

The Image of God

Is it seen in all human beings?

If modern evangelicalism has a foundational weakness, it is to elevate man's natural powers. Men are told that they can believe without depending on a preceding work of the Spirit. They are informed that they can come to Christ without being drawn by God. They are told that they can repent, when scripture states that repentance is a gift to some, not all. Essentially, for many preachers, man is sick in sin and a slave to sin; but he is not dead in sin. However, God categorically states that natural man is spiritually dead and can do no good work of any kind, which includes believing in Christ.

Regarding sinners in the world, many modern teachers insist that they can do good works, that they are recipients of a kind of grace that doesn't save and so can please God. Some 'evangelicals' even dare to say that sincere students of false religions will get to heaven.

Moving on past basic Gospel facts we see that men are frequently called to serve in church ministries who have no capacity to do the work and no sense of divine calling. People are called to participate in worship without any consciousness of reverence or submission to God. Over and over the powers of man are elevated above Biblical warrant.

One of the basic reasons for these aberrations is that modern theologians teach that all men are found in the image of God. There is something of God resting upon and being revealed by every human being, even sinners outside of the church. Is this right?

When we see God's word describe man as a sinner, it uses terms that can in no sense reflect the image of God. Man is reprobate, wicked, evil, dead, enslaved, corrupt, lawless, blind, deaf, following Satan, given to lust, darkened in his thinking, iniquitous in his heart and defiled in spirit. How can such a man express anything at all of the holy, righteous, perfect God? Exactly what part of a sinner is the image of God; it cannot be his mind since it is darkened, It cannot be his spirit as this is dead. It cannot be his heart as this is deceitful and corrupt. How can sinners be in God's image in any sense?

Man created in God's image

When God created Adam, he created him in his own image and likeness:

Then God said, 'Let us make man in our **image**, according to our **likeness**; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, 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. (Gen 1:26-27)

This is the book of the genealogy of Adam. In the day that God created man, He made him in the **likeness** of God. (Gen 5:1)

Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the **image** of God he made man. (Gen 9:6)

The word 'image' is **~l,c, tselem**, Strong's 6754 meaning: 'image' as in images of heathen gods; image or likeness of resemblance; or empty semblance. The English noun means 'resemblance' or 'likeness' as found in various representations such as: sculptures,

paintings, effigies, and so on. The word 'likeness' is the Hebrew **tWmD> d@muwth**, Strong's 1823 meaning: 'likeness', 'similitude'.

So the basic meaning of both words is 'resemblance to', or 'likeness of', and the Hebrew words are used interchangeably so do not refer to different things. This doesn't really help us to understand what this image consisted of and theologians have wrestled with this concept for hundreds of years.

The usual answer is to affirm that the image consists in the rationality of man's thinking that raised him above the animal kingdom; or perhaps his desire to worship, or perhaps his appreciation of beauty and ethics, or even all of these. In this sense all men must retain the image of God since they are rational creatures with a perception of (even if flawed) ethics, worship and beauty. But is this good enough?

Likeness and image in history

The early church fathers and medieval theologians made much of a wrong distinction between these two words, using various human characteristics. For instance:

| Image | Likeness |
|-----------------------------|--|
| What man is by nature | Characteristics that may be cultivated or lost |
| Freedom and intellectuality | The original righteousness man possessed |
| Rational faculties | Moral faculties |
| The body | The soul |

The Reformers rejected this distinction, seeing image as the original righteousness of Adam. Luther did not see any of man's natural characteristics as being part of this image, such as rationality, and the image was lost at the Fall. Reformed theology constructs a wider and narrower sense of the image, which raises man above animal life. The wider sense, though marred, includes natural endowments (rationality, morality, immortality of the soul¹) which remain; and the narrower sense consists of spiritual qualities (true knowledge, righteousness and holiness - Adam's original state) which were completely lost by sin.

However, Reformed standards do not support this wider and narrower sense, though it is commonly taught in doctrinal works and in seminaries. The Three Forms of Unity limit the image to man's original integrity - true knowledge of God, righteousness and holiness.²

| | |
|---------------------------|--|
| Luther | The image is man's original integrity: true knowledge of God, righteousness & holiness. This is now lost. |
| Calvin | Uses the term 'nearly deleted', but still says, ' <i>in the ruins there is nothing left than that which is confused, mutilated, and infected with filth</i> '. He never says that man's body and rational soul belongs to the image of God. |
| Reformed Standards | As Luther. Note: Luther, Reformed Standards and Calvin essentially agreed. Later Reformed theologians opened up the sense of the image. |
| Reformed Theology | Wider sense of image: rationality, morality, immortality i.e. what distinguishes man from animals; this remains. Narrower sense: true knowledge of God, righteousness & holiness, i.e. man's original righteousness - now lost. See next heading for details. There have always been divergent views, however, on this matter. |

¹ This concept, as normally stated, is unbiblical. Immortality means more than unending existence and is only applicable to saints in Christ who have eternal, incorruptible life. The wicked are mortal and do not have uncorrupted life; while God can destroy both body and soul in hell (Matt 10:28). Only Christ brings immortality to light. (2 Tim 1:10). The wicked after judgment will have unending existence, but in ceaseless condemnation; this is not immortality.

² See the Three Forms: Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 3; Belgic Confession, Article 14; Canons of Dort, III, IV, I. Calvin taught that the image was corrupted and in ruins. Neither did he teach that man's rationality or his body was part of the image, despite this being claimed in certain Systematic Theologies, such as L Berkhof. See H Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p206-207.

What was the image according to current Reformed theology?

1. ORIGINAL RIGHTEOUSNESS: everyone agrees that the righteousness possessed by Adam was a part of the image of God. Adam was pronounced, 'very good' (Gen 1:31) and upright (Eccles 7:29). Everyone also agrees that this was lost at the Fall when Adam sinned. This original righteousness consisted in true knowledge of God (an innate, positive revelation of God's mind in true fellowship), righteousness (a total harmony with God's will in thought, word and deed) and holiness (a consecration to love God with all his being and innate purity of nature). These three things constitute men restored to the image in Christ (Col 3:10, Eph 4:24). Adam wasn't just innocent or morally neutral, he was holy. Some call this the 'moral image'.³ Adam was God's prophet to know God and represent him truly, his priest on Earth to consecrate himself to God and minister to God, and his king on Earth to have dominion over God's works.
2. MAN'S NATURAL CONSTITUTION: intellectuality, emotions, will; i.e. the constituents of the soul of man. However, these are characteristics of man as man, not man as the image of God. When God breathed the breath of lives into the dust, man 'became' a living soul (Gen 2:7). The soul as the executor of life is a necessary feature of man to exist and carry the image, but it isn't the image itself. Man's rational and moral nature makes man, man. All agree that this part of man is ruined by sin. So even if it were a part of the original image, it is not a reflection of God now.
3. SPIRITUALITY: God is a spirit. Man, in possession of a living spirit, having communion with God as spirit, is a reflection of God. It was the breathing into man of life that man was created and bore the image. This was God's life, spiritual life that empowered man and automatically resulted in the creation of a soul. When Adam sinned he died. But it is clear that what made Adam a man, his soul (emotion, intellect and will) did not die, so what died? Adam's spiritual life died. Adam's ability to commune with God in spirit ceased to function. All agree that this spiritual function was lost at the Fall, so natural man cannot bear the image of God in this sense.
4. IMMORTALITY: God is eternal and has immortality as an essential attribute of his person; while man was created to be immortal, in God's image. If Adam had not sinned he would be alive today as there would have been no seed of death in him. However, sin results in death and Adam ceased to hold immortality. Eventually, Adam died physically.
5. DOMINION: some believe that man's dominion over the animal kingdom is a feature of the image, but this is disputed.
6. THE BODY: many also teach that man's body, as a suitable receptacle for rationality and righteousness, is a part of the image. But this is more to do with image bearing than the image itself.

Note

- All these aspects have been either lost or badly damaged by sin.
- If the image was something absolutely essential to man's nature, when it was lost at the Fall it would have destroyed man as a being. Since the image is said to be lost, it cannot consist of man's rationality and will.
- The qualities of the image must be that which distinguishes man both from animals and also angels.
- The image is: spirituality (now dead in man), original righteousness (man is lost in sin) and immortality (man is now mortal and dies - see footnote 1). The image is lost, man actually lives in the image of Adam as fallen, which is the image of Satan.

³ Adam was not perfected in holiness. He was like a child, perfect in parts but not yet perfect in degree. He had higher degrees of righteousness to attain on obedience.

- It is more true to say that man is an image bearer; he is so constituted as to be able to bear God's image (having rationality and an ethical sense), but does not.
- The idea that there are remnants of the image of God in sinners leads directly to a watered down notion of Total Depravity, and thence to false Gospel statements. This matter is serious in its implications.

Men now are in the likeness of Adam, and hence, Satan

Adam lived one hundred and thirty years, and begot *a son in his own likeness, after his image*, and named him Seth. (Gen 5:3)

And as we have borne the image of the *man of dust*, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly *Man*. (1 Cor 15:49)

How could this be clearer? It needs little comment. Man is no longer in God's image but is the image of his father, Adam. What Adam was man now is - and this is a rebellious sinner, lost in iniquity, mortal, following Satan and requiring a saviour.

Scripture is absolutely full of statements about what man is; for instance:

- Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every intent of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually. (Gen 6:5)
- Cursed *is* the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart departs from the LORD. ... The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked; who can know it? I, the LORD, search the heart, /test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways. (Jer 17:5, 9, 10)
- They have all turned aside, They have together become corrupt; *There is* none who does good, no, not one. (Ps 14:3, repeated in Ps 53 and Rm 3:12)
- I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me. (Ps 51:5)
- Truly the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil; madness *is* in their hearts while they live, and after that *they go* to the dead. (Eccles 9:3)
- For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies. These are *the things* which defile a man. (Matt 15:19-20)
- You are from beneath; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. (Jn 8:23)

Man's constitution by nature is thoroughly wicked; no part of him reflects righteousness or does good, nothing reflects God or could be said to be in the image of God. His is alienated from God, totally separate, alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works (Col 1:21).

However, man is said to follow another spirit:

- [Man is] dead in trespasses and sins ... [walking] according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience ... in the lusts of ... flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind ... children of wrath. (Eph 2:1-3)
- The whole world lies *under the sway of* the wicked one. (1 Jn 5:19)
- You are of *your father* the devil. (Jn 8:44)
- The ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in me. (Jn 14:30)
- He who sins is of the devil. (1 Jn 3:8)
- Every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the *spirit* of the Antichrist. (1 Jn 4:3)
- In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor *is* he who does not love his brother. (1 Jn 3:10)

Clearly, natural man walks according to Satan's direction, is a child of wrath, a son of disobedience, is under Satan's sway since Satan is his father. How could it be possible to

teach that just because a man has rational powers that are merely a vehicle for something spiritual, he is in God's image, when all men are a vehicle for the devil?

When Adam sinned he fell from the reign of grace, he was separated from God and lost all connection with divine things. On that day he died spiritually and became mortal. Instead, he submitted to Satan and became a vehicle for wickedness and iniquity. Consequently, all man are in Adam's image and that image is submitted to the devil, not God.

Nowhere does the Bible teach that natural man is still in God's image. Only in 1 Cor 11:7 do we see this term in the NT spoken in general terms to man as a representative of God. However, Paul is here talking to Christians and even so it is in the context of creation.

For a man indeed ought not to cover *his* head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.

This is not speaking of all men, but to the testimony of believers. In the church, since Christian men are in God's image, their testimony must be spiritual and righteous, thus they should not cover their head. Just because Paul uses the phrase 'a man' it does not mean that he is applying what he says to sinners, it is simply the way he communicates his argument about men and women in church. Paul would never teach that the wicked reprobate are the image and glory of God, this is preposterous.

Christ is the true image

[God] has in these last days spoken to us by *his* Son, whom he has appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the worlds; who being the brightness of *his* glory and the **express image** of his person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. (Heb 1:2-3)

There is only one man who is the likeness of God, and that is the Son of God. No other man is in God's image by nature. This is the point of salvation. Adam was made in God's image and lost it through sin. There was then a void - there was no proper divine testimony in man as God's image.⁴ The Lord Jesus came into the world to restore the image, to bring a spiritual testimony. He was the exact representation of the Father as a seal makes an identical image on paper.

Jesus then brings many sons to glory who share this image by virtue of spiritual union. Christians are in Christ and have ceased to be human; they are new creatures. As such the image is now seen in all believers.

Christians are new creatures

If anyone *is* in Christ, *he is* a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.
(2 Cor 5:17)

This is a crucial verse. The old life has passed away. All that we were in Adam is now dead and at the Second Coming even the physical body we inherited from Adam will be replaced. Everything is new - mark this, all is new. We now have the image and this is a new thing. Man did not previously have the image, but now under the New Covenant the image is restored to man is newness.

⁴ OT saints were a testimony to God but restricted in the realm of types, shadows and symbols. The reality of what they testified to came with Christ (Heb 8:5-6, 9:24, 10:1). They did not have the fulness of the Spirit's ministry indwelling as we do under the New Covenant (Jn 7:39, 14:16, 17, 26).

This newness is a new creation, a new order of mankind that is a true repository of God's image. Because their life is hidden with Christ in God, believers are image bearers, they are the true likeness of God. They have a spiritual life, they are righteous in Christ, they have immortal, eternal life, they are a holy people, they love God and are loved by God, they are renewed in the spirit of their minds - they have the true image.

Be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:23-4)

You have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new *man* who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him. (Col 3:9-10)

We are '*according to the image*', '*according to God*' - the Greek word means 'down from'. We are the resemblance of God, the likeness of God. Our mind is now renewed, it doesn't think like Adam, it thinks like Christ since we have his mind (1 Cor 2:16). Natural man's rationality cannot be in God's image since he thinks like Satan; only believers can think like Christ and thus represent God.

Not only that, but we were predestined to be conformed to God's image:

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to be* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. (Rm 8:29)

People who are not predestined to be in Christ are not in God's image.

This image bearing will continue in heaven in fulness

as we have borne the image of the *man* of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly *Man* (1 Cor 15:49).

Here Paul draws a contrast between Adam and glorified man in Christ:

| Man in Adam | Man in Christ |
|----------------------------|-----------------|
| Corrupt (v42, 53, 54) | Uncorrupted |
| Sown in dishonour (v43) | Raised in glory |
| Sown in weakness (v43) | Raised in power |
| Natural (v44) | Spiritual |
| Made of dust (v47, 48, 49) | Heavenly |
| Flesh and blood (50) | Spiritual |

The difference could not be more extreme. Believers in Christ are in the image of God, men in Adam cannot be in the image in any sense.

Objections

There is only one passage to consider:

With it [the tongue] we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God. (Jam 3:9)

Does this not suggest that natural man is in God's image?

Firstly, no sane translation uses the word 'image' here (a few foolish ones do). Most use 'similitude' while a few use 'likeness'. The word in question is *homoiosis* which is not the usual Greek word for 'image (*eikon*)' or 'likeness' but a weaker word that only appears here in the NT.⁵ The usual word is *homoion*, as seen in Phil 2:7.⁶ James specifically used an

⁵ ο`μοιωσις *homoiosis*, Strong's 3669 meaning 'a making like'.

unusual word instead of the accepted, more common word. We cannot use such an oblique use to overturn sound Biblical theology elsewhere.

James's point is that since man was originally made in God's image and still has similarities to God, yet they have been defaced and corrupted, so we should not curse men as we would not curse God. The people that James spoke to would never dream of cursing God or even write his name down on paper in case it was trodden underfoot, yet felt free to curse other men whom God created. James is emphasising a moral point, not teaching on the image.

Conclusion

We have seen that only two people can be certainly said to have the image of God as a man: Adam at the time of his creation, and Christ. Adam lost the image when he sinned and fell, so that all his progeny bear the image of man and not the image of God. Since Satan captivated Adam, mankind follows Satan also and reflects more of his wickedness than the righteousness of God.

Believers in Christ are united to him, becoming one body in him so that they now also bear the image. Christians have the likeness of God because they are in Christ, being spiritual and righteous people, sons of God.

It is important to hold a clear view of this subject since the idea that all men are still made in God's image leads to a degeneration of the doctrine of Total depravity. This then leads to further degeneration, such as teaching that sinners can please God in the flesh, or can choose to believe without a prior work of grace in their heart.

We must hold to a Biblical doctrine of the image if we wish to avoid error.

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⁶ **ο`μοιωμα** *homoioma*, Strong's 3667 that which has been made after the likeness of something, a figure, image, likeness, representation, i.e. resemblance, such as amounts almost to equality or identity.