

Humanity and Sin**Aaron Smith, Ph.D.**

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Humanity and Sin

The triune God has His existence in an eternal decision to be this God: Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer. Humanity, in turn, has its existence in the corresponding act of being His created, reconciled, and redeemed. We must stress that this coordinated event is grounded in a decision on God's part, in His benevolent will, not in any kind of ontological necessity. We are not necessary to God being God.

What makes God to be God is the authority to decide as He does, to be Lord over His living and all other living in relationship to Him.

Humanity is in no way a pantheistic instance of deity, of God living in this form. No, God lives and acts determinatively in the singular, exclusive form of His Word made flesh, in Jesus of Nazareth and Him alone. In Christ, we encounter both genuine divinity and genuine humanity, as we will discuss in Lecture Eleven, precisely as the content and form of God's decision.

He is the subject of God's self-election and object. Our being, then, is simply inclusion in Christ as the object of God's self-determinative will. We have being in Him or, as we talked about last time, in responsive confession of God's reality in Christ, obedient living after His sacrificial life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

The doctrine of the church supplies necessary terms and sets parameters for our understanding of the human being. We do not begin with general humanity and then locate the church as a special, curious collection of individuals taken from this broader genus. It is exactly the other way around. We begin with the specific humanity that takes place in the event of faith, with those called by God and who hear His voice. In the church, we encounter the act of God granting an aptitude to the darkness, which of itself the darkness does not and cannot possess.

Humanity and Sin

*Christ is both the **subject and object** of God's self-election.*

God gives faith, which is to say that He gives the means and power of receiving His gracious, life-sustaining Word.

Humanity and Sin

Humans in Genesis 2:

- Lush provision
- Harmonious living (God - Woman - Creation)

He gives faith, which is to say, He gives the means and power of receiving His gracious, life-sustaining Word. He brings about both the internal and external equipment necessary for humanity to be the objects of His love, both our “souls” and “bodies,” we might say. Or more precisely, God brings about the intellectual and volitional qualities together with the space-time opportunities actually to live before Him in a subordinate, corresponding act of will. Here again, we must locate these observations in Scripture.

Genesis 2–3 form a literary unit. The chapters are set off as a whole by a linguistic cue—a shift away from use of the word “God” in Genesis 1 to the unusual expression “LORD God” beginning in 2:4; by their recapitulation of the creation account; and by their unique setting in the garden of Eden and thematic focus on the human condition. They should not be severed, as we exegetes and theologians often do, but must be treated together if we are to appreciate the full biblical picture of humankind.

Taken together, Genesis 2–3 portray the human as living in a great contradiction, in fact as being a great contradiction. On the one side, human existence is characterized by lush provision. It exists in a world of flowing rivers’ headwaters from which foreign lands and creatures draw life (2:10-14). It is placed in a garden of abundant fruit from which it may eat freely (2:16). Indeed, it’s as if the fruit is there just for the human, made “pleasing to the eye and good for food” (2:9), as it were.

Moreover, the man lives harmoniously with God, with the woman, and with creation. Man’s intimate union with God is depicted in the touching act of God breathing the breath of life directly into his nostrils (2:7). It is in this face-to-face proximity and loving gift that “man became a living being,” the text says. Man’s intimate union with the woman is described in the account of her fashioning from Adam’s rib (vv. 20b-25). Here Adam is referred to simply as “man,” “ish” in Hebrew. Woman is “ishah,” indicating as the equivalents do in English an inherent relationship: ishah is counterpart to ish, woman to man. She is “bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh,” the man says; “she shall be called ‘woman’ / ‘ishah,’ for she is from ‘man,’ ish” (2:23).

The text plays on the words in order to convey the correspondence between these creatures. There is no sense of hierarchy or domination here, but mutuality and even reciprocal definition. Man is man in relation to woman and vice versa.

Humanity and Sin

Humans in Genesis 3:

- Creation
- Man - Woman
- God

Adam's intimate union with creation is expressed in the care he is to exercise over the garden. He tends to the garden, and in a sense it tends to him. He is to work it, and it is to feed him (2:15-16). His efforts yield a crop, as if creation is responsive to the man, ready for his attention and, once again, suited to him.

On the other side, each ring of human relationship is broken as we move to chapter 3. With regards to creation, it will no longer be responsive to the man's efforts. "It will produce thorns and thistles for you," says the Lord God. "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food" (3:18a, 19a). The man now relates to the earth by force; by compulsion and hard labor alone can he bring forth food, for the ground is no longer responsive to him. Even more strongly, the Lord God tells Adam, "through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life" (3:17b).

Similarly, domination, compulsion, and painful toil define interhuman relationship. Concerning man and woman, mutuality and reciprocity are shattered as man now exercises rule over woman. Adam names his counterpart "havvah" or "Eve" (3:20), which act is an exercise of power in the Ancient Near East. It is to bestow identity on to something, as if this is now the man's prerogative relative to the woman.

For her part, Eve, "the mother of all the living," will only bring forth offspring in anguish. "With pain you will give birth to children," the Lord God declares in verse 16. The Hebrew word is the same as that by which Adam's labors are defined. Just as in his characteristic work of bringing forth life from the earth, so also in hers, man and woman experience suffering and strife. From birth to death, life relates to life in dislocation.

The greatest form of this pain, however, is the separation man and woman experience relative to God. The greatest contradiction of human being is just here: The creature is barred from its source of being, from the one who breathes life into it and stands face-to-face with it. Adam and Eve are driven out of Eden and forbidden reentry by the angel and the ever-turning fiery sword (3:23-25).

Humanity lives east of Eden, no longer at the headwaters of existence, but now in the contradiction that it has no basis for being.

The sign of this tragic state is death, which also comes into the picture at every level in Genesis 3. Life persists; creatures come

Humanity and Sin

The fall of humanity into sin is by breaking God's command.

Humanity and Sin

Created in God's image:
 - Reflective of God's own being
 - Potential to be in conscious, vital communion with God and with each other

into being and live for a season, but death stands on the horizon of creaturely existence, reminding it that it derives from nothing and will return to nothing. "For dust you are," the Lord God tells the man, "and to dust you will return" (3:19c). The cause of this dramatic shattering of relational harmony and undermining of creaturely being is described in 3:1-7.

These verses contain the fall of humanity into sin by breaking God's command not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Commentators are divided as to what exactly was forbidden in this act, and why eating of the fruit of this tree was not allowed in the first place. Two conclusions merit restatement in our context.

No doubt that the text is conveying the quintessential human struggle with disobedience. Humanity is constantly tempted to test God's command and the relationship it establishes.

Genesis 1:26-27 teach that we were created in God's "image" and "likeness," that we were endowed with a kind of being reflective of God's own being. We have been made with the potential to be in conscious, vital communion with God and with each other, given those attributes that make such communion possible—reason, empathy, and speech, for starters. But these attributes likewise afford self-deception. It is by the exercise of reason, empathy, and speech that we correspondingly determine our being. It is in thinking, feeling, and speaking that we direct ourselves to the other or remain in isolation from the other, that we determine the degree to which we will be shaped by the other. We sift what is given to our senses in thought, in emotion, and in language, using each to set us in proximity to or at great remove from what we encounter.

The irony of this, of course, is that we are given these faculties by God; and so to exercise them in a way other than that which affirms our dependence upon God, even testing God's command to see how far we might tread in our living outside of His direction, is self-compromising. Anything except gratitude, the use of our faculties to give thanks to God, to acknowledge His sovereignty over us and gladly obey Him, is delusional self-contradiction.

In keeping with this, the second conclusion that students have taken from the account of humanity's fall worth mentioning here has to do with the meaning of "the knowledge of good and evil."

Humanity and Sin

Nahum Sarna
(1923 - 2005)



In his learned commentary on Genesis, Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna interprets this phrase, compellingly in my judgment, to be a merism. Merism is an allusion to a comprehensive construct by reference to its constitutive elements. For instance, “heavens and earth” is a merism, an allusion to the entire cosmos by reference to the realm of planets and stars and to our planet among them.

Similarly, “knowledge of good and evil” is an expression of comprehensive understanding by reference to moral wisdom. It is not enough for the man and woman to have knowledge derived from God. They want God’s knowledge. It is not enough to exist in God’s image. They want to exist as God, to enjoy total understanding of all things and judge right and wrong from an Archimedean vantage point; to place all things, including God, at their discretion to have or not to have, to be in proximity with or at great remove from. Very importantly, it is not the pursuit of greater understanding that the text condemns. The Bible is not anti-intellectual!

It is the presumptuousness of placing God within the specter of our judgment that is the problem.

But in the light of what we just said about disobedience, it is the presumptuousness of placing God within the specter of our judgment that is the problem. It is a self-compromising reversal of our dependency upon God by seizing after divine comprehension. In sum, Scripture’s description of the human being is one of tragic contradiction. Endowed with the faculties to exist in intimate union with God, with each other, and with creation at large, humanity exercises those faculties to stand against God, each other, and the world. We break each ring of fellowship and authentic being by placing ourselves not in deference to the other—not living in the mutuality that defines the triune life of God, as we discussed last lecture—but in domination over the other. The human, crown of God’s creation and singular instance of His image, exists in sin.

Humanity and Sin

Sin is often defined as
“Missing the Mark”



“Sin” is often defined as missing the mark. There is warrant for this, as disobedience takes individual form in the various ways that we fail to live up to God’s will morally and socially. But more fundamentally, sin is the recurrent, dispositional tendency to grasp after a self-actualizing, self-governing kind of existence. It is “original” to us, as Augustine taught. Sin is descriptive of all humankind as evidenced in the account of Adam and Eve. And, as such, it is deeper than mere action. Sin is “ontological” and not merely “behavioral,” a condition of our being and not merely doing. We must say not only that we are sinful because we sin, but also that we sin because we are sinful.

Any instinct, thought, feeling, word, or action that situates God in a relation of dependency upon us is sin.

Humanity and Sin

*We must **ground** our doctrinal convictions in **God's Word**.*

We must live in obedience to God when our every disposition is inclined to disobedience.

The human exists, as we have been saying, wholly in the exercise of God's act. We have being in His being, not the other way around.

Any instinct, thought, feeling, word, or action that reverses this order, that situates God in a relation of dependency upon us, is sin. We have indicated how insidiously troubling this reality is for us by noting how readily we make God the predicate or our routine, quotidian operations, how readily we assume the priority of our comprehension and locate him, as we do anything else, in willed proximity to or distance from us. It simply is a function of the way that we have come to operate in the world to treat God this way, as if we are dealing first and foremost with the concept or possibility of God and not His all-determinative, factual reality.

We see in this why it is so important methodologically to ground our doctrinal convictions in God's Word. Doing so is already to participate in His rejection of sin (however meager our participation may be in this respect). It is to engage our faculties in grateful obedience to Him, to subject our thoughts to His and even allow them to be reframed, to place our emotions on hold and even permit them to be retrained, to tune our ears to His voice, to reverse the sequence of operation by which we naturally live, to move at a tempo alien to the world and thus to take part in the re-cadencing of the world itself.

It is to live in obedience to God and therefore to truly live if even for an instant, to see a glimpse, if only a glimpse, of true being. We do not do this, once again, by some capacity native to us, for our every disposition is inclined to disobedience, but already as citizens of the Word. To turn to the Word is already confession, more or less humbly as the case may be, that the Word has come to us and created a hearing, that God has turned to us and lives as Lord with us and over us. We come to life in the life of Immanuel even as we look to define our living. This dialectical event is the event of faith. It is the happening of living encounter with Christ Jesus.

In confrontation with Christ, we experience restoration of the image in which we were created. This restoration is secure although not fully realized; our internal and external means of operation are claimed completely by God even as their perfection remains on the other side of glory.

Both soul and body, the human is made again to stand before its Maker. Its mind is rewired to perceive the world according to an

Humanity and Sin

The human is made again to stand before his Maker

- His mind is rewired
- Her history is restructured
- They live in the cadences of hope

Humanity and Sin

Humans receive the being in which they were created anew in the reconciling work of Christ Jesus.

Humanity and Sin

Lecture Point #2: There is no human existence outside of Christ, only the self-compromising contradiction of Adam.

entirely new matrix, to see everything as from God, for God, and to God—as the object of His creative, reconciling, and redeeming work. And its history is restructured accordingly. Death recedes on the horizon and human living becomes defined by a new reference point: resurrection. It transitions from the movement between nothing and nothing, dust to dust, to an existence that is from God and will return to God.

It lives in the cadences of hope—of bearing welcome to the stranger and not animosity; of giving refuge to the outcast, if nothing else in the sanctuary of a smile and the haven of acceptance as one beloved of God rather than the closed door of scoffing and derision; of feeding the hungry and caring for the widow in the name of the Father who cares for us all. Indeed, of feeding and caring for them out of our first and best and not merely leftovers, for that is how God loves them.

To be concrete, the human receives the being in which it was created anew in the reconciling work of Christ Jesus. In Him, she becomes “born again” (John 3:7; 1 Peter 1:23). Christ is both the condition of her true being and example. He both makes possible her living before God and structures that living. We will talk more about both sides of this equation in Lecture Ten, which covers the work of Christ. There are two points to underscore for this lecture.

First, in Christ we do not think and speak of human existence by abstract speculation about organs of “soul” and “body.” In keeping with our methodological commitments, we let these biblical terms be defined by Jesus of Nazareth. We do not slip Him into them as containers for His living, but understand His being as the internal and external instance par excellence of obedience to the Father. His is the perception (which we might call, “soul”) and historical, space-time enactment (“body”) of complete self-deference to the will of the Father, which Adam neither perceived nor enacted.

Secondly, there is no human existence outside of Christ, only the self-compromising contradiction of Adam. There is only the exercise of our faculties in dependency upon God on the one side and the nonbeing that comes from their exercise in pursuit of independence from God on the other. That is why we began our construal of human being last time with God’s calling and covenant, and in this with His covenant people, the church. It is only in the response of faith that we enjoy genuine human being.

It is the decision and act of God by which humans have being.

| *Humanity and Sin*

— *Being-in-faith* —
— *Living-in-obedience* —

It is not the church's judgment and dealings that bring about the new man, but the limitlessly potent Word...

What, then, of all those who consciously and unconsciously have no part in the church? Is it really right to say that they do not have being, or that their being is inherently false?

Here again we must stress that it is the decision and act of God by which humans have being. Our responsive decisions and acts are brought about by God, not by ourselves. It is thus the case that humanity at large, mired as it is in disobedience, is false being whose only hope is in the promise of God to be Immanuel, to come to us and have His living with us. Yet it is also true of the church that we are coming to be, that we are genuinely human agents only in the act of obedience corresponding to God's act of turning to us. We do not possess being but receive it and only acknowledge it in the moment of receiving it, in the instant that God gives us faith and we think, speak and live after Him. The church is not light per se, but a persistent coming to the light.

The being of its members then, which is a coming to be in faith is only a first instance of the being that God is giving to the world. Their living-in-obedience is a glimpse of the humanity that God has brought about, is restoring, and will unite with Him in uncompromised truth. It is not a repository of existence as a thing in itself, which stands in opposition to the false existence of the world, but becomes a light in the darkness of the world, becomes something that can be identified as true being in the actual happening of Christ's lordship.

Whatever humanity has existed, may exist, and will exist, therefore, does so in reflection of this glimpse, but also through the single event of the Word made flesh, when and where that has happened and will happen, when and where Christ has been and will be Lord is a judgement only He can make.

It is not the church's judgment and dealings that bring about the new man, but the limitlessly potent Word in its actual operation. The church's judgment of where grace is operative and life is taking place can only be reiteration of the judgment of the Word of God. So the church must be cautious about its boundaries. God has drawn it into His work of bringing light to the world, but as a reflection of His light and not a self-contained source.

Because the Word brings about the church, not vice versa, the Word remains Lord over in the work of the church. He decides who His offspring were, are, and will be. God is free to bring about the obedience of faith as He chooses, precisely as offspring of

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Christ Jesus. He does this in the church, we must not be shy about that fact, but we must immediately add that God works in the church as he makes it to exist not as it claims to possess its own existence. His act of producing children in the church takes place by bringing forth human words of proclamation in and through His word. It does not take place by the church conjuring its own words.

God's Word remains the determinative agent and His spirit the authoritative agency in the work and faith of the church. The churches power and authority are gifted and derived in each moment of their exercise never a fixed power and authority to which it might hold God accountable. We do well therefore not to hold God accountable to the composition of the church and the execution of its judgements at any single point.

For its composition and judgment are simply the event of obedience in response to God's word not given constructs external to the word. It is entirely possible the grace of God's word moves backward temporally and outward spatially from the event of the church in ways that cannot be identified. We must underscore the importance of the churches work of participating in the word by proclaiming and living in the obedience of faith, and just as quickly underscore that the effect of the proclamation is God's to determine.

In this, the church gladly leaves unanswered the question as to how far the call of God into the obedience of faith and authentic being may extend, hopeful that the answer will be to its great surprise and certain that it will be to God's glory!