

BEING HUMAN

Jo Frost



INVESTING IN THE FOUNDATIONS OF WHO GOD IS AND WHO WE ARE WILL ENABLE US TO FACE THE PRESSURES OF LIFE AND ADDRESS THE BIG QUESTIONS OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN TODAY, SAYS JO FROST, EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE DIRECTOR OF COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT, AND CO-FOUNDER OF THE BEING HUMAN PROJECT.

Psalm 8 starts with this glorious refrain, 'O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.' But by verse 4 the psalmist ponders this profound question, 'what are human beings that you think about them; what are human beings that you pay attention to them?' (Common English Bible (CEB)). What does it mean to be human? And why does God care so much about us? These questions strike at the heart of so many conversations, stories, ideas and actions swirling around in our world at the moment and it is crucial for Christians to have good, true and beautiful answers for people that point them towards Jesus and his Kingdom.

Towards the end of last summer, after a longed-for heatwave in September, cracks started to appear in my house. The types of cracks that you really don't want to appear in your house. We started to worry and then we started to panic. So, we invited a friend over, a helpful friend - a civil engineer. As he walked around our house, examining each of the cracks, he muttered to himself 'Oh no... yeah definitely.' And then he turned to us with resignation and said, 'You have subsidence.'

'Look,' he said, 'you can see how your building is twisting. One section of your foundation has slipped, and the rest of the building is now twisting and straining to stay upright whilst one area is weakened by a crisis'.



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The crisis is a nearby oak tree which is draining the soil of water and causing the foundations to fail. As the oak tree sucks out the moisture of the ground soil, and causes a crisis, that one bit of foundation isn't strong enough and the whole building drops. The cracks therefore appear as the rest of the building takes on the burden to hold the building upright while one bit is weak. You see it most clearly on one of the supporting walls where there's a crack almost like the guy rope of a tent streaking diagonally down the wall as it pulls taut to hold my home intact. What the engineers are going to have to do is come in and reinforce the foundations right at the bottom so that the one bit that is currently weak is able to withstand the pressure and the crisis that may come from the environment around it.

Just like my home, our society is cracking under the pressure of crisis and trauma everywhere we look. From Covid death tolls to climate emergencies, from political turmoil to economic crashes, our culture is fragmenting and fracturing because our culture's foundation is not strong enough to handle the pressure. At our foundation we don't have robust answers to life's fundamental questions. And we are all feeling the strain as a result.

But as Christians we do have that necessary foundation. Right at the

beginning of our story, in the creation story of Genesis, we see who God is and who he made us to be and how that understanding forms and shapes our lives. The more attention we give to our foundations, to strengthening and reinforcing the fundamentals, the better prepared we are for life's questions and crises.

I have never met the Queen. But I'm pretty confident I would instantly recognise the Queen if she walked in through my front door and said hello. Why am I so confident that I would immediately know someone I have never met? Well because I have seen countless objects that bear her image. Coins, notes, stamps, tea towels and even her image on the TV. Image bearing objects means that when you encounter the Queen, you recognise her for who she is. None of those objects are actually her and yet because they bear her image, she is forever recognised.

Being human means bearing God's image. Like a child resembles their parent, how they look, how they act, the type of character they have, we resemble God. God made humans to be like him - to reflect and project his character into creation, so that when creation encounters God, they will recognise him because they have seen his likeness before.

But what does it mean to be made in the image of God? Let's remind ourselves of Genesis 1:26-28:

Then God said, "Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us. They will reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, the livestock, all the wild animals on the earth, and the small animals that scurry along the ground."

So God created human beings in his own image.

In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground."

We are made in the image of a good and true God - God who is worthy - who gives every human being dignity and value. Every human being matters. We each have significance.

We are made in the image of a loving and relational God - a God who cares - who wants us to know him as friend. Every human being matters to each other. We are all connected.

We are made in the image of a personal and present God - a God who shows up - who promises us we will never be alone. It matters that every human being is here, now. We are present in this time and in this place.

We are made in the image of a generous and active God - a God who gets involved. The difference every human being makes in the world matters. We are all invited to join with God to bring peace and wholeness to all of creation.

These are our foundations; they are who we are and how we are made. And yet we live in a broken and messed up world. Our foundations went wonky, almost straight off the bat. In Genesis 3, the first human beings decided that being made in the image of God was not enough - they wanted to be God. The core human temptation is to redefine good and evil on your own terms - rather than trust God's vision and definition of human flourishing. God has a vision for what it means to be human; instead, we fall into the trap of trying to be God for ourselves.

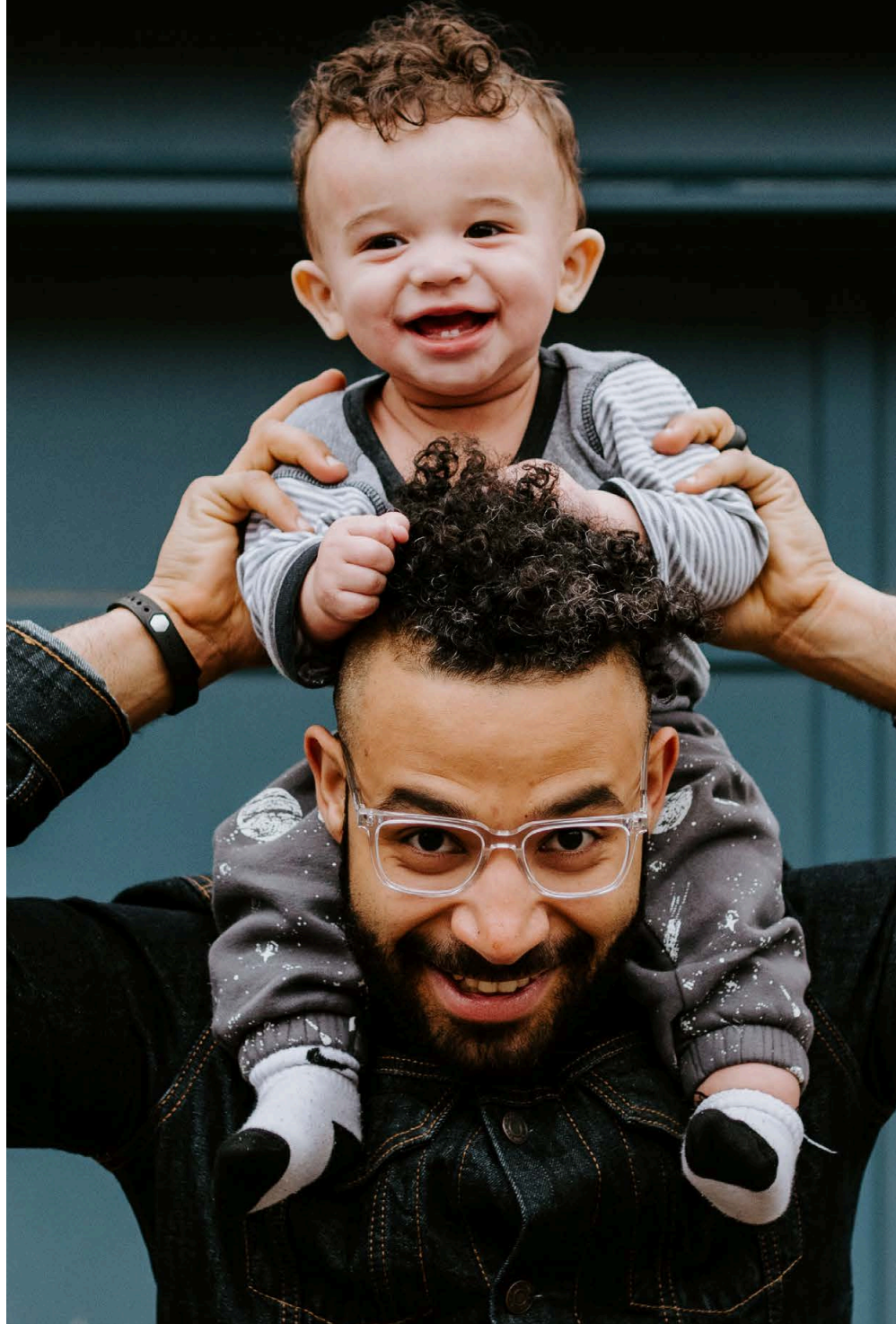
We see the cracks in our humanity everywhere. In this broken world, we use a broken ruler to decide how much other people matter. We measure them by their usefulness or their record. We build our identities on our own fabrications instead of receiving our lives as a gift. We live in a messed-up world where we suffer the grief caused by absence, where we long for a world which is whole and flourishing while we find ourselves part of a culture that all too often deforms and dehumanizes, where purpose is distorted, power is abused, and freedom is twisted.

We value relationships, but we also know how badly relationships can go.

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Our relationships can give us joy, a sense of self, or purpose. But they also can cause us pain or harm, or we can cause that pain in others. Our sin brings injury, breaks connection, and fractures the peace that once ordered God's world. We crave acceptance and inclusion but rather than share the honest, vulnerable truth with others, we hide ourselves and chase distraction. Our broken lives lead us to injustice, as we exploit our fellow human beings and the natural world.

We are made in the image of God, but we are forever falling short of his glory.

But the God who is good, present and active, does not leave us bereft of his likeness.

Jesus is the true image of God. In Jesus we see both the mystery of God and the secret of being human revealed. He is the perfect human, the one who shows us how to do it right. Jesus' identity and his actions, flowed directly from his confidence in who he was in relation to the Father. Jesus communicates to us who God is, who we are meant to be and shows what a human life lived in loving obedience with God looks like. Jesus is the human being we were all made to be and through all that he says and does, Jesus teaches, demonstrates and creates a new way of being human.

The life of Jesus shows us how to love our neighbours as we long to be so loved. He loved us, not for anything we did, but simply that we are his beloved. He died for those who injured and rejected him, to mend our broken, love-sick hearts. He patched the holes in our broken bonds and gathers us together as his church - a people forged in his grace and mercy. Therefore, because of him and what he has done, we are invited to share with him the joy of knowing and being known by God, joining his family as his adopted children.

As we look to Jesus to show us fully who God is and who we are, I am struck by how profound the image of humanity is for our hurting and damaged world, and how beautiful and compelling the truth of the gospel is, of the life well lived in relationship with Jesus. It is summed up for me by this paraphrase of Matthew 28:19-20:

As you go and live your lives, help everyone you encounter to become imitators of Jesus. Immerse them into a community built upon the characteristics of, and the relationship between God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Enable them to put into practice Jesus' instructions for life; to love God with all you do, say, think, feel and will. And to love all others as you are loved.

This is being human.

Jo Frost is director of communications and engagement at the Evangelical Alliance, and co-founder of the Being Human project which aims to inspire and equip everyday Christians to understand, articulate and participate in the biblical vision of humanity. Jo teaches and preaches regularly on communications, conflict, whole-life discipleship, mission and leadership. For more information on Being Human go to beinghumanproject.co.uk

