

**Reaction to Rev. Brett Krause’s Essay
“The Goal of All of God’s Ways: Man as the Image of God”**

Happy the Elephant is not a person. Such was the (merely!) 5-3 ruling from the highest court of the state of New York four years ago. The Nonhuman Rights Project had sued to free Happy from her “wrongful imprisonment” in the Bronx Zoo, because—they argued—Happy is a person. She demonstrates self-awareness by being able to recognize herself in a mirror, in addition to the other advanced social behaviors seen in elephants, such as the custom of grieving death.

But as comical as such legal proceedings sound, let’s not lose the plot. This is what happens if we try to define “humanness” or “personhood” according to a threshold of cognitive functions that can be carried out or according to a measure of perceived social utility. The inevitable conclusion to such an approach for determining a being’s value would have to be that some animals—and all Large Language Models—are simply more human and more of a person than many actual human persons. Some human beings are simply unable to recognize themselves in a mirror, let alone produce speech or grieve—things non-humans can do to some degree. Treating non-humans as humans and non-persons as persons, while simultaneously treating the most vulnerable of human persons as neither humans nor persons—that’s what naturally happens in a world that’s lost the ability to define the unique creature that human beings are, made in the image of God.

And so, Pastor Krause, your reminder is an important one. “We’re fighting a different battle today.... Never before has man questioned on such a fundamental level what man actually *is*, and so, what it actually *means* to be human” (28). So, as you’ve shown us, the broad understanding of the image of God is a God-send in times like ours. It’s always been Scripture’s teaching, and Lutheran theologians have always recognized there was still something important left within human beings even after the fall—though admittedly they weren’t always agreed with each other as to how worthwhile it was to speak of the image of God in terms of the broad sense. In our day there can be no such question.

Still one might wonder—do we actually need to speak of the image of God in a broad sense to respond to these contemporary ethical questions? Don’t we have other Scriptural arguments to level against transhumanism, posthumanism, all dehumanizing bioethical positions, and whatever else might arise? Perhaps. But think of how we teach the Sixth Commandment in Catechism or BIC. We *could* start the lesson by responding in succession to every Sixth-Commandment sin we’ve ever heard of. But far better is the way we likely handle the lesson—we start by taking a step back and letting people hear how God defines marriage and what makes it special, then we get to the specific ethical questions. Our treatment of life and humanness and personhood issues ought to follow the same pattern. Certainly we *could* respond to each ethical question that emerges in society in a reactive *ad hoc* manner. But don’t we do better to start by taking a step back and letting people hear how God defines human beings and what makes them special? Don’t we do better by starting with the image of God?

But thank you, Pastor Krause, for not just pointing us to our need to define what a human being is, but for also teaching us how to do it—by focusing on God’s *telos* for human beings. You covertly slipped in a nice philosophy lesson for us as you demonstrated the benefit of defining things *teleologically*, a tradition going back to Aristotle. We don’t define humanness or personhood by coming up with a list of necessary-and-sufficient features an individual must have to be part of the category. We look at a creature’s *telos*—what God designed it for.

Due to sin, none of us are able to come close to reaching the *telos* for which we were created—apart from drastic direct divine intervention. Due to the effects of sin, some of our human race may be so impaired that they may seem to reach no *telos* at all in this world. But that doesn't negate the fact that all of us human creatures remain of a human nature that is designed by God for a *telos*, and in that sense—broadly speaking—bear God's image. Sin has certainly devastated the image of God in people, rendering it near unrecognizable, but “the God who speaks has not changed his goal” (33). So all human beings are still of a nature that is, very broadly speaking, designed toward that goal. And in that image of God (in the broad sense) and for the sake of the restoration of the image of God (in the narrow sense) all such human life, then, has an inherent worth.

By the way, let's keep this teleological way of defining things in our back pocket for the next time we face the “gotcha” question of how to define “man” or “woman” in a way that includes everyone that should be included and no one who shouldn't be. Regardless of whether the effects of sin prevent an individual man or woman from meeting such a *telos*, each man or woman is still of a nature which is designed toward the respective *telos* of “man” or “woman.”

But back to the point. Yet as necessary as “broad talk” about the image of God has now become, “there will always be,” as you've reminded us, Pastor Krause, “‘a need for the narrow.’ For, we cannot tell the story of salvation without it” (28). For, whatever we might still have from our original creation, we've lost anything that could contribute even in the slightest to our conversion or to our salvation. All of that had to come to us from outside ourselves—from Christ, who is the image of God.

In reading from non-Lutherans, one often encounters the expression “image bearer.” It's certainly the non-Lutherans' favorite term for upholding the dignity of human beings—and it has to be. They have no other meaningful way to uphold it. The Calvinist denies that Christ's death is for all and that the Spirit desires to work in the hearts of all—to them only God's first-article gifts have anything universal about them. The Arminian and the Roman Catholic deny the severity of the fall. So they downplay what Christ's death does and what the Spirit accomplishes in the heart while focusing on what remains of those first-article gifts—as if that rubble of God's image is what we just have to “tap into” in order to save ourselves.

Lutherans too can fully affirm the gift God has given all people as broad-sense bearers of his image—but perhaps Lutherans alone recognize that Scripture does not limit itself to this way of upholding human dignity. We see the value every human has on the basis of all three articles—all created in the image of God, all redeemed by Christ, all desired for the Spirit's work in their hearts.

So thank you, Pastor Krause—even as the topic you led us in today was primarily a first-article topic, you delivered God's gifts to us in all three articles, and for that we are thankful. You showed us the image of God as a wonderful gift we still have from our Creator, even though the most important part of it by far was lost through sin; as a wonderful gift achieved for us by our Redeemer; as a wonderful gift restored in us by our Sanctifier which will be fully realized in eternity.

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A few questions that could be talked about...

- What might be the best way to speak of the image of God—simply and briefly—that does justice to both its broad and narrow senses? Is there a favorite illustration?
- Should the image of God and the innate striving of humans for a *telos* form a “soft apologetic” for the Christian faith? (Hard apologetics argues that Christianity gives a *true* account; soft apologetics argues that Christianity gives a *better* account.)
- Should the image of God receive a greater emphasis in how we speak about vocation?