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Genesis 1:14-31

Third Message

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# AN IMAGE FOR GOD'S TEMPLE

*SERIES: OUR STORY OF ORIGINS*

Today is National Sanctity of Human Life Day, a day created by presidential decree in 1983. It is observed on the Sunday closest to January 22, the date in 1973 when the Supreme Court ruled on *Roe v. Wade*, thereby legalizing abortion. The dignity and sanctity of human life are under attack throughout the world. Nearly thirty years ago Francis Schaeffer and Everett Koop presented a film series and companion book, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race* (1979), in which they described the triple threat to human dignity of abortion, infanticide and euthanasia. The three decades since have seen the fulfillment of many of their warnings. Practices once thought taboo are now accepted. Dr Jack Kevorkian brought doctor-assisted suicide to national attention in the early 1990s. Michigan sent him to prison for his actions, but voters in Oregon approved a doctor-assisted suicide measure. Abortion continues unabated at the rate of about 46 million per year worldwide. Though numbers are down in the US, there are still over 1.2 million a year, about a quarter of all pregnancies (excluding those ending in miscarriage or stillbirth). A disturbing trend is that an increasing number of abortions are performed not to terminate pregnancy in general but to terminate the pregnancy of a particular fetus whom prenatal tests show does not measure up in terms of gender or development. In the West, infanticide is usually due to mental illness; our papers regularly carry reports of these shocking stories. But in other countries, infanticide, especially of baby girls, is practiced by the sane, who understand exactly what they are doing.

Western society is confused in its attitude to people. Abortion and euthanasia view life as disposable, yet in other arenas we do everything we can to avoid death, for death is feared. Huge amounts are spent trying to keep people alive at the end of their lives. We can no longer stomach the death of our troops on the battlefield.

What are we to think about human life? Who are we as humans? Are we just animals? Are we disposable? What is our purpose?

Today we continue our analysis of the six days of creation. These days are presented as a highly-structured, artistic, semi-poetic account of how God made an organized cosmos. These days are presented in two sets of three days, two triads of days. God started with a blank slate: the earth was formless and void (1:2). In the first three days he reversed the formlessness of the earth; he formed the physical world, giving it structure by separating light from darkness, the waters below from those above, and the sea from the dry land. In forming the world, God moved from the heavens, to the sea and sky, to the land. Finally he put vegetation on the land, the final structural element required for life. The account of each day is presented in an orderly manner: God's command, the resultant act, statement of fulfillment, naming, evaluation, and evening/morning formula.

In the second triad of days, God fills the cosmos which he has formed. There is the same progression in the successive days from the heavens to the sky and sea to the earth. On each day he fills the realms which he had formed on the corresponding day in the first

triad. On day 1 he formed the day and the night; on day 4 he fills the day with the sun and the night with the moon and stars. On day 2 he formed the sky and the sea; on day 5 he fills the sea with fish and the sky with birds. On day 3 he formed the dry land; on day 6 he fills the land with animals.

The general pattern of the days is the same as those of the first set, with one notable exception. On each of the first three days God had named the new structural elements: day and night, sky, land and sea. God names nothing in the second set of days, for he will delegate this privilege to the human.

## Day Four: Lights

And God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth." And it was so. God made two great lights—the greater light to govern the day and the lesser light to govern the night. He also made the stars. God set them in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth, to govern the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day. (Gen 1:14-19 TNIV)

The first realms formed in the first set of days are the day and the night, so they are the first realms for which God makes the contents: the sun, moon and stars. Day-age advocates propose that these were made on the first day, but became visible only on the fourth day, perhaps due to a reduction in the opacity of a vapor layer over the earth. But the text seems clear: the light appeared on day 1, but these light-bearing bodies were made on day 4. This may pose problems scientifically but not theologically or Biblically for there is more to light than mere photons.

These lights in the heavens have multiple roles. They are to illuminate the earth. They are to govern the day and the night, as rulers over their realms, separating light from darkness. They are to serve as signs, seasons, days and years. These lights mark out time: day and night. More importantly for Israel, they will mark out holy time; the rhythm of Israel's life as she moves back and forth between ordinary time and holy time. To be worshiped is not one of their purposes.

## Day Five: Fish and Birds

And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky." So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." And there was evening, and there was morning—the fifth day. (1:20-23)

The realms created on day two are the waters below and the waters above the vault which God made. The waters above are beyond our observation for the vault marks the outer limit of the physical cosmos. Into the vault have been placed the lights. Across the vault now fly the birds. In the waters below the vault now swim the sea creatures.

The fish and the birds mark a major new stage in creation for they are the first living creatures. A distinctive verb is therefore used here for God's work. God made the vault and he made the lights and he will make the animals, but he creates the sea creatures. The verb "create" (Heb. *bara*) is distinctive: it is only ever used with God as the subject: humans may make but we cannot create. The verb is used in three places in this chapter: in the summary statement (1:1), for the creation of the first living creatures (1:21), and for the creation of the human (1:27). I don't know how God created the living creatures, but, however he did it, "create" is the appropriate verb: living creatures are qualitatively different. I find this hard to reconcile with evolution.

God invokes a blessing upon the fish and the birds, the first instance of blessing in the Bible. To bless means to endow with abundant and effective life, to facilitate success. God will give the birds and fish the potency to fulfill his command to be fruitful and multiply and fill their realms.

### Day Six: Animals

**And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good. (1:24-25)**

The final realm to be filled is the earth itself, the dry land formed on the third day when the waters fled at God's command. For this realm God makes three categories of animals: livestock, wild animals and creepy-crawlies, each according to its kind. Since these are living creatures, like the fish and the birds of the fifth day, the narrator returns to the verb "make" rather than "create."

By midway through the sixth day, the realms of the formed cosmos have been filled with their appropriate residents. The three realms of the inhabited world—sea, sky and land—have been filled with their appropriate living creatures. There is no realm that is empty. After seven acts the cosmos seems complete: it has been formed and filled. But, since the third day of the first set had a second act, we expect the same for the third day of the second set.

### Day Six: Humans

**Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."**

**So God created human beings in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.**

**God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea**

**and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."**

**Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so.**

**God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day. (1:26-31)**

The account of the first 5½ days has been very rhythmic, establishing a pattern. The pattern leads us to expect to read, "Then God said, 'Let the earth produce man according to its kind.' Then God made man according to its kind." But that's not what we find. Instead we read, "Then God said, 'Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness...' Then God created." The pattern is broken in every possible way. I see six ways in which the pattern is broken.

1. The first seven acts have been in response to divine fiat, to God's declaration, "Let it be." But now it is different: now we have divine deliberation, "Let us make." This switch to first person plural continues to keep commentators busy. There are three main interpretations: that it is a plural of majesty, that it refers to the divine council (God's heavenly court), or that it is a premonition of the Trinity. I doubt that it's a plural of majesty because it's not used this way anywhere else. As for the other two, I don't know, and I don't think that's the point. The point is that the pattern is decisively broken. The switch to first person plural emphasizes that the human is the special creation of God, that he is according to God's deliberate intention.

2. The narrator returns from the verb "make" to the verb "create," which he uses three times in v 27. Whereas God makes the animals, he creates the human. God creates the heavens and the earth, that is, the entire cosmos. God creates living creatures. God creates humans. These demarcate a three-level hierarchy of special status: all creation, living creatures, humans.

3. The human is not made according to its kind, but in God's image. Ten times we have been told that things are made according to their kind: the vegetation, the birds and fish, and the animals. To then read that the human is made in God's image can only mean that he is made after God's kind.

4. Each divine declaration has been immediately followed by an action. These have all been given in narrative form, but the creation of the human in response to the divine speech is given in poetry. Many of the narratives of Genesis come to a climax with a poem. This poem has three cola, each with the verb "create."

5. Uniquely among the living creatures, it takes male and female to be the human.

6. Alone of all that he has made, God speaks to the human, not once but twice. He blesses them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." Though God spoke this same blessing over the sea creatures on the fifth day, he did not address these creatures directly.<sup>1</sup> But in v 28 God does speak to the humans in blessing them. He speaks to them again in vv 29-30, informing them of his provision of the plants and trees for food. Of God's ten words, eight are used to bring things into existence. The other two are reserved for addressing the human directly. This is a high honor indeed given the significance of the word in this account.

The creation poem could not express in any stronger terms the special status of the human.

This is in great contrast to the accounts of the prevailing cultures. The Mesopotamian stories all give a similar reason for the creation of mankind. The minor gods, themselves created, complained to the greater gods of all the work they had to do; mankind was created to take over this work. In these accounts, mankind was not part of the original plan; when he was created it was to relieve the gods of their labors. Mankind was created as an afterthought to do hard labor.

I don't know how God created humans, but, however he did it, it was of even greater significance than the creation of the living creatures. Humans are qualitatively different, even more so than living creatures. I find this hard to reconcile with evolution.

## The Image of God

Rather than making the human after its kind, God created him, male and female, after his kind, in his image. What does it mean to be in the image of God, to be created according to God's kind? Many have attempted to identify the characteristics that distinguish us from other living creatures: we are capable of speech, of rational thought, of social organization, and so on. The problem with such approaches is that animals seem capable of some of these things, at least to a limited extent. Parrots can speak; Koko the gorilla could use sign language and understand English words. Certain animals display remarkable intelligence. Some have highly-developed social organization. And what of humans who do not exhibit these characteristics, the developmentally-challenged who cannot speak, who have low intelligence, or have poor social skills? Are they less than human? Are they not in God's image? We share almost all our DNA with chimpanzees. Chemically and genetically we are very similar to the animals, but we all know that we are profoundly different, though in ways not easily accessible to science. There is much more to being human than our DNA, but what is it?

The imaging of God in humanity lies in another direction, that of being representative and representational. The human is God's representative on earth. The Greek word used to translate the Hebrew word used here for image is *eikōn*. Thanks to computers we all now understand that an icon points to something else. The icon doesn't have to look like the thing to which it points; its role is to represent not imitate. Until the advent of graphical user interfaces, an icon was usually found in a sanctuary. In Egypt and Mesopotamia the king was regarded as the image of the deity, but it was only the king who was so regarded. The king didn't look like the deity but represented the deity on earth, ruling on his behalf. Similarly, a temple contained an image of its god, standing in as a representative for the deity. These two concepts were joined in Mesopotamian thought for the focal point of each year was the king's ascent of the ziggurat to the temple on top; there the two images met.

In Genesis 1 there is no mention of a sanctuary within the cosmos. It's as if the whole cosmos is God's sanctuary. Into this sanctuary God places his image to be his representative, both ruling over his kingdom and pointing to him. In chapter 2 we'll see that God places the human in the garden, and I'll argue that the garden is God's sanctuary, but here in chapter 1 the whole earth is the sanctuary. The Mesopotamians and Egyptians understood only the king to be in God's image; all other humans were slaves to the gods and the king. But Genesis understands the human in general to be in God's image. All humans are God's representatives on earth. God created

the whole cosmos, but he doesn't make himself personally visible in this cosmos. Instead he makes himself visible through his representative, the human. The cosmos is God's realm, but he doesn't rule directly. Instead he exercises his rule through the human he has made. The human is God's vice-regent, his viceroy, given rule over all three realms: over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the animals of the land. This is God's purpose for the human (v 26) and part of his blessing upon the human (v 28).

In chapter 2 the human will also be commissioned to administrate the garden; he is the vicegerent. As vice-regent he rules (Lat. *rego*); as vicegerent he manages (Lat. *gero*). Such rule is benevolent not despotic. It is not the vice-regent's world to do with as he pleases. He rules it under trust from God, for it is God's world. He must never forget the "vice-" in his title. We are God's representative presence in the world. The founders of Regent College understood this when they named the school "Regent."

The human is not created as the image of God but in the image of God, as his representative. Nevertheless, there is one who is the very image of God, the Son who is "in the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). The Son's relationship to the Father sets the pattern for the human's relationship to God. It is because the Father has a Son who is his image that they can make one who is in the image. The image-bearing nature of the human on earth is a reflection of the image-sharing nature of the Son in heaven.

Sadly the human will not long remain a wise ruler and administrator. In chapter 3 he rebels against his sovereign and is expelled from the garden; the image is cast out of the sanctuary. By the time of Jesus it is clear that the image is so badly damaged that a new image is required. Jesus Christ is this new image. The Son gave up his equality with the Father in heaven, and took on human form as he came to earth. He who has always been the image of God now became in the image of God as the new human, the man from heaven, the second Adam. In salvation, God takes us out of being in Adam and places us into Christ, out of the old broken image and into the new perfect image. We are thus a new creation. In sanctification, the Spirit is remaking us into God's image perfectly expressed in Christ. In becoming Christ-like we not only become more like God, we become true humans. This is what God saves us and sanctifies us for: to become true human beings. There is no heart so dark, no life so disordered, no personality so deformed that God cannot speak light, order and formation into it. There is no human in whom the image is so marred that God cannot restore it into his image in Christ; there is no one so deeply sunk in Adam the old man that God cannot move him over to being in Christ the new man.

God invites us to return to him, to be placed in Christ, to be reformed by his Spirit, and thereby to become truly human. What does it mean to be truly human? The creation account of Genesis 1 shapes our understanding of God, of the world, of ourselves and of others. We see God as the Creator to whom we as creatures owe our allegiance.

We see the world as God's handiwork that he made for his pleasure. At the end of the sixth day he looks at it all and pronounces it very good. This means that it fulfills the purposes for which he has made it. It's exactly what he wanted it to be when he spoke his words. It is not the end-state which he has in mind, for the last two chapters of the Bible show a new heavens and a new earth that is beyond the state of the first two chapters of the Bible. But we affirm that this world is our Father's world. He loves this world he's made.

We see ourselves as the objects of God's care, created not as an afterthought, but for his pleasure. He loves us whom he has made.

We see others as being also in the image of God. Who matters in this world? Only the beautiful people? The rich? The educated? Even the prophet Samuel fell into looking at the things man looks at, looking at outward appearances. We affirm that all people matter.

To understand what it means to see others as made in God's image we can look at what the Scriptures say about Israel, about Jesus, and about the church, the three stages of redemption history in which God was at work to restore humanity to its intended nature.

God gave his laws to Israel to show them how to live differently as a nation, how to live as a new people. These laws are notable for the care enjoined upon the helpless. Israel is repeatedly commanded to help the poor, the widow, the orphan and the alien. It seems taken for granted that these people will always exist. It's no good simply imagining a world without them, though I'm told it's easy if you try. It's no good railing against the evils of the system that generates such unfortunates. I think that this side of the new heavens and the new earth there will always be such people in our midst. God doesn't seem particularly bothered by their presence in society, but he cares very deeply about how society treats them.

My parents were missionaries in Thailand for nearly forty years. They both worked with lepers. When they went to Thailand in the mid-1950s, leprosy was a feared disease. Lepers were outcasts, forced to live on the outskirts of villages. Most people would do nothing to help them, because Buddhism taught that they were suffering the just desserts of some horrible sin in a previous life. But missionaries came in, bringing the gospel of a God who loves all who are made in his image. Each day missionary nurses would set out, two-by-two, to cycle to a village. Here they would set up under a tree and invite the lepers to come. They touched them, treated their wounds, gave medicines, and shared the gospel. Astonished to hear of a God who loved them, many of these lepers were converted. Filled with gratitude at God's grace they grew into strong Christians. With much time on their hands they taught themselves to read and studied their Bibles. Later my father ran Bible classes for them when they came to the mission hospital for rehabilitation. It's a wonderful story of God's grace to those whom society seeks to dispose of.

Of all the books I've read in the past few years, the one I find myself talking about the most is *The Rise of Christianity*, written by Rodney Stark, a sociologist of religion. His subtitle gives the purpose of his study: how the obscure, marginal Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the Western world in a few centuries. At the time of writing (1996) he described himself as an agnostic. He did not write the book to promote the church or Christianity; he wrote out of professional interest in the sociology of the early church. He writes,

The simple phrase "For God so loved the world..." would have puzzled an educated pagan. And the notion that the gods care how we treat one another would have been dismissed as patently absurd... the idea that God loves those who love him was entirely new... [C]lassical philosophy regarded mercy and pity as pathological emotions—defects of character to be avoided by all rational men. Since mercy involves providing *unearned* help or relief, it was contrary to justice... This was the moral climate in which

Christianity taught that mercy is one of the primary virtues—that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful. Moreover, the corollary that *because* God loves humanity, Christians may not please God unless they *love one another* was something entirely new. Perhaps even more revolutionary was the principle that Christian love and charity must extend beyond the boundaries of family and tribe to "all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 1:2). Indeed, love and charity must even extend beyond the Christian community.<sup>2</sup>

He concludes the book by writing, "Finally, what Christianity gave to its converts was nothing less than their humanity."<sup>3</sup> What an extraordinary statement by an agnostic sociologist of religion! This understanding of God and of humanity turned the world upside down. Richard Dawkins' selfish gene cannot do that.

In the ancient Near East it was only the king who mattered, for he was the only one in the deity's image. Today it might seem that it's only the beautiful, the educated, the rich, the well-born who matter, for they are in society's image; that it's only those with sufficient usefulness and quality of life who should be allowed to live. The Biblical view is that all people matter, no matter how broken; that all are in God's image as his representatives, that all are God's presence on earth.

It is not always easy to discern God's image, but we are easily mistaken. I know a family who used to be here at PBCC whose third child was born with Down's Syndrome. The father was extremely angry at God for this curve ball thrown into his perfect family. But now the family views this child as God's great gift to them, for she has taught them so much about unconditional love. In her God is present in the world.

Let me close with a statement by C. S. Lewis from his remarkable sermon, "The Weight of Glory."

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you say it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare... There are no *ordinary* people.<sup>4</sup>

God calls us to love him, to love his creation, and to love one another. There are no ordinary people. We are all God's presence in the world.

1. "God blessed them and said," (NIV, TNIV) obscures this point. Other versions translate, "God blessed them, saying," (NASB, ESV, JPS). Better still to take the last word (*lēmōr*) as simply introducing direct speech: "God blessed them," (HCSB).

2. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997 [1996]), 211-212.

3. Stark, *Rise*, 215.

4. C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001 [1949]), 45-46.