Theological Anthropology and the Image of God

A Biblical Understanding of Man

Theological anthropology is rooted in the biblical understanding of a human being—a marvelous

creature made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27; 9:6; Ps. 139:14). The image of God issue is

core to theological anthropology, since they are inextricably linked in the field of theology. You

cannot study mankind in a theological manner without a theological understanding of who man

is—it is axiomatic. A valid understanding of man is lacking if there is not an awareness of his

imagio Dei, his fallenness from that core reality of his humanity, and any hope of a better

humanity (Packer, & Howard, 1985; Johnson, 1973; Wright, 2008). The attempt to indulge with

the issues of humanity (e.g., psychology, sociology) apart from a biblical theology is derelict at

best and destructive at worst.

Disciplines associated with the field of anthropology (e.g., cultural anthropology,

psychology, sociology) are concerned with assessing mankind, but *not* with a theological

grounding or from a theological perspective. For the most part, the true and living God is left out

of the equation (Jer. 10:10; 1 Th. 1:9), although there is a warranted recognition of the pagan

reality of religion. A secular approach with humanity is fraught with all kinds of dangers, which

I will expound on briefly.

False Anthropologies with Respect to Theological Anthropology

A biblical anthropology to humanity spares people from the misery of false

anthropologies (e.g., Marxism, humanism, paganism). False anthropologies emerge from within

man—they are the delusion of his own machinations. The source of a true anthropology is from

God Himself through an innate existential realization, but even more so, through the Word, from

Him and about Him, in Scripture. His commentary on what He has created (mankind) is the only

commentary that matters. And then one has to wrestle with the concept: can/does God Himself communicate His view on mankind? This would give us a theological anthropology, that is rooted and ground into something that is trustworthy to follow, and indeed man must follow God's commentary or what else is there of substance. False anthropologies destroy humanity; a theological anthropology blesses humanity.

Areas of Disagreement with Respect to *Imago Dei*

There are several perspectives on the image of God in man after the Fall: 1) man completely lost the image after the Fall; 2) the image was not at all affected by the Fall—man has perpetually retained the image no matter how sinful he/she lives; or, 3) man lost some of his ability to function in this image—the image of God within man was marred by man's Fall but he retains it to some degree, albeit horribly, inconsistent and contradictory (e.g., Nazi's able to love their children and yet abuse and murder Jews during the holocaust). For many, this affinity with God/*imagio Dei* is "irreversible" (Berkhof, 1979, p. 69), and "inalienable" (Bancroft, 1976, p. 191). Thus, "The fall of humanity is not destructive of the formal image (human personality), although it involves the distortion (though not demolition) of the material content of the image" (Henry, 2001, p. 593). Demarest (2001, p. 436) believes the image of God is sustained (Gen. 9:6), but posits that what has been loss is the soundness with reasoning ability, the inability to choose God and goodness, and the concomitant spiritual blindness and death. The image of God in man had to remain "otherwise man would not be man," but with respect to man's depravity, the unregenerate *now* are *incapable of not sinning*" (Bloesch, 1979, p. 94). Kilner (2015, pp. 54, 72, 73) seems to present a unique approach to the *imagio Dei* issue, that emphasizes connection with the One who perfectly bears the image of God.

Let me share some perspectives that have surfaced in my mind regarding the weight of theological anthropology.

Challenges with the Reality of *Imagio Dei*

First, there is a tremendous advantage in articulating a theological anthropology in public discourse? Fromm (1947, p. 4: "With all his knowledge…he is ignorant with regard to the most important and fundamental questions of human existence: what man is, how he ought to live, and how tremendous energies within man can be released and used productivity." This is a positive view of man. He believes that there is such a significance in a human being that must not be lost in the "mastery of nature" (Ibid). Kilner (2015, pp. 69-82), shares this optimism, but only through a connection with Christ, who is the true image of God (Jn. 10:30; 2 Cor. 4:4b; 5:21; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). And it is out of being in the true image of God through Christ that the gravitas of one's life can be felt.

Packer and Howard (1985) point out that "Christianity is a humanism, indeed the only view of life worthy of that name." How true Christian history has proven this. The concept of "redemption and lift," has been a remarkable reality where ever a Christian *imagio Dei* has taken route. There is a clear distinction between those who live in an authentic theological/Christian anthropology and those who don't (see this idea of distinction in Scripture: Ex. 8:23; 9:4; 11:7; 33:16; Mal. 3:18; 2 Cor. 6:14-18). The bottom line with humanity amounts to this "by their fruits you shall know them" (Mt. 7:20).

Second, living with another human being is no small matter. It is only in a theological grounding that a marvelous connectivity can occur. This comes in the identification/connection with Christ, the perfect image of God, who transforms us into ideal human being we were created to be. In this theological grounding there are many variables that make this man-to-man

experience not only possible, but ideal. *First*, the Holy Spirit cultivates a quality human being that is capable of something wonderful and beautiful in the connectivity/fellowship with others (Gal. 5:22-23). *Second*, wisdom, available through a connection with God (Ps. 51:6; Pr. 1:7; 2:6,10; 8:22-23; Jam. 1:5) in necessary for the proper functioning in relationships. Otherwise, disorder and chaos abound. *Third*, love is it at the core of the human existence. Irrationality reigns the further one gets away from love. Love is at the core of a theological anthropology— "All that matters now is living in the faith that is activated and brought to perfection by love" (Gal. 5:6, The Passion Translation).

Third, the idea of being involved with spiritual community is a significant part of being a creature in the image of God. We are relational-spiritual beings. Thus, the church allows for a realizing of this image. To not be in community is counter to a more complete realization of what it means to be *imagio Dei*. From the perspective of cultural anthropology, there is a difference between those who emphasize individualism and others who have a sociocentric emphasis in a culture (Haidt, 2012, pp. 16-17). This issue is germane to theological anthropology. The Scripture emphasizes both the individual and a sociocentric/community existence. The most thrilling and nourishing community for a human being is the Church/Kingdom of God, because it is a place where human beings have been transformed into a new kind of humanity.

Fourth, the kind of language one uses in discourse about man is critical in being a thought leader in a culture. Haidt (2012, p. 16) notices an interesting dichotomy: "When anthropologists wrote about morality, it was as though they spoke a different language from the psychologist" and the theologian. This is true with the use of theological language. Speaking to

the culture with a theological approach must be seriously considered. What is the most effective

language articulating a theological anthropology?

   Fifth, a serious view of *imageo Dei* involves a theology that informs one who is living in

the reality of this theology, as he connects with those living in spiritual darkness. Jesus is our

example of One who entered into the darkness as the light (Jn. 8:12 cf., Mt. 5:13-16)—He

resonated with people—the image bearer resonated with those made in His image. But this is a

challenging thing for avdisciple without a serous theological rootedness. Mother Teresa went

into an era of what is called the "dark night of the soul" (Teresa, 2007). How could this be for

one who was considered a spiritual giant? The answer that many have offered is that she so

identified with the darkness of humanity, that she felt as Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemane,

who cried in His anguish with such a connection (Mt. 26:36-43). Man in the image of God

compels a theological grounding that addresses the "dark night of the soul."

   Sixth, theological anthropology compels us into the fray with human beings. We are

involved in a battle for human beings made in God's image. This must surely be acute in our

minds—"open your eyes and look at the fields—they are ripe for harvest" (Jn. 4:35) It is clear

from Scripture that God's people have always had to fight against evil (Eph. 6:12-20), and this

compels one to get specific with this battle, for we must not be ignorant of "his [Satan] schemes"

(2 Cor. 2:11). Satan's hatred for mankind is unimaginable to a rational thinker—the distortion of

sexuality (e.g., homosexuality, pedophilia), sex changes, an essential mutilation of the body,

transgenderism as a defiance against God's creative order, the torturous destruction of an unborn

child through abortion. Theological anthropology confronts such evil.

   Fromm (1964) points out a dichotomy in the existence of man, what he calls the

syndrome of decay (deterioration or death) or the syndrome of growth. Something within a

human being launches him into one or the other direction—this is the seriousness of a theological anthropology. The syndrome of death *ultimately* involves a love of death, a dependency upon other—"incestuous symbiosis," and "malignant narcissism." The syndrome of life involves a love of life, independence (interdependence), and serving others (the only way to overcome "incestuous symbiosis") (Ibid, p. 13).

The human being realizes his immortality—this is the greatest anthropological issue. It is only in a theological anthropology that this anguish of humanity with his eventual death can be dealt with in the only effective manner. Becker comprehensive treatment of this subject, *The Denial of Death* (1973), deals with this anguish unlike any other writer, but he ends up at the door step of theology. (An outstanding quote from Beck on pp. 268-69 is too long to quote here, but is as sobering as it gets). Barrett (1962, p. 227) reflecting on Heidegger's perspective observes "Man…is a creature of distance: he is perpetually beyond himself, his existence at every moment opening toward the future" but death seems to be the greatest challenge of our existence. Theological anthropology is the only anthropology that answers this greatest issue of humanity.

Kierkegaard tells the story of a man who hardly knows he exists, but wakes up one morning to discover that he is dead, and speculates how tragic it is to wake up dead and never "touched the roots of our own existence" (Barrett, 1962, p. 3). Theological anthropology awakens us from such a scenario, and brings us to the roots of our intended existence (Eph. 2:1-10).

The difference is rooted in the biblical understanding of man on so many fronts, the *imageo Dei* being of the greatest significance. Two thoughts have emerged in my thinking with respect to your post. *First*, the idea of false anthropologies that have had a devastating effect

upon humanity (e.g., Marxism). We certainly have a responsibility to oppose these false anthropologies (2 Cor. 3:3-5). As disciples of Jesus, we seemed positioned on the high ground to address these false anthropologies better than any other. While, I have not completely thought this out, but it seems apparent to me that Jesus confronted these destructive approaches (e.g., the woman caught in the act of adultery, the woman at the well). A false anthropology may been seen in how it treats human beings. Would you agree? *Second*, I have studied quite extensively the use of defense mechanism. The defense mechanism of projection identification is an approach to humanity that in most cases (and in its egregious aspect) puts a denigrating label on a person to ignore, mistreat, or abuse an individual (VandenBos, 2007, p. 740). Projective identification has been used by the fascist Nazis and Japanese during World War 2. For instance, the Japanese labeled the Chinese as subhuman monkeys and this defense mechanism (utilized to justify evil) launched one of the greatest holocaust of humanity in the "rape of Kanking (Chang, 1997). It would be interesting to explore how defense mechanisms are utilized to further false anthropologies.

Conclusion

The most fascinating and compelling subject to study is God, and second to that is the study of man—a creature made in God's image. In theological anthropology you have the delight of both, in a marvelous "dance on the rim of mystery."

Resources

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