

How to be Human Part III: Dust

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Growing up, I played video games a little bit. I remember loving Duck Hunt, and I think I had the electronic bazooka that you could get for the Super Nintendo. At a certain point, though, I got bored with video games and stopped asking for the new system at Christmas. Once I got to high school, I pretty much only played with friends.

Some of those friends, I still have. A good friend of mine who works in DC was in town last week and he brought his new virtual reality system. I admit, I didn't even know you could buy these things yet. It wasn't just the funny headset you see here, it was these sensors that go up on tall poles, controllers for both hands, and some pretty sophisticated software. After getting a crash course from my friend and playing for about 20 minutes, the thought came to me: people are going to lose themselves in this. Don't get me wrong - this is really cool technology and we played for hours on end - but there are some real implications here.

We already live in a world where it is easy to lose ourselves in technology. How often do you see a couple sitting together in a restaurant, and they are both on their phones? Facebook and other social media offer us a chance to present the world with our ideal selves, building "followers" and "friends" we may never meet and who may never know who we really are. Ever more immersive and elaborate video games - which VR technology could even intensify - can take people (often young men) out of the real world for hours on end, day after day. Last year a 32 year old man in Taiwan died after a three day video game binge in an internet cafe. This begs a lot of questions:

What does it mean for us to be Christians in this kind of world? How do humans made in God's image live well in a digital - and now virtual - age? Should we care about the digitization of life - does matter even matter?

In the last few weeks we've been looking at what it means to be human from a biblical perspective. Our central conviction has been that a human being is a creature made in the image of God, a mixture of dust and divinity. We are made like God, but distinct from God - which means we can grow closer to God but we must always remember - especially through practices like Sabbath keeping - that we are creatures, not the Creator. Today we look at what it means that we are dust.

Genesis 2, much like Genesis 1, gives an account of the creation. Did you know there were two creation stories in Genesis? Go back and read chapters 1 and 2 and compare. You may remember that Genesis 1 describes God making man and woman and called them "very good." Only in chapter 2 do we get the

further detail that Eve was formed from a rib of Adam (and they don't even get named until Genesis 3). Verse 7 says that man was formed "from the dust of the earth." This is reiterated a chapter later in 3:9, after Adam and Eve succumb to temptation from the snake, where God tells Adam "For dust you are, and to dust you shall return." (3:19)

What does it mean that we are made from the dust of the earth - and what does this mean for how we live our daily lives? More than you might think.

The greatest clue here is linguistic link between Adam and earth, between the first human and between the rest of creation. The word for man in Hebrew is adam (let that sink in for a second - the name of the first human, in Hebrew, is literally "man" - what might that mean?) - and the word for earth is adamah. You literally can't say earth without including man in it. Whatever the earth is, man is. Humans are of the earth, from the earth. Yes, you might notice, Eve is made from the rib, but the rib comes from dust as well. So humans are earth, dirt, dust. Kansas was, in a way, accurate when they said "all we are is dust in the wind." But in the Bible this is much more positive idea.

In fact, Christians are thoroughly committed to materiality, to physicality. Not just because God made the world and called it good, not just because of the beauty of the earth, though that is wonderful in its own way. We are especially committed to physicality because we believe and celebrate that God took on our flesh, being born of Mary and the Spirit in Bethlehem. In Jesus the material became the vehicle for God's very nature, it was elevated, sanctified, made holy. And ever since then Christianity has been a very fleshly, physical faith.

A few years ago I got maybe the angriest I have ever gotten at something inside the church. I got word that a neighboring church - just an hour or so from here - was planning to have an online communion service. That's right. An ordained pastor was going to have communion on video and people watching at home were going to be invited to take their own bread and juice and receive at home. I happened to be friends with the daughter of the pastor who was proposing this - and he's a great guy, a very respected pastor - and so I got an invite to a meeting where this possibility was going to be discussed. The pastor had written an essay explaining their reasoning and seeking to justify online communion from a Methodist and biblical/theological perspective. I read the paper, and I was still so livid, that I wrote a 25 page paper in response. (If you want to read it, I will send it to you - but I warn you, it is really nerdy!)

Why did I get so angry? Because of just what we are talking about today. Because we are made of earth, adam from adamah. We are committed to this world, to the physical, to the material. Our central acts of worship demand physical signs and physical acts - wine and bread, water, ashes, oil, hands, hugs.

There have always been alternative worldviews - visions of life that denigrate or ignore the physical world. I'm going to let Chris Armstrong explain this for a couple of minutes. [video]

You might think that this problem Chris describes doesn't exist today, that surely Christians would never embrace this. But I would argue that we approach this more often than we think. Have you ever heard this song? "This world is not my own, I'm just a passing through." I don't mean to pick on that one song, but rather the idea that is at the core of it that is present in a lot of mainstream Christian art and preaching and theology: the idea that reality, the really real, the best stuff is somewhere away from here. This idea is at the core of a 19th century teaching called the rapture, which is the idea that at some point God will take away all the Christians to a spiritual realm and sort of let the world go to pot.

There is a name for this belief system, which is in reality very old: gnosticism. Gnosticism was a religious movement that taught matter was evil and that the spiritual alone was good - that liberation meant freedom from the physical and natural world. "Not my home, just a passing through..."

Nancy Pearcey describes it this way: "the physical world did not ultimately matter, which means that physical suffering did not matter either. Seeking 'enlightenment' meant cultivating an attitude of detachment, even indifference." Gnosticism flourished in the first few centuries after Christ, and there are a variety of "gnostic gospels," writings that involved Jesus from a gnostic perspective, that did not make it into the New Testament. (Every Christmas and Easter you'll notice specials on TV about "lost gospels," they are almost always gnostic texts that the church rejected over 1000 years ago.)

If we look in Scripture, it's not hard to see why this view was rejected. Jesus took on flesh, and told us to eat his flesh. Revelation teaches that a renewed creation, not a detached existence on the clouds, is our ultimate destination, after the resurrection - after a return to restored, different, but very much physical existence.

As Nancy Pearcey hinted at, gnosticism would lead to a detachment or indifference about the world - an indifference to which Christians who follow Jesus - who ate with sinners, healed the sick, and preached release to the captives - can never agree. In Jeremiah 29:7, God speaks through the prophet and commands the Hebrews in exile: "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

Other translations say "peace" instead of welfare, but the root word there is shalom; shalom is most commonly translated "peace," but it denotes something stronger: wholeness, justice, cohesion. We share that calling of the exiles to whom Jeremiah spoke to seek shalom in our community, to care about the poor, the widow, the orphan, the alien (all those the Bible names as "the least of these.") Adam is called to care for adamah, humans for the earth, for fellow humans, to seek peace for creation and flourishing for our neighbors. To denigrate the material world, to forget our vocation, is to denigrate the

One who made us. To care for the material world - in the form of our neighbors, our community, or even the birds and the trees - is to honor the One who created it all. To be human, then, is to live as if the material world matters, to recognize that adam is made from adamah.

In practice, most Christians get that the earth is more than just a temporary home. I was blown away this week by a story about the "cajon navy," a group of fisherman and other boaters who've worked tirelessly to rescue and bring supplies to their neighbors, many of whom live in very remote regions. These are women and men who clearly live as if our fellow dust matters.

The material world matters. The invisible and immortal God became flesh and blood so that we might be saved, so that the whole world (a physical world) could be healed. We are not gnostics. To follow Jesus is to live in the real world, committed to justice and peace and mercy, committed to our neighbor, committed to caring for this beautiful creation.

You and I are dust, we are the stuff of the earth. This is not bad news, for God has called us very good from the beginning, and stamped this by becoming human, joining God's own nature to the dust God had formed. We are not merely passing through. We are adam from adamah - we are humans, dust from dust - but not only dust. More about that, next Sunday.