LEGACY CHURCH

Humanity

A Position Paper of Legacy Church

Introduction

No question is more urgent or more contested in our cultural moment than the question of what a human being actually is. It is a question that shapes everything else: how we treat one another, how we understand suffering, what we believe about life and death, what obligations we carry toward the vulnerable, and what kind of future we are working toward. The answers being offered today are many and often incompatible. Some locate human value in capacity, others in utility, still others in the individual's own self-definition. The result is a culture that simultaneously inflates the self and diminishes the neighbor, that speaks loudly about human dignity while steadily dismantling its only reliable foundation.

The Bible offers a different account. From its very first chapter, Scripture insists that human beings are not accidents of nature, not animals with more complex instincts, not economic units, and not autonomous creators of their own identity. They are creatures made by a personal God, in His image, for His glory, and for relationship with Him and with one another. This is not one perspective among many. It is the only account of humanity that can actually bear the weight of the dignity it claims.

This paper traces the church's historic understanding of what it means to be human, from the creation account through the early church and the Reformers to the present moment, and articulates what Legacy Church believes and how those beliefs shape the way we live together and engage the world. A fuller treatment of what sin has done to humanity is found in our separate position paper on sin. What follows here is focused on what God intended when He made us, and what remains true of every person despite what sin has done.

I

Old Testament Foundations

Made in the Image of God

The most foundational statement Scripture makes about human beings is found in Genesis 1:26-27: "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." This is the *imago Dei*, the image of God, and it is the cornerstone of the biblical doctrine of humanity. Everything the Bible says about human dignity, human purpose, and human responsibility is anchored here.

The phrase "image of God" has been interpreted in various ways across church history, and we will trace those interpretations below. But at minimum, several things are clear from the text itself. First, the image is something that belongs to humanity by creation, not by achievement. It is not earned or developed. It is given. Every human being possesses it simply by virtue of being human. Second, the image is relational in origin. The God who creates in His image is Himself a God of relationship, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the creature made in that image is designed for relationship at his core. Third, the image is purposive. It comes with a commission: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion" (Genesis 1:28). The image-bearer is given a task.

The Commission and the Calling

The image of God is not merely a description of what human beings are. It is a description of what they are for. In the ancient Near Eastern world, the image of a king was placed in a territory to represent his authority and presence there. When God places humanity, made in His image, in creation and gives them dominion over it, He is doing something analogous. Human beings are God's representatives in creation, the visible expression of the invisible God's rule over the world He has made.

This is a staggering calling. To be human is to be a vice-regent, a steward of creation on behalf of the Creator. The task given in Genesis 1:28 carries the weight of a royal commission. And the intimate portrait of Genesis 2, where God places the man in the garden to "work it and keep it" (Genesis 2:15), deepens this with the language of care and cultivation. Humanity is not placed in creation to exploit it but to tend it, to develop its potential, and to offer it back to God in worship.

Alongside this outward commission is an inward calling. Humanity is made for fellowship with God. Genesis 2 portrays a God who walks in the garden, who speaks to the man and woman, who is present and personal. The question "Where are you?" that God asks after the fall (Genesis 3:9) is not a question of geography. It is a question of relationship, and it reveals that the God who made humanity desires to be known by what He has made. We were made to know God, to love Him, and to find in that knowing and loving our deepest joy and fullest humanity.

The Image After the Fall

Genesis 3 records the catastrophic rupture that sin introduced into both the human relationship with God and the shape of human life in the world. The consequences are sweeping: shame, fear, conflict, pain, toil, and death all enter the story. The image of God in humanity is not destroyed by the fall, but it is severely distorted. The representative becomes a rebel. The steward becomes an exploiter. The one made for fellowship with God hides from His presence.

Scripture is careful to maintain the dignity of the image even after the fall. Genesis 9:6 grounds the prohibition on murder in the fact that human beings are still made in the image of God: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." Even in a fallen world, the image confers a worth that cannot be violated without consequence. Every human being, regardless of their moral condition, their usefulness to society, or their recognition by any other human system, retains the image of God and therefore retains a dignity that is absolute and non-negotiable.

The Old Testament establishes that human beings are image-bearers of God by creation, called to represent Him in the world, made for fellowship with Him, and possessing an inherent dignity that the fall distorts but does not destroy.

II

New Testament Understanding

Christ as the True Image

The New Testament does not leave the doctrine of humanity where the Old Testament ends. It introduces a development of extraordinary significance: Jesus Christ is the perfect image of God. Paul writes that He is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15) and "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Hebrews 1:3). He is what Adam was always meant to be and never fully became. In Christ, we see what human life looks like when lived in perfect conformity to the image of God, in unbroken fellowship with the Father, in perfect love for neighbor, in complete obedience to the commission.

This has profound implications. When God set out to restore what sin had distorted in humanity, He did not send a moral code. He sent a person. The restoration of the image of God in humanity is not primarily a matter of ethical improvement. It is a matter of union with the one who is Himself the perfect image. To be conformed to the image of Christ is to be restored to the fullness of what it means to be human.

New Creation and the Restored Image

Salvation, in the New Testament's account, is not merely the forgiveness of sins. It is the beginning of a new creation. Paul describes the new self as being "renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (Colossians 3:10) and "created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:24). The Spirit within the believer is progressively conforming them to the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18), restoring what sin corrupted and moving toward what God always intended.

Romans 8:29 sets the horizon: God has predestined His people "to be conformed to the image of his Son." This is the telos of human existence, the end toward which the whole story of redemption is moving. It will not be fully accomplished until the resurrection, when the body itself is glorified and the image of God in humanity is finally and completely restored. But it begins now, in the life of the believer who is being transformed by the Spirit.

The Equal Dignity of All People

The New Testament expands on the Old Testament's insistence on universal human dignity by making explicit its application across every social boundary. Paul's declaration in Galatians 3:28, that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus," is not an erasure of distinctions but an insistence that those distinctions do not determine worth. The image of God belongs to every human being regardless of ethnicity, social status, or any other category by which human systems assign or deny value.

James makes the same point from a different angle: "With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. My brothers, these things ought not to be so" (James 3:9-10). Contempt for any human being is, at root, a failure to reckon with what they are. They are made in the image of God. That fact does not disappear when they are difficult, sinful, broken, or different from us.

Made for Fellowship

The New Testament is equally clear that human beings are made for community. The great command Jesus gives, that we love one another as He has loved us (John 13:34-35), is not an optional pursuit for the spiritually ambitious. It is the defining mark of authentic humanity restored in Christ. The church itself, in the New Testament's vision, is not a gathering of private individuals pursuing personal spirituality. It is the body of Christ, a community of image-bearers being restored together into the likeness of the one true image, learning to love, to serve, to bear one another's burdens, and to display to the world what it looks like when humanity begins to flourish as God intended.

III

Early Church (First 300 Years)

The early church inherited the Old Testament's doctrine of the image of God and developed it with remarkable theological precision, particularly as it sought to define what exactly the image consists of and what the fall had done to it.

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-202 AD)

made one of the earliest and most influential distinctions in the doctrine of the image. He differentiated between the image (*imago*) and the likeness (*similitudo*) of God in Genesis 1:26, arguing that the image refers to the rational and free nature of humanity while the likeness refers to a spiritual endowment that was lost in the fall. While later theologians would question whether this distinction is supported by the Hebrew text, Irenaeus's underlying insight was sound: there is something in humanity that sin damages but does not destroy, and there is something that the fall deeply corrupted and that must be restored by grace. For Irenaeus, Christ is the perfect image and the restorer of the likeness, recapitulating in His own person what Adam lost and leading humanity back toward what it was always meant to become.

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-215 AD)

emphasized the rational nature of humanity as the primary locus of the image, reflecting the influence of Greek philosophical categories. But he was careful to ground the image in relationship with God rather than in mere intellectual capacity. For Clement, the image is oriented toward the Logos, the divine Word, who is both the model of true humanity and the teacher who forms the image in us toward its proper end. Human dignity, on this account, is not self-generated. It is received from and directed toward the God who is its source.

Tertullian (c. 155-220 AD)

insisted on the dignity of the human body as part of the image, against various spiritualizing tendencies that would locate the divine image only in the soul. He writes in *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* that the body is "the very condition on which salvation hinges," arguing that because Christ took on a physical body, the body cannot be dismissed as spiritually irrelevant. Human dignity is not merely a property of the inner life. It belongs to embodied existence.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD)

gave the most comprehensive early account of the image of God, locating it primarily in the soul's capacity for memory, understanding, and will, which he understood as a finite reflection of the Trinity's own inner life. But Augustine was equally insistent on the relational dimension of the image. In his *Confessions*, his famous opening prayer captures the heart of it: "You made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it reposes in Thee." The image of God in humanity is not a static quality. It is a directedness, an orientation toward God, a restlessness that will not find its rest anywhere except in Him. When that orientation is disordered by sin, everything else about human life becomes disordered as well. When it is restored by grace, the image begins to function as it was designed to.

Across these early voices, the church developed a consistent and rich understanding: that the image of God is the ground of human dignity, that it encompasses reason, will, and relational capacity, that the fall distorted but did not destroy it, and that its restoration is found only in Christ.

IV

The Reformers

The Protestant Reformers took the doctrine of the image with great seriousness, particularly in relation to the effects of sin and the nature of salvation. Their account of human dignity is inseparable from their account of human depravity, and holding both together is one of the Reformation's most important contributions to Christian anthropology.

Martin Luther was emphatic that the fall had far more severely damaged the image of God than many of his predecessors had acknowledged. Where medieval Catholic theology often spoke of the image as substantially intact after the fall with only the supernatural addition of grace lost, Luther argued that sin had corrupted the image at its very core, twisting the human will so thoroughly that it was incapable of turning toward God on its own. And yet Luther equally insisted on the dignity of every human person. Because human beings are God's creatures, made in His image, they retain a worth that is not contingent on their moral condition or spiritual status. Luther's pastoral care for the outcast, the poor, and the marginalized was an expression of this conviction.

John Calvin developed the doctrine of the image with characteristic precision. He located it primarily in the soul but insisted it also "extends to the body," so that even the human form reflects something of the Creator's workmanship. Calvin was equally insistent that the image, though profoundly corrupted by sin, is not entirely erased. "Some sparks still gleam," he writes in the *Institutes*, enough to leave humanity without excuse before God and enough to ground the obligation of universal human dignity. He made the pastoral application directly: "Since every man is to be regarded as an image of God, we are bound to serve and honor him in every man, without exception."

Both Reformers understood that the restoration of the image was the work of grace alone, accomplished through union with Christ. The new humanity they described was not an improvement on the old but a new creation, sharing in Christ's own life and being conformed progressively to His image by the Spirit.

V

Mainstream Western Christianity

The doctrine of the image of God has never been more contested or more urgently needed than in the modern West. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced a series of intellectual and cultural movements that, taken together, dismantled the biblical foundation of human dignity while often claiming to defend or enhance it.

Darwinian evolution, as it was popularly received, relocated humanity on a continuum with other animals, raising the question of what, if anything, distinguished the human animal from others. If humanity is simply the most complex product of blind natural forces, the concept of inherent dignity becomes philosophically unstable. Dignity, on this account, can only be a social agreement, not a given, and social agreements can be renegotiated. The twentieth century demonstrated where that renegotiation can lead.

Marxism assigned human value in terms of economic class and historical function. Fascism assigned it in terms of racial identity and national strength. Various utopian movements assigned it in terms of contribution to a projected future. In each case, the category of inherent human dignity was subordinated to a larger system, and those who did not fit the system's categories were dehumanized with consequences that are now the defining horror stories of modern history. The lesson is severe and should not be forgotten: when the image of God is no longer the ground of human dignity, human dignity becomes negotiable.

Contemporary culture has not abandoned the language of human dignity, but it has largely severed it from any transcendent ground. Dignity is increasingly located in individual autonomy, in the right of each person to define themselves and their own meaning. This produces the paradox of a culture that simultaneously elevates the self to supreme importance and has no coherent answer for why the self of one person should limit the freedom of another. The result is not genuine dignity but a competition of wills dressed in the language of rights.

Historic Christian theology, Catholic and Protestant alike, has maintained that human dignity is not self-generated, not socially constructed, and not contingent on capacity or usefulness. It is given by God, grounded in the image of God, and therefore inalienable. This conviction is not merely a religious preference. It is the only account of human dignity that can actually sustain what it claims. Legacy Church stands within this historic conviction and seeks to live it out in every dimension of our common life.

VI

Key Scriptures on Humanity

> Genesis 1:26-27
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> *"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them."*

> Genesis 2:7
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> *"Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature."*

> Genesis 9:6
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> *"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image."*

> Psalm 8:4-6
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> *"What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet."*

> Psalm 139:13-14
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> *"For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well."*

> Colossians 1:15
>
> *"He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation."*

> Colossians 3:10
>
> *"...and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator."*

> 2 Corinthians 3:18
>
> *"And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."*

> James 3:9
>
> *"With the tongue we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. My brothers, these things ought not to be so."*

VII

Legacy Church Position

At Legacy Church, we believe that what we think about human beings is not a secondary or merely theoretical concern. It shapes how we treat every person who walks through our doors, how we engage our neighbors, how we speak about those with whom we disagree, and what kind of community we are building together. Our doctrine of humanity is not confined to a statement on a page. It is a way of seeing every face we encounter.

Created in the Image of God

We believe God created humanity in His image, male and female, with inherent dignity, value, and purpose (Genesis 1:26-27). The image of God is not a quality earned by achievement or conferred by society. It is given by the Creator to every human being. This is the irreducible ground of human dignity, the reason every person matters, and the reason no system of thought or practice that denies it can ultimately uphold the worth it claims to protect.

Made to Know, Love, and Enjoy God

We were made for fellowship with God. Not merely to be aware of His existence, not merely to acknowledge His authority, but to know Him, to love Him, and to find in that knowing and loving our deepest joy. Every human being carries within them a longing that nothing created can satisfy, because they were made for the Creator. This longing is the echo of the image, the restlessness Augustine described, that will not rest until it rests in God.

Uniquely Designed and Deeply Loved

Every person has been uniquely designed, intentionally formed, and deeply loved by their Creator. There are no accidents, no surplus human beings, no one whose existence is without meaning or purpose in the eyes of God. The psalmist's confession that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14) is not poetic exaggeration. It is theological precision. God knows every person He has made, and He made each one with intention and care.

Made for Fellowship with God and One Another

Mankind was made for relationship. With God and with one another. Isolation is not the natural state of a human being. We are made for community, for love, for the mutual bearing of burdens and the shared pursuit of God's glory. The church at its best is a demonstration of this: a community of image-bearers learning to love as Christ loved, to honor the image of God in one another, and to show the watching world what restored humanity looks like.

Called to Reflect His Glory

Human beings are not the point of creation. God is. We were made to reflect His glory, to be living displays of His goodness, wisdom, and love in the world He has made. This is the royal commission of Genesis 1, the priestly calling of the image-bearer: to tend the world on behalf of its Creator, to develop its potential, and to offer it back to Him in worship. Every dimension of human life, work, art, relationship, rest, and service, can be an expression of this calling when it is rightly oriented.

Marred by Sin, but Retaining the Image

Though humanity has been profoundly marred by sin, every person retains the image of God and deserves to be treated as such. The fall is real, its effects are devastating, and no account of humanity that ignores it is honest. But sin does not erase the image. It distorts it. And the distortion of something does not change what it fundamentally is. A broken mirror still reflects. A defaced image still bears the marks of its original. Every human being, regardless of their condition, their choices, or the ways they have been shaped by sin, retains a dignity that calls for our honor and our care.

The Practical Weight of This Conviction

We believe that every person who walks through our doors, regardless of their background, their brokenness, their beliefs, or their behavior, bears the image of God and is worthy of dignity, honor, and love. This is not a mere posture of inclusion. It is a theological conviction with teeth. It means we cannot write anyone off. It means contempt has no place among us. It means the way we speak about people, including those we disagree with, including those who have wronged us, is a theological act, because every person we speak of is an image-bearer.

It also means we take seriously the calling to restore what sin has distorted. The gospel is not only the forgiveness of sins. It is the beginning of a new creation, the renewal of the image, the progressive conforming of the believer to the perfect image who is Christ. **Every person who comes to faith in Jesus is beginning the process of becoming more fully human, not less, because to be fully human is to bear the image of God well, and only Christ restores that capacity.**

We hold this conviction with both clarity and compassion, knowing that the world is watching not only what we believe about humanity but how that belief shows up in the way we treat one another.

SOLI DEO GLORIA