

HOW ARE HUMANS MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE?

There's something special about people and we all know it. The death of a person is simply a different category than the death of an ivy vine, an insect, or even an idea. So what makes humans different than anything else? Maybe the Bible provides a clue when it says that humans were made in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27). But what exactly does this mean? How are humans made in God's image? Perhaps we should take a closer look at this mysterious biblical phrase.

For starters, it's likely that the Hebrew and Greek terms used for "image" and "likeness" in the Bible are interchangeable. There is no indication that these are two distinct characteristics. In fact, the writer of Genesis is probably just emphasizing one idea by using two different words. But what is this idea? A helpful concept comes from the Greek word for image, *eikon*, where we get our word icon. Consider how an icon on a computer screen works. It's a small picture that represents and points to another file or program when functioning properly. In the same way, human beings or Eikons, are people who somehow represent and reflect God himself when functioning as designed.

The Bible also says that Adam and Eve were created in the image of God and that all subsequent human descendants – that means you and me – carry the image of God as well. So, every human being you've ever met or will meet is made in the image of God. There is no indication that any persons are made in the image of God the slightest bit more or less than other persons. In fact, people who may be tempted to think they are less valuable according to the world's standards – the chronically ill, poor, immigrants, orphans, outcasts, or socially marginalized – are often highlighted in the Bible as especially significant to God. What's more, sin itself doesn't destroy the image of God in us. Sin seems to corrupt, corrode or distort the image, but does not eradicate it completely. Surely, we are all cracked Eikons beyond the abilities of self-repair. Nevertheless, there remains a glimmer of God's image in all of us.

So if we have the image of God, what *is* the image of God? Or as one Christian scholar asks, what does it mean to be an Eikon? Because Genesis does not provide an exhaustive explanation, theologians have offered three slightly different answers. First, the image of God could be something substantive that humans possess that separates us from God's other creatures. Perhaps it is the human ability to reason, the freedom of will, a sense of morality, or an immaterial soul/spirit. As far as we know, no other living things have these qualities in the same way as we do. Thus, according to this view, the image of God is one or several substantive qualities that God has uniquely given to humans.

Another view is that the image of God is not something resident in human nature, but the actual experience of a relationship. Put a different way, when a person is in relationship with

God and other people, he or she bears the image of God. So, when God originally made humans uniquely in his image, he made beings with an unmatched ability to relate to each other and to himself. And though sin brings brokenness into our relationships, it does not remove the relating ability altogether. Even people at odds with one another have a relationship, albeit a fractured one.

Last, some theologians suggest that the image of God is functional. In other words, when we do as God has instructed and live out the function for which we were made, we bear his image. Pointing to Genesis 1:26-28, these scholars suggest that our purpose – being fruitful and ruling over the earth – bears the image. Another picture might be helpful here. Ancient rulers scattered statues of themselves across the land over which they ruled. These images reminded the subjects of their sovereign ruler and functioned to maintain his dominion over the land. In the same way, perhaps humans are images of God scattered across the land he created. And when we live out our stewardship responsibility, we most truly bear God's image.

So, which is it? A quality we have been given, an ability to be in relationship, or a purpose we serve? Maybe there is no right answer. It could be that the Bible is intentionally vague because all three are important. Perhaps we don't so much need a theological system to analyze as a model to follow. This leads to an extremely significant conclusion.

In Jesus Christ, we see the only perfect and complete example of one who fully bore God's image. On one hand, this is because Jesus was God. This is why the apostle Paul said that Jesus "is the image [eikon] of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15 TNIV). But on the other hand, Jesus was fully human. In fact, he is *more* human than any one else who has ever lived. Jesus was tempted in every way humans are, yet he never sinned (Hebrews 4:15). He also lived in perfect relationship with God the Father (John 17:21). Moreover, Jesus obeyed God fully and fulfilled his earthly purpose completely (John 17:4). Put simply, in light of the person he was and the life he lived, Jesus provides the perfect example of God's image to us. This is why the Bible also exhorts us – as cracked Eikons who dimly bear the image of God – to be "conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29 TNIV). Even if we don't fully understand it, we have a model to follow.