



THE IMAGE OF GOD

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Martin Luther once said that if he could understand “Our Father,” the first two words of the Lord’s Prayer, as Christ did, the rest of his life in Christ would fall into place. Luther’s observation shows that it is easy to use God’s words but much more difficult to grasp the reality that they signify. This applies to the concept that each person was made in the “image of God.” While believers have heard of this concept, few grasp the profound significance of its meaning.

That mankind was made in the image and likeness of God is announced at the beginning of Genesis:

Then God said ‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth.’ And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.ⁱ

Note that mankind is made in the image and likeness of God, meaning that human worth is connected to the Creator. If God is of great and inestimable worth, then human beings made in his image must be of great value. Note also that man and woman have equal dignity before God as his image-bearers.

This dignity is present in mankind not only in creation but after the Fall into sin. For instance, Genesis 9:5-6 says, “Whoever sheds man’s blood by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man.” It is important to observe that the seriousness of murder is that it attacks one who is in God’s image. To attack a person is to attack God through his image-bearer. Another passage talks about the tongue saying “with it we bless our Lord and Father and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God.”ⁱⁱ It is contradictory for Christians to walk into church proclaiming the worthiness of God while cursing

someone who God created in his likeness. How believers treat people is an indication of how they value God.

The Fall has not taken away the humans' inherent dignity as image-bearers of God, but it has caused them to lose something in their relationship to God, each other, and creation. There are a couple New Testament passages that indicate what aspects of the image of God have been lost as a result of the Fall.

Colossians 3:9-10 says,

Do not lie to one another since you laid aside the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.ⁱⁱⁱ

That “true knowledge” is being renewed in this passage means that it must have been lost in the Fall. Similarly in Ephesians 4:22-24, it says that conversion involves laying “aside the old self,” being “renewed,” putting on the “new self” which means being restored in “likeness of God...in righteousness and holiness of the truth.” Righteousness and holiness are being restored here.

Both passages could serve as a summary of all the virtues or attributes that were part of the image and likeness of God before the Fall. During this time, image-bearers were directed toward serving God and had a character that corresponded to him in some manner. Now, instead of saying, “Thy will be done,” people say, “My will be done.” Thus we have lost our direction and gone against the way we were made. As a result of the Fall, humans have pursued ignorance, unrighteousness, and unholiness. As a result, each person has lost a significant aspect of the image of God. Yet God’s plan of redemption leads to a renewing of what we have lost. The fact that mankind has fallen yet can look forward to the promise of redemption and eventual restoration has several crucial implications for how the Christian carries out his life.

THERE ARE NO ORDINARY PEOPLE.

One of my favorite quotes from C.S. Lewis says “there are no ordinary people. You have never met a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations, they are to our life as the life of a gnat.” The people one sees every day—even the ones to whom one gives little regard—are ones that are going to live forever either under salvation or judgment. Even the most obscure person is not ordinary in God’s eyes. On one occasion, C.S. Lewis and Walter Hooper were talking about a man who was unbelievably dull. Hooper remarked that the man amazed him by the very intensity of his boredom. Lewis responded, “Yes, but our Lord may well have said as ye have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.” Lewis lived out this idea that, “There are no ordinary people” in the above instance, and also by writing personal handwritten notes to everyone who wrote to him, as well as giving away all his royalties, honorariums, and half his meager salary. Many people knowingly or unknowingly benefited from his “Agape Fund.” How do we affirm the dignity of the people around us? We may not choose to give as Lewis did, but his spirit of generosity and his regard for every single person is a model for valuing people.

WE SHOULD NOT FOCUS ON OUR SIN FOR LONG WITHOUT ALSO NOTING GOD'S GRACE AND OUR OWN DIGNITY.

Today, some focus on our dignity and self-worth without much mention of our sinfulness. Others have overemphasized man's utter unworthiness and sinfulness without any note of his dignity, or of God's grace.

The apostle Paul is an example for balanced contemplation on this issue. He never mentions the depth of his past sin without also mentioning God's grace. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 15:9-11, Paul writes "For I am the least of the apostles, who is not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." While he seems to hold a very low view of his own merit, he goes on to say, "But by the grace of God I am what I am and His grace toward me did not prove vain."

Every believer can say the same. No matter what anyone has done, God's grace works in him or her. To deny or fail to acknowledge this is to say that God's grace equals nothing. To focus on one's own sin without acknowledging what God has done in one's life is to insinuate that Christ has died "in vain." The apostle likewise says in Ephesians 3:8, "to me the very least of all saints this grace was given." In 1 Timothy 1:15, Paul calls himself the "foremost of sinners" but immediately notes "yet for this reason I found mercy." Certainty it is right to take extended time for self-examination, confession, and repentance, but one should never do so without eventually coming back to God's grace and one's own dignity in the image of God.

THE RESTORED IMAGE OF GOD LOOKS LIKE CHRIST.

While the image of God remains after the Fall, it is certainly marred and defaced. As Christians are redeemed, what will they look like when the process is completed? On the one hand their individuality as created by God will shine even more brightly, and their gifts will reach their full potential. On the other hand, they will look like Christ. According to Romans 8:29, Christians are being "conformed to the image of His Son." 1 John 3:2 says, "we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him because we shall see Him just as He is." Jesus is the perfect representative of the image of God, and his followers are being made like him.

AS CHRISTIANS EXPERIENCE REDEMPTION AND RESTORATION, THEY WILL REACH THEIR POTENTIAL.

One's gifts cannot reach their full potential without the Holy Spirit's help. In Exodus 31:1-5 we see two artists who were already gifted and chosen because of their skills to make the tabernacle and all the utensils in it. But it says that the Spirit put further skill into the hearts of those who were skillful. Our gifts are withered, deformed, and misdirected because of the Fall. They can be developed, unfolded, redirected, and brought to their potential through the Spirit's help.

GOD WILL FREE HIS FOLLOWERS FROM DISTORTION.

Charles Williams used to say about everything in the creation “this is Thou,” meaning the divinely-intended use for this thing, and “this is not thou,” meaning the divinely-prohibited abuse of this good created thing. For instance, food and financial resources are all good things but can easily be abused. One of the demons in C.S. Lewis’ *Screwtape Letters* says:

He [God] is a hedonist at heart. ...He makes no secret of it – at His right hand are “pleasures forevermore” ...He’s vulgar, Wormwood. He has a bourgeois mind. He has filled His world full of pleasures. There are things for humans to do all day long...sleeping, washing, eating, drinking, making love, playing, praying. Everything has to be twisted before it’s of any use to us.^{iv}

The Fall takes the good structure of God’s creation and twists one’s gifts so that they are “this is not thou” rather than “this is thou.” We need God’s help and the help of others in the body of Christ to untwist ourselves so that we can be what we are created to be.

WE WILL ADOPT A THREE-DIMENSIONAL APPROACH TO OUR LIVES.

The Holy Spirit can restore the Christian’s ability to respond to God, though this requires effort and patience. However, Christians should not try to seek in God what he has created them to find in others. Just as he has made us for an intimate relationship with him, he has made us for an intimate relationship with others. One without the other will lead to a lack of fulfillment and fullness that God wants for each person. Similarly, Christians should know their gifts and have an appropriate outlet for them, in order to experience the energy and creativity that God has given them. Responding to God, others, and creation are aspects of each person’s humanity. To go against one’s nature is like running up against a wall. Chances are that one will do more damage to one’s self than to the wall. God has made people in a certain way, and when they operate according to specifications and guidelines, they run freely and well. To do otherwise is like putting water in a gas tank with the expectation that the car will run normally. A Christian should pursue intimacy with God and with others in the body of Christ, the church. Believers should seek wise counsel on how they can better use their gifts in the church and in the world. If they do these things, they will sense integration, wholeness and meaning in their life.

Clearly, God created every human being with inherent dignity and worth as his image-bearer. Even after the Fall, every individual continues to reflect the Creator, making it an affront against God to attack, belittle, or show disrespect to another human being. Yet the Fall has twisted and obscured each person’s relationship to God, each other, and creation, and this is what makes God’s plan of redemption so necessary for the restoration of the entire creation. Christians must understand what it means to be made in the image of God and the implications that the Fall and God’s redemptive plan have in their lives. As they experience God’s renewing power, they will treat others with greater dignity, have a better understanding of God’s grace, reach their potential, and become more Christ-like.

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ⁱ Gen 1:26-28, NASB.

ⁱⁱ James 3:9.

ⁱⁱⁱ Col. 3:9-10.

^{iv} C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009), 101-102.