



Everyday Life

The Dignity of Every Human

By *Stephanie O. Hubach*

Flipping through the newspaper on a quiet Sunday afternoon, my eyes fell on an article entitled "The Toll of Alzheimer's Disease" by syndicated columnist Dr. Peter H. Gott. Since a close friend from church suffers from an early-onset form of dementia, I was eager to read the piece. Alzheimer's and related forms of dementia are, undoubtedly, dreadful diseases for both recipients and their family members. Due to the degenerative nature of these disabling conditions the road is long, the effects are heart-breaking, and the outcome is certain.

As Christians, when we encounter this type of struggle it should call forth our deepest compassion, inspire us to provide practical supports, and encourage us to invest in ethically-based preventative research. But there is also a point at which we must be careful in our thinking. Listen to Gott's description of end-stage Alzheimer's disease—but most importantly, listen to the conclusion that he makes from his observations: "This eventually ends in a catastrophe: extreme confusion, loss of judgment, inability to recognize loved ones, belligerency, and the failure to be able to carry out everyday chores and activities of daily living (including bathing, dressing and eating). *In the truest sense of the word, the advanced Alzheimer's patient has lost all the qualities that make him or her human* [emphasis mine]."

How many people read that article and never noticed that last line? Isn't there a difference between the valued experiences of being human and the essence of our humanness? According to the columnist, the essence of our humanity can be reduced to a simple formula: If you can stay focused, have good judgment, connect with your family, be cooperative, complete your chores, and take care of yourself—then you are human. If you can't—then you are not. How many typical teenagers do you know who could meet those criteria? On a much more serious note—how many individuals with profound developmental disabilities could meet those criteria? Do you see what is happening? Do you hear the whisper? Our humanity is being redefined, and we don't even realize it. What do the Scriptures have to say about this? How is our humanity defined? And why does it matter?

Defining Our Humanity

While, hopefully, most Christians would respond that "human beings are unique because we are created in God's image," it is often difficult for people to describe what that actually means. This occurs, in part, because we miss the big picture. We fail to recognize the significance of the doctrine of the image of God in the overarching story of Scripture. When you view the meta-narrative of Scripture, the grand story is one of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation. And the image of God is central to that story. At Creation, the image of God was intact. As a result of the Fall, the image of God became distorted. In the process of Redemption, the image of God is being restored more and more. And in the Consummation of all things, when the coming kingdom is here in its fullness, the image of God will be fully complete in every redeemed child of the King.

Central Yet Mysterious

That said, while the concept of the image of God is central to the story of Scripture, it is also

mysterious. And that's because God Himself is mysterious—He is immanent, yet transcendent. He is near, yet high and above us. The image of God is not easily understood because God is beyond our comprehension. There is a level of mystery that makes it impossible for us to concretely describe that which cannot be fully contained. But at the same time, grasping the image of God is central to living the Christian life.

Who We Are and What We Do

The concept of the image of God can be thought of as “something we are” and “something we do.” In other words, we are created in the image or likeness of God and, as such, we image or reflect God. When considering the “something we are” concept, sometimes we mistakenly refer to the image of God as “impressed on man's soul,” but it is more than that. The image of God is part of the integrated personhood of our humanity—an entirety of body and soul. The natural order of creation is for body and soul to co-exist. That is why death is an unnatural state. In contrast, at the resurrection of the dead, the reuniting of a perfected body with a fully sanctified soul represents the glorified state. Therefore, in some mysterious way, we are impressed with the image of God in our integrated personhood of body and soul.

How is the image of God “something we do”? How do we actively image or reflect God? Recall that God has both communicable and incommunicable attributes. His incommunicable attributes are those that he does not share with human beings. (He is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. We are not.) But His communicable qualities are those that God does share with us as His image-bearers—and these include a capacity to express the character of God. At Creation, when the image of God was intact, male and female could naturally reflect the essence of God's character through the expression of their God-given capacities. This means that in their capacities for relationship with God, self, neighbor, and creation—man and woman could readily mirror the essence of God's character, His communicable attributes of love, grace, mercy, wisdom, faithfulness, patience, goodness, truthfulness, justice, righteousness, and holiness.

Affected by the Fall

We are, however, woefully inadequate at reflecting the essence of God's character through the expression of our God-given capacities for relationship with God, self, neighbor, and creation. Why? Because the effects of the Fall are universal, pervasive, and alienating. In Romans 8:22, Paul reminds us of the universal effects of the Fall when he states that “the whole creation has been groaning.” We often forget that the Fall affected not just our spiritual status with God, but all of creation itself. Men, women, children, and nature are impacted. When we fail to grasp the universal effects of the Fall, we fail to grasp the universal need for restoration.

Consider specifically how the Fall has touched humankind, and we realize that it is also pervasive. It permeates every aspect of our humanity across every dimension of our human faculties: intellectual, psychological, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual. Due to the Fall, none of us possesses complete capacities in any of these areas—and yet, due to God's common grace, we do not have completely destroyed faculties in any of these areas either. All of us experience some mix of the blessings of creation and some level of brokenness in every aspect of our lives. Finally, the effects of the Fall are alienating. We were created with God-given capacities for relationship with God, self, neighbor, and creation—and the Fall has the effect of causing alienation in all of those relationships.

The Good News

So, where is the good news in all this? First, God is faithful to allow his unfaithful creatures to retain

His image. It is damaged, but not destroyed. The image or likeness is fractured, but we are not forsaken. Like a broken mirror that reflects God's character with distortion, so is the image of God within us. God in His sovereignty knew from all eternity past what we would do with His image, and yet, He chose to endow us with it anyway.

Second, the gospel is all about the restoration of all things through the coming of the kingdom. This means reversing the effects of the Fall—restoring alienated relationships with God, self, and neighbor; restoring culture; restoring creation; and restoring the image of God within. All are different dimensions of the coming of the kingdom. God is in the business of redeeming our brokenness for our good and His glory. The goal of our sanctification is for us to become more and more conformed to the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3: 18).

Third, we see the perfect picture of the image of God in Christ the King Himself. Hebrews 1:3 tells us, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." No matter how woefully we image God at times, Jesus shows us by His example exactly how we are called to image God and empowers us to do it through His indwelling Spirit. Jesus is not just in the image of God, but he actually is the image of God. In Him we see the perfect essence of God's character expressed through His capacities. Therefore, we have both an example and an equipper.

Why The Image of God Matters

So why does the image of God matter? For me, that question hit home on January 5, 1992, when, after the birth of my second son, the pediatrician announced, "We believe Timothy has a chromosomal abnormality." My passion was for academia, and now I had a newborn son who had an intellectual disability. What did that say about him? And about me? Timmy's entrance into my life caused me to reevaluate my yardstick of human value. The doctrine of the image of God provides us with an understanding of not only the basis for human value—but also establishes the basis for respect, equality and interdependence, our purpose in life, and our role in restoration.

Providing the Basis of Human Value

Often when we try to understand the image of God, we find ourselves comparing human beings to other creatures. "What are the differences?" we ask. This, in addition to Greek influences on Western thinking, contributes to our tendency to over-emphasize reason and intellect when we consider the meaning of the image of God.

Anthony Hoekema, author of *Created in God's Image*, suggests that, instead, we should focus on Christ—who is the image of God. Perhaps that is why a loving adult with Down syndrome sometimes reflects the essence of God's character through the expression of his God-given capacities so much more than his counterpart who is a hard-charging CEO. But both the successful executive and the intellectually disabled individual have great value. The infinite value of the Creator imparts value to His finite creation through His shared image. Every human being, therefore, is worthy of our care—regardless of his role in society or her life experiences—even when it is costly, time-consuming, or inconvenient. Once we have redefined what it means to be human, as in the newspaper article noted earlier, we have implicitly redefined what our responsibilities are—as individuals and as a society—to those who fall outside of the new definition.

In addition, the image of God allows us to focus on the goodness, truth, and beauty in every person. Covenant Seminary professor Jerram Barrs exhorts us to look for the glory, the dignity, and the treasure in each human being we meet. When we do so, it radically changes our relationships. When you see a person with severe disabilities, what do you see first? When you encounter a

person in dire poverty, what do you see first? Let's be honest—when you deal with your own spouse and your own children, what do you see first? All of us, with God's help, can afford to be transformed in this area.

Establishing the Basis for Respect, Equality, and Interdependence

Not only does the image of God provide the basis for human value, but it is also fundamental to the issue of respect. Respect-based relationships are grounded on two pillars: grace and the image of God. We can only enter into respectful relationships when we keep both of these elements in balance. Grace allows us to deal with the brokenness in our lives and the lives of others, while the image of God allows us to relate on the basis of our shared, precious value endowed at Creation.

Robin is a 52-year-old adult woman with Down syndrome. When she goes out to eat in restaurants, waitresses often ask her parents what she wants to eat. Robin's spunky response is to say, "I'm over here!" We cannot have truly meaningful relationships with others unless we inherently respect them. And that is, in part, based on the image of God.

Different, but directly related to its role in respectful relationships, is the fact that the image of God is the basis for equality and interdependence. "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). The Bible teaches that male and female are equally created in the image of God. On this basis, both sexes are called to mutual respect for each other as exemplified in interdependent relationships.

Consider Hoekema's insights into the image of God in male and female: "Man's existence as male and female means that man as a masculine being has been created for partnership with another being who is essentially like him but yet mysteriously unlike him. It means that woman is the completion of man's own humanity and that man is wholly himself only in his relationship with woman. ... Man and woman can only image God through fellowship with each other—a fellowship that is an analogy of the fellowship God has within Himself."

While Hoekema's observations can apply to marriage, they are certainly not limited to marriage. Interdependent relationships between men and women operating in community, within the culture, and particularly, within the Church, simply offer a broader perspective on God's image than when we image God in isolation.

Prescribing Our Purpose and Our Role

"What is the chief end of man?" asks the Shorter Catechism. "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." How do we actually glorify God since we can add nothing of value to Him? The answer is found in the image of God: we glorify God by reflecting back to Him the essence of His character as expressed through our God-given capacities for relationship with God, self, neighbor, and creation. In other words, we mirror His character back to Himself—albeit imperfectly in this life—in all that we do. This means that every type of work God calls us to can have eternal value when it is done in God-imaging ways. This is a countercultural concept, as it imparts deep meaning to sacrificial work, menial tasks, and labor that doesn't necessarily produce tangible results or desirable outcomes. It allows us to "de-couple" from the world's model of success that showcases ability, celebrity, and performance.

Finally, the image of God is practical in the way it defines our role in restoration. As children of the King, we each have a small role as agents of restoration in the coming of the kingdom. But there is only One who can restore the image of God within any given human individual: the indwelling Holy

Spirit. However, imparting the gospel in relationships around us is also part of the process of our own sanctification that renews the image of God in our lives. "You have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Colossians 3:9-10). The goal of the Christian life is for each of us to become more and more like Christ, who is the image of God. It is often through living out the gospel in our interactions with others that the Holy Spirit actively transforms us from the inside out.

After speaking at a countywide event about promoting self-determined decision-making for people with disabilities, I sat down to listen to the rest of the speakers. Up to the microphone stepped Gina, a woman from our church who has intellectual disabilities. After being interviewed by a staff person, Gina was offered the opportunity to say anything she wanted in that public gathering. Being a decisive woman of few words, she pointed at me in the audience and blurted out, "YOU! Stephanie!" "Uh-oh!" I thought, wondering what would come next. Softening her tone, Gina smiled and said, "Thank you for my church." And then she sat down. That was it. Given the opportunity to speak publicly about any subject on her heart, Gina chose to express thanks for her church. Is that what I would have done, given a similar opportunity? I was honored. I was humbled. And I realized that my meager efforts at being an agent of restoration in the lives of others are really God's vehicle for changing me.

Discover More:

- Teach a Sunday school class on the image of God. Explore the biblical concepts and identify practical applications to daily life. Use part of the time to examine challenging bioethics issues.
- Hold a deacons' retreat. Discuss how the image of God needs to impact the work of the diaconate. Do an honest assessment and recommend changes.
- Hold a Sanctity of Human Life Sunday service. Present the sanctity of human life as more than just an anti-abortion issue. Present the sanctity of human life as an all-of-life issue that calls us to protect and promote the image of God in every human being from conception to the grave.

Suggested Reading:

- *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* (2nd Edition) by Gilbert Meilaender
- *Created in God's Image* by Anthony Hoekema
- *How Now Shall We Live?* by Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey
- *How to be a Christian in a Brave New World* by Joni Eareckson Tada and Nigel M. de S. Cameron
- *Human Dignity in the Biotech Century* by Charles Colson and Nigel M. de S. Cameron, editors
- *Same Lake, Different Boat: Coming Alongside People Touched by Disability* by Stephanie O. Hubach
- *The God Who is There* by Francis A. Schaeffer

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