

What is the Image of God and Sin's Effect Upon that Image

Introduction

There are few verses in the Bible, relatively speaking, that mention the idea of man created in the image or likeness of God/*imago Dei*: Genesis 1:26, 27; 5:1, 3; 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; Colossians 3:10; and James 3:9. The words “image” (Heb. *tselem*, Gk. *eikon*), and likeness (Heb. *demuth*, Gk. *homoiosis*) are both utilized interchangeably, considered synonymous, and are essentially a use of Hebrew parallelism (Berkhoff, 1941, p. 20-3; Kilner, 2015, p. 124). Other passages implicitly indicate this doctrine (e.g., Ps. 8:4-6; 1 Cor. 15:49). 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 for example a paucity of the Virgin birth).

What is the Imago Dei

What does the *imago Dei* involve? How does a human being actual reflect the image of God? I agree with Kilner (2015) that the image involves “*image as connection*” (pp. 54,116-23, 131), and “*image as reflection*” (pp. 124-33). Image as connection is wrapped up in being the offspring of God through Jesus (Jn. 3:3-5; Rom. 8:14), and in that redemption, reflect the Lord's glory (2 Cor. 3:18). Christ is standard “to which people need to conform” (Kilner, 2015, p. 89). According to Kilner (2015), being *imago Dei* is not about having the attributes of God (pp. 95, 104). He declares that “all people, with and without the best attributes, are in God's image” (p. 105); being in God's image is about “standard rather than present human attributes” (p. 109); “people are created to develop according to God's image in Christ” (p. 112). Christ is the exact image bearer (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). So, it seems (if I am understanding Kilner

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correctly) that the image of God is a permanent potential identity, not a present reality until one identifies in Christ—created in and according to the image of God “in view [of] people conforming to God’s image in Christ before the beginning of creation” (p. 123). It is the eternal purpose that connects us to this reality (Ibid). It was the end game “even before the fall” (p. 132).

Sin’s Effect Upon the Imago Dei

There are three major positions with respect to the fall and sin’s effect upon the *imago Dei*.

First, man completely lost the image after the Fall. This is problematic, since the *imago Dei* is mentioned after the fall as a present reality (Gen. 9:6).

Second, the image was not at all affected by the Fall—man has perpetually retained the image no matter how sinful he/she lives. This is Kilner’s position: “...there is every indication that people remain in God’s image...that no harm has been done to this status into the image on which it is based” (p. 134). It is the standard to which we have been created into/for (Ibid).

Third, man lost some of his ability to function in this image—the image of God within man was marred, but he retains to some degree the ability to function in this image. This affinity with God is “irreversible,” (Berkhof, 1979, p. 69) and “inalienable” (Bancroft, 1976, p. 191), but as Henry puts it: “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. 595). Demarest (2001, p. 436) believes the image of God is sustained (Gen. 9:6) but posits that what has been lost is soundness with reasoning ability, inability to choose God and good, spiritual blindness, and death. Kilner (2015) critically analyzes these attributes to the *imago Dei* (pp. 178-230). The image of God in man had to remain

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“otherwise man would not be man” (Bloesch, 1978, p. 94). The shift within man was dramatic—an irrepressible propensity to sin: “Once able *not to sin* (*posse non peccare*), the unregenerate now are *incapable of not sinning* (*non posse non peccare*)” (Ibid.).

I offer a *fourth* perspective to consider: Man retains the image of God up to a point, but, if a human being, steps over to the dark side and is *given* to evil, they have permanently distorted the image and there is no return back, whether with respect to attributes or an inclination to the standard.

I offer some modest biblical support (as this is inchoate in my thinking). **First**, Jesus mentioned about the Pharisees that they were children of the devil—“you belong to your father, the devil” (New International Version, 1984, John 8:44). This indicates an abandonment of their identity with the true Father—can it be said that they retained the *imago Dei*? **Second**, God eventually gives people up who grossly distort their humanity because of their insistence to continue in sin (see Rom. 1 & 2). **Third**, the Hebrew word for evil, *ra*, (Greek word *kakos*—evil in character) depicts the idea of a stain that cannot be removed, food that is spoiled and can never be good again, or a piece of pottery so broken that it can never be put together again. **Fourth**, relative to the previous point, Scripture speaks of an *irreversibility* in a human being’s status: God gives people up at some point (Rom. 1:24-28); “A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed and that without remedy” (New International Version, 1984, Proverbs 29:1); “It is impossible...to be brought back to repentance” (New International Version, 1984, Hebrews 6:4-6); “He who does what is sinful [present active indicative tense: a continuous lifestyle of sin] is of the devil” (New International Version, 1984, 1 John 3:8). **Fifth**, if one can grow to the point of reflecting the *imago Dei* to greater degrees (2 Cor. 3:18), it seems

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apparent that one can deteriorate to the point of being contrary to what they were created to be—wholly given to evil—“brute beasts” to be annihilated (2 Pet. 2:12).

In the face of one given to absolute evil (e.g., Hitler, Stalin, Charles Manson, the pedophile who rapes and murders children), it is unbiblical (in my estimation), unconscionable, teeters on the brink of blasphemy, and defies sensibility to say that these people retain the image of God. Kilner, up to this point in our reading has not dealt with the reality of *evil* in a human being. Try telling the holocaust survivor who lost his spouse, parents and children at the hands of evil barbarians that such a person retains the image of God—it seems ludicrous to this writer!

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