

## **Imago Dei, Science and What It Means To Be Human**

Genesis 1:26-27

*Faith and Science series #3*

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*Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in God's image, in the image of God, created them; male and female God created them.*

What is the essence of being human? Today we are looking at a biblical perspective and some scientific perspectives – some good science and some bad science.

What does it mean to be made in the image of God? What does it mean to be human?

Let's start with the with passage from Genesis. Scholars believe this poem, this creation story was written down during and after the Babylonian exile. It is called the "P" source meaning Priestly. It comes out of a time of chaos and confusion. The Hebrew people, who had been freed from slavery and known Divine promise and laws for their identity, did not remain faithful to the covenant. They are conquered by Babylonians in around 598 BC. They had to leave their land, leave Jerusalem. So the priests sometime around 6<sup>th</sup> century BC wrote down a creation story and poem to remind the people of God's promises, of order and their identity.

Genesis 1 was written down during and after exile. God making order out of chaos and giving clear identity to the people. God made humankind by taking mud and blowing breath. Made in the image and likeness. A wholeness that human beings would be like the Holy One – caring for creation, in reason, moral agency and capacity for relationships. People have taken that passage through time and sometimes is has been inspirational. And sometimes misused.

What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be made in the image of God?

We can answer these questions from a biblical perspective. From various theological perspectives. And we can answer it from scientific perspectives.

Darwin shook up the world when the church authorities reacted to his theory of evolution. For those who took the book of Genesis as history and God made people on the 6<sup>th</sup> day as fully formed human beings, then theory of evolution did not fit. It was rejected.

As we have discussed faith and science the last few weeks, we look at ways this is a continuum. And how science can broaden and deepen our perspectives on the ways God was and is at work in creation. Our theology and biblical interpretation is not to take the Bible as science, but stories, poems, parables. Truth but not scientific facts.

But there have been times that scientists seem to take their bias, prejudice, racism and even narrow biblical interpretations into the public with grave consequences.

### Cartwright and Scientific Racism

On March 12, 1851, the noted physician Samuel A. Cartwright reported to the Medical Association of Louisiana that he had identified the malady of Black people - Drapetomania - Drapetes, a runaway, and mania, madness. Cartwright told fellow doctors that Negroes, with their smaller brains and blood vessels, and their tendency toward lethargy and viciousness had only to be kept benevolently in the state of submission, awe and reverence that God had ordained. (1)

He made the case that black people were not made in the image of God. That they were lesser than, lower. Cartwright's presentation a decade before the Civil War was part of the long, insidious practice of what historians call **scientific racism** — the spread of bogus theories of supposed black inferiority in an attempt to rationalize slavery and centuries of social and economic domination and plunder.

This thinking would thrive in the 18th and especially the 19th centuries. It would mutate, vary in perversion and persevere for 400 years right up to the present day. Starting with theories of physical and intellectual inferiority that likened blacks to animals, it would evolve to infer black cultural and then social inferiority. There were so many examples of this I found that were shocking and horrifying.

Historian and author of *How to Be An Anti-Racist*, Ibram X. Kendi, reminds us - "What black inferiority meant has changed in every generation . . . but ultimately Americans have been making the same case."

Today we lift up our conviction that all people are sacred, all are created in the image of God, all are beloved. We bring faith, science and social justice together and look for examples.

### Theology of voting rights –

I read this week of an application of the being made in God's image I was not aware of. It was in the midst of a conflict between President Lyndon B. Johnson and Martin Luther King, Jr. which is highlighted in movie "Selma." There is a link between the Voting Rights Act of 1964 and King's theological anthropology. In King's view, humankind was created in the image of God, endowed with free will and the capacity to reason. The denial of Black voting rights, while literally depriving African Americans of their political agency, also represented the

disavowal of God's image, for King. King defers moral responsibility from himself to Johnson, who, equipped with the image of God, can make the rational free choice to pass legislation on Black voting rights and thereby restore Black political agency and, with it, the truth that all people are made image of God. This was one of the compelling factors that moved Johnson to sign the Voting Act of 1964. (2)

What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be made in the image of God?

Science has also brought new truthful ways we can see essence of being human on the physical level. The discovery of the structure of DNA – Double Helix. Our bodies have 3 billion genetic building blocks, or base pairs, that make us who we are. And of those 3 billion base pairs, only a tiny amount is unique to us, making us about 99.9% genetically similar to the next human. We are the same. Race is a construct. We are all made in the image of God. And neuroscience helps us understand our brains and how we as a human family can learn more about living an abundant life, facing trauma, how loving relationships affect our brain and how being connected to one another is basic to who we are.

Science can offer a corrective to some of the divisions, but it takes spiritual truths to weave us together as a human family who cares for one another, respects each other, wants the best for each other. To work for the common good and the beloved community. These are not the goals of science.

Today we come to this table on World Communion Sunday to celebrate the human family and all we have in common. We break bread together. All are welcome. We need to think theologically in a way that heals trauma and restores humanity to a life-affirming, this-worldly faith that supports earthly flourishing.

We want to believe that the Bible will not be used to support racism and division again. We are one human family on this planet. We can change our old and wrong perceptions about groups of people. We have a long way to go, but as a church, we continue to look for ways to see and celebrate the tapestry of all people made in the image of God.

Close with a quote by Rita Nakashima Brock

We are at risk of a moral injury epidemic because human beings are neurologically hardwired to need love, which is our basis for being moral and for being at peace with ourselves and the world. Another way to say “neurologically hardwired” is to affirm that we are born moral because we are made in the image of God, the Spirit that links us profoundly and completely to each other, our bodies, and all of creation. Because being moral is crucial to maintaining important relationships and being part of a community, recovery from moral injury is not an individual achievement. It is a relational process that restores our sense of worthiness to be loved, sustains our families and communities, and nurtures creativity, curiosity, and a love of beauty and life. Amen. (3)

1) Michael E. Ruane, "A brief history of the enduring phony science that perpetuates white supremacy," The Washington Post, 4/29/19  
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/a-brief-history-of-the-enduring-phony-science-that-perpetuates-white-supremacy>

2) Marcos Norris, "Dr. King and the Image of God: A Theology of Voting Rights in Ava DuVernay's movie *Selma*," Journal of Religion & Film: Vol. 20 : Iss. 2 , Article 40.  
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol20/iss2/40>

3) Rita Nakashima Brock, "An Epidemic of Moral Injury." The Christian Century, 1 Sept. 2021,  
<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/how-my-mind-has-changed/epidemic-moral-injury>