

The Image of God in Man

Have you thought through the glorious privilege and various ramifications of man being created in the image of God? Have you formed a well-reasoned defense on how your Christian worldview and standard for right and wrong flow out of God's Word which teaches there is value and sanctity of human life upon the image-bearers of God? The fact that man was created in the image and likeness of God is what separates man from the rest of God's creatures, compelling him to value human life, and restraining him from acts of murder.

Moses records in the creation account, "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness'...God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Gen 1:26-27). Mankind was created by God in His image and likeness, free of sin, and with a rational nature, intelligence, volition, self-determination, and moral responsibility to God. So man is like God in a way that no other earthly creature is. He is not like the brute beast. Only man can pray to God or communicate through complex language or experience interpersonal harmony with God or fellow man.

Though the scope of this image is not specified here in Genesis, the book of beginnings, the context of the passages shows God to be personal, rational (having intelligence and will), creative, ruling over the world He created, and morally admirable. What this all looks like and how man bears that image is of great debate among theologians.

The *Substantive View* holds that there is some quality or characteristic that is shared with God. Millard Erickson states, "The image is the powers of personality that make humans, like God, beings capable of interacting with other persons, of thinking and reflecting, and of willing freely".¹ Most often this view speaks of the capacity for reasoning and reflection, the ability to engage in rational discourse.

Another position is the *Relational View*, which refers to human capacity for relationships. As the Triune God has fellowship within Himself, so humans were created for relationship. Barth notes in *Church Dogmatics* that in Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 5:1-2, Scripture speaks of image in the context of man being created "male and female."²

A third position is the *Functional View* that suggests that image refers to man exercising dominion over creation. This view focuses not so much on a quality in humans or their capacity, but their function. Proponents of this view note that passages like Genesis 1:28 and Psalm 8:5-6 emphasize humans as rulers, God's vice-regents of creation. It is through exercising dominion and subduing the earth that people reflect God's image in His ruling over the universe.

Some theologians go one step further in tweaking this third view into yet a fourth, the *Royal View*. Of this perspective, Michael Bird says, "Humans reflect the reign and goodness of God when they justly rule over the created order."³

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Baker Books, 2002), 532

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, (Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), III/1:192-206.

³ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, (Zondervan, 2013), 660.

Regardless of which view of the image of God that we hold, we must all recognize that only man is said to be made “in the image of God.” So in some aspect, image and likeness point to a concrete shape or form that can in some way be visualized.⁴ Yet we can neither give the attributes of God to man nor give flesh to God so we are still left in a quandary. As Carl Henry recognized, “The Bible does not define for us the precise content of the original imago.”⁵

Much confusion enters into the discussion when we tighten the definition too much or try to be too specific. Maybe we should keep our understanding of the image of God general enough so that that we remain silent where Scripture is silent. Yet we need to let all of Scripture, which fleshes out what God is like, form our world view that to be created in the image of God has massive ramifications for how we relate to God and how we conduct life.

Because of the Fall, all mankind is tainted and twisted in sin (Isa 64:6; 53:4-6; Rom 3:10-20; Jer 17:9). Yet there is still a likeness to God remaining (cf. 1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9). That image was distorted, not lost. The image of God, as revealed in Scripture, is a standard for right and wrong. Thus to kill is to attack the part of creation which most resembles God (Genesis 9:6). Since rebels against God cannot get to Him, they commit acts of murder against the physical representatives that bear His image: mankind. We retain the image of God structurally, in the sense that we remain human beings, but not functionally, because now man is a slave to his sin.

Furthermore, since the image of God was corrupted in the Fall, it necessitated the incarnation. Jesus was the perfect embodiment of the image of God on earth. And it was through the Incarnate Son that redemption could provide a renewed image. Though still imperfect, a man in a right relationship with God is empowered with the ability to love his fellow man as God originally intended.

The Gospel, through the aid of the Spirit, motivated by the glory of Christ, empowers believers to bring glory to God as they reflect His person and plan. The apostle James confronts man’s inconsistencies in not relating to others in a God-glorifying way as he addresses the way in which we speak with one another, blessing God and cursing man who bears God’s image (Jas 3:9-10).

Therefore, when individuals are redeemed by Christ and are “being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him” (Col 3:10), they will harness their tongues and treat others with respect and dignity. However, this respect is not due to any inherent goodness, perpetrated by man falsely thinking he is a little god, but simply because the Gospel compels us to “lay aside the old self...and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in

⁴ Note: In the Patristic period it was common to distinguish between “image” of God (emphasizing reason and choice) and “likeness” of God (looking more at supernatural endowment). Though there is merit in distinguishing the two, it appears that the Hebrew in Genesis 1:26-27 is using parallel thoughts, giving emphasis, rather than distinction, i.e., “in the *very* image of God.” They are simply synonyms, as only “image” is used in Genesis 1:27 and only “likeness” is used in Genesis 5:1.

⁵ Carl F. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, (Crossway, 1999), 2:125.

righteousness and holiness of the truth” (Eph 4:22-24). It is only those in Christ who can progressively grow more in likeness to God.

So, Christian, grow to be more like Christ as the full weight of Scripture teaches how you are to bear His name. As you are convinced of the weightiness of the image of God and pursue Him in every detail of life, seek progress through the Spirit of being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:18).

Remain steadfast in hope, against the difficulties of life and the depressing events around us as we await the return of Christ when the image of God will be completely restored. As we have been like Adam, subject to death and sin, we shall be like Christ, morally pure, never subject to death again (1 Cor 15:49; 1 Jn 3:2). Let us look forward in hope to a perfect relationship with God, man, and the rest of God’s creation when all things are made new!

Soli Deo Gloria,

Pastor Parker Reardon, D.Min.

Applegate Community Church

18960 N. Applegate Rd.

Grants Pass, OR 97527

www.applegatechurch.org

www.biblicalexpositor.org

Adjunct Faculty, Liberty University & Pacific Bible College