

Our Humanity: Capacities and Privileges

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A Charis global worker from Modesto was among the Bayaka people in Central Africa when his Toyota Landcruiser broke down. He had been in Africa long enough to know to wait until dusk and that the nearby pygmies would appear from the forest. Later, around the fire, they asked, “Baba, are we human beings?” Goodman replied, “Yes, you are fully human. God made you.” A relief as other Africans called them animals. I used to think of that as an extreme case, but now Americans are showing signs of doubting our humanity, or feel we are losing it due to isolation, abuse, existential threats, self-generated identities...even the hollow activists.

If we are going to understand the tragic human failures of our times we must begin by correcting our own Christian view of human nature. The creation, as revealed in Genesis 1-12, is not a mere prelude to the story of Abraham, Moses, and Israel. Nor is it limited to a demonstration of our sin and rebellion preparing us for salvation in Jesus as explained by Paul in Romans 1-8. We were all created noble and magnificent. We fell.

Genesis 1-12 is the foundational and reliable story of human nature. It is universal to all people.

Today the church inadequately comprehends human nature (fallen) while the rest of the world ignores the biblical view believing that we can shape our own human nature (blank slate) or ideally that the state can shape it for us in ways that will bring thriving and peace (utopia).

All western thought, as Braudel noted, is a long and sometimes very hostile conversation with Christianity. That explains why many western philosophers take a slice of Gen 1-12 and build an inadequate way of life on it, ignoring all else. Rousseau saw only the innocence and pleasures of Eden. Marx saw the complete focus on work after the fall. Nietzsche said that God invented sin in Eden. Locke denied the fall and said we were all born without human nature, a tabula rasa.

Monsters or utopians all.

As Tim Keller points out, all creation stories, except our own, deal with creation in terms of powerful and violent action resulting in a random and reactive world. Even modern science relies on random power and violence. The biblical view is fundamentally different. Our triune God implements his intention to create the heavens and the earth in terms of design, beauty, function, and glory. We were created in his image. We are noble and have agency.

This is true of all humanity along with the privilege to know him and to be sub creators. This is far beyond speech and self-consciousness. Creation is the arena where we are all the children of God. The pattern of life is not random; it is the bumpy road described as “creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.” Keller says that not only creativity, but love comes from God. How could there be love for us if God were perfect without love?

According to Sam Yeiter God has given us several universal privileges in addition to our capacities: 1) Marriage and family, 2) The opportunity for rest and restoration (sabbath). 3) A social expectation of respect for life. 4) The willingness to acknowledge an authority above us (sacrifice) and others we can serve. 5) Work as a gift to each of us so we can provide for our needs and for others. This is God’s common grace available to all.

When, in our brokenness, we seek to define our own lives, our ambitions lead us to false pathways. We even enjoy those pathways because, whether it is work, family relationships, the arts or sciences, we are in the image of God, even the committed atheists cannot escape that. In Genesis 11:4 at Babel Mtn people said, “Let us make a name for ourselves,” meaning let us use God’s gifts to us to recreate ourselves in our own image. The good came with the bad: creativity was marred by conquest, which led to pride and futility. Artificial intelligence.

We must know the boundaries (law). Selfishness, greed, anger, arrogance, violence, manipulation, deceit, and cheating are out. We must understand that using our life to serve others, investing our own life in the lives of others, yes even the fallen, is worthy. We must hold a very high view of the created nobility in all humans.

Many Bayaka, having found their humanity, have also found and trusted Jesus Christ.

TWO FOUNDATIONS: Common Grace in Creation and the Saving Grace of Jesus

