



EXCERPT FROM THE

CSB WORLDVIEW STUDY BIBLE

WHAT IS A HUMAN?

America's founders explained their rebellion against the British crown by appealing to a particular view of the human: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" (*Declaration of Independence*).

Today there is little agreement about what human rights, dignity, and equality entail, and few remember just how tedious these concepts have proven to be. Throughout most of history, some lives were considered dispensable, and oppression was justified by aspirations to power, claims of ethnic or familial superiority, and economic disparities.

Humans come from different cultures, genders, and ethnicities. We do not possess the same abilities. These obvious differences make the answers to the important questions about life anything but self-evident.

Do all humans have value, or just some?

Are we distinct from the animals?

Is dignity shared by every member of the human race, or is it dependent on gender, ethnicity, or abilities?

Is our humanity fixed, or is it culturally determined?

As important as determining how people should behave is settling on what people are. Different visions about what it means to be human compete in the marketplace of ideas. These notions, when lived out in the real world, have serious consequences for individuals, communities, nations, and entire cultures.

HUMANITY AND OTHER WORLDVIEWS

Non-Christian worldviews fail to ground the concepts of human dignity, value, and universal rights.

Naturalistic worldviews such as atheism, Marxism, and secularism deny anything that is spiritual or metaphysical. Because all that is has resulted from

natural, mindless physical processes, spiritual beliefs are fantasies that, like all human behaviors, result from chemical processes occurring in the brain.

In this view of reality, no Creator exists to endow special status to humans. Therefore, there is nothing *intrinsic* about humans that establishes their equality, dignity, or value. Instead, for naturalistic worldviews, there are only *extrinsic* realities, like appearance and abilities, to distinguish us from other humans, or even from "other animals."

Transcendental worldviews, such as Hinduism, certain forms of Buddhism, and New Age, understand all living things to be part of the impersonal spiritual oneness that is ultimate reality. Many of these religions hold to reincarnation, in which to be human is to be merely an expression of life trapped in the cycle of birth and rebirth along the journey to losing individual existence and rejoining the universal oneness to which we all ultimately belong. Humans, according to transcendental worldviews, are "divine" but ultimately not distinct from—and certainly no more valuable than—any other living thing.

Postmodernists deny that humans are able to know who we are. According to this view, everyone is trapped by perspectives shaped by culture. Categories that describe human nature, behavior, or roles—such as male, female, intelligent, leader, upper class, impoverished, antisocial, married, productive, etc.—are socially determined. In its more pessimistic forms, postmodernism despairs that humans can ever find meaning and purpose. In its less pessimistic forms, postmodernism ends in relativism, in which no individual or culture is allowed to judge any other.

Islam understands God to be so remote and far removed from anything in the universe that he cannot share his attributes. In Islam, humans only relate to God in service. Because God has not given of himself in creating humans, human dignity depends on obedience. Thus, the follower of God and the non-follower do not share equal rights or value.

HUMANITY AND A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

The Old and New Testaments, however, present an entirely different vision of what it means to be human. First, the creation of humans is the pinnacle of the biblical creation narrative. Of all the things God made, only humans bear his image. Many atheist thinkers, like Friedrich Nietzsche, recognized that only the biblical vision of *imago Dei* (the image of God) grounds universal human dignity, value, and rights.

Biblical scholars offer three different, but complementary views of the *imago Dei*. The *functional* view suggests that humans resemble God in what we are able to do. Like God, humans create, reason, love, and imagine. This theory describes what results from the *imago Dei* more than it does what the *imago Dei* is. For example, someone unable to reason or create due to injury or disability still bears God's image.

The *relational* view emphasizes the Trinitarian nature of God as the key to understanding humanity. The Bible describes the eternal community that exists between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Unlike in Islam, where the idea of God as Trinity is considered idolatrous blasphemy, God doesn't merely *do* relationships. He is, by nature, a relationship.

The *representative* view clarifies the unique role God bestowed on humans in the world. They are to rule over all he made, filling and subduing the earth, effectively continuing the creative work from which God rested (Gn 1:26-31). That God, the Sovereign, made humans sovereign over his world is unique to Christianity.

Unlike most other religious and cultural frameworks of the ancient world, the biblical creation story describes both male and female as representatives of God. Before we meet Eve, the first woman, the Bible is explicit that the status of image bearer applies to both genders (Gn 1:27), and it is a role not shared with the animal kingdom. Still, the Genesis account does not present male and female as identical. They are complementary. Alone, man is unable to accomplish his God-given task of filling and subduing the earth (Gn 2:18). With woman, God provides a helper for man uniquely suitable and distinct from man (Gn 2:20-24).

The significance of the *imago Dei* is underscored by how the Bible describes the fall of humanity. Not only are humans separated from God and each other by sin, but the entire creation is in "the bondage to decay" (Rm 8:21). Thorns, pain, frustration, and death infect the cosmos because of Adam's disobedience.

Finally and ultimately, human dignity is secured by the incarnation. That God became man in the person of Jesus Christ, C.S. Lewis wrote in *Miracles*, "was the central event in the history of the earth—the very thing that the whole story has been about."

HUMANITY REDEEMED

Among the earliest and most persistent heresies condemned by the church is Gnosticism, which teaches that anything physical, including the human body, is evil. When mixed with Christianity, Gnosticism proclaimed that God could not have taken on human flesh without being corrupted. In response, the church upheld that Jesus Christ was both fully God and fully man. Jesus physically rose from the dead, Paul proclaimed, or else our faith is "worthless" (1Co 15:17).

If Jesus was not corrupted by taking on the flesh of humanity, then our humanity can be made new. The NT authors describe the effect of Christ's work with "re" words: redeem, restore, reconcile, and renew. "Re" words imply the reversal of the corruption of sin. In Christ, the dignity, value, and rights given to humanity by God are restored, not lost. As Thomas Howard wrote, "The Incarnation takes all that properly belongs to our humanity and delivers it back to us, redeemed. . . . All the dancing and feasting and processing and singing and building and sculpting and baking and merrymaking that belong to us, and that were stolen away into the service of false gods, are returned to us in the Gospel" (*Evangelical is Not Enough: Worship of God in Liturgy and Sacrament*, Ignatius Press, 1984, pp. 36-37).

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