

Mankind, the "Image of God"

A Look at the Differences Between God, Humans, and the Rest of Creation

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. ...
When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, *what is man that you are mindful of him...* ? (Psalm 8:1a, 3-4a)

The "Creator-Creature Distinction" - This is the most basic distinction that exists.

God is not a part of creation (as are the gods of the pantheists and similar groups). He is not a "super-man" (as were many of the gods of the pagan Greeks and Romans, 2000 years ago). Nor is he associated with a human "feeling" (as many church-goers would have you believe). Rather, the "being" that Scripture reveals to us as *God* is totally different from creation.

- We can describe it this way: God is *transcendent*. There is a fundamental distinction or gap between God (as creator) and us (as creatures) - a gap that we can *never* cross. We can never become *uncreated*, or experience what it is like to be that way.

The difference is so great that we *cannot* interact with God on this level. However, God has chosen to interact with us on *our* level. He has chosen to reveal something about himself to us, using terms that we *can* understand, to give us a finite (limited), yet accurate comprehension of who he is and what he is like.

- We can describe it this way: God is *immanent*. Though the highest of heavens cannot contain him (1 Kings 8:27), he has chosen to interact with us, on *our* level of existence.

We cannot comprehend the *infinite* God, except to the limited extent that he reveals himself in *finite* creation. Though finite, this revelation is sufficient. It is all that we, as created beings, will ever need.

- Since the fall of mankind into sin, sin has confused our thinking. But it has *not* erased God's revelation of himself in creation.
- False religion tends to distort this distinction. It may emphasize only *one* of these two aspects of God (his transcendence or his immanence). Or it may *lower* God to the level of the creature, or *raise* the creature to the level of God.

How God Reveals Himself in Creation - This is the only way we can know about God.
(We cannot cross the gap and become uncreated!)

All creation was designed to be revelatory of God. It was created in such a way as to reflect the character, nature and glory of God, though in a *finite* way. Creation is *not* God himself, but it tells us *about* him.

- This is why Scripture tells us that even the *sky* declares the glory of God (Psalm 19:1+). This is why the apostle Paul can tell us that God has not left himself without testimony (Acts 14:17); and that what may be known about God is plainly seen by *all* humans, so that it leaves them without excuse when they sin (Romans 1:19-20).

God has revealed himself most perfectly in the "Word of God" - both a reference to Jesus Christ (the Word of God in *human* form - John 1:1, 14, 18), and to Scripture (the Word of God, in *written* form - Hebrews 4:12).

Our emphasis below is on yet another way that God has revealed himself: in *humans*.

The Differences between Humans and the Rest of Creation - What makes humans so special?

Different aspects of creation have different characteristics. The characteristics of humans show their connection with creation, as well as how they are different.

- All creation is *created*. This sets everything apart from God, the *Creator* (Genesis 1:1).
- Plants were created to be *used* by animals and humans - with the initial emphasis in Genesis 1-2 being on their use as *food*. (Animals were not given as food until after the Flood - Genesis 9:3.) When plants are eaten (or cut down, etc.) they are not described as "dying," the way that animals and humans die (something that has occurred only since sin entered the world - Genesis 3).
- Animals and humans are *living beings* (also translated as *living creatures* or *living "souls"*). This sets them apart from plants (Genesis 1:24, 27; 2:7, 19; 9:10; Leviticus 11:10).
- Humans and air-breathing animals have the *breath of life*. This sets them apart from sea creatures (Genesis 2:7; 6:17+; 7:14-15).
- Humans are the *image of God*. This sets them apart from all the rest of creation (Genesis 1:26-27; 9:6).

The Creation of Humans - The way it happened was different from all the rest of the creatures!

God created humans in a manner that was *different* from the rest of creation. For everything else, God merely spoke the command, and it happened. For example, when land animals were created, God commanded the land to form them, and it happened.

And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: ...And it was so. (Genesis 1:24)

With humans, it was God's direct activity (not just a command) that formed them.

Then God said, "Let us make man *in our image*, in our likeness, ... (Genesis 1:26a)

...the LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils *the breath of life*, and the man became *a living being*. (Genesis 2:7)

The "Image of God" - What does it mean?

In Genesis 1:27, when Scripture says that "man" was made in "the image of God," it defines the word "man" as equivalent to the concept of "mankind" or "humanity." The third line of the verse shows that this word refers to both "male and female." (The importance of this is seen below.)

This phrase tells us that God created humans in such a way, that they are *as much like God as is possible* for a created being. This means that humans, though they are created beings, are revelatory of God in ways that the rest of creation cannot be. Humans have a special calling, a *dignity* that is higher and greater than anything else in creation. (Being formed out of dust, we are reminded of our connection with the rest of creation. Though our calling is higher, we have a need to respect creation and to care for it.)

This phrase also affirms the distinction between Creator and creature. We do not blur the distinction between humans (the image) and God (the one whose image is reflected in us). Rather, we acknowledge that humans are only a finite *reflection* of the infinite.

Being the "image of God" explains the reason for many things found in Scripture. For instance:

- This is the reason that human life is *sacred* in a way that no other created entity is. This is also why humans will live for eternity.
- This is one of the reasons that the Old Testament Law required the *death* sentence for certain sins. Such sins are committed not only against *humans*, but also against *God!* (This is why even *animals* were to be put to death, if they committed certain acts against humans, such as killing someone.)

Like God in Some Ways - How do we compare to God?

There are *differences* - attributes that describe God, but *cannot* describe humans:

- God is self-sufficient; humans are dependent.
- God is unchanging; humans change.
- God is infinite; humans are finite.
- Since sin has entered the world, God remains sinless; humans are sinful.

There are also *similarities* - attributes that describe God, and, in a finite manner *can* describe humans. Some of these things have to do with the *nature* of humans; others have to do with their *function*. (See the following sections.)

"Unity and Plurality" and Sexuality - This is one of the reasons the Bible considers sexuality to be *sacred*, even though the world wants to treat it like a mere biological function, a form of entertainment, and a joke!

God is perfect unity and plurality (the concept of the "trinity"). In a limited way, humans experience this unity and plurality in marriage ("the two shall be one," as in Genesis 2:24). This fact has many implications regarding the nature of marriage.

- Since God created sexuality and marriage for the purpose of reflecting his own character, God *defines* what marriage is, based on his character. Humans have no right or authority to define it differently.
- Sexual sin is not only against other *people*, it is also against *God*. It is just as serious as using God's name in vain or committing idolatry.

When plants and animals reproduce, they also reflect, to some extent, this unity and plurality. Plants do so with no control and with no awareness of what is happening. The animals do it instinctively, with an awareness of what they are doing, but with no understanding of its significance. Humans, because they bear the "image of God," are to fulfill this command morally and with conscious reflection on what sexuality represents (such as the concept of "oneness" - Genesis 2:23-24).

Moral and Spiritual Issues - These aspects of human nature do not exist in animals.

God is holy, different from his creatures, and set apart from sin. These and other related concepts are the basis for morality - which is *defined* by the nature and character of God. In Scripture, these moral obligations are summarized in the 10 commandments (Exodus 20), as well as in the "two greatest commands" given by Jesus (love for God and neighbor - Matthew 22:37-40).

Humans have an awareness of God that plants and animals do not (and cannot) have. Even *atheists* and those who worship false gods cannot totally suppress this awareness (Romans 1:19-20, 32; 2:14-15), for it is a direct consequence of being the "image of God."

- Humans have no right or authority to determine their own moral values or principles. Nor do they have any right or authority to decide for themselves who or what their "god" will be, or to claim that God doesn't exist or cannot be known.

In these matters, to *not* reflect God's character is to *violate* (profane or desecrate) it. The only option for those who do this is to be cast out of God's presence forever - unless someone (Jesus) is willing to bear our righteous punishment (which he was), and if we repent of our corrupt values and conduct.

What an "Image Bearer" Is to Do - This has to do with how we are to *function* as humans. Two examples:

God is sovereign ruler over all; humans are to rule over creation, in ways that are good for creation, and that bring glory to God. God created humans to rule as his *delegated authority* - but under the rule of the Creator himself.

God knows, interacts and communicates; humans are to know, interact and communicate on a level not possible for other creatures. (*How* should we do it? This ties in with the moral and spiritual issues already mentioned.)

What about Jesus? - How is he different from other humans?

The term "image of God" is applied both to Jesus and to other humans. But since Jesus' very *nature* is different from ours, the way that Jesus is the "image of God" will also be different. Jesus is *uncreated deity* in human flesh; he always was God, and always will be (and *infinitely* so). In contrast, humans were created as a *finite* expression of what God is; and though they will exist forever in the future, they had a beginning.

- There is an interesting way in which the language of the New Testament reinforces this fact. In New Testament Greek, there are two words that are translated as "is." One implies "exists" and the other implies "came to be." Considering this, it is quite significant that the New Testament tells us that Jesus "is" (= always "existed" as) the image of God (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15); while the man (representing humans) "is" (= "came to be") the image of God (1 Corinthians 11:7).

Though the phrase "image of God" is used for both Jesus and the rest of humanity, there are related concepts that indicate something special about Jesus, and do *not* apply to the rest of humanity. Unlike other humans, Scripture tells us that Jesus is *equal* to God (John 5:18; Philippians 2:6). He is the exact representation of God's being, and the radiance of God's glory (Hebrews 1:3). Before he was born as a human, he existed (in heaven) in God's form/nature (Philippians 2:6). When he became a human, he did not lose the attributes of deity, but added to them the attributes of humanity (without sin - Hebrews 2:14, 18; 4:15). Even now, in him all the fulness of Deity resides in bodily form (Colossians 2:9).

What Jesus has done for us - What difference does it make, if the way he is the "image of God" is different from us?

The uniqueness of Jesus makes him able to accomplish for us what we can no longer accomplish for ourselves. Since we humans have become corrupted by sin, even in our *natures*, certain aspects of the "image of God" in us have become marred. In Jesus Christ, these aspects are being restored; and the change will be complete at the resurrection.

- Because of this, Scripture tells us that our "new self" is being renewed in the *image* of its creator (Colossians 3:10). Our desire is to be conformed to the *image* of the Son (Romans 8:29), and transformed into the *image* of God's glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). Ultimately, we can say that, just as we have borne the *image* of Adam (which was marred by sin and resulted in death - Genesis 5:1), we will also bear the *image* of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:49).

Jesus has already accomplished everything that we, the human race, have failed to do. *Even now*, he is crowned with glory and honor. But the day is coming in which those who belong to Jesus will *share* in his glory. When that happens, everything that was ever meant to be part of "bearing God's image" will be fulfilled in us, his people.

You made him [man] a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor.

You made him ruler over the works of your hands; *you put everything under his feet*: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8:5-9)

In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. *Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus*, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Hebrews 2:8b-9)