

## BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HUMANNESS

When we turn from recent advances in biology and medical technology to the Bible, we are of course immediately struck by the gulf between the biblical world and our own. The world of the Bible is pre-scientific, technologically primitive, predominantly rural, and dominated by the realities of an agricultural existence. It is a world in which no-one questioned that unseen and powerful spiritual forces controlled all aspects of human life, from the weather to the mysteries of human reproduction and infertility. How can the Bible possibly have anything relevant to say to the complexities of bioethics in our radically different society?

Historic trinitarian Christianity can retain its authenticity only if it seeks to remain faithful to the biblical revelation. We are not at liberty to conclude that the Bible has little or nothing to say of relevance to contemporary ethical debates. Nor though are we free to manipulate or distort the biblical message to make it more acceptable to modern ears and prejudices. We must learn to apply with integrity the unchanging principles of the Bible to the world we live in. We cannot minimise the difficulty of the task we face. There is no hope of finding simplistic proof texts which will genuinely apply to the dilemmas of embryo research, technological enhancement or the persistent vegetative state. God has not given us a dictionary of quotations. Instead he has given us a comprehensive revelation which covers the sweep of world history.

A very useful way of approaching this is to use the four-fold scheme of biblical history used by a number of theologians over the centuries and used by John Stott in his *Issues Facing Christians Today* (1984). The Bible divides human history into 4 epochs: Creation, Fall, Redemption and Future Consummation. A number of commentators have noted that many modern evangelical Christians frequently concentrate on the middle two perspective to the exclusion of the first and the last.

### CREATION

#### The seven days of creation

The first chapter of Genesis is not just a list of God's creative activities, but a skilful literary composition. In days one to three we have the creation of the sky, the waters and the land, and in days four to six we have the corresponding inhabitants: heavenly bodies, sea creatures and land dwellers. The careful structure of Genesis 1 allows the author to express his theological purpose. The narrative has two peaks: humankind and the Sabbath. The creation of human beings crowns the work, but the Sabbath is the supreme goal. The existence of the Sabbath keeps human beings from total absorption in the task of subduing the earth. It reminds them that they will fulfil their humanity, not finally in the work of

transforming the earth, but in the delight and recreation of relationship with God himself. At the centre of the biblical worldview is the concept of God as designer. God is the one who imposes order, meaning and purpose on the whole creation.

### **The image of God**

Human beings are unique in all the vast array of creation because they alone of all creatures are made in God's image. Human beings are God-like beings. We reflect God's reality back to himself in worship and communion, and we reflect God's reality to the rest of creation in stewardship. God has chosen no other image bearer, animate or inanimate on planet earth. It is human beings who are called to rule over the rest of creation in the place of God, as his authorized representatives. Sadly, this concept has been frequently abused to imply that humans have the right to dominate and misuse the rest of creation as we wish. The biblical narrative reveals God's rule as one of ordering, life generating, life preserving servanthood and as a celebration of his kingdom. These then should be the characteristics of human rule over the physical creation.

### **God's image implies dependence**

Human beings are not self-explanatory. We derive our meaning from outside ourselves from God in whose image we are made. We are not autonomous individuals, constantly creating ourselves by the decisions and choices we make. No: we are images, we are reflections of another reality. The dignity of our humanity is derivative: it comes from him whose image we bear. As Henri Blocher says 'being made in God's image stresses the radical nature of our dependence'. The theologian Helmut Thielicke expressed it like this:

'The divine likeness rests on the fact that God remembers us.... The divine image is like a mirror reflecting God's glory. Like a mirror, it goes dark if the source of light is withdrawn. In Thielicke's words, 'It possesses only borrowed light'. We can surely see that such a view clashes with some of the key assumptions of our culture. There are those who argue that value cannot be poured into a life from the outside, it must be generated by the person who life it is – really? The biblical worldview claims that the dignity of our humanity comes precisely from outside ourselves: it comes from God whose image we bear. Within the story of my life, I have a degree of independence, the dignity of genuine choice, the relative freedom of a creature. But it is not simply my life to do with as I please. The ultimate meaning of my life can be found only within the Godhead. For a society penetrated by liberal individualism like ours this concept is peculiar, nonsensical, even outrageous. Yet the biblical revelation stresses our creaturely dependence. See Job 10:8-12, Job 34:14-15. We have to recognise that current secular views of autonomy are a modern fantasy. They are out of touch with reality, with the way we and the rest of the universe is made.

## **God's image implies the dignity of each human life**

In biblical thought, as each human life has a unique dignity because of the divine image, therefore each life has an incalculable value. It is not possible therefore to calculate the value of a human life in material terms, and it is not possible to compare the ultimate value of one human life with another. Each individual is in in the literal words of the eight Psalm, 'lacking a very little of God' (Psalm 8 v 5). Each human being is a unique masterpiece of God's creation. It is though an economist asked, 'How much is the Mona Lisa worth and is it worth more or less than the roof of the Sistine Chapel?' There can be no answer because the value of a supreme masterpiece is incalculable. In place of the Lego – kit view of humanity then, we have what some writers call the flawed masterpiece view.

For writers such as Peter Singer and Ronald Dworkin, the dignity of personhood depends on your function: on what you can do, on whether you can choose and exercise autonomy. If your level of cortical functioning is critically reduced, because of Alzheimer's or just because you happen to be a foetus, then you have less worth. But in Christian thought, the dignity of a human being resides, not in what you can do, but in what you are, by creation.

## **Responding to God's image in others**

How then should we treat human beings?

### *Wonder*

Of all the marvels of creation, it is the existence of human beings which should evoke the greatest awe.

### *Respect*

Respect for the mysterious immutable dignity of the image of God. Respect for others is one of the hallmarks of authentic Christian compassion. To abuse, manipulate or illtreat a fellow human being is to show contempt for God. It is to spit in the face of the Creator, to treat the divine image with contempt.

### *Empathy*

To enter into the experience of the other, to share the pain and the joy. Because we are all the same in the stuff of our humanity, we are able to enter into the other's experience.

### *Protection*

Finally, because each human life carries God's image, each life is sacrosanct. In the view of some ethicists stronger persons can use brain damaged non- persons for their own ends. For instance, we can take the organs from PVS sufferers of malformed babies and transplant them into someone who is worth more. The strong can make use of the weak. Christian thinking turns this on its head. The weak are worthy of special protection precisely because they are vulnerable, and the strong have a duty to protect the weak.

## **Fall**

At the heart of the account of the fall in Genesis 3 is a rejection by human beings of the creation order that was instituted for their enjoyment and well-being. Adam and Eve struck a blow for moral autonomy independent of God and his law. Although God's image is defaced, the biblical revelation makes it plain that it is not destroyed (Genesis 9: 6; James 3:9) Human beings are still Godlike beings but our humanity is fatally contaminated and distorted by evil. In Pascal's words, 'Man is the glory and the shame of the universe'. Although the universe is fractured and broken, a crucial part of biblical understanding is that the universe still displays the moral order, the hidden grain. Its brokenness is that of order and not chaos. The terrible three-fold curse which God pronounces after the fall brings home the reality of the human condition contaminated by evil.

## **Death and Decay**

As God had warned them, the disobedience of Adam and Eve led directly to the entrance of death into the world... 'for when you eat of it you will surely die'. In biblical thought, the death of human beings, in all its horror and mystery is not natural. The deep intuition which most of us share, that physical death (especially the death of a child or young person) is an outrage, an alien interruption into the nature of being, reflects the original creation order. Similarly, the inexpressible longing we have for eternity, for stability, for freedom from decay, reflects our created nature. It seems futile to speculate on what would have happened if human beings had not disobeyed. CS Lewis once pointed out how strange it is that human beings are constantly surprised by the passage of time, despite the fact that we spend the whole of our lives within time: 'It is strange as if a fish were repeatedly surprised by the wetness of water. And that would be strange indeed; unless of course the fish was destined to become, one day, a land animal.'

The inevitable accompaniment of death is fear. The blessing of human life is transformed into a slavery of fear, especially fear of death. The terrible, all pervading fear of death drives human beings to extraordinary lengths. The last decade has seen the rapid development of scientific research dedicated to the extension of human life to 150 years and more. There is a better answer to the fear of death. As the writer to the Hebrews states, Christ came to 'free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death' (Hebrews 2: 15)

In God's providence, death may be a merciful release from an existence trapped in a fallen and decaying body. Christian attitudes to death should reflect a curious ambivalence. We need to retain, a sense of outrage at its alien destructive character; and secondly, an acceptance that the end of physical life may be evidence of God's grace, a 'severe mercy' to use a phrase from CS Lewis, and finally a sense of future hope in the knowledge that ultimately death will be destroyed.

## **Futility**

The entrance of death into human life condemns our physical existence to an awful futility. Humans are condemned to return to the ground from which they were taken: 'Dust you are and to dust you will return' (Genesis 3:19). So, the dust of the ground, which is both the origin of our human bodies and the source of their food becomes a symbol of their eventual decay and death. The futility and grief of physical ageing, its progressive decay and biological malfunction are also graphically illustrated by the preacher at the end of (Ecclesiastes 12:1-8). The biblical revelation is unsparing in its bleak depiction of the cycle of human life from an earthly perspective. We have come a long way from the creation blessings of Genesis: 1-2.

## **Suffering**

Like death, in biblical thought, suffering is not an entirely negative phenomenon. To the secular mind, suffering is a futile, bewildering and purposeless reality. It is the destroyer of autonomy – an evil to be feared at all costs. The book of Job has a great deal to teach us about human suffering. It is particularly relevant in an age which has lost a belief in any positive aspect of suffering. Christians too have been affected by this secular disease. If Genesis 3 represents the entry of death into creation, the book of Job represents the entry of suffering. Job loses everything. For thirty long chapters of theological argument Job protests his outrage at God's apparently capricious dealings, while his so-called friends try to persuade him that the root of his suffering is some hidden sin in his life. Eventually God's prolonged silence is ended. He answers Job 'out of the whirlwind'. He does not however provide him with any answers for his suffering. Instead he points to his own creative freedom and concern for all creation. The world expresses the freedom and delight of God. In place of the human-centred perspective of Job and his comforters, God gives glimpses of a radically different viewpoint. The cosmos does not exist merely for human beings, and the meaning of human suffering cannot be fathomed within a limited, anthropocentric worldview. The mystery of God's purposes is never fully revealed. When confronted by suffering, like Job's friends we frequently have an overwhelming and very human desire to provide neat explanations. "This happened because of that.... God is teaching you to..." Instead, we should learn from the book of Job. There can be no human explanations for the mystery of suffering- only the presence of a loving, suffering and redeeming God.

## **Redemption**

Even as God pronounces the terrible curses in the Garden, the first glimmering of the gospel hope of redemption is seen. God promises that the offspring of the woman will crush the serpent's head. (Genesis 3: 15). Later God enters into a solemn covenant with Abraham, promising to bless him and through his children, ultimately bless all the nations of the earth (Genesis 12: 2-3). The giving of the law at Mount Sinai symbolises the justice and mercy which lie at the heart of God's gracious covenant with his people. The Old Testament laws are not the arbitrary commands of a primitive desert god. They are the Maker's instructions, endorsing and protecting the hidden moral order. They reinforce the equality of all human beings before God, and uphold the sanctity of all human life.

## **Defending the defenceless**

A beautiful expression of God's grace and mercy is found in the Deuteronomic law. In Deuteronomy 10, the mighty Yahweh is revealed as the defender of the defenceless. 'For the Lord your God is god of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt'. A particular responsibility was laid on rulers to create social structures that protected the weak. Jeremiah referred to the righteous reign of King Josiah: "He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me?" Declares the Lord (Jeremiah 22:16) Strikingly, the personal knowledge of God, the heart of the biblical covenant, is defined, not as a mystical religious experience, but rather in practical concern for the defenceless in society. Who are the modern counterparts to the widow, orphan and alien? The foetus, the new-born infant, the disabled child, the brain damaged adult, the elderly sufferer with Alzheimer's disease, and the psychiatric patient- we do not need to look far to find them.

## **Christ, the Word made flesh**

In Christ, God affirms and fulfils the original creation. When God breaks into human history to bring redemption to his fallen people, does he overturn the created order he has previously established to introduce a completely new kind of reality? No. God reveals himself as a human being, a Mark 1, original human model. Christians treat the human body with special respect. Why? Because this strange collection of 35,000 genes, 10 billion nerve cells, several miles of wiring, eight metres of intestinal plumbing, five litres of blood- this is the form in which God became flesh! In the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, the created order is both re-established and fulfilled. Before the resurrection it might have been possible for someone to wonder whether creation itself was a lost cause.

But when Christ is born and raised as a physical human being, God proclaims his vote of confidence in the created order. Jesus shares in the stuff of creation. His body like ours, is made from dust from physical atoms. The Gospel writers go out of their way to stress Christ's full humanity. And in the resurrection of Christ, the physical creation is not overturned but subsumed or caught up into a greater and richer reality. In Jesus, the Second Adam, we see both a perfect human being (what the original Adam was meant to be) and the pioneer, the blueprint for a new type of human being, the one in whose likeness a new creation will spring, the first fruits of those who are to come.

(1 Corinthians 15: 20)

Our humanity is not something which comes between us and God. No, it is the means by which God is made known. "Destroy this temple (said Jesus) and in three days I will raise it again in three days" ... But the temple he spoke of was the temple of his body. (John 2:19-21) Here is a new and exalted view of the human body – a temple. If Christ's body was a temple, then I must treat all bodies with a new reverence. Furthermore, Jesus comes, not as a sovereign King as Caesar or Herod, the symbol of human power and authority. He comes as a pathetic, vulnerable and totally defenceless new-born baby. God makes himself a baby who can do nothing for himself. Jesus starts his life totally dependent on the love and care of others. And how does his earthy life come to an end? With arms and legs stretched out and from his parched lips the words "I am thirsty...."

If we take this scandalous teaching seriously, then it has radical implications. We can no longer view the state of dependence as dehumanising. As Gilbert Meilander puts it 'Jesus has been with us in the darkness of the womb as he will be with us in the darkness of the tomb.'

**In Christ, we see a new way to love, the way of self-giving.**

Jesus was not just a preacher, a teller of parables. He entered into the experience of pain, suffering, loneliness, emptiness and despair. Together the incarnation and the cross are the ultimate expression of empathy. He experienced humanity from the inside. He showed the paradoxical nature of God's love. God's love is love that gives; it is self-sacrificial, costly love. As Jesus entered into the mystery of human suffering, he gave us a model of how we care for others who are suffering. In the words of an anonymous writer, 'Suffering is not a question that demands an answer; it is not a problem that demands a solution; it is a mystery which demands a presence'.

If we want to care for people as Jesus cared for people, we have to give ourselves, we have to pay a price.

## **Consummation**

Christian caring does not stop at the agony of the cross. It is shot through with hope, expectation and longing for the future. The resurrection of Christ points towards the future of humanity. And the future is not some disembodied, immaterial, and purely 'spiritual existence'. The Gospel writers go to great lengths to emphasise the physical reality of Christ's restored body and its continuity with his old physical body. The Gospel narratives are all adamant that the tomb was empty. The risen Jesus eats and drinks. He breaks bread. He talks. He is touched. In one sense the resurrection looks back to Jesus' life on earth. But in the same resurrection we also see that the physical man has been subsumed, transformed by God's power. His body is not part of a new reality- a future reality which somehow penetrated backwards into our space-time. Our humanity is both vindicated and transformed. In God's mysterious purpose, this is what human beings were always intended to become. As Paul writes: 'Just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so we shall bear the likeness of the man from heaven'. (1 Corinthians 15: 49). Not only that but it seems that the transformation of our physical bodies is a central element in the transformation of the entire physical universe. The second person of the Trinity enters into our space-time universe and takes on physical form. His body is composed of dust-carbon, phosphorus, DNA. And then by the working of God's resurrection power, those particular carbon atoms are somehow transformed into a new kind of physical reality, the resurrection body of Christ. See Romans 8: 19-21.

What relevance does that have to the practical medical dilemmas we face?

### **We can make sense of the present only in the light of the future**

When the apostle Paul talks about the resurrection of the body, he uses the dramatic image of the seed and the flower. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory, it is sown in weakness it is raised in power, it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.' The image maybe familiar and we easily lose its power. But if we had never seen a tiny brown seed transform into a spectacular flower, we would never believe it was possible. Yet the transformation is a commonplace of the natural creation. And modern molecular biology has revealed the power of that image. In the tiny and pathetic brown husk is packed all the DNA all the information, that is required to make the miraculous flower. The two entities which seem so dissimilar share a hidden identity. The seed is becoming what it already is. And that says Paul is a picture of what is happening to our bodies. See Isaiah 65:18-20 and Revelation 21:3-4.