

Theological Anthropology:

What does it mean to be human?

Although the title may confused many people, I want to give you the full explanation of this topic and its technical language. The phrase “theological anthropology” carries with it enormous weight. The final word “anthropology” makes sense to most people, the study of humans or humankind. Left at just that word, this session would focus on the human being as part of the animal kingdom and as a subject of scientific investigation. Adding the word “theological” before it takes the focus from the scientific realm and brings it into the realm of God. Thus, this session is about our relationship with God, our creation, and the role of humanity in the grand picture of the universe.

When people think about the view of humanity from the perspective of God, our minds turn to the common mentality we hear amongst preachers and evangelicals: we are sinful and corrupt creatures who are destitute until Jesus came to save us. This mentality was the dominant understanding of the nature of the human person preached during the Protestant Revolution. Many felt that this degradation of the human person brought them a greater sense of the power and importance of Jesus in their lives. In contrast to this image, the Catholic Church preached a totally different message which greatly influences a huge number of people. The Church preached that we were essentially good, marred by original sin, with the potential of being recreated by Jesus to become the fullness of our creation. This positive message transformed the focal points of the Middle Ages and kept the church strong throughout the revolutions. The rest of this session is unpacking that central message.

What are we?

God created the heavens and the earth and everything contained within them. When God creates, he always creates things to be good. He cannot do otherwise. Therefore everything God creates is good. We were created good. The story of the Garden of Adam and Eve tells this story and explains in detail the joy of being created good. Everything lives in harmony, everything works together, there is no death or ruin, and God walks among us. The story of Adam and Eve goes a step farther. Although we say that we were created good and continue to be good at the core of our being, we are more than just creatures of the world. We could have been animals and lived an existence of finding food, finding a mate, and trying to avoid being eaten or dying. But Adam and Eve were different. When God created Adam and Eve he breathed into them making them something different from the rest of creation. They were a mix between the animal creatures that God created and himself; they had a body made from the earth and a soul given by the breath of God. Not only was their creation different from the rest of the creatures but their purpose was also different. All creatures exist to glorify God in the capacity that they are able. Every creature’s basic task is to survive and mate. Unlike the other creatures of the world that were created and left to their own devices, God commissioned Adam and Eve. They were tasked with caring for the garden. They were the one creature that God set apart that could glorify him and begin to understand God’s ways. Humans were different from the rest of creation. God made us for himself.

Humans are a combination of a body and a soul. The body is the easiest part of our identity to understand. We can see our bodies, we move our bodies, we care for our bodies, and our bodies are responsible for the vast majority of what we do and are. Yet, just like the animals of the world, our bodies have certain tendencies and desires. The same works for our minds which are part of our bodies and yet distinct from them. Our minds allow us to ponder the deeper truths of the world and come to work with creation for our good. Our minds help us to build relationships and explore creation as a way to understand God. The part of our humanity that delves into the theological is our soul. We can try to prove the existence of a soul, and many have tried, but it would be the same challenge as proving God's existence, a rather difficult challenge. Some researched have found that we lose between 5 and 10 pounds upon death. Some have argued that the change in weight is our soul. Others have noticed that at the moment of death, a strange breath leaves the body and the room becomes eerily calm. Could this be the soul? The soul is the hardest part of the human person to prove and yet invaluable to our identity. The soul connects us to God since it is his Spirit dwelling in us. The soul have the ability to determine right from wrong as evidenced by Adam and Eve eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The soul helps us to wonder, to see greater realities, and to bring everything into a greater perspective. Our souls are the only part of us that is immortal. Since the soul is connected with God's Spirit and God cannot die, neither can our souls.

Who are we?

Although understanding our goodness and that God made us is important, we need to go a step further and explore who we are. When God created the universe, he created everything as good and with the ability to worship and glorify him to their capacity. Humanity is slightly different. Rocks, plants, and animals can only give minimal praise to God but more importantly they cannot grasp the love of God nor the greatness of his works. God wanted creatures that are able to understand his ways and praise him in his works. Not because he desires praise but because he wants to share the goodness of the universe and the beauty of the universe with his creation. Therefore humans were given the unique ability to understand and ponder the mystery of creation with the goal of being able to know it and praise God through it.

The mythologies of other near eastern religions like the Babylonians and Sumerians depicts their gods as needy beings who want humans to please their desire for praise and offerings. God is quite different. Adam and Eve were given a command similar to that of the ancient near eastern religions, to plow and cultivate the garden and to serve God, but there were not compelled to by either punishment not the desires of God. Instead God gave humanity a task so that we would take part in God's creative power and share in his creativity. Adam and Eve were given the task of caring for the garden before the Fall and after the Fall for cultivating the earth and subduing it. Humans were not meant to lounge around and bask in God's grace but were given a mission, a task. Our task after the Fall is to reorder creation back to the original goodness that it had prior to the Fall. We were tasked with sharing in God's creative power so that we can co-create with God.

The final part of our humanity was to serve and love God. The first part is found in every religion: service of the gods. In Jewish and Christian theology, the service of God is not demanded of his adherents with punishments for those who disobey. Instead the desire for the

service of God was formed in our inmost being. We want to serve God. We find joy in being of service to another, of being helpful, of giving of ourselves for the sake of another. God wrote into our very being the desire for service. Thus the service of God was not meant to be punishment or a compulsion but a desire rooted in every human heart out of a desire to love the creator. Which leads to the second part. No other religion in the world claims that their gods created humans out of love or to love. They were always created as an accident or a happenstance. God created humans out of love and for love. A truth with such great weight that most have yet to plumb even the surface of this incredible truth. God loved us into existence and created us to love. We were meant to love God, each other, and creation. Our humanity is rooted in the need and desire to love and be loved.

How do we live our humanity?

The internet and bookstores are full of people who seem to have an answer to this question. They fill shelves with self-help books, quick tips on living well, or a new fad that is supposed to increase our well-being. The answer to this question is quite simple: understand our goodness and who we are meant to be. Too often our social problems boil down to a lack of understanding our goodness or our dignity. Too often our personal issues can be summarized in trying to become something we are not or putting too much focus on the wrong qualities of our humanity. Let's finish this section by examining the totality of our humanity and how to live it well.

Our bodies: an integral part of our identity is our bodies. Our bodies are fleshy, earthy, and have strong limitations. Many self-help program either try to dismiss or overcome the body or succumb to the desires of the body. Our bodies have natural animalistic inclinations. These inclinations are not necessarily bad. We cannot, however, eat whatever and whenever we want. We cannot act on every urge whenever they emerge. Our bodies need to be cultivated so that we can live well. Each urge has a proper time and place through which we cultivate our bodies and guide our actions to conform to our dignity. In a similar way, our bodies need to be cared for and cultivated like a garden. We need to nourish our bodies with good food and keep them strong and healthy. Simple activities like exercise, fasting, and proper balance vastly increase our health and well-being. We need to see our bodies as tools or instruments for our salvation. We have these limited bodies so that we can rely on God for the things we cannot do. We need these bodies to remind ourselves of the good of our humanity and strive for uniting our entire selves to God.

Our minds: the human mind is one of most incredible gifts to humanity. No mind in any created things compares to the ingenuity, the creativity, the flexibility, and skills to reason as the human mind. Often our minds are greatly neglected or taken for granted. When we were young and in school, our minds were constantly cultivated by new material, the quest for knowledge, and the need to perform well at our studies. As we grow older the desire for study and cultivating our minds decrease. This decrease, I argue, is the reason for the breakdown of our society, the mental issues we face, and the degradation of the human person. If we don't cultivate our minds to think and ponder the issues of our time, how can we choose the best route for our society? If we do not cultivate our use of language and reasoning, how can we speak to others about our issues and needs? If we cannot work to use our minds to ponder the universe and the seek greater truths, then how will we come to know and praise God? Cultivating our minds is essential for our well-

being and understanding the goodness of our humanity. I encourage everyone to continue to practice skills like memory, learning, and reading. Too often we truncate the skills required to learn by substituting them with technological sources. Books, people, and writing are essential skills for cultivating the mind and cannot be replaced by other sources. We need our minds to realize the goodness of who we are and we need to enjoy learning to experience the joy of our humanity.

The Soul: the soul is the most neglected part of our humanity. Since we cannot measure, see, or study the soul, many people argue that it doesn't exist. Yet, we can easily recognize the presence of the soul as distinct from the body and the mind. Where does the sense of right and wrong emerge except from the soul? Where does the sense of something greater in the universe or the sense of wonder come from except from the soul? The soul is the part of us that connects us to the greater sense of the universe and the things beyond the here-and-now. Cultivating the soul, however, can seem tricky. Neglect your body and you will soon see the effects. Neglect your mind and you may notice after a while. Most people who neglect their souls never notice because they never tried to focus on nor cultivate their souls. Simply activities like pondering the universe and bigger questions, wondering at something beautiful, thanksgiving, healing, forgiveness, pondering the mystery of God, or praise of God are all activities that cultivate the soul. Often the same activities we associate with an "existential crisis" are also issues of the soul. Whenever we are caught in a situation that strikes us to the core of our human existence, we are dealing with an issue of the soul. We face more soul-related issues than we realize. Anger due to injustice or frustration are problems at the level of the soul. Lack of forgiveness, desire for reconciliation, or holding grudges and pain are issues of the soul. We need to recapture the gravity and dignity of our souls by recognizing the powers of the soul and its value in our lives. A well-cared for soul leads to a happy and joyful person.

Our humanity is a gift. A gift that not only makes us who we are but gives us avenues for grace, helps us to understand the universe and our identity, guides us into relationships with each other, and helps us to ponder the mystery of God. I encourage you to explore and find joy in your humanity. Experience the joy of its limitations as they give boundaries and teach humility. Enjoy our strengths as they give us a sense of our dignity and the incredibly gifts given to us. We need to celebrate our humanity anew that all people may recognize their intrinsic goodness and come to celebrate the dignity of their humanity.