

• *God has a special interest in the human race*

'Let us make man as our image, according to our likeness'

• *Each age interprets this 'image' in terms of its own interests*

One scholar's summary of the options

A fourfold approach

1. Consider how the New Testament uses the idea

At Genesis 1:26 the narrative slows down. Everything in Genesis chapter 1 leads up to this point and the story then becomes unhurried and gives greater detail. We notice that only in the case of the creation of mankind do we have a special mention of God's counsel. It is a way of saying that God shows special interest in the human race.

Then God said, **'Let us make man as our image, according to our likeness'** ¹. There is no special distinction between the words 'image' and 'likeness'. Only the term 'image' is in verse 27. In verse 26 the two words simply support each other by saying the same thing twice with two similar words. Also the change, 'as ... according to', has no special significance. In 5:1 we have 'as' with the word 'likeness'.

What is this 'image of God'? Each age tends to read its own ideas into the 'image of God'. In the fifth century a 'church father' called Athanasius was interested in Jesus as the 'Logos' (Word, reason). He said the image of God was our ability to reason. Augustine was interested in God as trinity, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He said the image of God was the 'trinity' in man consisting of memory, affection, and will. In the 16th century the 'Reformers' who were used by God to bring revival to the church were interested in justification by faith only. They said the image of God was man's original righteousness before the fall of Adam. At the 'Enlightenment', a time of European history when there was special emphasis on human ability, scholars said the 'image of God' was the enlightened soul of man. Karl Barth, a twentieth-century theologian, lived in a day when interaction between people was causing much interest. He said the image of God was relationship between sexes. Each age interprets 'the image' in terms of its own interests!

Half a century ago a biblical scholar summarised people's opinions about the image of God. He put the various opinions into four groups.

- (i) One group consists of those who think the image of God is some spiritual quality in man, such as self-consciousness, understanding of the eternal, capacity for thought, personality, vitality.
- (ii) Another group contained those who thought the image of God had a connection with rule over creation.
- (iii) A third approach stressed direct relationship with God,
- (iv) A fourth group stressed physical shape.

So obviously the 'image of God' is a subject where there are a lot of different opinions. How are we going to tackle the matter? I suggest we can come at it in four ways:

- (i) by considering the New Testament use of Genesis 1:26, 27;
- (ii) by considering the description of God in Genesis 1:1–25;
- (iii) by considering the words of Genesis 1:26–27 carefully;
- (iv) by considering how 'images' were used in the ancient world.

1. One way of considering the image of God is to remind ourselves how the idea is used in the New Testament. When we look at New Testament passages of Scripture, how do they interpret the image of God?

Judging by the New Testament, the image of God is true knowledge of God; it is righteousness and holiness. This is the point of Colossians 3:10 and Ephesians 4:24. It is a capacity for personal relationships. James 3:9–10 ¹ treats sin against fellow man as enormous because of the image of God. It is a capacity for a progressive relationship to God. Romans 8:29 says that Christians are predestined to be conformed to the image of Jesus. 2 Corinthians 3:18 says by our knowing God through Jesus we are to be transformed more and more into His likeness. Romans 12:1–2

¹ 1:26

¹ recalling Genesis 9:6

says something similar. Also, judging by the New Testament the image of God is a capacity for ruling God's world. This is why 1 Corinthians chapter 11 which has much to say about degrees of authority, brings in the subject of the image of God. chapter 1 leads up to this point and the story then becomes unhurried and gives greater detail. We notice that only in the case of the creation of mankind do we have a special mention of God's counsel. It is a way of saying that God shows special interest in the human race.

2. Consider how God has been described in Genesis

Personal

2. Another way of considering the image of God is to recall how God has been described in Genesis 1:1–25. When Genesis 1:26 talks about the image of God, it has of course been talking of God for the previous twenty-five verses. So what is it in verses 1–25 that is true of God but also is characteristic of men and women.

In Genesis 1, God is personal. He makes decisions concerning creation. He expresses ideas within Himself. He is able to contemplate what He does. Man's nature also comprises these things. Men and women think, reflect. They interact with others. They have a capacity for speech and thought and communication with each other. They are capable of personal relationships. Men and women are able to consider the world around them. God gave names to aspects of creation. In Genesis 2:20 Adam names things. Men and women are the image of God in their capacity to think and analyse.

Holy & righteous

In Genesis 1, God is holy and righteous. He makes good things. Part of the image of God is man's original goodness ^{□1}. Holiness and righteousness are part of God's image. God was holy and righteous. When He made men and women He made people who in some respects were like Himself. They were created good.

^{□1} see Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 4:24

Ruler & king



In Genesis 1, God is a ruler and a king. The ruling function of men and women is part of the image, or the immediate result of his being the image of God. Genesis 1:28 follows immediately on Genesis 1:25, 26. Ruling over creation is a task delegated to man ^{□1}. This does not mean that the human race must exploit creation excessively like a tyrant. In the Bible 'ruling' and 'shepherding' are closely related. Man rules over creation by being a good shepherd of creation.

^{□1} see Psa 8:6

Creator

In Genesis 1, God is a creator. Similarly creativity is part of human character. Man is to draw out capabilities of nature. Man has a capacity for skilful and creative use of what he finds in God's world. The vision of the glory of God which we have in Genesis 1:1–25 and even into 1:28–2:3 shows us something of what it means for men and women to be God-like, made as the image of God.

Men and women are also like God in being designed to 'enter into rest', but we shall come back to that in part 6.

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