

## Development of the Image of God in Biblical Theology

### Original Image

Kilner (2015) points out that *imago Dei* “involves special connection and intended reflection” (p. 233, 286-310). This connection is with God through Christ and involves connection with others in spiritual community (Kilner, 2015, pp. 239-41). However, he sees this only as potential that begins to be fulfilled in Christ and finally realized in eternity: “people now are *not* God’s image but are enroute to becoming God’s image” (p. 242). Kilner, rightfully delineates a Christian from Christ, with respect to the idea of image: “people are in the image of God, but Christ is the image of God” (p. 242). Furthermore, a human being does not demonstrate he is in the image by godly *attributes*. This of course goes against the thinking of most theologians through the centuries.

Per my previous posts, it is this writer’s perspective that the image of God is innate in a human being, reflected in the godly attributes he demonstrates (e.g., morality, relationship, love). The original image has been compromised, but renewed in a connection with God in Christ, be fully realized in eternity.

### Image Distorted by Sin

Sin has distorted the image of God in humanity (Rom. 3:10-18). This marring or compromising is to varying degrees. When one outside of Christ displays love, joy, or extends peace, or serves others, what is that? It is a God-like thing. A parent, though sinful, giving gifts to their children, is to be like God (Mt. 7:9-12). The idea of “fruit” and attributes are similar: these come out of a “good tree” or a “bad tree” (Psalm 1:1ff.; Mt. 7:15-20). (There are many verses/passages in the Bible that speak of this idea of “fruit” as a behavior/attribute of the righteous.) So, the question again emerges about attributes—are these not that which emerge out

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of a person in the image of God, not merely one in the potential of that image? Contrary to what Kilner says, few theologians would assert that the “image must change” (p. 257). The consensus is that the person must change—the image based in Christ is permanent.

### **Image Restored and Renewed**

The initial restoration of the *imago Dei* is found in Christ, the true image of God (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:4; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 1:15; 3:9-10; 1 Jn. 3:2). Indeed, “Christ is both the standard and the enabler of who people are to be, as created in God’s image” (Kilner, 2015, p. 233). This transformation is not without the effort of the disciple who must get rid of the behaviors accompanying the “old [kind] of man[kind]” (anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, lying) and “put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator” (New International Version, 1984, Col. 3:8-10). This truth / “knowledge” of our legitimate and destined existence is part of the transformation by the renewing of our mind (Rom. 12:2). But this knowledge is a “full knowledge” that often involves a long-learning curve (Kilner, 2015, p. 256-57). Given this, God is the active “agent” bringing about this renewal (Ibid., p. 254). Satan attempts to interdict this truth that could settle into the minds of humanity (2 Cor. 4:4). Complete restoration in the *imago Dei* will happen at the resurrection and thereafter (Romans 8:29; Phil. 3:21).

### **Major Interpretations Related to Canonical Development**

There are only a few references in the Bible about the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27; 5:1-3; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; Col. 3:10; and Jam. 3:9). There is essentially no theological treatment within Scripture of this doctrine (c.f., for example immortality and the resurrection 1 Cor. 15:1ff). It seems that *imago Dei* is axiomatic, a given in biblical history, which is perhaps the reason why it is mentioned sparsely (compare the paucity of canonical development on the Virgin birth). There

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are a few references about man being an astonishing creation (Ps. 8:2-8; 139:13-16), but a return to the *imago Dei* is then found in Pauline theology. Guthrie (1981, p. 210) asserts that Paul's theology adhered to the idea that the *imago Dei* remained, and that "some distinguishing marks of his origin must still be visible" including the idea that he is a moral creature.

The development of the *imago Dei* doctrine starts with Genesis—man made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27); reiterated after the Fall (Gen. 5:1-2); echoed in the birth of Seth (Gen. 5:3); affirmed after the Flood (Gen. 9:6); axiomatic in biblical history until the *imago Dei* came into full view with the coming of Christ—"We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only" (New International Version, 1984, Jn. 1:14); elaborated by Paul (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 11:7; 2 Cor. 4:4b; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:10); confirmed by John (1 John 3:2) and James (Jam. 3:9); and culminates in the resurrection (1 Cor. 15).

### **A Theological Model**

Sin has distorted, marred, damaged the image of God in a human being, but this *innate image* (manifested in attributes) can still be seen in a depraved humanity—bad people can still do good things. In a restored humanity through Christ, it can be realized to astonishing degrees: "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (New International Version, 1998, 2 Cor. 3:18).

With respect to this discussion and the presenting of a theological model somewhat in juxtaposition, I feel compelled (in this post) to delineate my perspectives on Kilner's position.

### **Kilner Assessed**

I greatly respect our author's intellect, his place in the Kingdom, and devotion to theology (and his energies with this particular focus—he brings much to the table), but I humbly

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take issue with Kilner's position for many reasons:

*First*, he sees the image of God as potentiality, when the simplicity of the *imago Dei* texts point to a given reality. The simplest viz., least complicated explanation is usually the best. Kilner complicates things. Certainly, God's intentions have not been changed by man's sin (Kilner, p. 233), but this is not the issue. It is the reality of a human being's *creative identify* that has been clearly/simply stated in the texts of Scripture. He creates a needless dichotomy between the individual and the *imago Dei*. People are *imago Dei*, not potential *imago Dei*. How can we explain the good of God's people before Christ, albeit not the perfect reflection of God (e.g., Job; David "a man after God's heart" 1 Sam. 13:14; Acts 13:22; Abraham—a "friend of God" 2 Chron. 20:7; Isa. 41:8; Jam. 2:23)?

*Second*, even when the *imago Dei* is renewed in Christ, it is stilled tied into the idea of attributes—the sanctification of an individual to greater degrees. Otherwise, there could be no delineation between the spiritual mature and immature (cf., Rom. 15:1; Heb. 5:15-6:3).

*Third*, attributes are innate to identity. They are indelibly connected—"by their fruits you shall know them" (Mt. 7:15-20). One in the image of God will display attributes as a human being; one who has stepped out of the image will be fully malevolent.

*Fourth*, Kilner rejects the prodigious work of theologians throughout church history. His thesis is novel, but with all due respects, I sense he has thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

*Fifth*, he seems contradictory so much of the time (e.g., his use of the word attributes). On one hand, the author dismisses a connection between attributes and the image of God, and then states: "The image of God is about all human attributes that are a reflection of God's attributes" (Kilner, 2015, p. 268).

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*Sixth*, Kilner fails to deal with the reality of evil in the equation of the loss of *imago Dei*. (*Sin* is of a different level than *evil* especially in the Hebrew language—see my first post.) Evil is a big variable in this dialogue. It is this writer's position that the *imago Dei* is marred, but was retained up to a point. That point being, an individual stepping over the line to the dark side and giving himself to evil. There is the theological idea of living in such a way in one's depravity to lose one's status of the *imago Dei* and connection with God (Pr. 29:1; Rom. 1-2; Heb. 6:4-6). How do you cogently explain Stalin, Hitler, John Wayne Gacy, and numerous murderous sociopaths? It is ludicrous to dogmatically assert they have retained even the potential of *imago Dei* within them. God does "give people up" to follow the path of their depravity (Rom. 1:24-28). Kilner acknowledges that people have lost the glory of God (p. 244) (Ps. 106:20; Rom. 1:23), and connects the image of God as exuding glory, but has not glory been given by so many in biblical history—glory came out of one made in the image of God (e.g., Mary's Magnificent Lk. 1:46-55). "Glory," albeit limited in comparison to being in Christ, exudes through the centuries from God's people (the word glory is ubiquitous among God's people—again from what kind of person? A person made in God's image)

*Seventh*, image and glory are inextricably linked, a Jewish concept conceded by Kilner (p. 245). He sees Paul as reworking this theological perspective. They certainly function in tandem, but do we not see glory emerging all through biblical history. If glory is inextricably linked to image, how then can one say that the *imago Dei* is merely potential and not a real expression of something quite innate in the people of God.

### **Reflection, Connection and the Substance of a Human Being**

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The idea of the moon reflecting the sun may serve us well here. The moon will perpetually reflect the sun as long as there is some kind of connection. However, when there is a planet that gets in the way, the ability to reflect the sun is compromised. So, the degree of connection will always allow for varying degrees of reflection, unless there is a complete disconnect. Sin obstructs the reflection, and if one gives himself to *evil* the ability to connect is lost forever. But to remain in that connection and to ultimately gained the greatest connection with God through Christ is “to become truly human” (Kilner, 2015, p. 235).

Since God is a relational being and has instigated a “family” through creation, it logically follows that *imago Dei* involves relationship—connection in community. Community allows this aspect of *imago Dei* to be realized and activated. Relationship is deeply innate in our image. Out of this connectivity based on a renewed image in Christ, an unprecedented unity out of humanity (out of diversity) is experienced (Gal. 3:26-28: Eph. 4:3-6)—the church exemplifies this fruit of a renewed *imago Dei*.

It is true that “In themselves, people have no lasting significance” (Kilner, 2015, p. 250). We are nothing apart from Him, for “in Him we live, and move and have our being” (Ac. 17:28). Jesus said, “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (New International Version, 1984, Jn. 15:5). So, when one is transformed, what are they transformed into—a child of God (or an insignificant cipher)? It seems, the reality of our being as a creature is at debate here. Are we an insignificant being, a mere reflection; or a glorious reflection, substantive individual created and recreated in the image of God. This anthropology has had grave implications upon history. Jesus said his disciples were the “light of the world” and the “salt of the earth” (Mt. 5:13-16). Is this one of substance vs. reflection? Can one be both? Substance does not obviate the idea of reflection nor does reflection obviate the substance. It all boils down to what we are innately. We indeed

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are children of God, lights of the world, and made in the image of God—innately a glorious creature.

### **Implications for Leadership**

How a leader treats people is rooted in *imago Dei*. He sets a tone in the environments he exists—the corporate ethos. His view of people is critical. Seeing people like Jesus is the way of a disciple (2 Cor. 5:16-17); seeing people otherwise is dangerous. The influential Scottish preacher of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Stalker (1889, 1980), offers an *imago Christi* in every aspect of a disciple's life, which is fundamental to *imago Dei*. Once, one has been renewed in the image of God, he expedites his life in the perfect image of Christ, who is his example. Anderson (1997) suggests that a leadership so identified with Jesus, the *true imago Dei*, results in a connection with God's people, so much that they “smell like sheep.”

The call for human beings to become the “best me” is appealing to the current culture. But how is this “best me” is to realized. It is in identifying and connecting with the greatest life ever lived in human history—the very one made in the image of God, who demonstrates what it is to be truly human.

False anthropologies abound (e.g., Marxism), which have wrecked humanity. It is incumbent upon the Christian leader, equipped with the theological truth of *imago Dei ~ imago Christi* to offer the only hope for humanity—a renew life in Christ.

I have developed a paradigm for people in my teaching and counseling ministry. The paradigm is ensconced in the example of the life of Jesus. It's premise is this: It is irrelevant who people are to me. It is nice if people like me, love me, affirm me, invite me to things, but it is largely irrelevant. What is utterly relevant is this: who am I to people? As one made in the image of God, I am a lover, servant, encourager, enjoyer, truth-teller, salt and light to people. I

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am this way with people because I am like Christ (1 Jn. 2:6; 4:17)—living like Him in this depraved world, providing an example of how to be truly human. With this paradigm, what comes back in human connectivity is astonishing. Living *imago Dei ~ imago Christi* is the most powerful and effective way to live on the face of this earth.

The focus for the leader is not just belief in the doctrine of *imago Dei*, as it is living *imago Dei ~ imago Christi* (1 Cor. 11:1; 15:49; Heb. 13:7; 2 Pet. 1:4; 1 Jn. 3:2). Leaders are to be “imitators of God” as seen in the life of Jesus (Eph. 5:1-2). This is the road to effectiveness among humanity.

Every day, in my counseling ministry, I face the reality of human beings in my very presence, made in the image of God, but wrecked by the reality of their own sins and sinned against by others. The challenge of counter-transference (what you feel toward the client) is a ubiquitous experience. Because of my embracing the theological truth of *imago Dei*, I have been convicted with *primum non nocerum* (“do not harm”). But this doctrine has driven me to be patient, extend grace, and love everyone on the deepest of levels. And it has been my joy to point them to the only One who can make them fully human *imago Dei*.

## **References**



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