

## An Intrinsic or Extrinsic ‘Image of God’?

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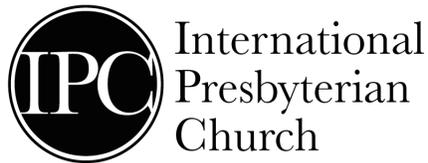
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Scholars have wrestled for many years to try to explain the familiar expression ‘the image of God’. From the middle of the last century, for example, Near Eastern studies drew heavily on Mesopotamian parallels in which Babylonian kings were commonly described as God’s ‘image’. As a result, biblical studies gravitated — not always helpfully as we shall see — towards an interpretation of Genesis 1 in terms of ‘status’ rather than ‘structure’. Human beings, it was argued, are God’s representatives on earth like the Mesopotamian kings. They are God’s image because they are delegated rulers.

Previously, for almost 2000 years, the church had focussed more upon Adam and Eve’s likeness to God, that is, upon the unique attributes which God had given them. Their dominion was possible only because of their appropriate nature or *structure*, i.e. their likeness to God as persons. However, partly under the influence of evolution, the Mesopotamian interpretation was preferred, but needs now to be challenged. In fact, it should always have been beyond dispute, first, because the New Testament’s teaching on sanctification demands it, and second, because our Lord’s incarnation presupposes it.

In relation to the former, the Apostle Paul says we need to be ‘... transformed ‘into (Christ’s) likeness’ [*eikon* in Greek, i.e. his image] with ever-increasing glory ...’ Our whole life has to be re-formed to imitate his life, with our attitudes of heart being the key. Why? Because our human characteristics are what God is concerned about in salvation. It is they that constitute us in his ‘image’. In relation to the incarnation, the man Jesus demonstrates what God intended his image-bearers to be in the first place. He becomes the ‘last Adam’ to recover what the first Adam lost.

In short, the ‘image’ is without real meaning apart from an *intrinsic* view of our human identity.



It was unfortunate that a Greek emphasis on reason (*ratio*) confused the medieval Church. The human intellect was selected as *the* distinguishing feature of our ‘image-ness’ — a misconception the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers quickly repudiated, along with all forms of Greek dualism. Their stress was on the Hebrew view of the unity of body and spirit. They did not deny reason — think of their stress on the need to read and understand the Bible — but they expanded the image to include all we are as human beings. What was axiomatic to them was that we resemble God *with a unique and God-like structure*.

The approach taken by most theistic evolutionists is different. Through purely physical forces, they suggest that organic life gave rise to ape-like creatures whom we now call ‘*homo sapiens*’. These creatures had language, creativity, beauty, and a system of ethics and religion. But, like other species, they had to struggle to survive. They were selfish, angry and cruel. They died. They were *not* God’s image. They were definitely *not* made for eternity. Their significance was no greater than, say, toadstools or tigers. They only became the image of God in the fuller sense when God intervened to give them what one writer calls ‘a delegated value and status...by divine decree’.<sup>1</sup> The level of speculation in all this is obvious. For example, were just two *homo sapien* individuals chosen (like Adam and Eve), or many more? Were they sinners before their ‘adoption’ and then sinless after it? Did their moral Fall involve a specific and inexcusable choice like that in Genesis 3? The point is that nothing like this appears in the Bible or in Christian theology before the end of the nineteenth century.

The traditional pre-Darwinian view was different. Adam and Eve came through a divine act in history. Though they were part of an organic matrix involving millions of species, they were in a class by themselves. They did not need to graduate to a higher form of existence. They already had a personal relationship with their Maker because they were *like* him.<sup>2</sup> We call this the *intrinsic* view of God’s image. Adam and Eve were God’s divinely decreed rulers, but *only because they had the capacity for it*. The *extrinsic* view

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge Paper, December 2013, vol. 22 no. 4, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Animals were different: though sentient, they lacked rationality; though communicators, they lacked language; though ‘organisers’ and ‘constructors’ of a sort, they lacked imaginative creativity. They were admirable but not *personal*. That is why Scripture calls them simply ‘brute beasts’

derives from status rather than structure: ‘... the value and status of humankind is established *not by intrinsic capabilities but by divine decree*’.<sup>3</sup>

Why the need for the second, we ask? Answer: to accommodate evolution theory. All theistic evolutionists believe that organic life came out of purely physical means within an overarching providential order. But is this enough to explain *homo sapiens*? Can personality really be derived from a purely impersonal process without a supernatural and miraculous intervention at the beginning? We think not; and we believe that Scripture points us to this reality through the supernatural dimension inherent in every aspect of human behaviour. Not that a miracle takes place whenever any of us does something. But, as CS Lewis puts it, ‘... the supernatural element in man concerns us solely as *evidence that something beyond Nature exists ... his rationality* is the little tell-tale rift in Nature which shows that there is something beyond or behind her’.<sup>4</sup> Lewis is not advocating the Greek view mentioned earlier. He starts with rationality simply because he knows that it is inexplicable in material terms only. But his argument extends wider; ‘the same argument leads us to acknowledge a supernatural source for our ideas of *good and evil*’.<sup>5</sup> So too with human *choice*: we do not just ‘think’, we *choose* to think — and see, hear, feel, act, assess, reflect and love. At the very heart of our being, in fact, we show that we are neither mechanically programmed nor purely physical.<sup>6</sup>

We conclude, therefore, that God’s image-bearers did not just evolve. They were designed to be rational, creative, choosing and moral beings. This is what makes them his ‘image’. But theistic evolutionists tend to be uncomfortable about design. They worry about it implying successive acts of creation in Genesis 1: ‘This cannot be the case’, they say, ‘because evolution is a random, physical process’. Similarly, they prefer to speak of God’s image being ‘decreed’ rather than designed. They even avoid Scripture’s ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’ terminology even though it crops up on every page of the Bible. This does not, as is so often thought to be the case, require a Cartesian view of soul

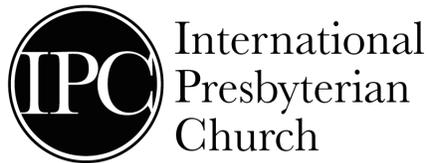
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<sup>3</sup> Ibid p 4(b) – my underlining – RM.

<sup>4</sup> C S Lewis ‘Miracles’ Fontana Books 1947 p 33.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid p 42 my underlining – RM.

<sup>6</sup> More could be said here about the structure of *all* reality, but that’s another topic.



and body. It is not as if ‘a kind of magical essence or ethereal intelligence indwells a body like a ghost in a machine’.<sup>7</sup> Far from it:

the body must be regarded not as the vessel or vehicle of the soul, *but simply as its material manifestation, expression and occasion.* This means that even if one should trace the life of the body back to its most primordial principles, one would still never arrive at that point where the properly human vanishes and leaves a ‘mere’ physical organism or aggregation of inchoate tissues or ferment of spontaneous chemical reactions behind. All of man’s bodily life is also the life of *the soul*, possessed of a supernatural dignity and a vocation to union with God.

But one finds barely a hint of this sort of language in theistic evolutionists’ descriptions of God’s image.

To conclude: although the theistic evolutionist explanation of Genesis sounds biblical, it masks an essentially unbiblical theology; although it affirms men and women as God’s image, it fails to clarify how the fundamental animal-human distinction arose in the beginning; and it seems to hesitate to say, unequivocally, that the person-ness of humanity (inexplicable to science) is the clearest evidence of God’s creation. It prefers to explain the human race extrinsically. Why? Because this sits more comfortably with the theory of Darwinian evolution. We understand the cultural pressure involved, especially for scientists, but it seems an odd way to explain one of the most important concepts in the Bible. As we said, everything in Scripture depends on what we take the *imago dei* in Genesis to be.

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<sup>7</sup> David Bentley Hart, ‘The Anti-Theology of the Body’. *The New Atlantis*, Number 9, Summer 2005, pp. 65-73.