

## The Image of God and Pastoral Care in Genesis 1:26-27

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Men and women are creatures created in the image of the uncreated and invisible God, hence the mystery surrounding this term 'image of God' and the difficulty in understanding it. The image of God reflects the Trinity, a Triunity that evades our exhaustive understanding. Furthermore, what the term 'image of God' means is not fully explained in Scripture. Hence it should not be seen as a technical term that bears the same precise meaning every time we see it used since it may well be used in different ways by the different biblical authors.

In Gen 1:27 (b-c) we have two phrases with no grammatically explicit link, just one phrase butted up against another, describing the same event from two different aspects. Here the creation of humanity is specified for the first time as being both male and female. To create the female in his image means that God, as he does with the male, images female in his being. Refer: Job 38:29; Ps 71:6, 131:2; Is 42:14, 49:15, 66:9, 12f; Prov. 9:1-12; Matt 23:37.

Further, we see that both male and female are in God's image, rather than being required together to make up God's image. Each stands on its own as being in God's image. So, our sexuality does not define our image-bearing. Such an association would not occur to the Israelites - their God was not male or female. Therefore, it follows that our interaction as males and females is the outworking of our image bearing.

Historically, the extensive theological debate concerning humans as God's image bearers has centred on the question, "What is the image of God *in* us?" The text in Genesis 1:26ff, however, does not use that precise expression. If we think of the image of God as being *in* us we will begin trying to identify the image of God in human beings either structurally, relationally, or functionally, or we will look for some entity, quality or aspect, (e.g. emotion, volition etc.) within us that points to the reality of our image bearing. The text of Scripture does not encourage us to look for some specific item/s within, rather the individual, whether male or female, is described as being made in God's image. The image of God is not in us; rather we are in his image. Hence every aspect of what it means to be human reflects the divine image. This suggests a wholeness of similitude rather than a list of qualities.

Our human attributes are indeed a reflection of God's person and attributes. E.g., we speak because God speaks, we relate because God relates, or we build things because God builds/creates, or we rule over things because God is a ruler. These are the out-workings or evidence of image bearing, not the definition of image bearing.

If we see these attributes as the definition of what it means to bear God's image then we will be inclined to think that restoring the divine image means learning to speak more truthfully, relate more sincerely, build more diligently, or rule more wisely. But these actions only provide the context and out-working of our renewed image bearing, not its definition.

We cannot define with precision what God meant in Genesis 1:26 about image bearing. The rest of Scripture gives hints and clues, but only in Jesus Christ is the term given final content and meaning (Hebrews 1:3). So, we are not directed inward to learn about what it means bear the divine image, rather we are directed God-ward, more especially to Jesus Christ who is the express image of God (2 Cor 4:4, Col 1:15). So, both the definition and out-working of our image bearing come together for us in Jesus Christ

As image bearers we are called to respond to God, and by our responding we show ourselves to be image bearers. As image bearers we ought to respond to God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind. No image bearer can avoid this obligation. In our refusal to love the One whose image we bear we show ourselves be fallen image bearers. In our stumbling but sincere efforts to respond to God in faith and repentance we show ourselves to be ones in whom the image of God is being renewed.

As fallen, yet still remaining bearers of God's image, both our dignity and depravity are simultaneously present in all our thoughts and actions. Our depravity threatens to overwhelm our dignity but can never destroy it. Conscious of our depravity we yearn for redemption and forgiveness. At the same time, conscious of our dignity, we yearn for heaven and holiness. Here is the assurance within that though fallen we continue to bear his image and are being renewed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another until that great day when we will stand in his presence without fault and with great joy.

The church community and the marriage relationship provide the relational context for the renewal of our image bearing. Relationships are not the goal of Christian community or of Christian marriage. The goal must remain the restoration of our fallen image bearing through faith and repentance arising from our application of the Gospel in our communities and in our marriages. If we spend our time and efforts in developing harmonious relationships (believing this to be the goal and the definition of what it means to be an image-bearer) we may still miss out on Christlikeness. We all get along but there is little or no spiritual growth or change. To grow in our love for one another requires that we are changed from one degree of glory to another. So, every relationship, harmonious or conflicted, provides the context for the gospel

application of repentance, confession, forgiven sought and granted, reconciliation and restoration resulting in redemptive change and renewed image bearing.