

DESIGNED for DIGNITY

What God Has Made It Possible
for You to Be

SECOND EDITION

RICHARD L. PRATT JR.


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Second edition 2000

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Page design by Tobias Design
Typesetting by Michelle Feaster

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Pratt, Richard L., 1953-

Designed for dignity : what God has made it possible for you to be /
Richard L. Pratt, Jr.—2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN-10: 0-87552-508-3

ISBN-13: 978-0-87552-508-2

1. Man (Christian theology)
 2. Dignity—Religious aspects—Christianity.
 3. Self-realization—Religious aspects—Christianity.
 4. Kingdom of God.
- I. Title.

BT701.2.P69 2000

233—dc21

00-057481

*For my daughter,
Becky:
May you always live with dignity.*

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Foreword

I don't know about you, but I grow weary of glib answers to important questions. The existential questions concerning what I'm about, why I'm here, and where I'm going become increasingly important to those of us who have read all the self-help books, taken all the seminars, and listened to all the religious speeches—and who still feel unsatisfied and empty.

It was, then, with a degree of cynicism (albeit a “hopeful cynicism”) that I read Dr. Pratt's book on human dignity. I know Richard Pratt, and I know that what he teaches and writes is never shallow and glib. But there have been so many people and so few honest answers to honest questions, that I was careful not to allow expectations to override reality. One learns to be careful in reading books about important issues. Like Christmas, the experience can be ruined if one invests too many hopeful expectations.

If you feel that way, you are in for a very pleasant surprise as you read *Designed for Dignity*. Here is a book—written with great humility, simplicity, and honesty—about people like you and me. But more than that, it is a book about our Creator and the exciting revelation of himself to his people.

Richard has a wonderful gift of taking difficult and abstruse theological concepts and making them understandable and exciting. That is always helpful. However, his book is more than a simplification of difficult ideas. It is a return to the unbelievably refreshing and ever-new truths of the Bible.

Once, upon returning from an extended journey, Thomas Car-

lyle asked his maid if there was any news. She replied, “Jesus Christ died for sinners.”

He replied, “That is old news and new news—and good news.”

I commend this book to you. As you read it, you will sense something not dissimilar to the emotion a new Christian has upon first reading the Bible. It is old, it is new—and it is good.

STEVE BROWN
PRESIDENT
KEY LIFE NETWORK

Preface to the Second Edition

It is a great pleasure to see a second edition of *Designed for Dignity*. As I have continued teaching the material in this book, I have seen God's people respond positively to many themes. In recent years, I have learned that it especially helps to see the topic of human dignity in closer connection with the biblical doctrine of the kingdom of God. These two themes are intimately related and draw upon each other in many ways. For this reason, I have sought to make these connections more explicit in this edition.

My hope is that this book will continue to encourage believers in every walk of life to find their dignity in Christ alone. He has given us all a very special place in his kingdom, and we can find strength and joy in the struggles of life as we treasure his high calling for all of our lives.

Preface to the First Edition

This book is about people—you, me, and the billions of human beings with whom we share this planet. It's a familiar subject to all of us. We live with ourselves and interact with others every day. As much as we are involved with people, we might expect to understand each other better than we do. At least we should have a firm grasp of ourselves as individuals. But try as we may, these mysterious creatures known as *Homo sapiens* still baffle us.

I am not a psychologist, sociologist, or anthropologist, and I am not trying to be one as I write this book. If I am anything, I am a student of theology—more specifically, Old Testament theology. That puts me at a significant disadvantage, because these behavioral sciences offer indispensable insights into human nature. Yet, my interest in the Old Testament also affords me an advantage. The entire Old Testament from Genesis to Malachi—the whole Bible, for that matter—is keenly concerned with what it means to be human.

That may sound a bit odd. We normally think of the Bible as a book about God, not about people. But the Scriptures actually speak of both. In fact, the biblical teachings on God and humanity are so intertwined that we cannot understand one without the other. The more we learn about God, the more we know about ourselves. Similarly, the more we learn about ourselves, the more we know about God. Biblical writers understood this, and so they wrote both about God and the human race.

This subject first intrigued me about five years ago. At that point in my life, I had completed my formal education and faced

the stark reality that I could no longer think of my life as something I was preparing to do. I had settled into a job, my family was as large as it was going to be, and I was rapidly moving toward middle age. “This is my life,” I finally admitted. But it wasn’t entirely a happy thought. “If that’s all there is . . .” So I began to search for a perspective on my life that went beyond the Christian platitudes I knew so well. I yearned for a more satisfying understanding of why I am here on this earth.

As I have spoken to different Christian groups, it has become apparent that many people face this problem. Sometimes it comes in crisis proportions—a divorce, a debilitating illness, the death of a loved one. What is the sense in all of this? Many of us, however, manage to keep the issue safely in the background. But it still slowly eats away at the joys of life. We find ourselves inexplicably dissatisfied, longing for something more. Whatever your situation may be, God wants you to ask hard questions about yourself: What are you? Why do you exist? He calls you to reflect on what it means to be human.

These chapters deal with three basic issues: What did God make us in the beginning? What have we made of ourselves? What has God made it possible for us to be? I cannot think of any questions more important. They are at the center of our hopes and dreams. They shape everything we do.

In short, this book answers that you and I are *designed for dignity*. Every chapter develops some aspect of this theme. Don’t expect to find magical potions that will solve all of your problems. The dignity of human existence always remains somewhat mysterious. I certainly have not discovered all the answers, but I have found small tastes of dignity by following the paths I outline in this book. As you read these chapters, I hope you will also find paths along which you can move forward in awareness of yourself, other people around you, and the God who designed you for dignity.

Acknowledgments

This book is the work of many people. My secretary and friend, Diana Soule, has devoted countless hours to processing the manuscript. Four students—Brad Trenham, John Van Dyke, Jim Campbell-Robertson, and Janie Pillow—offered careful and very helpful editing. My sincere thanks goes to all of you.

Finding Our Place in His Kingdom

A few years ago I came across a newspaper article entitled “The Irony of Being Human.” The column reported two events that have haunted me to this day.

In the first story, a young woman was sitting alone in her hotel room. She had left her husband and two children to live with another man, but that evening her new partner had deserted her. Everything was lost—her husband, her children, and now her lover. In utter despair, she shoved the barrel of a .38 caliber pistol into her mouth and pulled the trigger. The police found a desperate note left on the nightstand. “Don’t cry for me,” the wrinkled paper said. “I’m not even human anymore.”

Another event occurred that evening in the same hotel. Just a few floors below, advocates of the New Age Movement gathered in the convention center. After several rousing talks, a well-known celebrity led the crowd in a unison chant, “I am God! . . . I am God! . . . I am God!”

“The irony of being human,” the article concluded, “is that people in the same time and place can have such contradictory views of themselves.”

The columnist was right. These events dramatically illustrate one of the greatest ironies of human existence. We don’t know what to think of ourselves. Some of us feel so worthless that we

can hardly stand to live another minute. Others are so full of self-importance that they lift hands in praise of their own divinity. One says, “I am nothing.” Another says, “I am God.”

Which is true? What does it mean to be human?

In this book, we are going to explore what it means to be human from a Christian perspective. As I teach groups of Christians in many different countries, I am continually dismayed at how little otherwise mature followers of Christ understand about themselves. Often it appears that even believers with a good knowledge of the Bible and strong, orthodox doctrinal commitments fail to grasp much of what the Bible says about them. Ask a group of Christians what place human beings have in God’s world, and you will often get platitudes and blank stares. Though we spend a lot of time learning about God and his commands, we have little time for finding out what Scripture says about ourselves.

When we look carefully at the Bible, it becomes apparent that the writers of Scripture were deeply concerned not simply with God, but also with people. It amazes many Christians when they realize that God barely appears in many stories of the Old Testament. In fact, God is not mentioned in the entire book of Esther. Yet, in every narrative of the Bible we find one focus without exception. The stories of the Bible speak about people: their origins, successes, failures, disappointments, hopes, and destinies. Even the Psalms, the Bible’s book of prayer and worship, does not simply speak of God. People are a repeated, vital concern in this portion of Scripture. In the New Testament, Jesus taught much more directly about human life than he did about God himself. The same may be said about the epistles. No doubt, they teach much about God, but never without simultaneously teaching about people. For a book that is designed to reveal God, the Bible also talks a lot about you and me.

How can we explain the Bible’s preoccupation with human existence? The Reformer John Calvin helps us understand the Bible’s focus on us. He rightly observes at the beginning of his *In-*

stitutes of the Christian Religion that we understand who we are only in the light of who God is. God is the Creator and we are his creatures. Without viewing ourselves in this light, we will never grasp what it means to be human. At the same time, Calvin believed that we only understand God as well as we understand ourselves. As the pinnacle of God's creation, human beings reveal God more wonderfully than any other creature does. For this reason, we know ourselves as we learn of God, and we know God as we learn about ourselves.

Unfortunately, many Christians today turn away from Calvin's balanced outlook. In reaction to the tendency of modern humanists to make humanity their chief concern, sincere followers of Christ often go to the opposite extreme by overlooking the importance of focusing on human beings. To be sure, as we study the Scriptures we must give first place to learning about our Creator. Jesus himself said that the greatest commandment is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). At the same time, however, a proper concern with God will lead to learning about human beings as well. As Jesus put it, "The second [command] is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' " (Matt 22:39).

For many believers learning what the Scriptures teach about people holds a very distant second place. But for Jesus, it is a photo finish. You cannot have one properly in view without the other in view as well. In short, God-centered theology that fails to give serious attention to human beings is not God-centered at all.

THE KINGDOM ON EARTH

Jesus taught his disciples to ask for something that should be everyone's burning desire. He asked the Father, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). This prayer sums up the central message of the Bible in

just a few words, and it provides an indispensable perspective on God and humanity.

In one sense, God has always been and will always be the sovereign King over everything. He controls all things and works his own pleasure throughout history. Yet Jesus' prayer did not have this broad idea of divine kingship in mind. Jesus first said, "Your kingdom come," but he explained what he meant in the next line: ". . . your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus desired for his Father's kingship to be recognized on earth in the way it is in heaven.

To understand Jesus' request we have to know how God's kingdom is displayed in heaven. God's will is done in heaven in ways that it is not done on earth for at least two reasons. First, God's glory is so spectacularly displayed that no one in the heavenly throne room of God can doubt who is in charge. Listen to the way John described God's throne in heaven.

And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. (Rev. 4:3–5)

God's glory in heaven is clearly revealed for all to see. He sits on a glorious throne with lightning and thunder emanating in every direction to display his awesome power. God's unavoidable display of glory is one way in which God's kingdom is manifest in heaven.

Second, in the heavenly throne room God's kingship is manifested in that no one can resist reverent submission to him. His splendor simply compels everyone to worship and obey. John's vision of heaven draws attention to the response of those who see the glory of God in heaven.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures. . . . Day and night they never stop saying:

“Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come.”

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne, and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being.” (Rev. 4:6–11)

In the heavenly realms God receives a continuous outpouring of adoration from all the creatures in his presence. God displays his spectacular sovereignty, and all acknowledge him as their supreme Lord.

On earth, however, the situation is strikingly different. God is in control of all things, but his glorious sovereignty remains largely hidden from view. For this reason, the vast majority of earth’s creatures refuse to worship and obey God as King. Before sin came into the world, the Garden of Eden was the one place suitable for the glorious manifestation of divine kingship, but the rest of earth remained to be shaped into a glorious dwelling for the worship of God. With the advent of sin, the condition of our planet worsened. The earth itself fell into corruption and became the arena of defiant rebellion against the King of the universe.

Jesus' hope—in fact, the hope of the entire Bible—was that this condition of earth will not continue forever. One day, God will establish his reign throughout the earth as magnificently as it is in heaven. Instead of being a place where God's splendor is obscured and his creatures live in rebellion, the earth will one day be a holy place filled with the glory of God, and all humanity will honor and worship God as he deserves. We catch a glimpse of the earth's future in John's description of the New Jerusalem, the center of the new heavens and new earth: "The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it" (Rev. 21:23–24).

In the new world that comes when Christ returns, the glory of the Father and Christ will be displayed as divine splendor now shines in heaven. Moreover, those redeemed by Christ from all the nations of earth will come before God with unending worship and praise. At that time, Jesus' prayer for the coming of the kingdom of God will be fulfilled.

In the meantime, followers of Christ pray and work to extend the kingdom of God. We seek to spread God's glory in Christ throughout the world by preaching the gospel so that more and more people will bow before God the Father and his Son. In this sense, everything we believe, do, and feel should be designed to fulfill God's purpose of establishing his glorious kingship over all the earth.

The Bible's focus on the kingdom of God is so overwhelming that it may appear at first to draw all attention toward God and away from us. To be sure, the honor of God is our highest goal, but Christians often miss a crucial aspect of God's plan for the arrival of his kingdom on earth. One of the most remarkable things taught in the Bible is that God has determined to bring about his kingdom on earth in a particular way. He has chosen to work out the plan for his ultimate glory through a special instrument. What is that instrument? What is that created means by which

the kingdom of God will come on earth as it is in heaven? The answer of the Bible is straightforward. That instrument is the human race.

That's right. God ordained humanity to be the primary instrument by which his kingship will be realized on earth. To be sure, we need to qualify and explain this statement in many ways, and we will do so throughout this book. At the same time, we will see in this study that the human race has the unique role of bringing the kingdom of God to fruition and the wonderful destiny of sharing in its glory.

OUR UNIQUE TITLE

The Christian understanding of the role and destiny of humanity in the kingdom of God finds its roots in the very beginning of the Bible. The first time the Bible speaks of us, we find God himself giving a unique title to the human race, which established our unique place in his kingdom.

In recent years, advertisers have encouraged shoppers to “read the label.” Their message has gotten through to me. I used to go to the store and simply buy orange juice, but now I read the fine print for additives and preservatives. I used to just look for potato chips, but now I have to see how much fat and sodium each package contains. It's a bother, but labels tell you a lot about what's inside the package.

In the opening chapter of Scripture, God put a unique label on the human race. If we look carefully at this label, we can learn a lot about ourselves. Moses reported God's first words about humanity in this way:

Let us make man *in our image*, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. (Gen. 1:26, emphasis added)

In the original language of Genesis, the expression “make man in our image” meant that God made man “into” his image, much as we would say that a potter makes a lump of clay “into” a vase. And so humanity is not *in* the image of God; we actually *are* the image of God. In the very beginning, our Creator gave us this remarkable title.

We Christians often refer to people as images of God as if everyone understands that terminology. But most of us are confused about what it means. We know that our title distinguishes us from other creatures. We guess that it must be something good. But what precisely does it tell us about our place in the kingdom of God?

To begin with, we must understand our unique title in the context of Old Testament history. Moses and his Israelite readers understood these words because they lived in a world full of images. The most dominant images in the cultures of the ancient Near East were those of kings. Throughout the ancient world, kings made images of themselves and placed them in various locations in their kingdoms. Pharaohs of Egypt, the Emperors of Babylon, and the kings of other empires used images of themselves to display their authority and power.

This custom of Moses’ day helped him understand why God called Adam and Eve his image. Just as human kings had their images, the divine King ordained that the human race would be his royal image. Put simply, the expression “image of God” designated human beings as representatives of the supreme King of the universe.

The title that God gave you and me has many facets, which we will explore throughout this book. Here we want to focus on just one aspect of our title: the balanced outlook it offers as it highlights two sides of human existence: our humility and our dignity. We are humble “*images of God*,” but we are also dignified “*images of God*.” To have a balanced outlook on the human race, we must understand both sides of the title God has given us (see figure 1).

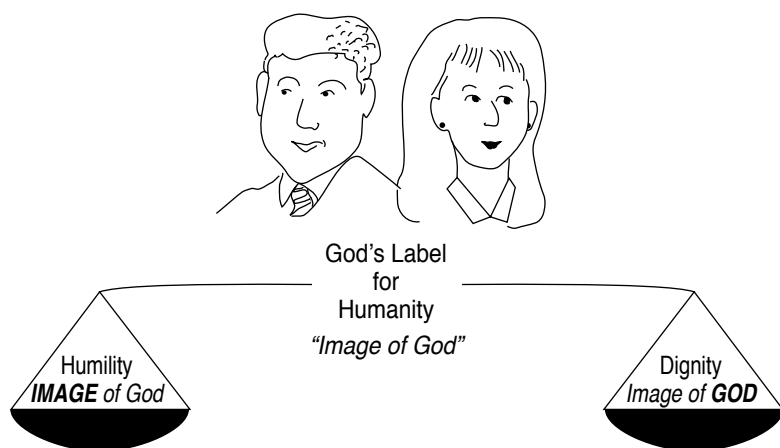


Figure 1. Our Balanced Image

A TITLE OF HUMILITY

The word *image* calls attention to our humble status. In the ancient world of the Old Testament, this term often denoted a statue or figurine—a three-dimensional representation of a person or thing. In light of this widespread usage, we understand what God meant when he called Adam and Eve his image. They were finite, physical representations of their Creator. As astounding as this description may be, we must not miss how it discloses our humility. We are images of God, but that's all we are—images.

In our day, an age-old lie has become popular again. In one way or another, many groups are teaching that human beings are divine. We are extensions of the Creator, having the potential to be gods ourselves. In its own way, secular humanism has lifted humanity to the place of God; Marxism has done much the same thing. Some religious cults express similar views. In recent years, the influx of Eastern religions into the West has made it increasingly popular to speak of the divinity of humanity.

These teachings may surround us, but one thing remains clear. The Bible insists that we are not gods; we are merely *images* of God. We are not equal with our Maker; we do not have a

spark of divinity within us. We are nothing more than creatures who reflect our Creator.

Our humility as creatures becomes even more evident when we notice the kind of material God used to make his image. Different sorts of images were common in the ancient world. Archaeologists have uncovered spectacular statues of stone and precious metals. But they have also discovered simple images of clay, which were usually small and very fragile.

The variety of images in the ancient world raises an important question. What kind of images are we? When God formed Adam, he did not use silver or gold, diamonds or rubies. Adam came from ordinary soil: “The LORD God formed the man *from the dust of the ground*” (Gen. 2:7, emphasis added). The first man was not a splendid, diamond-studded image; he was not shaped from precious metals. He was a clay figure.

To grasp the importance of this portrait of humanity, we have to recognize how sharply it contrasted with widely accepted views in the days when Moses wrote Genesis. Moses had been trained in the courts of Egypt to divide the human race into a hierarchy of classes. Commoners served at the bottom of the ladder, and kings ruled from the top. This scheme reflected more than convenient socioeconomic groupings. It stemmed from Egyptian beliefs about the human race. Common people ranked low on the scale because they were little more than clay. The pharaohs stood above all others because they were divine. Some people were humble creatures and easily replaced. But others, especially the high-ranking nobles, were anything but humble. They stood above all others, at times even becoming gods.

Moses opposed these false views as he wrote the Book of Genesis. He declared to Israel that all people descended from images of clay. From the greatest to the least, every person comes from the dust of the ground. Every person is fragile and humble in comparison with God himself.

It is hard today to deny that human beings are but dust. Disease and death have turned us into a vapor. We are here today and gone tomorrow. But we must remember that Moses was not

writing about sinful, suffering people. At this point in Genesis, Adam was a perfect man, entirely uncorrupted. Nevertheless, even in the absence of sin and death, Adam and Eve were still breakable clay figures.

If our perfect parents were such humble creatures, how much more are we! Can there be any doubt that we are only finite creatures? As obvious as this truth appears, many people still run from it. They delude themselves with fantasies of grandeur and hide from the biblical portrait of humble humanity any way they can.

When I was in college, a classmate told me about his first day as a student. In the opening lecture of the school year, his instructor explained why he was a teacher. "A liberal arts education is liberating," he said. "I am here to free you from the shackles of superstition, religion, and morality that your parents forced on you. . . . I am here to give you the freedom to make your own way through life, unhindered by your parents and undaunted by God. . . . I will help you become your own god."

These words shocked my friend. He had never heard anyone talk like that. "Be your own god?" he asked me. "I wondered if all my teachers felt that way."

Sadly, that professor's goal is shared by many teachers in higher education. They may not say it explicitly, but countless university teachers see themselves as those who liberate young people from the humiliating dogmas of God and morality. They tell their students not to submit to the decrees of the Creator, but to live as their own creators.

We might expect this kind of attitude from university professors, who are notorious for holding radical views. But visit any major business center and you will be surrounded by large numbers of people who act like gods. They may not boldly proclaim their intentions, but many people in the business community believe that no moral restraints apply to them. They lie and cheat as it suits their purposes; they step on their competitors without a second thought. As Gordon Gekko told us in the movie *Wall Street*, "Greed is good!"

We even encounter these perspectives among our friends and families. Racists treat other groups as inferior because they think

of themselves as a step above others. Mothers abort their unborn children because babies would interfere with their personal freedom. Children neglect the financial needs of their aging parents to buy a nicer car. “Look out for Number One” is no longer shameful; it’s now considered common sense. People all around us exalt themselves above others. Filled with a sense of their own importance, they act as if they were gods.

My family and I have visited Cape Canaveral several times through the years. We enjoy the rocket sites and scientific displays. Whenever we visit the Space Center, one theme comes through loud and clear. “We have come so far,” the tour guides keep saying. “We’ve accomplished so much in space travel. The potential is limitless!”

No doubt, we have come a long way compared to past generations. The power of those rocket engines is astounding; the space shuttle hanger is gigantic. We have to admire the people who put these things together.

Even so, these accomplishments pale in comparison with what we have *not* been able to do. We were so proud when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon and spoke of “one giant leap for mankind.” But going to the moon is a stroll around the block compared to traveling to one of the planets of our solar system. The moon is barely a stone’s throw away compared to the chasms of space that divide the galaxies. Advances in space exploration should never convince us of our greatness. As we learn more about the universe, we see how small we are and how little—not how much—we have accomplished.

Actually, the same thing is true in every area of life. We have surpassed our ancestors in many fields, but we have mastered little. We have minuscule knowledge, a pittance of power, and only a whisper of wisdom. Why? Moses explained it long ago in Genesis. Our limitations are severe because we are images made of dust.

It grieves me to admit it, but self-aggrandizement appears not only outside the church. Even Christians lose sight of how small they are. I visit many different churches, but one problem comes up nearly everywhere I go. Every church has a few members who

think they are a cut above the rest. We've heard the jokes about ministers who refuse to retire until there's a vacancy in the Trinity. We've seen wealthy Christians rule the church with their money. Theologians arrogantly insist that everyone must think precisely as they do. Humility does not come naturally even to those who know Christ. We get a few good ideas and conclude that our opinions are always the best. We recognize that God has given us some gifts, and we soon believe we are indispensable.

We also raise ourselves above others in our homes. Through the years I've seen many Christian families fall apart. Each troubled home has its unique difficulties, but arrogance is a recurring problem. "It's my way or no way!" we shout at each other. Husbands abuse their leadership; wives demand their independence. Even in Christian homes we deny that we are humble clay.

It is so easy to think we are grand. It is so easy to believe we are above others. But that myth will be shattered on the day we die. Do you think the world will notice when you pass away? Think again. A few people may attend your memorial service, and close loved ones may miss you. But the church will do just fine without you, and society will continue unhindered. We may believe we have the grandeur of gods, but one day that delusion will end for good.

As we seek to understand what the Scriptures teach about humanity, we must begin where God's label begins—with a full recognition of our humble condition. How are you tempted to forget your humble status before God? We all wrestle with this matter. How do you struggle with self-importance at home, at work, and at church? Cast aside this arrogance whenever it arises. It simply does not accord with what you are. We have true understanding of ourselves only when we recognize that we are humble images of clay.

A TITLE OF DIGNITY

Human beings are humble creatures, but look at our title again. We are images, but we are images *of God* (Gen. 1:27). God

did not make Adam and Eve to resemble rocks, trees, or animals. Nothing so common was in his design for us. Instead, God carefully shaped the first man and woman so that they were in *his* likeness. He determined to make us creatures of incomparable value and dignity.

This side of Moses' account also represented a radical departure from the common beliefs of his day. In those ancient times, only kings could rightly claim to be images of divinity. Commoners and peasants had no such value; they had no importance. It was their destiny to suffer and die for the gratification of kings. These beliefs were behind Israel's terrible suffering in Egypt. What gave Pharaoh the right to subject the Israelites to cruel slavery? How could the Egyptians justify their attempt to destroy the Jews? The answer was very simple for ancient Egyptians. The lowly Israelite shepherds should not have expected honorable treatment. They had no dignity; they did not deserve any respect. Only Pharaoh represented divine authority on earth.

Moses' words in Genesis directly opposed these lies. He boldly claimed that *all* people were royal images of God. Every human being represented the authority of the heavenly throne on earth. Every descendant of Adam and Eve possessed the same honored status as representatives of the kingdom of God. God bestowed this value and dignity not on a few, but on all of the human race.

Moses' portrait of universal human dignity also challenges the way we look at people today. All around us, people deny the honor that God ordained for human beings. Just as the ancient world spurned the vast majority of humanity as so much worthless dirt, modern men and women have also abandoned the human race to ignobility.

Strange as it may seem, university students often encounter excessively low views of humanity from the same professors who encourage them to act like gods. I remember my own biology teacher presenting both extremes. He scoffed at traditional religion and asserted that we must be masters of our own fate. Yet, as contradictory as it seems, he also insisted that the human race is noth-

ing more than the result of random evolution—ooze out of ooze and back into ooze. People are nothing more than lucky mud.

The results of deprecating the human race are evident everywhere. What value can we attribute to human life if we are just lucky mud? What becomes of morality and human freedom? As this low view of humanity has filtered down to people on the street, the outcome has been devastating. We deprive ourselves of every vestige of worth; every ounce of wholesome honor dissipates. As I once heard it said, “If we have no dignity, let’s live it up! If we have no freedom, let’s give it up!” Worn down by failure and meaninglessness, teenagers turn to drugs and adults hide inside their liquor bottles. Many even take the last step of suicide.

In the opening chapter of Genesis, Moses affirmed the dignity of all human life for two reasons. First, he wanted the Israelites to reject the views propagated by the Egyptians. Many of Moses’ readers had forgotten how terrible life had been in Egypt. But now he reminded them that Egyptian policies of cruel oppression were contrary to God’s created order. God did not bestow nobility on just a few human beings; everyone was his image. The Israelites serving in Egyptian homes, working in the fields, and suffering under the heavy load of Pharaoh’s building projects were designed for dignity and should have been treated as such.

Second, Moses taught the Israelites how they should treat other people in the future. He knew how easy it would be for the oppressed to become the oppressors. Once the Israelites settled in their homeland, the temptation to mistreat the weak and vulnerable would be great. This is why the Law of Moses focused so much on protecting widows, orphans, and strangers (for example, Deut. 14:29; 24:19–21). Mistreating others was contrary to the ways of God. No cruel caste system would hold sway among God’s people. Servants were to be treated honorably (Ex. 21:2–11). Judges were to show no favoritism to those who were rich and powerful (Ex. 23:6–9; Deut. 1:16–17). Everyone, even the king, was under God’s law (Deut. 17:14–20). All people were to be treated with the honor they deserved as images of the invisible God.

The biblical view of human dignity addresses our modern world in the same two ways. First, it helps us look at ourselves as we ought. We must learn to deal with a world that constantly assails our own sense of honor. We don't face ancient Egyptian propaganda; few modern people believe that dignity rests in royal lineage. We have exchanged those outdated notions for more democratic ideals. But the world hasn't stopped saying that some people are more valuable than others; it has merely swapped criteria.

Many people know this harsh reality from their teenage years. "I hate high school," one young woman told me. "Everyone makes fun of me because of the kinds of clothes I wear." Teenagers can be cruel. They seem to look for any excuse to ridicule and mistreat others.

Sadly, adults do the same to each other. We determine human worth by a person's income. We measure someone's dignity by his or her possessions. Education, good looks, and a promising career have become the standards by which we determine the value of our fellow human beings.

Moses' record of human creation offers good news for all who fail these false modern standards. Our value does not rest in external circumstances. God, the Creator of all, has announced that we are his image—royal images possessing divinely ordained dignity. It does not matter what others say; we are valuable because we represent the throne of God on earth. Rich or poor, educated or uneducated, attractive or unattractive—you are the likeness of God.

Surprisingly, many Christians have little sense of the honor they bear as God's images. We look in the mirror every day and see someone who disappoints us. We learn to hate our failures, but we end up hating ourselves as well. We want to be humble, but we lose all sense of importance.

Take another look at yourself. God has declared that the person in your mirror is his regal image. You are not perfect—that should be plain enough. But you are still valuable because you are God's image. In God's eyes, you are as important as any king

and as valuable as any nobleman who ever walked on this earth. Discard the lies of the world and joyfully acknowledge the dignity God has lavished on you.

Second, Moses' perspective also teaches us how to treat others. Christians are as guilty as the world in showing favoritism. Our church programs exclude certain groups of people. We ridicule the customs of other cultures and sneer at fellow believers who do not live up to our idiosyncrasies. The Bible's radical commitment to the nobility of all people warns us to forsake these ways. All people deserve to be treated as honorable images of God.

I want you to put this book down for a moment. Go find another person and shake his or her hand. Although you will see a flawed, weak human being, say to that person, "Hello, Your Majesty!" Don't say it as a joke. Let the look in your eyes and the tone of your voice convey sincerity. As you do, you may get a sense of what Moses' readers felt when they heard him describe the first man and woman. These former slaves looked at each other and realized with amazement that they were all of the royal lineage of Adam and Eve. They possessed the dignity of being the Creator's images, representatives of his reign over all the earth.

How the world would be different if we lived according to this truth! Family tensions would be gone; bigotry would disappear; war would vanish. If we all looked at each other as God designed us, the world would be a radically different place.

Give yourself this test. What happens as you drive down the road and someone pulls out in front of you? What do you say to yourself as you slam on your brakes? "Look at that! There's the noble image of God"? When you are sitting in an airplane and the mother in front of you cannot stop her toddler from screaming, do you think, "Oh, look at that wonderful likeness of God!"? Of course not. We can hardly control the bitter thoughts racing through our minds. Instead of honoring God's images, we curse them.

When I was in graduate school, I came out of the subway early one morning and turned into Harvard Yard. Blue lights were

flashing from several police cars surrounding the statue of John Harvard. As I walked toward the cars, I saw that someone had poured lime green paint all over the statue. I stood there for a moment surveying the damage and overheard one officer talking to the other. “These kids haven’t got any respect for the school,” he grumbled. “No respect at all.”

What was that officer saying? As far as he was concerned, the desecration of John Harvard’s statue was an affront to the university itself. An attack on the image was an attack on the school it represented.

In much the same way, you and I must come to grips with the reality that people around us are visible symbols of God in the world. When we dishonor God’s image, we dishonor God and rebel against his heavenly throne. When we unjustly attack his likeness, we attack him. The well-known words of James press the point home: “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be” (James 3:9–10).

Parents dishonor God when they provoke and abuse their children. Children disrespect their Creator when they rebel against their parents. Husbands and wives mistreat God when they mistreat each other.

Moses made it clear to Israel that God gave every human being a title of royal dignity. How do you deny the honor that belongs to you? In what ways do you treat others with less dignity than they deserve as God’s likeness? We must take God’s description of the human race to heart. We are clay images—a powerful lesson in humility—but we are also images *of God*—creatures of wondrous value and dignity.

OUR CHANGING IMAGE

On occasion I come across old photographs of myself. Years ago, I did not have a beard, my hair was much longer, and I had

fewer silver strands. When I look at those pictures today, I can hardly believe my eyes. I have changed in so many ways.

As we have seen, Moses presents a beautifully balanced portrait of the human race in the first chapter of Genesis. But his picture raises a serious question. If we are the image of God, humble yet dignified, why do we struggle so much with self-degradation and self-exaltation? Why do our lives seem to contradict what God designed us to be in the beginning? The answer to these questions lies in the fact that the image of God has gone through many changes. The course of human history has left indelible marks on every aspect of our existence. To understand who we are today, we must look not simply at our original state but also at the changes that have occurred since then.

Throughout this book, we will look in detail at the historical development of God's image. Each chapter will focus on a particular stage in human history and explore what happened to us at that time. At this point in our study, however, it will help to sketch a brief overview of these developments.

In chapter 2, we will further explore Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God not only gave our first parents a revealing label; he also gave them a wonderful job description. He commanded Adam and Eve to fill the world with other images of God and to rule over the creation as his vice-regents. This twofold task became a distinguishing mark of human dignity throughout history.

Chapter 3 will give attention to the terrible day when humanity fell into sin. Adam and Eve were dissatisfied with the position God had given them in creation. They violated their relationship with him by rebelling against his command. In response, the Creator placed a curse on our parents that cast the whole human race into futility and death. The royal image of God fell into the severe ignobility we all experience even today.

As we will see, however, God did not leave his image to rot under this curse forever. He had a plan to redeem us. This plan unfolded slowly through redemptive history, as related in the

Bible. At different times, God gave various gifts and responsibilities to his people. Step by step, he made it possible for his images to move further away from the futility of sin and closer to his original design for humanity. In the remaining chapters, we will trace this history of redemption. We could stop at any point along the way, but we will concentrate on five major periods during which God entered into special relationships with his people.

After the Fall, God richly blessed the whole human race in the days of Noah (chapter 4). Human sin and violence had so corrupted the earth that God radically interrupted history. He destroyed wicked humanity in the Flood, formed a new world order, and commissioned his redeemed images to serve in that new world.

In the days of Abraham, God chose to bless one family, the Jewish race, with a great honor (chapter 5). He revealed the three things all people must have to reach full restoration as his image. God taught Abraham to trust in divine power, to wait patiently, and to persevere in faithfulness.

At the time of Moses, God moved the family of Abraham another step toward full restoration (chapter 6). He formed the people of Israel into an army ready to take the Promised Land. He provided a larger measure of dignity for his redeemed images by giving them his purpose, guidance, and presence.

The time of David also stands out prominently in God's plan of redemption (chapter 7). This was the time when God formed Israel into a magnificent kingdom. David and the people were blessed with countless riches that provided a fuller taste of their dignity as God's restored images.

Finally, we see that God's image is ultimately restored only through Christ (chapters 8, 9, and 10). Our heavenly Father sent Jesus to be the Savior of all nations. He is "the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4), and all who trust in him are "conformed to the image of [God's] Son" (Rom. 8:29). Beyond this, when Christ returns in glory, "we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2) and "we will also reign with him" (2 Tim. 2:12). Through the great work of Christ, God's

image becomes whole again and takes the place of royal honor given to us in the beginning.

Although we were originally made the image of God to represent and extend the kingdom of God on earth, many changes have come over the human race throughout history. To understand who we are, we must take these developments into account. As we understand what we have done to ourselves, what God has done for us, and what he will do for us, we see with greater clarity what it means to be human.

CONCLUSION

People all around us are confused about who they are. Often in our attempt to honor God, we fail to realize the unique role God has given us in his kingdom. In this confusion we vacillate between self-degradation and self-importance. Scripture, however, provides a balanced portrait of human beings. We are images of clay, but images designed to represent the authority of the King of the universe. In this balanced perspective, we live with humility and dignity as images of God.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. If the kingdom of God is a central theme in the Bible, why is it dangerous to emphasize divine kingship to the neglect of the human race?
2. What does it mean to be the *image* of God? How does remembering this side of our title keep us humble?
3. What does it mean to be the *image of God*? How does remembering this part of our title reveal our dignity as representatives of God's heavenly throne?
4. How has God's image changed through history? How did we lose our original dignity? What are the five major historical steps through which God redeems his image?

DISCUSSION EXERCISES

1. Why is this chapter entitled “Finding Our Place in His Kingdom”?
2. Glance through an issue of a major news magazine. What perspective on the human race does it propound? Does it exalt or denigrate humanity? Explain your response.
3. Make a list of five things in your life that regularly assault your sense of dignity. How can the biblical portrait of your dignity help you overcome these attacks?
4. Make a list of five things in your life that cause you to think too highly of yourself. How can the biblical portrait of your humility help you overcome these temptations?