

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The nature and the value of human life

Ten years ago, the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assembly (GA) directed the General Assembly Council (GAC) to instruct the National Ministries Division to update and re-issue the 1981 PCUS paper on “The Nature and Value of Human Life” (*Minutes, 2000, Part I, pp. 52, 482*). The assignment was referred to the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP). The primary issues addressed in that paper were abortion, euthanasia, war and capital punishment. The GA acknowledged that advances in medical technology and genetics were raising new questions that the 1981 paper did not address. It took ACSWP 10 years to produce its paper entitled “Living a Human Life before God.” It is item #11-07 on www.pc-biz.org. The paper fails one simple test: it does not actually address the subject matter assigned by the GA.

In this study, let us explore what the Bible has to say about the nature and value of human life.

“In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”

John 16:33

Where the ACSWP paper operates from a “natural” or “humanistic” worldview, this study is offered from an unapologetically “supernatural” perspective and where the ACSWP paper takes a “progressive” view of history, this study takes a “redemptive” view.

A redemptive view of history acknowledges the depravity of

humankind and the need for salvation (and a Savior) to come from “the outside.” A redemptive view of history holds out the expectation of Christ’s return. A progressive view of history posits that through human achievement, education and cooperation everything can be made progressively better for everyone in every place. Indeed, a laudable desire. Unfortunately, this view of history is not supported by our experience in the 20th and 21st centuries, by our observation across history, nor by the revelation of God in the Scriptures. Jesus acknowledges that the poor will always be with us (Mark 14); there will be wars and rumors of wars; brother will betray brother to death; children will rebel; Christians will be hated, arrested, tried (Luke 21), indeed yet to come are days of unequalled distress (Mark 13).

Both the progressive and the redemptive views of history are hope-full, it is just a matter of where one places one’s hope: in humanity’s ability to get along and advance in every succeeding generation, or in God’s ability to redeem all things in the fullness of time as He sees fit. In a progressive scenario the distinctive nature of the Christian Gospel is necessarily diluted into a pluralistic co-existence. In a redemptive scenario Christians understand that they will become increasingly marginalized for their distinctive witness, but continue to stand with confidence in Christ who assures His followers “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

This study is presented in four parts:

1. The nature of human life in God’s original design: *Imago Dei*;
2. The nature of human life since the fall of humanity into sin;
3. The value of human life evidenced by Jesus;
4. The value of human life lived in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

If you are facilitating a small group Bible study for the first time, keep these tips in mind:

Pray in advance – by name for each person and for yourself, that God would use you. Ephesians 3:14-21 and Philippians 1:3-11 are excellent model prayers.

Prepare in advance – you can only lead others as far as you have been; provide materials to others in advance (it removes one barrier of anxiety for participants); prepare an outline plan of what you are going to cover. “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine.” Titus 2:1

Create a welcoming environment – greet people as they arrive, offer hospitality, and invite them to sit facing one another at the same level, assure them that no one has to talk but that you hope this will be an open discussion and free exchange of ideas. Be reminded of Luke 10:38-42, sitting at Jesus’ feet is more important than the fare you serve.

Ask open-ended questions and show appreciation for those who contribute to the conversation and participate in the study. Do not be anxious if people are not quick to answer. Allow periods of silence for people to think and formulate a response. Be an encourager.

Use Scripture – When an answer is contrary to the Scriptures, use the Scriptures themselves to point out the error. Remember: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” II Timothy 3:16-17

Agree before the end of the first lesson what individual study is to be done before the group reconvenes and pray before folks depart. “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together ...” Hebrews 10:24-25

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Week I: The nature of human life: We are created ... in the image of God

We are Creatures

Genesis 5:1-3 echoes Genesis 1 in acknowledging that “when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, He called them ‘man’ (in Hebrew, adam).” Indeed, as the Psalmist declares, “the LORD is God. It is He who made us, and we are His; we are His people, the sheep of His pasture” (Psalm 100:3).

The conversation about the nature of human life begins with the recognition of God as the Creator and then unfolds in a living response to Him.

What do we know of this Creator God? We know that which God has chosen by grace to reveal. We do not posit ideas about God, we receive the self-revelation of God and are drawn into relationship with God. Through the general revelation of creation and through the special revelation of His Word, written in the Scriptures of the Bible and made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, God has revealed all that is necessary for life and salvation.

We are Created in the image of a personal God

Among God’s attributes we know that He is infinite, immortal, invisible, holy, merciful, triune, indivisible, immovable and perfect. But maybe the most extraordinary thing that can be said about God is that He is personal. As a trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God has eternally experienced perfect communion and fellowship. In creating human beings, God then gives us the opportunity to share in that fellowship. Amazing!

Unlike all the other creatures of the earth, human beings are made in the image of God. Our personhood, our personality, the essence of our being bears the imprint of God’s own likeness. Created in His image, male and female, we have the unparalleled privilege to show forth to the world the character and nature of God as we live in relationship to Him.

We are set as stewards over all that God has made

When we read Genesis 1 and 2 we cannot escape the refrain that when God saw what He made He declared that it was “good.” So, not only did God make man great, by creating us in His image, God also made man “good.” Goodness is more than delight to the eyes; it is delight to the heart. God found a joy, a delight, in what He had made. Out of His goodness, God shares all that He made with us. Everything in all creation is on loan from God. More accurately, we are the stewards, the managers, the caretakers and tenders of all that God has made.

Everything in all the universe belongs to God. He made it. It is His. Your house is on loan to you by God. Your time and your talents belong first to God. Every good and perfect gift, every person you have ever met, ever dime you have ever spent, every book you have ever read, every moment you have ever wasted. ... God’s, God’s, God’s. You and I don’t really own anything. We are but stewards, managers, caretakers, tenders of the things of God. That has been our “job” since the very beginning and it continues as a part of our calling in the world today.

For study & discussion:

Read Genesis 1 and 2. What do these chapters say about the nature and value of human life?

Re-read Genesis 1:27-31. What do these verses say to you about God’s design for human life?

Week II: The nature of human life: Freedom (and bondage) of the will

Our free nature

At creation, in imparting His image to humankind, God granted us a will that was perfectly free.

The first human beings possessed the freedom to choose to live in perfect obedient relationship to the Father; they were equally free to choose to live according to their own desires, in sinful disobedience to God. It is hard for us to imagine even having such a choice today. The reality in which we live is so far removed from Eden that our minds cannot conceive of the joy and peace and life that must have characterized the world before the fall.

The question that God asks in Genesis 3:13 gives us a glimpse into the heartbreak of God over the fall of man: “What have you done?”

Once fallen, there was no going back. Sin had entered the world, and with sin all of its consequences: disease, pain, envy, violence, war, greed, lust, disaster, poverty, death. Within a chapter of Scripture and within a generation of humanity we witness Cain’s jealousy that leads to anger that leads to sins of violence, murder, lies, defensiveness and an actual separation from God resulting in Cain’s “restless wandering on the earth.” That restless wandering continues to plague many people in the world today.

Our fallen nature

The nature of human life and the nature of life on earth is now a fallen nature. Things are not as God created them to be. Human beings are no longer born bearing the perfect image of God. We are born sinful. That is the nature of human depravity. There is no part of our lives that is untouched nor untarnished by the consequences of the fall.

In fact, we are no longer even free like the first humans were free. Their choices changed the choices that would be available to everyone after them. With sin, the nature of human life was forever altered.

We became slaves to sin. Our freedom became bondage. The inclination of human nature became slanted toward sin.

Indeed, created in the image of God we are also fallen and we cannot save ourselves. Thanks be to God that is not the end of the story! The nature of human life is not one of sinners doomed to suffer the temporal and eternal consequences of sin. No, we are not forsaken, abandoned nor orphaned. God places far too great a value on human life to ever let us go.

For study & discussion:

Read Romans 1:18-32. According to God, how serious is the issue of sin?

Read Romans 7:14-25. What does this passage say about our personal power over the influence of sin in our lives? Where does Paul place his hope?

Week III: The value of human life: ‘Redeemed!’

The value of something is often determined by what someone is willing to pay for it. So, what was God willing to “pay” for man’s redemption? The answer is: Jesus. The incarnation of Jesus, the way in which Jesus related to people, and the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross, demonstrate how precious people are to God.

Consider this: when God asked Himself what we were worth, the answer was “Jesus.” When considering our redemption, God chose to buy back that which we had sold into slavery to sin by taking on human flesh. God did not choose to redeem us by some other means or through some other flesh. He took on human flesh. Colossians 1:19 confirms that “God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in (Jesus), and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.” God has no other plan for man’s redemption. Jesus is it. The fullness of God poured into human flesh, sacrificed upon the cross to satisfy the perfect holy justice of God, once for all.

In Christ a human life is redeemed and the ultimate value of being created in the image of God is restored in a life lived in relationship to God. In Christ we become new creations, children of God, vessels of the Holy Spirit, citizens of heaven living as agents of divine grace throughout the world that God so loves. In Christ we become people who:

- are no longer full of themselves, but filled with the Holy Spirit.
- are no longer seeking to make a name for themselves, but broadcasting with their lips and lives the name of Jesus, bearing continual witness to Him.
- are no longer building terrestrial kingdoms that will rise and fall, but tirelessly advancing the Kingdom purposes of God upon the earth.
- are no longer storing up treasures for themselves where rust can ruin, moths eat and thieves steal, but people who store up for themselves treasures in heaven, good deeds which God has prepared in advance for them to do.

Through Jesus’ incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension the path of regeneration is laid. Salvation comes as we are justified (once for all), sanctified (throughout the course of this life as we are conformed by one degree of glory to another into the likeness of Christ), and glorified (in heaven, with Christ, forever). This is the “added value” nature of a redeemed life in Christ.

Jesus demonstrates throughout His teaching and ministry that every human life has value. From little children to lepers to the adulterous woman and the thief on the next cross, Jesus valued people and regarded them as precious in God’s sight. Those who would claim the name “Christian” must regard every human life as equally valuable, treating people as co-heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven they very well may be.

For study & discussion:

Read John 1:1-18. What does this passage say about who Jesus is and the value the world placed upon Him?

How does it make you feel to know that your salvation, your redeemed life, was worth the life of Christ to God?

Read through the healing miracles of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark and take particular note of how Jesus values or esteems people who are regarded by the world (and the religious leadership) as having no value. How might Jesus’ treatment of the least and the last and the lost inform the living out of our faith in the world today?

Week IV: The value of human life: Leading a life worthy of the calling

Ask yourself, “how does the value God places on my life through Christ influence how I value and esteem myself and other people?” Asked another way, how does the knowledge that I am incredibly valuable in the sight of God influence my value system?

Jesus put it this way in Matthew 16:24-26, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”

Paul put it this way in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.”

Christians are a people belonging to God. Those who are in Christ are no longer their own. We have been bought with a price. It is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us. Our bodies are not our own, they are temples of the Holy Spirit. Our minds are not our own, but ever becoming the very mind of Christ. Our actions are not our own, but bear witness (either falsely or truly) to Jesus Christ.

- What does a life that is worthy of the Gospel look like?
- What does a life that is worthy of the name “Christ-ian” look like?
- What does the life of a royal priesthood look like?
- What does the life of an ambassador of Christ look like?
- What does the life lived as the bride of Christ look like?
- What does the life of an heir of the Kingdom of Heaven look like?
- What does it look like to be a living demonstration of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world?

Jesus says in John 15:15-16 to those who abide in Him, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last.” So, we are stewards of God’s creation and friends of God’s Son. He has called us, He has redeemed us from slavery to sin and death, He has chosen us, He has equipped us, He has appointed us to lives worthy of Him.

Each and every day we have the opportunity to lead lives that are worthy of the calling of Jesus Christ. Each and every day we have the opportunity to put the Gospel on display to a broken, dying and desperate world. Each and every day we have the opportunity to demonstrate the value God places on a human life by sharing with others what a life redeemed in Jesus Christ and endowed with the Holy Spirit looks like. Further, we have the privilege of inviting others to live into the joyful reality of their ultimate worth. Let us do so.

For study & discussion:

Read Matthew 10:28-39 What does Jesus say about a life that is “worthy” of Him?

Read John 15. How does this text inform your living a life that Jesus would consider “worthy” of His name?