



PEER COMMENTARY

On Being Human and Humans Being in God's Image: A Dialogue with Catherine L. McDowell

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Editor's Note: The following is a commentary on Catherine L. McDowell, "On Being Human: Some Biblical and Theological Reflections," *Dignitas* 30, no. 3 (2023): 3–7.

Catherine McDowell places the doctrine of the image of God at the center of the overarching biblical narrative, and in so doing grounds the doctrine in the larger story of redemption. This is a needed reminder as too often, the image of God is only discussed in sterile considerations of human ontology or personhood in isolation from the doctrine's importance to the Bible's larger story of God pursuing lost humanity. In a culture searching for purpose and what it means to be human, discussing the image of God in the context of the Christian message of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration provides a more compelling vision of the doctrine.

The importance of placing the image of God in the context of the Bible's narrative for all humanity is seen when contrasted with the competing materialistic metanarratives of human life. For example, the enormously popular 2018 novel *Where the Crawdads Sing* by American zoologist Delia Owens has an incoherent moral message. The protagonist in the novel is Kya Clark, a poor girl who is abandoned by her entire family in the swamps of eastern North Carolina, yet she grows up to be a famous and successful author. Kya's enemy is a young man named Chase, who sexually assaults her. In the novel, Owens simultaneously asserts materialistic naturalism as the overarching narrative of life and yet insists Chase's actions

are morally abhorrent. The reader wants Chase to get his comeuppance, but if materialistic naturalism is true, why is what he did wrong? If humans emerged as champions in the struggle to survive, Hobbes was right when he said, "And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,"¹ and Chase is a just predator doing what predators do.

In contrast, McDowell explains the worth and value of humanity as the central object of God's love. Her comparison and contrast between the ancient Near Eastern cosmological stories and the Biblical account illustrates the profound way in which the Bible dignifies humans. As McDowell notes, in the *Atrahasis Epic* humans are an afterthought. Likewise, the dominant metanarrative in the industrialized west is that to be human is to be merely a member of a species

only existing for the moment as a bubble on the ocean of time. Richard Dawkins said that when he looks at the universe, he sees a world that looks as “if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.”²² The doctrine of the image of God contrasts both ancient near eastern paganism and modern materialistic naturalism—to be human *is not* to be an accident or an annoyance, but to be the pinnacle of God’s creation.

McDowell rightly asserts that to be human means we are appointed with tasks and responsibilities that give life purpose and meaning. She says, “Image (*tselem*) and likeness (*demut*) in Genesis 1 also imply royal status. God commissioned humanity to rule over and subdue creation (Gen 1:26, 28).” She provides evidence for this assertion in ancient references to statues that kings would set up as *images* of their authority. Likewise, God has placed humans in the world as an image of his authority. Our purpose is rightly to exercise this delegated authority in a manner that brings glory to God, not to ourselves.

McDowell’s argument could have been strengthened by affirming that the image of God is a status and not a function, and that this status is coextensive with all of humanity; there are no humans who are *not* made in the image of God, including the weak, sick, handicapped, or developmentally challenged. While I affirm McDowell’s careful background work, we should also insist that should one become incapacitated by the vicissitudes of life and not be able to exercise dominion, that person is still in the image of God and thus worthy of honor and protection.

The importance of stressing the image of God as a status is seen when contrasted with the concept of developmental personhood. Developmental personhood is the philosophical idea that human personhood and human life are separate ontological categories and only human *persons* deserve protection, but human *life* does not always deserve protection. Developmental personhood argues that when life begins, one does not possess personhood but develops into a person with moral rights at some later point. At the end of life, one may subsequently lose the status of being a person as certain cognitive

abilities deteriorate. Developmental personhood is the major idea in competition with a Judeo-Christian viewpoint regarding the moral status of prenatal life.

In contrast to developmental personhood, the image of God dignifies every human being. Because the Bible does not give a specific definition of the image of God, the background work by McDowell is extremely helpful. The image of God clearly assigns unique value to human life; humans are the pinnacle of creation, not the awkward outcome of a long, unthinking process. At the most basic level, the fact that humans are made in the image of God means the ethical value of human life does not arise from humanity itself but comes from God. As Dan Heimbach says, The image of God “is a matter of reflecting or expressing something beyond ourselves, which makes it something we cannot generate or lose, do not share with animals, do not control, do not own, and all bear the same regardless of gender, age, intelligence, health, wealth, or social status.”²³ As such, the image of God is not distributed to some more than others. Fundamentally, the image of God is a status, not a function, and it is a status granted to humans by their Creator and not a status humans give to themselves. The image of God is not a status into which humans grow. To be human is to be in the image of God, and the sanctity of human life entails from conception to natural death.

And yet, in discussions of bioethics and the inherent value of human life, it is easy to assert the image of God as an isolated concept apart from the overarching story of the Bible, and here McDowell provides a needed reminder. Indeed, the fall has distorted the image of God, and we exercise our God-given responsibilities in autonomous ways, elevating human desires over God’s glory. And since sin has distorted and ruined humanity’s relationship with God, God himself sent Jesus Christ to solve our sin problem. When we are born again, God’s plan is for us to “be conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom 8:29). We reflect the image of God most when we grow in conformity to Jesus Christ, who is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). McDowell says that when we lay down our lives and become living sacrifices, “we discover the richness

and depth of our humanity and live as God designed.”

To be human is also to be given the gift of biological sex. An essential aspect of the image of God is that “male and female he made them” (Gen 1:27). In a footnote, McDowell comments on Genesis 1:27 and says, “The Hebrew expresses that God created the category ‘human,’ which consists of male and female.” But in our modern context, this is a profound assertion deserving more than a footnote. When God finished creation, including the creation of the biological gender binary, he said that it “was very good” (Gen 1:31). Being created male and female is essentially *good*, and not an evil to be overcome.

Modern transgender theory has bifurcated individual identity into the separate ontological categories of sex and gender. Sex is a matter of biology and relates to DNA, reproductive organs, and external genitalia, while gender is a subjective sense of how one feels. Transgender ideology has strong gnostic, religious overtones and says the *real* person is one’s subjective gender identity. The body is thus treated in an almost alien manner as an evil entity to be overcome in pursuit of the true self. From this perspective, to be human is to view God’s design with hostility. But being in the image of God means being created male or female is equally good. Both males and females share in the image of God. Our purpose is discovered by embracing God’s design and living consistently with it, not treating it as a mistake.

What does it mean to be human? Building on McDowell’s comments, I suggest answering the question as follows: Being human means being created in the image of God. As such, we are assigned tasks as God’s royal representatives on earth, and we are to steward our lives and the earth God has given us in ways that glorify God. The image of God is a status that attaches to every human, regardless of age, gender, ethnic background, or health. Sin has distorted our ability to live as God intended, but Jesus Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection has provided a way for us to be redeemed and to rediscover our true purpose. As part of God’s good design, our biological sex is a gift to be received and not rejected.

Notes

1. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, reprinted from the edition of 1651 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), 99.
2. Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 133.
3. Daniel R. Heimbach, *Fundamental Christian Ethics* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2022), 325.



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