

The Image of God In Man

By Edward Kurath

There has long been a debate about the nature of man. Scripture says we are made in the image of God, and yet we sin. How does one reconcile these truths?

Who Cares?

Over the last 2,000 years there have been many attempts to explain this. For the average person, what does it matter?

It matters a great deal. One's view of this issue will have a fundamental impact on how one ministers to others. If you believe that the image of God was obliterated or tainted at The Fall, your goal will be to bring to death everything in the person (and of course be resurrected in Christ). On the other hand, if you believe as I do, the goal is to uncover and unbury that part of the person that is made in God's image, so the individual can become the person God originally made them to be. It isn't a killing off, it is a releasing.

Every person I have counseled has a fractured image of themselves. I have discovered that one of the great keys to healing is for each person to begin to see the truth about themselves, that he or she is made in God's image. The blockages to this are judgments and inner vows that need to be brought to death and resurrection, so the person can move towards seeing themselves the way God sees them, and experiencing and living with themselves the way God intended.

This perspective is a major theme in my book.

More About Loving Ourselves

I was recently counseling a woman who suffers from anxiety and panic attacks. She has always driven herself mercilessly, and is terribly self-condemning. When she saw how critical she is of herself, she asked me if I knew anybody else like that. I told her that every client I have ever seen has an unloving

relationship with themselves. It is only a matter of degree.

I am convinced that the central issue in inner healing is based on our relationship with ourselves.

Matthew 22:36-40 says this same thing.

36. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?"

37. Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart,

with all your soul, and with all your mind.

38. This is the first and great commandment.

39. And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

40. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Love Yourself

We are told to love ourselves. The Greek verb "agapao" (Strong's #25), translated into English as "love," means to regard with favor, goodwill, benevolence, compassion, esteem, regard with strong affection. To not love means to neglect, disregard, condemn.

With these definitions in mind, people who struggle in life do not love themselves. Therefore life does not go well for them.

The Greek word translated into English as "as" in "as yourself" is "hos" (Strong's #5613), which means in "exactly the same way," and other similar meanings. The clear implication is that we are to love our neighbor, and we are to love ourselves in exactly the same way.

Loving The Image of God In Us

Why would God tell us to hold in esteem something that is evil (our neighbor and ourselves)? This is a part of the puzzle. The answer to this is that there is a part, or an aspect, of each person that is made in the image of God, and is not defective. Below is a more in depth discussion of the biblical evidence for this.

When God says to not do something, He is saying, "Please don't do that; because if you do, it will hurt you." When He says to do something, He is saying, "Please do this so you can be blessed." He is simply explaining how reality works.

In the above great commandments, God is saying that my relationship with Him, with myself, and with others is the key to life; and love is what makes them work. No wonder, then, that people who are self-condemning struggle.

Then how can I love? I believe that I can truly love only out of God in me. I once had a pastor say to me, "Ed, I don't believe there is anything good in me that God didn't put there." Then how can I, being evil, truly love?

There is a simple and profound answer. There is an aspect of me that is made in the image of God. When I was created, that part of me was created by God as a "chip off the old block." That part of me is the real "me," and was not tainted by the sin of The Fall (I will explore this issue in more depth at the end of this Newsletter). The image of God in me is a gift, I didn't deserve that gift, and I didn't do anything to earn it. I also can't make it disappear, though I may try to bury it and repudiate it.

Given this assumption, then the image of God in me is love, because God is love. It is therefore only out of this place in me that I can love God or others. Any love that I try to crank up out of my own will or strength is tainted. That is why loving myself is so central and important. If I do not love myself, that part of me made in the image of God, and then I can not possibly love God or others. Only God in me can love purely. Trying to bury that part of me means I have buried my ability to love. That part of me needs to be released from my oppression and repression, and to be embraced.

Not Loving Yourself

People who hate themselves have tried to bury themselves, and they try to present to the world a "persona" that they think the world will accept. In the process of trying to bury who they really are, they are repudiating the real person God made them to be. In my book, "I Will Give You Rest," I call that part our

"Treasure Inside." If you are curious as to how this process of burying happens, read Chapter 9 in my book, or online on my website, www.divinelydesigned.com. Since the Treasure Inside operates on love, hating that part of us causes great pain. The pain is the Treasure Inside sending up a distress signal that we are mistreating ourselves. We are doing the opposite of what Jesus told us to do if life is to go well. So life does not go well.

With this in mind, it becomes evident that the primary focus in inner healing must be the restoration of a loving relationship between the person and their Treasure Inside. Anything short of this will have limited impact.

What Part?

As I speak of loving myself, I need to be clear about what part of "me" I am to love. I am to love the image of God part of me. The image of God does dwell in me, but we are strange creatures: at the same time, we also have a sin nature, and we sin daily. So even though we have His image somewhere inside us, we are not God. God does not have a sin nature. Jesus is not saying to love the sinful part of me.

The Image of God Still Exists In Us

How can we have the image of God in us, and yet we sin? Since the time of Christ, this paradox has been debated. The problem is that Scripture is not very clear about the issue. In the past there have been many theories presented. By now there seems to be a consensus among theologians that the image of God does still exist untainted in us. However, when it comes to explaining exactly what it is, there is no definitive answer available in Scripture; so the debate is not settled. At the end of this article I have included an overview of this debate.

Based upon Scripture, we can surmise about some aspects of us that are definitely "good," such as our gifts or talents. We can also surmise about some aspects that are definitely "bad" (or "fallen"), such as our tendency to judge. But what about the many other traits and aspects of a human being where Scripture is not so clear about their status? Since Scripture is our only reliable authority on such an issue, we really don't know, and

really can't know about these traits "in between."

I am not sure that we need to know exactly what the boundaries are of the image of God in us. We just need to know that there is an aspect of us that is made in the image of God, and that we need to have our relationship healed with that part of us. Then, as Jesus alluded to, life can flow.

The Debate

The best discussion I have found of this question of the image of God in man is contained in one of my seminary text books, *Christian Theology* by Millard Erickson, pages 495-517. He spends 22 pages discussing the details of the various views that have existed, and then summarizes what he believes is the most reasonable conclusion. I will very briefly mention the various views, but then quote his conclusions verbatim. There are many different viewpoints, but for clarity Erickson has grouped them into three major categories.

1. Substantative Views

Under this category, some have considered the image of God to be an aspect of our physical or bodily makeup. A more common substantive view is that it is some psychological or spiritual quality in human nature.

Genesis 1:26-27 says, "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to our likeness'" (NKJV).

In order to try to explain the paradox of the image of God and sin both existing in man, several hundred years ago Roman Catholic theologians split "image" and "likeness" into two separate qualities. They postulated that the "likeness" was fallen, but the "image" was intact, still retaining purity of the image of God.

Martin Luther reacted to this perspective (along with many other things the Roman Catholic Church taught at that time). He viewed all aspects of the image of God in man as having been corrupted - what is left is a relic or remnant of the image. Calvin maintained that a relic of the image remained in man after the

fall.

"All of the substantive views we have mentioned, with their widely differing conceptions of the nature of the image of God, agree in one particular: the locus of the image. It is located within man; it is a quality or capacity resident in his nature. Although it is God who conferred the image upon man, it resides in man whether or not he recognizes God's existence or his work" (Erickson, p.102).

2. Relational Views

In these views it is postulated that the image of God is the experiencing of a relationship. Man is said to be in the image or to display the image when he stands in a particular relationship. In fact, the relationship is the image.

Emil Brunner believed "It is the act of response, the relationship with God that constitutes the material image."

Karl Barth believed that ". . . in that man is capable of relationship, he is a 'repetition' or 'duplication' of the divine being."

3. Functional Views

Here it is believed that ". . . the image consists in something man does. It is a function which man performs, the most frequently mentioned being the exercise of dominion over the creation."

Erickson's Conclusions

In his evaluation of the various scriptures and views, Erickson starts out by saying, "It is significant that the text of Scripture itself never identifies what qualities within man might be the image" (p.512).

Then he goes on to say:

"Having noted that there are difficulties with each of the general views, we must now attempt to form some conclusions as to just what the image of God is. The existence of a wide diversity of interpretations is an indication that there are no direct statements in Scripture to

resolve the issue. Our conclusions, then, must necessarily be reasonable inferences drawn from what little the Bible does have to say on the subject:

1. The image of God is universal within the human race. We will go into more detail in chapter 25, but at this point we note that the first and universal man, Adam, not merely a portion of the human race, was made in the image of God. Note also that the prohibitions of murder (Gen. 9:6) and cursing (James 3:9-10) apply to the treatment of all humans. There is no limitation placed upon these prohibitions which are based on the fact that man was created in God's image.

2. The image of God has not been lost as a result of sin or specifically the fall. The prohibitions against murder and cursing apply to the treatment of sinful humans as well as godly believers. The presence of the image and likeness in the non-Christian is assumed. If this is the case, the image of God is not something accidental or external to human nature. It is something inseparably connected with humanity.

3. There is no indication that the image is present in one person to a greater degree than in another. Superior natural endowments, such as high intelligence, are not evidence of the presence or degree of the image.

4. The image is not correlated with any variable. For example, there is no direct statement correlating the image with development of relationships, nor making it dependent upon the exercise of dominion. The statements in Genesis 1 simply state that God resolved to make man in his own image and then did so. This seems to antedate any human activity. There are no statements limiting the image to certain conditions or activities or situations. While this is essentially a negative argument, it does point up a flaw in the relational and functional views.

5. In light of the foregoing considerations, the image should be thought of as primarily substantive or structural. This image is something in the very nature of man, in the way in which he was made. It refers to something man is rather

than something he has or does. By virtue of his being man, he is in the image of God; it is not dependent upon the presence of anything else. By contrast the focus of the relational and functional views is actually on consequences or applications of the image rather than the image itself. Although very closely linked to the image of God, experiencing relationships and exercising dominion are not themselves that image.

6. The image refers to the elements in the makeup of man which enable the fulfillment of his destiny. The image is the powers of personality which make man, like God, a being capable of interacting with other persons, of thinking and reflecting, and of willing freely.

God's creation was for definite purposes. Man was intended to know, love, and obey God. He was to live in harmony with his fellow man, as the story of Cain and Abel indicates. And he was certainly placed here upon earth to exercise dominion over the rest of creation. But these relationships and this function presuppose something else. Man is most fully man when he is active in these relationships and performs this function, for he is then fulfilling his telos, God's purpose for him. But these are the consequences or the application of the image. The image itself is that set of qualities that are required for these relationships and this function to take place. They are those qualities of God which, reflected in man, make worship, personal interaction, and work possible. If we think of God as a being with qualities, we will have no problem accepting the fact that man has such qualities as well. The attributes of God sometimes referred to as communicable attributes constitute the image of God; this is not limited to any one attribute. Man has a nature that includes the whole of what constitutes personality or selfhood: intelligence, will, emotions. This is the image in which man was created, enabling him to have the divinely intended relationship to God and to fellow man, and to exercise dominion."

So there you have one theologian's view.

Additional Resources

Below are a few suggestions for resources for further study of this topic.

- **You might want to read the rest of the chapter in Erickson's book. Erickson spends 22 pages on this topic, and I have quoted less than 2 pages.**
- **Another resource that I used is Evangelical Dictionary of Theology by Walter A. Elwell.**
- **You may also find discussions in many Bible dictionaries.**
- **Wikipedia online has a brief discussion of the issue.**
- **You might also read chapters 9, 12, 13, and 18 (and the Endnotes to those chapters) in my book, "I Will Give You Rest." If you don't have a copy of the book, you can read chapters 9 and 12 on my website, www.divinelydesigned.com. These chapters are intended to bring the reality of this issue to bear on inner healing.**

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