

“Reformed Basics”: 3. Humanity

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Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.

—Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, p. 1

1. Introduction

At various times in the Church’s history different parts of God’s truth have been under attack. In the 1600s the attack fell on God’s authority (the Scripture) and on the way people are saved (grace). The WCF accordingly is strong in those areas. In our day and our Western culture the main attacks are on what it means to be human. Thus we take some time to gather the Scripture’s teaching on that subject. God has spoken; we are not left to our own or others’ opinion.

Gen 1–2 state humanity’s (1) nature, (2) vocation, and (3) ultimate objective (telos).

2. Nature of human beings

Gen 1 moves quickly through five days of creation, then lingers over man’s creation. Man is presented as the climax of the six days, as the crowning act.

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.”

Human beings are made in God’s image. In God’s likeness they exercise dominion over the rest of creation.

27 So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

Male and female together are in God’s image; they are not of different kinds (contrary to Aristotle, and some Christian teachers). The full expression of God’s image requires the diversity of sexes (and of ethnicities, as we’ll see).

28 And God blessed them. And 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.”

God gives them a vocation, or calling: be fruitful; fill the earth; and subdue (order) it. This is referred to as the “cultural mandate.”

- God’s image requires the diversity of the sexes (and of nations)
- As human beings spread on the earth, they spread God’s glory.

- Adam and Eve have dominion, but under God, and for his purposes.

3. *Vocation of human beings*

Our understanding is organized according to the Biblical-historical pattern of: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.

3.1 *Vocation as created*

Gen 1 gives us the broad picture of creation. Gen 2 focuses on details.

2:15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.

Adam is given work to do. Work is intrinsic to human beings; not a consequence of the Fall.

16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

Adam receives a command from God and obeys it. Adam is a priest serving God’s Edenic temple.

3.2 *Vocation after the Fall*

And to Adam he said,
 “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
 and have eaten of the tree
 of which I commanded you,
 ‘You shall not eat of it,’
 cursed is the ground because of you;
 in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
 and you shall eat the plants of the field.
 By the sweat of your face
 you shall eat bread,
 till you return to the ground,
 for out of it you were taken;
 for you are dust,
 and to dust you shall return.” (Gen 3:17–19)

What does man gain by all the toil
 at which he toils under the sun? (Eccl 1:3)

Work becomes difficult and characterized by futility. By God’s continuing grace we still have bread to eat but it’s by toil under the sun.

Cain knew his wife, and she *conceived and bore* Enoch. When he *built a city*, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch. 18 To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad fathered Mehujael, and Mehujael fathered Methushael, and Methushael fathered Lamech. 19 And Lamech took two wives. The name of the one was Adah, and the name of the

other Zillah. 20 Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who *dwell in tents and have livestock*. 21 His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who *play the lyre and pipe*. 22 Zillah also bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of *all instruments of bronze and iron*. (Gen 4:17–22)

Human culture (see emphasized phrases) develops despite the Fall, but as an expression of rebellion against God.

God remains committed to filling the earth with image-bearers; thus he scatters the nations at Babel (Gen 11).

3.3 *Vocation under redemption*

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:18–20)

God renews those made in his image. These renewed image-bearers are chosen from all the nations. As Adam and Eve were to fill the earth, so the Church is to spread throughout the earth. The renewed image-bearers spread God's glory in words, deeds, and labors.

3.4 *Vocation as consummated*

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “*Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God*. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” 5 And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” (Rev 21:1–5)

God's presence is the focal point of this description. Where Adam and Eve dwelled with God in a garden-temple, now all redeemed humanity dwells with God as their God in a city-temple.

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 2And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. (Rev 21:22–26)

- A new city! In one way it is continuous with previous human culture, but new.
- Not immaterial
- Not the result of human achievement: God brings it
- It includes the “glory and honor” of the nations: it includes whatever is honorable in human culture.

4. Humanity's ultimate goal

To live in communion with God. The temple of the Garden becomes the temple city.

Human beings are renewed as the image of God.

Consummated life is communal: New Jerusalem is a city where God's people live together. The Father's house has many rooms. (But we don't stay in them!)

Consummated life is not immaterial, any more than our Lord's resurrected body is.

Consummated life is adorned with "the glory and honor of the nations."

5. Humans as psycho-somatic unity

... 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. (Gen 2:7)

We are "of dust" like animals. But, unlike animals, we have souls. The soul is the seat of consciousness and of moral agency.

Scripture uses "soul" and "spirit" interchangeably. It often uses "soul" to mean the "life" of an individual.

Humanity's destiny is not a disembodied existence. Our Lord has a fully physical body in his exalted state. We long for a day when we will be with him in the New Jerusalem, not "unclothed" but "further clothed." (2 Cor 5:4)

And he [the penitent thief] said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." (Luke 23:42–43)

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven... (Heb 12:22–24)

Because of the Fall, believers who die before the Lord's return enter an "intermediate state" which persists until the general Resurrection. Scripture is not entirely clear as to its nature, but we know that believers in it (1) have a conscious identity, (2) are morally perfect, and (3) enjoy communion with God. But this is an *intermediate* state, an unnatural consequence of the Fall. The Lord Jesus is the "firstfruits from the dead" (1 Cor 15:20), and we shall be like him.

What does it mean to be human? Unlike the animals, we have souls. Unlike the angels, we are embodied. One of the goals of the Transhumanist movement is the extraction of consciousness from the body. Another is the creation of an "artificial general intelligence." These are unlikely to be met.

6. Humanity as male and female

In any discussion of the sexes is a danger of stereotypes! It is easy (and dangerous) to smuggle cultural assumptions into the discussion. Persons of each sex fall on a continuum.

This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth. The days of Adam after he fathered Seth were 800 years; and he had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days that Adam lived were 930 years, and he died. (Gen 5:1–5)

Males are presented as fathers, sons, brothers, husbands; females as mothers, daughters, sisters, wives. The full image of God requires the diversity of sexes. The sexes share:

- Common human nature
- Common blessing
- Common calling (Gen 1:28): they have authority together, under God

Thus sexual identity is not ultimate for human beings, but is an essential part of being human. Except in a small number of cases, a baby's sex isn't "assigned" at birth but recognized. How an individual's identity develops should be guided by Scriptural norms rather than cultural stereotypes. Favale's book is helpful with the present debates over gender.

Now concerning the matters about which you wrote: "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband. For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does. Likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Do not deprive one another, except perhaps by agreement for a limited time, that you may devote yourselves to prayer; but then come together again, so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. (1 Cor 7:1–5)

The Fall has complicated marriage. Marriage now has a remedial function (among others): to avoid sexual impurity. Note that the partners have authority over each other.

18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, ...
21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.

25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. (Eph 5:18–33)

Paul starts with the common calling of male and female to be filled with the Spirit, to be disciples of Christ, in mutual submission.

He then discusses roles of husband and wife *to their own spouse*. Authority and submission are *not gender attributes*., but must be discussed carefully with respect to specific roles.

Final end of marriage: Christ and the Church. Marriage is not an ultimate good but a sign of the age to come. Persons single in this life will participate in the consummate marriage.

Purposes of marriage from creation:

- Companionship (not good that the man is alone)
- Offspring

After the Fall:

- Preservation from sexual sin
- A sign of union with Christ

While the kingdom of God is first planted spiritually in human hearts, the future blessedness is not to be spiritualized. Biblical hope, rooted in incarnation and resurrection, is creational, this-worldly, visible, physical, bodily hope. The rebirth of human beings is completed in the glorious rebirth of all creation, the new Jerusalem, whose architect and builder is God himself. The salvation of the kingdom of God, including communion with God as well as the communion of the saints, is both a present blessing and a future, consummated, rich glory. The kingdom of God has come and is coming. The scope of God's mercy is wide.

—Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol 4

7. For Further Reading

Our church's subordinate standard, the Westminster Confession of Faith, discusses the doctrines of humanity and marriage in chapters 6 and 24. The doctrine of humanity is relatively undeveloped in the Confession because it was not controversial in that day. The Confession is available here:
<https://opc.org/wcf.html>

The Westminster Larger Catechism explains why the Fifth Commandment requires honor, not just to natural parents, but to all in authority, both male and female. See Q.123–125.
<https://opc.org/lc.html>

7.1 Videos

Carl Trueman on why “anthropology”—the truth about the nature of humanity—is the main battleground today:

<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/3R918yQrTLA>

Kevin DeYoung on the two most important ideas in anthropology:
<https://www.youtube.com/shorts/QbCUDBw8-0Q>

7.2 Books

A non-technical but deep discussion of gender: Abigail Favale, *The Genesis of Gender: a Christian Theory*, Ignatius Press, 2022.

For a robust account of the Scripture's teaching that same-sex attraction is contrary to the Creator's design, see Greg Johnson, *Still Time to Care: What We Can Learn from the Church's Failed Attempt to Cure Homosexuality*, Zondervan 2021. Johnson should be read carefully. His thesis is that evangelical churches have largely failed to care for same-sex-attracted persons. (He and his church have since left the PCA; it's a long story.)