

The image of god | literature review



The term image is everything is truer today than its ever been before.

Whether its the designer clothes a person is wearing, place of residence, the car they drive or the calculated lines they recite, presentation is now replacing content when it comes to discerning the authenticity and character of a person. This is the measure by which people are valued nowadays; superficially and without substance. Unfortunately and sadly this is also true within the church. We lack concern when it comes to the true character of an individual, but we care more about their gifts and talents. It's seems like society and the church are captivated and awestricken with an individual's false persona, and television personalities rather than a person's character.

This standard is used chiefly because of the materialistic and/or secular nature of today's society. Much of this is done either consciously, or subconsciously, in an effort to enhance one's " image" as seen through the eyes of man, one's friends, family, peers, and even society in general. All that being said, the term, " image is everything" is alive and well. However, it shouldn't have validity for the reasons described above, but rather because man is created in the " image" and " likeness" of God. This is the true image that should shape the manner in which Orthodox Christians live their lives.

" Then God said, ' Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Gen 1: 26-27) The significance of man being created in God's image is sometimes

overlooked due to the complete silence of the rest of the Old Testament on this subject (In the Image and Likeness of God by Vladimir Lossky). However, the Orthodox Church lays the utmost emphasis on the image of God in man (The Orthodox Church by Timothy Ware). To acquire the likeness of God is to become deified or to become a “god by grace”, this is the ultimate goal of Orthodox Christians.

According to the church fathers, the terms image and likeness do not mean the exact same thing. In general, the term image can be thought of as the powers with which each one of us is endowed by God from the moment of our existence. By making proper use of being created in His image, each one of us has the ability to acquire God’s likeness or to be deified. (1)

Oddly, its meaning “image of God” has been debated, a hot topic, if you will, for centuries in and outside of the church. Most theologians argued that it is the human mind – the capacity to exercise reason or rationality, the intellect – which marks us as being made ‘in the image of God. It also distinguishes us from animals.

The argument for this is that God himself can be described as acting in accordance with reason. God’s actions, Christians affirm, are always consistent with God’s inherent qualities, such as love, justice and mercy. God is consistent and trustworthy, and so can be said to be characterized by perfect reason. In creating human beings, God gives them, uniquely, a capacity for reason that reflects God’s own reason. It is in this respect that Christians believe we are in God’s image. (2)

I. Image:

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The “ image of God” is a key concept in Christian theology. It is foundational to Christian thinking about human identity, human significance, bioethics, and other topics. Many Christians see evolution as incompatible with the image of God. How could God’s image bearers have evolved from simpler life forms? Doesn’t image-bearing require miraculous creation of humans rather than shared ancestry with chimpanzees? When in the evolutionary process did humans attain this image? These questions are tied to many other issues concerning human origins, including the soul, the fall, and the historicity of Adam and Eve.

The phrase “ image of God” does not appear many times in the Bible, but the importance of the concept is emphasized by its repetition in the scripture: “ Then God said, let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground. So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

(Genesis 1: 26-27) Herein, it’s clear that part of bearing God’s image is ruling over the animals. Genesis 9: 5-6 reveals another aspect of image bearing: all human lifeblood is sacred because all humans are made in the image of God. The emphasis on Judeo-Christian thought on the sanctity of human life is derived in part from this passage. In the New Testament, the idea is expanded further as Christ is revealed as the true image of the invisible God. (2 Corinthians 4: 4, Colossians 1: 15).

Being made in the image of God, says Lyons and Thompson, does not refer to the physical body, the posture, or the authoritative aspect of man. It is

true that the word “ image” (Hebrew tselem) is a term used in certain contexts within the Old Testament to refer to a model or to idols (and thus can refer to a similarity in physical appearance). It can’t and doesn’t denote such meaning in Genesis 1: 26-27, nor in any of the other passages referring to the imago Dei (“ image of God”). God is not “ like unto gold, or silver, or stone” (i. e., He is not physical; Acts 17: 29). As Ashby Camp observed: God, of course, is a spirit (Jn. 4: 24), and the O. T. stresses his incorporeality and invisibility (see Ex. 20: 1-4; Deut. 4: 15-16). So, the resemblance no doubt relates to some nonphysical aspect(s) of humanity (1999, p. 44). Since it is the case that a spirit “ hath not flesh and bones” (Luke 24: 39; cf. Matthew 16: 17), then man does not bear the image of God in his physical nature. (6)

“ Creation in the image of God distinguishes humankind from all other life forms” said Milne in Know the Truth. Additionally, he said, “ traditional interpretations of the image refer to features such as human knowledge, moral awareness, original moral perfection and immortality.” He goes on to say some scholars argue for a physical meaning for the image. And he also declares that others have argued for humanity’s alleged Trinitarian constitution, or the image as human dominion. (Gen. 1: 26-28.) They are looking forward to the renewal of the dominion in the kingdom of God through Christ, the embodiment of the image. (Heb. 2: 5-9) Furthermore, more recent interpretation Milne says, has spoken of the social nature of the image, human experience as being-in-community reflecting the divine being-in-community of the Godhead. Barth extended this interpretation specifically to the man-woman relationship. (Gen. 1: 27) “ God created (humanity) in his own image... Male and female he created them.”

Irenaeus distinguished between the image, which he identified with human reason and moral freedom, and the likeness, he identified with original righteousness. He taught that only the likeness was lost in fall. This interpretation was followed through the medieval period and contributed to its essentially optimistic view of human nature. Luther, however, says that there is a case of Hebrew parallelism in Genesis 1: 26. He believed image and likeness were synonyms; what was true for one was true for the other. The image of God, he said, “ has therefore been totally lost and can be restored only through regeneration by the Holy Spirit.”

There is a variety of views on how the image has been affected by the fall. A common view is that the image of God refers to the human abilities which separate us from the animals. Still, scientists have found that abilities like communication and rationality are also present in animals on a basic level. Another view is theologians do not see the image of God as human abilities, but instead it as our capacity for a relationship with God. Other theologians see it as our commission to represent God’s kingdom on earth. Either way, the author says God has given us our spiritual capacities and calls us to bear his image. (3)

Nevertheless, Milne says the bible doesn’t actually refer to a total loss of the image of God. (Gen 9: 6, 1Cor. 11: 7 and James 3: 9.) Calvin, spoke of relics of the image of God in fallen humanity, which, while affording no basis for humanity’s justification, still distinguish them from the animal creation account for the undoubted gifts and achievements of non-Christians. Dutch scholars, in the reformed tradition, such as A. Kuyper and H. Bavinck, spoke

in this connection of common grace, whereby God in his pity restrains the worst effects of the fall and renders social life tolerable for humankind. (4)

Lyons and Thompson communicate that, through the years, numerous scholars have suggested that the image of God spoken of in Genesis 1: 26-27 refers to some sort of “ spiritual perfection” that was lost at the time of man’s fall, and thus is incomprehensible to us today. Genesis tells us that man was created in a special way, bearing the stamp of God upon him which the animals did not bear. Unfortunately Genesis also tells us that he lost this stamp. While Adam himself was created with this image, his disobedience so robbed him of it that all his children thereafter bore not the image of God but his-and even his likeness (1975, pp. 103, 109, first emp. added, last emp. in orig.) When we see in Genesis 1: 26-27 that man was created in the “ image and likeness of God,” does the language refer only to Adam and Eve as these writers would have us to believe? Or does it refer to all mankind in general?

It is the author’s position that the “ image of God” spoken of in Genesis 1: 26-27 does not refer to some kind of “ spiritual perfection,” especially considering the fact that the members of the Godhead (Who created man) are omniscient and therefore knew that man would sin. Reformer Martin Luther claimed that the image was an original righteousness that was lost completely. He averred: “ I am afraid that since the loss of this image through sin, we cannot understand it to any extent” (as quoted in Dyrness, 1972, 15: 163, emp. added).

John Calvin similarly spoke of the image of God as having been destroyed by sin, obliterated by the fall, and utterly defaced by man’s unrighteousness

(see Hoekema, 1986, p. 43). Yet, at other times, he took a less “hard-core” approach and vacillated between a complete loss and a partial loss of the image. In his commentary on Genesis, he wrote: “But now, although some obscure lineaments of that image are found remaining in us, yet are they so vitiated and maimed, that they may truly be said to be destroyed” (as quoted in Hoekema, p. 45, emp. added). Keil and Delitzsch commented that the “concrete essence of the divine likeness was shattered by sin; and it is only through Christ, the brightness of the glory of God and the expression of His essence (Heb. 1: 3), that our nature is transformed into the image of God again (Col. 3: 10; Eph. 4: 24)” [1996, 1: 39]. Canadian anthropologist Arthur C. Custance, in his book, *Man in Adam and in Christ*, observed.

Feinberg, in speaking of the image of God as what he called an “inalienable part of man’s constitution,” spoke of that image as currently being in a “marred, corrupted, and impaired state” (1972, 129: 245). Hoekema elaborated on the same point when he wrote: in other words, there is also a sense in which human beings no longer properly bear the image of God, and therefore need to be renewed in that image. We could say that in this latter sense the image of God in man has been marred and corrupted by sin. Nevertheless, we must still see fallen man as an image-bearer of God, but as one who by nature images God in a distorted way (1986, p. 31). (6)

II Likeness:

Jim Schicatano believes that “likeness and image are different.” Likeness, he says, “doesn’t convey such preciseness as “image.” To be like someone means you possess many, but not all of the characteristics of that person.

Obviously, man does not possess God's omnipotence, wisdom, righteousness, perfection, ability to create, and divineness, he said. (5)

In these others (along with Lyons and Thompson) differs with Schicatano in relations to the image/likeness of God. They say, the "image" (tselem) of God does not refer to something different than the "likeness" (demuth) of God. The Greek and Latin "church fathers" frequently suggested a distinction between the two words. They taught that tselem referred to the physical, and demuth to the ethical, part of the divine image (Feinberg, 1972, 129: 237). Other theologians (like Irenaeus, A. D. 130-c. 200) taught that "image" denoted man's unchangeable essence (viz., his freedom and rationality), whereas "likeness" referred to the changing part of man (i. e., his relationship with God). Thus the former related to the very nature of man, while the latter was that which could be lost (Crawford, 1966, 77: 233). As of 1972, this still was the official view of the Roman Catholic Church (Feinberg, 129: 237).

They go on to say despite the influence of those who claim that these words carry very different ideas about the image of God, a careful study of such passages as Genesis 1: 26-27, 5: 1-3, and 9: 6 reveals that, in fact, these two Hebrew words do not speak of two different entities. "Likeness" simply emphasizes the "image." As William Dyrness noted in regard to tselem and demuth: "The two words should be seen as having complementary rather than competing meanings. The first stresses the image of God as its being shaped and the second express its being like the original in significant ways" (1972, 15: 162). Charles Feinberg, writing on "The Image of God" in the respected religious journal *Bibliotheca Sacra*, agreed when he remarked: A

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careful study of Genesis 1: 26-27; 5: 1, 3; and 9: 6 will show beyond question that it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that the two Hebrew terms are not referring to two different entities. In short, use reveals the words are used interchangeably (1972, 129: 237).

There actually is no good evidence for making any distinction between the two. In fact, the words are essentially synonymous in this context. Keil and Delitzsch remarked in their commentary on Genesis that the two words are “merely combined to add intensity to the thought” (1996, 1: 39). As Clark puts it: “Man is not two images and to distinguish between image and likeness is fanciful exegesis” (1969, 12: 216). (6)

III Dominion:

In relations to dominion, there seems to be a difference of opinion as to what exactly God meant when he said, “Let hem have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” (Genesis 1: 26-28)

Schicatano believes we are like God in the sense that we have been given sovereignty over the entire Earth. God is responsible for the creation of the universe, and likewise, we are responsible for our world. This sovereignty, however, is not a birthright of ours. It is a sacred gift, given to us from God; it is a delegated responsibility. Just as God has created and formed our world to His liking, we are capable of changing it and managing it to our liking. So, it is this responsibility that has been entrusted to us. It must not be taken for

granted because ultimately we are answerable to God for the conditions of planet Earth and the state of our fellow human beings. (5)

However, Lyons and Thompson don't share Schicatanos belief. They convey that the "image" is not man's domination of the lower creation around him. In a "letter to the editor" that Norman Snaith penned to the Expository Times in 1974, he boldly claimed: The meaning is that God created man to be his agent, his representative in ruling all living creatures, and he was given sufficient (to quote the psalm) "honor and glory" to do this....

Biblically speaking, the phrase "image of God" has nothing to do with morals or any sort of ideals; it refers only to man's domination of the world and everything that is in it. It says nothing about the nature of God, but everything concerning the function of man (1974, 86: 24, emp. added, parenthetical comment in orig.). In regard to this kind of thinking, we would be wise to remember that man must exist before dominion can be invested in him, and that man has authority because of the truth that he is made in the image or likeness of God.

Also, the authority is not the cause of the image or likeness, but the image and likeness is the ground of the authority (Chafer, 1943, 100: 481, emp. added). In commenting on this subject James Hastings wrote: "The view that the Divine image consists in dominion over the creatures cannot be held without an almost inconceivable weakening of the figure, and is inconsistent with the sequel, where the rule over the creatures is, by a separate benediction, conferred on man, already made in the image of God." The truth is that the image marks the distinction between man and the animals,

and so qualifies him for dominion: the latter is the consequence, not the essence, of the Divine image (1976, 1: 48, emp. added).

“Dominion,” Keil and Delitzsch noted, “is unquestionably ascribed to man simply as the consequence or effluence of his likeness to God” (1996, 1: 39). As William H. Baker commented: “[I]t is the presence of the image of God in people that makes them able to exercise dominion over the earth. Dominion itself is not what constitutes the image” (1991, p. 39, emp. in orig.).

Although somewhat closely related to the image of God, exercising dominion over the world is not itself that image. (6)

Conclusion:

Perhaps while on earth we may never totally understand what is meant by these verses. But, upon research, some theologians, Christian Orthodoxy believe we are still in the image of God, others concur that when man fell his image was marred. And some agreed it was lost. However, without a doubt, what is clear is that in mankind, God has completed His final creation of the Creation Story. Let's consider what King David said of our creation and our special place among all of God's creations. “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.” (Psalms 8: 3-8 NIV)

With the diversity of views, most (Christian orthodox) agree that each of us have been made in the image and likeness of God, and because of this, we are capable of determining our own destiny. Unlike the plants and animals, God has endowed us with the ability to form a relationship with Him, the ability to increase our knowledge and wisdom, and the responsibility of caring for the world that He has given us.

As His primary creations, we are obligated to imitate and show evidence of His divineness in every area of life. Some may find it complimentary that we have been made in His image. But, because of evolution many no longer treasure this mystery. Matter-of-fact, some have become irresponsible stewards and have neglected the responsibilities that it entails. Above all of His earthly creations, God has endowed man/womankind with a unique soul – holding us responsible for all of our actions. (5) One day we will give an account to the Creator how we've managed; our temples, our lives, family, resources, businesses, ministries, blessings, and this planet called earth.

Each author seems to have scriptural evidence to support their theory on this controversial and highly debatable topic. But, there was another point of agreeableness among them: some of the characteristics were which represent man/woman being formed in the image of God. To name a few, we are creators, God created the heavens and the earth, we're relational, God is relational, we are communicators, God is a communicator, we are spiritual beings as God is a Spirit, and we are intellectual beings who reasons, God is intelligent and reasons too.

When we fully grasp what it means to bear God's image, we are amazingly struck with the boundless, grandeur of our possibilities and the tragedy of our unrealized potential! To be fully human is to completely reflect God's image. Furthermore, though all humans possess these godlike capacities, each of us has the potential to express them uniquely because God's image has been imprinted peculiarly on each of us. (7) In God's infinite creativity there are no duplications. Everybody is an original and is created in the image of God, which according to Orthodox Christians can never be lost.

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