



IMAGE OF GOD

THE APPROACH OF MARINERS CHURCH

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The Word of God is clear that we were all created on purpose for a purpose. From the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 1, we read that God created human beings—male and female—in His image and charged them with caring for the rest of God’s creation. God’s generous gift of creating us in His image affects the way we view ourselves, relate to others, and care for the world. The more we understand and embrace our human identity as defined by God, the more we are able and willing to treat ourselves and each other with the dignity and respect that is due every bearer of God’s image. Intrinsic to our identity is the responsibility to cultivate the flourishing of God’s creation by reflecting the wisdom, justice, love, and authority of our Creator.

At Mariners Church, we believe the Bible’s teaching on the image of God forms our perspective on several vital issues today, including the sanctity of the unborn and the elderly, the beauty and value of minority ethnic groups, the responsibility to care for the immigrant and those in poverty, and the task given to humanity to care for creation. A proper theology of the image of God in humanity gives us a lens through which we can see, as we seek to make decisions and take actions consistent with both God’s intention from the beginning and the restoration that comes from through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

GENERAL VIEWS OF HUMAN IDENTITY

We live in a society that claims to uphold the dignity of every person—a culture that says we are born with inherent value, rights, and worth. But without a biblical foundation, we are unable to understand what it means to be human, or to explain why this aspiration of honoring humanity is right, or to find agreement on how to apply this perspective consistently toward every person. Many today believe we must look within ourselves to define our own reality, to make our own meaning, and discover our own dignity. Furthermore, the question of who defines personhood or who decides the ways in which we are responsible to the vulnerable is often left to people who already have cultural or political power. As such, human self-interest and power dynamics create an environment that sometimes celebrates life but often discounts the value of others.

We see this tension unfold in wide-ranging debates over how we treat and care for unborn children, people with disabilities, refugees and immigrants, minority ethnic groups, people at the end of life, or people in poverty. Our society reflects various opinions on the value of human life. There is no worldwide consensus across cultures, or even in our own communities, on how humans, animals, and the rest of creation should coexist, or why some lives seem to be valued more than others. We also struggle with how to maintain our humanity in the face of technological advances that tend to dehumanize us.

When humans take on the role of establishing the value of human existence and the hierarchy between humans, animals, and the rest of creation, the ethics of human dignity become riddled with circular logic, self-preservation agendas, unending disagreement, and divergent outcomes. Human value then varies from person to person, culture to culture, or philosophy to philosophy.

Naturalism is the view that only the physical universe exists, and thus humans are merely material beings—biological organisms without a soul, ceasing to exist upon death. In this view, human value is subjective and random, primarily held in the eye of the beholder or commanded by force. “Might makes right,” and only the fittest survive. According to this philosophy, there is no inherent meaning to life, or any reason why the vulnerable in society cannot be either eliminated or exploited. Everyone is left to fight to assert their value and dignity.

The predominant view in our society today—expressive individualism—claims that our worth lies in whatever value we ascribe to ourselves. We are self-creators, self-actualized individuals. Slogans such as “You be you”, “Be true to yourself”, and “Follow your heart” have their roots in philosophical currents that go back several hundred years. This “self-acclaiming individualism” assumes the “capacity of individuals to define the terms of their own existence.”¹ While this view has helped people recognize and cherish the uniqueness of the individual, it has also resulted in unwelcome side-effects, including the disintegration of a common culture and the rejection of any moral authority outside of us.

Apart from of a biblical view of humanity, we tend to either elevate humanity to the highest levels, making ourselves out to be gods, or we demote humanity to nothing, as if we are merely dust. Non-biblical human identity is either demoralizingly low or blasphemously high, and apart from God’s perspective, human flourishing is impossible. Without a connection to God, there is simply no basis for human dignity.²

MARINERS CHURCH POSITION

Mariners Church upholds a biblical view of humanity. In contrast with the views above, we believe the Bible establishes the purpose, dignity, and value of all human beings. The Scriptures present humanity as uniquely created in “the image of God” (the Imago Dei) and as the pinnacle of God’s creation (Gen. 1). God’s Word describes our relationship with Him, each other, and the rest of creation—a framework that cannot be formed outside of a Creator-centered worldview. Since God is the one who establishes the existence and parameters of the entire cosmos, all human beings should rely on Him to determine the value and dignity of each person. The sanctity and dignity of every human life, “must be at the heart of our Christian lives because it is at the heart of the gospel story.”³

We champion this view of humanity because we find it in the Bible and because we believe only this view transcends our human tendency to self-protect, seek control over other human beings, and exploit the rest of creation. All life is sacred, but Scripture insists humans are unique, and a proper understanding of human value has implications for the way we treat every person, no matter their stage of life, social rank, ability, utility, differences, or distance. This biblical and theological framework informs our ministry practice in how we love one another.

THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

1. The image of God in creation: Like God, but not God

The Bible tells us in Genesis 1 that God created all manner of plants, trees, animals, birds and fish, and multiplied them “according to their kinds.” Humanity, however, holds distinction because God created us “in his own image” and “likeness” (Gen. 1:26).

The Bible does not provide an explicit definition of what is meant by “the image of God.” Some scholars believe the image of God is best understood as humanity’s ability to reflect some of God’s communicable and incommunicable attributes, such as reason and love (“Substantive”), while others believe it refers to how we relate to one another in a manner similar to the three persons of the Trinity (“Relational”), and still others claim it means we are made to do and act as God does (“Functional”).⁴ Whatever the case (or combination of these), we acknowledge that each person is “like God, but not god,” and this truth influences how we think of and treat ourselves, others, and the rest of God’s creation. O. Carter Snead writes: “All human beings are created and embodied, unrepeatable, precious, and fundamentally equal.”⁵ Bearing the image of the Creator makes every person “inestimably valuable.”⁶

2. Sin cannot destroy, eliminate, or restructure the image of God in any human.

The biblical narrative makes clear that sin dehumanizes us, disrupting our unity with God and one another, tarnishing the “glory and honor” that came with our image-bearing status, and corrupting the hearts of men and women everywhere. Human rebellion has consequences not just for individuals but for entire societies, all of nature and indeed the world (Gen. 3:6-7, Rom. 1:21-22).

But sin does not erase the God-given dignity embedded in us even before birth. God’s merciful and transformative master plan (Gen. 3:22-23, Rom. 8:28-30, 1 Cor. 15:49) is to restore humanity to the fullness expressed and lived out by Jesus Christ.

3. Implications of the image of God for human life

Life is a miraculous gift from the sustainer of life (Ps. 54:4). God’s works are indeed “wondrous” (Ps. 139:14). The Bible presents God as breathing the “breath of life” into the nostrils of man, “and the man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7). Children are a gift from God (Ps. 113:9, 127:3-5)—a blessing and a rich heritage. God forms every individual and fully knows each person even before birth (Eph. 1:3-4, Jer. 1:5, Luke 1, Ps. 127:3).

The gift of life is defined by the One who gives it. As the giver and source of all life (Deut. 32:39), God alone has the authority to define its limits. He “himself gives everyone life and breath and all things” (Acts 17:25). God opposes any attempt to dehumanize our neighbors, mistreat others, or destroy innocent human life. We are entrusted with life as a gift, which “includes nurturing, curing and caring, especially for those who cannot look after themselves”— a “privileged partnership.”⁷

As the German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, “There is no worthless life before God, because God holds life itself to be valuable. . . the Creator and Lord alone has the right to dispose over creation. . . natural life has its right not in itself but in God.”⁸ C.S. Lewis reminds us that “there are no ordinary people.”⁹ Every person is extraordinary because we all have been created in God’s image and will live forever, either with God or apart from Him.

THE SANCTITY OF UNBORN LIFE.

From the moment of conception, the developing baby in the womb, no matter how tiny, is a “complete or whole human organism”¹⁰ with God-given dignity and worth. John Stott points out what modern science confirms: “the zygote has a unique genotype which is distinct from both parents” and determines the child’s sex, size and shape, skin color, hair and eyes, temperament and intelligence. “Between fusion and maturity, forty-five generations of cell division are necessary, and forty-one of them occur before birth.”¹¹

Therefore, induced abortions at any stage of development are ethically and morally wrong.¹² The life of a defenseless and nascent human should not be arbitrarily ended. Bonhoeffer described the destruction of the embryo in the mother’s womb a “deliberate deprivation of life” and “nothing but murder.”¹³ Throughout the Bible, the shedding of innocent blood is prohibited by God (Gen. 4:10, Ex. 20:13, 23:7, Prov. 6:16-17).

We believe the Lord the Giver of life grieves for the millions of aborted children. We believe He also grieves over a society that makes the taking of innocent unborn life seem plausible and justifiable, as well as the cultural circumstances that leave a woman in distress. We believe He cares deeply for women who carry the heavy weight of a past decision to abort a child. (Studies indicate that many post-abortive women experience anxiety disorders, depression, addiction to substances, self-harm and suicidal behaviors.¹⁴) We believe that God’s love, compassion and mercy know no bounds for His image bearers; His forgiveness, redemption and healing are offered through Christ (Rom. 8:1-4, Luke 5:31-32, Matt. 4:23-24).

As we grow in our appreciation for our God-given identity, we are compelled to champion, with empathy, the value of every image-bearer from conception to natural death. The Christian response to the issue of abortion is to speak up on behalf of the unborn, and to show compassion to women in need of care—to provide counseling, education, and generous material support. We provide care because we believe that all involved—the child, the mother, the father, siblings, the extended family, and the community—are made in the image of God.

In certain circumstances (such as the threat of medical complications, ectopic or tubal pregnancies, or cancer), the difficult choice may arise as to whose life to prioritize. When it is medically clear that either the mother or her unborn baby will die, some families face an agonizing decision as to how to proceed. In the extraordinary case in which the life of the mother is in danger, families will require God-given wisdom on how to preserve life wherever possible.

In situations where a pregnancy is the result of rape or incest, women will need a safe place to heal and experience support before and after the child’s birth. It is wrong to commit rape or incest against a woman, and it is also wrong to intentionally kill an innocent human being. We believe in compassionate care for every image-bearing individual.

And women who have made or are thinking of pursuing an abortion will yearn for biblical, wise, and compassionate counsel and healing support.

At Mariners Church, we offer a variety of services and support to families and individuals dealing with the myriad of possible struggles related to childbearing before and after birth, including pastoral care, classes, access to resources, referrals, and group support.

THE SANCTITY OF LIFE

We believe that during every stage of existence, from the first genetic spark in the womb to the last breath in hospice, a human being bears the image of God and has intrinsic value.

God cares for the whole person, both physically and spiritually (Ps 8:3-4, Phil. 2:3-4). God cares for the entire life, every day, at every stage (Ps. 139:13-18). Our bodies are His temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17, 6:19-20), the end of our lives follow His timing (Ecc. 3:2), and death is not the end (John 11:25).

A person does not become less valuable to God simply because of a genetic difference, birth defect, or debilitating disease. Human value is not determined by a person's age or usefulness to society, whether at the beginning, middle, or end of life. God cares for every person, the whole person, over the entirety of one's life span. The Lord walks with us at every stage of our lives including our times of sorrow and the journey of death.

In an era of expressive individualism—where value is self-assigned, and in an era with advancements in medical science which prolong life and sometimes extend suffering, we have seen the increasing popularity of “mercy killing,” “voluntary or involuntary euthanasia” and “physician assisted suicide.” We believe this to be a toxic mix of modern trends. The term “euthanasia” refers to “the intentional killing by act or omission of a person whose life is considered not to be worth living.”¹⁵

Active euthanasia, to actively end someone's life is not permitted under Christian thought because it “involves throwing the gift of life back in the face of the giver”¹⁶ The Bible considers the taking of human life, along with the denial of God himself, to count among the most serious sins (Gen. 9:5-6).¹⁷ Cain's punishment for killing was forever being sent away from the presence of the LORD. Therefore, hastening someone's death is murder. That being said, we are not required by any Scripture to keep someone alive, no matter what the cost to the patient, his family and community.

Passive euthanasia, omitting action, is argued for as the “act of letting die.” Patients, family members, and/or doctors may decide to refrain from pursuing or continuing medical treatment and removing life-support machinery that might extend life. This is the case whether a patient is able to voluntarily make the choice or not (either because of immaturity, incompetency or both). In order to be considered passive, or indirect euthanasia, the cause of death must be attributed to the medical condition. Concerned Christians are urged by the narrative of the Gospel to treat every human with dignity and compassion in an effort to alleviate suffering, and to preserve life until their time has really come. We must protect patients who are intensely suffering, particularly those whom because of despair are tempted to seek death either by suicide or assisted suicide. Followers of Christ are called to endure and trust God through the journey of suffering (Rom. 5:2-5). Additionally, they are called to love each other and care for the needy and sick (Jn. 13:34; 15:12; Rom. 12:10; 2 Cor. 13:11...the list is long). But, when the medical conditions are advancing the inevitable death of a person, to hold on to ‘this’ life at all cost is to reject the promise of the risen Lord.

We believe there is a significant difference between causing someone to die and allowing the natural death process to take place with dignity. As Christians, we champion the latter and forbid the former. We support laws that “encourage and offer care, not open a pathway to suicide by transforming the healing art of medicine into a handmaiden of death.”¹⁸ The Scriptures require us to treat every human with dignity and compassion, to help those who are dying to “die well and faithfully in the light of the hope of the resurrection,” trusting in His hand in timing.¹⁹

THE IMAGE OF GOD IN THE VULNERABLE

In the Bible, we see God set His heart on those who need care, support, and protection, especially the orphan, the widow, the poor, and the immigrant, a grouping sometimes referred to as the “Quartet of the Vulnerable.”²⁰ While this list is not exhaustive, it demonstrates God’s concern for those who are in jeopardy. He is the “father to the fatherless and champion of widows” (Ps. 68:5).

We believe there is a matrix of causes that lead to social, economic, and physical vulnerability: oppression (Lev. 19:14), calamity (Gen 47), and personal moral failures (Prov. 6:6-7). No matter the circumstances, God’s people in the Old Testament were commanded to care for the vulnerable. In the New Testament, the expectations of care are not relaxed, but raised.

The gospel results in reconciliation vertically (with God) and horizontally (with each other). The Bible emphasizes both justification and justice. Justification by faith alone (right standing with God based on the righteousness of Christ in our place) leads to and produces a life of justice.²¹ The pursuit of justice takes place individually and in the context of the local church.

We believe we are not to cross our arms and move away from those in need, but stretch out our arms, like Christ, and show compassion. To mistreat the vulnerable made in God’s image is an offense to God. Mere sympathy can be dehumanizing if it is not followed by practical support. Pursuing the right treatment of the vulnerable in our society through love, learning, and strategic thinking is the way we emulate Jesus and the early church.

THE IMAGE OF GOD AND RACE

If we begin with the end in mind, Scripture makes it clear that the eternal state will be a multicultural experience and expression “from every nation, tribe, people and language” (Rev. 7:9-10) who worship and bring God glory forever. The new heavens and the new earth will be the fullest expression and final realization of God’s intended vision for perfect unity in eternal diversity. This has been God’s plan from the beginning of time. While marriage will pass away, human ethnicity will not.

The cosmic story of the Bible is the redemptive plan “to bring everything together in Christ, both things in heaven and things on earth to him.” (Eph. 1:10) Jesus came to “proclaim justice to the nations” (Matt. 12:18), the gospel created ethnic unity in the church (Gentiles and Jews), and the church’s unique mission to make disciples of “all nations” (Matt. 28). “The unity of all the peoples of the earth through faith in Christ is not an afterthought, but has always been part of the main plan and purpose of Christ.”²²

God cares about diversity. He wonderfully and fearfully created people of all ethnicities as image-bearers whose diverse cultures reflect His creativity and joy. God’s vision from the beginning of time has been a diverse and unified body. Therefore, in the words of Dr. Tony Evans, “racism in any form must be seen as the humanistic evil expression of the sin of idolatry since it is an attack on the value of the image of God in which all humanity of every race is created.”²³

The gospel of Jesus Christ creates ethnic unity (Eph. 2) and calls us to “work together across racial lines to lead the way in repairing the damage done by the long history of racial injustice.”²⁴ The cosmic story of the Bible is the redemptive plan “to bring everything together in Christ, both things in heaven and things on earth to him” (Eph. 1:10). This cosmic unity,

centered on the person and work of Jesus, includes the unity in diversity of the people of God. Both result in a passion for “biblical justice”, meaning “the equitable and impartial application of the rule of God’s moral law in society” which becomes “a foundational part of fulfilling the purpose of the church.”²⁵ Daniel Darling is right: “This is not a liberal or conservative ideal but a reflection of the fullest expression of humanity and of the heart of Christ.”²⁶

THE IMAGE OF GOD IN OUR ENEMY.

The world is divided today, just as it has been since human relationships first suffered strife following Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God in the Garden. Sin divides people), and hate intensifies hate (Gen. 3:12-13). Among breakdowns in personal relationships and societies, division leads to suspicion, jealousy, hatred, neglect, violence, and ultimately death (Gen. 4:6-8, Matt. 5:21-24, 1 John 3:11-15). Just about any person can become our enemy, and we can become the enemy to another. An enemy is an adversary, antagonist, or hostile person (or group of people) toward another. By their action or inaction enemies produce all sorts of negative and harmful results including stress, hate, division, stress, harm, injury, or death.

Because of sin, seeing or acknowledging the image of God in another person can be difficult, especially when that person stands against us, does harm, or spurs violence. Although we recognize that even an abusive person bears the image of God, we believe it proper and right to remove ourselves from dangerous situations and protect ourselves from further harm. God stands against abuse wielded toward His image bearers. He hates injustice (Gen. 4:10, Prov. 6:16-19).

All of us have sinned (Ps 14:3, Rom. 3:10-12), and sin makes us ugly to one another. Sin makes enemies of us all. Loving like Jesus means we love and pray for our enemies rather than seek revenge (Matt. 5:43-46, Rom. 12:19). Loving like Jesus means we hold accountable those who commit crimes, and then treat even lawbreakers with dignity.²⁷

As citizens of God’s Kingdom, Jesus calls us to seek peace whenever possible. He crossed the greatest divide (Phil. 2:6-11) and showed us love while we were yet sinners (1 John 4:19-21). Ultimately, God’s mission in this fallen and splintered world is reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18). As our lives are transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ, we cultivate the necessary humility to acknowledge our own sin, the hatred in our hearts and the evil actions we’ve done, so that we see a part of ourselves even in our enemies. We believe only Jesus can “change our hatred to love,” help us forgive and nurture peace whenever possible.²⁸ We depend on Him, as He has committed us to seek reconciliation whenever and wherever possible (2 Cor. 5:19)

THE IMAGE OF GOD IN ACTION

The presence of the image of God in humanity endows every person with sacred responsibility. As the pinnacle of His creation, God charged His created image bearers with overseeing the rest of His creation (Gen. 1:26-28): to subdue and rule. These terms denote distinctively royal tasks.

Humans are called to create (Gen. 2:15; Eph. 2:10, John 15:16), commanded to multiply (Gen. 22:17-18), and authorized to cultivate (Gen. 1:28). Theologian J. Richard Middleton concludes from these passages that, “the Imago Dei designates the royal office or calling of human beings as God’s representatives and agents in the world, granted authorized power to share in God’s rule or administration of the earth’s resources and creatures.”²⁹ Such is the generosity of God that He does not hoard His power, but “entrusts the care of earth to human beings.”³⁰

This authority to subdue and rule does not imply or condone violence or mistreatment of people (Mic. 6:8) or any other part of creation. It is a command to act with love under heavenly authority (Luke 10:5-6, 9, Matt. 18:18). Every day, we act in ways that either create good or evil, that either steward well God's creation or exploit it. We either join God in reflecting His creativity or we participate in the destruction of peace. We either exert authority rightly (under His ultimate authority) or we abuse or abandon our authority.

We look forward to the day when all creation will be free from the curse of sin and its effects on our relationships with God, creation, others, and ourselves. Until then, we rely on Jesus to help us live out the God-given function and stewardship of His creation. God's redemptive plan is to conform believers into the likeness of Jesus—the only human to perfectly reveal the “image” of God (Col. 1:15, Hebrews 1:3), as He is God with us, fully God and fully man. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we share in His creative power, that we might make our “own contribution to the harmony and beauty of the world.”³¹

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR MARINERS CHURCH

The truth that every person is created in the image of God has stunning implications for how we view ourselves and how we interact with God, people, and the rest of God's creation. As we seek to follow Jesus and fearlessly change the world, we look through the lens of the image of God as we encounter others, treating everyone with dignity and honor.

We seek to champion—with empathy and through the lens of Genesis 1:26—the ultimate worth and value of every image-bearer. We consider how the image of God in humanity informs our attitudes and our actions toward all people, and we allow this truth to inform the ministries and programs we initiate and promote. We join God in caring for His creation, our bodies, our friends, family, coworkers, communities, cities, and the created order. We imitate Jesus who came to “be a servant, not to be served” (Phil. 2), and by the power of the Spirit, we participate with God in caring for and cultivating His creation.

From this position of vulnerability, humility, and full dependence on our Creator, we take each step with our eyes fixed on Jesus until the goal of redemption is fully accomplished.

ENDNOTES

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- 4 J. Richard Middleton, “The Liberating Image; The Imago Dei in Genesis 1” (Michigan: Brazos Press, 2005), 29. For an overview of different ways of understanding the image of God, see Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994).
- 5 O. Carter Snead, “What it Means to be Human: The Case for the Body in Public Bioethics” (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2020), 101.
- 6 Scott Klusendorf, “The Case for Life: Equipping Christians to Engage the Culture” (Illinois: Crossway, 2009), 144.
- 7 Stott, “Issues Facing Christians Today”, 415.
- 8 Bonhoeffer, “Ethics” 189, 198.
- 9 “There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.” C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory” (New York, Harper Collins, 1980), 46.
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- 25 Evans, “Kingdom Race Theology”, 71.
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- 28 Bishara Awad, President, Bethlehem Bible College, Case Study #2 in
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- 30 Middleton, “The Liberating Image”, 291.
- 31 Middleton, “The Liberating Image”, 289.