

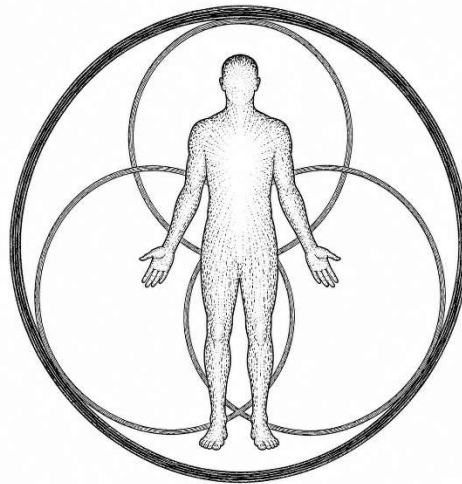
I Believe in Man

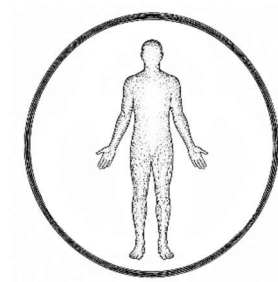
A credal confession of the human creature



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INTRODUCTION

“Darwin has deprived us of our souls. If you really understand the theory of evolution, you understand that there is no soul.”¹

Yuval Harari wrote that. He’s what we might call a public intellectual and somewhat of a futurist, writing on everything from military history to science and anthropology. While he writes much we’d disagree with, he offers keen and honest views of the implications of the current materialist worldview. And the striking thing about his statement is that it wasn’t a triumphant boast about unshackling man from some divine morality, nor was it a lament about the loss of human dignity or meaning. It was simply a statement of fact – at least, of the factual claims that are consistent with a worldview that has excised its Creator.

But of course, it’s a “fact” that *does* unshackle the human creature from any objective morality and leads to the complete loss of any inherent dignity or transcendent meaning² in human life. That’s not to say that all people who reject the Biblical account of creation reject such human values – God’s law and the longing for eternity written on our hearts are wonderfully powerful witnesses,³ and in many ways our culture seems to still be coasting on the fumes of Christianity.⁴ But it *does* remind us that objective morality and inherent human dignity are by their natures unsupportable apart from the belief in a Creator.

¹ Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2018), 66.

² As opposed to temporal meaning. *Temporal meaning* speaks to our personal fulfillment or the significance we might ascribe to events, but *transcendent meaning* speaks to the place our lives have in a divine or universal purpose.

³ Cf Romans 2:15 (“They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts”) and Ecclesiastes 3:11 (“He has also set eternity in the human heart”).

⁴ Asserting truths that flow naturally from the Christian faith while denying any of the truths that support them.

The same author elsewhere observes that principles such as justice or equality are only *myths we tell one another* that exist nowhere except in our own fertile imaginations⁵ and that “human life has absolutely no meaning.”⁶ While we’d like to think that few people share such a view, there’s evidence to think we’re at an inflection point where our society is beginning to truly *mark, learn and inwardly digest* those views. We can hear it when a moral philosopher suggests that newborns shouldn’t be considered *people* until thirty days after birth or that some disabled babies should be killed at delivery – and is then appointed as a professor of bio-ethics at Princeton University.⁷ It’s there when a political commentator and comedian concedes on his show that abortion is murder, but, “I’m just okay with that. I am. There are 8 billion people in the world. I’m sorry, we won’t miss you.”⁸ I hear it when my agnostic friend – one of the kinder and more thoughtful men I know – was willing to wrestle with the question of human value with me as I worked on this essay and said, “I know I value the lives of my children more than the lives of squirrels, but I can’t give a good reason why. And I’m not sure that I should. It seems to me the most evolved and enlightened view would be that squirrel lives have equal value with ours.”

It should catch our attention when both a transhumanist thinker and a Lutheran systematic theologian evaluate our world and come to the same diagnosis:

“The primary political and philosophical question of the next century will be the definition of who we are.”⁹

“Theological anthropology will most likely be the most important issue of theology in the twenty-first century.”¹⁰

We need an answer for what it means to be human. So what are we? What is man?

In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche’s Madman storms into the marketplace mourning the “death” of God and what would follow. He asks, “Who gave us the sponge that wiped away the entire horizon?”¹¹ I like his choice of words. A *horizon* is something that’s

⁵ Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2024), 108.

⁶ Harari, *Sapiens*, 390.

⁷ Peter Singer, who continued to serve in that role for twenty-five years. He chose to define *personhood* quite narrowly with *self-awareness* and argued that human life only had value in so far as it brought joy or pain to others. In his *Practical Ethics*, he argued that newborns thus had less value than dogs or pigs.

⁸ Bill Maher, during a panel conversation on HBO’s *Real Time with Bill Maher*, first aired April 12, 2024.

⁹ Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence* (New York: Viking, 1999), 2.

¹⁰ Mumme, Jonathan. “Theologizing the Body Between Two Resurrections.” *Logia* 34, No. 4, 29.

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 181.

been ὁρίζω'd – determined, defined, limited. When we lose God and his Word, the horizon lines disappear like streaks off a mirror, wiped away with a sponge.

The creation account gives a horizon to man. It draws lines around the human creature. It gives us true anthropology that highlights both our nature and our purpose.

CERTAIN OF WHAT WE DO NOT SEE

And true anthropology is an article of faith. When Harari wrote that human life has absolutely no meaning, he qualified it by saying this is true “from a purely scientific viewpoint.”¹² While the *instinct* of my friend is to see human life as entirely different than animals, in many observable ways, the things that separate man from animals – intelligence, emotion, relationships, even creativity and artistic efforts – seem more and more to be differences only *by degree*.¹³ And mankind isn't necessarily the best at many of those things; there are plenty of things that squirrels are better at than me. We won't discern human value under a microscope or find it encoded in a DNA sequence.

So we remember the Holy Spirit's description of faith: “Faith is being sure about what we hope for, being convinced about things we do not see.”¹⁴ We don't approach anthropology simply as a matter of biology, philosophy, politics or economics. The things we truly need to know and believe about ourselves are matters of divine revelation, not scientific observation.

WE CAN ONLY RIGHTLY UNDERSTAND MAN IN RELATIONSHIP WITH THE GOD WHO CREATED US

Understanding *man* apart from *God* is like trying to understand the idea of a *husband* without any concept of a *wife*: You don't have the referent you need to get there. One is made for the other, and you can only properly understand each in terms of the other.¹⁵

The Genesis creation account leads us to confess both the Creator and his creation. After six days of saying “Let there be...”, God speaks differently. We're no longer dealing with jussives, but a first-person cohortative, a beautiful נִנְעֹשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדִמּוּתֵנוּ: *Let*

¹² Harari, *Sapiens*, 390.

¹³ The only feature that truly separates man from other mammals according to some scientists? Our chins: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/chin-stroking-mystery-why-are-humans-only-animals-with-chins-180957997/#:~:text=Many%20scientists%20have%20stroked%20their,the%20chin%20remains%20a%20mystery.>

¹⁴ Hebrews 11:1, EHV.

¹⁵ Luther observed that man has no hope of knowing himself unless “he sees himself in his origin which is God” (*Disputation Concerning Man*, No. 17) and that “In the human being, especially in Adam, [God] is truly recognized” (LW 1:68–69).

us make man in our image, our likeness. Francis Pieper observes: “the plural possessive suffix: ‘in Our image, after Our likeness,’ shows that man was created *in the image of the Triune God* [emphasis added], of the glorious divine essence belonging to the three Persons.”¹⁶ While we can debate the merit of this as an *exegetical truth* bound up in a person-and-number analysis,¹⁷ the rest of Scripture guides us to the same conclusion: *mankind is a special creation, made in the image of the God who is triune in essence.*

That’s helpful to keep in mind. As the church confesses the God who reveals himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we also confess a humanity that was made in the image of the same Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Humanity can only be fully understood in relation to the Triune God who created, redeemed, and sanctifies them. When we approach anthropology this way, we learn to know man as a limited body-and-soul human creature, created for righteousness, and shaped for and by a life in communion with God and his other human creatures. As we seek to lead God’s lost creatures into a full human existence, Scripture blesses us with a “robust trinitarian approach”¹⁸ to answering the question, “What is man?”.

¹⁶ Pieper, Francis. *Christian Dogmatics*. Vol. 1. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 516.

¹⁷ Some understand the plural verb as referring to a discussion among “the heavenly court” (doubtful, since it’s otherwise absent from the account and the angels play no role in the creation of man) or used as a majestic plural rather than being an explicit reference to the Trinity.

¹⁸ Schulz, Klaus Detlev. *Theological Anthropology and Sin*. Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics 5. (Fort Wayne, IN: The Luther Academy, 2023), 254.



I believe in man, created by the Father

I believe that God created me and all that exists, and that he gave me my body and soul, eyes, ears, and all my members, my mind and all my abilities.¹⁹

“They’re made out of meat.”

American author Terry Bisson’s short story imagines a conversation between two non-carbon-based aliens exploring our solar system. They aren’t impressed with what they find on the third rock from the sun. “You’re asking me to believe in sentient meat?”, asks one. The other replies, “Yes, thinking meat! Loving meat. Dreaming meat. The meat is the whole deal!”²⁰

The meat’s important, but it’s never been “the whole deal.” The Genesis account shows us remarkable truths about man: his substance, his attributes and his purpose. Much of the account teaches us what Luther would include in his explanation to the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed. It unsurprisingly receives the majority of the focus in theological anthropologies; we’ll cover the most pertinent points here.

MAN IS A CREATURE, A LIMITED BEING

“Let us make mankind.” (Genesis 1:26)

Secular anthropologies typically start with the question of what man is *composed of* or is *capable of*. In other words, those anthropologies start by looking at the ἄνθρωπος. It’s a reasonable starting point, but it leads to uncertain conclusions. Is man a godlike being that’s capable of untold wonders, destined to transcend death itself by our unique genius so that we should prioritize nothing above ourselves? Is he just another animal, with no inherent dignity or meaning, so that we should feel shame neither about

¹⁹ *Luther’s Catechism*, 4.

²⁰ Bisson, Terry. “They’re Made Out of Meat.” Accessed March 5, 2026. <https://www.abika.com>. It’s a short read, and worthwhile if just to hear the act of singing described as “squirting air through their meat.”

enslaving nor slaughtering others when it serves our purpose? A little bit of both? Who's to say?

But *theological* anthropology starts with an entirely different truth: *God created man*. To be a *creation* is to be *limited* and to be *defined*. It assumes that whatever dignity, value and identity we have come from outside of us and are bestowed upon us. An author once observed, “All things are created twice. There's a mental or first creation, and a physical or second creation to all things.”²¹ That is, the very act of creating relies on first having an intended concept and purpose. At the culmination of his creative work, God makes man. That means man is neither self-created nor self-defined. He's also not the rest of creation – he's something different from the seas and skies, the great creatures of the deep and the other creatures that move along the ground. He's neither God nor the other animals. He's אָדָם. And it's up to the Creator to tell us what that means.

MAN IS CREATED AS A PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL BEING

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)

Adam's creation has much in common with that of God's other *animated* creatures. Just as Moses tells us that God יִצָּר ²² man from the dust of the ground, so too he tells us he יִצָּר'd “all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky” from the ground (Genesis 2:19). And as God breathes into him the נִשְׁמַת הַיִּים, Adam becomes a נִפְשׁ חַיָּה – the same words used to describe God's other animated creatures.²³

But Adam *wasn't* just like God's other animated creatures. While Luther observed that animals and man greatly resemble each other in their composition and activities, we can see the

outstanding difference between these living beings and man when [Moses] says that man was created *by the special plan and providence of God* [emphasis added]. This indicates that man is a creature far superior to the rest of the living beings that live a physical life, especially since as yet his nature had not become depraved.²⁴

And Luther rejoiced to picture what this “far superior” creature was like. He describes Adam as having the clearest intellect and best memory, with a mind free of anxiety. He was “fully convinced” that Adam's eyes surpassed the lynx and eagle, was possessed of strength greater than the lions or bears (and would be able to command

²¹ Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 99.

²² “Formed,” like a potter shaping clay. Genesis 2:7.

²³ Usually translated “living creatures,” it's used for aquatic life (Ge 1:20, 21); land animals (1:24; 2:19; 9:10), birds (9:10), and “all flesh” (9:15, 16).

²⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 1, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 56.

them “just as we give a command to a trained dog”). He viewed Adam as having full innate knowledge of plants, herbs, animals and astronomy.²⁵ Those speculative descriptions might strike us as a bit fanciful, but maybe they shouldn’t. Adam was created for the purpose of exercising dominion over God’s world, and the LORD equipped him perfectly for the task. We see it as Adam gives each animal what can be inferred as its fitting name. It’s especially evident when God presents him with Eve. In seemingly an instant, Adam not only discerns her origin (taken from his bones and flesh) and gives name to her gender (*woman*, since she was taken from *man*) but also states her divinely intended purpose – and declares all this in poetic verse.²⁶

On the composition of man

Following Scripture, we most often speak of mankind as a *dichotomy* (body and soul), not a *trichotomy* (body, soul and spirit). There are times that Scripture speaks of man in a trichotomous way,²⁷ and at times Luther clearly does the same.²⁸ Most of the uses of *soul* and *spirit* in the same passages, though, seem to be piling up terms for the sake of literary completeness. And when there does seem to be a distinction made between soul and spirit, it’s clear they still both belong to our “non-physical” selves.²⁹

A more-recently-coined term speaks of man’s nature as a *holistic dualism*. Even though we have spiritual and physical components, our body-and-soul nature is a unified whole. We’re created as *individuals* in the truest sense: things that aren’t dividable, aren’t meant to come apart. I think of a four-year-old boy, looking at his mother’s body in her casket and asking his grandfather, “Not mommy anymore?” The grandfather gave beautiful comfort, “No, mommy’s in heaven with Jesus.” But what a natural and fitting reply came from the young Christian as he looked at his mother’s body and said, “Goodbye, mommy; I love you.” In the theological anthropology of the last century, there seems to be some recognition that through Augustine, Christianity inherited an overly Platonic view of the human: *My soul is my true essential self; it just happens to be in my body*. That view fit naturally with the Age of Reason that defined man

²⁵ Cf *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 61-66.

²⁶ Genesis 2:23. While v. 24 is likely not part of Adam’s exclamation, his words in v. 23 by themselves fit beautifully with God’s intent to make Eve as Adam’s עֵצֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ.

²⁷ Consider 1 Thessalonians 5:23 (May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ) or Hebrews 4:12 (For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart).

²⁸ Most notably in his comments on *The Magnificat* (LW 21:303), but Luther later and most often spoke in clearly bi-partite terms.

²⁹ Speaking of the way Scripture at times draws a distinction between soul and spirit, Quenstedt observed that “not every distinction and division is an essential one.” Quoted in Vogel, “The Old Testament Concept of the Soul,” 9.

as a *res cogitans*³⁰ and paved the way for gnostic tendencies that are again taking over in an age that regards our feelings and urges as our “true self,” regardless of reality. But scripturally, the lines between our parts are blurry; their effect on each other is a two-way street: our spiritual state has an impact on mental health and physical well-being. Try writing a sermon when you have the flu and you’ll see the impacts flow in the other direction, too.

The deep goodness and *us*-ness of our bodies as gifts from our Father is important to remember, especially against the increasingly gnostic view of our bodies simply being a temporary home for our souls. While Scripture does speak in similar terms at times,³¹ it’s not to disregard or diminish our bodies. It’s to emphasize the ongoing existence of our souls. Scripture teaches this clearly: there’s a part of us that still survives after the death of our bodies. It’s *only* the reality of sin that causes us to be *dividuals*. Our parts come apart at death now. Scripture speaks so holistically about our existence that the Catechism of the Catholic Church states that “the soul is the form of the body.”³² While that’s an Aristotelian approach, there’s Scriptural merit to it, too: consider the way Saul recognized Samuel’s spirit (1 Samuel 28:12,13) or the disciples’ Easter assumption that they were simply seeing Jesus’ ghost.³³

ON THE ORIGIN OF THE SOUL

Luther teaches us to recite that “God ... gave me my body and soul.”³⁴ How did he give us our souls? There are various views of the origin of the soul.

Pre-existentialism

This view teaches that God created every human soul before he created the physical world. In (or sometime after) our conceptions the soul leaves the spiritual or heavenly realm and is joined to our bodies. This view has its roots in Plato’s philosophy and has no scriptural backing. Since it’s based on pagan philosophy and stands in contradiction to the Biblical teaching of the total corruption of man, it is to be rejected.

³⁰ A “thinking thing”, as Descartes referred to humans.

³¹ In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul refers to our bodies as our “earthly tents” and in Philippians 1:21ff he looks forward to departing from the body to be with Christ.

³² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), ¶366.

³³ Luke 24:37: ἐδόκουν πνεῦμα θεωρεῖν. While neither of these cases prove that the soul is the “form” of the body, they are at least evidence that this is the way the Jewish people conceived of it.

³⁴ *Luther's Catechism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 4.

Creationism

In this view, every human still receives their soul directly from God. Our parents conceive our bodies; God creates and adds the soul.³⁵ Most of the Scripture cited in favor of this view simply speaks of God's care in forming us in the womb.³⁶ While this is the favored position of the Roman Catholic Church (and was taught by Melancthon and others), our theologians tend to follow Augustine who said creationism failed to explain "how souls did not come from Adam and yet acquired from him the just sentence of damnation."³⁷

Traducianism

Traducianism holds that the soul and body derive from the parents and come into existence together, "yet not through (*ex*) conception but by means of it, *per traducem vel propaginem* (that is, by direct derivation, in their ordinary way of propagation), as a continuation of the seed in Adam."³⁸ God remains *the cause* of the soul's existence (just as he remains the cause of other natural acts in this world), but the soul – in a sinful and fallen state – still derives from its parents. This view seems to best reflect Scripture and is the position of the Lutheran Confessions.³⁹

Emergentism

The more-recent theory of emergentism is not yet widespread,⁴⁰ but seems to have many hallmarks that would suit it to our culture's thinking. It proposes that the soul (often defined as the *personality* or *mind*) is a distinct part of us⁴¹ which gradually "emerges" from the body and brain in normal development. In some ways, this an outgrowth of Darwinian evolution⁴² and fits very well with those who wish to deny personhood to humans in the womb.

³⁵ Aquinas suggested this *hominization* didn't take place until the fortieth day of pregnancy for boys or the eightieth day for girls (Schulz, *Theological Anthropology and Sin*, 96).

³⁶ Numbers 16:22, Acts 17:25 and Psalm 119:73 are good examples. Zechariah 12:1 might make a stronger argument ("The Lord.... who forms the human spirit within a person"), though ריח here may be best understood as someone's "life-force" or coming into existence as a living being, not a newly created soul.

³⁷ Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009), 311.

³⁸ Schulz, 92.

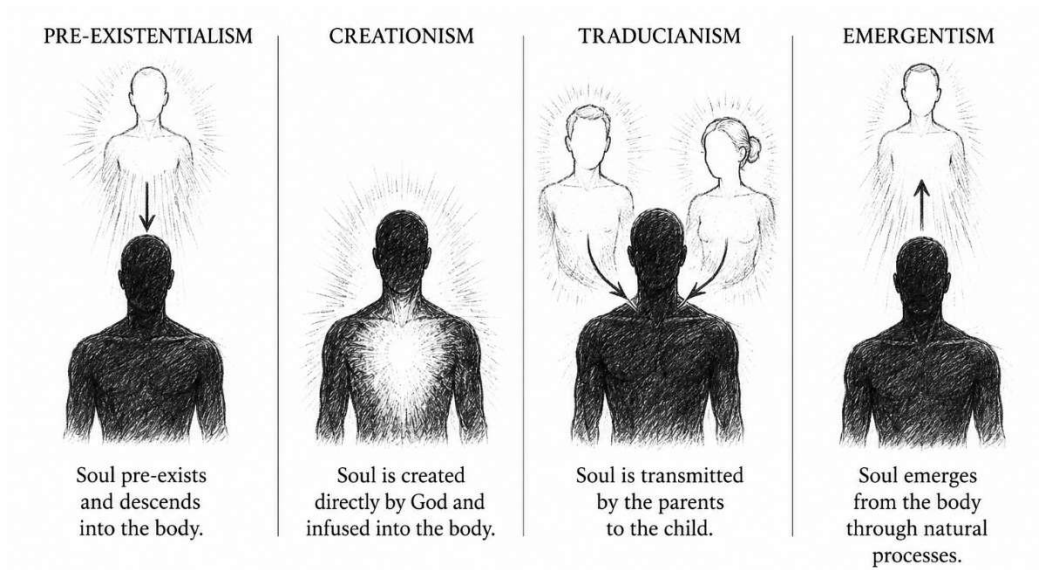
³⁹ Cf. *FC SD I* 7, 30.

⁴⁰ A good example is evangelical philosopher William Hasker in *The Emergent Self* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁴¹ As opposed to non-reductive physicalism, which sees the "soul" not as a distinct spiritual component, but just as a way of describing the *functions* of the brain.

⁴² Darwinian evolutionists often see *consciousness* or *the mind* as having gradually developed or emerged in more complex life forms.

Motives for supporting this view aside, it not only lacks Scriptural support but also is at odds with the soul's continued existence after the death of the body – proponents suggest that either the soul disappears until the day God recreates it anew at the resurrection or that God miraculously preserves it until then. While emergentism is to be rejected, it's worth being aware of because of how well it seems to fit the views of our culture.



GENDERED

Male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27)

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." (Genesis 2:18)

God continues to draw lines around his human creature as he defines us as a binary-gendered creation: male and female. This gender distinction has:

1. An order: Man, then woman created from him as *עֶזֶר כְּנֶגְדּוֹ*, both created in the image of God.
2. A purpose: to unite us in lifelong marriage for companionship and procreation.
3. A blessing: the *goodness* of not being alone and being united in families.

Those clear lines are intrinsic to human identity and a needed message from the church. The dominant sexual message in our culture is a confused and self-contradictory one: the sexual act is represented as little more than a recreational activity while sexual desires are at the same time presented as the very center of our

“authentic selves.”⁴³ That’s not to deny that some people are born with aberrant forms of that sexuality or due to trauma or mental illness struggle to conform to a biological reality. Those are situations to be dealt with with great care, compassion, and the clarity of Scripture. What God’s Word presents for us will of course run counter to our sinful desires but also point us back to essential humanity. It’s no small thing that the final thing that Adam gives name to in the creation account is *himself*.⁴⁴ “Man does not know himself except as embodied creature before woman, and likewise woman before man.”⁴⁵

And permit an encouragement: As grateful as I am for the *basic Christianity* courses produced among us and the faithful and skillful teaching they contain, I’m struck by how often I find a course that shares the *basic teachings* of the Bible but offers nothing about what it means that God created us *male* and *female* nor about the unique callings he gives to each gender. It’s always a struggle to decide which truths need to be taught before someone expresses fellowship with us, but I’d suggest that God’s clear words to us as his gendered creation belong among the *basic teachings* that a Christian needs to know. Especially in an age of marital mayhem and the disintegration of gender distinctions, these words are not only of vital importance for understanding ourselves, for the prospering of the family and the work of the church, they also help us grasp the mystery of Christ’s relationship with his Church.⁴⁶ We would do well to teach them as the *basic Christian teachings* that they are.

ENDOWED WITH DOMINION

“Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Genesis 1:28)

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. (Genesis 2:15)

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. (Genesis 2:19)

Mankind was created for work, even in utopia. The LORD equipped them well for that work. There’s a logical progression in his creation and calling of man: God creates

⁴³ Trueman, Carl R. *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020, 35.

⁴⁴ The first time Adam identifies himself as אָדָם is after coming face to face with אֱלֹהִים.

⁴⁵ Mumme, “Theologizing the Body,” 33.

⁴⁶ Ephesians 5:25-33 reminds us that God created marriage to be a living image of Christ’s relationship with his church – living as faithful husbands and wives in our unique callings doesn’t simply express our faith; it confesses deep things about our faith to others..

man in his own image → He calls them to increase in number and fill the earth → He commands them to subdue and rule over creation.⁴⁷

What can we say about the nature of that work? God describes it in Genesis 1:28 with forms of כבש and רדה. The former has the sense of bringing something under one's control in spite of its resistance;⁴⁸ the latter speaks of exercising dominion, often over something you've prevailed against.⁴⁹ That Christian truth is, of course, often parodied as teaching that we have the right to plunder and pillage what God has made.⁵⁰ Far from it: we are stewards of a once-perfect-but-now-dying world, using the blessings God entrusted to us for the good of all.

We have a sense of what the verbs of Genesis 1:28 mean in a fallen world, a place of thorns and thistles – after all, that's the only world we know. It's difficult to know what meaning they carried in a perfect world, but Professor Cherney's comments are helpful: "To רדה or to כבש takes work, and work was God's intention for humanity from the beginning."⁵¹ While inventions and progress are at times the fruit of that work, we do well to remember that the goal of life ought not be an elimination of using the gifts God has given us. Even Harari touches on this when he seems to lament that "every new invention just puts another mile between us and the Garden of Eden."⁵² The Danish Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard warns about what happens when we forget that the proper use of our dominion doesn't replace God's providence, but relies on it: "The result of human progress is that everything becomes thinner and thinner. The result of divine providence is to make everything deeper and more inward."⁵³ God's gifting of mankind with dominion is a reminder that we don't find our meaning in leisure, but were created for thrilling, challenging use of the abilities God entrusted to us.

⁴⁷ The NIV 2011 seeks to strengthen or highlight that connection with the translation, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, *so that* they may rule over the fish in the sea..." (Genesis 1:26, emphasis added)

⁴⁸ Whether it be land or people. See 2 Samuel 8:11 or Nehemiah 5:5 for examples.

⁴⁹ Of Solomon's rule over territories in 1 Kings 4:24.

⁵⁰ An oft-cited example is Lynn White Jr.'s 1967 essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis." As a *criticism of Christianity*, he wrote that "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects." I still occasionally see reference to the "quote" by James Watt, the Secretary of the Interior under Ronald Reagan from 1981-1983: "After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back" – a quote that he never spoke and expressly condemned.

⁵¹ Kenneth A. Cherney Jr., "Distinctively Human: An Anthropology of Genesis 1 and 2," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 119, no. 1 (Winter 2022): 21.

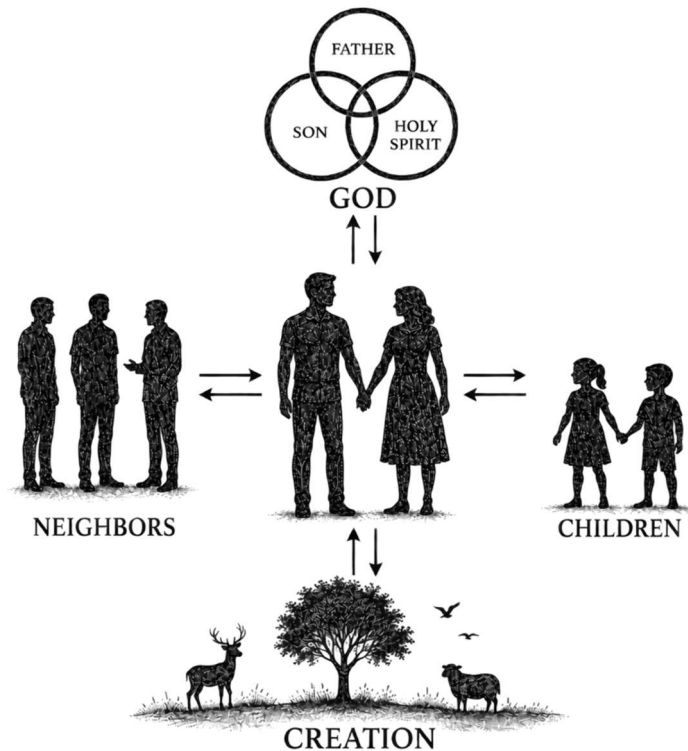
⁵² Harari, *Sapiens*, 378.

⁵³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, comp. and ed. Charles E. Moore (Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 2002), 313.

IN A STATE OF PERFECTION

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. (Genesis 1:31)

As the sun set on Day 6, God's work of creating was complete. A perfect man and woman bore his image, standing below their Creator yet above the rest of creation, and as partners with him in caring for it.



LOST AND CONDEMNED CREATURES

"You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die." (Genesis 2:17)

On a Sunday morning we speak together, "I am sinful by nature and have sinned against you [God] in my thoughts, words, and actions... I deserve your punishment both now and forever,"⁵⁴ and it shocks me, week after week, that people don't run out the door screaming in terror – or in anger. It's a dreadful thing we're confessing, isn't it? *Lord, I don't just do evil things; I'm an evil person. And you'd be right to torture me in this life and damn me in the life to come.*

Students of Scripture have many ways to speak of the impact that sin has had on humanity. We speak of *original sin* to emphasize that it all traces back to the fall of Adam and Eve; of *inherited sin* to affirm that it is passed down from parent to child; we

⁵⁴ *Christian Worship* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2021), 154.

speak of the *total depravity of man* to confess with St. Paul that nothing good lives in our sinful natures and admit that we are “by nature objects of wrath” (Ephesians 2:3 EHV), fully deserving God’s punishment even because of the guilt that is *imputed* to us.⁵⁵ We acknowledge the *hostility* (Romans 8:7) we have against God by our very nature, and guilt we carry from our sins.

God sums up all of that in one word: *death*.

We have a proper anthropology when we take death seriously as the intrusion into God’s blessed creation that it is. Harari catches the spirit of our age when he considers death a “technical problem” and that humans always die due to some “technical glitch”:

And every technical problem has a technical solution. We don’t need to wait for the Second Coming in order to overcome death. A couple of geeks in a lab can do it. If traditionally death was the specialty of priests and theologians, now the engineers are taking over.⁵⁶

There may seem to be reason for that optimism from a purely materialist worldview, but we can say with theological certainty that death is far more than a technical problem. And if you’ve held hands with a dying man with a guilty conscience, you know with pastoral certainty that he fears much more than a glitch. Death is the wages of sin. It is at the same time God’s justice against mankind’s wickedness and the last enemy God will destroy.

Genesis 4-11 expound what that death looks like. Adam and Eve bury their second-born child, murdered by their first. Those who come after them use their amazing gifts not just for innovation, but for domination and desecration. We hear the constant toll of “and he died ... and he died ...” ring throughout chapter 5 so that we can see God’s justice in action as he drowns the wicked world in chapter 7. Even after the Flood, mankind is steadfast in its desire to reject God’s will for it – and God is equally steadfast in his commitment to send the Savior promised in Genesis 3:15.

The Lutheran Confessors follow Scripture closely when they make the distinction that while sin thoroughly corrupts the human being from the point of our conception, it’s not an “essential” part of mankind.⁵⁷ That distinction reminds us that though we are “lost and condemned creatures,”⁵⁸ far from what we were created to be according to the First Article, we’re not beyond God’s Second Article work. God hasn’t given up on his human creature.

⁵⁵ Romans 5:12: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.”

⁵⁶ Harari, *Homo Deus*, 23. In much the same spirit, in 2012 Google spun off a company called Calico with the stated mission of “solving death.”

⁵⁷ Cf. F.C., S.D. I, 48-62, p 539-542.

⁵⁸ *Luther’s Catechism*, 5.

IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

*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)*

When we were growing up, every year at the big holidays Mom would bring out the ceramic figures she made in an art class in college. I can still see them: at Christmas beautiful angels holding candles flanked the mantle over our fireplace; at Easter it was little bunnies and a family of ducklings and intricate Easter eggs. They survived years of moving from place to place and being packed and unpacked. But then she had kids. It was one thing if an ear broke off a bunny when we played with it: *Don't tell mom, just get the glue*. But other times? The nerf ball hits something, it falls onto the brick hearth below and you're looking at a pile of dust and bits thinking, "I don't even know what this was. How am I ever going to put it back together?"

Isn't that what the image of God is like? We know our God-given humanity is broken, but we can't put it back together. We even struggle to speak of what it is.⁵⁹

I'm mindful that another essay will treat this in depth, but it seems impossible to talk about the creation of man without speaking about the image of God. And we don't always speak about the image in consistent ways:

- Publications that might be seen as the "official" voice of the WELS often tightly define the image of God as true righteousness and holiness.⁶⁰ (Yet while the majority speak quite strongly in this way, there are some that allow for a broader view.⁶¹)

⁵⁹ Luther spoke of the image of God being beyond our understanding in our fallen state: "Therefore when we speak about that image, we are speaking about something unknown. Not only have we had no experience of it, but we continually experience the opposite; and so we hear nothing except bare words" (LW: Vol 1, 63). Likewise Johann Gerhard: "We can only speak of [the image of God] in a way similar to those who are incarcerated in dark dungeons, who investigate the excellence of a light which is unknown to them" (Johann Gerhard, *Succinct and Select Theological Aphorisms in Twenty-three Chapters Containing the Core of All Theology Drafted and Adapted for Use in Scholastic Disputations*, Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2018, 63).

⁶⁰ A few examples: "The image of God consisted in a natural conformity of man's mind to God's. Man was created holy just as God is holy." (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary dogmatics notes, 387). Our *Luther's Catechism* (2017) glossary defines the Image of God as "The holiness in which Adam and Eve were created, and the fact that their wills naturally conformed to the will of God. The image of God was lost through the fall into sin, but it is restored through the work of the Holy Spirit" (380). In *God So Loved the World*, we read "The image of God in which man was created consisted of a blissful knowledge of God and his will, holiness... and righteousness" (154).

⁶¹ In 2024, the WELS Conference of Presidents released the document, "Instruction, Encouragement, and Guidance Regarding God's Unchanging Truths as Presented in "Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles". It states, "Broadly defined, 'created in the image of God' means that God created Adam and Eve as a reflection of him and to be representatives of him (GENESIS 1:26-28). This image includes a personal existence that is conscious of self, God, and eternity and possesses personal moral accountability (ROMANS 1:18-21,32; ROMANS 2:14,15; ECCLESIASTES 3:11). For the work of representative dominion, God

- The Lutheran Confessions speak in a similar (but not always *quite* explicit) way.⁶²
- This definition is more of a systematic distinction than an exegetical conclusion.⁶³
- Some of our materials – and much of the rest of Christendom – speak of the image more broadly, including things like man’s self-awareness, reason, emotions, etc.⁶⁴

What can we say about *the image of God* Scripturally?

- It’s a defining attribute of man that separated us from the rest of creation. (Genesis 1:26)
- It is a gift that was given to both male and female. (Genesis 1:27)
- It is linked to man’s work of dominion. (Genesis 1:28)
- A distinction *seems* to be made between the image of God as Adam had it and the image that Adam passed to his descendants. (Genesis 5:3)⁶⁵

has crowned human beings created in his image with superlative gifts of reason, will, emotion, and creativity (GENESIS 1:26-28; GENESIS 2:15-25; GENESIS 9:6; JAMES 3:9).” Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Conference of Presidents, *Instruction, Encouragement, and Guidance Regarding God’s Unchanging Truths as Presented in “Scriptural Principles of Man and Woman Roles”* (September 2024), 2.

⁶² Consider the Apology of the Augsburg Confession II:17-22. “What else was this image and likeness other than that man was created with wisdom and righteousness so that he could apprehend God and reflect God?”, while asserting that nothing of those original gifts remain.

⁶³ There is nothing in the syntax or grammar of passages such as Genesis 9:6 or James 3:9 that would lead us to the conclusion that Moses and James are speaking of the image only in respect to God’s *original intent* in creating us or *his purpose and goal* in redeeming us. Lawrenz and Jeske assert this (see their footnote on p. 76), while Giese disagrees: “James sees the existence of God’s image as an ongoing reason not to curse humanity; thus the image still remains in some manner even after the fall” (Giese, Curtis P. *James*. Concordia Commentary. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2021, 312). While it is true and clear from Scripture that we have fallen from the righteousness and holiness for which we were created, reaching the conclusion that nothing of *the image* remains in man can’t be established by an exegesis of those passages, and isn’t universally seen (even among confessional Lutherans) as a plain reading of Ephesians 4:22-24 or Colossians 3:10. Likewise, those statements are generally made with *doctrinal intent*: to make it clear that we are unable to effect our own conversion or salvation.

⁶⁴ Readers are likely familiar with *the image of God* being defined *broadly* and *strictly*. Whether or not those are the most helpful terms, the approach is one that has a long history throughout Christendom and among Lutheran authors. In *Grace Abounds*, Daniel Deutschlander speaks of things like man’s “emotion, will, and reason” as “the living shell” of the image of God and “the heart and core inside of that shell” was the gift of righteousness and holiness (169). While some, including our WLS dogmatics notes, classify the image of God as something *accidental* to the nature of man (397), theologians such as Johann Wilhelm Baier, Johann Gerhard, and Johann Quenstedt aren’t willing to say it’s entirely so, but allow for a “part” of the image to remain. Cf. Schulz, 62.

⁶⁵ We typically read 5:3 with this kind of intent: *God had made Adam in his image. Now Adam is fallen and sinful, and he fathers a son that comes in his image instead of God’s*. That’s a logical reading that certainly fits with everything that Scripture says about our sinful natures (cf. Romans 5:12ff), and it’s certainly how Luther read it. It seems to be the most natural reading, especially with Adam’s creation preceding it and the constant tolling of the *noisy bell* following it. But it’s not the only or necessary reading. It’s possible that

- Man's creation in the image of God is cited as a reason not to kill humans, even when the killing of other living creatures is allowed. (Genesis 9:6)⁶⁶
- Man's creation in the image of God is cited as a reason not to curse man. (James 3:9)
- Christ is presented as *the* image of God. (Colossians 1:15)
- The Christian's new self is renewed in this image of God in knowledge, righteousness and holiness. (Colossians 3:10, Ephesians 4:22-24)

Over the centuries students of Scripture have sought to define the image of God through different approaches: what can be gleaned from word studies of *צֶלֶם* and *דְמוּת*;⁶⁷ the attributes of man that separate him from other creatures; man's unique function and purpose;⁶⁸ and more recently, the cultural associations those in the Ancient Near East would have with those terms.

There's value in all those approaches, but it's hard to find one definition that fits all of the Scriptural uses of the phrase. Perhaps the difficulty comes from seeking to give a definition where God hasn't. God doesn't *define* the image of God; he simply *uses* and *applies* it. In his *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Adolf Hoenecke makes a statement that strikes me as the assumption that runs throughout much of our thinking on the subject. He *defines* the image as "what we lost in the fall" and views it as "the *opposite* [emphasis mine] of what we observe in the unreborn man."⁶⁹ While that's a logical statement, I'm not sure that it's the correct way of speaking about the results of sin. Sin doesn't necessarily *invert* God's good gifts; it *perverts* them.⁷⁰ Even after the fall God rightly warns that sinful man is still so gifted that should they work together, "nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them" (Genesis 11:6). King David can still wonder that he was "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14) and that man is only "a little lower than the angels" (Psalm 8:5).

Moses is simply sharing: *God created Adam in God's image. In a similar way, Adam has a son in his own image* – without comment intended on to what extent God's image remained in Adam or passed to Seth.

⁶⁶ It's at times remarked in our circles that we don't "need" to assert that mankind has anything of God's image remaining in him to see the value in every human life. True enough. We can point to God's love for the world (John 3:16) or God's call to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:31) to establish that point. But it's notable that God *does* point to the image as a foundational reason to respect and preserve life.

⁶⁷ While many have tried to draw distinctions between the terms, our authors (and Luther, more often than not) see these terms as synonymous.

⁶⁸ Living in a responsorial relationship with God and exercising dominion.

⁶⁹ Hoenecke, Adolf. *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*. Vol. 2. Trans. Richard A. Krause and James Langebartels. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009) 319. Jeske and Lawrenz speak in a similar way on 75-76.

⁷⁰ Luther used an analogy that made a similar point: while mocking those who assert that anything of the image of God remains in wicked man, he conceded that perhaps you could speak of it in a way that's similar to creation. Creation was created in a state of perfect beauty, but now it is so marred that *anything that was once beneficial can now be harmful on account of sin* (LW Vol 1, 90).

Mankind was made in God's likeness. What does that mean? At the simplest level, to observe man was to get a glimpse of what God is like. Are there still ways that we *image* him, that we are like him, even in a fallen state? There certainly are, even though they've all been perverted. A few examples:

- We still have dominion over creation, even though it's become a sweaty labor (Genesis 3:17-19) and is often carried out to the harm of others.⁷¹
- We still have a convert-ability, the potential for a relationship with God,⁷² even though we have no ability to effect this.
- We are still creatures with a moral nature and accountability, even though apart from faith we will always fail.⁷³

That seems to be a fair reading of Scripture. Scripture still associates the image of God with man (Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9) without qualifying that image simply as *God's original design* or as *that which man has the potential to own again* – a common approach in many Lutheran writings.⁷⁴ And it's worth considering that in Colossians 3:10 and Ephesians 4:22-24, Paul is only discussing our spiritual state as people who were created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness, now fallen and in need of the Spirit's renewing work through *knowledge* and the *truth*. Whether or not that spiritual state is the whole of where we "locate" the image of God isn't something Paul clarifies. Whether or not our other attributes (our intellect and reason, our capacity for abstract thinking and communication, our existence as moral beings, etc.) are part of the image of God isn't under discussion in those passages.

An analogy comes to mind. At times when counselling a couple, the husband or wife gets exasperated and finally yells out: *You don't get it! We don't have a marriage anymore!* That's when I get to give them the good news: *Of course you have a marriage;*

⁷¹ Consider Genesis 3:16, where Adam's "rule" over his wife is now characterized by their fall into sin, or Isaiah 5:8, where man uses his wisdom and skill to enlarge his own wealth through shrewd business dealings – to the detriment of other humans that God loves.

⁷² Luther and the other Reformers talked about this often. They identified a defining attribute of mankind is the ability to be brought to faith through the Gospel. We see indications of this right after the fall as God calls out to Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:9), as he lets them overhear the Gospel (3:15) and as men begin to publicly call on the name of the Lord (4:26). It's there in his invitation to "seek the Lord while he may be found" (Isaiah 55:6) and his ruling of the world "so that [people] would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him" (Acts 17:27). They consistently maintained that man is purely passive in this process.

⁷³ Consider Genesis 4:7, where God pleads with Cain to not be mastered by his sin and the Lord's statements on the complete depravity of man in Genesis 6:5.

⁷⁴ As Professor Cherney notes, efforts to explain Genesis 9 and James 3 in such a way are "ingenious but unnecessary" (18). Such a treatment of the passages seems to be a typical approach in the WELS. It's taken by Lawrenz and Jeske and is similar to what we find in our Seminary's dogmatics notes: "The image is spoken of in connection with man in his sinful state, since God sees each person as one in whom he wants to restore the image through faith in Christ" (388).

it's just a miserable one. Their marriage was still essentially a marriage – no infidelity had taken place; neither had forsaken the other. But it was missing the vital part of marriage: the selfless love that gives meaning to every other part of their marriage. Without that, their marriage completely failed to fulfill the purpose it was created for. But that really *is* good news to share. I get to confidently tell them that God still stands behind their marriage, and he has what they need to renew it.

We read something similar in Scripture regarding the image of God. God still stands behind the image of God in man in Genesis 9 and James 3. But what a miserable image we present. Even if we have such fearful and wonderful (Psalm 139:14) attributes that we might be considered just “a little lower than the angels” (Psalm 8:5), we are still by nature objects of wrath (Ephesians 2:3). And God has what we need in order to be renewed and rejoices to give it. Through the Gospel God not only imputes Christ’s righteousness to us but *also* begins the work of renewing us in his image in righteousness and holiness – a renewal that will be complete on the day that he appears.⁷⁵

In his *Grace Abounds*, Professor Daniel Duetschlander speaks about the image of God in terms of a “living shell of the image of God ... that consisted of emotion, will, and reason, the organs of the soul” while noting that “the heart and core inside of that shell and indeed that which permeated the shell and made it so beautiful was God’s gift of righteousness and holiness.”⁷⁶ A similar approach is seeing it as a lamp that’s now damaged on the outside and with the light completely extinguished. It’s still a lamp but has completely lost the ability to serve its true purpose. Through the Gospel God causes his light to shine in us again, and one day will transform the rest of us, too.



Or might we consider it like a shattered mirror? A shattered mirror still reflects the image before it, in a sense, but now the attributes are all disordered and distorted. There are still some ways you can glimpse the image, but what you see now is all the more monstrous for it. It’s not wrong to speak of the image being there – but it’s not what it was meant to be.



⁷⁵ 1 John 3:2: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

⁷⁶ Deutschlander, Daniel M. *Grace Abounds: The Splendor of Christian Doctrine*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2015: 169.



I believe in man, redeemed by the Son

All this [Christ] did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally.⁷⁷

In his *Magnifica Humanitas*,⁷⁸ Pope Leo XIV speaks beautifully about the dignity and value of man in an age where technology can increasingly imitate human attributes and activities. There's much that he writes that we might agree with. But his reason for the *magnificence* of humanity seems limited to First Article truths. *What makes man special? God created us.*⁷⁹

But an anthropology that's limited to the First Article will never be a firm foundation for human value. Our Ash Wednesday liturgy is a powerful reminder of that:

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God created us to know joy in fellowship with him, to love all people, and to live in harmony with all creation. But sin separates us from God, our neighbors, and creation, and so we do not enjoy the life our Creator intended for us.⁸⁰

Our value and worth aren't just found in the fact of our creation. Our value is found in our identity, and our identity is found in our relationships – our relationship with God and with those around us. On February 11th of this year, James Van Der Beek died

⁷⁷ *Luther's Catechism*, 5.

⁷⁸ "Magnificent Humanity." Pope Leo XIV released his first encyclical in May 2026 with the stated purpose of "Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence." Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas: On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence*, encyclical letter (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, May 15, 2026).

⁷⁹ It's worth noting how imprecise and unspecific he is about the *creating* itself. In nearly 100 printed pages (as I download it), the only reference to a specific Genesis account is to Babel (paragraph 7), and the only time Eden is mentioned is in terms of the heavenly Jerusalem as a "new Eden" (paragraph 242). Mankind is repeatedly spoken of as being "created by God" or being "willed" by him, but without any reference to God's special and unique act of creation in Genesis 2:7.

⁸⁰ From *The Ash Wednesday Confessional Rite: Introduction to Confession*, downloaded from <https://builder.christianworship.com/>.

from cancer. He was known as an actor, not a theologian, but less than a year before he died, he made some keen observations that have been viewed millions of times since:

When I was young, I used to define myself as an actor, which was never really all that fulfilling. And then I became a husband, and that was much better. And then I became a father, and that was the ultimate. I could define myself then as a loving, capable, strong, supportive husband, father, provider, steward of the land that we're so lucky to live on, and for a long time that felt like a really good definition to the question, who am I, what am I. And then this year I had to look my own mortality in the eye. I had to come nose to nose with death. And all of those definitions that I cared so deeply about were stripped from me. I was away for treatment, so I could no longer be a husband who was helpful to my wife. I could no longer be a father who could pick up his kids and put them to bed and be there for them. I could not be provider because I wasn't working. I couldn't even be a steward of the land, because at times I was too weak to prune all the trees during the window that you're supposed to prune them.

And so I was faced with the question, if I am just a too skinny, weak guy alone in an apartment with cancer, what am I? I meditated, and the answer came through: I am worthy of God's love. Simply because I exist. And if I'm worthy of God's love, shouldn't I also be worthy of my own? And the same is true for you.⁸¹

Replace the phrase "I am worthy of God's love" with "I am an object of God's love", and you have a good starting point for a Christological anthropology.

RIGHTEOUSNESS AS HUMAN IDENTITY

It might strike people as ironic that the more we learn about the composition and attributes of the human creature, the more we struggle to answer what really gives us value, meaning and identity. Martin Luther wouldn't be surprised. He recognized that *righteousness* is a key part of the human identity. It doesn't answer the question, "What is man made of?," but "What is man made for?" His view is summarized: "Human beings are truly human, that is, right or functioning properly (according to the design for human righteousness that God made) when their identity does express itself in the activities that flow from that identity."⁸² That's vastly different from a Darwinian view that sees the only purposes of humanity to be the propagation of our genes or the maximization of our pleasure – or, as Harari categorizes the purpose of human life, "a constant pursuit of power within a universe devoid of meaning."⁸³ Luther saw that righteousness on full display in the creation account, but he made the keen observation that there wasn't just one kind of righteousness. He recognized that our righteousness –

⁸¹ James Van Der Beek (@vanderjames), "What Cancer Taught Me," Instagram video, March 8, 2025.

⁸² Robert Kolb, "Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness: Reflections on His Two-Dimensional Definition of Humanity at the Heart of His Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1999): 456.

⁸³ Harari, *Homo Deus*, 202.

our identity – exists in two dimensions. In Genesis 1–2 we see mankind’s identity both in our righteousness before God (*coram Deo*) and our righteousness before the world (*coram mundo*).

Righteousness Coram Deo

Adam and Eve were gifted *righteousness* at their creation – before they had done anything, God considered them righteous. Luther talks about it as “the innocence of a child” or a “middle position,”⁸⁴ since man was not confirmed in holiness⁸⁵ and was capable of sinning. Created in the image of God, man and woman existed in a state of righteousness and holiness that they had done nothing to earn but had only passively received. God gave it to them as freely as he’d given the air in their lungs and the fruit hanging on the uncultivated trees of Eden. This righteousness flows *from God to us*. Man was made *for* standing in that righteous state before God.

Righteousness Coram Mundo

And man was made to actively live out that righteousness in the world. What does God call his righteous man to do? Increase in number and rule creation (Genesis 1:26). Care for the garden (2:15). Live as *one flesh* with our helpmates as our foremost earthly relationships (2:23-24). Guard each other’s relationships with God (3:11).⁸⁶

This righteousness is an utterly human exercise. In our catechism, we answer the question, “Why is it necessary for our salvation that Jesus is true God and true man?” in this way: “It was necessary for Jesus to be both God and man so that he could be subject to God’s law and keep all the commandments perfectly in the place of all humanity.”⁸⁷ That’s true, but some added clarity would be helpful. Christ didn’t need to be truly God *in order to keep the law perfectly*. He needed to be true God *to be born without sin and to have his death count for all*. But his obedience to the law was a *fundamentally human* calling and exercise. After all, obedience to God’s will was to be a blissful part of human life in Eden, and the Spirit makes clear that Christ’s existence “under the law” is due to his being “born of a woman” (Galatians 4:4).

At times with his own words, at times quoting Pope Francis, Pope Leo XIV asserts that living graciously according to God’s will is a way of *transcending* our humanity, of

⁸⁴ Luther, *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 1–5*, 111–12.

⁸⁵ Luther and others have assumed that if Adam and Eve resisted Satan’s temptations, they would have been “confirmed in holiness” and *non posse peccare*.

⁸⁶ The singular suffix here (צִיְתִּיהָ) has often been read as a reflection that God gave the prohibition against eating the fruit to Adam and faulted him for not properly defending his wife against Satan’s temptation, since he was there *with her* (עִמָּהּ).

⁸⁷ *Luther’s Catechism*, qq. 148, 152–53.

becoming “more than human.”⁸⁸ Far from it. To *be human*, in the God-intended sense, is to live in beautiful righteousness *coram mundo*. To honor our leaders, to love our neighbors, to raise our children and make our spouses feel satisfied and cherished, to bring forth good things from the land in honest ways. When scriptural anthropology preaches righteousness *coram mundo*, we aren’t preaching triumphalism or perfectionism, but we are restoring man’s intended place as a priceless gift that God gives so that we might be blessings to each other and to his world. This is thrilling stuff. This is human stuff. And it’s beyond us, until we find our place at the cross of Christ.

CRUCIFORMED HUMANITY

The Ash Wednesday confessional rite continues:

Therefore, God in his mercy has sent our Lord Jesus Christ to take our place under the law, to suffer for us, and to die the death we deserve. God made Jesus, who had no sin, to be sin for us so that in him, we might become the righteousness of God... As disciples of the Lord Jesus, we are called to struggle against everything that leads us away from love of God and neighbor.⁸⁹

The cross of Christ takes us back to Eden, at least in part. Under Jesus’ cross we stand with a righteousness before God that we have no right to claim on our own. It is as free a gift as the innate righteousness Adam and Eve received in Eden, and we can stand before God just as confidently as they did.⁹⁰ Knowing that our righteousness is an undeserved gift, we view other sinners with the same gracious love of God – the cross doesn’t lead us to elevate ourselves in a class above others, but restores our co-humanity with them. And with our identity as God’s children restored, we find again our purpose and motivation to live righteously as God’s human creatures.

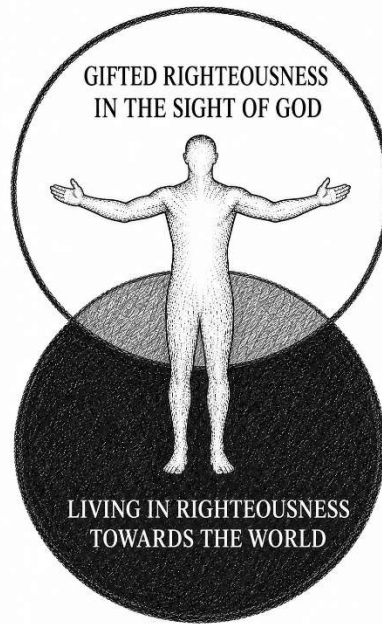
Or as Lutheran theologian Robert Kolb beautifully pictures it: “Human life is cruciform—eyes lifted to focus on God, feet firmly planted on his earth, arms stretched out in mutual support of those God has placed around us. Having the focus of our lives directed toward Christ inevitably extends our arms to our neighbors.”⁹¹

⁸⁸ Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas*, pars. 127–28.

⁸⁹ From *The Ash Wednesday Confessional Rite: Introduction to Confession*, downloaded from <https://builder.christianworship.com/>.

⁹⁰ 1 John 3:1: “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”

⁹¹ Kolb, “Luther on the Two Kinds of Righteousness,” 455–56.



It's a small gift of providence that today is the festival of St. Matthew. The whole festival is a beautiful setting to preach the two kinds of righteousness, but the Second Reading is an especially fitting text for proclaiming this truth in a clear, doctrinal and empowering way:

⁴But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. ⁶And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, ⁷in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— ⁹not by works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (Ephesians 2:4-10)

God takes us living dead people who were “by nature objects of God’s wrath” (Ephesians 2:3 EHV) and makes us alive in Christ. He imputes to us the incomparable riches of his grace in Christ with no aid or contribution of our own. Now standing in that righteousness *coram Deo*, we are created anew to live in righteousness *coram mundo*. God used his hands to fashion man in the Garden. Now his grace on the cross makes us his handiwork again. We might not *see* our purpose when we look at our lives, but God teaches us to *believe* that this is what we are created for. Here is true Christological humanity.



I believe in man, renewed by the Spirit

*But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.*⁹²

I buried her mom, then her dad. A few months later we sat in my office telling stories of her father's last days and the privilege of hearing him talk about how much he looked forward to being in heaven with Jesus. That's when she broke down sobbing. It wasn't the fresh grief from losing her dad. Through the tears she let me know how devastated she was that her mom wasn't in heaven, too. Her mom had had Alzheimer's. Do you follow her logic? That disease destroyed her mother's brain. She watched as it robbed her mom of her past. She concluded that that meant her mom didn't just lose the memories of first dates and holding her babies, summer vacations and family recipes; she lost her faith. She lost Jesus.

So together in my office we grabbed hold of our skulls and reflected on something: what we held between our fingers were our *brains*, not our *souls*. There's a difference. It's worth noting that current neuroscience struggles with questions about the intersection between things like our *brains*, *minds* and *selves*, too. There is something about our existence as self-conscious beings that pure materialism can't explain. If – as a materialistic worldview asserts – we're nothing more than bits of matter and electricity reacting to stimuli and impulses dancing between neurons, then why do we *feel* anything – and *where*, exactly, are we feeling it? Why are we aware of anything, instead of having all our reactions “go on in the dark”?⁹³ How do you explain what the hymnwriter describes as the “mystic harmony, linking sense to sound and sight”?⁹⁴ The

⁹² *Luther's Catechism*, 5.

⁹³ Goff, Philip. “The Mystery of Consciousness Is Deeper Than We Thought.” *Scientific American*. Accessed February 19, 2026. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-mystery-of-consciousness-is-deeper-than-we-thought/>.

⁹⁴ *Christian Worship* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2021), 505 “For the Beauty of the Earth,” v. 3.

best answer science currently proposes is that the sheer complexity of the processes taking place between neurons causes consciousness to emerge, like magnetism arises from a magnet. But that theory doesn't offer any explanatory value; there's no reason that *complexity* should create *consciousness*.⁹⁵ Is it proper to attribute this self-consciousness⁹⁶ to the soul? We wouldn't be the first Lutherans to do so;⁹⁷ at least one prominent neurosurgeon would agree.⁹⁸ But a measure of caution would be good.

It's hard to speak specifically about the relationship between our physical and spiritual elements; again, God speaks about the reality of our minds and our souls but doesn't draw the clear lines we'd like to see. God describes the animals he made as נִפְשׁוֹת;⁹⁹ the Teacher refers to animals as having a רוּחַ.¹⁰⁰ It might be permissible to speak of animals having *souls*, but there's something different about the *human soul*. Jeske and Lawrenz observe that in the Genesis account, we don't find the difference between man and animal souls in the Hebrew vocables the Spirit employs:

When used in connection with man's creation, נִפְשׁוֹת הָאָדָם indeed means the soul which makes him a living being. It is not the term, however, but the manner of its impartation which indicates the distinctiveness and the superior dignity of man's נִפְשׁוֹת. The animals became living creatures by a divine fiat (Ge 1:20,24). Concerning man we are told that the LORD God very personally "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life."¹⁰¹

What we *can* say is that God blessed man alone with what we might call a "spiritual soul" – that is, one that's created for relationship with God that is effected by the Holy Spirit.

⁹⁵ A parallel: An Amazon warehouse is incredibly complex. Orders – data or stimuli – are constantly pouring in, setting in motion countless strings of reactions along programmed and predictable lines. Various "cells" each have a job to do and execute them in a self-sufficient way. The whole of the parts cooperates to respond to the external stimuli. But none of that leads to some cohesive consciousness; it never becomes an Amazon aware-house.

⁹⁶ Some draw a helpful distinction between the *consciousness* of animal life and the *self-consciousness* that seems unique to humans.

⁹⁷ Cf. pages 305-306. Hoenecke, Adolf. *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*. Vol. 2. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009.

⁹⁸ Wilder Penfield, an internationally respected neurophysiologist and brain surgeon, confessed: "I conclude that it is easier to rationalize man's being on the basis of two elements [i.e., a physical *and* spiritual component] than on the basis of one." Cooper, John H. *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*. (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1989), p. 209.

⁹⁹ Cf. Genesis 1:20,21. Some see this as more of a technical term for "living agents."

¹⁰⁰ Ecclesiastes 3:19, though admittedly this can be simply in keeping with the poetry and "under-the-sun-ness" view of Ecclesiastes.

¹⁰¹ Carl J. Lawrenz and John C. Jeske, *A Commentary on Genesis 1–11* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004), 102.

A RESPONSIVE SOUL

It was the same thought Luther expressed when he quoted the saying, “Heaven was not made for geese.”¹⁰² What he meant is that mankind alone is blessed with a capacity to be converted, passive though that capacity may be. We are beings with responsive souls that God has created for a communicative relationship with him.¹⁰³ The Confessors, too, saw this as an essential part of our humanity when they declared that “only the human being” is “capable of conversion.”¹⁰⁴

That communal relationship with our triune God is effected through the Gospel, the power of God proclaimed in Word and sacrament. We observe that the Gospel “works in both a psychological and supernatural manner.”¹⁰⁵ That means the Gospel doesn’t just go to work on ears that hear and brains that process. Through the means of grace, the Spirit speaks to our souls in a spiritual way to turn us back towards our Creator.

And more than that. The Spirit doesn’t just *speak to* us. On the sixth day, God breathed his breath into man, and Adam became a living being. He bore the image of God for the world to see. We ought not miss the connection when God tells us that the Holy Spirit – God’s πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον, his holy breath – lives in us now.¹⁰⁶ The same life-giving Spirit¹⁰⁷ who animated man as the image of God now is present in us again and makes us God’s temples here on earth.

We cannot explain that, but we treasure it and practice it. No human being is excluded from a relationship with their Savior due to the ravages of a disease, the challenges of cognitive impairment or the lack of development that marks our earliest months. We baptize babies and welcome severely autistic children into our worship and read to memory-ward-bound members with the same confidence. These are “creatures that can be converted;” or better yet, sheep that can hear – and know – their Shepherd’s voice.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰² Quoted in Schulz, *Theological Anthropology and Sin*, 70.

¹⁰³ My working title for this essay was simply, “You.” Some Lutheran theologians have argued that our existence as individuals created for personal and responsive relationships with God – a *dialogical personalism* in which God speaks to us and invites us to respond – is the defining feature of what it means to be human, and that Luther’s anthropology is best understood as an “anthropology of responding.” Cf. Schulz esp. 80-81.

¹⁰⁴ FC SD II.22, in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 548.

¹⁰⁵ Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, *Dogmatics Notes*, Vol 2, 110.

¹⁰⁶ 1 Corinthians 6:19: “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?”

¹⁰⁷ John 6:63: “The Spirit gives life” (τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν τὸ ζῳοποιούν)

¹⁰⁸ John 10:14.

FROM SELF-CREATION BACK TO FORMATION

In his *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, Carl Trueman diagnoses our age as one characterized by the *psychological man*. Rather than finding our identity in “outwardly directed activities” – that is, what we do as members of our societies, faith communities or economies – we look inward in the hopes of finding our identity in our own psychological happiness¹⁰⁹ and expect the world outside of us to conform itself to whatever reality we find within us.¹¹⁰ When he observes that

individual personal identity is not ultimately an internal monologue conducted in isolation by an individual self-consciousness. On the contrary, it is a dialogue between self-conscious beings. We each know ourselves as we know other people,¹¹¹

he’s expressing a truth we see in the creation account. Man receives his identity in his relationship to God and being known by him; likewise in the relationship between man and woman.

That’s a truth the Church embodies and restores. When, as Trueman laments, our cultural institutions are increasingly places where people go “to perform, not to be formed,”¹¹² they allow people to carry a burden of *creating themselves* that we were never meant to carry. The Church treats people as humans when we apply the Word of God to each other as he commands and privileges us to, allowing us to receive our proper identity from God, through each other.

It’s a striking thing how rarely God says what I want and expect him to say. Rather than calling his people to gather together so that we can each hear his Word, receive the sacrament and praise God,¹¹³ Scripture regularly puts such an emphasis on what we do for each other. We meet physically together at a set place and time as God’s people so that we can encourage one another and spur each other on towards an active righteousness *coram mundo*,¹¹⁴ to speak and sing to each other with the Spirit’s words¹¹⁵

¹⁰⁹ Trueman, Carl R. *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020, 44-45.

¹¹⁰ Trueman, *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 54.

¹¹¹ Trueman, *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 56.

¹¹² He especially cites schools and churches. Trueman, *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 49.

¹¹³ Though he certainly calls us to this as well and the proper administration of Word and sacrament are rightly seen as the marks of the Church. Acts 2:42 is a beautiful example of a focus on Word, sacrament and prayer... that also seamlessly includes the sharing-life-and-identity-together of the Christian Church.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Hebrews 10:24,25: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

¹¹⁵ Cf. Ephesians 5:18-20: “Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

as we admonish and teach each other.¹¹⁶ In calling us to do this, God gives us a measure of dependency on each other and calls us to offer ourselves as gifts to each other. He frees us from a need to fashion our own identity apart from reality and brings us back into a life of being conformed to our intended design. He uses each of us to bring one another back into our long-lost identity.^{117, 118}

HEAVEN ISN'T THE END OF THE WORLD

Martin Luther rightly explains the culmination of the Spirit's work in the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed this way: "On the Last Day [the Holy Spirit] will raise me and all the dead and give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ."¹¹⁹

Heaven – the abode of God where the souls of believers exist after death – is a joy to look forward to, but it isn't the end of the human story. God created the human creature for an eternal, righteous, embodied life together with him. God's goal in calling us by his Spirit is to fully restore that humanity to us again. While we can't picture what that existence will be like,¹²⁰ it will be bodily – and we will experience it with *our* bodies.¹²¹ And it's not surprising to read at the end of Scripture God describing it with words so similar to the beginning.¹²²

¹¹⁶ Cf. Colossians 3:16: "Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts."

¹¹⁷ While he's speaking more in sociological terminology, Trueman's concluding point still stands: "If the struggle for Christianity is the struggle for the nature of human selfhood, then it is worth noting... that selves are socially constructed and only come to full self-consciousness in dialogue with other self-consciousnesses, is of great importance." *Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, 404.

¹¹⁸ Writing this section calls to mind a forgotten encouragement from a friend who served as a Catholic priest. At nearly every child's baptism (with the parents' permission), he would have all the other children of the congregation gather around the font as well. He would take a moment to remind them of their baptisms that brought them into God's family and then explain that this child was now being baptized into the same family of faith – they should now see this one as their little brother or sister. The whole thing struck me at first as shifting the focus too much away from the chief work of baptism as God brings us into his family, but I appreciate it much more now than when I first heard it. Emphasizing our Spirit-given baptismal identity through practices like this, godparents or sponsors (no matter the age of the baptized), and congregational promises to the baptized perhaps serves an *especially* needed purpose in our individualistic age.

¹¹⁹ *Luther's Catechism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2017), 5.

¹²⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:35,36.

¹²¹ Job 19:26,27 and Romans 8:11.

¹²² Consider the Edenic imagery in Revelation 22:1-5.

Scripture teaches us to point *past* heaven to the day that God creates a new created order, a new physical existence “where righteousness dwells.”¹²³ The future we’re made for and look forward to isn’t a spiritual one “in the clouds” – nor a disembodied and digital one in “the cloud.” Our anthropology has a *teleology*, a purpose and a point: the blessed communion between God and his embodied people in a good creation. That gives us motivation for the proper use of and respect for our bodies now, dying as they may be.¹²⁴ And it gives us a needed reminder. What we need isn’t simply *improvement* or *progress*. We need to be remade. We need to die to our dying selves and to be raised with a resurrection into a newness of life.

The physical resurrection from the dead isn’t some happy ending tacked on to the end of human existence. It’s the culmination of everything that God has been doing since the beginning. He breathed the breath of life into our dust. He sent his Son as the new image to redeem us. He breathed life into us anew when he brought us to faith and began to renew his image. And one day, our whole self – body and soul – will stand completely renewed as the triumphant culmination of the Spirit’s work. At the end of *Sapiens*, after marveling at mankind’s progress and prowess that exists in a supposedly meaningless universe, Harari ends his book with what’s meant to be a haunting and unanswerable question: “What do we want to want?”¹²⁵ But there *is* something we want. St. Paul reminds us that we groan for this broken world to be set right; even creation itself groans for this.¹²⁶ All people do, whether they have words for it or not. God gave us the words to name it for them when he stood face to face with death on the outskirts of Bethany and said: “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25). God teaches us to believe that it’s the nature of mankind to be formed by the Spirit through the means of grace to serve his eternal purpose of a blessed life with him.

¹²³ 2 Peter 3:13

¹²⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:12-17, esp. v. 13b-14: “The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also.” Paul reminds us that knowing that our bodies will have a use beyond this life leads us to use them well.

¹²⁵ Harari, *Sapiens*, 420.

¹²⁶ Consider Romans 8:19, 22: “For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed.... We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”

The Church Confesses Man

What does this mean?

Anthropology is storytelling. Some anthropologies tell the story of humans as merely a higher animal whose life has no intrinsic meaning or value, destined to sink back into meaninglessness. Some anthropologies tell the story of mankind in terms of his ever-changing social relationships as he exists within the state, the economy or the family unit. But they aren't *just* stories. They're belief systems. They're faiths.

The importance of knowing the right way to define the human creature isn't going to go away. Harari sees the rapid advancement of technology bringing a new problem for mankind to reckon with: "superfluous people."¹²⁷ Technology will eliminate the need for hands to hold a rifle or pull a factory lever. At the same time, it seems likely that the decay of the family structure (and other social structures) will continue to advance. There's no reason to think that the path we're on will have a natural course correction – apart from God, seeing our existence as *meaningless* is neither new nor without reason.¹²⁸

The solution isn't to present a rational argument for human rights or the dignity of mankind. It's not even to act like a materialist worldview of man and a scriptural one have much in common and that "we all really view humanity the same way." It's clear that we don't. The solution is to recognize that our confession of faith tells a completely different story: Mankind is a special creation of God. We're given definition as we exist *under him, over creation, in relationship* with others. Created in his image but now fallen, God has again sent his image in the person of Christ Jesus into this world in the likeness of sinful flesh to redeem and restore us. God renews his image in us through faith now and will restore his fallen creation at the culmination of all things. Until then, we have purpose and meaning as we receive his righteousness through faith and live in righteousness towards our families, our fellow humanity and all creation. We believe and teach these things. They are our confession. And confessions are meant to be confessed.

We can proclaim that faith clearly. The church does so when we speak clearly about all of existence as a special creation of God who called all things into being by divine fiat and formed man from the dust of the ground. It does so when we don't hesitate to point out the specific and wondrous callings God gives us to live out righteousness as men and women, parents and children, citizens and neighbors. It proclaims it when we preach that man isn't in need of improvement, but salvation. When we point to death as the terrible wages of sin that we rightly mourn. And above all, when we point to

¹²⁷ Harari, *Homo Deus*, 322.

¹²⁸ Ecclesiastes 1:1. As well as the following 221 verses.

Jesus, the Son of God and his very image, who lived, died and rose to restore our lost humanity.

We can practice it, privately and publicly. Pray for the babies carried by the pregnant women of the congregation and rejoice in every baptism. Welcome those with special needs into the worship service, even when – especially when! – it takes extra effort to recognize and honor their humanity. Rebuke racism as the affront against God that it is. Honor the poor equally with the wealthy. Hold the Supper in high regard as the Lord comes to embodied people in an embodied way. Rejoice in the gift of marriage as a reflection of Christ – and mourn its dissolution as a true tragedy. Grieve with those who grieve, but grieve with hope. And I’d suggest that many of the historic practices of the Christian Church help tell the story of our anthropology: the sooty dust of Ash Wednesday (don’t hide the tears as you smudge it on the heads of your own wife or children), the eager vigil anticipations of Christ’s birth and his resurrection, standing in the presence of the Gospel, the remembrance of those in heaven on All Saints as we let their names sound out on earth because we know they live with God. These have no divine command, but much like mankind they exist in a middle position: they are earthy things, yet they’re filled with spiritual truths, and many find them to have great blessing.

And remember that it’s not just that we have a *better* story or that we have the *true* story. It’s that when we proclaim these truths, God is *effecting and accomplishing that story through the church’s proclamation*. We don’t just ascend into pulpits and walk into classrooms and meet people in coffeeshops to proclaim God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. When we confess his works, we’re also confessing what it means to be human – and God works through that proclamation to *restore* humanity in the image of its triune Maker.



Mequon was a good place to learn anthropology. I’m grateful for the lessons God blessed me with through the writings of Martin Luther and Francis Pieper and at the feet of John Lawrenz and Richard Gurgel and so many others. But it was also a good place to learn anthropology in a different way. On Call Day I was assigned to serve what was then Calvary Lutheran Church,¹²⁹ just down the road. While serving there I had the privilege of sitting with a forty-three-year-old man. He wasn’t worried about his pancreatic cancer diagnosis – after all, he was strong and he would beat it. And he wasn’t worried about things like his soul or heaven or hell. After all, he and “the big guy were just fine.” Never mind the fact that he hadn’t been part of our Christian community since the day twenty years earlier when a pastor had loved him enough to talk to him about the sin of adultery he was living in. Or that now his wife was in the process of divorcing him for the wretch of a husband that he was. He wasn’t troubled

¹²⁹ In 2017, Calvary merged with Trinity Lutheran Church (South Mequon) to form Christ Alone Lutheran Church.

by his lack of righteousness in the sight of God or the sight of man. He was a ruined and dying man in Adam's likeness, but he couldn't see it yet.

He would. The more he saw his body returning to dust, the more he thought about the One who made us from it. He understood it in stages. He went from telling me not to give him a funeral (*Just throw me in the ground somewhere, I'm not worth the fuss.*) to making me promise to give him the biggest and best Christian funeral I could (*Pastor, a lot of my friends don't know about Jesus. You tell them.*). He looked up one day and asked me if Jesus gave him his cancer just to bring him back to faith. What do you even say to that? But I didn't need to say anything. Tim just lay back down, closed his eyes and said, "I like to think that he did." And smiled.

The next day he called in his wife and kids and told them that he didn't want to leave them, but he wasn't afraid to die anymore – he told them that even though he hadn't been okay with God, God washed away his sins and made him his child. He apologized for not being the father and husband he should be. He told them, *That wasn't your fault; it was my fault.* He apologized for not taking them to church and asked them to promise they'd start going. *I know I'm going to die, but I just want to know that one day I'll see you in heaven, too.* And here he was: this dying dust, ruined by sin. And at the same time, he looked so much like Jesus. "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day" (2 Timothy 4:16).

And the wonderful true story that began with God forming Adam from the dust of Eden and Eve from his rib continues. The day before Tim died, I prayed with him one last time. No cancer is easy, but his was especially hard. We'd begin praying when suddenly his body would seize up with pain and he'd let out a string of words that weren't exactly hymns. And he'd look up with tears in his eyes and say in the most honest and simple way: *I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't talk like that. It just hurts so much.* But not for much longer. We prayed that Jesus would hurry up and take him home. It's hard to wait for the promised end of our stories. Along the way, life is filled with so many great blessings and unexpected joys and incredible privileges. Days of health and happiness, service and adventures, falling in love and raising children. And we have so many things to ask forgiveness for and so many reasons to give thanks. But even when those are stripped away, the greatest ones remain: we get to hear of the Father's love, accomplished by the Son and made ours by the Spirit; we get to hear grace and show mercy and hold out hope for others as we wait for Jesus. We get to be human. I believe it.

Praise be to God the Father, who, in Adam, made us in His image.

Praise be to the Son, who again earned for us the renewal of that image.

*Praise be to the Holy Spirit, through whom that image, in turn, begins to be renewed in us.*¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Johann Gerhard, *Succinct and Select Theological Aphorisms in Twenty-Three Chapters: Containing the Core of All Theology, Drafted and Adapted for Use in Scholastic Disputations* (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2018), aphorism 75, p. 69.

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Bible Study Resources

Supplemental Bible study materials based on this essay are available at <https://bit.ly/SeifertAnthropology> or through the QR code above.

(Lord-willing, you won't be prompted to prove that you are really a human if you click on the link.)