

The Theological Implications of Being Made in the Image of God

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Introduction

As Kathryn Tanner (1994, p. 567) pointed out, there is nothing in the universe that is independent of a relation to God. Creation exhibits a vast network of interconnections of many different types, including personal ones. Humanity's creation in God's image and likeness has implications for many aspects of human existence such as dignity, vocation, conduct, and our relationships with the environment, animals, other people and God. The effect of sin on creation is a further complication. This essay will be limited to the theological implications for the preaching of the gospel. As Stephen Wellum (2009, pp. 2-3) has said, the post-modern world has a 'collective identity crisis' and is desperately in need 'to be confronted afresh with the truth of who we are in the light of God's Word.'

Theological anthropology closely links to other areas of systematic theology. This has resulted in the imposition upon theological anthropology of views originating from other areas of theology (Middleton, 1994, p. 10). Good preaching is based in good theology, so it is necessary to establish a theological anthropology that will support other areas of theology and provides a firm basis for the preaching of the gospel.

The Image of God in Scripture

There are relatively few Scriptures mentioning the image of God, yet scholars have different interpretations of what humanity's creation in the image of God means. In order to evaluate the different views we will first survey the relevant Scriptures commenting on general areas of agreement and raising matters of relevance to the analysis that follows.

Although some patristic and medieval scholars saw a distinction in the terms 'image' and 'likeness' used in Gen 1:26, the terms appear to be synonymous and the concept repeated for emphasis. Also in verse 26, God is said to give

humans dominion over other creatures. Most modern scholars think that dominion does not define creation in God's image but is a consequential activity (Clines, 1998, p. 44). The differentiation of humanity into male and female is an additional characteristic rather than a part of the definition of the image of God. The phrase 'male and female he created them' (Gen 1:27b) introduces a new idea leading into the next verse about reproduction (Sands, 2010, p. 36).

Gen 5:1-2 refers to all humanity, regardless of race, gender, status, ability or disability, as made in the image of God, not just individuals or the male sex (Clines, 1998, p. 51). Therefore, when Paul said in 1 Cor 11:7 that a man in the church is the image and reflection of God, he was not implying that women are not also in the image of God.

Gen 5:3 describes the fathering of Seth by Adam as being according to his own likeness and image. Presumably, the phrase is used in the same way as in Gen 1:26 to describe humanity's creation in God's image.

Gen 9:6 and Jas 3:9 indicate that humanity's fall into sin did not result in humanity no longer bearing the image of God. Yet Paul wrote that God conforms Christians into the image of his Son (Rom 8:29). This might suggest that the image of God in sinful humans is not a static state or relationship but transformational, whereby the Spirit gradually transforms Christians from one degree of glory to another, that is, into the same image (of God) as the Lord Jesus (2 Cor 3:18). If the image of God is not lost, 2 Cor 3:38 could be interpreted to mean that humanity has a degree of glory by virtue of its creation in God's image and this is transformed to another degree of glory, that of Christ's, when one becomes a Christian. Hence, Paul commanded Christians to put on the new self which is created in the likeness of God (Eph 4:22-24).

In Trinitarian theology, God the Son is the eternally begotten image of God (2 Cor 4:4). At the incarnation, the divine image of God became a human being, and hence the glorious image of God in human form. Paul in Col 1:15 & 3:10 referred to Jesus Christ, in whom we are being renewed, as the image of God and the firstborn of all creation. Paul argued that just as humans bear the

image of Adam, so we can bear the image of Jesus (1 Cor 15:49) and subsequently receive an imperishable body at the resurrection (1 Cor 15:53). Scripture's application of the image of God phrase to both humanity and Jesus has implications for other areas of theology, which is one of the factors that has given rise to different interpretations of the image of God.

Interpretations of the Image of God

The most common ways of understanding what Scripture means when it says God made humans in his own image are usually categorised into the following four approaches.

1. Substantive (also called structural, mimetic, or noetic).
2. Functional (also called vocational or representative).
3. Relational.
4. Multifaceted (or dynamic).

Each of these views has different implications for human behaviour and Christian theology. We will consider each view in turn as to its Scriptural support and as to its theological foundation for a credible gospel presentation.¹

Substantive

Historically, the most common approach has been to look for some capacities of humans that are analogous to attributes of God. This view reasons that since Scripture only identifies humans as created in God's image, the image must be something that sets humans apart from animals. One such attribute that clearly distinguishing humans from animals is the capacity for rational thought. Rationality in humans is seen as analogous to divine rationality, except more limited. Other capacities, such as self-determination, morality and altruism, help to describe more fully the distinguishing human attributes (Cortez, 2010, p. 18).

¹ These classifications, sometimes with different nomenclature, have been noted by many authors (Cortez, 2010, pp. 18-29), (McFarland, 2009, p. xxi), (Migliore, 2004, pp. 140-141), (Sands, 2010, pp. 31-39), (Welz, 2011, p. 74).

Paul Sands summarises the criticisms levelled at the substantive approach as (1) not doing justice to the dynamic view of human nature found in Paul's epistles, (2) being too individualistic (3) a tendency to see male's as more in the image of God than females, and (4) for its rationalism as seen in the mind-body dualism (Sands, 2010, p. 33). The emphasis in Genesis 1:26-28 is with humanity as a whole rather than the individualistic human attributes the substantive view proposes. The dualistic emphasis on human attributes disregards the scriptural understanding of the whole person (body/soul/spirit). The whole of creation reflects the glory of God (Ps 19:1; Rom 1:19) and not just some human attribute. Thomas Aquinas (2009, p. 131), a substantivist, replied that such things as goodness in creation can bring glory to God without having the dignity of possessing the image of God. This argument is insufficient since even admitting that humans image God in a way that the rest of creation does not, it does not necessarily follow that any particular human attribute defines the image of God.

There is difficulty in finding a human attribute that applies to all humans and no animals. Chimpanzees display a capacity for cognitive development to the level of a two-year-old human (Wobbler, Herrmann, Hare, Wrangham, & Tomasello, 2013, p. 1). Animals display such human attributes as loyalty, emotions, and self-determination. Another objection is that any view based on rationality could imply that people who are in a coma or who have mental impairment display God's image to a lesser degree. John Berkman (2013, p. 95) argued on behalf of Aquinas that people with mental impairment receive the spiritual gift of wisdom at their baptism. Protestants would not find acceptable a theology of sacramental impartation of grace for salvation.

Regarding sin, those who follow Augustine's substantive interpretation maintain that the image of God in humanity was not lost in the fall but we now exercise freedom and rationality in sinful ways (Duffy, 1988, p. 601). The doctrine of original sin builds on the teaching that humans are born sinful and therefore sin taints everything we do, even good things.

This approach has a number of problems: (1) the view that humanity can do nothing other than sin, makes God's judgement of sinners appear unfair. (2) There is a tendency to feed into our culture's obsession with cleverness, success, power, individualism and perfection. (3) It does not provide incentive to support the interests of the disabled, weak and oppressed (Cortez, 2010, pp. 19-21).

Functional

The functional approach applies the Gen 1:26 phrase 'let them have dominion' to define the 'image of God' in terms of what humans *do* as opposed to what they *are*. Proponents of the functional view argue that Gen 1:26 applies an ancient belief of surrounding cultures that kings were divine representatives (Cortez, 2010, p. 21). Thus, human beings serve as God's representative rulers. This argument has been criticised because of its reliance on extra-biblical sources to interpret Scripture and the fact that Scripture itself does not use the 'representative rulership of its kings' to image behaviour (p. 22).

The view of humanity as divine representatives fails to give any innate significance to human life. The New Testament's teaching that Christ is the sinless image of God, to which humanity is to be conformed, cannot be reduced to divine representation, since Christ as mediator is also humanity's representative.

Sin, under the functional view, does not destroy the image of God in humanity. Humans continue to represent God after the fall but, in as much as they dominate and oppress others, they fail to provide the stewardship and love God requires. Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky (1974, p. 138) put it this way, 'Man created "in the image" is the person capable of manifesting God in the extent to which his nature allows itself to be penetrated by deifying grace.' Preaching from this approach could easily become legalistic by focussing on behaviour as evidence of salvation. The functional view's narrow focus on its derivation in Gen 1:26 does not make it sufficiently well grounded in Scripture.

Relational

This interpretation links relationality in humans with that within the Trinity. Karl Barth (2009, pp. 140-146) proposed the 'I-Thou' relationship as establishing human responsibility towards God and each other. Some think the use of the plural pronoun in Gen 1:26 implies to relationality in the Godhead. However, most biblical scholars see the plural pronoun as referring to the heavenly host surrounding God (Cortez, 2010, p. 25). This is not critical since, the doctrine of the Trinity also implies relationality in the Godhead.

Barth said God-likeness 'is not a quality of man' (Barth, Bromiley & Torrance, 1958, Vol. 3, pt 1, p184). Barth saw biblical support in humanity's creation as male and female (Gen 1:27) directly following the statement that humans are made in God's image as suggestive that the image involves relationship (p 186). The Genesis creation account proceeds with descriptions of humanity's relationships with God (Gen 2:8-17), creation (Gen 2:18-20) and between each other (Gen 2:21-25). The account of the fall in Gen 3 describes its impact on human relationships with God (Gen 3:8), others (Gen 3:7, 12, 16) and creation (Gen 3:18-19).

Barth thought that since, 'There are strictly speaking no Christian themes independent of Christology' (Barth, Bromiley & Torrance, 1958, Vol. 2, pt 1, p320), all Scripture should be interpreted christologically. Christ, as the true image of God, lived in a relationship with his Father, taught the importance of loving relationships between humans, and came to save a people for God by bringing them together in relationship as members of the church.

Theologians such as Paul Sands (2010, p. 36) are unconvinced about scriptural support for the relational view because of what Sands calls a reliance on a 'quasi-trinitarian' reading of Gen 26 and an identification of the image of God with sexual differentiation. The high value placed on relationships in postmodern culture can make this approach appear attractive for preaching but we need to be careful not to compromise our theology to meet our culture's expectations.

Regarding sin, this approach sees the relationship between God and humanity as severely damaged at the fall. Barth commented, 'the blessing has

been turned into a curse' (Barth, Bromiley & Torrance, 1958, Vol. 3, pt 1, p190). Many relationists think the image of God is no longer seen in humanity, at least in those who are not Christians (Cortez, 2010, p. 26). They argue that this alienation from God provides the motivation for preaching reconciliation with God. It might be more reasonable and faithful to Scripture to preach God's forgiveness to people who God values precisely because he made them in his image.

Multifaceted

Multifaceted approaches, as Cortez (2010, p. 28) calls them, see all the above views as too narrow. The image of God applies to the entire person as a social being and not just some particular capacity, function or relationship of individual humans. Gen 5:3 where Adam 'became the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image' implies a broader understanding of the image. We would not describe the likeness of a child to its parent in terms of only one feature. While it might seem helpful to combine all or some of the above approaches, it would only answer the criticism of an approach's narrowness but would not resolve other problems. Additionally, there is the difficulty of relating unlike approaches.

Moltmann (1985, pp. 215-243) described the image of God in humanity as a combination of created image, messianic image, and eschatological image. By introducing a distinction between God's relationship to us and ours to God, Moltmann could say that the Godward image was lost but humanity's created existence remains determined by God's love for humanity. Prof David Fergusson (2013, p. 448) objected that this 'fails to connect with the ways in which Moltmann has already characterised human existence as representing God in all its facets.' Fergusson (p. 449) rejects the classical approaches and proposes that the image points to 'forms and conditions that characterise human life in community.' Fergusson (p. 451) goes on to say, 'The concept of the imago Dei requires to be treated in this diffuse manner, rather than continuing the search for a single ingredient of which it is the referent', and this leads him to suggest a multifaceted approach involving the relational view.

Cortez (2010, p. 30) is another example of a theologian who rejects the substantivist approach. He proposes a combination of the functional and relational approaches. He sees an image as involving the personal presence of the one represented and he connects this with the christological relational model (pp. 32-33). Cortez describes this as the 'covenant presence of God' with his people which is not lost because of their sin but something that God manifests over time through a 'covenant relationship' (pp. 35-37). The quoted phrases combine legal and personal terms, and are not found in Scripture. Rabbi Dr Norman Solomon in his article 'Covenant' (Solomon, 2001) argues that 'covenant' in Scripture is a metaphor for a strong bond or relationship. Therefore, Cortez's view is not strongly supported by Scripture and he has not overcome the criticisms of the functional and relational views as to Scriptural support.

Multifaceted approaches generally see sin as impeding humanity's capacity to give glory to God while not destroying the image of God completely. This is an attempt to remain faithful to those Scriptures that see sinful humanity as still bearing the image of God.

Proposed Approach: Covenantal

In reflecting on the above approaches with regard to the needs of preaching, I would like to propose a covenantal approach. Michael Horton (2005, p. 96) sees God's covenant as being the theological framework for Scripture and so he says, 'To be created in God's image is to be called persons in communion.' By this, he does not imply a reduction of person-hood to purely relational terms, but that people participate in communion with God because of God's covenant. Note that the understanding of God's covenant here is different from that used by Reformed Covenant Theology. In the covenant approach, the Creator's covenant with his people is understood in terms of such phrases as, 'I will be your God, and you shall be my people' (Jer 7:23).

If due regard is given to the poetic and symbolic language of the early chapters of Genesis, the phrase 'made in the image of God' can be understood as a metaphor equivalent to God's covenant people. As David Clines (1998,

p. 40) observed, 'The primary function of an image is to express, not to depict.' It is not necessary to see the phrase in objective terms as describing humanity as a reflection of God. A metaphorical interpretation does not require an objective meaning "image of God" or "covenant of God" as discussed above in the multifaceted section. Similar applications in Scripture support a metaphorical interpretation of the image of God. For example, Gen 5:3 does not just mean that Seth looked like Adam (as pointed out by Cortez in the multifaceted section), but that they had a father-son relationship. Luke describes Adam as 'son of God' (Lk 3:38). Phrases such as 'the children of God' and 'the people of God' convey the same concept as the 'covenant of God' in the creation of humanity. Feminist theologians object to descriptions of the image of God in masculine terms (son, father) but interpreting them as metaphors of the covenant of God, would overcome these objections.

Humanity's creation in God's image and likeness provides the context for the story of the fall that follows in the book of Genesis. God planted a garden and grew two trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:9). The trees represent respectively, human access to life and access to the knowledge of what it is to be sinful. Since Adam and Eve did not lose their mortal life on the day they sinned as they were warned (Gen 2:17), it is reasonable to assume that what they lost was eternal life (Col 2:13).

God does not disown us as his people because of our sin. God still regards us as being in his image and likeness. Paul said, 'whatever does not proceed from faith is sin' (Rom 14:23; see also Heb 11:6). This implies that the root of sin is not pride as Augustine (2009, p. 207) proposed, nor the self's attempt to overcome anxiety as Saiving (2009, p. 290) suggested, but the breaking of faith with God, which has ramifications for all creation (Rom 8:22).² Sin damages all relationships of faith but in the case of human relationships with God, it excludes us from eternal life ('For the wages of sin is death' (Rom 6:23a)). One reason for this might be that a good God would not condemn humanity to an everlasting sinful existence.

² Valerie Saiving thinks that pride is more of a male sin, whereas women tend more towards self-abnegation, both stemming from anxiety at the human condition (Saiving, 2009, p. 300).

Stanley Grenz (2004, p. 617) said that evangelical theology, in focussing on Christ's saving work, was omitting the part of 'the salvation story that involves Jesus' role as the image of God.' Grenz thought that an understanding of Christ's coming in the image of God is important for 'a more nuanced understanding of the flow of systematic theology' and is in keeping with the insights of postmodernism (p. 618). Although Grenz proceeded to outline a vocational approach, the important place of the image of God in theology is a valid point. The Son of God's incarnation restored the sinless image of God to humanity in the person of Jesus, who God called his beloved son (Mt 3:17). God sent his Son for the very purpose of restoring eternal life to humanity through faith in Christ (Jn 3:16, 36; 5:21-29).

Relationships between people are of a different kind to those between people and God. Michael Horton (2005, p. 190) said, 'God cannot simply forgive the way we are enjoined, because unlike us, he is not simply violated personally..., but God's moral character that establishes and upholds the moral order of the cosmos must be sustained.' Although Barth emphasised the transcendence of God, the relational view does not adequately apply the significance of this difference. Unlike the human-divine relationship, human relationships are able to engage with the good in people while not approving the sin. Proverbs (3:18; 11:30; 13:12 & 15:4) uses the tree of life image to refer to life-affirming personal relationships. Similarly, faith in Christ is a tree of life (Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14 & 19). God's plan of salvation hinged on Christ being the sinless image of God and mediator of a new relationship (covenant) between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5; Heb 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). Jesus identified himself as 'the life' (Jn 14:6). When we place our faith in Jesus eternal life is immediately restored and this reconciliation provides assurance of our resurrection (Rom 6:5).

Implications for Preaching

The covenantal view of the image of God provides useful input into soteriology (instead of the other way around). It supports salvation by grace through a faith relationship with Jesus made possible because we are children of God (Jn 1:12; Rom 8:14), God's own people (1 Pet 2:9), and loved by God (Jn 3:16). There is no suggestion that we save ourselves by how clever we are

or by the good works we do in representing God. God takes the initiative and does the work of salvation.

Preaching provides more than information. It clears away the fog of sin so that we can see and embrace Truth, and love others as brothers and sisters made in the image of God.³ Since human sin does not destroy God's covenant, we can encourage people who are hurting because of the damage and suffering caused by sin with the good news that they are God's beloved children and God wants to save them. How well they have imaged God to the world is not relevant to their salvation. A relationship with Jesus gives us access to the transforming power of God. However, just as Jesus' coming conveys life to his friends, it confirms eternal destruction to those who reject him (2 Thes 1:9). This provides the urgency to preach the good news that all creation will one day be renewed (Rev 21:1) and God's people raised to everlasting life (Rom 8:11).

Conclusion

The image of God is humanity's redeeming feature, but not in the sense of a capacity, task or characteristic. The 'made in the image of God' metaphor understood in the context of Scripture corresponds to being God's covenantal people. This informs the Genesis story of the fall into sin and death. Humans are denied access to the tree of life because of sin but God has acted to give us eternal life through faith in Christ, the Son (or image) of God. Preaching the gospel from a covenantal understanding supports a life-imparting message to a postmodern world because of our identity as beloved children of God (Rom 9:25).

³ Prayer, worship, fellowship and meditating on God's Word also bring God's light into the world.

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