

The Image of God

Introduction

The implications of the doctrine of man in God's image (*imago Dei*) upon humanity is perhaps the *sine qua non* of human existence (apart from the reality of God). Get this right and history flows well; get his wrong and history goes awry. The difference is between sanity and insanity; peace and war; civility and social chaos; civilization and barbarism; enjoyment in the human experience and misery. The gravity of a proper Judeo-Christian/biblical perspective on a human being is without parallel. (The only exception being the doctrine of God.) As Kilner (2015, p. 311) puts it: "Nothing less than liberation and devastation are at stake when discussing humanity in the image of God."

The famous novelist, William Faulkner gives the young inimical writer (at the time), Thomas Wolf (1934/1990, p. ix), the gravitas of "put[ting] the whole of the human heart on the head of a pin." His writings, unlike any other, indeed do this, for they have capture the centrality of this doctrine—the abuse and glory of *imago Dei*. In his novel, Wolf (p. 596) describes a scene that depicts the poignancy of this issue. It involves the helpless Jewish man grabbed off the train by the Nazis: "And in that gaze there was the weight of man's mortal anguish...they all felt that they were saying farewell, not to a man, but to humanity; not to some pathetic stranger, some chance acquaintance of the voyage, but to mankind; not to some nameless cipher out of life, but to the fading image of a brother's face." This is what has been perennially at stake with this doctrine as it works its way down the corridor of human history.

Let's proceed to delineate this doctrine, and provide a brief summary of the *imago Dei* from a biblical, theological and historical position.

Biblical, Theological and Historical Summaries

A Brief Biblical Summary of *Imago Dei*

Scripture has given us a doctrine that if embraced will bless humanity; God has given us an identity that will make us what we are supposed to be—a human being made in God’s image with an innate or existential dignity (cf. Kilner’s denial of an innate/existential *imago Dei*, p. 314).

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 human being's "existence in God’s image is a constant” but with Kilner (2015) it is only a potential goal for humanity in Christ (pp. 204-07, 226-27, 242, 276, 281, 288, 325). Yet, contrary to Kilner's position, I, along with the preponderance of theologians in church history, have posited that the *imago Dei* in human beings has been compromised to varying degrees. Given the human predicament/Fall, human beings must repent (Lk. 13:3; Ac. 2:38) and find their ultimate fulfillment as a person in a relationship with God through Christ, *imago Christi* (Jn. 3:3; Rom. 8:29). Certainly, with Kilner (p. 325), this doctrine is “more about God” who can restore the image.

A Brief Historical Treatment of *Imago Dei*

Historically, the church fathers have affirmed that man has retained the image of God, but that image has been marred and horribly affected by sin. Many theologians through the centuries

have held this view and focused on the attributes, but not separate from the existential reality of man who is *made*—*made* implies a current existential reality—in the image of God. Kilner’s position, (with all due respects) though novel and iconoclastic, fails to see that the attributes emerge out of the existential reality of a human being. They go hand in hand and are inextricably linked.

After two world wars, Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao, and the reality of evil--man's inhumanity to man, have many come to realize that a person can in fact lose this identity and become essentially a brute beast/an animal, no longer human (2 Pet. 2:12) (e.g., Eli Wiesel, Viktor Frankl, Dennis Prager). The Hebrew *ra'*, for evil, then must be considered here, for it implies a piece of pottery that cannot be put back together again, rotted food that can never be made good, and a stain that can never be removed (Wilson, n.d., p. 150). God even gives up on people who have so turned their back on Him and the reality of their creation (Rom. 1:24-28). (In a previous post, I gave more attention to this point.)

With respect to this dialogue about *imago Dei*, Kilner (2015) creates needless dichotomies (either/or). For instance, he juxtaposes God as the source, i.e., connection with Him with the issue of attributes (p. 318). No one I’m aware of (and I confess my awareness of scholars on this issue is limited compared to Kilner) would argue *against* the idea that people draw their significance from God’s connection, reflect God’s image, or suggest that “attributes” are the “whole enchilada.” The existential reality of a human being created in God’s image, in his existence from creation, is the disagreement—man is innately *imago Dei*, perfected in an identity with Christ and will become ultimately what God intended in eternity. It seems to me, that Kilner creates a straw man and attacks it.

Kilner (2015, pp. 327-28) tends to see the church as negative with respect to the moral challenges of racism, sexism, poverty, and disability. The church historically has been at the forefront on all these matters because of their high regard of humanity made in God's image— notwithstanding tarnished attributes. It is those who have *not regard this doctrine in themselves or others*, whether they claim to be in Christ or otherwise, that has led to the enormous abuses in church history (for example vividly pointed out in Johnson, 1997, pp. 52-53). The danger with this doctrine is not so much with the church, which has contributed immensely to the good of humanity, but with those outside of the Kingdom (e.g., Marxism and the radical left; radical Islam, which has no *imago Dei* doctrine; and all those who have stepped over to the dark side of evil—sociopaths/psychopaths). Kilner's assessment of the church is negative and misguided: "No wonder Christians are not consistently motivated to stand up and speak out for human life, dignity, and sacredness grounded in God's image" (p. 329). The exact opposite is true as I have seen all across the Kingdom of God throughout church history and currently in the world.

Theological: Innate/Existential Reality of the *Imago Dei*

The misguided approach to *imago Dei* is not focused on attributes as Kilner (2015) so assiduously asserts, but comes with a disregard for the *existential reality of a human being*— one *made* in the image of God. Attributes flow out of that existential reality. They are not mutually exclusive (and once again Kilner creates a needless dichotomy: see p. 311). What has happened tragically in history is a disregard for the existential reality of *imago Dei*, and with that a focus on attributes, but it is man's attempt to ignore the existential reality *with its concomitant attributes*. Kilner (2015, p. 312) contends that "people cannot add or subtract from this dignity in themselves or others, since being in God's image is not an attribute that anyone or anything

can cultivate or diminish.” This smacks against common sense reality and biblical attestation (which, again I have elaborated in previous posts).

It is my contention that both the dignity and attributes can be altered by sin and especially by evil. (I present a case for this point in a previous text.) God destroys humanity through a flood because the image (the reality of human beings) has been so badly marred—“the Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (New International Version, 1984, Genesis 6:5). People actually become children of the devil (Jn. 8:44). Evil is an issue that must be considered in this debate regarding the *imago Dei*. Becoming evil is the line that determines the complete destruction of the image of God within a human being.

How the Doctrine Relates to Education and Leadership

Education apart from God amounts to foolishness—“the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (New International Version, 1984, Proverbs 1:7); leadership apart from God’s influences ends in disaster and the misery of humanity. Central to the best things unfolding in human history is teaching and living out of the *imago Dei*. Let me present a few ideas germane to education and leadership with respect to this doctrine of *imago Dei*.

The Disciple of Jesus and *Imago Dei*

The issue of “what is man and what he can become” has been at the forefront of the great philosophers of history (Durant, 1926/2006, p. 8), and as Plato challenged his students in his Academy, it involves the study of the doctrine of ideas, and this is the drive of higher education tested by the concrete reality of life (Ibid, pp. 37, 40-41). Plato who *knew not* this idea of the *imago Dei*, advocated eugenics, the “exposure” of infant children, abortion, and the elimination of the deformed in a society, in this drive to build a utopian society (Ibid, pp. 46-49). He was an

educator, but in many ways misguided especially on this front. Plato may have affected Western civilization in many positive ways, but one thing he lacked—this doctrine. Jesus, the greatest “philosopher” in human history, altered it by demonstrating the perfect God/Man, the perfect *imago Dei* (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). As a disciple of the greatest life ever lived in history, this doctrine must be core to how we live, speak and treat people.

The disciple of Jesus, who is being ever developed into the appropriate functioning in the image of God, has this doctrine ingrained in his soul. As he embraces the doctrine *imago Dei* ` *imago Christi* in his own life, he is compelled to see *everyone* as a precious human being made in God’s image (Jn. 3:16-17). Indeed, a disciple is “uniquely suited to grow in their appreciation of others in God’s image” (Kilner, 2015, pp. 223-24). 2 Corinthians 5:16-17 (New International Version, 1984) is poignant here: “So from now on we regard *no one* from a worldly point of view...if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come.”

The Idea of Therapeutic Discipleship

Discipleship and *imago Dei* are inextricably linked. Can one truly be a disciple without this doctrine imbued in his/her thinking and soul? I think not. Therapeutic discipleship is the concept of combing healing with growing as a disciple—healthy people have a healthy life and relationships. Every Christian counselor has the challenge of facing a wrecked humanity made in the image of God. The challenge of seeing people like Jesus is called “counter-transference” (what you feel toward the client). It is only by embracing the theological truth of *imago Dei*, that one can overcome any negative counter-transference, “do not harm” (*primum non nocerum*), love people, and feel motivated to help a person become a maximize human being.

The Example of a Leader in the Kingdom of God

It is interesting that some of the most famous people in the last several centuries have had such devastating effects upon others by their own personal life and the doctrines they advocate (e.g., Rousseau, Marx, Hemingway, Brecht, Sartre, Nietzsche). Johnson (2007) in his treatment of some of the greatest intellectuals in the last several centuries, points out the deplorable lives many of them lived. Can such people offer us an example? Certainly not. They failed to live *imago Dei* within and failed to see the value of others in light of this doctrine. Somerset Maugham (1938/1988), the famed agnostic playwright gives us a rare vulnerability with respect to his own life: “For my part I do not think I am any better or any worse than most people, but I know that if I set down every action in my life and every thought that has crossed my mind, the world would consider me a monster of depravity.”

A Paradigm Shift for Leaders: Who I Am to People, Not Who People Are to Me

Connection with humanity in their depravity is a ubiquitous challenge. As G.K. Chesterton (2011, p. 14) put it, “Every man has hated mankind, when he was *less than a man*. Every man has had humanity in his eyes like a blinding fog, humanity in his nostrils like a suffocating smell.” When one becomes more that *what he used to be*, and experiences a restoration in the image of God in Christ (Rom. 8:29), he then see human beings *more than he ever has*.

The paradigm embracing the life of Jesus is based on this premise: *It is irrelevant who people are to me*, though 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 *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 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. In 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. 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 renewed life in Christ.

The Writing of a Thought Leader in the Culture

I mention writing because this reflects the image of God within us (the core of our being coming out in deep reflection). The English author, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, opined, “The pen is mightier than the sword.” The horrible violence of man outside of the *imago Dei* must be countered with truth that can be marvelously articulated in writing. Somewhere Douglas Gresham said, “There lies a truth so real and so pristine that all of man’s concocted philosophical posing[s] tumble into ruin beside it.” The prophet put it: “Is not my word like fire, declares the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces” (New International Version, 1984, Jeremiah 23:29). Out of a deepened *imago Dei*, God’s people can write with great inspiration to bless humanity, and they have been doing such for millennium (e.g., Augustine, John Bunyan, Max Lucado, C.S. Lewis). Out of the *imago Dei* doctrine, comes a motivation to affect humanity with theological truth. The novelist (e.g., Thomas Wolf, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Harriet Beecher Stowe—Uncle Tom’s cabin altered the attitude toward slavery in America), the historians (e.g., Paul Johnson, Will Durant), and play/movie writers (e.g., Shakespeare, Mel Gibson—“The Passion of the Christ”) have depicted theological reality rooted in man’s

fallenness from the image of God, but stretching for a truth about humanity. Without the written ideas/truth of God's people, the ideas of man will not be challenged in the marketplace of ideas.

Conclusion

Viktor Frankl, years after his horrendous experience with the holocaust, mentioned an idea that caught my attention with respect to logotherapy and positive psychology, in his 1984 Postscript to Man's Search for Meaning (Frankl, 1959/2006, pp. 137-54). It involved the idea of projecting the best me or the worst me somewhere out there in the future (let's say ten years from now). I have found that this consideration for people to be a serious one, but how can this "best me" ever emerge? 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 demonstrated what it is to be truly human; and allowing the Holy Spirit to transform a person "into His likeness with ever-increasing glory" (2 Cor. 3:18).

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