

# Understanding the Image of God

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**“Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”**

The words stand out in their context. The first chapter of Genesis relates in sweeping language God’s creative work. By the power of his word alone, God created a world from nothing. He furnished that world with every natural beauty by the power of his word alone. Seven times “God said” and it was so. As he surveyed his work, the stars of the heavens, the depths of the seas with all its magnificent creatures, and the well-sculpted land dotted with animals of every kind, he declared it good.

The words could trip up any reader. The eighth time we are hit with the phrase “God said” we have to notice the jarring change. God does not simply make another declaration of creation and it was so. Rather, this time he allows us a sneak peek into a divine conversation. “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.” Something even more grand than the rest of creation was about to happen. “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him.”

Surely, the change in pattern of creation shows the wonderful significance of the crown of God’s creative work. The divine conversation grabs your attention. Man is God’s special creation made in God’s own image. But, then God leaves us hanging in a way. He tells us that our first parents were created in his image, but he remains silent about exactly what that means. In fact the entire Old Testament continues from the creation account with little direct reference to this curiosity. Man’s fall into sin further complicates matters since we can no longer understand fully what we possessed before the Fall. Yet, in spite of Scripture’s limited explanation of what

man received in God's image, theologians over the centuries have spent pages attempting to explain this wonder.

### **What is the Image of God (Imago Dei)?**

Of all the creatures God made, man stands out as extraordinary. We understand this already from the special deliberation that preceded his creation. God also makes a noteworthy distinction between man and animals by creating man in the image of God. Therefore, we see that the image of God cannot possibly contain anything which is common to man and to animal. God's image has nothing to do with eating, sleeping, or any other part of survival that both man and animals do. The image of God has first of all in a strict sense to do with mankind's special relationship to his creator.

As stated earlier, the Genesis account of man's creation says little to explain what the image of God entails. Furthermore, with the Fall into sin we exchanged the image of God for original sin and a sinful nature. Therefore, we had little life experience in this image of God. Only Christ's work of redemption restores us to God's image. So, we must look to what the Bible says about our restored image of God that we have in Christ.

Two passages concerning the image of God stand out in the New Testament. They give us valuable insight into the definition of God's image. The first of these is Ephesians 4:23,24. Here Paul writes to the congregation in Ephesus to encourage the people in their lives of sanctification. In chapter two Paul reminded them that in God's grace we have been brought through Christ from spiritual death into spiritual life. Paul now answers the next logical question. How do we live in this new spiritual life? The answer is simple. We no longer live as we did before when we were spiritually dead. Rather, we live according to the truth that is in Jesus. We are "to be made new in the attitude of (our) minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." Our new life in Christ, the "new self",

resembles Adam's original state in the image of God. Therefore, in this passage we see that part of the image of God consists of "true righteousness and holiness."

The second passage is quite parallel in context and thought. In Colossians 3:9,10, however, Paul adds another piece to the puzzle. Again, Paul reminds the congregation of Christ's work of redemption. Through Christ "he has rescued us from the dominion of the darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves." (Colossians 1:13) Again, Paul answers the next logical question. How do we live in this kingdom of the Son? We "put to death" everything which our sinful nature desires. Therefore, among other things, we "do not lie to each other since (we) have taken off (our) old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its creator." So, we see the added piece of "knowledge" came with the image of God given to Adam.

According to Luther, Augustine and many of the other early church fathers classified the image of God in this way: "the image of God is the powers of the soul—memory, the mind or intellect, and will."<sup>1</sup> Luther goes on to relate the great lengths that Augustine in particular went to show how these three categories correspond to the various persons of the Holy Trinity. The passages from Ephesians and Colossians, however, show that such a definition, while interesting, falls short of a true definition of the image of God.

All people surely have a memory, a will, and a mind, but this hardly completes the picture that the Bible gives us of the image of God. First, all people still possess these three qualities. The Fall into sin damaged but did not destroy man's ability to think. We see this difference in our mental capabilities most readily in Adam's relationship to the animals. Adam had an amazing understanding of all God's creatures (Genesis 2:19). Luther writes, "Here again we are reminded of the superior knowledge and wisdom of Adam, who was created in innocence and righteousness. Without any new enlightenment, solely because of the excellence of his

nature, he views all the animals and thus arrives at such a knowledge of their nature that he can give each one a suitable name that harmonizes with its nature.”<sup>2</sup> On top of that knowledge man had the ability to rule over nature. “God blessed them (Adam and Eve) and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’” (Genesis 1:28) Our mental abilities resemble those of our first parents only in part.

We also see that Augustine’s definition of the image of God only gives a partial picture in light of the passages seen earlier from Ephesians and Colossians. Both of these passages talk about the creation of a “new self” as opposed to the “old self”. The “new self” we have in Christ is the image of God restored in us in part. When we were dead in our sinful nature we had no such thing. Now, however, through faith we are being renewed in the image of God continually while here on earth and we will be restored completely to it in heaven. So, the image of God is more than our superior mental capabilities. Rather, the image of God consists as those two passages stated in “true righteousness and holiness” and in a true “knowledge” of God. Pieper writes, “The image of God in man consisted much more than in his possession of intellect and will, in his personality; it consisted in the right disposition of his intellect and will, in his knowledge of God and the will to do only God’s will.”<sup>3</sup> We had a perfect unity with God.

### **What happened to the image of God in man at the Fall?**

As previously stated, man lost the image of God completely at the Fall. The image of God is not part of the very essence of a person like his soul is. From the first parents down to us we no longer have that perfect unity with God. “But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.” (Isaiah 59:2) Adam and Eve now had a sin-produced fear of God. Mankind’s will did a spiritual turnabout. Rather, than agreeing with God in everything, man’s will now actually opposes God. “The sinful nature

desires what is contrary to the Spirit.” (Galatians 5:17) Adam and Eve show these traits vividly in their actions following the Fall. They immediately felt an unprecedented shame at their nakedness. The previously welcomed sound of their heavenly Father walking in the Garden now caused Adam and Eve to hide in fear. Genesis 4:3 puts the exclamation point on man’s loss after the Fall. “(Adam) had a son in his own likeness, in his own image.” God’s image was lost in mankind for good. Now parents pass on a new image--their own--to their children. The sinful nature dominates this new image. “True righteousness and holiness” are non-existent.

With man’s loss of the image of God came death. All people face physical death. In addition, all people are born spiritually dead. Certainly, before the Fall Adam and Eve knew about death (Genesis 2:17). This would never be an experiential knowledge, however. Adam and Eve and all their descendants were created to be immortal. Now, everyone is destined to experience death (Genesis 3:19).

Without the image of God, we are all spiritually dead. Not a spark of it remains and so Luther rightly explains the third article of the Creed, “I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him.” Paul writes in Ephesians 2:1, “You were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world.”

This last point must be emphasized in light of other heretical interpretations of man’s condition after the Fall. Many are of the opinion that mankind retained the image of God following the Fall. What usually follows then is some sort of synergistic approach to salvation. Consequently, their variety of definitions of the image of God differs from ours. Some agree with Augustine’s definition and place the image of God solely in man as an intelligent, reasoning, moral creature.<sup>4</sup> Some see the image of God in man as the qualities of personhood unique to mankind and God. So, people have a will, moral responsibility, and feelings.<sup>5</sup> Others

see the image of God defined in man's dominion over the earth. Others even see the image of God simply as a physical quality. People actually resemble God physically.

With each of those definitions of the image of God in man it remains possible for the image to remain with man after the Fall. They claim it is not lost. Lawrence J. Crabb, a Christian counselor, claims that the image of God has endured even through the Fall.

Whatever those characteristics are that as persons we share with God, it seems clear that *they have survived the Fall* (see Gen. 5:1-3; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; and James 3:9). Contrary to the Lutheran view... We may summarize the matter this way; the image of God consists in the *enduring* qualities of personhood which both God and people share, qualities that define what it means to be a person rather than a nonperson... Neither can moral virtue be made equivalent to the image. As persons who bear God's image, we have chosen to rebel against God (something a non-image-bearer could not do; only image-bearers choose). We have therefore lost any claim to moral virtue, but we *remain* persons—corrupt and wicked to be sure, but still persons.<sup>6</sup> (italics added)

Here we see the main proof passages used against the Lutheran teaching that the image of God was lost at the Fall.

The first of these, Genesis 5:1-3, was dealt with briefly before. This passage in no way supports Crabb's conclusion that the image of God remains in man. In fact it explicitly and hauntingly contrasts how Adam was created in the image of God with how Seth was born in the image of man.

The second proof passage used is Genesis 9:6. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man." This passage again does not support the idea that mankind kept the image of God after the Fall. Rather, it emphasizes God's value on life as our time of grace. God created Adam in his image. That was his intention for all people, but it was destroyed by sin. God in his grace, however, set up a plan of salvation by which we would have this image restored in us through faith. God does not want anyone to

take the life of another and thereby end that person's opportunity to hear and believe God's message of sins forgiven.

James 3:9-10 similarly shows that God indeed "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."<sup>7</sup> Here James writes, "With the tongue...we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness...This should not be." When we curse people we wish on them exactly opposite what God wants. Again, God created Adam in his image, but this was destroyed by sin. God wants to restore that image in all people through faith in Christ. Therefore, when a person damns another he is fighting against God's will for that person.

Finally, 1 Corinthians 11:7 speaks of the image of God in man. Here Paul is referring again to how God originally created Adam. Note the context. Paul refers to the creation account of man and woman as he is showing their proper roles. Paul also is referring to the Christian in whom this image is restored (11:3).

None of these passages prove the existence of the image of God in man after the Fall. The Bible does make it clear that apart from our Savior we had an unbridled old self which lived in complete opposition to the will of God (Ephesians 4:25ff, Colossians 3:5-10). Does the Bible leave any room at all for the image of God in man's natural state? "The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Psalm 14:2-3) People in their sinful nature are no longer holy like God nor does anyone have a true knowledge of God.

## **How is the image of God restored in us?**

This question to a certain degree has already been dealt with. In order to answer questions pertaining to the definition of the image of God and the loss of it, it was necessary to refer to its restoration in Christ.

Time hardly took a beat between the Fall of Adam and Eve when mankind lost the image of God and God's first announcement of his plan of salvation, his plan to restore his image to us. In those moments after Adam and Eve's first sin, God's words recorded in Genesis 2:17 must have loomed over them frightfully. "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it *you will surely die.*" In this context God comes to them and offers his plan of reconciliation. Yes, they would still die, but it would not be an eternal death. God promised that he would send a Champion for them from the Seed of the woman who would destroy the power of the devil and death. The sinful nature fed by the devil would be defeated and the image of God could then return.

This Champion was the man Christ Jesus. He had one quality which made it possible for him to carry out God's plan. Christ is the essential image of God (2 Corinthians 4:4, Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:3). He lived a life in which there was "true righteousness and holiness." His will was always the same as the Father's. He at no point in his life followed in the footsteps of Adam and sinned. He had a true "knowledge" of the creator as he is one with the God the Father (John 10:30). "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has *made him known.*" (John 1:18).

Jesus perfect life in the image of God made it possible for him to be the perfect sacrifice needed for the sins of all mankind. At the cross God's image was restored to believers. "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of

God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21) That lost state of righteousness is now ours again through faith in Christ Jesus. Eternal life is ours! While we are here on earth there remains a struggle between the old self controlled by sinful desires and the new self which the Holy Spirit continually builds up in the image of God.<sup>8</sup> In heaven, however, the image of God will be restored to us in full. “And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven.” (1 Corinthians 15:49)

### **The image of God and Christian counseling**

I am not going to attempt to give an exhaustive look at Christian counseling. Rather, I want to briefly look at how one’s view of the image of God effects his approach to counseling.

As part of my research I asked a local Episcopalian Father for his thoughts on the image of God. He saw the image of God as something physical. We resemble God closely like a mirror image or a photocopy. At the Fall, we kept this image of God. In fact, we benefited because the Fall into sin was the “birth of liberty.” In other words, he saw it as an improvement that we became “like God, knowing good and evil.” The downside was that the Fall was also the “birth of death” in which we are no longer like God.

When asked how he would counsel an unbelieving man who was feeling the weight of his life of sin, the Episcopalian Father said that first he would point out that he was made in God’s image. What naturally followed was a works-righteousness plan of counseling. The man could not wipe the slate clean as if nothing happened, but he could develop a new relationship with God. He was of the opinion that no one is stuck in a life of sin because at the core we are in the likeness of God. He finished with a telling smoking illustration. He said that when a life-long chain smoker quits smoking his lungs would be black. When he quits his lungs will not immediately clear up, but over time as he stays away from smoking his lungs will purge themselves. According to the Episcopalian Father the solution to the man’s problem lies in his

ability to stay away from sin. If he began to live a better life and continued in it, eventually his past life of sin would be wiped away.<sup>9</sup>

Christian counseling is also affected negatively when one views the image of God in the “*enduring* qualities of personhood which both God and people share”, namely a will, moral responsibility, and feelings.<sup>10</sup> Lawrence J. Crabb, Jr. in his book “Understanding People” says that change in life begins with repentance. Repentance according to him is solely “a turning from sin.”<sup>11</sup> Since man is made in the image of God he has the ability to choose the right instead of the wrong. “God made us in His image. Among other things, that means that we have the capacity to move about in our worlds in a fashion determined solely by our ability to choose. A wise person chooses to walk according to God’s revealed plan—“trust and obey.”” He then illustrates, “For Paul, being “crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20) did not mean that the responsibility to choose was taken from him. It meant that he was determined to know Christ at whatever cost. When life was confusing and discouraging, he recognized his *internal freedom* to keep moving toward God.”<sup>12</sup>

In both of these examples the answer to man’s problem lies in the mistaken notion that we are not lost in our sinful nature. Rather, these men would counsel sinners to change their way of life based on their opinion that the image of God remains in us giving us the ability to improve ourselves. How sad that these men leave those most in need of comfort without the assurance that the Gospel gives.

First, they both fail to recognize the severe depravity of our sinful nature. I will grant that Crabb acknowledges that sin is deeply rooted in us and not merely superficial, but he stops short of a scriptural definition. We are blind in our sin, so much so that in our sinful nature we cannot ever “see the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” (2 Corinthians 4:4) We are dead in our sins unable to come to faith apart from the Holy Spirit working through the Word.

Furthermore, the weight of our sins demands more than the impossible change in our way of life. So, right Christian counseling begins with the presupposition that every person, whether they need counseling or not, is a person born not in the image of God but rather with a sinful nature. Each person deserves the payment of death for his sins. Only then can the Christian counselor apply the right solution. For, Christ crucified is the payment for those sins. The message of Christ crucified alone restores the lost image of God. The message of God's love in Jesus Christ alone gives anyone the motivation to live a God-pleasing life. Through the blood of Jesus Christ we do live in "true righteousness and holiness"!

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<sup>1</sup> LW, vol. 1, p 60.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p 119.

<sup>3</sup> Pieper, vol. 1, pp 516,517.

<sup>4</sup> Adams, "More than Redemption", p 45.

<sup>5</sup> Crabb, pp 93-96.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp 92,93.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 2:4.

<sup>8</sup> Note again Ephesians 4:23,24 and Colossians 3:9,10.

<sup>9</sup> This information comes from an interview with Father Jay Lambert at St. Boniface Episcopal Church, 3906 W. Mequon Rd., Mequon WI 53092

<sup>10</sup> Crabb, pp 93-96.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p 149.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p 169.