

The Imago Dei*

By Don Kimbro

*"The real question today is not when human life begins, but what is the value of human life?
The real issue is whether to affirm and protect the sanctity of all human life, or to
embrace a social ethic where some human lives are valued and others are not."
— President Ronald Reagan¹*

Twenty years ago there was a landmark case involving the birth and death of a baby, known only as "Baby Doe" in a Bloomington, Indiana Hospital. Baby Doe was a little boy with Down Syndrome who also had a hole between his windpipe and his esophagus, which could have been corrected surgically, but if not corrected would be fatal.

The parents of the baby decided to let the infant die rather than face a lifetime of being caregivers for what they thought would be a severely mentally retarded child. The hospital couldn't just put the child to sleep as you would a cat or a dog, so they sought the courts sanction to allow the baby to starve to death by not performing the surgery. The death of that tiny infant tore at the hearts of all Americans because the child was undeniably a live human being — one lying helpless before the eyes of the doctors and the eyes of the nation.

The real issue for the courts was not whether Baby Doe was a human being. The real issue was whether to protect the life of a human being who had Down Syndrome, who would probably be mentally handicapped, but who needed a routine surgical procedure to unblock his esophagus and allow him to eat. A doctor testified to the presiding judge that, even with his physical problem corrected, Baby Doe would have a "nonexistent" possibility for "a minimally adequate quality of life"—in other words, that retardation was the equivalent of a crime deserving the death penalty. The judge let Baby Doe starve and die, and the Indiana Supreme Court sanctioned his decision.

Thus, America continued on the slippery slope away from the sanctity of all human life, barely eight years after the Roe v. Wade decision by the U.S. Supreme Court allowing abortion and a mother's right to choose the life or death of her child in the womb.

What does God's word say about life? Is the sanctity or sacredness of human life found in the Scriptures? Is all human life truly precious in His sight? Does this include the unborn, the aged, the widowed, the mentally handicapped, the unattractive, the physically disabled and every other condition in which our unique humanness is expressed from beginning to end? Let's start in the beginning, when for us it all began — Genesis, Chapter 1.

The first four days of God's creation were devoted to the environment necessary to sustain life (Gen. 1:1-19). God spoke into existence the light and the darkness — night and day. He created the waters, the sky and the land, the vegetation — the sun, the moon and the stars. There was light and heat and water and food and an expanse to allow for movement and growth. Then God surveyed what He had created, *"And God saw that it was good"* (vs.

18). Beginning with the fifth day, however, there was a new direction in the creation as God made the living creatures. Notice the progression beginning in verse Genesis 1:20:

²⁰ And God said, "Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky." ²¹ So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and moving thing with which the water teems, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. ²² God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth." And there was evening, and there was morning — the fifth day.

So God created all kinds and sizes of fish and birds, all with the ability to move and breath and reproduce. The waters and the air were suddenly made to swarm with creatures formed to live and sport in their new environments.

²⁴ And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds; livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. ²⁵ God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

Notice again that God was pleased with his living creatures. They were all created within their species "*according to their kinds*." There were no mutants, no half fish and half snakes — no half cows and half pigs. Each was its own breed. There were four-legged livestock that could be domesticated and capable of labor. There were the wild animals that kept the animal kingdom in check and reptiles and other species that crept along the ground. Each had a place, a purpose and a function. But none of these, although all were living creatures made by God, would compare with His greatest creation, *a human being*.

²⁶ Then God said, "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." ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

The image of God. The *imago Dei*. What does this mean in contrast to all of God's other creation, both environmental and living? Being created in the image of God means more than having certain abilities and attributes. It means that humans are the images of God, regardless of what they can or cannot do. This image bearing of the Creator is a privilege extended uniquely to humans. No other "creation" of God can make this claim.

In God's eyes, we are each endowed with a touch of Himself. Each human carries within his or her being the eternal, holy breath of God, the Creator. Therefore, each human life exists as an expression of God and His character. We are not merely flesh and blood like the animals. We are all image bearers of the living God. Since we embody God's image, the sacredness of our lives, and the dignity it demands, is based on something beyond our characteristics or abilities — it is rooted in the essence of God Himself. This touch or likeness of God bestowed on each human creation is not tangible; you cannot see, touch or smell it. It is part of the mystery of life.

Men, women and children created in the *imago Dei* should be respected, regardless of their mental capacity, physical ability, faith (or absence of faith), social position or even size, which extends even to the very smallest member of the human race — and the most defenseless — the human embryo.

What else was involved in this unique process of God creating us in His own image? What distinguishes man from all other forms of life? What else makes us different and more important to God than the animal kingdom or the environment? We've already discussed that by design we were made after God's *image* and *likeness*. But also notice that God gave mankind authority over all His creation. He gave us the *rule*. God gave man and woman dominion. In God's order, all of His creation is subservient to His highest creation, human beings. But God also did something else to distinguish man from all other creation. After forming him from the dust of the earth, He "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7)

Although man's physical body was made from the dust of the ground and because of the fall will return to the dust, our soul or spirit is God-breathed. The soul of man, therefore, is not of this world and will one day leave its earthly mortal dwelling and return to God (Eccl. 12:4). This cannot be said of any other of God's living beings. Job expresses this uniqueness well, "*The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life*" (Job 33:4).

Although the human body came from dust, the fact that it contains the image of God, has received ordained authority from God and its soul from God, makes it holy.

Chuck Colson says being made in the image of God means that we "*find our ultimate identity and worth in reflecting our Creator*"² Blue skies, mountains, trees, the sun, moon and stars — the birds, the cattle on a thousand hills — all point to God as the Creator (Psm. 19). Only man, however, who alone is made in His image and likeness can reflect the essence and nature of God. Therefore, men and women and children created in the image of God — every human life — must be considered as precious, regardless of race, color, size, shape, economic status and yes, even their faith.

God has put his fingerprint on each and every soul. A portion of God rests in each human spirit and extends to every member of the human family. Upon death, every person will be judged (Heb. 9:27). But until that time, God has called you and me to reflect His image through respect, dignity and the love of Christ to *every* human being and if possible, show them the way to the Savior of the world, who alone can save their souls.

Notes

¹ "Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation." President Ronald Reagan, *The Human Life Review*, Spring, 1983.

² "The Sanctity of Human Life." Carrie Gordon Earll, *Citizen Link*, November 24, 1999.

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*This essay was published in the Christian Standard magazine on April 14, 2002.