

Gods Proxy Polaroid

Created in Gods image

It is God who does the first missional act in history - He sends his word into the nothing, unleashing seven days of perfect and unparalleled creativity. In an almost prophetic statement of everything that his great story line will accomplish God speaks light into being and separates the light from the darkness. Then come the heavens and the seas, vegetation, plants, seeds, trees, fruit, seasons, evening, morning, night, stars, birds and beasts. God speaks and the lifeless nothing bursts into life. And over his new work God makes his first declaration of judgement, that everything he has just created is good.

Everything that God has created, as the bible tells us, is a declaration of his glory and his handiwork. But he has not finished. Although creation is, in a way a reflection of who God is, it isn't the final brushstroke on his creative masterpiece. He wants to create something much more like him than anything else in the whole of creation. He wants to create something that is unparalleled and unmatched by anything else he has already created, so he creates man and woman. In a grace loaded act God creates man and woman in his, trinitarian, image and likeness. It is truly amazing to think that when God wanted to create something more like himself than anything else in creation he made us in his image. Out of everything the God created he alone said of mankind that we were created in his image and likeness.

Simply put it means that man is created to be like God and to represent God. What an amazingly gracious act. When you consider that the writers of Genesis would have written these words with the echo of the second commandment in their ears, that no graven image of God should be made. They knew that Human attempts to fashion images of God were doomed to failure. But God doesn't expect us to make images of him as a means of knowing him more, rather he makes an image of himself, a reflection of who he is, man and woman. So as an amazing finale to everything that God has made he makes man and woman in his unique and unmatched image and signs off with the words "it was very good".

What does it mean to be in the image of God?

Much has been written about exactly what it means to be made in the image of God. Some have read too much into it, and others too little. At one level it is a deep mystery that we will never be able to fully comprehend this side of the new heavens and the new earth. But at another level it is profoundly simple. As the pinnacle of his creativity He wanted to make something that would reflect and represent who he is. A parallel passage in Genesis chapter 5 verse 3 helps us to understand this. Here we see that Adam fathered his son Seth who was 'in his own likeness, after his image', two words that essentially mean the same thing. What did it mean that Adams son Seth was in his own likeness and image? Did it mean that Seth was exactly the same as Adam? Adam and Seth what not identical but in many ways they were the same and of the same likeness.

When I look at my son it is clear that in many ways he is different to me. Although he is different, in other ways he is very similar to me, he bears a likeness to me. When people see us together they often comment by saying that 'he is the image of his father'. Now everyone knows he is not me, he is his own, individual person, with his own thoughts, personality and character. But as my son, he will, maybe unfortunately for him, bear some of my personality and character traits. In many ways by looking at him, knowing his character and personality and in turn by knowing me you would be in no doubt that I am his father.

D.A Carson says this on being made in the image of God. *'The least that "image of God" language suggests in addition to human personhood, is that human beings are not simply hairless apes with cranial capacities slightly larger than those of other primates, but that we are accorded an astonishing dignity; that human beings are moral creatures with special privileges and responsibilities; that there is implanted within us a profound capacity for knowing God intimately, however much we have suppressed and distorted that capacity; that we have a hunger for creating things - not of course, ex nihilo, but in art, building, expression, thought, joy of discovery, science, technology; that we have a capacity for personal relations with other persons'* - Carson *the gagging of God* p 205.

To be made in the image and likeness of God means that like we are like God. We are of course not God, just like my son is not me, but if you want to know a bit about me you could spend some time with my son. Put quite simply, if you want to discover what it means to be made in the image of God then find out what the image of God is. As we look through scripture we see that God;

- creative
- purposeful, intelligent, engaging
- ordered
- missional
- intentional
- loving
- gracious
- merciful
- relational
- communal
- kind
- rational
- logical

These are a few of the many character traits of God that we find throughout scripture. Being made in the image of God means that we were created to exhibit these and many more. Like him we were made as creative beings, intelligent and capable of building loving relationship, being kind and gracious. Being made in the image of God is who you are, it is inseparable from your very being. It is not a component that can be extracted, turned off, removed or separated. It is at its very core YOU. You are an image bearer of the almighty, creating, gracious, merciful, ordered, intentional, loving GOD.

In his excellent book Christopher Wright says this about the nature of being made in Gods image. *'God did not give to human beings the image of God. Rather it is a dimension of our very creation. The expression "in our image" is adverbial (that is, it describes the way that God made us) not adjectival (that is, as if it simply described a quality we possess). The image of God is not so much something we possess as what we are. To be human is to be the image of God. It is not an extra feature added to our species, it is definitive of what it means to be human'* Wright p119 *Old testament ethics for the people of God.*

In other words to be human is to be in the image of God. If you undermine the truth that God created man in his image you begin to lose the very essence of humanity. If we attribute less worth to the humanity of a person because of who they are then we are, in a sense, attributing less worth to God, and that is at its most basic form the root of idolatry. Does this view undermine the sinfulness of many human acts? No, because we are not affirming man's sinful nature which is a distortion of God's Image. Rather it simply affirms the truth that like it or not all humans are made in God's image. In undermining the *imago dei* we are left with only one other possibility, that we are made in our own image, that we are our own god, which is exactly what happened in Genesis chapter 3.

Fairground mirrors

'if we ever deny our unique status in creation as God's only image-bearers, we will soon begin to depreciate the value of human life, will tend to see humans as merely a higher form of animal, and will begin to treat others as such. We will also lose much of our sense of meaning in life' Grudem *Systematic Theology* 450

In Genesis chapter 3 the image of God present in man and woman is distorted. What was previously a clear reflection has now become a fairground mirror, distorted and jaded. Adam and Eve not satisfied with an intimate and unobstructed relationship with God attempt to reverse the divine created order and make God in their image, creating a God made in the image of man. The image of God in man is defaced but not effaced. The distortion is only partial, mankind is still made in the image of God. As part of the curse God does not remove his image from man, but as sin has entered the world the image is now not as it was, like a polaroid picture it will slowly begin to fade.

But there is a plan. A plan rooted deep into eternity, a trinitarian blueprint, a story that would weave its way through history, building to its climax at an execution, on a hill outside a city. In knowing that his image in mankind would be distorted God set in place a grace propelled restoration project. When we consider this we are thrown forward from the first Adam, created in the image of God, to the last Adam who IS the image of the invisible God. The one who through an amazing act of redemption would begin, for those in him, the progressive recovery of the distorted image, so that we through salvation and ongoing sanctification would become more like him. The fading polaroid picture gradually becoming clearer as we are 'transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.

The redemption of the fading image

'The lord Jesus is the perfect example as well as the perfect proof that when 'man in the image of God' and 'the law in the image of God' coincide in the life of obedience, then perfect true humanity comes to its full realisation' - Alex Motyer Look To The Rock p 78

Gods restoration plan was achieved and accomplished through the sending of his son into human history as the God man. When we look to Christ we see one who 'is the image of the invisible God', we see the true undistorted image of God. To begin the restoration of his true undistorted image in humanity the father sent the son, who was the perfect model of Gods image and likeness. Humanity was an inadequate reflection of the image of God, but Jesus was 'the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature'.

Through redemption we experience a progressive recovery of the image of God. As we become more like him our minds are renewed and we are changed into his likeness, conformed into the image of his son. By being in Christ we 'have put on a new self which is being renewed in knowledge after its creator' (Col 3:10). In Christ we live with the promise that 'just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven' (1 Cor 15:49). And in being children of God we realise that 'what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because, we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3:2)

Having been brought back into community and relationship with God, through his son and by his Spirit we are being made more like Him. The distorted fairground mirror image is no longer fading away, but is becoming clearer and clearer. The fading of the polaroid has been reversed, the image is no longer become harder to see, but as we become more like Christ so that image and likeness becomes more apparent. As the pinnacle of Gods creation was mankind in his image, the crown of His new creation will be, for those he has redeemed, men and women being like His son, in his image and likeness. The power of sin to distort the image will finally be abolished and we will indeed be 'like him'.

Gods proxy polaroid

The doctrine of the image dei is fundamental to our missiology as a church. It is not a separate doctrine that sits alone on a piece of paper conjured up by theologians in universities. It is who we are. It is our DNA, our reason for being. Coupled with the grace of God it propels us into mission with a realisation that God valued his creation of people so much that he made us in his image. And when that image was distorted He set about seeking to restore it, we therefore are in the business of restoring that image. As a damaged painting is carefully restored and given a new life, we, by the finished work of the cross, are in the business of restoration, repainting, revealing, scraping and re-touching. Revealing a distorted beauty in people that when revealed displays the glory, majesty and image of almighty God. The reality is that as you go, where you go and whatever you do, you do so as someone bearing the image of God. You go as someone representing that which God is - kind of like a photograph - Not the exact image but something that looks and is a lot lighter. We are Gods proxy image on this earth. Yes we can see and in a sense experience God in creation but his primary means of revealing who he is now is through us his redeemed and being-redempted image bearers.

In a world where people are desperately seeking worth and meaning in life, we have a responsibility and mandate to show that by our very existence as image bearers of God there is purpose, meaning and reason. As image bearers of God we can help reopen eyes that sin has blinded, eyes that fail to see the divine blueprint in human life, but would rather choose to ignore it at the expense of true worth, meaning and dignity. This is our responsibility as image bearers. Christopher Wright says that *'When we look at any other person, we do not see the label (Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Secular atheist, white, black etc) but the image of God. We see someone created by God, addressed by God, accountable to God, loved by God, valued and evaluated by God. - Wright The mission of God p 423.*

There isn't a western protestant monopoly on the imago dei. Like it or not everyone was made in the image of God. It is not something you get at salvation or something you earn, it is something that by the grace of God YOU are. Consider this; You are an image bearer of the almighty, His fingerprints are on your soul. Now consider that for a person who you would struggle to imagine as being made in the image of God. It is irrelevant where you come from or on which side of the city you live, what colour football top you wear, what colour flag is on a lamp post outside your house, where you went to school, what job you do, what job you

don't do, what side of a wall you live on, what your surname is, which political party you support you are equally human and in being human you are made in the image of God. The recapturing of the imago dei needs to come as a wake up call to the western evangelical church. We do not have a divinely attributed mandate as Gods sole messengers. We are part of a much bigger picture, a broad and wide canvas. A multi denominational picture, made up of those we probably wish were not there and some who we think should be there but are not.

Wright goes on to say that *'the biblical gospel will only be fully seen in all its glory when it shines forth like many facets of a diamond, in all the redeemed cultures of the new creation.....Mission is not a matter of inviting or compelling people to become westerners or koreans or nigerians. It is inviting people to become more fully human through the transforming power of the gospel that fits all because it answers to the most basic need of all and restores the common glory of what it is to be truly human - a man or woman made in the image of God. - Wright the mission of God. p 424*

We don't just care for and value people because its what we think we ought to do. We do so because we should be so compelled by the realisation that mankind is made in the image of God that our valuing of people is the only legitimate response. Unless we understand the imago dei our mission as churches will be nothing more than graceless good deeds rather than acts of astonishing grace and mercy, propelled by the reality that all of humanity is created in the image of God regardless of race, nationality, sexuality or religion.