

Made in the Image of God to Worship Him

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. (Genesis 1:26)

It is impossible in a short essay to communicate the totality of the significance that God chose to make human beings, male and female, in His own image and likeness. It is God Himself who said, “Let us make man [humans] in our image, after our likeness” (1:26). And then, in order to set apart the extraordinary significance of this statement, the author of Genesis repeats the truth in a poetic way. In Genesis 1:27, the text seems to be set apart as we read,

So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. (Genesis 1:27)

Humans, not animals, are made in the image and likeness of the Creator God, who spoke the universe into existence by the word of His power and made them. Being made in the image of God means that humans are like God, represent him, and have a special relationship with God that animals do not. If something is an image of another thing, it is not the thing, but it reflects what the other thing looks like. To list the number of ways man is like God would be nearly impossible. God loves; man loves. God hates; man hates. God thinks, designs, and creates, and so do men and women. God is grieved, and man is grieved. And on and on. Adam was the first image-bearer of God, and God gave him dominion over the earth. Humans create other image-bearers of God by fulfilling the mandate to be fruitful and multiply, filling the earth with potential worshippers of God (Gen 1:28). And the Father wants these people to worship Him (John 4:23).

Creating humans in God's image and likeness sets humans apart from every other created thing. One does not think twice when he crushes a cockroach under his shoe. But humans are not insects – they are beings who bear God's image, both male and female. Because of this truth, all humans – without regard to their apparent value to society – are to be treated with dignity and respect. In Genesis 9:5-6, God institutes capital punishment, “by man shall his blood be shed” for those who take human life because “God made man in His own image” (v. 6). When humans treat fellow humans like God would treat them they are reflecting God's image and glorifying God. Inasmuch as humans are image-bearers of God, their goal should be at all times to be, say, and do what God would be, say, and do, and thus reflect His image. If you deny that humans are made in God's image, then you are free to do what is right in your own eyes. Humans can murder, rape, kidnap, assault one another, etc., as the stronger sees fit.

When Adam sinned, he was no longer a perfect representative of God. The image of God was marred or distorted but not lost. There were still many ways in which Adam was like God, and at any given moment, if he chose to be, say or do what God would be, say or do, he could reflect God's image to others. The more one is like God, the more one reflects His image to others. The less one is like God, the less one reflects God's image. God is gracious, tender, merciful, compassionate, understanding, patient, loving, kind, etc. These are all attributes of God humans can reflect as image bearers. But sin and man's sinful nature often interfere with our ability to reflect God's image and thus worship God. When humans reflect God's image to others, it is God-glorifying and is a form/act of worship (Rev 15:4).

When sin entered the world, sin was like an enemy crouching at man's every decision point, influencing them contrary to the will of God. But God instructed man to rule over sin (4:7). Cain failed to rule over sin and murdered Abel. Since then, no human has been capable of ruling over sin entirely until Jesus did it. Jesus ruled over sin and death so that those who have been born again (John 3) through faith in the gospel can rule over sin in the power of His Spirit. Death and sin no longer rule over the believer. Christ's victory in the resurrection demonstrated His defeat of sin and death. Christ made it possible for followers to reflect God's image to others more perfectly.

When Christ saves a person from the wrath of God through faith in the gospel (1Co 15:1-4), the Holy Spirit begins a good work of transforming the believer into the image of Jesus (Rom 8:29, Phi 1:6). This is a slow progressive process of helping followers of Christ restore what Adam lost in the Garden of Eden (1Co 15:49). This process is called sanctification and means growing in Christlikeness. When the Holy Spirit works in the life of a Christian, the Spirit restores what sin damaged in bearing God's image. Christians diligently seek to make disciples of Jesus (Mat 28:19) so that more people reflect God's image on the earth such that the world is filled with worshippers of the one true and living God. Again, the Father is seeking this (John 4:23). Ultimately, the new heaven and new earth will be filled with worshippers who perfectly reflect God's image and likeness for all eternity (Rev 21-22).