

The Harvester



Preparing Souls

To Serve The Lord



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Made in the "Image" and "Likeness" of God

By Brian R. Kenyon

On the sixth day of creation,

God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth."²⁷ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. ²⁸ Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen. 1:26-28, NKJ)

The most concise way to summarize the difference between humanity and everything else created is to note that humanity, and humanity alone, is said to be made in the "image" and "likeness" of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Nothing else created can wear that title! What does it mean to be made in the "image" and "likeness" of God? There seems to be more to it than just the spiritual nature of mankind, but what is it? This article will examine the meaning of that phrase and why it is important that people understand the uniqueness of being made in the "image" and "likeness" of God.

Key Words

Genesis 1:26 is the only verse in the Old Testament where "image" (from *selem*) and "likeness" (from *demut*) are found in parallel with reference to God. "Image of God" is found four times in the Old Testament (Gen. 1:26, 27 [twice]; 9:6). A related con-

cept to this term is found in Genesis 5:3. Most Old Testament occurrences of the word "image" (*selem*) refer to idolatrous images that God wanted destroyed (Num. 33:52; 2 Kgs. 11:18; 2 Chr. 23:17; Ezk. 7:20; 16:17; 23:14). However, there are two passages in the Psalms that use the word with a "less concrete meaning" (Hamilton 134). The first is Psalm 39:6, "Surely every man walks about like a shadow; Surely they busy themselves in vain; He heaps up riches, And does not know who will gather them." The term "like a shadow" is from a form of the same word in Genesis 1:26-27 translated "image" (*selem*). In other translations, this word is rendered "a vain shew" (KJV) and "like a phantom" (NAS). The second is Psalm 73:20, "As a dream when one awakes, So, Lord, when You awake, You shall despise their image [from *selem*]." Here, the psalmist declares that "when God arouses Himself as from sleep ... and deals with the wicked, they vanish like the shadowy characters of a dream" (Barker 813). This is anthropomorphic, but it does reveal interesting insights to this word.

These passages indicate that *selem* can be used for purposes "other than describing the physical limitations of something," as with the case of idolatrous images (Hamilton 135). Thus, among other meanings, *selem* can convey the idea of "unreality" or "unsubstantiality," something not physical. If this is what the Spirit had in mind here, the "image of God" may convey the idea of humankind's unseen, spiritual side (cf. God is a spirit, Jn. 4:24).

"After our likeness" seems to have been added by the Holy Spirit to "in our image" in order to avoid

the possibility that mankind be viewed as an exact image of God. "The physical nuance of the concrete term 'image' is toned down by the more abstract term 'likeness'" (Hamilton 135-136). This would be consistent with "likeness" used elsewhere in relation to God. For example, Ezekiel, who was in direct contact with God, especially through Chapters 1-10, did not speak in terms of seeing God, but in terms of seeing God's "likeness" (Ezk. 1:5, 10, 13, 16, 22, 26, 28; 8:2; 10:21-22).

Although "in the image of God" is used by itself elsewhere in reference to humankind (Gen. 9:6), only in Jesus the Christ is the image of God perfectly seen in human form (Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4). Jesus being the perfect image of God gives further insight into the meaning of being made in the image of God. Since Jesus, who is the perfect image of God in human form, and humankind, also made in the image of God, share the same human nature (cf. Phil. 2:7; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 2:14, 17), it follows that whatever being made "in Our image, according to Our likeness" entails, it must somehow involve the entirety of an individual's nature, acting as a unit, rather than merely one aspect of an individual's nature, such as his spiritual side.

More Than Just the Spiritual

To limit the "image" and "likeness" of God merely to the spiritual aspect of mankind seems inadequate. Angels are created spiritual beings, yet they are never referred to as being made in the

"image" and "likeness" of God. Jesus, however, was in flesh, yet He is referred to as the "express image" of God (Heb. 1:3); the "image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4); and the "image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15).

Being in the image of God, therefore, must somehow include the physical part of human nature, not in the sense of appearance, but in the sense of an individual spiritual nature being able to interact with and in some way able to intentionally and purposefully control a physical nature, such as an individual's own self and, to some extent, the physical nature of individual's surroundings. Is not this what God is able to do with His creation? That is, the spiritual being God has always existed (Deut. 33:27; Job 36:26; 1 Tim. 1:17; Rev. 11:17), but only through creation could His "Spirit" interact with and control nature (cf. Gen. 1:2). Of course, there are two major differences: (1) God is the Creator, while mankind is the created; and (2) God is totally in control of all nature, while mankind is only potentially in control of his own voluntary, physical nature, and, in a very limited way, the physical nature of his surroundings.

When God made Adam, He made for the first time a being with a spiritual nature who could interact with and control a physical nature (i.e., his own and in a limited way his surroundings). This spiritual natured creature being able to influence and dominate a physical nature is supported by the fact that immediately after God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness," He said, "let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over

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the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Gen. 1:26).

While in the Garden of Eden, Adam exercised this power in a limited way by naming the animals (Gen. 2:19-20). Adam momentarily relinquished his spiritual control over his physical nature when he sinned (Gen. 3:6b). In fact, all humans manifest a lack of spiritual control over their physical nature when they commit sins involving the body (Rom. 8:5-8 cf. Col. 3:1-2). Only in Jesus is there a perfectly and totally controlled human nature, both spiritual and physical (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:22; 1 Jn. 3:5). Although all other humans fall short of the perfection seen in Christ, the mere fact that they have the ability to spiritually control their own physical nature sets them apart from anything else God created. Thus, humans can properly be said to be made in the “image” and “likeness” of God.


Applications

Being made in the “image” and “likeness” of God is a way of declaring the inherent equality of all human beings. In Egyptian and Mesopotamian society, “the king, or some high ranking official might be called ‘the image of God’” (Hamilton 135). Thus, by use of the expression in relation to mankind’s origin, God is saying that all humanity is royal, not just the

king. That is, all human beings are related to God, no matter their skin color, culture, or social standing! As Paul declared in “the Areopagus [Mars hill, KJV]” of Athens, God “has made from one blood [man, ESV] every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth” (Acts 17:26).

Being made in the “image” and “likeness” of God also implies a great responsibility that each human being has to reflect God. Every human is an “image bearer” of God. For this reason, human life is sacred and must not be taken lightly. It is even wrong to prejudicially curse other human beings, “who have been made in the similitude of God” (Jas. 3:8-10).

Conclusion

All people, whether they acknowledge it or not, are made in the “image” and “likeness” of God (Gen. 1:26-27). The only way to truly reflect God and to fulfill His purpose in creating mankind (i.e., to glorify Him cf. Isa. 43:10) is to “be conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29) through obedience to the Gospel (Rom. 6:3-4, 16-18). 

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