

Bite Size Bible Study

Image of God #146

By Pastor Lee

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, in the likeness of ourselves; and let them rule over the fish in the sea, the birds in the air, the animals, and over all the earth, and over every crawling creature that crawls on the earth." Gen 1:26 NIV

As Christians we sometimes speak of being created in the Image of God, but how often do we stop to ponder just what that means and what expectations that places on us?

One of the better discussions I have found on this topic is by John H. Walton in his book "The Lost World of Adam and Eve". The following is an edited version of his chapter 21 on this subject.

The image of God has been the topic of numerous dissertations and monographs in a variety of disciplines (e.g., exegetical treatments of Genesis, theology, philosophy, art history, neuroscience/psychology). This will entail a brief presentation of four aspects: function, identity, substitution and relationship. These are not mutually exclusive alternatives, and I would propose that each of them is true.

Function. The understanding of the image of God as an assigned role with an inherent function has long been part of the discussion. In this view, humanity corporately functions as God's vice-regents — stewards who are charged with subduing and ruling as articulated in the very context in which the image is granted (Gen 1:26-30). As a corporate designation, it differentiates humanity from all other creatures and species. Those capacities that can be discussed neurologically (self-awareness, God-awareness, etc.) may well be understood as allowing us to carry out this task, but they would not themselves define the image of God. All humans have a role to play in this aspect of our corporate identity, regardless of how well they function mentally or physically.

Identity. This aspect of the image of God expresses our core identity: this is who we are. We should recall that naming is an act of creation in the ancient Near East. It then follows that when God designates humankind as his image; that is what humankind becomes. The image becomes interwoven in our destiny and our nature. Like any name in the Old Testament, it takes on reality over time in any number of possible ways. Our Creator assigns this identity; it is not something we could take on our own for ourselves, and it is not something that can just develop in us. Just as naming is an act of creation in the ancient world, so this giving of identity is a spiritual act of special creation.

Substitution. When a king in the ancient world had an image of himself placed by the gate in a city he had conquered or at the border of a land that he claimed, the image proclaimed the king's presence there. It was a substitute, but it was more than just a stand-in. In its aesthetics, it communicated important ideals about the king and about his kingship.

It is interesting that in Genesis, God's image, (is placed) in humanity, (just) as in the case of images in the ancient world; we, as his image, stand in as God's substitutes. We represent his presence in sacred space. His essence makes us spiritual beings and constitutes discontinuity from any other creature. Just as images were revered as divine creations in the ancient world, we are considered to be the works of God in the truest possible sense.

Divine-human relationship. In each of the previous categories, the premise of the category implied some level of relationship between God and his people. In this last category, more specificity can be provided to suggest that the relationship is best expressed in familial terms. In the biblical text this can be most easily observed when Adam begets Seth "*in his own likeness, in his own image*" in Genesis 5:1-3. (End of edited quote from Walton)

The image of God provides more evidence, from the scriptures that this characteristic is only in humans and not in other creatures. Namely the other creatures are not tasked with the care of the entire worldly creation.

These four categories for understanding the image of God are not mutually exclusive, each gives insight into that category. As we consider the image of God in each category, we must accept that all human beings are participating in the divine image; some with a better reflection others not so much.

That image was not lost when Adam and Eve were sent from the garden, but it has been distorted. The tasks that were given to Adam have been passed on to us. They are still our responsibilities, even though our ability to carry out those tasks have been hampered in so many ways by the conditions we inherit.

People, God's images, were placed in sacred space (this world) just like the images of Babylon's gods were placed in sacred space in their temples to represent their god's presence. We understand that these images were not representing anything, because the scriptures tell us that other gods do not exist. We are the only Images of God. As such we should live lives that represent that image as best we are able.

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