

What Does It Mean to Be Human?

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In the Christian biblical tradition, being “human” is being in the image of God. The kind of humanness we embrace depends on who God is and how God is. In this tradition (shared with Judaism) God is marked by five big terms: justice, righteousness, steadfast love, faithfulness, and compassion (*mispat, sedeqah, hesed, amunah, and raham*). All five terms refer to tenacious relatedness to the other who is unlike us. Being in the image of this God means we are most fully human when we are tenaciously related to others unlike us in terms of justice and righteousness.

There is, however, a fake god masquerading in Christian tradition whose actions contradict the gospel. This fake God yields a gospel that is fake news. The fake god is one of fear, greed, tribal exclusiveness, and ready violence. This is a god who is worshipped and obeyed by fake Christians who believe the fake news, and who advocate for fear, greed, tribal exclusiveness, and violence in their own lives. And when we are honest, we find that we ourselves, all of us, are susceptible and sometimes tempted to that fake news and that fake life.

As a result, a Christian notion of being human is always one of contestation between the image of God and the false image that arises from fake news. That contestation needs always to be done in vigorous, intentional, and in public ways around real issues of restorative justice at the sore points in our society. Thus Christian humanness is not a private parlor game or a head trip, but an engagement with the reality of the world.

That contestation is well voiced by the prophet Jeremiah:

Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord. (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

On the one side are might, wealth, and wisdom of a worldly kind. On the other side are those things in which God delights: justice, righteousness, and faithfulness. To be human means to be aligned with that in which God delights. Being human means to be at this work in a society that is smitten with wealth and might and that is enthralled by transactional wisdom. That humanness of a relational kind, in such a world, is risky inconvenience with practical costs. That contestation, we Christians say, is clearest in the life of Jesus who gave himself away for the sake of restorative justice in the face of the empire. Such humanness requires immense intentionality, because the alternative of a fake way sponsored by a fake god is compelling and convenient. This humanness consists in daily acts of resistance and subversion according to a truth that has come bodied among us in covenantal Israel and in the life of Jesus.