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Man ~ Made in the Image of God

by Don Dunavant

The Palmist asks, *What is man that You remember him, the son of man that You look after him?* (Psalm 8:4). Today's culture does not take a high view of man, and answers to the question "What is man?" would vary, depending on whom you ask. But the biblical answer to this question is that men and women are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Thus, to truly comprehend what it means to be human, we must understand *imago Dei*, the image of God in man.



The study of the doctrine of *imago Dei* must address four questions. First, what does it mean that man and woman have been created in the image of God? Second, how was the image of God in man marred or affected by the Fall? Third, how is the image of God in man restored in salvation? Fourth, how is this truth significant to us today? This article will focus on the first three questions by looking at the theological aspects of the image of God. Then it will take up the fourth question by exploring the practical applications of *imago Dei*.

Theological Aspects of the Image of God

That we are created in the image of God says something awesome about God in His creative purposes. It also says something wonderful about the uniqueness of humans in God's grand design. But what does it mean? The theological challenge in *imago Dei* is the fact that the Bible does not define explicitly what it means that humanity is made in the image of God.

Three authors provide helpful theological direction for us. Wayne Grudem pointed out that the words used in Genesis 1:26-27, "image" (*tselem*) and "likeness" (*demut*) in the Hebrew "refer to something that is similar but not identical to the thing that it represents or is the 'image' of."¹ Therefore, Genesis 1:26, "would have meant to the original readers, 'Let us make man to be *like* us and to *represent* us.'"² Bruce Ware noted that "the image of God in man involves God's creation of divine representations (images of God) who, in relationship with God and each other, function to represent God (imaging God) in carrying out God's designated responsibilities."³ Anthony Hoekema wrote that the image of God "describes not just something that man *has*, but something man *is*."⁴ Building on these observations, a theological construct for *imago Dei* begins to crystallize.



The Meaning of the Image of God

Several characteristics in the uniqueness of humanity help us understand the meaning of the image of God in man. While this is not an exhaustive list, the following seven characteristics reflect *imago Dei*.

- **We are *spiritual* beings.** We are created to represent and worship our God who is Spirit. Human beings are not merely material beings. When God created the first man, He *breathed into his nostrils the breath of life* (Genesis 2:7), making man a living soul and giving to him spiritual life. Only humans are able to relate to God in worship and communication. A vital component of this spiritual nature is immortality — human beings that will never cease to exist but will live forever.⁵
- **We are *personal* beings.** We are created by a personal God, and our personhood reflects that aspect of God. He created humans with personality, as unique individuals with self-consciousness and purpose. While every man and woman share common characteristics, no two people are alike. Since each individual is stamped with the image of God, each human life has significance before God.
- **We are *moral* beings.** God is holy. He created humanity with a moral compass, a conscience that gives each of us an inner sense of the difference between right and wrong. The conscience may be deadened or seared by sin, but it remains hardwired in man. The hardest question for both atheists and evolutionists is how to explain the moral nature in the human race, in every culture, in every people group, and even in every religion. Moreover, man's moral capacity makes him accountable to God for his actions.
- **We are *relational* beings.** God reveals the relational nature of the Trinity in this phrase: *Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness* (Genesis 1:26). God created us with the capacity to relate both to God and to others. Humans were not made to live in isolated individualism. Thus, the image of God is involved in how we relate in marriage and in the fellowship of the church, and how we relate to others in the Great Commandment and the Great Commission (see Genesis 2:18-25; Matthew 19: 1-12; Galatians 3:26-29).
- **We are *rational* beings.** God is a God of knowledge. While our knowledge is limited, God created us with the capacity to think, to know, and to learn. Christianity is not a mindless faith. Just the opposite. The intellectual aspect of *imago Dei* means that our minds are a vital part of how we are to love God (Matthew 22:37), that we are to cultivate our minds (Ephesians 4:23), and that we are to renew our minds for transformation (Romans 12:2).
- **We are *emotional* beings.** We are made in the likeness of God who Himself is love. It is the emotive facet of our makeup that allows us to experience intimacy with those close to us, to feel compassion for others, and to know the deep awe of God that causes us to delight and find soul satisfaction in Him.
- **We are *creative* beings.** God is the Creator. His glory is displayed in His creation. We have an insatiable desire to create, whether producing a piece of art, starting a business, writing a book, or landscaping the yard. While our creativity is different from God's, who made everything from nothing, the linkage of the image of God in man in creation to the cultural mandate in Genesis 1:26-27 speaks to our creative responsibility. Nancy Pearcey observes that the first phrase, be fruitful and multiply, may mean: "to develop the social world: build families, churches, schools, cities, government, laws." She suggests the second phrase, subdue the earth, means: "to harness the natural world: plant crops, build bridges, design computers, compose music. This passage ... tells us that our original purpose was to create culture and build civilizations — nothing less."⁶

The Image of God and the Fall

The characteristics listed above are how we have historically understood the image of God in original creation. The question now is how did the Fall affect the image of God in men and women since? The first response is that the entrance of sin did not eradicate or destroy *imago Dei*. The clearest demonstrations of this are God's

communication with Noah after the flood establishing the death penalty for murder because "God made man in His image" (Genesis 9:6) and James 3:9 which indicates we have retained the likeness of God.

However, the image of God in humans was deeply marred or distorted by the Fall. Men and women died spiritually. Humanity's relationship with God was ruptured, as well as interpersonal relationships. Moral purity was lost, replaced by a sinful nature. Personality was corrupted, producing an array of psychological problems. Knowledge was degraded by false philosophies and vain imaginations. Emotions were turned to selfish desires. Creativity was despoiled by evil purposes and pursuits (Romans 1:18-32; Ephesians 2:1-3; 4:24-32). The uncorrupted image of God was replaced by the fallen image of the fallen Adam (Genesis 5:1-3).

The Image of God and Salvation

However, the Good News of Scripture — the central message of God's revelation — is that in redemption we are made a new creation and the firstfruits of the new creation (Colossians 3:12). Through sanctification, the believer in Jesus Christ progressively grows in godliness, conforming more and more to the likeness of God (2 Corinthians 3:18). This on-going process of spiritual growth involves both a response on our part to God's purpose in our salvation and the deep work of God in our lives. Our response is seen in such passages as Colossians 3:10 where we are exhorted to put on (an act of conscious commitment) the new man, *who is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of his Creator*. The work of God is His providence operating in all our life situations to conform us to the image of His Son (Roman 8:28-29).

That which started at salvation will be completed when Christ returns. *Imago Dei* will be restored because, when He appears we will be like Him (1 John 3:2).

The Practical Applications of the Image of God

There are profound implications and applications of *imago Dei* for the Christian and the church. John Piper highlights the significance it gives to us as human beings offering this definition: "The *imago Dei* is that in man which constitutes him as he-whom-God-loves."⁷ Regardless of how the image of God may be distorted by sin, the fact that men and women are still bearers of the image of God shapes our view and action toward others. Six critical areas of application stand out.

- **Evangelism and Missions.** The image of God in every man and woman everywhere gives emphasis to the priority of evangelism and missions. Since humans were created in the image of God and yet are fallen sinners, they miss out on their ultimate purpose in life — to glorify God by reflecting Him, loving Him, and worshipping Him. Evangelism and missions is God's appointed means to restore us to our original purpose. Moreover, the immortal aspect of *imago Dei* underscores the urgency of reaching out to those who do not know the Lord Jesus. Their eternal destiny is at stake.
- **Sanctity of life.** No issue since slavery has so divided our nation as abortion. The reasoned voices for life must be heard. Nothing emphasizes and promotes the sacredness and preciousness of life more than *imago Dei*. It goes to the core of the meaning of life. It means that human life is to be revered and respected. Our stand against abortion is grounded in the fact that abortion is a sin against God as the creator of life and against the human life of the unborn (whether embryonic, fetal, or viable) as those who bear His image.
- **Dignity.** Inherent in *imago Dei* is the dignity or worth of each individual. This has a profound impact on how we see, relate to and treat others. C. S. Lewis stated it well, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal."⁸ Clearly, the image of God in man condemns any type of bias toward, discrimination against, or exploitation of anyone on the basis of skin color (racism), gender (sexism), economic status (classism), ethnic origin (ethnocentrism), or age (ageism) as sin. James 3:9 highlights the dignity accorded to

man by pointing out the contradiction of using our mouths to bless God on one hand and on the other to curse people *who are made in God's likeness*.

- **Sexuality.** The high Christian view of sex is based on the fact that God created man and woman in His image as sexual beings with a commitment to marriage (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:21-25). The sexual union of a man and wife is created for intimacy, fidelity, and faith. The intimacy of marriage also represents the Trinitarian relationship of God and man's intimacy with God. Marital fidelity — one man and one woman as one flesh for one lifetime — is used throughout the Scripture to represent the people of God and their fidelity to Him. By faith, we trust that God's provision for our wellbeing — and our best — restricts sexual intimacy to the bonds of marriage. The implications go to the heart of biblical sexual morality in a world plagued by pornography, premarital sex, extramarital sex, and homosexuality. One, it distinguishes man from the animal kingdom, for whom sex is merely a biological function devoid of any spiritual meaning, committed attachment, or moral parameters. Two, it warns us of how we dishonor God when we fail to reflect His image by taking sex outside the wonderful and ennobling relationship of marriage. Three, it is a positive guide to flourishing in marriage to the glory of God.

- **Compassion toward others in need.** When we look at other people through the lens of being bearers of the image of God, it is impossible to close our hearts to those who are suffering, poor, or marginalized. In His earthly ministry, Jesus healed the sick, fed the hungry, and delivered those held captive by the demonic. While He was moved with compassion by the temporal needs, He saw that meeting those needs was a bridge to meet the greater need and bring people to salvation. And so it is for us — Gospel-driven ministries of mercy are viable visual representations of the mercy of God and grace of the Lord Jesus.

- **The Church.** Jesus Christ is the image of God (Colossians 1:15); there is a sense in which the church, as the Bride of Christ, is the image of God in Christ (Ephesians 1:22-23). The church, as God's new humanity, represents the image of God by living with one another in *shalom* (peace), by loving our neighbors as ourselves, and by passionately sharing the Gospel with a lost world.

Conclusion

A robust view of *imago Dei* is an essential component of a biblical worldview. It informs our understanding of both the purposes of God for us and what it truly means to be human. In a culture that increasingly diminishes the value of man, concluding that the human is merely one more animal produced in a random evolutionary process, it is critical that Christians embrace the biblical account and treat others accordingly, both inside and outside the community of faith.

1 Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 442.

2 Ibid., 444.

3 Bruce Ware, "Male and Female Complementarity and the Image of God" (The Council of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood Journal, www.cbmw.org/Journal/Vol-7-No-1/Male-and-Female-Complementarity-and-the-Image-of-God).

4 Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 95.

5 Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 446.

6 Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 47.

7 John Piper, "The Image of God: An Approach from Biblical and Systematic Theology" (*Studia Biblica et Theologica*, March 1971, www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Articles/ByDate/1971/22271).

8 C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Essays* (San Francisco: Harper, 1976), 46.

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