

In the Image of God

GENESIS 1:26-27

Rev. Dr. Richard D. Phillips
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So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Gen. 1:27).

If you want to really understand something, one of the best things to do is study its origin or founding. This is true of nations. If you want to understand why America is as it is today, what its institutions are about and how its self-identity formed, then you have to go back and learn about its birth in the Revolutionary War, its struggle as a colony seeking independence, its ideal of equality under God, and its desire for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The same is true of sports and pastimes. I recently investigated the invention of the great American sport of football. Football has its roots in the English game of rugby. In the 1880's Walter Camp, captain of the Yale University team, introduced rule changes that transformed the sport to what we know today. He began the line of scrimmage, the point differential between touchdowns and field goals, and the eleven man limit on the field. In 1906, when the game was bogging down in mass brutality, he innovated the forward pass. In all of these transformations Camp was seeking to take the British virtues of physical strength and stamina and add the American ethos of speed, daring, and strategy. These are the very things that explain the vital connection between football and the American ethos.

If you want to understand man, including yourself as a human being, it will also be important to consider your origin. You of course need to know your parents and place of birth, and it is only natural for people to be interested in their more distant ancestry. But the most important ancestors for you to know about are your first set of parents

and their origin. Genesis 1:27 provides this vital information: “God created man in his own image.” R. Kent Hughes points out the significance of man’s special origin. He states that if you “could travel a hundred times the speed of light, past countless yellow-orange stars, to the edge of the galaxy and swoop down to the fiery glow located a few hundred light-years below the plane of the Milky Way,” and if you “could witness a star’s birth, in all your stellar journeys you would never see anything equal to the birth and wonder of a human being.”¹ That baby human rests at the very pinnacle of creation, for it is made in the image of God! “He or she will exist forever. When the stars of the universe fade away, that soul shall still live.”²

The Image and Likeness of God

Despite the great significance of the statement that “God created man in his own image,” the meaning of these words has been hard to nail down. The basic idea is clear. God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). Here, “image” and “likeness” speak of resemblance. The word for “image” (Hebrew, *tselem*) has the meaning of something that is carved or cut out. “After our likeness” makes much the same point, defining man as like God though not himself divine. John Calvin defines the *imago dei* by saying that “man resembles him and that in him God’s glory is contemplated, as in a mirror.”³ The same language is used in Genesis 5:3 when Adam has a son: “he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image.” Alasdair Paine writes: “Seth is a chip off the old block. Being in God’s image means being a chip off his.”⁴

While it is not difficult to understand what it means to bear God’s image, the question that is difficult is *how* man bears God’s image. What is it about mankind that bears analogy to God?

One historic answer is that man bears God’s image by virtue of the nobility of our physical form. Man walks upright among the beasts, as God’s royal delegate on earth. The problem with this view is that God does not possess a body, since “God is spirit” (Jn. 4:24). So it is

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 37.

² *Ibid.*

³ John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis Chapters 1-11*, trans. Rob Boy McGregor (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 93.

⁴ Alasdair Paine, *The First Chapters of Everything* (Ross-Shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2014), 54.

not likely that we represent him primarily through our physical form. We should always think of man as a unified whole – body and soul – but it is the inner man that more clearly connects us with God. You see this priority in Jesus’ teaching to love the Lord “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Mt. 22:37).

With our inner faculties in view, the most common way to define the image of God is through aspects of the human nature that place us clearly above the animal world. Over the years, writers have identified different facets of the mind and soul that show divine likeness. Augustine proposed that the image of God resides in man’s memory, understanding, and will, seeking in this way mirror God’s Trinitarian personhood.⁵ Others speak to man’s self-awareness and personality, which are of a higher order than animals. The English preacher and poet John Donne wrote: “the difference between the reason of man and the instinct of the beast is this, that the beast does but know, but the man knows that he knows.”⁶ Man further possesses a sense of conscience and performs moral decision-making. Man does not live by mere instinct like the animals, but with a divinely imprinted moral compass designed to glorify and obey God’s law.

Moreover, man alone among the creatures worships God with spiritual awareness. Solomon wrote that God “has put eternity into man’s heart” (Ecc. 3:11). Man alone is aware of a world beyond his senses. However intelligent and loyal an animal may seem, it remains a creature of the earth, from which it came (Gen. 1:24). C. S. Lewis wrote of watching an old dog die. He noted that there was no existential struggle or anxiety, but that the dog simply lay down, closed its eyes, and died. Man alone faces death with an awareness of the afterlife and with a sense of meeting God beyond the grave.⁷

Given the distinctive nature of mankind in God’s image, with a divinely granted personality, morality, and spirituality, we can see why God places a unique value on the human life. James Boice writes: “God loves men and women, as He does not and cannot love the

⁵ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 17

⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain or God in the Dock*.

animals, plants, or inanimate matter. Moreover, He feels for them, identifies with them in Christ, grieves for them, and even intervenes in history to make individual men and women all that He has determined they should be.”⁸ With the ability of a nature that reflects the divine image comes the responsibility to fulfill our chief end as God’s beloved creatures: “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.”

The Image as a Community of Love

After saying that God made man in his own image, Genesis 1:27 makes a significant addition: “male and female he created them.” This statement grounds the fundamental equality between men and women. People often blame the Bible for repressing women, but the opposite is actually the case. It is hard to imagine a more radical social comment in Moses’ second-millennium B.C. context that to grant the image of God to women. It is remarkable enough that Genesis says that God made *all* humans in his image – not merely human rulers. But to say that God made *women* as well as men in his own image may have been the single most elevating comment ever to have been uttered regarding the female sex.

The Bible will go on to note differences between males and females. Men are called to covenant headship throughout the Bible, both in the church (1 Tim. 2:11) and in the home (Eph. 5:25). Women, bear the high calling of being helpers to men (Gen. 2:18). But we should never think that this complementarian arrangement results from inferiority on the part of women. Men and women equally bear the image of God and are of equal dignity and value before him.

As well as grounding the equality of men and women, Genesis 1:27 declares the distinctiveness of male and female, and also sexuality as the gift of God the Creator. Victor Hamilton writes: “Sexuality is not an accident of nature, nor is it simply a biological phenomenon. Instead it is a gift of God.”⁹

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 78.

⁹ Victor Hamilton, *The Books of Genesis, Chapters 1-17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 138.

In an age of such incredible confusion that gender is declared a social construct or personal choice – this in the face of irrefutable biological determinism – the Bible declares sexual identity to be created by God. If you are male, it is because intrinsic to your God-designed being is maleness. If you are a woman, it was God who made you female at the moment you came into existence. A man may deny his gender, put on a dress or even take hormone treatments to violate himself chemically. But he will never be a woman, or vice versa. Not only does the Bible declare the sexual difference but it sets men and women on distinctive, though complementary, paths. As Kenneth Matthews writes: “The proper role of the sexes. . . is crucial to God’s designs for human life and prosperity.”¹⁰ The way to honor God as our Creator is to embrace his design for our lives and relationships. As we continue in Genesis we will discover extensive teaching on this subject. But here at Genesis 1:27 we note that our distinctive sexual identity is created by God and should be honored through a grateful pursuit of his design.

The statement on male and female as the image of God seems to be given particular emphasis in Genesis 1. God made the fish, birds, and animals in two sexes as well. But it is only of mankind that Genesis employs valuable text to highlight mankind’s two genders. The reason for this may extend beyond the valuable ideas of the equality of the sexes as well as their created difference. It may further indicate that just as God himself exists within loving community – as Father, Son, and Spirit experience eternal and perfect love – mankind bears God’s image in relationships of community and love.

We see this theme in Genesis 2, where the pinnacle of creation is not merely man as male and female but man as husband and wife. God’s creation of the human race took place in the form of a marriage. Realizing this suggests that we bear God’s image through our capacity to love one another, especially in marriage, in a way that reflects the holy and giving love within God. In this way, the Bible’s beginning connects seamlessly with the Bible’s end, where history concludes with Christ as the bridegroom taking the church as his bride in a love relationship that will last forever. John wrote, “God is love” (1 Jn.

¹⁰ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 174.

4:8). Therefore, it may be that men and women bear God's image most significantly when we exercise his own love toward one another. John said: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God" (1 Jn. 4:7).

The Image as Communion with God

So far, we have considered the image of God mainly in terms of the sinner life of the human nature. Mankind was made with personality, morality, and spirituality. We expanded our thought to include the idea that men and women bear God's image in relationships of love. In recent years, however, scholars have emphasized that the image of God in man involves our creation for a relationship with himself. In the highest sense, man in the image of God speaks of our identity in communion with the Creator.

We see this emphasis reflected when the New Testament reflects on Genesis 1:27. For instance, in Colossians 3:10 Paul speaks of the great restoration that has taken place in a Christian's salvation. He says that the new self "is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator." The image of God is being renewed in believers, Paul writes, as a restoration of the knowledge of God. This indicates that knowing God is intrinsic to man's creation in God's image. The animals are unaware of God. They do not seek or worship their Maker. But mankind, Paul says, knows God because he has designed creation to reveal himself to his image-bearers (Rom. 1:19). This key aspect of our humanity explains Jesus' exclamation that "this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God" (Jn. 17:3).

The biblical idea of knowledge involves more than possessing information. It involves communion and fellowship. We see this in the contrasting way that God began dealing with mankind versus his dealing with the animals. In Genesis 1:22, God pronounces his blessing on the fish and birds: "God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply.'" The same blessing is granted to mankind but with a crucial difference. Genesis 1:28 says: "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply.'" The difference is seen in the added words, "And God said to them." God put his blessing on

the fish and birds, but God blessed man by means of personal communication designed to foster a relationship of faith and love.

A second New Testament passage adds the idea of righteousness and holiness to the image of God. Paul says in Ephesians 4:24 that believers have been “created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” So in addition to knowledge of God, the image of God involves a right standing with God and holiness before him. The point of this righteousness and holiness, like our knowledge of God, is for the sake of an eternal communion in love with our Maker. With this in mind the Westminster Confession of Faith gives its definition of the *imago dei*: “God. . . created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image” (WCF 4.2).

Genesis 2:7 tells us of how God made Adam: “The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” God made man face-to-face for a covenantal relationship of fellowship, communion, and love. This, too, is seen at the end of the Bible just as here in the beginning. As heirs together with Jesus Christ, Christians enter into an inheritance that consists of God’s gift of himself. Revelation 21:3 says: “He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.” Revelation 22:4-5 goes further, using imagery taken straight out of Genesis 1: “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.”

Throughout our studies of Genesis 1 we have been commenting on the significance of the creation account for a Christian worldview. We saw that Genesis 1:1 tells us where we are living: in a world created by a transcendent, holy, and almighty God. It is therefore a world with purpose and with a history under the Creator’s sovereign will. Genesis 1:27 reveals an equally important question: What am I? It answers that we are living creatures made by God to bear his own image. The stamp of God is seen in our souls, which possess moral and spiritual self-awareness. It exists in our ability and calling to love. And, above all, we are creatures designed by God to know God, for

spiritual communion with our Maker in knowledge and righteousness. There is nothing that could grant a greater dignity, along with humility before God, together with a higher sense of calling and privilege than to realize that we are creatures designed to know and be known by God and to love and be loved by the Creator himself.

The Image of God Fallen & Restored

There is a problem, however, with the image of God in man: it has been shattered by our sin. Genesis 3 ends, after the breaking of God's covenant, with these words: God "drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword. . . to guard the way to the tree of life" (Gen. 3:24). Man, made as royalty amidst the creatures, became a servant to the earth: "the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken" (Gen. 3:23).

Two questions are raised by the fall of man into sin and condemnation. The first question is whether the image of God was lost to fallen mankind. The answer is both No and Yes. First, the Bible indicates that fallen man retains the image of God with respect to our value and dignity. We see this truth when God forbids the taking of human life. He told Noah, long after the fall: "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image" (Gen. 9:6). Man has not lost the image of God, a fact that grounds the sanctity of human life.

On the other hand, man has lost the vital core of the image of God, in the form of righteousness and holiness in relating to him. The result of sin, therefore, has been not the complete loss of the divine image but rather its thorough corruption. Henri Blocher writes:

We must state both that after his revolt mankind remains mankind, and also that mankind has radically changed, that he is but a grisly shadow of himself. Mankind remains the image of God, inviolable and responsible, but has become a contradictory image, one might say a caricature, a witness against himself.¹¹

A good illustration of the image of God in fallen man is that of a car windshield that has shattered. The glass remains there but it is so

¹¹ Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity, 1984), 94.

damaged that it will no longer function properly. So also with the image of God in fallen mankind. What is particularly lost through sin is our righteousness and holiness. We now are guilty before God, alienated from the God we still know, and we are corrupted in our thoughts and desires. This being the case, the marvelous faculties God has given us now are employed in the service of sin. No longer will we reflect the perfect love of the Trinity in our relationships, but they will be damaged and destroyed by a love of self in the place of love for one another. And though we still know God, we raise the fist of rebellion against him. Paul writes that fallen man “does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him” (1 Cor. 2:14). Romans 8:7 adds, “the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.” In short, the image of God has been distorted by total depravity. We remain creatures designed to know God and respond to him in faith and praise. Now fallen man, bearing God's image, responds to divine knowledge by cursing his name and rebelling against his grace.

This dire situation of the image of God shattered by sin raises a final question: can it be restored? And if the original, glorious image of God in man can be restored, who will be the one to do it?

The answer to this great question of all questions is the main subject of the entire Bible, the good news of Jesus Christ, God's Son. There is hope for us in our sin, because of the grace of God which fulfills his original plan for creation. Jesus came to restore our original righteousness which was lost through sin against our Maker. He fulfilled the law of God on our behalf and then offered his own life as a sacrifice to the justice of God for the forgiveness of our sins.

Romans 3:23-25 explains the great gospel doctrine of justification through faith in Jesus Christ: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”

The good news of salvation in Christ does not only remedy our standing with God. God's image involved not only righteousness but holiness of mind, heart, and body. Jesus' saving gift provides the remedy for the power of sin, along with the cleansing of sin's guilt.

This is where the language of Genesis 1:27 is echoed in the New Testament teaching that by faith in Jesus we are being “renewed in the spirit of your minds, . . . to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:23-24). By the grace of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit whom he sends, we are born again to a God-honoring life, restored in the image of righteousness and holiness. To this end, one of the great promises of the New Testament assures us that Christ is working in us by the Spirit not only to restore us to the image of God which we have lost, but to carry us forward to bear the image of the glory of God in Jesus Christ. By the power of the very Spirit who brooded over the waters of the original creation (Gen. 1:2), Paul says, “we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18).

What great joy there is in our justification through faith in Christ! And what hope and purpose there is in the sanctifying work of the Spirit who is conforming us to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29). Henri Blocher exults: “In Jesus Christ, who is both the Son of God and the Image of God, we are restored to our humanity, as true images of our Creator, and more than images; we become God’s sons in his Son, by the bond of a new covenant.”¹²

Twice God’s!

It is tempting to look back on the created image of God which was broken by sin and regret that things will never be the same way with God again. Yet, in the light of God’s revealed Word, we see that God’s gift in salvation is greater than the original creation gift, and his purpose in all these things was a higher communion with him through our union with Christ in faith.

God’s attitude is like that of a young boy who bought a kit and spent weeks carefully constructing a treasured sailboat. When it finally was completed, he took it down to the lake. It sailed so beautifully that it kept going, right out of sight. Despite all his efforts, the boy could not find the boat. Several weeks later he was walking past a store window

¹² Ibid.

when to his amazement he saw that boat, only it had an expensive price tag on it. He went into the store and explained to the shopkeeper. But the owner said, "I'm sorry, but I paid a great deal of money for this toy boat and I cannot give it to you for free." So the boy took up jobs and worked and worked until he finally had enough money to buy back his boat. Finally, he walked out of the store with his precious boat in his hand. And he said, "Now you are twice mine – once because I made you and once because I bought you."¹³

So it is with God. He created us in his own image, after his own likeness. We belonged to him, but then were lost in sin. But so great is his love for his people that he sent his own Son, Jesus, to purchase us back by the precious blood of his cross. Now we really are twice his forever – once by creation and again by the cross. However marvelous is the goodness of God in creation, it is only made more wonderful by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. How willing, eager, and excited we should be, to exercise our privileges as bearers of his image, redeemed and restored in Christ: to know God better, serve him, and live from now on to the PRAISE of his name.

¹³ Quoted from R. Kent Hughes, *John: That You May Believe* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 1999), 308.