

WHAT IS A HUMAN?

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What is a Human?

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What are you?

*Have you ever thought about
that question before?*

*Have you ever questioned
the answers that have been
handed to you?*

Can you even really know?

So you're a human. What is that? Seriously. Have you ever actually stopped to think about it? What would you say if someone asked you directly—"What are you?" Maybe a couple answers spring to mind, like, "I'm a creative individual," or "I'm a unique person," or "I'm a future hall-of-famer."

But I'm asking something deeper. What *are* you? What *is* this thing that you *are*? If pressed, many people would default to an answer they learned in school. Maybe it would be something like, "I'm a member of a highly-evolved species of mammals."

OK. But have you ever thought about what an answer like that says about you? Aside from placing you on some sort of "chain of being," what help does it *actually* give you for knowing anything about who you really are and what you're supposed to be doing with yourself? More on that in a minute.

We can't answer the pressing questions of our days without answering this one first.

THIS IS A CRUCIAL QUESTION. REALLY.

Now this might seem like just some excuse to "get deep," but actually "What is a human?" is a crucial question for us to consider—because it's totally necessary to have a thought-through

answer in order to understand any of the pressing questions of our day.

Why? Well, just think about all of the current "hot button" issues. We're all at each other's throats over questions like:

- Who should be allowed to get married?
- Does the body we were born with tell us anything about our identity? Should we be able to do anything we want to it or ignore it all together?
- Who should get to tell anyone else what to do?
- What should we be allowed to do sexually? Anything? Anything we like *at all*?
- What about before someone is born...can a mother do anything she wants to her unborn baby?

- And what about the environment—who should get to control what happens to it; and how should we treat it?

Right now, our whole culture is engaged in all these debates over how humans should or shouldn't be living their lives, what should be accepted or discouraged, what we should celebrate or shame—but there's a simple reason we're not able to come to any agreement on any of this. Here it is: *You can't decide what humans should do if you don't know what they are.*

Let's make it personal: You'll never be able to figure out what you're supposed to do with yourself if you don't know what you are. And, why not, let's make it political: No one should think they have the right to tell anyone else what to do or think unless they can give a coherent, compelling definition of what a human is—a definition that they themselves consistently live out.

If that seems to go too far, too fast, think about it this way. How can we know what we should *do* if we don't know what we *are*? For instance, why should we have opinions on what we should do with our bodies if, since we don't know what a human (in general) is, we don't even know what our bodies (in particular) are, or why we have them, or what they were designed for?

*How can we
know what we
should do if we
don't know
what we are?*

No one seems to be stopping to point out that we can't begin to answer questions about what we should be doing with ourselves if we aren't clear on what we are. Once we get that clear (and have an answer we can live with) we might be able to make some progress in clarifying the big questions of our day.

THE TWO COMMON DEFINITIONS AND WHY HUMANS CAN'T LIVE WITH THEM

Now, there are two answers a lot of people would give if they had time to think and respond to our title question. First, many people would give some answer they think science gives—haven't we figured

out that we're an evolved species of mammal? Doesn't that answer the question? Another group of people would take a more cynical track, and say that we can't really know what a human being is. The more we think about it the less we'll really be able to be sure of. It is interesting that both of these answers bring us to the same place when we're trying to figure out a way forward for the questions of our day.

How so? Let's pick them both apart for a second. In the first case, the idea that a human can be *defined* in any helpful way by the process of evolution is a gross oversimplification. First of all, as we noted earlier, what information would this answer give us other than to tell us who

If everything is only matter, then things like meaning and beauty don't really exist.

our nearest animal relatives were? All we need to do to see this is to read the list of questions from a couple paragraphs ago. Try to answer each one of them using only the evolution definition. Do you see the problem? The answer to each question ends up to be something like, "There's no answer," or, "Whatever you want." Because if we're only animals, why should anyone care what we do or don't do? We might think it's gross when a spider eats her mate, but did she do

anything wrong? Would we berate her and publicly shame her? Of course not. When a lion kills or maims a gazelle, we say, "That's just nature." When a lemming runs off a cliff, we don't hold a funeral and offer counseling to each other. But what about when humans do those things? See the problem? If we can't find an answer bigger than "evolution" we should stop acting like we can give any direction on how people should live and think. They should live and think however they want, because they're no different than a lion or a lemming.

And the issue with this answer goes even deeper. The idea that science has defined human beings by the evolutionary process is typically based on a more fundamental idea—the philosophy of *materialism*. This is the idea that the only thing that exists is matter. Everything else...well, there isn't anything else. So we can forget talk of love, of beauty, of meaning, even of human consciousness, because those things are not material. So they can't really exist. Ditto for God, spirituality, and even (if you think it through) for communication, and information itself. Unfortunately, they're all

immaterial. You may have read things like this in your biology or psychology textbooks. Don't skim over stuff like that! Instead, think about it. Question it. Challenge it! What would it mean if that was really true? It would mean the textbook itself is nonsense—an illusion! How could words communicate to your consciousness that there is no such thing as meaning or consciousness?

So the “we're just evolved animals” definition of humanity runs aground twice—first because it makes us simply animals, and second because it makes us simply atoms. In the first step, morality becomes absurd, and in the second knowledge becomes a fantasy. If someone's really thought it through this far, they often adopt the second answer we're examining, that real knowledge about humanity is impossible. If materialism is true this has a certain logic to it. But then, as we noted earlier, we're no closer to answering any of the big questions of our day than we were before.

At this point, many people would be tempted to say, ok, but it still confirms what I thought: Morality is dumb and you shouldn't try to force your views on

others. But wait! What we all need to see is that, if the answers we learned in school are true, and humans are just atom-animals, then this “no more morality” thing cuts both ways. How? Well, the statement “Morality is dumb” is a moral statement. It's moral because it makes a value judgment, and hides an assumption that “dumb” is “bad,” and “to be avoided.” It's even worse with the statement “no one should force their views on others.” That's pure morality. And that's totally inconsistent with the materialism/evolution paradigm. The words “should” and “shouldn't” can't actually exist in the common way of thinking. We use those words all the time, but we don't have a right to. If we're just mammals, we can't tell anyone how to live, and we can't tell anyone not to tell anyone how to live. If we say no one can tell anyone else what to do, we're simply telling people what not to do. We're getting all moral and indignant about people being talking about morality. And animals who do that are simply not behaving like animals.

*If we're just
mammals, we
can't tell
anyone else
how to live.*

Which of course is the whole problem. What if we're missing

something? What if we're not just animals? That would make sense out of a lot of things, like our insistence that human life is valuable, that beauty and meaning are worth finding, that relationships matter, that it's valuable to communicate, that "should" and "shouldn't" do exist, that we have an obligation to care for the earth and future generations.

Our friend the skeptic might say that coming to any agreement on this issue isn't really possible, but some of us aren't willing to give up hope that easily. This booklet attempts to provide a way forward that makes sense of ourselves and the world we see around us.¹ It provides short versions of the answers Christians have found powerful for 2000 years, but with the hope of starting a conversation with those of you who don't share that perspective.²

*What if we're
missing some-
thing? What if
we're not just
animals?*

As you read these things, I invite you to keep asking these questions:

- *Does what I believe about humanity make sense of the people I know?*
- *Can I actually live out what I say I believe?*
- *Do I think things that are contradictory?*
- *And what about this definition of humanity I'm reading. Does this make sense of the people I know? Is it ringing true to me? Could I live it out daily?*

STARTING OVER: AN ANSWER THAT WORKS

So let's do this. I'd like to offer a succinct definition of what a human is, which we'll spend the rest of the booklet unpacking. This definition is drawn from information Christians have relied on for centuries, information contained in the pages of Scripture.³ Here it is:

A human is a creation made in the image of God, with a mandate on the earth, under authority, and called into relationship with God.

Let's look at each part of that definition, one at a time.

1. A Creation

A human is a created being. Somebody made you. This is the first and most important thing we must know about ourselves. We simply cannot truly understand anything about ourselves if we don't start here. It might not be too much to say that all the problems we face flow from the denial of this fundamental fact about ourselves. We see the fruit of this denial every time someone treats another person as worthless, and every time someone sees their own life as meaningless, too.

Instead of a philosophy built on the negation of human worth, materialism, and skepticism, the message of Christianity is exactly the opposite. You are a creation of God. We find this glorious truth right at the beginning of our story. In the first two chapters of the Bible we see that humans were thought of, designed, and crafted by the one we should call "The Creator" himself. We are the work of a mind of genius beyond anything we can imagine. And once you look at those chapters, you see something even more exciting than the fact that we are creations.

Instead of a philosophy which negates human worth, Christianity teaches the opposite.

2. Made in the Image of God

Genesis, the first book of the bible, opens with the story of this Master Artisan crafting everything. It climaxes when he takes a deep breath⁴ and says,

"Let us make man⁵ in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, 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."

And then, the bible reports, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."⁶

Seriously, if it wasn't amazing enough to find out that I'm not simply a random assembly of chemicals, but that I'm *made* by a genius, it's got to be even better to discover what is written in these verses—I am not just any part of this artist's catalogue of work—I am the final, crowning part. In fact, I am the one part of his creation which he made in his own image. I represent him. I am, somehow, *like* him. I am unique, and I am special. If that sounds corny, maybe it's because we've all had a steady drum beat of the opposite kind of message drilled in to our heads for the last few decades. After a while, you don't even realize that it's hard to think any other way anymore. The most telling symptom of this condition is the cynicism that affects us all and makes us scoff at any sincere assertion that humans have real meaning.

*You were
made by a
genius,
master artisan.*

But why should we just accept a set of beliefs that tells us that we don't have any real meaning except what we make up ourselves? The message of Christianity is founded on what the Scriptures declare: You were made in the image of God. Because of that, you have meaning and purpose beyond what you might have imagined. Your creator had a purpose behind how he made you. And this brings us to our next point...

3. With a Mandate on the Earth

We typically don't hear the word "mandate" anymore unless we're talking about elections. When politicians win by a landslide, the news always says, "the voters gave them a mandate" or something like that. It means that the election results indicate that voters had a specific, driving purpose behind why they elected the candidates, and this in turn means that the candidates have both a clear purpose and the power to fulfill that purpose when they take office.

The bible indicates that the fact that humans were made in the image of God means that they have exactly this kind of mandate. And just to make it clear, God personally spells out what this mandate is to the first two humans. I've already quoted part of it above. Here's the rest of what the book of Genesis tells us God said to them:

"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have

dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Here, the one who made us makes it clear. We have a special purpose on the earth, and it is tied directly to the unique way we were made—with our ability to hear and put in to action the things he said. We are made to fill the earth and “subdue it”—or, as bible scholars might tell you this means—to cultivate it and extend God’s beneficent rule over the entire planet. He seems to have made it almost, well, wild, and then invited us to partner with him in the creative work of ordering it and helping it flourish. He wants us to fill the earth with human kind, and to rule it for its good. And he wants us to do it as those made in his image, that is, he wants us to represent (to “image”) him to the rest of creation.

But before you even try to wrap your mind around the specifics of what that means, it’s helpful just to let the basic truth sink in. A human is someone who has been made, in a unique way, and given a high purpose on this earth. That purpose comes from outside ourselves, and is not choosable or changeable. It was given as a gift, and because it is given as part of who and what we are, it is irrevocable.

*You have a purpose.
Your life has meaning. It can’t be taken away.*

You have a purpose. Your life has meaning. It can’t be taken away. It’s not ultimately determined by what you make of yourself or what happens to you in this life. It’s just what you are. And it’s a high, sacred, awesome thing.

Of course, within this purpose, there are thousands of options as to what each of us individually might do or become. How we discover what that should be is part of living this life we’ve been given to live. But it’s important to see that we don’t get to decide whether or not we have a purpose, and we don’t get to decide what the ultimate meaning of our life is supposed to be. And that’s because our maker hasn’t gone away and left us to ourselves.

4. Under Authority

Not only did he not leave us alone in the universe, but this God

has shown himself to be intimately involved at every level of our lives. “He is not far from us,” one of Jesus’ early followers said, “for in him we live and move and have our being.”⁸ The Bible is the record of God’s involvement in the history of our world, from his personal creation of the first pair of humans, to his guidance of the family that he used to do his work in the world, to his coming, personally, among us to be with us as one of us.⁹

And the Bible also teaches that the nature of his presence with us, even when the majority of us are totally unaware of it, is one of authority. He is called “King” and “Lord” and “Father.” He is shown to be in command of what happens in our world. Now on this point I might run up against some opposition—I understand. We, especially

*Authority,
when it
belongs to
God, is not
something to
be feared.*

those of us in the modern west, have developed an instinctive reaction against any talk of authority. It feels controlling. We smell bad intentions when we get a whiff of these kinds of claims. (And sometimes, we have legitimate, personal reasons for those reactions. Point taken.)

But maybe we could play, “what if,” for a moment. *What if* there were such a God, who made everything with his words? He would, with this kind of power, be in

authority over his material universe. And what if he personally made human beings to share this authority and co-reign with him to cultivate his creation? Wouldn’t he then have the right, the authority in himself, to be recognized as the one in authority?

And what if, as the bible reports, he had shown his goodness and his care for creation, and especially humanity, for our entire history? Would we then have any real reason to resent his authority, or to rebel against it? If this were all true, could we call this ungrateful, or even... *evil*?¹⁰

The Christian message, taken from the scriptures, is that all these things are true. Our God, who made us and everything, is the supreme authority in the universe, and we are under his authority. We bow to him, even while he has made us to share his reign.

This is expressed, right from the start, in some of the first words

God addresses to humanity:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat...”¹¹

This speech has many levels of significance, but we shouldn't overlook the fact that God clearly assumes his own inherent right to offer direction, even commands, to humanity.¹²

The final part of this exploration of what we are takes this idea of authority and shows why it is not something to be feared.

5. Called into a relationship with God.

What kind of authority does God exercise? And what's it like to actually bring yourself under his authority? The bible's answer is that God's authority isn't just the authority of a faraway king over subjects, or of a boss in a corner office over ground-level employees. Instead, our maker designed us specially to be in actual relation to him. Like him, we're relational creatures¹³—wanting (and in our case, needing) to connect, to be known, to love and be loved, to relate, and to share company.

*It's not simply
that there's a
law to obey,
but that it's all
personal.*

Not to be missed in the quotes above, where God commands Adam and Eve, is that he is also bringing them into personal, relational accountability to himself. It's not just that they had a law to obey. It's that the One who made them made it all personal. If they broke his command, they were essentially choosing to mess up the relationship. And since they were made to always have a whole, healthy relationship with their maker—communicating, relating, connecting, loving, and doing everything with him—it meant that when they messed up that relationship they messed themselves up. They began to live against the grain of their very beings.

Which gets us to one more essential point.

6. ...and, for now, fallen because of sin.

In the third chapter of the book of Genesis, we see that the first two humans chose to mess this relationship up in exactly the way God had directed them to avoid. They opted out of their close personal tie with their maker and listened to part of his creation instead. In doing so, they chose to lend credence to direct personal attacks on the character of this Maker. Nothing harms a relationship like that, right? And since this maker is also their Authority, they committed a simple, but massive, act of rebellion. Since they're calling had been to exercise God's own authority over this creation, instead of listening to it contradict God, they abdicated their place as God's vice-rulers. Since they were made in the image of God, they marred (vandalized, you could say¹⁴) the good thing God had made.

These two things explain everything we face on a daily basis.

In other words, it was no small thing when they turned their backs on God. It was huge.

These two things: the high nature we have as those made in the image of God, and the massive evil of our chosen sin against that reality, explain everything we experience, on a daily basis, as human beings.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS OF ALL THIS?

So, back to all this discussion about what's right and wrong, what's moral or immoral, and what people should be allowed to do and say. Even while many of us don't like to think about ourselves as very into morality, still, everyone seems to have a strong opinion about what should and shouldn't be going on. And issues of what we should be doing with our bodies are front and center in this discussion. But, as we have seen, how can we come to agreement on what we should be *doing* when we don't agree on, or even have any idea about, what we *are*?

And the real truth is: we can't.

Think of *anything* at all—if you don't know what the thing is, you can't be an authority on what it should do or how it should be used. The

same goes for our humanity. It's a great habit to get into—whenever someone tells you what you should and shouldn't be doing, saying, or thinking, ask them if they can tell you what you are first. And then ask them if their definition of what you are actually matches up with what they say you should do.

In other words, test people's ideas about what humans should *do* against their ideas about what humans *are*. When you do this, you'll quickly find nearly everyone's moral authority breaking down. It just doesn't exist.¹⁵

Following the teachings of scripture, the Christian message is that our first duty as beings created in the image of our Creator is to acknowledge our position as creations.¹⁶ As creations, we don't get to define ourselves, or direct ourselves. That's the Creator's prerogative. In keeping with our status as creations, we acknowledge his right to do these two fundamental things, and we actively seek to live in accordance with what he says in these areas.

We let him define us. He tells us what we are.

We let him direct us. He tells us what to do.

Then, and only then, can we know what we should be doing. But flip the statement around, and see how positive it is. Once you know what you are, you can know who you are! You can know your purpose! You can believe in the significance of your life and know it's real. And you can figure out what you're supposed to do with this amazing gift of life you've been given. Why would we want to trade that away for...nothing?

*Our first duty
as creations
is to
acknowledge
our creaturely
status.*

UNDERSTANDING BOUNDARIES IS TOUCHING REALITY

It may be difficult for those of us raised on a steady diet of Disney and Top 40 radio to think we might not be able to "be anything we want to be," but acknowledging limitations shouldn't make us feel oppressed. Instead, we need to begin to see that to claim that being human

means anything we want is really to claim that being human is nothing in particular. In our quest for that kind of “freedom,” all we’ll really find is non-existence.

Like anything else that is real (as opposed to what we call “fantasy”), what it means to be human has edges. There are lines to what is human and what is not. Once we discover those lines, we haven’t found walls, we’ve found clarity, like a person getting off a boat and finally touching solid ground—now we know what we’re working with. Now we can get some things done. Now we can live.

Let’s be honest. For all our talk about endless possibilities, if we were to go behind the closed doors of homes and into the hearts of our modern culture, would we really find a strong, confident, empowered people? Or, in our most soul-bearing moments, would many of us plainly admit that we’re unsettled inside, plagued by anxieties we can’t understand or control, often sad or even depressed, confused about what we should be doing with our lives, and, well, kind of scared when we actually stop and think about our future, or stare into the blackness of space on a dark night?

What’s wrong with us?

Here’s one answer: we’ve lost track of who and what we are, and as a consequence we’ve pursued many things that are actually beneath us, and that break us and blur our vision.

But there is a light. The one who made us has shined and spoken—he will show us what is real if we are willing to have ears to hear and eyes to see. He will speak to us about what he had in mind for us when he made us—about a strong, noble people—men and women who cultivate the earth in boundless joy and endless family love with their Father and each other, forever.

That’s the life you were made for.

Notes:

- ¹ This is, if you like, an attempt at a Christian Anthropology.
- ² If you are a Christian believer, this booklet can still be very helpful in (1) helping you to hone your understanding of your personal identity as a human from a biblical perspective, (2) helping you share these things with non-believers, and (3) seeing the foundational nature of these things for so many of the complex moral and social issues of our day.
- ³ For Christians, this way of answering questions is natural. We just ask, "What did God tell us?" If the bible doesn't seem like a reliable source of information to you, I invite you to check out the discussion contained in the Truth on Campus booklet *What is the Bible?* It's free to download at www.truthoncampus.com.
- ⁴ Scholars say this is kind of indicated in the Hebrew—not that God actually inhaled, but that there seems to be a dramatic pause to heighten the perception of importance in the situation.
- ⁵ "Man" (quoted here from Genesis 1:26) is a translation of the Hebrew word for "Adam," which becomes the name of the first man. It is used in the Hebrew bible as a generic term for humankind, and in no way implies that women aren't also made in the image of God (as clearly indicated in the next sentence, Genesis 1:27). If you get tempted to get hung up on what might seem like sexist language, I hope you'll at least press on through the rest of this booklet.
- ⁶ This is Genesis 1:26-27, in the English Standard Version.
- ⁷ Genesis 1:28-29 (ESV)
- ⁸ That's the Apostle Paul speaking, quoted in Acts 17:27-28
- ⁹ That's who Jesus Christ is, just in case you didn't know.
- ¹⁰ I realize that if you aren't a believer in Christ, I may have lost you here. Hopefully you realize that the nature of this booklet is not actually to prove anything. There's not enough space here for that kind of argumentation, and besides, it's all been done in longer, more substantial works already. What I'm actually doing here is what Christians have traditionally called "proclaiming." I'm setting the stage and telling the story. And in doing so, I'm inviting you to look at this story in a fresh way. Does it make sense of the world you live in? How does it match up against the story you're currently living in? Does your story offer you this kind of hope? I'm also asking you to consider yourself from *within* this story, and then, to actually place yourself *into* it, and live your life out *through* it. The bible calls this faith.
- ¹¹ Genesis 2:16-17 (ESV)
- ¹² Seeing this famous command this way can be helpful for understanding what's going on in this passage. While God gives the entire earth to Adam and Eve as their domain (Genesis 1:26-28), he clearly shows that ultimate authority rests with him by putting this one part of the earth (a tree) under his direct authority.
- ¹³ See the TCSI booklet *How is God Love?* for an exploration of how the Christian God (and only the Christian God) is truly relational, without actually *needing* us to be relational.
- ¹⁴ I got this word from New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg.
- ¹⁵ Unless, of course, they have the authority of the Scriptures to back them up. Maybe that's a controversial statement, but it's what this booklet is trying to commend.
- ¹⁶ I first heard this from Don Carson, who said it was our duty to acknowledge our "creatureliness."

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

If any of the ideas in this booklet got you thinking, we're developing an ever growing line of resources to help you think through the big questions of life.

Our current literature offerings include these titles:

What is the Bible?

How is God love?

Orientation, Choice and Change

Planning your time with God

Surviving Your Twenties

Surviving Dorm Life

Also, please email us if you'd like to continue the conversation.

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Who we are:

Truth On Campus seeks to equip students on college and university campuses, to cultivate Christian thinking and living in the academic environment, and to spread the gospel. Working with existing campus groups, we aim to help you with free resources discussing the issues Christian students face, as well as addressing the “big questions” that all people ponder. Truth On Campus is based out of Calvary Chapel of Philadelphia, online at www.ccphilly.org.

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