

Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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## Life, Name, Identity

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## Life, Name, Identity

### Abstract

"Being pro-life means taking seriously that God intended blessing on all 'that has the breath of life in it.'"

Posting about the value of human life from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/life-name-identity/>

### Keywords

In All Things, covenant theology, Bible, life

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

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 [all in allthings.org/life-name-identity/](https://allthings.org/life-name-identity/)

Jeff Ploegstra

God blessed them and said, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number’”(Gen 1:22). This is a familiar phrase for many of us. However, when we typically encounter these words, we tend to think of them in the context of “the [Great Commission](#)”: humans’ care for the world offered in Genesis 1:28. But that is actually the second time the phrase appears in Genesis 1. The blessing and mandate to fill the earth is *first* given to the “*living* and moving things” on the fifth day of creation, before humans are even created. The human mandate is part of a larger life-oriented mandate.

In the context of that larger mandate, it is very interesting to study how “life” is defined and used in Genesis. We are given many images of life in early Genesis – God fills the seas, the land, and the air with *living* creatures, and then the Creator blesses them.

It is interesting to then read Genesis 2:7:

“Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the *breath of life*, and the man became a *living being*.”<sup>1</sup>

The word “animal” comes from the latin “*anima*,” meaning breath or spirit. People are animals. We might be more than that, we might be a unique sort, but we are undeniably animals. Both of God’s revelations make this clear. The Bible, as outlined above, and our biology and genetics tell us that we are animals. The vast majority of our genes are completely functionally interchangeable: our organs are the same as those of many other “living creatures with the breath of life.” We have used heart valves from pigs to fix our own, hormones from a variety of animals to replace ours when our systems don’t work quite right, and insulin from dogs and cows to treat diabetes.

It is important to recognize humankind’s unique role and relationship with God, but we should never lose sight of our connectedness with other living creatures. In fact, those two ideas are deeply related to each other. An important part of our unique role as image bearers requires us to have a deep understanding of these creatures. I am always intrigued by Genesis 2:19:

“Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name.”

Naming is a powerful thing. If we look at naming in a biblical context, we see clearly that it is not simply giving something a designation. It is a process of discernment and hope; of understanding and giving recognition to the potential within a living being.<sup>2</sup> It requires intimate knowledge. It is a recognition of identity. Adam was asked not to care in abstract for living things, but to know the other creatures as unique expressions of life. He had to know the life that was entrusted to his care.

This connection is deeply and concretely reinforced in Genesis 9. Over and over again, promises made to Noah and his family are directly embedded in a larger promise to all living things. Consider:

“Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ‘I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with **every living creature** that was with you — the birds, the livestock and all

the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you— **every living creature** on earth. I establish my covenant with you: Never again will **all life** be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.’

And God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and **every living creature with you**, a covenant **for all generations to come**: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between **me and the earth**. Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you **and all living creatures of every kind**. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy **all life**. Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and **all living creatures of every kind on the earth**.’

So God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant I have established between me and **all life on the earth**.’”

It is clear that we are in this together, that we are a part of a bigger *life* – deeply valued by God.

For me, being pro-life means taking seriously that God intended blessing on all “that has the breath of life in it.” A critical part of that is our calling to know intimately the other “living creatures” — to give them names in the sense of understanding and giving recognition to their potential, to be fascinated by them, to praise God for them. This is at the heart of care, love, and compassion. It is also at the heart of being pro-life.

There is certainly a unique kind of concern that we should have for unborn humans, those living creatures who uniquely bear the image of God (Genesis 9:6). When we recognize that all of life has value, that we are a part of a bigger scope of *life*, it actually deepens and enriches our concern for human life. When we seek to understand that bigger scope of life — to describe it intimately, to appreciate what God has made and to “name” it – we become accustomed to knowing and caring specifically, not abstractly. We care with an invested knowledge of the varied and amazing expressions of life. And we image the Creator by doing so.

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## Footnotes

1. This is the same according to Strong’s Concordance in the New American Standard Version, King James, and Holman Standard Bible. Follow the links to read more on the use of *nephesh* (neh’-fesh) or *living being* and *chay* (khah-ee) or *age* in Strong’s Concordance. ↩
2. Drawing on the naming of the tribes of Israel, of Abraham, Sara, Noah — the *Chabad* describes all of the rules around naming and the significance of names. ↩