

Imaging God in Our Bodily Lives: What Does Image of God Mean?

Devaluing the Body

How are Christians to think about issues surrounding bodily health—things like fitness, exercise, and nutrition? How are we to respond to the growing number of psychological disorders associated with body image and care?

In the next three articles I propose to establish a framework for answering these questions. I will not specifically address these until the last article, and then only generally. My concern is to provide a foundation or framework for dealing with these issues. Specifically I will approach this by asking the Bible says about what it means to be human.

Here, unfortunately, there is a view of humanity that is sometimes assumed which can be detrimental to a proper perspective. It is an understanding that assumes that there are two parts to human beings—a physical body and a spiritual soul.

Since the soul is spiritual, it is this part of humanity that is the image of God. The body is simply the dwelling place of the soul. The soul is what matters. Thus, activities associated with the soul are considered more important; activities associated with the body are diminished.

This leaves one open for two opposite tendencies. The first is to simply devalue bodily issues. After all, a biblical verse taken out of context seems to support this: “For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.” (I Timothy 4:8 KJV) The opposite tendency is to fall into the obsession with the body that is characteristic of our culture.

This article proceeds on the basis that there is a better way to discuss these issues as Christians. What does it mean to be human? Specifically, what does it mean to be created in the image of God?

Genesis 1:26-28

It has been recognised for centuries that Genesis 1:26-28 is critical in answering what it means to be human. We are created in the image of God. The problem is that when the author of Genesis defines humanity in these terms he doesn't stop to tell us what it meant. Further, in the rest of the Bible there is not much about the image of God. How can we know what the author meant?

Clearly we must try to get hold of the meaning of this in its original context. What did the author mean when he used it? The interesting thing is that through the history of the church it has been primarily theologians who have discussed the meaning of this term. It is only in the 20th century that biblical scholars, Old Testament scholars, have weighed in.

Based on a growing knowledge of the original ancient near eastern context in which these words were written, our understanding of the terminology of ‘image’ is much clearer today.

Substantialist Interpretation

The interpretation that theologians offered for much of church history can be called the *substantialist* interpretation. The gospel was first expressed in pagan Greek culture. In the first centuries of the church a Platonic view of humanity was adopted. Plato was a pagan philosopher who divided the world in two: a spiritual and physical world. He also divided human beings in two: a spiritual soul and physical body. The rational soul belongs to the spiritual realm which is good; the body belongs to the physical realm which is bad. The body is a prison house for the soul. Salvation will come when the soul is released from this prison to return to a spiritual realm.

This pagan view has corrupted much Christian thinking. The problem was God's good creation was considered inferior. It didn't matter that He had said it was 'very good.' Following Plato it was at best inferior.

In Christian thought it was the soul that was considered to be the image of God. God is invisible so it must be our soul that is God's image. What is it about the soul that is similar to God? It is rational, free, creative, etc. It is these qualities that make us like God.

There were at least two big problems that Old Testament scholars pointed out. First, there is no body-soul distinction anywhere in the Old Testament. This was imported into the Bible from pagan philosophy. Second, the Hebrew words used in Genesis 1:26-28—image and likeness—have precisely to do with *visibility*! That is, the body is essential in what it means to image God. As one scholar puts it: "The customary view . . . tends to down-grade the role of man's body in the idea of the image. The more's the pity, for it is precisely in the body where the imaging occurs. There the invisible God takes on visible form."

Relationalist Interpretation

About the middle of the 20th century another interpretation took hold. We might call this the *relationalist* interpretation. Under the influence of Karl Barth, a German theologian, and further studies in Old Testament, the emphasis was put on the relationship that humans had with God. It is not how humanity is like God; rather it is how humanity lives *coram Deo*, in God's presence, in response to God.

While this interpretation helped us to see the importance of the relational categories of the Old Testament, it was not entirely satisfying. The question of what 'image' meant to its original hearers was still not clear.

Representationalist Interpretation

Over the last half a century Old Testament studies has become interested in the question of the meaning of 'image.' In something called 'comparative studies' biblical scholars look for parallels in ancient culture. How would people of Bible times understand image?

Old Testament scholars compared how Babylonians and Egyptians understood the word image. We must remember that these were two of the most powerful empires at the time, and like the United States and the English language, they affected all the peoples around. We know from the Bible that Israel was in constant contact with these empires. And perhaps most significantly, if Moses wrote Genesis, Israel spent 400 years in Egypt.

The study of Babylon and Egypt yielded very similar results. Both used the word to describe the king or the pharaoh. The king was in the image of God in that he was considered to be *like* the gods, had a special *relation* to the gods, and had a special *task* to carry out on their behalf.

The representationalist interpretation stresses the task that the image of God has. The king represents god on earth. Human beings represent God in the creation.

But we should not miss that the other two interpretations are important. One Old Testament scholar, Norman Habel, defines the image as “that special character and relationship of man to God which enables him to represent God as ruler of the earth.” Note that all three interpretations are present. “That special character”: Human beings are like God [substantialist]. “Relationship of man to God”: Human beings are in relation to God [relationalist]. Both of these enable humanity to “represent God as ruler of the earth” [representationalist].

To say that *all* human beings, not just kings, were in God’s image would have been quite startling to the original hearers. All were like God: finite and creaturely reflections of the infinite Creator. All were in relation to God. All had a task and were responsible to God. *All!*

Imaging God in our Bodies

If something like this is what it means to be created in the image of God, then our bodies are far from secondary. It is precisely in our *bodily* lives that we reflect, know, and represent God. In the whole of our creaturely life, as bodily creatures, we image God. Our activities cannot be divided into those things that are associated with the soul and are more important, and those associated with the body that are less so. The body matters because it is in our bodies that we image God. No wonder Paul exhorts us to “offer up your bodies as a living sacrifice to God” (Romans 12:1).

Imaging God in Our Bodily Lives: Are We Still Created in the Image of God?

A Deformed Image

In the last article we noted that human beings have been created in the image of God. That is, they have been created to reflect, know, and represent God in the creation. It is in the whole of their bodily lives that they image God.

However, that affirmation of what it means to be human comes before Genesis 3. In this chapter human beings refuse to live by God's word of life. Their rebellion is catastrophic! It affects everything: their relation to God, their relation to others, their relation to the non-human creation, and every part of themselves. In other words, the image of God is deeply corrupted.

Are human beings still in God's image? This has been debated for years. Many have said no. Others have said yes but that it is now deformed, vitiated, mutilated, maimed, disease-ridden, disfigured.

The Bible indicates that even after the fall human beings are still in the image of God (Genesis 5:1-3; 9:6). But clearly human beings have been deeply corrupted by the fall into sin. Would a good way to start be by saying yes and no?

Yes, we are still like God in the sense that we speak, hear, think, imagine, love, etc. But no, we are not like God in the sense that we don't always reflect God in the way we think, love, imagine, and so forth. Yes, we cannot escape God; we are still in relation to him. But no, we respond in rebellion and disobedience. We have been alienated from him and become enemies. Yes, in the sense that we still have the task to represent him. We still carry out that task to develop and care for the earth. In so doing there is to some degree manifestations of his justice, love, compassion, creativity. But no, our task is now deformed. Our relationships and structures and work do not reflect God's character.

We might compare human beings to a cracked mirror. A cracked mirror still reflects the original. However, since it is cracked it distorts the reflection. There remains something of the love, compassion, justice, and mercy of God's image in humanity. But it has been severely corrupted.

A Restored Image

The Bible tells the story of how God set out on a long road to restore the creation to again become his kingdom and human beings to again be his image. God was not content to let sin deface the image of God; his purpose was to reverse what Satan had accomplished in Eden.

That long journey or story reached its climax in Jesus Christ. In his life Jesus showed us clearly and perfectly the image of God (Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3). Of course, Jesus was unique: he was God in the flesh. However, as a man he also perfectly manifested what it means to be God's image.

In his death he was victorious over the sin and rebellion that had disfigured God's image in humankind. In his resurrection he stepped as the firstborn into the resurrection life where that image is restored; he invited others to follow. With the outpouring of his Spirit, he gave the power to reconstruct the image of God in human life. One of the goals of God's redemptive work is for human beings "to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters." (Romans 8:29)

The Continuing Battle

It is clear that this restoration is not complete! Sadly, many Christians reflect, know, and represent God far less faithfully than they should. But it is an ongoing battle between the power of sin to deface the image of God and the power of the Spirit to restore that image. This is a battle that rages for every part of human life. And it will continue until Jesus returns again and completes the work he has begun.

The call of Christians is to embody in the whole of their bodily lives what it means to be the image of God. This will mean taking hold of the gospel again and again so that the Spirit might increasingly restore that image in us.

A Sad Critique

At the end of the 19th century the nihilist philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God. He ruthlessly critiqued the Christian faith. One of the things he exposed was an attitude that was opposed to the present existence of human beings, to the body, to earth—in short to human life on this earth. For Nietzsche Christianity had held too many back from embracing the joy and liberation of human bodily life. He said: “They would have to sing better songs to me that I might believe in their Redeemer: his disciples would have to look more redeemed!”

No doubt the acceptance of Plato’s split between the spiritual and material, the soul and body, with a diminishment of the material and the body, is a big part of what Nietzsche is criticising.

God created the world as ‘very good’ (Genesis 1:31). To depreciate bodily life is, according to Paul, a doctrine of demons (1 Timothy 4:1-4). God meant for human life to be lived with joy, freedom, and thanksgiving in the body. Our sin has badly mangled this gift. But God’s restoration is not to release us from the body: that is the pagan Plato’s idea of salvation. Rather, his plan is resurrection—to restore the image, bodily life to what it is meant to be.

Christians who have responded to the good news in faith and repentance are now called to live out in the fullness of their bodily lives God’s saving work in Christ and by the Spirit. It is in our bodily lives that we bear witness to Christ and his love.

Imaging God in Our Bodily Lives: How Does It Matter Today?

Our first article suggested that we are created to image God in the whole of our bodily lives. Our second article suggested that we are saved to witness to the restoration of that image of God in the whole of our bodily lives. Our bodies matter because that is where we image God.

We have also argued that it is mistaken to divide human beings up into two parts—spiritual and material—and to diminish the material side of human life. This problem is serious for two reasons.

First, to devalue any part of God's good creation is serious business! God created the world and pronounced it very good (Genesis 1:31). He created humankind to delight in the rich bounty of his creation. Human life was to be lived with thanksgiving and joy in God's provision. To devalue bodily life is to challenge God's assessment of creation as very good. Paul speaks rather strongly about teachers who devalue sex and food. They follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons! They forbid people from enjoying God's gifts of sex and food. "For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, consecrated by the word of God and prayer." (1 Timothy 4:1-4)

A second problem is what I call the "coiled spring principle." Whenever we try to demean any good part of creation it is like pushing down a tightly coiled spring. We can hold it down for a while but eventually it will spring back with great force. Whenever we suppress any good part of creation, in the next generation or sometime later it will spring back and become a powerful idol.

In some ways that is what is happening today with the body. In earlier centuries bodily life was considered to be less important than more spiritual or rational activities. Sex, care for the body, fitness and so on were simply not considered important. Sometimes, in fact, they were considered to be an inferior expression of human life.

Bodily life was pushed down. Today it has sprung back with incredible force. Sex, body image, fitness—perhaps we can speak of a body cult—has taken on an importance beyond God's original intention. And, no doubt, growing psychological problems associated with eating and image have grown remarkably.

So if a Christian wants to live the whole of his or her bodily life in a way pleasing to God, he or she must fight on two fronts. Anything that diminishes the goodness of human activities associated with the body must be firmly rejected. We must listen to the critique of Nietzsche, mentioned at the end of the second article, or at least to Paul's searching critique in Timothy.

But when some good part of creation takes on idolatrous proportions, taking an importance beyond what it should, the Christian must also refuse to follow. All human activities must find their proper place in God's creation. All are good but none are worthy of our full devotion.

We bring this brief series of articles to a close with some conclusions:

1. We cannot divide humanity up into material and spiritual parts assigning certain activities to one or the other. The whole person is involved in all activities. We are not to set up a dualism that makes some activities in God's world superior and some inferior, some

related to God and others not. We are to offer the whole of our bodily lives up as living sacrifices to God (Romans 12:1-2).

2. Care for our bodies (fitness and nutrition) is part of our task as God's image. It is in our bodies that we image God so care for our bodies is a part of our task in God's world.
3. Care for our bodies is to be neither exalted above nor denigrated below other dimensions of human life. Our human task involves many dimensions all of which must find their rightful place. As Christians we are in danger of devaluing the body. Living in a neo-pagan society we are in danger of overvaluing the body. We must resist both.
4. All of our bodily lives are disfigured by sin. This comes in many ways. Sometimes it appears in that we do not care for our bodies as we should. Yet with sin, came a curse (Genesis 3:17-19). We experience this in terms of maladies we have no control over—sickness, pain, and so forth. There will be many people whose bodies are ravaged by disease and various kinds of disorders—physical and psychological. This is often beyond their control. We live in hope of resurrected bodies but until that day we may image God in those bodies God has given us.
5. The idolatry of the body in our culture tempts us to judge others too much in terms of physical criteria. Surely there can be no place for this in the Christian life! Our call to love and encourage one another dictates against such a posture. The growing abundance of psychological disorders stemming from eating and body image often reflect our culture's obsession with the body.
6. We continue to be part of a battle that will rage until Jesus returns. We will experience the power of sin and the curse on many levels. Yet in Christ, through the Spirit, and by the gospel we may experience some healing, some restoration, some renewal. And we live in hope—hope that one day we will be raised from the dead to renewed bodily life. Then we will reflect God's image in the way God mean from the beginning.