made new by the Holy Spirit, finding the fullness of what it means to be human again. We are brought again into the fullness of that special relationship with God, and that faith, that relationship, causes us to look at our humanity in a new way.

To better understand this, we can look at Psalm 139:13-16. This whole psalm is about the omnipresence and the omniscience of God. The psalmist is wrestling with the fact that he lives his life in the presence of God, who is always there and who always knows him. In that context, he writes "For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."

That description alludes to Genesis two and the formation of Adam. The Psalm calls us to remember that the same care that God used to form Adam, the same care that he used to form Eve, is the same care he used to create us. What is the response of the psalmist in this? He says, "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made." In our preaching class, one student working on this passage asked the question, "How often do we praise God for our bodies?"

For myself, if I were to describe my body, I would be pretty safe to argue that my spirit animal is the walrus. But in faith, I'm not to hate my body because of sin. I'm to recognize my body for the gift that it truly is. To recognize that I am fearfully and wonderfully made and to treat and care for my body accordingly.

That I bear the image of God also suggests that my body is to be used for his purposes. We are not our own. And there is a freedom to that, when we truly understand it. Not only am I to avoid sin and ungodliness, I am also called to positively love and serve my neighbor. That is the proper exercise of such freedom. It was what we were made for.

Not only does the image of God serve to ascribe to me dignity and purpose. It also does so for my neighbors. Recognizing that they are created in the image of God should change how I interact with them. Fundamentally then, though the relationship might be damaged, they belong to the Lord. The same Lord who created and redeemed me has created them and longs for a restored relationship with them. I should approach every person, and not just every person, but every interaction with a person, through that lens.

In the words of C.S. Lewis in his essay *The Weight of Glory*:

It may be possible each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think too often or too deeply about that of his neighbor. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbor's glory should be laid on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken.¹

Such an understanding of our neighbor is a weight indeed. It is a calling. It is a hope. Even, dare I say, a prayer.

And lastly, as we think about the relationship with the Lord that lies at the heart of the image of God, it is this wholeness, that our neighbors need to hear about. That they also may be restored in the fullness of their humanity. To discover who they are as his creatures, his image bearers and so praise the Lord. They need to be told of Christ. The God who laid down his life for them.

And as we learn and grow in faith, we can trust and confess the words of Martin Luther in the meaning of the First Article of the Apostles' Creed:

I believe that God has created me and all that exists. He has given to me and still sustains my body and soul, my senses and all my members, my reason and all the powers of my soul. I believe that he gives me food and clothing, home and family, and all material blessings, that he daily provides abundantly for all the needs of my life, protects me from all danger and guards and keeps me from all evil. I believe that he does this because of his fatherly and divine goodness and mercy without any merit or worthiness in me. For all this, I should thank, praise, serve, and obey him. This is most certainly true.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: MacMillan Publishing, 1980.), 18

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**A.A. Pedersen
Lectureship**
Thursday
Dr. Don Sunukjian



How to Increase Relevancy in Your
Teaching & Preaching

Our goal in preaching is not simply to give our people biblical knowledge or information. Relevancy occurs when the listener senses, "This message has some bearing on my life." Dr. Don Sunukjian will share how to increase relevancy in your teaching and preaching.



**Continuing
Education**
Friday
Dr. Stephen Saunders



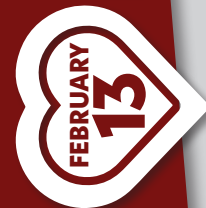
**Ministry &
Mental Health**

It's estimated that one in five people struggle with mental health. How do we, as pastors, teachers, and leaders in the Church, address this topic and help those who are struggling? Dr. Saunders will lead us through Martin Luther's letters on spiritual consolation.



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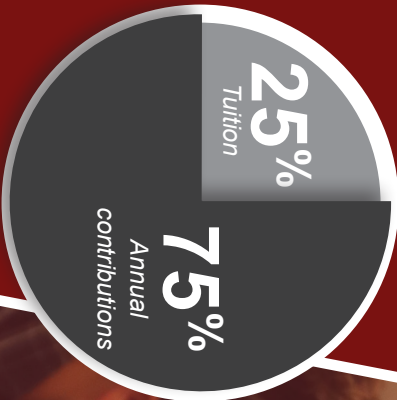


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