

Human Nature: The Creator's Intent

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The well-traveled story tells of a good ole' boy who is sitting in a bar in Indianapolis and orders three mugs of beer. His drinking methodology is somewhat unusual. He takes a sip from the first beer, a sip from the second beer, and then a sip from the third beer – and repeats the process until all three mugs are empty. The bartender (a backslidden Free Methodist) says “you know, buddy, a mug of beer goes flat after a while. So your beer will be fresher and colder and taste better if you just order one beer at a time. Then when you finish it, I'll pour you a fresh one.” The good ole' boy says “Thanks for the advice, barkeep, but I understand how to drink beer. Here's why I drink mine the way I do. Back home in Texas I had two brothers. When we grew up and moved away from home, we promised each other that we would always drink our beer three-at-a-time in order to remember the days when we could drink our beer together. So when I drink three beers like this, I'm drinking one for each of my brothers and one for myself.” The bartender nods his understanding and appreciation for the tradition, and the good ole' boy becomes a regular at that bar – always ordering three mugs of beer and sipping from each one in turn.

One day the good ole' boy comes in and orders two mugs of beer. The bartender and all the other regulars at the bar notice this change and become quiet. After a few moments the bartender says: “look, buddy, we don't want to intrude on your grief, but we want you to know how sorry we are for your loss.” The good ole' boy looks puzzled for a moment, then realizes what everyone must be thinking. He says “Oh, no, I'm sorry. Thanks for your concern, but everyone is fine. It's just that my wife and I recently joined the Wesleyan Church and had to quit drinking. It hasn't affected my brothers, though.”

We all know about the vast human propensity for deception, rationalization, corruption and ultimately self-destruction. Whether we're watching the evening news, tracking the exploits of our favorite athletes, dealing with wayward congregants and unruly congregations, or (sometimes) even looking in the mirror, we know and experience the seemingly limitless human capacity for behavior that dishonors God, destroys relationships, violates biblical values, and wreaks all kinds of havoc. It may be that the doctrine of sin is the one biblical doctrine that is most self-evident.

For good reason, then, when we think about the nature of humanity (and thus begin to do anthropology) our perspective is often dominated by our intimate and extensive familiarity with human fallenness. Valid and essential concepts like guilt, depravity, and immorality tend to fill the headlines of our mind. But when our anthropological framework is dominated by these kinds of categories, are we like museum patrons whose only exposure to a piece of art is after it has been damaged by fire, flood, or vandals? And would we not more accurately comprehend the heart of the artist and the value of the work by attempting to “see” the work in its original, pristine, intended condition?

The questions before us in this symposium have puzzled the greatest thinkers of every age and every culture. What does it mean to be human? Who are we? Where did we come from? What is the purpose of our existence? These are some of the fundamental questions of the human experience. And although we must always remember that the Christian Scriptures are first and foremost about God, not about us, the writers of Scripture do ponder these same questions about the nature of humanity. Occasionally the question is asked directly and overtly. The Psalmist asks God: “What are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?” (Psalm 8:4. See also Psalm 144, Job 7, Hebrews 2:6-8). Yet even when anthropological questions are not explicit in Scripture, they are woven in and around almost every chapter and every verse. The Bible is the story of God, but it is also the story of his interactions *with people* – people who are baffling and mysterious, weak and wonderful, saints and sinners. So although anthropology remains a secondary concern in the Bible (since God rightfully occupies center stage), it is a very important one nonetheless.

It is entirely appropriate and supremely important that we look at creation in our attempts to understand and explain human nature. Like overtures, opening acts, first chapters, and even sermon introductions, what an author places first sets the tone and charts the course for what follows. This is certainly true for the biblical account of creation, in which we are first introduced to the Creator God, to the cosmos He has made, and to his original intentions for that creation. “Creation, then, although certainly not the central message of Scripture, is the underlying foundation.” (Walsh and Middleton 1984, 44). When Jesus was asked by the Pharisees about divorce, his response was to appeal to God's intentions at creation (Mark 10:1-12). Jesus modeled for us the value of paying attention to the created order as a starting point for determining God's purposes. Clearly, then, the creation narrative is critical in any effort to construct a biblical portrait of the nature of humanity. It is in these beautifully crafted opening words of Scripture that we see the purest expression of the Artist's intent.

THE CROWN OF CREATION

Genesis 1 portrays God as the Creator of a universe that is unimaginably good. Six different times in the chapter, God steps back from his work, surveys what He has made, and declares it to be good (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). God is satisfied, even delighted with what He has made. Creation is “just what God ordered, no more and no less than perfection, and completely satisfying to God in every respect.” (Arnold 2009, 40). And without question, the crowning achievements in this delightful creation are the human beings God makes.

The biblical author goes to extraordinary lengths to communicate the exalted place of humanity within the created order. The various components of creation are presented in an orderly progression of splendor, almost like a parade of unspeakable beauty. And the parade reaches its clear climactic moment with the arrival of the final entrant – the two human beings. Their creation is preceded by a distinctive kind of divine speech. Rather than simply speaking the humans into existence, as He did with everything else, God prefaces their creation with a solemn “let us make...” (1:26). Commentators differ on the precise meaning of this phrase. Some have suggested that it contains hints of the Trinity. Others suggest that God is in conversation with an audience of angels. Still others (and probably a majority) view this phrase as an indication of God’s deliberation with Himself. Yet virtually all commentators agree that the use of such lofty language at this precise point is intended to show the special care and resolve with which God approaches the creation of humanity.

Further indications of the unique majesty of humanity include the three-fold use of the verb “to create” in 1:27 (it is used only two other times in all of Genesis 1), the care and detail with which the creation of the humans is described in chapter two, and the fact that they are the only component of creation to which God speaks directly. But perhaps the supreme indications of the dignified place of humanity come from these two notes from the text. First, while all of the animals were made “according to their kind” (1:24-25), the human beings are made “in the image of God.” (1:27). We will explore the meaning of this concept later in this paper, but for now it is unmistakably a stunning statement about the unique glory of the human race. And second, it is only after the creation of human beings that God’s delight in his creation is so profound and complete that He looks at his handiwork and sees that it is “very good” (1:31).

Whatever else can be said about human beings, the clear message of the creation account is that we are the crowning achievement of God’s created work. Walter Brueggemann writes: “Human persons are honored, respected, and enjoyed by the One who calls them to be. And this gives persons their inalienable identity.” (Brueggeman 1982, 31). Joel Green writes that the creation account puts “a canopy of sacred worth” over human beings. (Green 2008, xv) John Wesley wrote that humanity is “...an incorruptible picture of the God of glory; a spirit that is of infinitely more value than the sun, moon, and stars put together; yea, than the whole material creation.” (Outler 1986, 3:460). In contrast to the Gnostic view that sees matter as bad and creation as evil, the message of the biblical creation account is that all of creation is infused with the goodness of God (note also 1 Timothy 4:4-5) and that humanity is the majestic apex of that good creation. As the Psalmist said in answer to his own question about the nature of humanity, creation shows that God “crowned them with glory and honor” (Psalm 8:5).

There is a flip-side, though, to humanity’s lofty status as the crown of God’s creation – the very fact that humans are created means that by definition we are creatures. Although humans are created with special dignity and majesty, we are still fundamentally the created, not the Creator. We did not come into this world on our own. We are radically dependent upon God for both the giving and sustaining of life. Thomas Oden writes: “No creature got here by choosing to be alive. The inanimate cannot choose to be animate. The nonexistent cannot choose existence. Any creature that is sufficiently alive to be aware of life has already received creation’s most extraordinary gift – life itself.” (Oden 1987, 231).

This created and dependent nature of humanity also receives special attention in the creation accounts. The Genesis 2 account is a more detailed, up-close-and-personal telling of the story, and here we learn that humans are created “from the dust of the ground” (2:7) – thus demonstrating our continuity with the rest of the created order. The words of the curse reminded the first humans of these humble origins: “for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Genesis 3:19. See also Genesis.18:27, Psalm 103:14, etc.). John Calvin (I hope covenant members are allowed to mention his name) suggested that the phrase “image of God” communicates the dependent nature of humanity, for it shows that it is only through “participation with God” that humanity finds significance and blessing (quoted in Blocher 1984, 82). Humans are clearly in some way “like” God, but just as clearly most definitely not God. And as Bill Arnold points out, the inclusion of the Sabbath in the account of creation also suggests the dependent nature of human life: “The reader is invited to acknowledge the lordship of the Creator over time itself, and therefore to renounce one’s own autonomy by embracing God’s dominion over time and over oneself” (Arnold 2009, 50).

Humans are the centerpiece of God’s creation, but are nonetheless by definition still part of the creation. We are not autonomous. We are not sufficient unto ourselves. We are not self-made people. There is, in fact, no such thing! We are God’s creatures. We exist only because this good and gracious Creator God initiated and sustains our being. Everything we possess, everything we are, everything we ever aspire to be, even the next breath

we take – all of this we have only because of the Lord God who breathed the breath of life into Adam’s nostrils. Then and only then did “the man became a living being.” (Gen. 2:7)

F. Scott Fitzgerald famously said that the test of a first-class mind is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in your head at the same time and still be able to function. Maybe the test of a first-rate understanding of human nature is the ability to hold together both the breath-taking prominence we have as the pinnacle of God’s creation **and** the full extent of our own creatureliness. Image of God **and** dust of the earth. Glorious significance and comparative insignificance. Each one by itself is only half the story. Lose the first, and we become entrapped by the self-loathing wormy anthropology of Isaac Watts’ hymn and many camp speakers of my youth (present company excluded). Lose the second, and we become gods unto ourselves. To borrow some language from C.S. Lewis, the creation calls us to live with the realization that we are infused with “the weight of glory” and at the same time know that the God who created us so wonderfully “is in every respect immeasurably superior” to ourselves. (Lewis 1943, 111)

IMAGE OF GOD

With those foundational ideas about the created nature of humanity in place, we turn now to what is certainly the central anthropological phrase from the creation account: that human beings are created “in the image of God.” Our Creator’s intention for us is that we would in some way model or reflect His own character and activity. Without question, it is in this astonishing notion of the *imago dei* that we come very close to the heart of what it means to be distinctively human.

The commentary on the precise nature of the way in which we “image” God has covered 2500 years, two religious traditions (Jewish and Christian), innumerable commentators, widely varied opinions, and seemingly endless debate. It is far beyond the scope of this paper and the skills of this writer to unpack the nuances of that ongoing conversation. However, I do believe that Richard Middleton has helpfully summarized the debate by identifying three primary ways in which the meaning of image has been understood (Middleton 2005, 17-29).

The first interpretation (and perhaps the most common) focuses on the ways in which human beings are ontologically “like” God. Middleton calls it the “analogy of being” and it has to do with such qualities as reason, volition, self-awareness, creativity, and personality. In this school of interpretation, it is in these aspects of our identity that we are distinct from the rest of creation and uniquely similar to our Creator.

A second school of thought views the image of God as primarily a relational reality. That is, our likeness to God is captured in the fact that we can relate to Him and to one another. As God lives in community within his own being, so we as humans are invited to live in community with Him and with our fellow humans. The call and opportunity of the *imago dei* is to reflect God who exists not as a solitary, isolated being, but as an intensely relational being – both within the Godhead and with his creation.

The third primary way of interpreting the image of God is the “functional” or “missional” view, which sees image as a reflection and extension of God’s rule. God is introduced in Genesis 1 as the ultimate Ruler over all creation, but immediately after making humans in his own image He assigns to them the task of exercising rulership and dominion over creation (1:26-28). This delegated authority distinguishes humanity from other living beings and gives humans the sacred vocation of representing (or “imaging”) God’s rule and reign in the way they exercise dominion in the world. God entrusts the care of his creation to the humans He creates. In a deeply-flawed metaphor that would only come from the parent of teenagers, God creates the car and then almost instantaneously gives his children the keys. And He invites his children to be like Him in the way they mediate His wise, loving rule in the world. In the words of the Psalmist: “You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet.” (Psalm 8:6).

So which is it? What is the central meaning of the *imago dei*? Entire books have been written which argue for one viewpoint or another. Middleton argues rather convincingly for option number three. But perhaps since I am at my core a pastor – and therefore someone who likes to please everybody – I tend to side with those commentators who suggest that we do not need to choose among these different models. Rather, we can understand the image of God as a holistic concept that captures all of these different facets of what it means to be human. Moltmann writes: “what makes the human being God’s image is not his possession of any particular characteristic or other ... it is *his whole existence*” (Moltmann 1985, 221, italics his). Berkouwer follows suit: “The image of God shines forth in his children in the analogy of their whole life with the life of God” (Berkouwer 1962, 115). Maybe the image of God is, as the title of a yet-to-be-published book by Verna Harrison suggests, a “many-splendored” thing. Maybe the image of God is most fully evident in our lives when we gratefully and humbly use the unique capacities and qualities we have been given (the ontological facet of image) in order to live in vital union with God and one another (the relational facet of image) so that we may steward our dominion in the world in a way that is consistent with the intentions and character of our Creator (the functional facet of image). The image of God

thus becomes not merely a theological category for our analysis and admiration; rather, it becomes a statement of vocation for the way in which we are called to shape our lives and our world.

Three “postscripts” about the image of God, each of which deserves its own paper, if not its own symposium. First, as pointed out by Walter Brueggemann, it is interesting to think about the image of God in humanity in relation to the repeated biblical prohibition against making or using other images of God. He writes: “There is one way in which God is imaged in the world and only one: humanness!” (Brueggemann 1982, 32). God has decided for himself how He will place his image in the world, and it is through people He has created with the stamp of his own identity and to whom He has assigned the task of faithfully incarnating his rule in the world.

Second, whatever we say about the meaning and implications of being created in the image of God, we must remember that in Jesus Christ we see the image of God in perfection. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, Paul refers to “the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” In Colossians 1:15, Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” and in Hebrews 1:3 “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being.” As the expression *par excellence* of the image of God, Jesus is the best way for us to understand both the image of God and God’s intentions for his image-bearers. This perspective prompts a Reformed theologian to say the following: “If it is true that Christ perfectly images God, then the heart of the image of God must be love. For no man ever loved as Christ loved.” (Hoekema 1986, 22) Apparently Wesley would concur: “love is the very image of God: it is the brightness of his glory” (quoted in Collins 2007, 52).

And third, without (I hope) stealing any thunder from the next paper, an important dimension of New Testament soteriology is the recovery of the image of God in humanity. For example, Paul instructs the Colossians that they have “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (Colossians 1:10. See also Romans 8:29, Ephesians 4:24, and 2 Corinthians 3:18). Paul views salvation as God’s loving restoration to humanity of the image of God – the renewal of all that God intended and desired for his creation. Wesley picked up on this theme and made it a central feature of his conception of Christian perfection. He writes to his father: “By holiness I mean, not fasting, or bodily austerity, or any other external means of improvement, but that inward temper to which all these are subservient, a renewal of soul in the image of God” (Baker 1980, 25: 399). And in his sermon on the new birth, he states: “gospel holiness is no less than the image of God stamped upon the heart” (Outler 1986, 2:194). The image of God thus becomes a fruitful concept for not only thinking about God’s work in creation, but also his ongoing work of spiritual formation (or re-creation) in each of our lives and in our lives together.

LIBERTY AND LIMITS

Once the image-bearers are created, God gives them what is almost certainly the riskiest gift of all – freedom. Rather than overpowering and controlling them, the Creator gives them space so that they can enjoy autonomy, make decisions, and exercise rule. God’s first words of blessing to his creatures included the instructions to “be fruitful...fill the earth...subdue it...rule over.” Right out of the gate, humans are given the opportunity for genuine responsibility and authority in God’s good creation. In chapter two, God gives Adam the freedom to explore and enjoy the garden – “you are free to eat from any tree in the garden” (2:16). Next God gives the human the freedom to name the animals – “whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name” (2:19). In Scripture, to name something is to assert sovereignty (Numbers. 32:38, 2 Kings 23:34, etc.), and so God is giving to his creature the remarkable dignity of having a share in God’s rule. There is no oppressive micromanaging here. And as we know from chapter three, God gives to his creatures the freedom even to misuse the very freedom He has entrusted to them.

Brueggemann writes: “The grace of God is that the creature whom he has *caused* to be, he now *lets* be” (Brueggemann 1982, 28). The humans God creates are not puppets or pre-programmed robots. The world God creates is not a Stepford world in which the creatures unceasingly and mindlessly obey. The script of their lives is not downloaded from on high. Those God stamps with his image, He also invests with his freedom. And this freedom “...is the very purpose for which humanity has been created: humanity possesses this freedom in order that it may respond to God, in such a way that through this response God may glorify Himself, and give Himself to His creature” (Emil Bruner, quoted in McGrath 1995, 443).

However, just as our status as the crown of creation must be enjoyed from a framework that also remembers we are merely dust, so the gift of our liberty is clearly intended by God to be enjoyed within the limits He wisely and sovereignly establishes. The freedom of 2:16 “you are free to eat from any tree in the garden” is immediately followed by the limitation of 2:17 “but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” The human creatures are graciously given dignity and liberty, but they remain creatures and therefore fulfill their own destiny only when they utilize their freedom to live in submission to the will and purposes of their Creator.

For today, I'd like to pass on all the debate about the specifics of the tree of knowledge – whether or not it was a literal tree, what qualities of the tree made it off-limits, what kind of knowledge it would impart, whether the fruit was an apple or an orange or a kiwi (my son bet me an ice cream I couldn't get the word "kiwi" into this paper). In fact, I side with commentators who suggest that all of these kinds of specifics matter little or not at all to our understanding of the text. It could have been any kind of tree. In fact, as Schaeffer suggests, it could have been a stream the humans were not to cross or a mountain they were not to climb (Schaeffer 1972, 70). The theological significance of the prohibition is that God as Creator is well within his rights to establish expectations and commands, and the anthropological corollary is that humans are intended and expected to obey. Humans are not fully autonomous. Humans do not have unlimited freedom. Humans do not make the rules. Humans are creatures who find joy and fulfillment only when they live in God's creation on God's terms. Our freedom is to be tempered by the realization that we are people "to whom God has laid claim" (Bultmann 1951, 228).

THE RELATIONAL FRAMEWORK

The coupling of freedom and limitation in 2:16-17 is followed by the one time in the creation account in which God sees something that is "not good" (2:18). Coming on the heels of the repeated chapter one refrain "and God saw that it was good" which comes to a crescendo in God's joyful declaration that all He has made is "very good," this is a jarring moment. God sees something in his spectacularly beautiful creation which troubles him – and what God sees is the fact that Adam is alone. There is no one else in creation with whom Adam can fully relate. All the animals are brought to Adam and although He is able to name them, he is not able to find one that is a "suitable helper" (2:20). Not one of them will do. And so in a response of astonishing creativity, God fashions for him "woman," one who shares the image of God, one whose likeness to Adam prompts him to cry out: "this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (2:23). This beautiful account highlights the intensely relational nature of the creation story. The first human beings are embedded in a "relational nexus" (Green 2008, 9) that is central to the development of a creational anthropology.

Of course, the centerpiece of this relational nexus is the relationship between God and humanity. The story of creation is fundamentally the story of the relationship between the Creator and those He created in his own image. Human life has meaning, then, only as it is lived out in relationship with the One who is the Giver of that life. In a sermon describing the various endowments given to humankind at creation, John Wesley said: "Above all he was a creature capable of God, capable of knowing, loving and obeying his Creator. And in fact he did know God, did unfeignedly love and uniformly obey him. This was the supreme perfection of man...." (Outler 1985, 2: 439). Knowing, loving, and obeying the God who made us continues to be our supreme calling and the indispensable foundation of our existence.

The second dimension of this relational nexus is the community we are made to nourish with one another. The Creator God does not live in isolation in his own being, and so humans cannot faithfully image Him in the world by living in isolation from one another. A solitary life is "not good" (2:18). The human experience is intended to be a shared experience. The human calling is one that attains its true fulfillment only in meaningful community with other image bearers.

Two specific (and somewhat controversial) aspects of human relationships come to the fore in any honest exploration of the creation account. The first has to do with the relationship between man and woman. While I understand that Christians who honor Christ and revere the Bible as much or more as I do have come to different conclusions, I am of the opinion that the creation account speaks strongly and unmistakably against any view of women that devalues, diminishes, or subordinates them in any way. We don't have time for a full exploration, but the most salient points from that exploration would include the following:

- Both men and women share equally in the image of God and neither is able to fully represent that image alone (1:27). Further, from their close juxtaposition in the text, we know that being made male and female is somehow at the very heart of what it means to be made in the image of God.
- The man and woman *jointly* receive God's blessing and *together* are given the mandate to extend His rule in the world (1:28-30).
- The "helper" which Eve is created to be (2:20) does not in any way imply inferiority or subordination. The idea here is not that Adam was going to be busy doing real important things in the world and so needed someone who would make him coffee and do the laundry. The gopher had already been created. To the contrary, when the word "helper" is used in the Old Testament, the Person to whom it most frequently refers is God! (e.g. Psalm 33:20).
- The account of the creation of the woman (2:21-25) is positioned by the biblical author as the climax of the story and is a moving picture of complementarity and mutuality ("bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh"). There is no organizational chart in this picture: only likeness, unity, intimacy, and love.

- The infamous “he will rule over you” phrase of 3:16 is clearly from the context not part of the Creator’s original design. The desire for power, control, and rule in relationships is instead one more expression of the sin and distortion that came as a part of the curse.

Especially when all of this is placed against the backdrop of the strongly patriarchal structure of the Ancient Near East, the biblical witness from creation is stunning: men and women stand in a relationship of equality and dignity before one another and the God who made them. Any kind of patriarchal or sexist understanding of the relationship between men and women (in marriage, the church, the workplace, etc.) finds no warrant in an anthropology rooted in creation.

The other controversial relational issue which I believe can be addressed helpfully by the creation account is homosexuality. Rather than focusing on a few isolated proof texts, many of which do contain exegetical ambiguities, I believe the most constructive way to discern God’s intention for our sexuality is to look to the creation account. Here we learn that man and woman together reflect the image of God, that man and woman are made for one another, that man and women receive the command to be fruitful and multiply, and that the beauty of a “one flesh” sexual relationship is designed to be enjoyed between a man and a woman. God’s ordained plan for our sexuality is revealed in the way He made us. Much more can and must be said about this important issue and its numerous implications for our Church, but I will (with deep gratitude to whoever assigned the topics) leave that to a later presenter.

These first two dimensions of the relational nexus of creation (humanity’s relationship with God and with one another) of course align beautifully with Jesus’ words about the two non-negotiable priorities of the Christian life: to love God and to love one another. (Matthew 22:37-39). The New Testament tells us, in fact, that a person who does not love fellow human beings does not actually love God (I John 4:20). This recurring biblical theme flows right out of the creation account which shines the spotlight so brightly on the first humans’ relationships with God and one another. Creational anthropology is a relational anthropology. The nature of our existence as humans is inextricably bound up in and defined by the quality and integrity of these foundational relationships.

Our love for God and one another expresses itself in our care for the third dimension of the relational nexus: our care for the world God has made. As we saw in the creation mandate of 1:28, one of the ways in which humans image God on earth is by exercising appropriate rulership and dominion in the world He has entrusted to our care. The world is not ours to do with as we please; we act on God’s behalf and in a way that reflects his wise, loving rule. We share in and extend *His* mission. But the mandate is unmistakable from the creation account – God’s image-bearers are graciously called by Him to enhance, nurture, develop, cultivate, and even transform the world into which He has placed them. “We are called to participate in the ongoing creational work of God, to be God’s helper in executing to the end the blueprint for his masterpiece.” (Wolters 1986, 38)

At minimum, this task of dominion, this call to be agents of God’s reign in the world, will include care for the creation itself. A passionate concern for the preservation and faithful stewardship of our environment does not have to be rooted in political correctness, pantheism, or any other aspect of the spirit of the age. For biblical Christians, it can and must be rooted in the creation realities that this world is made and delighted in by God and that our sacred task as bearers of His image includes caring for that which He so deeply values. I applaud our denomination for including a statement on creation care in our position statements, and refer you to that statement for further exploration of this theme.

But beyond care for the creation itself, our care for the world involves the broader mandate to extend the influence of the One whose image we bear into every dimension of his creation. Our vocation as humans is to share in our Creator’s work by representing Him on earth, by mediating his Presence to his world. We are to be culture-makers (Crouch’s phrase) who steward the life and unique capacities we have been graciously given by reflecting and extending the glory of the One who breathed life into us and made us in his own image. “God has entrusted the garden to the human, as his sole representative on earth, to develop it and guard it as humanity’s home; a place where humans will have all their needs satisfied, and will live in freedom with each other and with God.” (Arnold 2009, 59) Our calling is not just to get to heaven when we die. Our sacred task is to be involved in the development and transformation of the entire created order into a place that fulfills God’s loving creational intent. In fact, “the creation waits in eager expectation” for this (Romans 8:19). While this hope is one that will be fully realized only in the eschaton, our vocation is to faithfully represent God’s rule by living, working, relating, worshipping and praying in such a way that God’s (now) broken, sin-stained creation more and more fully reflects his design – so that increasingly God’s kingdom comes and his will is done on earth, just as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

PLAYING BY A DIFFERENT SET OF RULES

My wife and I have four kids, and for each one of them, we have a memory book in which we write down funny or interesting or touching things that happen in each of their lives. I wrote this when my daughter Rebekah

(now seventeen) was five: “Dear Rebekah, Today you asked me if I would teach you how to play chess. I happily agreed since I figured chess would be a good way for you to begin learning skills like critical thinking and problem solving -- and because there aren’t many people I can beat at chess and I figured this might be a game I could win. I explained how the pieces are arranged on the board, how each piece moves, how the object of the game is to capture the other king, and then we began to play. A couple moves into the game I put one of my pieces in a position where it could be captured by one of your pawns – and I showed that to you and encouraged you to take my piece. But you informed me that your pawn couldn’t take my piece, and when I asked why, you said: “because he’s a friendly pawn and he doesn’t like to hurt other people.”

A couple moves later, I put one of my pieces in a position where your knight could capture it – and again, showed it to you. This time you happily moved your knight to where my piece was – but as you did you moved your bishop right along with the knight, and put them both on the space together. When I explained that you can only move one piece at a time in chess, you responded that the two pieces loved each other and were holding hands. They had to stay together. How could I argue with this? A couple moves later I wanted to teach you about putting the king into check, so I moved one of my pieces to a place where it was threatening your king. When I showed that to you, your response was to move your king right off the board – over to the edge of the dining room table. And when I said Rebekah, you need to keep your pieces on the board”, she said “but daddy, his home is over here and this is where he’s safe.” And I knew I wasn’t even going to be able to beat my five year old daughter, because you play the game by a different set of rules.

There is a way we sin-stained humans tend to “play the game” in our world, and it has to do largely with winning, acquiring, and self-interest. We pile up more and more of whatever it is we think will make us feel happy, successful, and significant. We try to extend our power on the board. And what that creates is the world we see on the news every night – a world increasingly filled with self-centeredness, injustice, oppression and brokenness, a world increasingly stained by the effects of the fall. But the call of our Creator and the summons of the way we are created is to play the game by a different set of values:

- where we understand our own infinite worth as those who are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalm 139:14) and yet live with the profound humility of creatures who are made from the dust
- where we use the capacities that are intrinsic to being made in God’s image in order to live in flourishing relationships of love with God and one another and to exercise caring dominion of God’s creation
- where we use the freedom God graces us with in a way that is joyfully submissive to His prerogatives as King
- and where we seek the transformation of our own lives and all of creation so that our Creator’s intentions may be fulfilled, His glory known, and His rule extended.

It is in these creational realities that we find our true humanity, become equipped to be God’s people in the world, and learn to live with the confident assurance of the prophet: “Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain O Israel, ‘My way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God?’ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, **the Creator of the ends of the earth.**” (Isaiah 40:27-28).

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