

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Should Dogs Be Granted Personhood?

Gregory Berns, professor of neuroeconomics at Emory University, argues that “dogs are people, too.” He bases this rather stunning conclusion on brain scans of dogs he and his colleagues at Emory have conducted. He posits a “striking similarity between dogs and humans in both the structure and function of a key brain region”—the caudate nucleus, the part of the brain that is activated when we sense things we enjoy, such as food, love, beauty, etc. Berns concludes that “the ability to experience positive emotions, like love and attachment, would mean that dogs have a level of sentience comparable to that of a human child. And this ability suggests a rethinking of how we treat dogs. By using the MRI we can no longer hide the evidence. Dogs . . . seem to have emotions just like us. And we must reconsider their treatment as property.” Dogs should thus be granted personhood, which would result “in the banning of puppy mills, laboratory dogs and dog racing for violating the basic right of self-determinations.”

How should we think about Berns, his work and his conclusions? Should dogs be granted personhood? Should they have rights equivalent to humans? Is there a Creation-Order difference between dogs and humans? What is the fundamental difference between a dog and a human being?

- First, one of my favorite writers is Andree Seu, who writes for the magazine *World*. In one of her columns, she wrote of reading through a bird magazine she bought at a local PetSmart store. One article particularly in this magazine caused her to write of the author: “. . . by the end of her remarks I felt just a little bit ashamed of being human. It’s hard to put your finger on a tone of voice, but here is a sampler: ‘We love our avian family members and know they love us. Unfortunately, we often hinder the development of a deeper and more precious relationship with them because of how we have been trained to think of animals. . . [A]s humans we are hindered by our egocentric tendency toward assessing intelligence by how much an animal thinks or behaves as we do . . . Their ability to adapt to our world is usually far superior to our ability to function in theirs. . . The animal world . . . possesses a state of sophistication that is inconceivable and unattainable to most human beings, yet we like to hold ourselves above it.’” After reading this, I too felt almost guilty that I am a human being. Perhaps C.S. Lewis provides an antidote to our perceived guilt: He observes that the problem is not that we love animals too much but that we love God and other human beings too little. In *The Four Loves* he wrote: “It is the smallness of our love for God, not the greatness of our love for the many that constitutes the inordinacy.” There is a clear creation-order distinction in the Bible. Humans are created in God’s image, not dogs or cats. Jesus declared that humans are worth more than birds, even though God cares for both (Matthew 6:26). Further, humans are the ones whom God declares are “a little lower than the angels” (Psalm 8), not dogs.

- Second, Christine Gutleben, the Humane Society's first Director of Faith Outreach, has stated that "Animal ministries are in every state, and they do everything, including pet food in traditional food drives, to donating to local shelters, designating church grounds as animal sanctuaries, hosting adoption events, printing animals for adoption in church bulletins." She also reveals that many churches include pets in their antipoverty work: "They will host an event for the surrounding community, and provide medical and dental care for people, but also have a veterinarian who will provide free vaccines on church grounds." In St. Louis, there is a pet ministry, which is a part of Grace Church, a large non-denominational Protestant congregation, call Noah's Ark. It runs a pet-food drive, supports no-kill rescue of animals, brings pets to visit the sick and infirm and hosts a grief group for those who have lost a pet. The Church of the King in New Orleans holds monthly events for pets, and when they do, hundreds of people line up to get vaccines. Indeed, Laura Hobgood-Oster, of Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, and the author of *Holy Dogs and Asses: Animals in the History of the Christian Tradition*, argues that "Animals have always been central to Christianity, as well as all the world's major religions." Further, many Roman Catholics are taught that St. Francis of Assisi communed with the birds and spoke with a wolf; thus, on his feast day, 4 October, many churches host events in which animals are blessed by a priests or other church officials.
- Third, how should we think about such developments within the broader Christian church? Is this a biblical response to our stewardship responsibility as dominion stewards of God's world? How should we think biblically about our pets? There are several biblical principles to aid Christian believers in thinking about animal life, the larger physical world, and our relationship to both. The non-human creation is of great significance to God. He created the physical world as a deliberate act. God also takes pleasure in His physical world. This is clear from the Creation Ordinance in Genesis 1 and 2 and from 1 Timothy 4:4: "For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude." (See also Psalm 104:31 where we see God rejoicing in His works.) The point is that if the physical world is important to God, then it must be to us—His creatures—as well (see also Job 39:1-2, Colossians 1:16 and Psalms 19:1-4). As Ron Sider points out, it is likewise imperative to note that God has a covenant, not only with humans, but also with the nonhuman creation. After the flood, God made a covenant with the physical creation: "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark" (Genesis 9:9-10). The physical world has dignity, worth and value quite apart from its service to humanity. Incredibly, God's redemptive plan has a cosmic quality to it. Further, Sider argues, "This fact provides a crucial foundation for building a Christian theology for an environmental age." The biblical hope that the whole created order, including the material world of bodies and rivers and trees, will be part of the kingdom confirms that the created order is good and important. Romans 8:19-23 demonstrates that at Christ's return the groaning of creation will cease, for the creation will be transformed: "The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (v. 21).

We honor our dogs as valuable beings, a part of God's world. It is our stewardship responsibility to treat them well, and care for them. But, dogs are not persons. They do not deserve to have the

rights associated with personhood. Only humans bear God's image and that is the fundamental difference between dogs and humans—an eternally significant difference. Jesus' death, burial and resurrection were accomplished for the justification of human beings, not dogs.

See Gregory Burns in [www.nytimes](http://www.nytimes.com) (9 October 2013); www.theweek.com (9 October 2013); Wesley J. Smith in www.nationalreview.com (9 October 2013); and James P. Eckman, *Christian Ethics* (2013 Revised Edition), pp. 109-120.