De Doctrina

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The Image of God in Early Christianity: Lessons for Today

Kevin L. Hester

Dean, School of Theology, Welch College and Divinity School

Psalm 8 asks, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" Since the beginning of time, philosophers have sought to answer this question. Socrates asserted that the beginning and end of all knowledge was "knowing one's self." Christians often answer this questions through the lens of redemption, highlighting the distinctiveness of God's creation, humanity's fall, and salvation. How we answer this question has far-reaching implications for Christian life and ministry.

The early church sought to apply Scripture to a world that was just as confused as we are about the definition, purpose, and goal of humanity. The Platonists and Gnostics taught that humanity was a divine soul trapped in a material body. Materialists defined humanity by the elements that composed it. Stoics argued that humanity was demonstrated by the exercise of quiet reason and resolve in the face of a mechanistic world.

The same perspectives are reflected today. On the one hand, secular humanism asserts that humanity is the measure of all things, moral and metaphysical. On the other hand, naturalism teaches that humanity is no more than a naked, evolved ape. Behaviorism defines humanity as a trained product of its environment. Such definitions impact our understanding of ourselves and others and often serve as the basis for ethical decisions.

Kevin L. Hester (M.Div., Ph.D.) is Dean of the School of Theology and Professor of Historical Theology at Welch College and Divinity School in Gallatin, Tennessee, where he teaches courses in church history, theology, and philosophy. He is the author of *Free Will Baptists & the Priesthood of All Believers* (The Historical Commission: NAFWB, 2010); and, *Eschatology and Pain in St. Gregory the Great: The Christological Synthesis of Gregory's Morals on the Book of Iob* (Paternoster, 2007). He resides in Gallatin with Leslie Hampton Hester, his wife of over 30 years, and his four sons.

Christianity, instead, asserts that human persons are creatures. We were created by an intentional act of God for a specific purpose. More than that, Genesis 1:26-27 indicates that humanity is created in the image of God. But this image has been mangled by our fall into sin. Christian definitions of humanity must account for both truths. Thus, Christian anthropology is directly connected to theology proper, hamartiology, Christology, soteriology, and eschatology.

The perfect God created humanity in His image. Sin marred this image, but God's purpose in salvation is to restore it through salvation by His Son and sanctification through His Spirit as he renews all of creation. Modern Christian anthropology often treats the image as a static philosophical abstraction rather than recognizing a biblical model of renewal. It is here that we can learn lessons from the early church that may reframe our questions and our understanding of the image of God. Such retrieval will help the church navigate the challenging moral and philosophical questions of our own day.

Traditional Approaches to the Theological Question

Modern biblical and systematic theologians typically present the image of God in one of three basic ways. The most traditional view in the West teaches that the image of God is best understood substantively or ontologically. In this view, the image of God is defined by properties possessed by the individual. Characteristics like personality, rationality, spirituality, and volition define humanity. These, *in potentia*, compose the image of God.

Others argue that the image of God is a relational expression. God created persons for a relationship with Himself and others. This is similar in some ways to Leroy Forlines's teaching on the four basic relationships. This position, revived by neo-orthodox theologians Barth and Brunner, has recently regained traction. Human beings image God as they relate to others through love and justice, fulfilling His commandments.

Finally, some have argued for a functional view that identifies the image as human dominion. Proponents often argue that the Near Eastern context of Genesis indicates that divine images stood in the place of the deity and acted on the deity's behalf. Thus, it is as human beings fulfill the creation mandate to order and subdue creation that they express the image of God in art, science, vocation, and other human affairs.

The early church fathers demonstrate each of these approaches (often more than one) in their anthropology. However, while modern theologians focus on the question of what the image of God is, the early church asked additional questions and in them we find a more holistic, biblical model. If we will listen and learn, these secondary and tertiary questions can help us formulate a vision for what it means to be human in the twenty-first century.

What Is the Image of God?

The early church's perspective on the image of God included similar substantive, relational, and functional views. Then, as now, the predominant approach was substantive. The early church identified the image in the human capacity for reason. Rationality sets humanity apart from the beasts. Augustine said, "How are you better, then, than these (beasts)? By the image of God. And where is God's image? In your mind, in your intellect!" (*Homilies on John*, 3.4) This rationality functioned closely with other aspects of the image including free will. Justin Martyr said, "God did not make man like the other beings, the trees and the four-legged beasts, for example, which cannot do anything by free choice." (*First Apology*, 43)

For the early church, a major component of the image also included a moral nature that understood good and evil. This moral component of the image, together with human rationality and will, serve as the basis for God's judgment against sin as he holds humanity accountable. Irenaeus expresses this sentiment when he says, "He shall be justly condemned, because, having been created a rational being, he lost the true rationality, and living irrationally, opposed the righteousness of God, giving himself over to every earthly spirit, and serving all lusts." (*Against Heresies*, 4.4.3.)

If God is spirit and humanity is corporeal, surely then the image must be internal and apply only to the spiritual, rational, or psychic component. If early church theology was as driven as extensively by Platonism as some have suggested, surely the body must remain foreign to God's image. But this is not so. Based in the Christian principles that the first man was made of the earth, that Christ became incarnate, and that the eschaton included a redeemed, restored humanity in a resurrected body, they argued that the body must participate in the image of God. Irenaeus's Christology informs his anthropology when he says, God made "man, and not [merely] a part of man, . . . in the likeness of God. Now the soul and the spirit are certainly a part of the man, but certainly not the man; for the perfect man consists in the commingling and the union of the soul receiving the spirit of the Father, and the admixture of that fleshly nature which was molded after the image of God." (*Against Heresies*, 5.6.1)

The body's participation in the image of God is largely foreign to modern Protestant theology. Ironically, we live in a world preoccupied by the physical.

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Our bodies have become a canvas upon which we paint our worldviews or carve out our bodily shame. If the body participates in the image of God, how then should we treat it? We should honor it and preserve it. We should watch what we eat and exercise. We should treat it like the temple it is. There are implications for how we adorn our bodies and how they are treated at death. How might the young man or young woman at your church struggling with self-image respond to the truth that his or her body bears the image of God? Our culture's clash over sexuality, gender, and body dysmorphia calls for a robust theological discussion that recognizes God's image, impacted by sin, but sensitive to God's renewal of the image in His Son and through His Spirit.

The early church did not ignore the body, nor did they deny the relational image of God. Humanity was created to exist in covenantal relationship with God. The substantive image provides the basis for the relational image. Augustine argues that the relationships

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Kevin Hester, *Chair*
Rodney Holloman *Secretary*
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Jackson Watts

between the members of the Trinity serve as the basis for the image of God and inform the relationship of the constituent aspects of the human person. The love that unites the Trinity is evident in the image of God in humanity. When we are called to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbor as ourselves, we are called to image God by being the people we were created to be.

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The Alexandrian school had early distinguished the image of God and the likeness of God referenced in the Genesis 1 account. While exegetically problematic, this distinction allowed them to see aspects of the image of God in light of both creation and redemption. The problem of sin was relational, the result of humanity failing to maintain the moral likeness of God. The image of God (substantive) was retained while the likeness to God (moral and relational) was lost in the fall. Salvation's end goal, as it concerns the image of God, was the perfection of humanity's moral character in Christlikeness through the work of the Holy Spirit.

> [The Soul] is fashioned according to the image of God, and according to his likeness is it made; as also the Divine Scripture indicates when it says, as if from the mouth of God: "Let us make man according to our own likeness." Therefore, when [the soul] puts aside all the filth of sin which covers it, and retains only what is pure according to that image, then quite properly, when it has been so brightened, it beholds as in a mirror the Word, the Image of the Father; and through Him it reasons to the Father, whose image the Savior is.
>
> Athanasius, *Treatise against the Pagans*, 34.3-4

Far from static, the image of God in the early church was the marker for dramatic spiritual growth. Salvation is about more than justification. Because of what Christ has done on the cross, believers are not condemned. We rest in his righteousness and therefore have no fear of the Judge. Nevertheless, without great care, this view can lead to what Leroy Forlines referred to as "cheap easy believism." As recent polls attest, the perspectives and lifestyles of many professed evangelical Christians are not measurably different from their non-Christian neighbors. This lack of holiness is a failure to make true disciples. Our churches must emphasize the Reformed tradition's twofold spirituality of mortification and vivification as we grow in Christlikeness. The early church reminds us that final sanctification (glorification) includes the complete renewal of holiness in the image of God.

The early church also reflected on the image of God in a functional way. They believed that humanity served as a mirror of God. Ruling as God's vice-regents in this world, humanity represents God. This view was largely limited to the Antiochene tradition seen in the works of Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Chrysostom, and Theodoret. Driven by their literal interpretation of Scripture, and coupled with the creation mandate to the original parents to subdue and order all of creation, they expressed the image of God in regency. The Antiochenes aligned the ordered structures of society with God's governance of the world. Thus, rulers imaged God in governance; pastors and deacons imaged God as they administered the church; and husbands imaged God as they led the home. While this view had its mistakes, like their active questioning of whether women truly possessed the image of God, their work assured the dignity of vocation.

While their application of regency may be too strong, I believe their identification of the image seen through human engagement in all spheres of the world is sorely needed today. Evangelical Christianity has often celebrated ministry vocations as more important than secular vocations. The teaching of the Antiochene tradition reminds us that no matter our calling, as we work to order, furnish, and sustain the created order we are actively imaging God. This realization should also lead us to a new openness to creativity in the arts. Far from a distraction from true service to God, our vocations and our creative work serve to glorify God as we express His image.

Who Is the Image of God?

The early church was not simply interested in defining the image of God. They also sought to identify the image as a historical reality. Instead of Adam, they focused on the incarnate Christ as humanity's archetype. The image of God expressed in Genesis 1 was an extension of Christ as the image of the Father. One reason the Antiochenes rejected the substantive view of the image was their literal reading of Hebrews 1:3 which describes Christ as the image of God. The Alexandrian tradition, and later the western fathers, saw Christ as the divine archetype as well. Thus, the incarnation was both a revelation of God and a revelation of what humanity was created to be.

> For in times long past, it was said that man was created after the image of God, but it was not [actually] shown; for the Word was as yet invisible, after whose image man was created. Wherefore also he did easily lose the similitude. When, however, the Word of God became flesh, He confirmed both these: for He both showed forth the image truly, since He became Himself what was His image; and He re-established the similitude after a sure manner, by assimilating man to the invisible Father through means of the visible Word.
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> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.16.2.

Irenaeus brings Christology and anthropology together to emphasize that what it means to be truly human begins and ends with the person and work of the incarnate *Logos*. Only by beginning in Christ, not Adam, can humanity realize the necessity of embodiment and the soteriological promise of human identity in the Son. Through Adam we inherit guilt and corruption. In Christ, and through the perfection of his image in us, we will be made perfect as He is perfect. Christ exemplifies what humanity was created to be and what we will be when He restores all things.

How might a focus on Christ's incarnation as a model of the image of God change our understanding of human "nature"? We often excuse ourselves from imitating the works and life of Christ because we so heavily focus on the Son's divine nature. When we do focus on His human nature it is generally to argue that as a man, He could die for us on our behalf. True, but the incarnation reveals

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more. The image of God is perfected in us when we serve as He served and love as He loved in His humanity. His resurrection in a physical body portends our own physical resurrection into His image. As Jesus demonstrated His dependence on the Father and His need for the encouragement of His disciples, we must burnish the image of God in us through the spiritual disciplines and fellowship with God's people. Christ's poverty and suffering should inform how we endure our own difficulties, recognizing them as part of a broken world but useful for spiritual benefit. The biblical concept of the imitation of Christ becomes a real possibility through grace, when we understand that we are made in His image.

What Is the Goal of the Image of God?

Another question seemingly unasked by theologians today is, what is the end of the image of God? The early church understood that the image of God also had a *telos*. It had a relational purpose that would be fulfilled in the *eschaton*. Adam and Eve were created good. But their potential for continued growth in gracious covenantal relationship with God was interrupted by their fall into sin. This produced a separation that could be healed only by Christ. This healing began in the incarnation but will be completed in the resurrection when our bodies are remade into the likeness of His resurrection body.

The early fathers highlighted the coming unhindered relationship between God and humanity promised in Revelation 21:3 and 22:3. There are echoes of Romans 8:18-25 and 1 Corinthians 15:42-49 in the early church's outline of the coming promise when the image of God in humanity will be perfectly reflected in God's children. In fact, all the divine moral attributes will be present, different in kind and glory, but shared nonetheless. Gregory of Nyssa says it this way, "All the corruptible may put on incorruption, and all the mortal may put on immortality, our first-fruits having been transformed to the Divine nature by its union with God." (*Contra Eunomium*, 3.13)

Such language borrows from Gregory's soteriology. Some Protestant theologians have preferred to link eschatology and the image of God through covenantal grace. God's redemption in Christ extends to His covenantal people and through them to all creation. God's grace will restore a fallen people and a fallen world (Romans 8:19-25). Too often, evangelical eschatology sees the coming kingdom of God as completely disconnected from the current life of the church. This is unbiblical, and the church fathers remind us of this. Instead, Christians should be concerned now with introducing the reality of the coming kingdom to the present world in all domains. Christians must be committed to evangelism and discipleship. But we are also called to live out redemptive grace in ecology, in working for justice, and in imaging the moral attributes of God and implementing them in all relationships.

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How Should We Understand the Image of God?

Early church theologians, much like biblical and systematic theologians today, adopted a number of different models to explain the image of God. Which is the correct one? Modern theologians often argue strongly for one model over another. Some in the early church argued similarly, but I think this is the wrong approach. Most early fathers were open to following biblical expressions of the image of God which allowed more fluidity in their theological method. They refused to confine themselves to one strict model but saw Christian truth as a diamond with different facets. Different lights and angles refract different colors, all aspects of a singular truth. Christian theologians today should begin with Scripture and be open to following its lead. Rather than blindly following an inherited theological approach, we should recognize that there is still room for creativity in the theological process.

One reason modern theologians have argued over the appropriate methodological approach to studying the image of God is because of the way certain views fail to convey its universal existence in all persons. If the image of God is primarily relational, how do we discuss the dignity of non-Christians and God's love for them? If God's image is merely confined to dominion, what motivation is there in caring for the poor and marginalized least of these? If the image is merely substantial, how do we account for the unborn and those who experience physical and intellectual challenges?

Similarly, modern Christians often argue for one or another theological key to understanding the image of God. Whether Trinity, Christology, or a covenantal expression of creation, we have seen all of these and more in our brief tour through the early fathers. All God's truth is connected and all of it is important. All areas of theology speak to the glory of God and the wonder of His work of redemption.

We need numerous ways of grappling to understand this mystery. God is ultimately incomprehensible. If we truly image God, we should expect the image of God in humanity to remain, at least partly, mysterious as well. The early church fathers help us to embrace this mystery, to worship, and to strive to imitate the one in whose image we are made.

Conclusion

A proper view of the image of God has immense pastoral and practical application. The early fathers' anthropology produced wonder and worship. It granted dignity, worth, and equality to all persons spurring social concern and benevolence. It motivated spiritual growth through the means of grace. It sanctified life in the body, leading them to speak out against infanticide, patricide, and all other types of murder. True theology is like that; it has hands and feet. May our theology always find practical application in worship of our God and love for our neighbors created in His image. (1 Corinthians 13:2)

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