

Unity and Diversity in the Local Church

Class 3: The Image of God in Our Unity & Diversity

I. Introduction

Does being made in God's image make you very happy? If it doesn't, I wonder if you're as happy as you could be when you try to love other people in our church, especially people who aren't like you?

Even as Christians, sometimes we're not too sure why we should love others. Gritting our teeth, we assume we should because God says so. But that reason isn't sufficient to help us *happily* love one another. Don't hear me wrong: obeying out of duty is usually good and shows our faith. But let's strive for one better—let's strive to obey with joy like the blessed person of Psalm 1. As Christians we are to do all things without grumbling or complaining Philippians 2 says, and that includes our obedience. Brothers and sisters, joyful obedience makes God very, very happy and us very, very happy.

So today we're gonna talk about the image of God, what's sometimes called the *imago dei*, so our duty changes to delight, and so we might more *happily* love one another. And let me make this nice, provocative statement upfront to frame our time and explain why this doctrine is more important than you might have thought: Outside of the *imago dei*, we *cannot* find lasting motivation to love those who are different

from us. Let's think about some alternative reasons to love others, and see why the fall short:

- 1) *We should love people because they contribute to society.*
 Well, what about those who don't? It's this kind of logic that leads to eugenics or even Nazi Germany; the Nazis looked at a class of people and said y'all aren't valuable for society. Or I think of Frank Stephens, a man with down syndrome, who recently came to Capitol Hill. He came to argue against legislation that would encourage abortions of babies with down syndrome. Given how our society operates, the reasons Frank gave for why people with down syndrome should be allowed to live all centered around how useful people with down syndrome can be to society. Isn't it tragic that Frank felt that he had to state his usefulness to make his case for his worthiness to live?
- 2) Ok, well then *we should, number two, love people because it's in our best interest.* Jenifer Lopez says, *love people because that's what makes "the world go round?"* Well, that's a reactive love, not a proactive love. And if that's the case, what we don't really love are people; we just love the world going around. People, then, are just a means to get

what we want, but what about those who don't give us what we want? Do we love them?

After all, what if it's not in our best interest to love someone? What motive do we have then? At the SBC a few weeks ago, the pastoral staff had dinner with an author who wrote about unity in the church. In one of his books he highlighted that if we only love people because it's what works best for us and those like us, no real reason exists for us to change the status quo if that change isn't in our best interest.¹ Praise God, Jesus loved us when it definitely wasn't in his best interest.

- 3) Well, we should love people then because...we're supposed to! Paul says in Colossians 2, that kind of "love" has no power to restrain our sinful desires. Simply knowing the rules never motivated anyone to love someone.
- 4) Ok, well do we love people simply because we identify with them? Often times, that is the case; we love people who we understand, people who are like us. But as we talked about last week even people who aren't Christians love people

¹George Yancey, *Transcending Racial Barriers*, Oxford University Press (p. 46).

who are like them, and that kind of love says nothing about the value of people who aren't like us.

But the doctrine of the image of God speaks to that value, and if we don't study the image of God, we're prone to forget the horrible dangers that come from misunderstanding this doctrine, and maybe even think we could never participate in those dangers. But Christians were some of the largest advocates of Chattel Slavery. And it's not like the image of God was only misunderstood in the past. From sex trafficking in dark alleys to inappropriate magazines in grocery store checkout aisles, *ours* is an age that values devaluing people. How we regard the poor or the growing number of abortions should remind us that though this doctrine may sound abstract and academic, the imago dei literally has vital implications for every person everywhere. And I know I've listed some extreme examples but these implications trickle down even to how we view one another in our church, and we'll come to that in a minute.

But first we should note that we don't study the image of God simply to avoid danger. But positively, when the implications of God's image are properly applied, they do not merely guard human preservation; they promote human flourishing. So given these high stakes, I'm going to suggest that to understand God's image, we must love people—especially those who we perceive to be different from us—because God has made all people like him to represent him for his glory. And I'm going to support that

from the Bible. We're going to walk through the story of the Bible—God's Big Picture; we're going to walk through Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation. And we're going to look at the image of God in each chapter of this story and draw some implications from it for how we love our neighbor.

II. The Image of God & Creation (Gen. 1:26-28)

Last week, we discussed how God is the primary builder of unity. But the source of that unity doesn't just reach back to Calvary; it reaches back to creation. And in some sense, this isn't news to many of us. In middle school, many of us learned these famous words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are **created** equal, that they are endowed by their *Creator* with certain unalienable rights..." Pop quiz: what document are those words from? (The Declaration of Independence). But an even better document for our purposes is Scripture.

We read in Genesis 1:26 that at the beginning of time, God said, "*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...*" So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God Said to them, "*Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...*" OK, we're at the beginning of our story and I want to make sure we don't miss what's happening: Just as kings in ancient times would set up statues or "images" on the highest peaks to

display their fame and rule, we too are designed to point beyond ourselves to our Maker.Q1

This means that our identities are inextricably tied to God and derived from him. It also means that our job is to represent God, to be like God, in the earth. Christianity has consistently taught that whatever being made in the image of God means, it at least means God created people in a unique way. So “the image of God is not some tacked-on extra, as if we’re slightly upgraded mammals. It’s about who we fundamentally are, not about a few upgraded attributes we might possess.”²

So, on your handout is our working definition of what the image of God is—*it’s the foundation of our identity and our primary job description*, and both of those realities mean we should love God and other people. The image of God is both a noun (identity) and a verb (job description, a task). So what are some implications of that truth for our church and beyond?

- It means that when we see differences in one another, we should praise God for them. What was Adam’s first response when he saw Eve, someone who was different from him but another image bearer? Praise! Our differences reflect God’s creativity and how multi-faceted God must be. There are 7 billion people on the planet

²Mark Meynell

who all look different (diversity), yet who all bear the same image of God (unity). Though individual callings may differ, reflecting God is the central calling of humanity. This, C.S. Lewis said, is “what God meant humanity to be like; like players in one band.”³ Beloved, we should be dumbfounded that people are the *only creation* who God made *like him*. So often we look at one another at a distance, through a telescope if you will. Understanding God’s image is more like looking through a kaleidoscope. You’re not so much inspecting but being awed at the array of colors and shapes. Q2

- Also, notice in Genesis 1 that our identity is established before our job description. So who we are is more important than what we do, and who we are isn’t dependent on what we do. What’s more, because we all share this common identity, we have more in common with one another at the most foundational level than we might think. This incredible identity we share is greater than our differences. Brothers and sisters,, the Bible speaks more to what unites us than what divides us.

In light of this truth, we should note that in Genesis 1–2, Adam and Eve are ethnically generic. They’re not Hebrews, they’re not Egyptians; they are

³ Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. San Francisco: Harper Collins: 2001 (later printing edition; quotation found on p. 164-165).

presented as non-ethnic and non-national because they are the mother and father of all ethnicities and all nations. Meaning there is no ethnicity on earth that reflects God's image better or more than any other. So it's not just the *dignity* of all human beings that Scripture traces to creation; it's also the *equality* of all human beings.

So to sum this up: The image of God means all people are worthy of love because each person is a picture and ambassador for God, which is why—as one theologian put it “whoever tries to see the human person apart from his relatedness to God will always fail to see him as he really is.”⁴ Or to put it positively and poetically, Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky: “To love someone means to see them as God intended.” But we often don't see one another as God intended, do we? Why is that? Because of sin!

Genesis 3—the next major scene in God's Big Picture—will add a painful layer of complexity to this image we all bear.

III. The Image of God & The Fall (Genesis 3-4)

Leaving the noun and transitioning to the verb: We see that it doesn't take long before our first parents, Adam and Eve, fail at carrying out our job description—instead of glorifying God they sinned against him. Instead of trying to *represent* the king they tried to *be* the King. And here's a fascinating thing: Satan tempted Eve by saying you can be *like* God. The

⁴Anthony Hoekema, *The image of God*, p. 59.

tragedy? Eve was already made in God's likeness, because she was made in his image.

So, raise your hand if you have ever seen a smart phone with a cracked screen? I don't know about you, but whenever my screen cracks, I'm like "Ugh!...how can I use this thing now?" In the same way, in creation we were like new smart phones made to transmit and depict the message of God's glory. But now we're broken; we have cracked screens.

Now, to be clear: The Fall doesn't mean we've lost God's image; no, we still bear the identity and job description. And that we can image God even in distorted ways in a fallen world, speaks to God's grace: He still lets us still make decisions and communicate, and work. We still, albeit imperfectly, image God.

So even after the fall, God says people should not murder other people, because people are made in his image (Genesis 9:6). But what do we see shortly after the fall in Genesis 4? We see the first murder. Because of sin, we naturally distort God's image in terrible ways, and that doesn't only affect our relationship with God; it also affects our relationships with each other. How do the effects of sin manifest in our lives?

- For starters, sin makes us naturally prideful. This is why Paul in Romans 12:16 command us to not be proud if we're to get along. We naturally think the way we look, the way we do

things is right. And anyone who doesn't look like us or do things how we do is wrong; at best, we think others are unknown and at worst we think they're a threat.

- What's more, sin makes us value and judge people because of what they look like or what we see them doing for us.

Whether it's a lustful thought or we're comparing ourselves or our possessions to someone else—our natural tendency is not to consider others better than ourselves; it's not to look to their needs like Philippians 2 would have us. Instead, our tendency is to see people simply as a means to meet our needs.

Instead of putting people made in God's image first, we put ourselves first.

- Earlier we talked about praising God for our differences. Sin makes our natural reflex to depreciate our differences, not appreciate them. Naturally, we fear what we don't know. But Proverbs says the fear of man is a snare (Proverbs 29:25). So with that said, who it is you prefer to talk to right after the service is over? Who do you seek to invite to church? It is always people who seem like you? Similarity is a good thing and we're going to talk about that next week. But even if you do reach out to someone different, is it because you see them as a project who is worthy of your condescension, or as peer

who is worthy of your love because they're made in God's image?

- Another implication: In Matthew 5, Jesus said if we're unrighteously angry with someone, we're liable to the judgment a murderer will face. We've seen what murder says about our love for God's image and those who bear it. Think even of how we tear people down with words—perhaps whispered words behind their back (1 Tim. 5:13). Are we unwittingly defacing God's icons? Warning us about this, James 3:7–10 in your hand out says: “For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse **people who are made in the likeness of God**. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.”

Slander is a form of cosmic vandalism. Remember we said that it's not just the dignity of all people that Scripture traces to our creation; it's also the equality of all people. And this is why, friends, that racism is not bad manners. Racism is an affront to God, an assault against his character, creativity, wisdom, and glory.

Proverbs 14:31: “The one who oppresses the poor insults his Maker.”

Proverbs 17:5: “The one who mocks the poor insults his Maker.”

Classism, racism, any ism that elevates one group of people over another, or demeans one group beneath another, is not a mere social gaffe or mistake. Oppressing a fellow image-bearer or group of image-bearers is an abomination in the sight of God, tantamount to looking at him and those he has crafted in his likeness and turning our back to him.

So, if someone broke into your home and defaced all your pictures, you wouldn't say, “That person has a problem with pictures.” You would say, “That person has a problem with me.”

And one of the reasons we should be talking about the imago dei and how these kind of problems may surface in our church is not just because the image of God demands it (though it does), not just because the character of God demands it (though it does), not just because the glory of God demands it (though it does), not just because biblical history demands it . . . but we're talking about the image of God because American history demands it (and we are a church in America, an American church), and because evangelical history demands it (and we are an evangelical church), and because Southern Baptist history demands it (and we are a Southern Baptist church). And in American history, evangelical history, and SBC history, the image of God in black people in particular has been assaulted on explicitly theological grounds.

Arguments defending chattel slavery and racial hierarchy were framed in theological terms (Genesis 4: Mark of Cain; Genesis 9: Curse of Ham).

And I don't say this to browbeat us. I say this because we evangelicals and Southern Baptists aren't going to get this right, if we aren't honest about where we've gotten it wrong.

IV. The Image of God & Redemption (Rom. 8:29)

This may sound sacrilege, but everything I've said so far regarding God's image, can be said apart from those who trust in Jesus Christ. All people are made in God's image. All people brokenly reflect it. But we are Christians —*Christ*-ians—in a *Christian* church, so let's talk about...Christ!

We praise Jesus because he lived, died and was raised as a substitute for broken image-bearers. Rom. 8:29 says that God predestined his people to be conformed to the image of his son. Jesus came to us so that we could be like him.

Praise Jesus! He perfectly carried out the task to image God. Colossians 1 tells us Jesus is the image of his Father (Col. 1:15, 19; Heb. 1:3 cf. 2 Cor. 4:4)! The Bible says the men who saw Jesus Christ saw God (John 12:45, 14:9)! So when we turn to Jesus and believe in Him, we get His perfect reputation of bearing God's image. Therefore, our value is not what we do as Christians, but what Christ has done. Jamie says we often think becoming a Christian means "oh life isn't about doing things for myself any more; it's about doing things for God!" No, though our actions

matter and glorify God that's all secondary at best. Life is ultimately about God's glory through what Christ has done and will do.

We who trust in what Christ has done are new creations (2 Cor. 5:16-21). Jesus, above all is our new identity and living like Him is our new job description. Paul describes this new identity and job description in Colossians 3. He says that because we are being renewed into the image of Christ, we must put away anger and slander. We must seek the good of others above ourselves, assume the best of each other and all of that is a part of loving one another. And I know that loving your neighbor might sound obvious. But that's the reality of the Christian life: God's commands aren't hard to find, they're hard to obey.

And we know this from our own experience. Let's just make this very practical for something members of this church experience. Let's say we walk into the main hall. On one side of pews are those we perceive to be like us. On the other side, there are those who we perceive to be different. So immediately, at the speed of thought, we start calculating. We think the one side seems "like me, therefore safe; safe, therefore, something to be gained..." and the other is "unlike me, therefore unknown; unknown, therefore potential for harm and loss; potential for harm and loss therefore I'll ignore them..." Understanding our unity in the image of God at creation helped us to say to the supposedly different side, "Wait! "They're made in God's image, like me; a descendant from Adam like me; a fallen sinner like

me, with potential to get saved, like me...” And in Christ we say, “Hallelujah! They’re miraculously saved, like me! Bought by the blood of Christ, like me! Filled with the Holy Spirit, like me! Part of God’s family, like me.” Sinclair Ferguson puts it beautifully when he says, “Our reality is not that we just share a lineage of Adam; Christ’s blood creates a deeper lineage than our genes.”

Yet even when we hear profound truths like that, when it comes to rubbing shoulders with people different from us week in and week out, loving them can be *hard*, right? Why is that? Here’s what 2 Corinthians 3:18 says, “And we *all*, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same *image* from one degree of glory to another.” Did you hear that, “*Being* transformed?” That verse from 2 Corinthians means we are *growing* (present tense) in Christ’s image until the last day. That means that none of us here are finished products; we’re all works in progress. We’re going to get this wrong. Our sin nature is going to flare up, which is why Paul commands us new creations to bear with one another in Colossians 3. How happily do we bear with one another?

In *The Meaning of Marriage* Tim Keller talks about how on his wedding day, he and his wife looked great. And now when he does weddings, he’s tempted to quip to the bride and groom: “enjoy it now, because it’s all down hill from here.” And it’s easy to believe that. But in

glory, we will have the greatest image that makes our earthly image look like rags. So, one way we can stay motivated to love another person is by imagining that person finally perfected. In other words, we can remember that God is at work in that other person. Like Paul, we can rejoice that God is using us to help prepare someone else for their most glorious day. And I want to talk about that glorious, final day in point...

V. The Image of God & Consummation (1 John 3:2)

So far we've talked about the image of God in man in Genesis 1, when man was created. We talked about how man fractured that image in Genesis 3, and how the incarnated God-Man in Colossians 1 is the perfect image of God, who is restoring us more and more after His likeness Colossians 3 says.

And yet we can't skip the last part of God's story because this is where we're headed, this is what gives us hope: Christ is coming again. 1 John 3 tells us that, "we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when Christ appears—on that day—we shall *be* like him, because we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2). We will be like God! In a way that was even greater than when Adam and Eve were like God. This is what the big picture is all about: God's glory. He made us to reflect it. We messed that up. He crushed his own Son, Who perfectly bore His image, so that we could reflect it again, even more

brightly. And He will keep us until we see His Son—until we are fully like Him.

Do you look forward to that brothers and sisters? That great day is the main event. The local church is a dress rehearsal for that day. Paul writing to the church in Ephesus, to another dress rehearsal, says in Ephesians 1:15: “because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers...” I think what made the news of the Ephesian church’s faith travel was their love toward *ALL* the saints. The Jewish Christians loved the Gentile Christians and vice versa. They were one family.

This unity, bought with Christ’s blood, was the proof that gave Paul confidence in the Ephesians’ faith. And he responded by praising God. Brothers and sisters, I praise God for the uniting love I see Him developing here at CHBC between His image-bearers. I think if Paul were to look at many of your lives, he would praise God for your love toward *all* the saints. And one day, *all* the saints will be gathered around Jesus, we’ll be fully like Jesus, and we’ll be very, very happy.

What a story.