



"Vital Articles on  
Science/Creation"

# Impact

January 2006

Impact #391

## What Makes Us Human?

by Dan Criswell, Ph.D.\*

Are humans really biologically and socially different from the rest of the created world? Are there definitive characteristics that separate humans from other forms of life, or are humans simply an improvement on the body plans of other animals, the result of random processes that have occurred over millions of years? The answers to these



questions may seem obvious to a Christian, but defining what characteristics separate man from the animals that closely resemble him, such as chimpanzees and gorillas, still has not been completely resolved by secular science. Is this an answer that can be derived by studying the physical and biological creation, or can it only be understood in light of Biblical truth?

There have been many attempts to answer these questions. Paleontologists have identified many features unique to human skeletons, enabling them to distinguish between human and ape (chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans) fossils. For example, apes and man share the same tooth pattern in their jaws; two incisors, one canine, two premolars, and three molars. But the tooth-bearing mandible (jawbone) in humans is smaller in relation to the skull and V-shaped, while that of an ape is U-shaped. Another skeletal feature, the human pelvis, is more bowl-shaped than that of an ape, providing support for the abdominal organs as a result of the constant upright position of humans. But these skeletal qualities can't fully define "what makes us human." They only describe some of the attributes of the "vessel" that "houses" a human.

\*Dr. Daniel Criswell has a Ph.D. in molecular biology and is a biology professor at the ICR Graduate School.

Anthropologists have looked for cultural evidence to identify and describe human remains and help determine “what makes us human.” Humans have been described as tool users, once thought to be a quality unique from all other animals. However, extensive studies over the years by many researchers has identified tool use by chimpanzees, and more recently gorillas, indicating that use of crude tools is not necessarily a unique human feature. Even a sea otter uses a crude tool, such as a rock, to crack open shell fish. The use of fire and burying the dead are also cited as evidence of “what makes us human.” It certainly could be argued that using fire and evidence of burials are unique to humans, but these activities result from the spiritual nature within humans. Fire use and religion (funerals) do not fully explain “what makes us human.”

Currently, molecular geneticists have taken their turn at defining a human based on DNA sequence differences between humans and apes. The arrangement, sequence, and expression levels of our DNA will provide valuable information of what makes a human unique from other created kinds, including the skeletal features and behavioral differences mentioned above. But like the studies from paleontology, it will only tell us more about the “vessel” humans were created in, not what truly “makes us human.”

In the Bible, Genesis 1:27 describes the creation of mankind as being in the “Image of God,” which usually leads to a discussion of the qualities of God that can be seen in mankind. For example, God is The Creator, and although man requires pre-existing materials to “create” new objects such as buildings, vehicles, artwork, and gadgets of all kinds, he is capable of creating objects for his use or pleasure from his imagination that have never been seen before. Emotions attributed to God’s character can also be seen in man. Man has the ability to love, hate, and become jealous, and through the power of the Holy Spirit he can express these emotions in appropriate ways. Forgiveness is another quality that man shares with his Creator. But these human characteristics are reflections of God’s nature given to mankind at the time of creation. Is “what makes us human” the combined characteristics that we share with animals and the attributes of being created in God’s image? Or is there more?

The observations mentioned above certainly contribute to our human character, but the following paragraphs give some of the unique aspects of humanity not attributable to any other part of creation, but to the present outworking of “what makes us human” and the choices we make.

### **Our Position As Servants**

Man was created to serve. Human ambition for the purpose of serving oneself certainly cannot provide anyone with the fulfillment they are seeking. There are many examples of people who became famous and wealthy, only to find there is no fulfillment in personal ambition. The resulting disappointment in reaching personal goals and not finding fulfillment in them frequently leads to that individual’s despair or eventual suicide. King Solomon, in the book of Ecclesiastes, described human ambition as “vanity” and “a chasing after the wind,” concluding that man’s only duty was to fear God and keep His commandments (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Certainly, a life spent not functioning as it was designed to leads only to frustration and misery. The

role for man as a servant can be seen from the beginning of his creation. Adam was created and placed in the Garden of Eden “to dress it and to keep it” (Genesis 2:15). The first recorded task man was given was to serve his Creator by caring for the Garden that He had planted. Christ emphasized the importance of the role of a servant many times to His disciples, teaching them that, “he that shall humble himself shall be exalted” (Matthew 23:12). He consistently used the concept of a servant as a synonym to describe those who would be His followers (Matthew 24:25; 25:21; John 12:26). Christ responded to the question of, “which is the great[est] commandment” by saying, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself” (Matthew 22:37,39). It may be easy to see that loving God with all your heart reflects a servant’s attitude, but sometimes what it takes to love your neighbor as yourself is not as clear. When questioned about, “Who is my neighbor?” Christ gave the parable of the Good Samaritan, who at his own expense served the needs of a crime victim from an ethnic group that was normally hostile to Samaritans. This human behavior contrasts with a recent study of chimpanzee behavior revealing that chimpanzees are oblivious to the needs of others who are not related to them.<sup>1</sup> In their book, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*, Dr. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey reported anthropologist Margaret Mead as saying, evidence for civilization is when a healed femur is found. It shows that someone must have cared for the injured person. Someone was a servant, evidence of “what makes us human.”

“What makes us human” is our created responsibility to serve God and one another. Whether we remember we were created to serve and do so, or choose not to fulfill what we were designed to do, may determine how fulfilled our life will be.

### **Our Value to God**

How is the value of a human determined? At one time in human history, slave traders would assess the value of a human based on the type and amount of work that an individual could perform for his “owner” just the same as if the person were an animal. Today the value of a human is determined by the individual’s prospects for a quality life and by how much one can contribute to society. This is evident by the treatment of the unwanted pre-born, the aged, and the infirmed. Mass slaughter of humans via legalized abortion, the push for legalization of doctor-assisted suicide, and the use of embryonic stem cells have defined what the worth of humans are by society. In addition to human value based on ethical ills, our culture is full of social ills that determine human value based on ethnic, social, or economic standing. Racial profiling and discrimination may be easy to recognize, but are all humans treated equally, regardless of their profession or economic standing? Is the trash man, referee, or sales clerk, valued and treated the same as the doctor, entertainer, or pastor? (James 2:2–4, 9–10.)

What is the standard that determines human value? Scripture clearly teaches what the value of a human is. Human life is to be valued from conception to old age (Exodus 21; Matthew 19:14), is infinitely more valuable than other forms of creation (Matthew 10:29; 12:12), and each individual is equally valuable to God (Colossians 3:11). The value of a human in God’s eyes is clearly stated in Romans 5:8. “But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died

for us.” How valuable are humans? They are so valuable that the Creator of the universe humbled Himself as a man and died a cruel death to reconcile Himself to His most valued creation.

“What makes us human” is our incomprehensible value to God.

### **Our Need for Salvation**

Recent natural disasters affecting the southern United States, Indonesia, and Pakistan have emphasized the need to save humans in times of distress. But this salvation is only temporary, providing salvation for the physical body or the physical needs of someone who has lost all material possessions. The true human need for salvation is from eternal spiritual death. Unlike the response to natural disasters that make physical needs obvious, many continue to allow another type of disaster, their spiritual need, to continue unresolved and frequently unnoticed. And God has permitted each human the right to choose to resolve this spiritual need or not. This right was given to mankind from the beginning when God told Adam and Eve they could eat of any tree in the Garden of Eden except for the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 2:16–17). Unfortunately, Adam and Eve made the wrong choice and all of their descendants have followed suit. Romans 3:10–18 quotes portions of the Old Testament, vividly describing the desperate situation of the human race. “There is none righteous, no, not one” (v.10), “none that seeketh after God” (v. 11), all have “gone out of the way” (v.12), and “the way of peace have they not known” (v.17). Because of this disastrous situation God in His mercy has provided a plan for salvation. Salvation cannot be earned, but is a gift offered to all humans as a result of Christ paying the penalty for each individual’s sin (Ephesians 2:8–9; John 1:12). There are many distinctions between those who possess this gift and those who don’t. Christ stated, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35). The apostle John put it another way when he wrote in his epistle, “Whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother” (I John 3:10). Paul further identified the behavior of those who have received the gift of salvation with those who have not in Galatians 5:16–24 and Colossians 3:1–11. Humans were created with an eternal spirit that will either live for eternity in the presence of God, or exist for eternity banished from His presence. Because of sin in the world, everyone needs salvation (Romans 5) and God has granted them the choice of accepting His plan of salvation or rejecting it.

Ultimately, “what makes us human” is the choice we make about the spiritual disaster in our lives. Do we accept the gift of salvation and experience the peace of God, or do we reject the gift and experience the consequences of spiritual death?

### **Reference**

1. Silk, J. B. et al., 2005. “Chimpanzees are indifferent to the welfare of unrelated group members,” *Nature* 437:1357–1359.



© 2006 by ICR • All Rights Reserved

Single Copies 10¢ • Order from: **INSTITUTE FOR CREATION RESEARCH**

P.O. Box 2667, El Cajon, CA 92021 • Available for download on our website ([www.icr.org](http://www.icr.org)).