

## Who Am I?

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Genesis 1:26-28

Today and next week I will be preaching on two basic fundamental questions that must be answered by every human being, every human culture, every human system of thought. Each of these questions have been answered in very different ways over the years, and, of course, the Bible has an answer to these questions. These two questions are ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What Am I for?’ Or if you want to ask it in a slightly more general way, ‘What is a person?’ and ‘What are people for?’ Over the next two weeks we will think about those questions. We will look at how people out there answer those questions, and how we answer those questions.

So, today’s question is, ‘What is a person?’ To answer that question, we go to the first chapter of the first book of the Bible. This is such an important, defining question that the Bible begins to address it right up front.

We will get to that wonderful and weighty word of Scripture in a moment, but first I want to look at how people answer that question in general out in the world. There are two parallel cultural movements happening now and each of them give a very different answer to this question.

First of all, you have the modern phenomenon of transhumanism. Have you heard of this movement? In certain intellectual circles (people in Silicon Valley and really techie people often fall into this circle) there is much talk about transhumanism. Transhumanism is the belief that using modern technology in some way we can radically improve humanity; we can transcend the bounds of normal life as we know it. We can transcend regular humanity. We can raise ourselves to become transhuman.

Transhumanists seem to fall into two camps. Some of them put their transhumanist hopes in computers. These transhumanists tend to be really big on Artificial Intelligence and super excited about the developments in that area. For these transhumanists, the brain is just a big computer made of organic tissue, and the developments in AI show that we can mimic that brain function in a computer made of silicon chips. If programmers can make a highly sophisticated program that can converse with you and write poems and make jokes and all that program is ultimately made of is a whole lot of bits and bytes and electronic impulses, software, why can’t we take the data in our brain, all the electrical impulses and upload them to a sophisticated computer? All our memories and thoughts could be uploaded to a computer when we get old so we could live forever in a virtual state without the limitations of our decaying bodies. We could live forever in virtual form. There are people who believe this. There are people working on this.

Other transhumanists imagine transcending their humanity by more biological means. There are also a growing number of billionaires and tech giants who have become obsessed with extending their life. Peter Thiel, the brilliant, billionaire founder of PayPal, is one of them. He’s spent millions of dollars in a quest to live to 120. He’s taken HGH and invested in all kinds of research aimed at extending his life. He’s studied the efficacy of being injected with blood from a younger person as a means of rejuvenation, a process called parabiosis. Failing that he has signed up for the services of Alcor. Alcor is a company that will cryogenically preserve your body at death. Here’s a description of what that will mean for Thiel. “The patient,” as Alcor calls its dead client, “is cooled in an ice water bath, and their blood is replaced with an organ preservation solution.” Next, ideally within the hour, Thiel’s remains will be whisked to an operating room in Scottsdale, Arizona. A medical team will perfuse cryoprotectants through his blood vessels in an attempt to reduce the tissue damage wrought by extreme cold. Then his body will be cooled to –196 degrees Celsius, the temperature of liquid nitrogen. After slipping into a double-walled, vacuum-insulated metal coffin, the patient is now protected from deterioration for theoretically thousands of years.” After that all Peter Thiel and the rest of the Alcor clients will have to do is wait for the arrival of a future society with both the skill and the inclination to revive him.

That’s transhumanism. It’s a growing movement, especially after the rise of AI, and as I think you can hear, it has the highest aspiration for humanity. Transcendence. Immortality. What is a human? Transhumanism’s answer is something like this: (Gesture: proud face, fist upraised). Heroic. Immortal.

Transhumanism stands in contrast to another movement, another cultural trend: anti-humanism. There is a growing philosophical movement that sees human beings as a problem, a parasite, a virus that has infected the world, a virus that harms everything it touches by consuming the world's resources and causing extinction. This feeling has led to a philosophy called antinatalism, which is the belief that it is immoral to bring children into the world, because of the harm they will bring. In his 2006 book, *Better Never to Have Been*, the "antinatalist" philosopher David Benatar argues that the disappearance of humanity would not be such a bad thing: "The concern that humans will not exist at some future time is either a symptom of the human arrogance, or is some misplaced sentimentalism."

Now this is an extreme position, and you may think, 'I don't know anyone who says this,' but the influence of these ideas shows up in our world. You see it in our declining birth rate. Birth rates are lower than any time in American History. Young people are choosing not to have children. I want to be careful here, there are lots of reasons a couple might choose to stay childless and many of those are good and fine reasons. We all agree that Jesus showed us what human life was supposed to look like and Jesus neither married nor had children. Still, when many younger people explain why they choose not to have kids, they say things like, 'How could I bring a child into a world like this one?' 'The political and environmental future looks bleak; how could I subject a child to that?' It's not full on anti-humanism, but there are some echoes.

What's a person? The picture given by anti-humanism is more like this. (Gesture: Shame cover up) A shameful thing.

Can you see how anti-humanism and transhumanism are giving completely different answers to the question, 'What is a person?' Anti-humanists say, something like, a virus. A creature that would be better off extinct. Transhumanists say, no we have the power to take control of our existence and live forever. We can be like gods. I know that many of you, if not most of you, might say to yourself, I've never heard of either transhumanism or anti-humanism, I'm just trying to pay the bills and live my life all this has nothing to do with me. But it does. Every day in your life, in the life of your kids, in the life of your grandkids these views of what it means to be human are out there in popularized forms, and they are shaping your life and they are shaping the life of the next generation.

So what is a person? What does the Bible say about that? What's the Bible's answer to this fundamental question? Well, the Bible has lots to say about who we are, but the first and foundational answer to that question are the words that God pronounces in Genesis 1 when he creates human beings. "So God created humankind in his own image; in the image of God he created them." This is such a familiar answer and you've heard it a million times, but maybe we can hear it differently today. You are made in the image of God. There are two sides to that statement.

On the one hand, it's a statement of value. To say we are made in the image of God obviously goes against the anti-humanist idea that we are something like viruses. You are not a virus, you are not a problem, you are a creation, you are God's handiwork. And not only that, unlike the rest of creation, you are God's handiwork into which he has poured a little bit of himself. God made everything in creation good and beautiful, but only on you did he put his image. You and your fellow human beings shine with God's presence in the way the rest of the creation does not. In the words of C.S. Lewis, your neighbor might be the holiest object present to your senses.

It's interesting: in my reading this week, I read that there were other cultures in Bible times that talked about people being made in the image of God. The Egyptians for instance. Only the Egyptians didn't talk about all people being made in the image of God; it was only the pharaoh who was made in the image and likeness of God and sent to be God's representative on earth. The rest of the people were seen with less and less value the further down the social scale you got. The slaves and the poor were disposable. So when God proclaims that humankind is made in his image, it's radically good news. Everyone is made in the image of God. The Pharaoh in his palace and the Egyptian slave making bricks. The men and the women. The beautiful, fluid athlete and the most profoundly disabled child. They all shine with this created radiance. This is the opposite of anti-humanism. This is the opposite of (shame pose).

But saying we are made in the image of God doesn't just keep us from getting too low; it also keeps us from getting too proud. It pushes against the optimism, the hubris of transhumanism. Transhumanism wants to bring god-like immortality. (Strike proud pose) Genesis 1:27 says, "No. You are not gods, you are only images

of God. You are made in his image.” Our glory, our excellence doesn’t come from us, it is not produced by us, it’s not controlled by us; it comes from outside ourselves, it’s an image. It’s derived. What is a human? Transhumanism says ‘You can be whatever you want to be.’ Transhumanism says, “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.” Genesis 1 says, no, you are an extraordinary creature, you are beautiful and beloved, but you are also dependent. You don’t find yourself by following your heart; you find yourself by opening yourself up to the life of God through Jesus. So if transhumanism is this (proud pose), and anti-humanism is this (shame pose). The image of God is this (posture of open-handed reception).

It’s hard on people when they get the answer to this question wrong. Do you know the children’s book *Stellaluna*? *Stellaluna* is a fruit bat, born to her fruit bat Mom. But when she was just a little baby bat, an owl attacks their family and she gets knocked out of her Mother’s arms and she falls into a sparrow’s nest. *Stellaluna* grows up surrounded by other sparrows, when she tries to figure herself out, everyone around her tells her she’s a sparrow. She should fly during the day not at night. She should sleep at night and not during the day. She shouldn’t hang from branches; she should perch on them. She should eat bugs. *Stellaluna* tries to be a sparrow. She eats bugs, but they taste terrible. She tries to perch on branches but she can’t seem to do it. And she flies during the day but it doesn’t seem right to her. She is miserable.

Then one day she goes off by herself and night sets in. She meets some other fruit bats, they bring her back to her mother and she learns her true self. She eats fruit not bugs, she hangs upside down from the bottom of a branch, she doesn’t perch. And when she flies at night it feels wonderful and she can see everything.

There are so many people in this world who have no idea what kind of creature they are. They’re trying to figure it out and they are struggling. Sometimes they are this (proud pose), and sometimes they are this (shame pose). Mostly they go back and forth between one and the other. We should have compassion for these people because being a person is hard. The answer to their question is simple and beautiful. You are a creature of love. You are made in the image of God who loves you. You are made to have his life live in you, and when you find that place, your heart will find its home.

2000 years ago, the Father could see that so many of his creatures were suffering and confused about who they were, so he sent his Son into the middle of our confused mess. Jesus came to a world where the Emperor called himself a god and the slaves were treated like dirt. Jesus told them the story of who they were. They were beautiful creatures made in the image of God, and they were made to become children of God. Ultimately Jesus gave up his life so that these confused people could find their proper place rooted in him. Some listened to what he said; others didn’t. But to those who did receive him, they found a new kind of life beginning to form in them, a life in the Spirit which started to change them from one degree of glory to the next.

Who am I and what is a person? Let’s finish this sermon by picturing the mass of people who move in and out of your life every day. The neighbor sleeping in the bushes on the corner of LaGrave’s lot. The neuro-divergent teenager whose mind doesn’t quite work like everyone else’s and has a hard time fitting in. The middle school girl who hates what she sees every time who looks in the mirror? The colleague down the hall who’s risen to the top of the professional world but whose marriage is falling apart. The down syndrome child trying to keep up with her cousins. The teenager who regularly waits on you in the coffee shop whose gender you can’t make out and who wants you to use they/them pronouns. Peter Thiel taking his supplements and his blood injections, trying to live to 120. And then there’s you sitting politely in your seat this morning, looking strong and competent but nurturing a thousand vulnerabilities in your hesitating heart. Who are all these people? They are beautiful creatures, made in the image of God, people for whom God sent his Son. Not all of them have figured that out yet. I wonder if we can find a way to tell them the good news. ©Rev. Peter Jonker