

# NORTHERN CONFERENCE 2009 REPORT

## *What Does it Mean to be Human?*

About 50 members and visitors gathered at St. John's College, Durham on Saturday 14th March to discuss what it means to be human. The venue was comfortable and we were ably chaired by Clare Parkinson and Jona Foster, two PhD students who are key players in the Durham local group. It included a CiS stand, the book stall run by Andrew Pinder and a good supply of Fair Trade chocolate. Biographical details of the main speakers can be found at [www.cis.org.uk/conferences/northern-conference](http://www.cis.org.uk/conferences/northern-conference).

The first speaker was Richard Briggs is the Director of Biblical Studies and Hermeneutics at Cranmer Hall, Durham. His talk on *Humans in the image of God – and other things Genesis doesn't make clear* was most interesting and challenging. He suggested caution if we imply that the historical context of the ancient author determines the theological significance of a text. There are other, perhaps more valid, hermeneutic approaches to garner theological significance. For example "the New Testament use of 'image of God' language to describe Christ might in its own way be equally as determinative of the significance of the phrase in Genesis 1-11 as any ancient near Eastern intertexts." Overall Dr. Briggs argued that the meaning of "image of God" was a scarcely unpacked 'place-holder' concept that gains greater clarity as the "canonical narrative develops, beyond Genesis, and indeed beyond the Old Testament". As author of books such as *Reading the Bible Wisely* and an expert on hermeneutics his comments deserve careful consideration.

The Edinburgh local group (as Neville Cobbe and Gavin Merrifield) asked what essential characteristics creatures made in God's image might possess. Their talk, *The Spectrum of the Image*, was a thought provoking account of potential future forms of life or consciousness (made possible by developments in biotechnology, computer technology, space exploration and even the convergence of all three). These asked serious questions of our concepts of 'Imago Dei'. Neville and Gavin reminded us that the bible shows how God often elevates the status of those we reject.

An excellent presentation on the ethics and current science of *The Status of the Embryo and Stem Cell Research* was given by Rev Dr. Stephen Bellamy and Prof. Judith Goodship.

Martin Rogers informed the audience of good science - faith resources for schools, in particular the *Science and Religion in Schools Project*.

Eric Middleton, in his talk, *Dimensions of the Spirit- Then and Now*, reminded us of the holistic perspective (such as in cases of healing) that is need to have any understanding of being in God's image.

*On Being Human - An Insider's View* was a broad look at humanity, that ranged from evolution through to the mind (and much in between) delivered in typically humorous fashion by Paul Marston.

Discussion groups gave everyone the opportunity share their insights and questions some of which were then helpfully addressed by the panel discussion. A brief but encouraging epilogue was given by the Director of St. John's College David Wilkinson.

Overall, the conference gave a wonderful hint of the richness of what it means be made in God's image.

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