



GOSPEL
SOCIETY
& CULTURE



What does it mean to be human?

A bible study based on GS&C Resource Paper 21 (2024) What is a Human, What is a Human For and Who is a Human For?

Before you start

This study looks at the Biblical view of what it means to be human and applies it to questions of gender identity. These are important questions that can be personally challenging and controversial. If you are doing this study in a group, ensure that you are all ready to discuss difficult topics respectfully. Make sure you pray together for God's wisdom and then listen carefully to one another as you seek God's truth in his word.

Pre-Reading

If you are going to lead a group to do this study, make sure that you read the GS&C Resource Paper 21 (2024) What is a Human, What is a Human For and Who is a Human For?

You might also look at

Rhys Laverty, "What Did You Plan To Be Hated For?" see

<https://thenewalbion.substack.com/p/what-did-you-plan-to-be-hated-for>

Trevin Wax, "Today's Defining Question: What Is a Human?" see

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/defining-question-what-human/>

Matt Walsh "What is a Woman?" see

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9f-IDSv2mLU>

Alan Noble "You Are Not Your Own"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AeknrBixqMc>

You may want to share these resources with others in the group as well.

Study One

Creation: What Does It Mean to Be Human?

Bible Readings: Genesis 1:26-2:9, Psalm 8.

Introduction

What is a woman? That's a question that has been asked of major leaders, political and cultural, around the Western world in recent years, and it seems to have stumped many. The answers range from "I won't answer that" to "I'm not a biologist!" It seems odd to us that such an obvious question seems to elicit almost fear or anger from those being asked it.

It's only as we step back and observe the larger landscape that such evasive answers make sense. We are, as Trevin Wax reports, facing a cultural crisis, and one that is invading the church, over the question of what a human is. And not only what a human is, but what a human is for, and who a human is for. The question "What is a woman?" is a subset of a bigger set of questions around what we call anthropology.

How does the Bible answer these questions? What is a "biblical anthropology?" How does the Bible build a framework for understanding what it means to be human. In this first session of a two-part series, we will explore the biblical foundational understanding of humans, an understanding that we can no longer take for granted as common among our friends, neighbours and indeed family members.

The Big Idea: The Genesis account of human creation tells us what a human is, what a human is for, and who a human is for.

Discuss: How would you answer the question "what is a woman" if you were asked it:

1.at work or school?

2.by a family friend who considered themselves non-binary?

Read Genesis 1:26-2:9

The Bible begins with the story of creation. Notice how the text "slows down" when it gets to the part about the creation of humans.

The rest of the creation story is summed up in 1:1-25 (with some additional scene setting for a summary and a description of the location of human dwelling in 2:1-6), while the account of human creation is more detailed and more intricate. This slowing down has a theological purpose — it points to the importance of this part of the creation. The Bible marks humans as different to every other part of the creation, with a distinct identity and task.

From the Bible passage answer the following:

1. What does God say about humans?
2. What does God do to humans?
3. What does God command humans to do?
4. What does God provide for humans in order to carry out their task?

Question: What might this slowing down and depth of detail tell us about humans?

Observation: It is important to notice that the created order has a binary nature to it. As Stephen McAlpine observes:

“It is not merely humans who are created binary; the whole of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 is binary. We see equal opposites everywhere: light and dark; day and night; land and sea; earth and heavens; animal and human; male and female; and—most significantly—Creator and creature. The binary nature of male and female completes, and is embedded within, a binary system culminating in the most binary relationship of all: the one between the God who created all things and the humans he created.” (Being the Bad Guys, pp52-53)

The implication of this is that a proper view of the created order based on Genesis 1-2 gives us clarity about the separation between each part of creation. When these distinctions are lost, or the biblical understanding is rejected, then the uniqueness of humans over the rest of the created order is also lost. What is more, the distinction between male and female is lost, or viewed as “backward” or “oppressive” to other perspectives.

Discuss:

1. How has a rejection of Genesis 1-2 led to the following issues we are grappling with in society:

i. The celebration of non-binary genders?

ii. The value of a human compared to, for example, another living creature or a river system?

iii. Human responsibility for the environment?

iv. personal freedom to be who and what you want to be ("You Do You")?

v. the status of human life at the start and end of life?

vi. Who can be married to who?

In-Depth: Pick one (at most two) of the issues above and discuss how you might frame a conversation from Genesis 1-2 with someone who is not a Christian but wants to know from you why you believe what you believe. What pushback would you expect and why?

Sin and The Fall

We cannot understand humans without Genesis 3, the story of humans rebelling against their Creator and his purposes for their lives, as well as their identities in Him. The issues we are dealing with in our society spring from a rejection of the created order, which is primarily a rejection of the Creator. Sin has suppressed the common understanding of what a human is. It does not only lead people to reject what God reveals in the Bible, but also what God shows through the creation pattern (which is often called "general revelation"). Sinful humanity suppresses our acknowledgement of general revelation (Romans 1:18-32).

Discuss: How does "general revelation" relate to ethical issues in our day? In a so-called "post-Christian" age, can such ideas still get traction? How might we use general revelation to argue against abortion or physician-assisted suicide?

Read Psalm 8

Psalm 8 shows that the role of human beings shown in Genesis 1-2 continues after the fall. The meaning and purpose of a human being has not changed. Nor indeed has their status in creation been changed, even if humans do not acknowledge God. In the second study we will explore how this tension is resolved. In the meantime, look at the similarities between Psalm 8 and Genesis 1-2.

Discuss

How does the creation mandate (Genesis 1:28, remarked upon in Psalm 8:5-8) transform how you see your everyday tasks as a Christian person living in the world? How are you encouraged? How are you challenged?

Summary

What are the key insights the Bible gives us about human identity?

What is one thing which you have found thought provoking from this study.

Pray

Thank you Heavenly Father that you are our Creator God. Thank you that you knew before time how you would establish the world and the special role that you would give to humans, and the special status we would be given by virtue of our relationship to you. Please help us to steward the created order with humility and confidence under your rightful reign. Help us to see other humans who do not view the creation the way in which we do, as nevertheless also made in your image and therefore having value, dignity and worth. Forgive us for not living as you have created us to be, and as we look to the Lord Jesus, who as the second person of the Trinity spoke the creation into existence, transform us with the truth that we do not belong to ourselves, but are doubly owned by you. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Study Two

New Creation: What Does It Mean to Be A Redeemed Human?

Bible Readings: 1 Corinthians 6:9-20, Hebrews 2:5-18

Introduction

Here are a few choice quotes from Alan Noble's book *You Are Not Your Own: Living for God in an Inhuman World*.

"Belonging to God sets limits on our lives. Sometimes they are hard limits to bear. It is not easy to stand before God, even with grace. Moment by moment we must set aside our sinful desires, even the ones closest to our heart, to live sacrificially. I do not want to lie to you. This is a difficult life."

"Almost everyone else you meet will continue to believe that they are their own and so are you. Almost every institution will treat you like an autonomous individual, subject to instrumentalization and valued according to efficiency."

"No matter how much we consciously affirm that our existence is already justified through God, virtually every other voice we interact with will tell us, "No. Keep striving. You haven't done enough. If you quit now, your life will be a waste. Do something else to make it worthwhile."

These quotes indicate the challenges we face in the modern West in living for Jesus, and recognising that our humanness is not our own to forge or to determine, but it is something that God has given to us.

The Big Idea: New Creation Humanity is called to live in the light of the gospel of the Lord Jesus who is the truly aligned human who fulfilled the creation mandate.

Discuss: Take one of the quotes by Alan Noble and discuss it in your group.

1. What is it about the quote that resonates with you?

2. In what ways does the quote challenge you in the way you are living your life?

3. In what way does the quote comfort you?

Read 1 Corinthians 6:9-20

The Christians in Corinth were, in many ways, not living up to their new creation identity. Paul wants them to know that their sinful human nature has been redeemed by Christ and that this means a totally different way of being human is required.

From the bible passage answer the following:

1. What was the Corinthians previous way of life?

2. Why might the Corinthians believe everything "is lawful"?

(This is almost certainly a slogan from some or all of the Corinthians, and not something Paul agrees with (see <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/why-christians-need-to-stop-citing-all-things-are-lawful-in-cultural-arguments/>)

1. How does Paul negate this idea? What arguments does he use?

2. What are the key truths in vv19-20? What are the implications of these truths?

3. How might we today fall into the trap of thinking we are our own (not just in the obvious ways listed here, but other areas of life today that are shaped by the modern individualist West)?

Question: If you were to tell people that being a Christian means that you do not belong to yourself and that the point of your body is not self-expression, but worship of God, what response would you expect? How do the truths of vv19-20 challenge our modern culture.

Observation: So many of the issues that Paul speaks into in this chapter revolve around sexuality. The Corinthians had separated their beliefs and their bodies. But this passage indicates that we are holistic beings. There is no separation. This is true of us as Christians. And it is true of our witness to the world. Our gospel message compels us to live and speak in ways that show that God's blueprint for creation still stands. That can make it uncomfortable for us as we proclaim a holistic gospel.

Rhys Lavery states: "what do Christians expect to be hated for? The answer is simple in one sense: we should expect to be hated for Christ. He has told us as much: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first" (John 15:18). Yet the Christ who said this is himself the Creator, the Logos by whom all things were made. And so to be hated because of nature is to be hated for Christ's sake just as much as being hated for grace is. If we do not grasp this fact, stressing it to ourselves, our churches, and our children, then we will not be ready for the days ahead." <https://thenewalbion.substack.com/p/what-did-you-plan-to-be-hated-for>

The implication of this is that any way of understanding salvation has to take the Creator role of Jesus as seriously as the Saviour role. Without having a view of Jesus' ownership of us both as Creator and Saviour, we undermine the creation framework that Genesis 1-2 espouse, and we allow a different vision of human flourishing, or a different understanding of what a human is, to pervade our minds.

Jesus the True Human

The story of the Bible has many threads. One of them is the search for the human being who truly lives under the mandate of God given in Genesis 1-2. Many characters in the story might look as if they are the one who will do that: Abraham, Noah and King David. Each fails the task. However, the New Testament shows that the God-Man, Jesus Christ fulfils the task that all other human beings failed. His life, death, resurrection and ascension have resulted in him fulfilling the Genesis mandate. His perfect life and sufficient sacrificial death have resolved the problem.

Read Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2:5-18

When we read Psalm 8 we are struck by the role of humans in the created order and before God. There is praise of God and there is purpose in the world. However we know from experience that both of these are marred by sin. Hebrews 2 resolves the tension.

Work through the Hebrews passage and answer the questions:

1. How does the writer come to the conclusion that everything is not subject to ALL humans yet, while still affirming that everything is subject to ONE human?

2. What work on earth did Jesus perform that enabled him to both rule over creation and free humans from the result of sin?

3. How did Jesus show that he was human?

4. What showed that Jesus was the perfect human?

5. What are the results for all other humans of Jesus' fulfilling the creation mandate?

Discuss

Go back to the three comments by Alan Noble at the start of the study. When we are tempted to fail in any of these areas, how does it help us to know that Jesus did not fail. For example, what does it mean for us to have a perfect human who did not fall into sinful desire? Or what does it mean to know that even with all his power, Jesus lived his life not for his own will but for the will of someone else?

What changes should you make this week/this month/this year, knowing that you are not your own but that you were bought with a price?

What ways can you show real humanity, patterned from Jesus?

Think about areas such as relationships, family life, work patterns, media and social media use or exercise and diet.

Pray

Father God, we are grateful for the salvation that was won for us by the Lord Jesus Christ, the one faithful human in all of history who is both our Creator and our Saviour. Thank you that we have a guide and a model of what it means to be truly human. Forgive us when we forget that we do not belong to ourselves and when we seek to run our own lives our own ways. Help us not merely to glorify you with our words but with our actions and in our bodies as well. Help us to go out into our world of work and relationships, of pleasure, leisure and industry, serving and worshipping you, and recognising that the cost of our salvation was the great price given by the truly perfect human, the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.

The Gospel Society and Culture committee aims to provide resources which are faithful to Scripture, relevant to the life and mission of the church, engaged with contemporary Australian culture and informed by careful research. Resource Papers and Bible Studies aim to be consistent with the confessional position of the Presbyterian Church of Australia and to reflect positions on social issues expressed by the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in NSW. They have not been approved by the Assembly and so do not represent the official view of the Presbyterian Church of NSW. For more information about The Gospel, Society and Culture committee see www.gsandc.org.au.

The research and writing for these studies were done by author Stephen MacAlpine. GS&C has a partnership with Stephen for 2024-25.

© Gospel, Society and Culture committee, PCNSW 2024.

The authors of this paper hold the copyright to all original work contained herein and offer it free to be distributed and reproduced in original form for non-commercial use, education, and review in accordance with the copyright laws of Australia, while in no way altering the copyright of other authors whose work is contained herein such as images and direct quotations.



GOSPEL
SOCIETY
& CULTURE