

CHAPTER 9.

CREATED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

If you could see as well as an eagle does, you could spot an ant moving on the ground from the highest balcony of a ten-storey building. If you could smell as well as a polar bear, you could sniff out a seal that was more than twenty kilometres away. If you had the stamina of a bar-tailed godwit, you could fly 11,000 kilometres from Alaska to New Zealand . . . non-stop!

Clearly, God has created animals which some truly extraordinary abilities. The more we learn about all these creatures with their diverse talents, the more we may be inclined to ask, “What is so special about human beings?” In answer to this question, people will often mention the intellectual and creative capacities of human beings. We may not have the eyesight and stamina of some animals, but we have figured out how to put a man on the moon. Besides, no animal ever composed the famous Ninth Symphony; a human being named Ludwig van Beethoven did. Others point out that human beings can communicate with language in a way that far transcends how even the chattiest parrot is able to do this.

However, if it is mental and linguistic abilities that set us apart, what about our fellow human beings who cannot think or speak very well, such as some of our mentally challenged brothers and sisters? Are they less human than we are? Clearly not. But then a question returns with even greater urgency. Among all the creatures that God has made, what

is so special about human beings? The first chapter of Genesis provides a profound answer to this pressing question. On the sixth day, when God was just about to create Adam and Eve, the first two human beings, he said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen 1:26). And it was so. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). Three times in two verses the Holy Spirit emphasizes that human beings were created in God’s image. Obviously the emphasis is purposeful. All of God’s creative work fills us with awe and wonder. Yet with the creation of Adam and Eve something even more special happens. For unlike the birds, the fish, the livestock, and the insects, only human beings are created in God’s image.

This truth demonstrates another difference between the revelation of Genesis 1 and the theory of evolution. Evolution is based on the premise that there is a fundamental continuum between animals and human beings. According to this theory, human beings have developed further than their animal ancestors, such as apes and chimpanzees. Human beings may stand straighter, think deeper, and communicate better, but there is nothing essential, or fundamental, that separates animals from humans. In this view it is always a matter of degree; the difference is seen as more quantitative than qualitative. However, in Genesis 1:26–27 the Lord reveals that there is a fundamental dissimilarity. All human beings are created in God’s image; not even one animal is created in his image. This boundary remains today, and it must be maintained today.

All of this leads us to ask an obvious and necessary question: what exactly is this image of God? Is it simply and only an honour that God has given to us? Or is it some special capacity or ability that human beings have? Or is it a task that God has assigned to human beings? Or is it some combination of those three possibilities? We will seek to answer these questions in the next section.

THE IMAGE OF GOD: WHAT IS IT?

Over the centuries, theologians have defined the image of God in various different ways. As hinted at in the introduction to this chapter, one of the

most popular explanations is that the image of God has to do with the special capacities of the human mind and will. The intellectual abilities of human beings are very impressive. Consider what men and women have all discovered and designed: efficient cars, increasingly fast computers, accurate GPS devices, splendid works of art, pleasing musical compositions, and effective surgical techniques. The list goes on and on. Surely, there is no other creature that even comes close to the mental acumen found in human beings!

Added to that, human beings make choices. They choose between one career and another, between one form of recreation and another, between one purchase item and another. This list also goes on and on. Whereas animals often seem to be driven by instinct, human beings evaluate their options and make informed choices. Therefore it is understandable that many theologians have pinpointed human intellect and choice as the key components of the image of God.

Closely related to this, but slightly different, is the idea that the image of God has to do with the capacity of human beings to have a relationship with God. If human beings could not talk or understand language, how could they communicate with God? Perhaps some kind of limited relationship could still exist, but God is one who speaks (see Gen 1), and therefore, if the relationship is to flourish, those who live with him also need to speak. Beyond this, it has been thought that since God is spirit (John 4:24), and since human beings have a soul, which is spiritual, there is a special contact point between God and human beings.

Other theologians emphasize that it is the triune God who said, “Let us make man in our image.” In chapter 6 we looked at this remarkable aspect of Genesis 1:26. Since *one* God is speaking, we would expect him to say, “Let *me* make man in *my* image”; however, he says instead, “Let *us* make man in *our* image.” Since it is the triune God who created man in his image, some have concluded that there should also be some kind of three-in-one aspect found in human beings. For example, the church father Augustine said that the human soul remembers itself, understands itself, and loves itself. So the soul has three distinct capabilities, but it is

still one soul. This human “trinity” is said to be a reflection, or likeness, of the true, divine Trinity.

Finally, many theologians, especially from the Roman Catholic Church, make a distinction between *image* and *likeness*. They say that the image refers to the intellect and choice that God gave human beings, while the likeness corresponds to an extra gift that God gave to Adam and Eve, that is, their original righteousness and holiness. Simply put, for these theologians the image allows human beings to think and choose, while the likeness displays that they were created without sin.

So, what is the image of God? With theologians offering at least four different options, it might seem hard to answer this question in any definite fashion. However, the place to begin is to turn back to Scripture and listen carefully to what God reveals about this matter. The first thing that we should notice is that the creation of human beings in God’s image is mentioned not only in Genesis 1:26–27 but also in Genesis 5:1–3. Let us look at the similarities and differences in these two passages.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.

Both passages teach that God created man in his own image, in his likeness, and that he included both male and female in his image. However, the unique aspect of Genesis 1:26–27 is that God commands Adam and Eve to rule over creation. We will look at this more closely a little later on in this chapter. By the same token, Genesis 5:1–3 also has something special. It makes a connection between Seth, Adam, and God. Surprisingly, the relationship between Adam and Seth is described in terms of

likeness and image (Gen 5:3), just as surely as the relationship between God and Adam and Eve is described using the same words (Gen 5:1; see also Gen 1:26). It is true that the Holy Spirit describes Seth as being in the image *of Adam*, whereas Adam was created in the image *of God*. We will come back to that detail in chapter 10 concerning sin. Nevertheless, the relationship between God and Adam is defined using the same words that express the relationship between Adam and Seth: image and likeness. For this reason we should link the image of God with a Father-children relationship.

This link is confirmed in the New Testament as well. The genealogy of Jesus Christ ends in a fascinating way (Luke 3:23–38). Slowly the genealogy works backwards, from one generation to the previous generation. At a certain point we reach Enosh, who is the son of Seth, who is the son of Adam, and we would expect the genealogy to stop there. After all, Adam is the first human being. He was formed from the dust of the earth (Gen 2:7). He has no ancestor, at least no earthly parents. Yet the genealogy of Luke 3 continues for one more step. In verse 38 we read, “Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.” Thus, the genealogies of Genesis 5 and Luke 3 help us make the important first step in defining the image of God. To be created in God’s image means that, unlike all the rest of the creatures, Adam and Eve were created to be God’s very own children.

Once we acknowledge the link between this Father-children relationship and God’s image, it becomes clear why the word *likeness* is also used. Even in referring to the relationship between an earthly father and his child, we often use the expression *like father, like son*, or *like father, like daughter*. Children may speak, think, act, or even look in a way that is very similar to their father. Obviously, since God is spirit and human beings have a body, there is no physical resemblance between the two. However, when Adam and Eve were originally created, there were many other similarities between God and them. As God was righteous, so were they. The same applies to God’s holiness, justice, and wisdom. All these divine attributes had a reflection, or likeness, in Adam and Eve. To be sure, God remained God, and Adam and Eve remained creatures. Yet, as

God's children, they reflected many of their Father's attributes in a manner that no other creature did. In the beginning, it was truly *like Father, like son and daughter*. This is summed up by the Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 3 when it says, "God created man good and in his image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness."

This definition of God's image also helps us to appreciate the God-given dignity of human beings who are mentally handicapped. As we all know, there are people whose mental capacities are limited. Some of them cannot speak. Others cannot learn to do basic math equations, let alone design a computer. Still others cannot make simple choices such as whether to wear a red or blue shirt. Yet with conviction—and rightly so—we affirm that these special brothers and sisters are created in the image of God just as much as anyone else is. At the same time, this brings things into sharper focus. If God's image is primarily identified with the ability to think and choose, then people who have limited use of those capacities also have less of God's image. But if God's image is defined in the first place in terms of a Father-children relationship, then this is not a problem. Just as earthly parents say, "These *are* our children," regardless of whether one is a Rhodes scholar and the other is mentally challenged, so also the heavenly Father lays claim to all his children.

THE IMAGE OF GOD: WHY?

In the fifth commandment the LORD instructs children to honour their parents. This also applies in the relationship between the LORD and us. Since we, as human beings, were created in his image, and thus created to be his children, our primary purpose in life should be to honour our God. Various Scripture passages confirm this. In Proverbs 1:7 we learn that "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge." In this case, *fear* means *respect*. In other words, a person may claim to have all kinds of intelligence and understanding, but if he does not start from the point of honouring and respecting the LORD, then he has not yet made it to the starting line of true knowledge (see also Prov 9:10 and Job 28:28).

This theme becomes even stronger in the book of Ecclesiastes. There, at the end of his book, the Preacher makes the following concise and clear statement: “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (12:13). In other words, someone may have big plans for his life. Beyond planning, he may even accomplish many great things: growing wealthy, becoming famous, and leaving a legacy behind after he dies. But if in all this activity he does not honour God or keep his commandments, all those labours are in vain. Such a person has missed the whole point and purpose of life for those who are created in God’s image. To know the Father is eternal life (John 17:3), and to honour the Father is the highest purpose of life, both now and in eternity.

This should also help people who are struggling to find meaning and direction in their lives. Some feel that their lives lack meaning unless they have a certain career or job. Others seek significance in wealth. Still others feel they are worthless unless they have many friends. However, the doctrine of being created in God’s image teaches us something different. Of course, it is good to have a fulfilling job, a steady income, and loyal friends. Yet even if someone has neither job nor money nor friends, if he but aims to respect God and obey his commands in everything, his life still has a definite purpose. In fact, such a life is pursuing the very highest goal that any human being could seek. As the Preacher says, “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Eccl 12:13).

In addition to this primary purpose for all those created in God’s image, there is also a secondary one. God expressed this in Genesis 1:26 when he said, “Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens” In other words, one of the key ways in which human beings can show respect for God is by taking good care of his creation. At the same time, this creation mandate has caused some concern. There are those who wonder if it does not leave the door open for people to abuse animals or other parts of creation, whether through neglect, malnourishment, harsh treatment, or pollution.

It is true that, ever since the fall into sin, people in power have often been corrupted by that power. History is full of examples of rulers who did not treat their citizens with kindness. Likewise, history is full of occasions on which human beings did not take proper care of other creatures. However, the mandate that God gave to Adam and Eve was not a licence to do whatever they pleased with God's creatures. Far from it! In Genesis 1:26 two important doctrines are revealed side by side. In the first place, there is the teaching about human beings being created in God's image (Gen 1:26a), and then, immediately thereafter, there is the command to rule over creation (Gen 1:26b). Although these two doctrines are not identical, they are inseparable. Being created in God's image, Adam and Eve were his children, and we might add, his royal children. God is the Creator who is King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tim 6:15). Therefore, his children must be princes and princesses.

At the same time, then, in their ruling activity these children are obligated to reflect the good and wise government of their Father. Also in this regard it should be *like Father, like children*. As outlined in the previous chapter, God the Father governs all creation for good and wise purposes. In obeying the mandate of Genesis 1:26, human beings are to do the same. Abusing creation is not only a misuse of resources or animals; it is also an offence to the God who created them. Christians, of all people, should be highly motivated to take good care of the world that their heavenly Father made.

MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM

In Genesis 1:27 we read, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." A plain reading of this verse suggests that both men and women are created in God's image. In this respect they are equal. Also, both Adam and Eve are charged with the responsibility to take care of creation. The Lord clearly says, "Let *them* have dominion." He does not limit this command merely to Adam, in which case he would have said, "Let *him* have dominion." Even though this image was completely corrupted by the fall into sin, when this image is renewed by grace for the sake of Christ, the restora-

tion applies to both male and female. The apostle Paul outlines this in Galatians 3:26–28, saying, “For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Even though the teaching of Genesis 1:26–27 is quite straightforward, in the history of the church some people have questioned whether women were really created in the image of God. They did so on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11:7. Writing about proper decorum in worship, the apostle Paul says, “For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man.” At first glance this verse may indeed seem to indicate that only men are created in God’s image. But if we read it carefully and pay attention to other related passages in the Bible, it is clear that women are certainly included in God’s image. The first thing to notice is that 1 Corinthians 11 speaks about headship. For instance, in verse 3 the apostle writes, “But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God.” The last phrase is crucial. The head of the Son, Jesus Christ, is his eternal Father. The Son even submits to the Father and does his will (John 14:31). At the same time, the Father and the Son are equal in glory and dignity. In this regard the Son and the Father are one (John 10:3).

A similar sort of thing applies in the relationship between male and female. Women as well as men were created and are restored in the image of God. In this regard they are equal. However, *equal* does not necessarily mean *identical*. It is also true that God created Adam before Eve, and this divine order has certain practical consequences. The apostle Paul describes one of these consequences in 1 Timothy 2, where he teaches that, in the church, women may not have authority over men. The reason for this goes all the way back to creation: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve” (1 Tim 2:13). For this reason women should not serve as office-bearers who hold authority in the church.

Another consequence of this distinction is described by the apostle in the chapter to which we referred earlier: 1 Corinthians 11. In the church at Corinth some women were trying to look like men, especially in the way they cut and styled their hair (1 Cor 11:14–15). Also in our society there are women who try to look like men, and men who try to look like women. Any kind of androgynous look should have no place in the church of God, especially not in public worship. Rather than try to erase all distinctions between male and female, both in physical appearance and otherwise, we should affirm and celebrate the gender distinction. God has made men and women different, not only in their physical bodies, but also in their manner of dealing with issues and cultivating relationships. These differences do not make one gender more or less important than the other. On the contrary, they complement each other. Life is so much richer with two genders. The church would only impoverish herself if she tried to erase the differences between them.

THE IMAGE OF GOD AND THE FALL INTO SIN

In the next chapter we will deal more extensively with what Scripture teaches us about sin. However, it is fitting at this point to touch briefly on how the fall into sin affected the image of God. Did the image of God continue to exist in any way after the fall? Or was it completely obliterated by original sin?

The short answer to these questions is that God's image, though severely corrupted by sin, continues to exist after the fall. The most convincing proof for this is found in Genesis 9. This chapter records what the LORD said after the Great Flood. As the Holy Spirit makes clear, God sent that flood because man's sinfulness was so great (Gen 6:5, 6). After the Flood, sadly but undeniably, sin still existed, both in Noah's heart (Gen 8:21) and in his conduct (Gen 9:21). At the same time, though, in the midst of this post-Flood yet still-sinful world, God does refer to his image in human beings. In fact, he uses the presence of his image as a deterrent against further sin, especially the crime of murder. To be more specific, in Genesis 9:6 God says, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own

image.” Clearly, if God’s image were completely eradicated by the fall into sin, this divine warning would have lost all of its weight. It would have become an empty threat.

At the same time, it should also be clear that God’s image was drastically affected by the fall. Those who were created to be God’s children now acted like insolent rebels. Those created to reflect their heavenly Father’s likeness in righteousness and holiness now began to act more like the devil, embracing deceit, greed, and even jealousy that could explode into fratricide (Gen 4:1–16). Respect for the heavenly Father was replaced with violence and every form of evil inclination (Gen 6:5, 11–12). Obviously, God’s image in man had been totally corrupted from every possible angle.

Yet there was a remnant among the ruins. Also today there is still the fact that God created human beings to be in a uniquely different category. Even if they act like irrational animals at times, God still deals with them as human beings. He expects human beings to respect and protect each other as those who were created in his own image, his own likeness. Furthermore, the image that was ruined by sin can be restored by God’s own Son. This is what the apostle Paul speaks about in Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10. But that is a topic for a later chapter.

MOTHER NATURE?

It is common in many cultures, and also in a number of religions, to speak of the earth as our mother. *Mother Nature* is also an expression that is used frequently. This idea has a long history reaching back to Greek mythology, which referred to the earth as *Gaia*, or *Mother Earth*. Following on the heels of this terminology is the teaching that, as children of the earth, all the citizens of this world must take good care of their aging mother. If they do not, then Mother Earth may become so weak and feeble that she can no longer support and sustain the life of her children. Environmental activists often borrow ideas from the Gaia philosophy.

As stated above, Christians also have a strong motivation for taking the very best care of this earth. However, their motivation is different. It is not because the earth is our aged and increasingly frail mother. Rather, the proper motivation is the confession that the world ultimately belongs not to us but to our heavenly Father, who created it all. In addition, when the Holy Spirit speaks in Scripture about our spiritual mother, he does not point to the earth below but to the Jerusalem above (Gal 4:26; Rev 21:2). This New Jerusalem corresponds to the church (Heb 12:22–23). In fact, John Calvin, one of the reformers of the church in the sixteenth century, said it this way: “To those to whom [God] is a Father, the Church must also be a mother.”¹ And it is the church, not the earth, that gives us the gospel, that pure spiritual milk by which we may grow up in our salvation (1 Pet 1:24–2:2).

Suggested Readings: Genesis 1:24–31; 1 Corinthians 11:1–16

QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Describe as fully as you can what it means that God created human beings in his own image. Be sure to refer to some relevant Scripture passages.
2. In Psalm 8:5 David speaks about how people were created and he remarks, “You made him a little lower than God and crowned him with glory and honour.” (Please note that there are different English translations of this verse, but the original does say “a little lower than *God*”). Read the entire Psalm and discuss how these verses shed light on what it means to be created in God’s image.
3. On the basis of the parallel between Genesis 1:26–27 and Genesis 5:1–3, this chapter reaches the conclusion that the image of God has more to do with a Father-children relationship than with the human abilities to think and choose. But do these abilities still form some part of God’s image? If so, in what way?
4. Lord’s Day 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism identifies three things that flow out of our creation in God’s image: man was created

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.1.1.

“so that [1] he might rightly know God his Creator, [2] heartily love him, [3] and live with him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify him.” In short, then, the threefold purpose of the image of God is to know, to love, and to live with God. How can we grow with respect to each one of these three purposes so that God’s image will shine even brighter in us?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Depression is a condition that affects many people, including Christians. In some situations there are medical factors that require medical treatments. However, often there are also spiritual struggles that complicate the situation. If a fellow Christian is struggling with feelings of worthlessness or lethargy, what kind of spiritual counsel can you provide based on the doctrine of the image of God? What other things can we do or say to help children of God who suffer in this way?
2. Environmental advocates are encouraging everyone to go green and to take better care of the earth, water, plants, and animals. How should Christians evaluate the green movement? Should we promote it? Discourage and avoid it? Or use it carefully and selectively? Please give reasons for your answer.
3. Unbelievers often refer to *Mother Nature* in their conversations. Discuss ways in which the use of that phrase could present you with an opportunity to share the truth of God’s Word. How would you approach it? What exactly would you say?
4. In your experience, what kinds of issues or problems arise between men and women, whether they are married or single? If you can, identify *three* such issues and explore how the truth of being equal but not identical before God (i.e., the fact that both genders were made in God’s image but also that one was created before the other) might help untangle some of these knots.