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*The Image of God:
According to Their Kinds*



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When God created the plants, animals, fish, and birds we are told that he created them each "according to their kinds" (Genesis 1:11-12, 21, 24-25). This phrase is repeated nine times in the first few paragraphs of the creation account with little apparent significance until we find that there is a creature which is created *not* according to its own kind, but after another kind. Before we consider this other creature, let's think about what being created "according to their kinds" signifies about these first creatures.

A creationist will be quick to let us know that if the animals were created "according to their kinds," then they were not evolved from other animals, and this is quite correct. If a dog was created "according to its kind," then it was not created as an amoeba which evolved. But this is only one conclusion drawn from a fuller concept in these words.

The idea of being created after their kinds implies that the type or design of each species created had existed previously in the mind of God. We cannot draw the timeline only in the direction of the future, from creation onward, simply as an antidote to evolutionary theory. God had delineated and distinguished each of the species beforehand, and that is why there was a "kind" according to which each species could be created.

Let us take a simple example of what we mean here. Say that a man has a tulip farm and one of his workers is going to bag the bulbs for sale. The owner tells the worker, "Label the packages according to their prices." Now if the owner had never set criteria for pricing the bulbs and there was no plan for how to price them, then the worker would be at a loss as to how to proceed. He could not label them according to their prices if there were no preordained prices. In the same way, God could not make the animals and plants "according to their kinds" if there were no preordained kinds.

At creation he was calling forth the manifestations of the kinds which he had earlier designed. In this sense the creation was similar to what God later told Moses, "See that you make them after the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain" (Exodus 25:40). The pattern preceded its manifestation.

IN OUR IMAGE

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'" (Genesis 1:26). What a difference! Now a creature was going to be made which was not merely "according to its kind," but according to the image and likeness of God. It immediately becomes clear that the reader has been primed by the repetition of the earlier phrase to be shocked by the contrast presented here. As we read, our minds supply the words we expect, "according to its kind," but we are stopped short; they are not there. God inspired this to be written in such a way, perhaps, to force us to reread this paragraph to see if we missed the words we expected. But why? God was here introducing humanity as fundamentally different from the rest of creation, and he wanted the differences to stand out in the text.

We read that we also were created according to a plan and pattern. We were not simply designed by God, but we were designed to mirror and imitate God. Unlike the animals, we were not created according to a pattern that was external to the Creator; our pattern is the Creator himself.

Many theories have been advanced about the exact

dimensions and content of this image. Theologians have long debated whether this image was utterly destroyed or only damaged at the Fall, and to what extent we still are in God's image. Is the regenerate person now in God's image while the unregenerate is not?

To save space I will quote only John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards for examples of common definitions of the image of God, for they are typical of the thought of their peers.

Calvin writes: "The primary seat of the divine image was in the mind and heart, or in the soul and its powers, yet there was no part of man, not even the body itself, in which some sparks did not glow." He expounds this idea: "I retain the principle I just now set forward, that the likeness of God extends to the whole excellence by which man's nature towers over all the kinds of living creatures." Again he writes: "Now God's image is the perfect excellence of human nature which shone in Adam before his defection, but was subsequently so vitiated and almost blotted out that nothing remains after the ruin except what is confused, mutilated, and disease-ridden." Later he adds: "God's image is properly to be sought within him, not outside him, indeed, it is an inner good of the soul."¹

Edwards focuses on a particular aspect of human nature:

And herein does very much consist that image of God wherein he made man (which we read of, Genesis 1:26-27, and chapter 9:6), by which God distinguished man from the beasts, viz. in those faculties and principles of nature, whereby he is capable of moral agency. Herein very much consists the natural image of God; as his spiritual and moral image, wherein man was made at first, consisted in that moral excellency that he was endowed with.²

Such arguments revolve around the assumption that the image of God refers to abilities and characteristics with which God has endowed us, such as reason, will, personality, or moral capability. Allow me to sidestep all of the arguments and suggest that these traits do not answer to the image of God for at least two reasons.

The first problem is that all such arguments attempt to look inside the human personality to see what seems godlike in us. We have been seeking to find the powers of God within ourselves. I am convinced that this approach is fraught with peril and comes very close to pursuing the bait which the serpent held out, "You will be like God," for Calvin and Edwards have explicitly told us that Adam and Eve already were like God before the Fall. But to be like God is to be infallible and our ancestors fell, dramatically disproving their likeness to God.

Because God said that his image was the basis of our creation, therefore his image is the basis of all meaning in human lives and affairs; and if we seek to find that meaning for our lives in the exercise of all of the godlike attributes which theologians hold up, we end up making ourselves our own idols.

Next we must question Calvin's and Edwards' interpretation because they declare the image to be either mutilated or obliterated. But about whom was God speaking in Genesis 9:6 when he said that he had made man in his own image if not sinful people? These are the descendents of the Fall about whom God speaks, declaring them still to be his image, just as Adam had been.

Third, consider whether any such attributes could be a sufficient explanation for the murder prohibition in Genesis 9:6, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." Can we really believe that the basis for the prohibition of bloodshed lies in our being rational creatures, or our personality?

No, God is jealous for the blood (life) of humans, not because we carry his image, but because we are his image. Scripture does not say that God implanted his image inside of us, but that we *are* in his image. This is far from a silly mincing of words; these two differ radically. This is the only basis that I know of for affirming human dignity and worth. Humans do not have value based on their being rational creatures; for then the more rational or intellectual or witty a person was, the more value he or she would have. Humans do not have

value based on their ability to will, to desire something, or to pursue goals; then the meek would have less value than tyrants. Human dignity comes not from any traits inside of ourselves, but from a role imposed upon us by our Creator at the time of our creation. As long as we exist, we will be in this role. All of the personality characteristics, which are so often debated in respect to the image of God, are merely that: characteristics. But God did not make mankind with his image as one, or some, or all of our characteristics. God made humans expressly to *be* his image.

This is the one central and essential point that sets up the difference between us and the animals: they were not created to be the image of God; we were. This was Adam's role in the newly created universe and this is the role into which every one of Adam's descendants is born. We are the image and likeness, the picture, to which all of creation looks to see the invisible God. The birds and fish, the stars and angels are to look to us to see what their creator is like. Even more fundamentally, God is to be able to see his own glory reflected in us.

THE FALSE IMAGE

But we do not look like God in our actions, thoughts, or motives. We do not display his image well. We do not look much like our Creator. Does this mean that we are no longer in the image of God? Has God's image failed, or disappeared? Not at all, for this again assumes that this image is an attribute, something added to us aside from our essential person. It is not. One could view it as a commandment. We are commanded to exhibit God's image, and although we fall short, the commandment of God will never fall. We are created *in the role* of manifesting God's self image just as the animals were created in the role of manifesting the types which God had preconceived. No matter what any person does, or in how evil a manner that person behaves, his or her role in the universe remains unchanged. God made human beings in his image, and they would have to cease to exist to exit from that role. Remember that in Genesis 9:6 God did not say that perfect people were made in his image, but rather "God made

man in his own image." Therefore even wicked people, like us, remain in the image of God.

This is precisely why sin is so abhorrent to God. As his image to the creation, when I sin, I bear false witness against my Creator. My sin lies about what God is like. My evil tells a false story about the perfections of God. Even those sins that I pretend are small, are giant lies which I am telling to creation, myself, and my Father, concerning his character. Every sin is blasphemy at its heart. It is for this reason that God cannot look on sin; sin is antithetical to his nature. Sin is the denial of who God really is, and God cannot let himself be defamed.

Notice how Isaiah unites the ideas of being created by God, called by his name, and God's glory:

Bring my sons from afar
and my daughters from the end of the earth,
everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made (Isaiah 43:6-7).

The idea of being called by his name and being in his image are similar in that they both point to the role of an ambassador who is entrusted with the reputation of the one represented and has the responsibility to seek the glory of the sender.

Why, if we are not fulfilling our role, does God still say that we are created in his image? Here the distinction must be clearly maintained between our commission and our achievement. For example, if the President commissions an emissary to go to a foreign land, that emissary's actions reflect personally upon the President, for good or ill. Now if the leaders of that land abuse or kill the emissary, will the President consider how well the emissary represented him? Won't he rather consider that the violence done his agent was done directly against himself and his nation? Likewise, while God is full of wrath against us for our sin, he is jealous that his image bearers receive respect on account of their commission as his emissaries.

History is the unrolling of a scroll on which we see God working to form his image rightly on his image bearers, who in turn reflect a twisted and maimed image. If we had lost the role in which we had been created, then God could have calmly turned his back on us with no shame. But at the creation he had bound us together with himself by making us his image. Suppose that God had slain Adam and Eve as soon as they fell. That would have been the end of God's image on the earth and I can hear Satan still laughing: "Yes, God, that is how you look. Those twisted slaves are your image exactly." You see, when God created us as his own image, he gave his reputation into our hands.

For his own glory's sake he would neither leave us in our sins nor annihilate us. The history of all of God's covenants with his people has been the extension of the creation, making us finally into his image: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

THE NEW ADAM

Christ did much more than to just die for our sins. If Jesus had only died for our sins, then we might avoid the fire, but would we have the holiness required to be welcomed into heaven? There is the double transaction of Christ taking off our sin and also putting onto us the robe of his righteousness. As Isaiah wrote:

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness
(Isaiah 61:10).

Or consider the vision of Zechariah: "Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed with filthy garments. And the angel said to those who were standing before him, 'Remove the filthy garments from him.' And to him he said,

'Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments'" (Zechariah 3:3-4).

Our salvation requires that we not only refrain from sin but also that we perfectly reflect all of God's positive attributes. Of course our sin detracts from our showing his image, but God is much more than a sinless being. He is holy and just and loving and long-suffering and jealous to see those attributes in his creation. To attain unto heaven, we must have all of these to our credit in full measure. To have only a little of each is insufficient, and belies an insufficiency in God. "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

Just as Adam was our corporate head, and when he sinned we all were committed to sin along with our head, so Jesus is our new corporate head, and his righteous life is given to us as a birthright when we are born into the family of God (see 1 Corinthians 15:45-49, 1:30). God sees us now not as the vile children of Adam who profane his name, but as brothers of Jesus who have "become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Because Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15), we are finally seen, in him, as also that image of the invisible God. Only in Christ do we finally fulfill the function of our creation.

"The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. . . . For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:4-6). Where does one look to see the very image of God? Look in the face of Christ, who is not only God, but also the image of God for us. We know full well that Jesus is God incarnate (John 1:1,14,18; Romans 9:5), but that is merely an external fact, pertaining to Jesus' nature but not touching us personally. As was said before, the idea of the image of God pertains to roles rather than mere external facts, and roles pertain to relationships. When we think of Jesus as God we know who he is, but when we think of him as the image of God we know who he is *to us*. He was made the image of God to give *me* the "light of the

knowledge of the glory of God" when I look to him. He is the only fully human person, because he is the only one to fulfill the purpose for which all humans were created; and he is fully human *for me*.

Therefore, the rules have not changed in regard to the basis of my creation. I was made to show forth the glory of God to all of creation, and that is still my role. I have no permission to abandon my duty. But in my failings in that regard, and they are many, I know that God has removed my dirty clothes and nailed them to the cross and he has given me Christ's clothes to cover my nakedness. How unbelievable it is that God would do all of that for one who has brought only disgrace to his name by my life! What a Savior!

A MISUSE OF THE DOCTRINE

People are willing to take to themselves the role of God as lawgiver, judge, and executioner; but not the part of showing his character as he is long-suffering, merciful, and abounding in loving-kindness. Yet it is primarily in these latter areas that we are to mirror him. What if someone says to his brother, "You will be damned for what you have done to me," and excuses himself by saying that he is acting in the role of God, as his image. Can he be excused by this doctrine, because truly judgment is the role of the Most High? Never! For it is not in the character of God to overstep authority or to go beyond what is written; and it is written, "Vengeance is mine, and recompense" (Deuteronomy 32:35).

Consider that he who is the perfect image of the invisible God was not willing to usurp authority. Even though he is the King of Kings, he said, "I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me" (John 5:30). Therefore we must understand that our role as the image of God on the earth extends to our displaying his character, but not to our attempting to take his prerogatives as our own. God is the only judge of the souls of humankind.

The question of which of God's activities are to be emulated by humanity and which are prerogatives which he has

retained as his exclusive domain will likely be a matter on which some will disagree, but the distinction must be made. The scope of this article does not include such an analysis, but the average Christian intuitively knows that he or she is to be an echo of God's love but not the executioner of God's wrath. It will be left to the reader's informed conscience to determine how to distinguish the two.

CONCLUSIONS

Because we are called to reflect God's image, we must carefully watch God to see how he acts. With Paul we can say, "We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Corinthians 3:18). And Jesus equated sonship with being of like disposition with our Father: "But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:44-45).

Because all are created in God's image, we have the right to rebuke all, sinners and saints, who sin against God. We may do this not because their sin hurts us, but because their sin reflects poorly on our God and theirs. Even if they do not profess him as God, they are still made in his image and bear the responsibility to display him accurately. God will hold them accountable for their actions, because they are his.

Because all are responsible to show forth God's image, and none of us have done so perfectly, all must be commanded in Jesus' name to repent and run to him for protection. We do not only need to advise people to seek an escape from hell, but also to instruct them to turn from defaming God in their actions. It is insufficient to present a Savior; we must also present a Lord. We have the responsibility to remind every living person that they are not living up to the role for which they were created, and that an indignant God is filling up the cup of his wrath. He will clear his name.

Because we are the image of God, every sin, no matter

how small, is a breach of the first and the third commandments: the first because it places our love of that sin before our love of God, and the third because our sin is a lie about the character of God, thereby defaming his name. Therefore God has a right to take every sin as a personal affront, and he will. There is no room for "small" sins, "white" lies, or the "lesser" of two evils. Sin is exceedingly sinful, lies are all lies and come from the father of lies, and evil is all evil and only evil. Seen in this light, the sins which we commonly wink at become weights around our necks which will drag us down to the pit.

Thus we begin to see why God takes sinfulness so seriously. The problem was great enough that God sent his own Son both to live the life of his image which we had not done and to take the punishment of his wrath for us. Jesus both lived and died for us and in our place. Just as Jesus is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15), so he was also "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Romans 8:3). He carried God's image on earth in our place, and he carries our image even now in his resurrected body, before his Father in our place. Those of us who are in Christ have the infinite benefit that when the Father sees us, he sees us only in our Covenantal Head; that is he sees us in his Son. We who have fled to Christ for cover, are covered indeed by his absolutely righteous life. We are judged to have lived the life that he lived, and therefore we are judged to have fulfilled our role in this universe.

Consider how abhorrent sin really is. My sin shows that I do not know God, for if I did, I would not depict him in my evil actions. This is affirmed by 1 John 3:6, "No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him." When we see sin in ourselves, we should be very afraid, and very eager to repent. Such an attitude is God fearing and godly.

We must be done with every foolish inquiry into the meaning of life. Libraries have been written trying to find a meaning and purpose to this life, with very little success. Our meaning is absolutely clear in that we were created for a purpose—to show the character of our Creator in ourselves. The

pursuit of this meaning will be successful only in Christ Jesus, who is God With Us. Therefore we are told to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). Therein is meaning, and fullness, and peace with our Father. Every other pursuit, if it does not tend toward this goal, will ultimately be found to be "vanity and a striving after wind," as the preacher of Ecclesiastes found.

It is because of the inner sense of the nonfulfillment of our role in creation that "our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Him" (Augustine's Confessions). We are empty, because until we begin to be that which we were created to be, we have not even fully become human. We seek ourselves and find nothing; but if we sought "first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, [then] all these things," even our own selves, would be "added" to us.

Our glory is a reflected and not an inherent glory. "We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:18). We have nothing in this glory about which we may boast. We bear witness to God's glory as the moon bears witness to the sun's glory, by staying in the light. Therefore, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:31).

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Notes

1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 188-90.
2. Jonathan Edwards, *The Freedom of the Will* (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996), 35-36.