



What Is It To Be Human?

Saturday 13th December 2025

Teaching by Tom O'Toole

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Thinking Theologically About Being Human

What are human beings that you are mindful of them? **(Psalm 8:4)**

“Almost all of the liveliest conversations we’re having in society, in theology, and in the church revolve around differences about what it means to be human and how we flourish as human persons.”

(Marc Cortez)

Two Reasons the Doctrine of Humanity is THE
Doctrine of Our Day:

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Being Human Quotations – Which Ones Catch Your Eye?

Everybody fails; it's no big deal. It's what being human is.

Katty Kay

Being a human being is difficult. It involves a lot of mourning, a lot of grief, a lot of confusion, a lot of happiness.

Louise Erdich

What is it to be human? It means we are always unfinished.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet.

Agent Smith from The Matrix

I think being human is being perfectly imperfect.

Michelle Obama

The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection.

George Orwell

The human race is a very, very magical race. We could accomplish anything if we just put our minds to it.

Walt Disney

Man is the only animal that blushes – or needs to.

Mark Twain

I'm as human as anyone. I love. I get scared. I wake up every morning and despite not knowing what to do, I put one foot in front of the other and I try to make the best choices I can. I screw up all the time, but that is being human, and that's my greatest strength.

Superman

Humans ... They think they own everything.

Anchor from Finding Nemo

Being human is being a lot of things at the same time.

Matthias Schoenaerts

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Created In God's Image

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them. **(Genesis 1:27)**

For any view of what the image of God means, the question to ask is
'who does this leave on the outside?'

What is the image of God?	Strengths/weaknesses of this option?
Rational view Capacity for higher thought	
Ethical view Ability to make moral choices	
Spiritual view Made for relationship with God	
Social view Able to have relationships generally	
Vocational view Given a role to represent God in the world	

Genesis 5:3 – *When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.*

Colossians 1:15 – *The Son is the image of the invisible God.*

Genesis 2:7 – *Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*

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Ethical Implications of Humanity In God's Image

Source of Human Rights

[UN Declaration of Human Rights]

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.

Amen. But why?

[Justine Toh]

The claim that all human beings have rights, regardless of birth, status, or creed, didn't pop out of nowhere during the 18th-century Enlightenment. Its roots are biblical, and it was Christian thinkers from Basil onwards that shaped the Western concept of "human rights".

The Fight Against Slavery

[Gregory of Nyssa]

How many obols [coins] did you reckon the equivalent of the likeness of God?... Whenever a human being is for sale, therefore, nothing less than the owner of the earth is led into the sale-room.

[Frederick Douglass]

The slave is a man, "the image of God,"... The first work of slavery is to mar and deface those characteristics of its victims which distinguish men from things, and persons from property... It reduces man to a mere machine. It cuts him off from his Maker.

What About Today?

- *Reports of elderly people 'ignored and treated as objects in care system.'*
- *Push for assisted dying.*
- *In conversations around abortion there can be reluctance to recognise human rights and dignity for the child in the womb – and even avoidance of language of person/child/baby etc.*
- *Dehumanising rhetoric around immigration.*
- *What else?*

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Physical and Embodied

Then the LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. **(Genesis 2:7)**

Two Parts of a Human

Physical

- Dust of the ground
- Body
- Similar to animals

Spiritual

- Breath of God
- Spirit/soul
- Similar to angels

It is a mistake to limit humanity to one or the other of these things.

One of the earliest heresies Christians had to deal with was Gnosticism.

It is a complicated set of ideas, but at the heart of it is the idea that the spiritual is good, but the physical is bad.



A modern parallel to this might be found in the way we can have digital identities that are totally disconnected from our physical existence.

There can be a 'me' with a name/avatar etc. forming relationships with people I have never physically met.

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Christians and the Body - Some Applications

Digital

Not shunning technology, but approaching it with discernment that recognises both the opportunities and the dangers.

Lifestyle

Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, and we should refrain from things like sexual immorality (see 1 Cor 6:19-20).

Worship

Worship involves both the spiritual and the physical. It includes bowing, clapping, shouting, lifting hands, dancing and prostration.

Sacraments

God has given very physical means of grace in baptism and communion.

Care For The Body

Sometimes 'spiritual' problems are actually physical (e.g. 1 Kings 19). Caring for the body matters.

Romans 12:1 - Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.

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Made Male and Female

...male and female he created them. **(Gen. 1:27)**

In Genesis 2, the idea of humans created male and female is developed. It is not good for the man to be alone (and this is the first 'not good' in the Bible), so the woman is made as his 'ezer kenegdo'. Ezer literally mean a partner or ally, and kenegdo is 'one who is like-opposite him', getting at both the common ground of being human rather than animal, and the difference of being female rather than male.

Jesus also refers to and affirms the gendered nature of humans as part of the creation design in Matthew 19:4.

Today the conversation around sex and gender often takes a different form. People speak of 'gender' as an inner sense of identity or 'how you see yourself' – with little reference to the physical body.

"There is no "I" behind or before the body. There is no "us" that exists... independently of our flesh and that is then randomly assigned to the bodies we have. Our bodies are an integral part of who we are. And I do not "occupy" my body... it is an integral part of me, inseparable from who I am."

Trueman

BUT these conversations can often revolve around cultural stereotypes. Biblical views of what constitutes masculinity and femininity are a lot broader than we often imagine.

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Human Limitations In Creation

...we have this treasure in jars of clay.... **(2 Corinthians 4:7)**



Physical Limitations



Intellectual Limitations



Emotions

What happens when we refuse to live within these limitations?

What happens when we embrace these limitations?

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Human Limitations From the Fall

...we have this treasure in jars of clay... **(2 Corinthians 4:7)**

The Sinful Nature

Sometimes know in the Bible as 'the flesh'. We have all inherited from Adam a pre-disposition to sin.

Ephesians 2:1-3

Frailty

Both the world and our bodies are groaning. We experience weakness, sickness and decay.

Romans 8:22

Mortality

Death entered the world at the fall. It is ultimately defeated in Christ, but is still part of our human experience.



Hebrews 4:15-16 - *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to feel sympathy for our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin. 16 Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

Three traps to avoid in engaging with death:

- Hiding from it
- Welcoming it
- Fearing it

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A New Humanity In Christ

Individual...

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! **(2 Corinthians 5:17)**

... and Corporate

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...

(Ephesians 2:14)

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith...

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

(Galatians 3:26-28)

The new humanity is one where nobody is excluded on the basis of their identity, background, ability or status.

For example, compare Deut 23:1 with Isa 56:4-5.

Some Outworkings of This:

- Welcoming foreigners
- Poor and marginalised people
- Men and women together
- The experience of disabled people

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Case Study – Disabled People and the Church

Two Truths To Hold Together:

Jesus Heals

People who are not healed are welcomed and
centred in Jesus' kingdom

"Disability theology is the attempt by disabled and non-disabled Christians to understand and interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ, God and humanity, against the backdrop of the historical and contemporary experience of people with disabilities." **John Swinton**

On the next page are some quotes from Amy Kenny's book, 'My Body Is Not a Prayer Request'. These quotes are meant to provoke us, and we might not agree with them all. But they do articulate the experiences and frustrations that some disabled people share about the church and there is a lot to learn from them.

Which quotes stand out to you?

In what practical ways can we model the inclusiveness of Jesus in the way we treat disabled people in the church?

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Ten Points Raised In 'My Body Is Not a Prayer Request' by Amy Kenny

People constantly wanting to pray for healing	<i>"Most of my disabled friends have their own stories of strangers approaching them to pray away their disabilities... It's draining to endure, especially because the people who do this don't intend to cause us harm. They just haven't considered how the assumption that disability needs "fixing" is dehumanizing." (p3-4)</i>
People facing discrimination on the basis of their disabilities	<i>"The most harmful ableism I have experienced has been inside the church..." (p26)</i>
People's disabilities being doubted or questioned	<i>"Since we cannot determine if someone else is disabled simply by looking at them, we should stop trying. There is no upside to doubting strangers' disabilities in the public sphere." (p45)</i>
People's bodies being particularly singled out as 'results of the fall'	<i>"Everyone currently alive is implicated by the fall. Disabled bodies carry the weight of being labelled "products of the fall," as if all bodies are not implicated in the cosmic tyrannies of sin and suffering... all humans bear the image of God; that doesn't diminish after the fall." (p58)</i>
The societal pressure to 'fix' disabled bodies	<i>"Faith... looks like wrestling - all night long - and emerging with a healing limp... I treasure (the image of Jacob wrestling with God) because it allows me to envision my limp as part of my healing instead of something that must be cured or killed off in hopes of inspiring nondisabled people." (p82-83)</i>
Disabled terminology being used as a negative metaphor	<i>"I am not your metaphor. My body is not your symbol to use. My crippled body and lame leg do not give you permission to dismiss me as symbolic for whatever you find difficult." (p93)</i>
How a person's disability can make them feel about themselves	<i>"We must learn to embrace each part of our disabled bodies as a revolutionary act of believing that we are inherently worthy as image-bearers." (p111)</i>
Many things that we do in church life can exclude disabled people	<i>"When a group of nondisabled people make all the decisions for a community, they unwittingly perpetuate practices that exclude disabled people... it has ramifications for everything from physical space to gathering etiquette, liturgy to song choice, theology to exegesis, and all aspects of community care." (p131-132)</i>
Disability is something that God himself can identify with	<i>"Jesus on the cross is disabled, physically impaired by sweating drops of blood while nailed to a wooden stake. Jesus is also disabled in a social sense. A person who was crucified bore the weight of social stigma in the ancient world, highlighting the social model of disability." (p168)</i>
Disabled people do not always feel included and welcomed into our churches	<i>"In many of our church spaces, we think it's on us to determine who is in and who is out. We spend a lot of time arguing over theological philosophies about the origins of disability instead of making space for more disabled people at the table." (p178)</i>

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The Future Glory of Humanity

Listen, I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. **(1 Cor. 15:51-53)**

Our Resurrection Bodies Will Be The Same But Different

Physical Bodies

Limits Transcended

Scars Remain?

Destined for Immortality

Some effects of being grounded in this future hope...

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Recommended Resources

On the Image of God
'In His Image' by Carmen Imes

On the Importance of the Body
'What God Has to Say About Our Bodies'
by Sam Allberry

On Sanctity of Life
'Matters of Life and Death' by John Wyatt
'Abortion' by Lizzie Ling

On Gender
'The Genesis of Gender' by
Abigail Favale

On Sin
'Not the Way It's Supposed to Be'
by Cornelius Plantinga

On Disability
'The Bible, Disability & the Church' by Amos Yong
'My Body Is Not a Prayer Request' by Amy Kenny

On Death
'Dying Well' by John Wyatt
'On Death' by Tim Keller

On Technology
'The Robot Will See You Now' edited by John Wyatt and
Stephen Williams
'AI Shepherds and Electric Sheep' by Sean O'Callaghan and Paul
Hoffman

On Future Resurrection
'Surprised By Hope' by N.T.
Wright