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The Image of God

By Henry Middleton

Genesis 1:26-27 says, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." This passage shows that man reflects God in some way and represents him.¹ The image of God distinguishes mankind from the rest of creation. Mankind reflects and represents God in a way which cannot be said of anything else in God's creation, but what does this mean? The image of God has significant impact in both theology and ethics, and so it is helpful to understand what it is.

First it is important to note that the image of God does not make men identical with God or the same type of being. Isaiah 43:10 says "Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me."² People are not divine, are not little gods, and cannot become gods.

There are various views of exactly what the image of God is. The *substantive view* holds that the image consists of traits intrinsic to human nature and therefore present in each person. In such a view, the image is universal to mankind regardless of whether that person has been redeemed through Christ and lives a godly life. Theologians holding this view differ on which traits are included, but they agree that it is a part of human nature whether or not a person acknowledges God.³ Millard Erickson, for example, argues that the image is universal to all mankind, that it was not lost due to sin, and that it does not exist in different degrees in different people. He suggests that it is primarily substantive and that it enables mankind to fulfill his purpose to know and worship God.⁴

The *relational view* holds that the image is something people *do* rather than something that they *are* and that it

consists of the experience of a relationship between two humans or between a human and God. This view correctly notes that out of all of creation only mankind is in relationship with God, but it seems to deny that the image of God is universal to mankind. Is there a way for a person who is indifferent toward God to bear the image?⁵

The *functional view* holds that the image is something people do, such as exercising dominion over the earth. For example, J. Rodman Williams holds a partially functional view. He writes, "God, who is the Lord over all things and sovereign over heaven and earth, willed to be reflected in one called man by making him to have subordination over all other living creatures and over all the earth."⁶ Advocates of this view will note, for example, that in Gen. 1:26-27, the phrase "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" is immediately followed by "and let them have dominion." In this view, humans reflect God's lordship over all creation by exercising dominion over creation. Although the image and dominion are closely connected, and the image may be what enables man to have dominion, it is unclear in Gen. 1:26-27 that dominion is a *definition* of the image. This passage could also be interpreted to say that man was created in God's image *and also* was given dominion.⁷

An image of God which is universal to mankind seems to be the most likely.⁸ The Bible does not define the specific nature of the image of God, but it is still possible to list ways in which humans are representative of God and are likely facets of the image of God. Wayne Grudem lists four areas which include substantive, relational, and functional elements. First, there are *moral elements*. Unlike any animals, God has given us moral commands (Gen. 2:17), and we are accountable to Him (Romans 2). We also have an inner sense of right and

⁵ Ibid., 520, 523-527, 529-530

⁶ Williams JR (1996) *Renewal Theology: Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective, Three Volumes in One*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, vol. 1, 201

⁷ Erickson, 520, 527-531

⁸ No distinction is made between types of murder victims in Genesis 9:6. This suggests that the image of God is universal to mankind regardless of an individual's actions or attitude toward God. See also James 3:9. More is said on these verses below.

¹ Grudem W (1994) *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 442-444. See also Gen. 5:1.

² See also Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29.

³ Erickson MJ (1998) *Christian Theology*, 2d ed. Baker: Grand Rapids, MI, 520-523, 531

⁴ Ibid., 531-534

wrong (Rom. 2:12–15).⁹ Second, there are *spiritual elements*. We have immaterial spirits (Phil. 1:23–24). We can also have fellowship with God (Gen. 3:8) and pray to Him (Matt. 6:9–13).¹⁰ Third, there are *mental elements*. We have the ability to reason (Isa. 1:18) and use language (1 Cor. 14:10). We have an awareness of the future destiny (2 Cor. 5:4). We also have creativity and emotions.¹¹ Fourth, there are *relational elements*. We are able to form interpersonal relationships to a degree greater than among animals, including marriage, friendship, government, and church (Gen. 2:18, 23, 3:6–8, 4:1). We also have dominion over creation (Gen. 1:26–28; 1 Cor. 6:3).¹² Grudem concludes, “Every way in which man is like God is part of his being in the image and likeness of God.”¹³

Image of God, Sin, and Salvation

What effect did the fall have on the image of God? Every facet of mankind was corrupted in the fall. For example mankind was corrupted in his moral aspects. People in their unredeemed state have corrupt hearts (Jer. 17:9). They seek their own ways rather than God’s ways (Ps. 14:1–3; Eccl. 7:29; Rom. 7:18). People are also affected intellectually and volitionally. In their natural state they cannot understand spiritual matters (1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 4:18) and will not come to God for salvation without His enabling (John 6:44,65).

The image was indeed affected by the Fall but it was not lost. Genesis 9:6 says, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” The biblical prohibition against murder implies that even in his fallen state, man still bears the image of God. To commit murder is to attack God’s representative in creation.¹⁴ James 3:9 forbids cursing another person on the same basis.

Man’s corrupted nature also does not need to be permanent. Those who receive salvation through Christ “have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col. 3:10) and are being conformed to His nature (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18). This process of sanctification of believers will not be complete, however, until their final glorification when they are resurrected and completely freed from the effects of sin (1 John 1:8; Rev. 21:4).

Jesus is the perfect image of God (Col. 1:15). Because we are creations, and He is the creator, we will never be entirely like Him, but through Him we can be restored to

the image that we were created to be (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; Eph. 4:23–24; 1 John 3:2).¹⁵

Image of God and Ethics

Humans are not merely bodies and collections of biological processes. There is a spiritual component which continues even after death (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23). People are also moral beings. Their actions have moral status, and they can reflect on the morality or immorality of their actions.¹⁶ What people choose to do has real significance for themselves and the world around them. People should therefore be valued for reasons that go beyond their individual contributions to their family or society. Every person has an “intrinsic worth” by virtue of being created in God’s image.¹⁷

Because people bear the image of God, they represent God in a way which cannot be said of any part of creation. This places a special value on human life which is not granted to other animals. If man is seen as no more than another animal, not fundamentally different, then there remains no reason to place special value on human life or dignity.¹⁸ Francis Schaeffer warned that once the uniqueness of humanity in the image of God is removed, then “nothing stands in the way of inhumanity. There is no good reason why mankind be perceived as special.”¹⁹ Without a basis for human dignity, almost anything could be justified in the name of a perceived social good.²⁰ Schaeffer continues, “The only thing that can stem this tide is the certainty of the absolute uniqueness and value of people. And the only thing which gives us this is the knowledge that people are made in the image of God.”²¹

This intrinsic worth implies rights which should never be made secondary to the goals of a government or other social structure, or personal goals, or what appear to be pragmatically beneficial ends.²² The image of God also precludes racial prejudice and oppression. All humans are descendants of Adam and Eve. Ultimately there is only one human race (Acts 17:26).²³

¹⁵ Grudem, 445

¹⁶ Lewis GR, Demarest BA (1996) *Integrative Theology*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, vol. 2, 160–162

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 172

¹⁸ Grudem, 449–450

¹⁹ Schaeffer FA, *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* in Schaeffer FA (1982) *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, vol. 5, Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL, 290. See also page 288.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 329

²¹ *Ibid.*, 405

²² Lewis, 173. For example, in Aldous Huxley’s *A Brave New World*, individual people are treated as mere commodities which can be discarded and replaced with ease in service to the social order. See Huxley A (2006) *A Brave New World*, Harper Perennial Modern Classics, New York, NY, 148

²³ Lewis, 176

⁹ Grudem, 445–446

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 446, 483

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 446–447

¹² *Ibid.*, 447–448

¹³ *Ibid.*, 444. Emphasis original.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* See also James 3:9

Conclusion

God created mankind to show His own glory. Isaiah 43:7 says, "Everyone who is called by my name, *whom I created for my glory*, whom I formed and made." 1 Corinthians 10:31 instructs us to live in such a way that we bring glory to God: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." We should live in light of the fact that our lives are significant to God.²⁴ ❧

²⁴Grudem, 440-441. Eph.1:11-12, "Also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory."