



# UNION UNIVERSITY

## A Framework for Biblical Anthropology

In His gracious love God created humanity for the blessing of fellowship with Him and then one another, crowned us with glory and honor (Psalm 8:6), and gave us the duty and privilege of stewarding all of creation. What an honor! Indeed, the goodness and beauty of God's creation and its structures reflect the love of God as Creator. However, in our culture today there is much confusion about and direct challenge to this glorious identity and calling of humanity. This document seeks to expound and summarize the biblical teaching on the nature of humanity and what it means to be human. The goal of this summary is to bring clarity and to provide guidance for our university and others so that we may more faithfully pursue God's path individually and corporately thereby pleasing God and knowing the fullness of life He intends for us.

It is not surprising that this is an area of confusion since mankind, as God's special creation, has been the object of Satan's attack since the Fall, humanity's willful rebellion against God (see point 9). Thankfully, we are not left merely to our own reasoning to address such important issues. In this question, as in all others, we look first to the Scriptures, knowing them to be the trustworthy Word of God, the final authority on all matters. "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever" (Isaiah 40:8). We are also grateful for thought given to these issues by other Christians across the ages.

A Christian understanding of mankind begins with the fact that we are created by God to glorify Him (Romans 11:26; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 10:31; Psalm 86:9-12) and to live in communion with Him (Psalm 73:24-28; John 17:21-23; Psalm 16:5-11). The creation account tells us we are created in His image with the purpose of procreating, filling the earth, and exercising dominion over it (Genesis 1:27-28). However, the first man and woman rebelled against God and thus brought sin into God's perfect creation and passed down this sinfulness to all humanity (Genesis 3; Romans 5:12-14). As a result, the image of God in humanity was marred so that we are born enemies of God, in rebellion against Him, alienated from Him and from one another, and under God's just judgment (Romans 3:9-20; 5:12; Ephesians 2:1-3). Thus, death entered into the world and reigns over the entire created order, including all of humanity (Romans 5:12).

God in His kindness did not leave us in this state, but sent His Son, Jesus Christ, who accomplished salvation through His perfect life, crucifixion, and resurrection (1 Timothy 1:15; 2:3-6; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Colossians 1:12-14). Now through faith in Jesus Christ, mankind can be restored to communion with God and renewed in the image of Christ (Colossians 1:28; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Ephesians 4:13).

Rooted in these central truths, several key points can be stated concerning what it means to be human and how we can thrive.

## 1. Created by God

The very first book of the Bible teaches that “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). As the climactic act of creation, God created the first couple, Adam and Eve (Genesis 1:26-27; Genesis 2:21-23). “He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place” (Acts 17:26).

The manner and description of the creation of Adam and Eve highlight mankind’s place in creation, God’s particular care for them, and their unique opportunity for fellowship with God.

As created beings we are derivative and dependent, not absolute nor independent. We rely on God for everything, for “in him [i.e., Christ] all things hold together” (Colossians 1:17); “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). God is the Creator, and we are His creatures. We do not create ourselves but must respect God’s order and the nature He has given to us. God has defined His creation, including humanity, and we are not free to redefine it. As creatures we come into a world created, sustained, and sovereignly ruled by God. This is God’s world, and as His creatures in this world we are accountable to Him— “Know that the LORD, He is God! It is He who made us, and we are His” (Psalm 100:3). God’s created order, like His Word, is for our good.

## 2. Bearing the Image of God

One of the most precious truths in the Bible— indeed one of its greatest gifts to the rest of the world from the biblical era through to our own— is that humanity is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Among other things, this fact of image-bearing undergirds the special relationship intended for humanity with God.

While God is the ultimate Lord, the fact that humans were made in the image of God entails that we are given “dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Genesis 1:26). Hence, to be made in God’s image is tied closely to the duty to exercise authority under God over the created order to steward and care for it.

Christians have always affirmed that image-bearing is a reality which now characterizes all of mankind—each and every human being (Genesis 5:3). Because all people are created in the image of God, each person has dignity and worth—regardless of physical or intellectual abilities, indeed, regardless of any sort of skill or ability (Psalm 139:13-14; Proverbs 22:2). This dignity is received as a gift from the Creator, is unearned, and cannot be taken away. Hence, faithful Christianity is eager to guard the lives and dignity of all people, including the unborn, the aged, the poor, and others who

are particularly vulnerable (Deuteronomy 10:18; 24:17-18; Psalm 68:5; James 1:27). The Fall may have tarnished or marred the image of God in man, but sin has not obliterated the image. Indeed, after the Fall, the prohibition against murder and against cursing another human is rooted in the fact the people bear the image of God, not in social utility or even in the notion of rights (Genesis 9:6; James 3:9). This innate dignity and value of human life has been the basis for all humane order in society.

All people have descended from Adam and Eve, and as such, there is a fundamental unity to the human race. This unity shows us that there can be no place for racial or ethnic hostility or partiality (Acts 10:34-35; James 2:1-13), though we recognize and lament how often Christians have fallen short in this area, intentionally and unintentionally. Indeed, the Bible—in one sense—only knows of two “races”—those in Adam and those in Christ (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:20-28). Other racial categories—in terms of biblical importance and emphasis—pale in comparison to both (1) the fundamental unity of all human beings and (2) the biblical teaching that the most important division of humanity is between those in Adam and those in Christ. Our Lord has commanded us to love our neighbors—every human being—as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31). Thus, all people are to be respected and cared for appropriately because all people bear the image of God.

Indeed, the Scripture makes clear God’s intention to save people from “every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” and to gather them all in unity “before the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9).

### 3. Created as Physical and Spiritual Beings

Historically, Christians have happily affirmed the goodness and beauty of both the physical world and the immaterial world. This affirmation of both the material and immaterial extends to biblical anthropology. Christians affirm that humans are both physical and spiritual (1 Thessalonians 5:23). Over against those who hold that physical “stuff” is inherently evil, Christians have always affirmed the goodness of the material world (Genesis repeatedly calls the various aspects of creation “good” or “very good”—Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). So, as humans, our bodies are important. Indeed, for the Christian, one’s body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), and Paul says physical exercise has some value (1 Timothy 4:8). Thus, concern for physical health for ourselves and others is an important part of human flourishing.

And, over against various forms of naturalism or materialism, Christians have always declared that mankind is more than “simply” material. Humans are embodied souls, and this spiritual reality is essential to being a person (Psalm 16:10-11; Matthew 10:28; 11:29; 16:26; 22:37; Luke 1:46; John 12:27; Hebrews 13:17). Thus, physical health alone is insufficient, and we must promote spiritual health as well.

Because human beings are both body and soul, evangelicals have historically affirmed that we do not “receive” a soul at some point in the birth process but that the body and soul come into being simultaneously. Thus, from conception there is human life, body

and soul. Thus, the Psalmist can speak of God seeing and knowing him in his preborn state (Psalm 139:15-16), and we read of John the Baptist responding to the greeting of the mother of the Messiah while *in utero* (Luke 1:41-44).

Furthermore, there is an indissoluble connection between one's body and who one is. Our physical bodies are not incidental as seen by the importance given in the gospel to the resurrection of the body (Job 19:25–27; Luke 24:36–43; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; 1 Corinthians 15:12–58). The teaching of the value, importance, and God-given nature of the body, means that our bodies are not a mere shell of our true identities to be altered to conform to some inner sense of our identity.

#### 4. Created Male and Female

Fundamental to the created order, according to the Bible, is the truth that God made man “male and female” (Genesis 1:26-27). The logic of this passage is essential to a biblical anthropology and is worth quoting in full:

- So God created man in His own image,
- in the image of God He created him;
- male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:27)

Note here that the word “man” in the singular in the first line and “him” in the second line are used to refer to male and female, as shown by the third line. The first “man” (the covenantal unit of Adam and Eve) can even be called “him,” which makes sense on biblical grounds, as Adam is “head” of Eve, and indeed head of the entire human race (Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:20-28). This also demonstrates the fundamental unity of men and women in their sharing of the image of God (Genesis 1:27).

The Scriptures also clearly differentiate between men and women. In fact, the differences between men and women were part of God's design from the beginning and are therefore inherently good. For this reason, the Bible can speak to men and women differently. Different instructions can be given to men than to women, and men and women can be expected to fulfill different roles in marriage and in the church (1 Timothy 2-3; Titus 1-2; 1 Corinthians 11:2-16; 16:13; Ephesians 5:22-31). Yet the Bible also affirms the vital importance of both sexes (creation is not complete until woman in addition to man is created) and affirms that both sexes equally bear the image of God and are equal in Christ (Genesis 1:27; Galatians 3:28).

Furthermore, “male” and “female” were created in the beginning and are inextricably tied to God's design of the human body (Genesis 2:18-25). Hence, one's sex is not chosen but given (1 Corinthians 7:17). While we recognize that in a fallen world there are occasional atypical anatomies that result from disorders of sex development, there remain only two biological sexes, male and female. And, because one's sex is a biological reality, to deny one's sex, to try to change one's sex, or to think one can “choose” one's sex is an affront to the very structures of creation, and ultimately to God Himself, the author of creation. Consequently, while we grieve the effects of the Fall manifested in gender dysphoria and we desire to minister compassionately to

individuals who struggle in these areas (Galatians 6:1-5), we nevertheless must insist that the current cultural emphasis on sexual self-determination (the ideology of transgenderism) is outside the bounds of biblical Christianity (Deuteronomy 22:5; Romans 1:26-27; 1 Corinthians 11:2-16). Indeed, the suggestion that one should “choose” or “determine” one’s own pronouns is a sign of deep moral disorder and confusion, which is not helpful to people in general or to people struggling in this area (Isaiah 45:9-12).

## 5. Designed for Procreation

Bearing and rearing children is an important and valuable task of humanity. In the original creation story, immediately following the creation of male and female in the image of God, we find the following command:

*And God blessed them. And God said to them,  
“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” (Genesis 1:28)*

Thus, within the context of marriage, being “fruitful” and “multiplying” is rightly seen as important and good, indeed, a blessing. Of course, not all people marry and procreate. Neither the Lord Jesus nor the Apostle Paul married, and Paul gives clear teaching on the goodness of singleness (1 Corinthians 7:8, 27-28, 32-35, 38). Those whom the Lord calls to singleness can flourish in service to the kingdom in ways married people cannot.

The continuance of humanity is dependent on procreation, and procreation is designed to occur only within the bounds of marriage. God created marriage and performed the first wedding before the Fall, making the marriage the first human institution, formed before any government or even the church (Genesis 2:22-25). God designed marriage to function as a life-long complementary union between one man and one woman. Ephesians 5 shows that from the beginning God designed marriage, in addition to being a source of love, comfort, support, and procreation, also to be a portrait of Christ and the church, with God weaving into the very nature of life an image of His redemption (Revelation 21:9-11). Therefore, any distortion of marriage is a serious issue as it thwarts human flourishing and distorts the gospel.

The family, the community formed by a husband and wife and their children is the central unit of human society. Three of the Ten Commandments undergird and protect the family (Exodus 20:12, 14, 17). This family community is shown by the order of creation to be the best setting for the maturing and flourishing of children. Sadly, in our fallen world (See point 9) we see the breakup of marriages and families. In light of this tragic reality, we must work to mitigate the hurt and damage and to see God’s grace at work redeeming these situations.

In Genesis, the command is not *simply* to be fruitful and multiply, but to thereby “fill the earth.” This biblical command applies generally to couples today, making procreation the default mode for married couples. Having said that, we recognize that some couples are unable to bear children for various reasons, and we realize the sorrow this causes (Genesis 30:1-24; 1 Samuel 1; Luke 1:7). In no way are we seeking to

diminish the struggle of infertility nor are we suggesting that couples facing infertility are somehow being disobedient to God's command. But generally speaking, this filling of the earth is an extension or expression of bearing the image of God and is one means of bringing glory to God—having children, raising these children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4), and populating the earth with such offspring. Given the command to have children, Christians should be happy to procreate and “fill the earth,” and therefore should not view population growth as a problem or something to be avoided (Psalm 127:3-5).

Christian marriage includes physical intimacy, and Genesis 2:24 teaches that when a man and a woman marry, they become “one flesh” (reaffirmed by Jesus in Matthew 19:5; cf. 1 Corinthians 6:16 and Ephesians 5:31). The marriage covenant is most certainly physical, but it is also spiritual; or, rather, the marriage covenant's physicality is simultaneously spiritual. Indeed, when Paul teaches on sexual purity in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20, he turns to Genesis 2:24 (“one flesh”) as a part of his argument. Given the importance of marriage and sexual purity, it is understandable that the author to the Hebrews can admonish: “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous” (Hebrews 13:4). Both Jesus (Matthew 19:4-6) and Paul (Ephesians 5:31-33) explicitly re-affirm the teaching of Genesis 2:24 that marriage is between one man and one woman.

Given such clear biblical teaching, homosexual relations of any and every sort are outside of God's moral will and are clearly prohibited by Scripture (see also Leviticus 18:22-23; 20:13; Romans 1:24-27; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:8-11; Genesis 19:4-7 and Jude 6-7).

## 6. Given Dominion over the Earth

God's creation is glorious and awe-inspiring, drawing us to recognize the wisdom and splendor of the Creator and to give Him praise (Romans 1:20; Psalm 104, 146, Psalm 148). Since creation is a gift that comes from the open hand of the Father of all things, it is, then, humbling to see that from the beginning God created humanity to have dominion “over all the earth,” including all the living things on the earth (Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8:6-8). This is part of what is entailed in bearing the image of God, as humans represent and enact God's rule on the earth.

We are ennobled and enabled by this, as we are called to bring order and good to this world by governing it. We are to “subdue” the earth (Genesis 1:28). The “subdue” language is used before the Fall, so there is implied a need for bringing order even to unfallen creation. After the Fall, there are various ways in which we are called to work to mitigate the brokenness of the fallen world by stewarding and caring for creation.

These truths undergird the goodness of work. Adam and Eve were given meaningful work before the Fall (Genesis 2:15), so meaningful work is part of the original good design for humanity. The introduction of sin often frustrates and twists this (Genesis 3:17-19) but working with creation and the resources God gives us is one way we reflect the Creator God.

This role for humanity also identifies mankind as unique among the rest of creation. Contrary to the claims of some, humanity is not a virus on the earth. Mankind stands above the rest of creation, bearing God's image and given the responsibility to rule benevolently this creation. In many ways, the earth exists for the sake of humans (as similarly, the Sabbath was made for man, Mark 2:27). We are commanded to "fill the earth" (see point 5).

Since the Fall, we have not always handled our role well, and humans have been carelessly destructive; but, this failure does not obscure God's design. Mankind has a stewardship over creation, being called to tend, care for, and make use of it (Genesis 2:15). Creation has been placed under the care and direction of mankind.

Biblical Christianity offers a challenge both to anarchy and to totalitarianism. Humanity is given real, limited, and derivative authority over the rest of creation. This is *real* authority, but it is *limited*, for mankind's authority is always exercised under God (Acts 5:29). Hence, Christians are necessarily committed to a hierarchical view of reality. God is Lord over humans, and humans have been given dominion over the rest of the created order.

## 7. Made for Communion with God

In Genesis it is clear that we were made for communion with God. We are created for relationship with God from the beginning (the breath of life itself comes directly from God—Genesis 2:7). This is further demonstrated by the work of redemption. Relationship with God is not something somehow added to our humanity in redemption. Rather, our relationship with God is something given in the very reality of being created beings. Adam (and by implication, all humanity) was related to God, and knew God, from the very earliest moments of his existence. Relationship with, and knowledge of, God was (and is) a part of the very nature of being human. Every human fundamentally relates to God—each one either loves or hates God; each person has either bowed the knee to the One True God or is living in rebellion to this One True God (Matthew 12:30; Romans 1:19-21).

Because we are made for communion with God but are all born alienated from God, gospel proclamation—evangelism and world missions—is a basic need of the world and a central task for all believers. Humans can only truly flourish once they are brought back into loving relationship with God, our Creator.

The greatest commandment, according to Jesus, is for us to love God with all that we are (Matt 22:37-38; Mark 12:28-30; Luke 10:25-27). Thus, loving God is central to our purpose and our good. Accordingly, our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. True life for every person is to truly know this God (Isaiah 66:1-2; Jeremiah 9:23-24; John 17:3).

Because the great commandment calls us to love God with all our mind, education is important for human flourishing and is a valuable part of Christian work. Because the great commandment requires us to love God with every aspect of our being, human beings need, in order to flourish, mental, emotional, and psychological growth, rooted in the truth of who God is, finding our ultimate fulfillment in Him.

Every day, then, we live under the gaze of God. We cannot hide from God's presence even if we try (Psalm 139). We are always in His presence in some sense, and we need to engage Him faithfully that we might know abundant life (Psalm 16:11).

## 8. Created as Individuals for Community

God created human beings as individuals for community. It is important to note both parts of this point, contra both radical individualism and various collectivist visions where the concept of the individual gets lost. First, Adam and Eve were created as unique individuals. Even their punishments are specific to them as individuals. Scripture makes clear that we will answer to God for ourselves specifically: "So then each of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12; see also Matthew 16:27; 18:35; Romans 2:6; 1 Corinthians 3:13; 4:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrew 9:27; 1 Peter 1:17; Revelation 22:12). Similarly, the call to trust Jesus for salvation goes to *each* person (Acts 2:38; see also Acts 3:26). Scripture emphasizes that each individual is personally responsible for discerning and acting on opportunities to help those in need (Acts 11:29; 2 Corinthians 9:7). Even in terms of temptation, Scripture notes personal proclivity and responsibility (James 1:14). There is no place for mere collectivism. Individuals are responsible for their deeds and decisions.

At the same time, it is clear that we were never meant for complete isolation. God did not just create Adam, but from Adam He made Eve so that they might be together. God invented marriage and stated, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). The Bible speaks often of our need of others and the beauty and value of friendship (Proverbs 18:24; 27:5-6, 7, 17; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12). Marriage and friendships are gifts from God. God called an individual, Abraham, but He did so for the sake of calling a people to Himself. Indeed, the second greatest commandment is to love one another (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27), requiring us to know and care for others. "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:4).

The New Testament discussion of spiritual gifts captures both of these elements well. God distributes different gifts to different individuals (note "each one," 1 Peter 4:10; 1 Corinthians 7:7; Ephesians 4:7), but their purpose is for the good of the whole community, "for the common good" (1 Corinthians 12:7; cf. Romans 12:3), "to serve one another" (1 Peter 4:10). This responsibility for caring for others is reflected in the "one another" commands in Scripture (e.g., Romans 12:10b, 16; 1 Corinthians 12:25; Galatians 6:2; Ephesians 4:2-3, 32; 1 Thessalonians 4:18; James 5:16; 1 Peter 1:22; 4:9; 1 John 4:7). The family and then the Church are the divinely established institutions where this blend of individual expression and responsibility for the sake of others is manifested, and thus both are central to human flourishing.

## 9. Fallen

Despite the glory of mankind seen in creation, we are now fallen into sin. This sinfulness affects every part of us—the physical, mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual. Apart from Christ we are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1). Our intellect and reasoning capacity is severely hindered by sin and rebellion (Ephesians 4:17-19, "the futility of their minds," "darkened in their understanding"; Colossians 1:21, "hostile in mind"). Our desires are also twisted, making them unreliable guides and often sources of temptation (Ephesians 4:22; James 1:14; 1 Peter 2:11). Our physical bodies now

decay so that all will die. Because of these effects of sin, we do not by our own initiative pursue God (Romans 3:11-12). Since the Fall, humans are born alienated from God and rebellious to His will. As a result, human intuition and reasoning will never be adequate for discerning God's will or ultimate truth. We must use our minds and can discern valuable things from God's design (e.g., natural law), but our discernment is always limited and flawed, so Scripture must stand above all (Romans 12:1-2).

The image of God remains in us, continuing to instill honor and value, but it is marred so that the non-Christian ("the natural person") cannot alone discern the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:14). On the other hand, the Christian ("the spiritual person") is able to discern spiritual things (1 Corinthians 2:15), because, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Christian has the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). Reason is a gift, and, with it, we can do many things. However, it is still fallen and hostile to God. Thus Scripture, God's directly revealed Word, must stand above any human reasoning in terms of authority and direction.

Death, though universal, is alien and not part of the original design. It is an enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). Therefore, we work against it and seek to relieve suffering. By God's mercy and grace, death is a conquered enemy, so Christians can approach death in confidence. Though we lament the death of loved ones, we do not grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). So, we seek to alleviate human suffering, but we do not cling to this earthly life at all costs.

Now that sin has entered the world, there is a sharp antithesis between things of God and things of the evil one (Genesis 3:15). This antithesis runs throughout the rest of history and is not overcome or done away with until Christ's return and ultimate fulfillment of all things (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

## 10. Restored in Christ

The great hope of humanity is the restoration made possible by the work of Christ, His birth, sinless life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension, and eventual return. Those who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus are forgiven their sins and are reunited to fellowship with God, which had been lost in the garden (1 John 1:2-3). Part of the purpose of salvation is for the image of God to be renewed in us by our being conformed to the image of Christ (Ephesians 4: 23-24; Col 3:10; James 3:9; Acts 17:28; Romans 8:29). This renewal in Christ does not entirely negate the effect of sin in this life, as we continue to fight sin and temptation and grow in sanctification (Romans 6). However, this salvation is the ground of hope, insuring our forgiveness, restoration, and glorification (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15:58; 1 John 3:1-3). At Christ's coming believers will be made like Him (1 John 3:2). This is our "blessed hope" (Titus 2:13), seeing our Redeemer, the One who will say, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

In being conformed to the image of Christ we do not cease to be human or created. The Creator-creature distinction, essential to Christian theology, is never overcome or annulled. We are not, in short, divinized. But we are transformed and glorified (Romans 8:17, 20; 2 Corinthians 3:18). Only in Christ do we fully become the people we were meant to be, as we are conformed to the image of the Son.