

# Restoring the *Imago Dei* in a Dehumanizing Age



by EAMON R. WILSON

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Several years ago, when my friend Ben announced his upcoming marriage and vasectomy, I was baffled. Marriage represents the fulfillment of the creation mandate to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28), and a vasectomy snuffs out that possibility. What could compel someone to make this decision? Ben shared with me his deep concern about the state of the earth and believed the most effective way to reduce his carbon footprint was to remove the possibility that his descendants would take a step in the first place. In fact, he had grown to view human life as more of a blight than anything positive or hopeful. I've had similar conversations with teachers, doctors, students, and retirees who share this opinion, also known as *radical environmentalism*. They imply, or outright state, that there should be fewer people and the responsible step is to consider having few children, and ideally none at all.

Ben's reasoning reflects an emerging set of cultural trends. These trends are linked by the fading of the long-held belief in humanism, which dominated Western secular thought since the Enlightenment. Humanity is no longer considered earth's most valuable species, capable

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of solving any problem.<sup>1</sup> Instead, a growing number of people now believe we are an existential threat to all life on the planet. In addition, the current discourse surrounding *artificial intelligence* (AI) inevitably concludes that it will eclipse human intelligence, and we will no longer be needed for future labor or problem-solving.

The same premise animates a third trend—*transhumanism*, which is the belief that science and technology can enhance human biology and cognition beyond natural limits. Higher-level examples include brain-computer interfaces to boost intelligence or control devices with the mind and genetic engineering to eliminate diseases or enhance physical traits.<sup>2</sup> Some of the more day-to-day body hacks that fill our inboxes and social feeds concern how to sleep longer and better, increase our endurance, avoid aging, and burn fat faster. And nearly everybody has a smartwatch to monitor their steps, sleep, and heart rate. These interventions assume the body can (and should) be shaped as we like, ignoring the limits of nature.

These three trends represent a drastic shift away from the lofty view of mankind offered by humanism. They are an inversion of how God has defined us and the role he has given us in redemptive history: to exercise dominion as faithful stewards.<sup>3</sup> Yet, many people have internalized these trends, and as pastors and counselors we must consider the implications for our ministry.

To recover a biblical view of humanity, we need to be guided by the principles of the *imago Dei*. This doctrine teaches that humans are uniquely created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26–27) and are endowed with inherent dignity and knowledge as God’s representatives on earth. These attributes persist in distorted and diminished form due to sin and are fully restored only through union with Christ.

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1. The Enlightenment deemed humans to be the pinnacle of evolution and exalted human reason as capable of solving any problem the world encountered. Though it has a high view of people, it is not a Christian ideology because it ignores the fall and our need for redemption.

2. A recent example of eliminating a genetic disease is Iceland’s elimination of Down syndrome by selectively aborting children through prenatal screening.

3. Genesis 1 establishes the creation mandate “to rule and exercise dominion over creation,” while Genesis 2 offers the manner in which we do it: by “cultivating” and “keeping” it (stewardship language).

This doctrine has historically separated the church from the world by affirming the sacred value of every person against dehumanizing cultural forces.<sup>4</sup>

With renewed knowledge of this doctrine, our self-assessment will be neither too low (we are a scourge and obsolete) nor too high (we are evolving into our own saviors and gods). If we can articulate and embody this doctrine in fresh ways, then when our culture offers alienation from God, neighbors, and even ourselves, we can offer a message of reconciliation to our churches.

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Therefore, this article examines each of these three cultural trends (radical environmentalism, AI, and transhumanism), exploring their core messages and dehumanizing effects. We'll then turn to consider how the *imago Dei* offers a biblical response and lay out some counseling implications. Each cultural message could be its own article, but I hope to offer some introductory ideas that could be built on by others.

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### **Cultural Message 1: From Steward to Scourge (Radical Environmentalism)**

One manifestation of this antihuman spirit is expressed through radical environmentalism. The anthropology of this view claims that we are destroyers and that each human is a drain on existing resources. This has led to antinatalism as a moral and even necessary development. A 2023 study of 10,000 people aged 16–25 indicated 39% were hesitant to have children due to concerns about the climate.<sup>5</sup> My goal is not to delve into climate science but to draw attention to a trend: An increasing number of people believe that decreasing the world's population is not

4. This doctrine is the foundation for human rights laws and remains as a vestige of Christian influence in Western nations. It profoundly shaped the end of the British slave trade and was expressed by early Christians saving infants left to die by exposure.

5. Lindsay P. Galway and Ellen Field, "Climate Emotions and Anxiety Among Young People in Canada: A National Survey and Call to Action," *Journal of Climate Change and Health* 9 (January 2023): 100204, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joclim.2023.100204>.

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