

In the Beginning

Message 3

The Beginning of Man I: Image of God

Genesis 1:26-2:17; Psalm 8:1-9

Who am I?

This morning Ruth was telling me about a book she was reading to Benjamin. *Hank the Cowdog* is a first person narrative about a canine who is in charge of ranch security. Hank is very serious about his responsibility to guard the ranch from criminals and troublemakers of various sorts, but he is frequently frustrated by the uncooperativeness of the humans who live there. Did you ever wonder what was going through the mind of your pet? What does your dog think about as he rides along in your car? What is your cat thinking as she stares out the window? I grew up on a farm and we always had a lot of animals around. They all had different personalities. We knew which cows were affectionate and which were mean, which were cooperative and which were contrary. And what a range of expressions you could see in the dogs! A dog will show happiness, fear, sadness, confusion, etc. Then there are the cats. Cats are master manipulators, as you know if you ever had one or if you watched the movie *Babe*. Our cats would sprawl lazily in the sun until someone approached the door. Then they would rush the human and cry pitifully, as though they were on the brink of starvation. A visitor would never know how lavishly those cats were fed. My mother, who fed them, would say, "After all, they're only human."

When you spend a lot of time with domestic animals you become increasingly amazed at how human they appear. They do seem to think, feel, and will much like we do. So this naturally makes us wonder, what is the difference between them and us? All societies, including those of today, make a legal distinction between human beings and animals. But there are some people who would convince us that the differences are not so great. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) is an organization which opposes using animals for food and fur on the basis that they also have feelings. Other people, in response, take pleasure in carving and eating animals – or at least they speak as though they do. What is the truth? Are we mere animals – or something better?

The difference between human beings and animals can be extremely difficult to pin down exactly, but I think we would all agree on one point. Human beings possess a level of thought and consciousness that no animals approach. The reason we are amused by the story of Hank the Cowdog is because it is so obviously made-up. The protective behavior of dogs does not spring from some higher consciousness of moral responsibility. It is simply a highly developed instinct. Human beings wonder about life and the universe – how it came into being, who made us, and what our purpose is. Animals do not. You never see a convention of monkeys gathered to wrestle with the question of existence or purpose. Animals don't ask the question, "Who am I?"

When Alexander Pope said, "The chief study of mankind is man," he was expressing the question which has most perplexed and eluded man. I think it is fair to say that this is the core motivation in the whole field of philosophy. But ordinary people ask and answer this question everyday. Some indeed say man is an animal, and conclude therefore that moral imperatives don't apply to him. When Nietzsche declared that God is dead, he opened the door for Darwin's principle of survival of the fittest to operate in human society. We all became animals in a world where only the strong survive. Hitler took this perspective at face value – until a stronger army defeated him. Today people copulate freely all around us, like animals to whom moral restraints don't apply.

Others say man is a machine, and seek to program him to behave in certain ways. They attempt to control his actions by controlling his environment. Still others declare that man is a proto god. This is the heresy of the Mormons, who teach that we can become gods eventually if we follow their religion. Obvi-

ously no one can say with certainty who man is. The problem is that by looking at ourselves we can never see the whole picture. It's like looking in the mirror. You can choose to see your front, or your back, or your side – but you can't possibly see all of you at once. Man can't possibly understand who he is because he is looking from inside himself. Only an intelligent, rational being with infinite understanding can tell us who we are. And so we turn to God for our answers.

Spiritual Dust

We shall begin with the more detailed account of man's creation in Genesis chapter 2, where verse seven says, "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." This verse shows us first that man is composed of two parts: dust and spirit.

Over the centuries there have been many schools of thought which taught that matter is evil. Only spirit is good. The most well-known promoters of this belief were the Gnostics of the first few centuries A.D. In those days some Christians were influenced by this thought and taught that what you do with your body is irrelevant, since the body is inherently evil and destined for destruction anyway. The New Testament authors soundly denounced this teaching, on the basis that the body is in fact good. Remember that in chapter one God declared all He created to be "good". That includes the dust. Our bodies are not an accident. We have bodies because God *wants* us to have bodies. In fact, He made our bodies from the substance of the good earth which He also made. This also highlights the fact that man is a creature. He is not God, nor is he divine in any ontological sense. Man is a created being, fundamentally different than God who made him.

But man is also fundamentally different from all the rest of God's creation. Man alone receives life by the breath of God. It's important to understand that in Hebrew there is only one word for breath, spirit, and wind. In Hebrew thought, the wind is the breath of God, and the spirit of man comes from the breath of God as the Spirit of God blows into the lump of dust. No matter how complex and sophisticated the other animals are, none come close to man, because none has a spiritual nature. Whatever we see in our pets, their emotions and thoughts have a different source than ours. They are dust only, while man is both dust and spirit. Man is dust, like the animals, but spirit, like God. This is the reason man is able to communicate with God. The scripture says that all creation praises God, but it is not a self-conscious, reasoned praise. The rivers and mountains, plants and animals praise God simply by being there. Man alone praises God by knowing and consciously responding to Him. Man alone has a personal relationship with God because man alone is a spiritual creature. Man is neither spirit alone, like God, nor dust alone, like the animals. Man is a completely unique being – spiritual dust.

Image of God

Now let's return to chapter one and consider what God says about man there. The key word here is "image". When we understand what God meant when He said, "Let us make man in our image," we will know who we are. Theologians have wrestled with this question ever since these words were penned. The usual approach is to ask, what is it about man that is like God and different from animals? There is a huge volume of material on this topic, but we will condense it into three points. First, man – and God, but not animals – possesses *personality*. By personality we mean knowledge, emotions, and will. True, we see some manifestations of these characteristics in animals, but nothing to the degree we see in man. Theologians have developed this concept in depth by distinguishing rational thought, creative power, etc. as aspects of personality.

Second, the image of God includes *morality*. Morality involves freedom and responsibility. Adam and Eve had the freedom to choose the fruit of the trees in the garden, and they had the responsibility to avoid the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. All mankind has this moral nature. All people are born

with the ability to comprehend good and evil and the responsibility to make moral choices. Before a child is a year old, he knows the difference between obedience and disobedience. If you have spent much time with children you have seen them debate within themselves whether to do right or wrong – and then make a choice. Animals have no such consciousness or ability. They do what they are able by instinct, training, and environment.

Third, the image of God involves *spirituality*. We have already addressed this topic at length. Man is more than dust. He also has a spirit, which enables him to communicate with God.

All this is helpful, but we might get a deeper understanding of the image of God by investigating the meaning if the term “image”. This is a word which was commonly used in the ancient world and today, but with much different connotations. We think of an image as a picture. When you see an image on your computer screen, you are looking at a picture of something. I remember studying in physics the difference between an real image and a virtual image. I don’t remember *what* that difference is, but both involve pictures. But this was not the way the ancients thought of image. Image is usually used in the scripture to refer to idols. The second commandment says, “You shall not make for yourself a carved image...” and in Judges 6 God commands Gideon to cut down the image of Baal. Now, the ancients were not stupid. They had statues of various sorts, and they understood that a statue is simply a physical representation of a living thing. Even the Hebrews had statues, the most familiar being the Cherubim positioned over the ark of the covenant. But a statue is not an image. The essence of an image is the presence of deity. A statue was merely a three-dimensional picture, but an image was a localization of their god. God was not merely represented by the image – He was present in the image.

Do you understand what this means for man? When God said, “Let us make man in our image,” He was saying, let’s make a creature who will convey the divine presence. Now I’m not saying that God is in every person in some material way. Image has meaning in relation to the rest of the creation. What this means is that the rest of creation will experience God’s presence when man is around. Do you see how radical this is? Man is more than a collection of characteristics he shares with God. He is a representative of God. On the earth man walks with the authority of God. In a sense, when man appears, God is present.

Now this idea was not totally foreign to the ancients. The Egyptians understood that the Pharaoh was the son of God and therefore was divine. The Mesopotamians held similar views. What was totally revolutionary about Genesis was the thought that *all* human beings were the image of God – even women, even children, even slaves. No one would have accepted this thought – no one ever would have *thought* it. The presence of the image of God in all people is the basis for the value and equality of all mankind. This is the reason we oppose slavery, racism, prostitution, abortion and euthanasia. This is the reason that every human being must be treated with dignity and respect. Every person, no matter how stupid or ugly or evil or young or old or sick or unproductive reveals – simply by living – the existence and nature of God. Thus no one is expendable and everyone deserves our protection.

Ruler of Creation

The immediate implication of God’s image in mankind is man’s rule over creation. God, by virtue of His having created the world, is the rightful ruler of all things. But then He made a creature who represented Him, and therefore is given the rule in His place. Where man goes, God’s presence is there. Man was given the authority to rule the earth for God. Everything is under His authority – all the plants and animals, even the earth itself. The gold, bdellium, and onyx are for man to use. But what is man to do with this authority? Is he therefore free to rape and pillage the forests and rivers for his pleasure. Absolutely not! Man’s rule is subordinate to God’s. God created a universe which was good, and man has no license to spoil it. God showed man how to rule the earth by giving him an example. God made a garden and placed man in it to tend it. The object lesson is this: man should go through all the earth, tilling and tending until the

whole earth becomes a garden.

Here we need to remember the important distinction between something which is good and that which is perfect. The Bible uses “good” to refer to the moral quality found in God, but it uses the word “perfect” to refer to the final desirable outcome. The original world was good because it was made by a good God, but it was not perfect. It had not reached it’s final form. God made man to take the good earth and work it until it reached it’s final, perfect form, which He illustrated by making a garden. There are several immediate applications to this. First, the wilderness is good, and it is wrong to spoil it by destroying the rivers, plants and animals God has made. Man sins by polluting the land, water, and air. But second, the wilderness is not an end in itself. There is something better than the wilderness, and that is cultivated fields, gardens, and towns. I think it’s a good idea to preserve some areas of wilderness, but the sort of conservation which opposes all development is unbiblical. The right kind of development is better than the wilderness.

Obviously one man cannot convert the whole wild earth into a garden. This is why God commanded man to multiply. Man rules the earth as he produces other men in his image (and thus in God’s image) who will join him in his work. This century has seen strident movements that have alarmed us with warnings that the earth is already filled up and we need less people, not more. This is an evil idea. Anyone who has driven across the American prairie, or studied the African grasslands or the Russian steppes knows there are huge, vast expanses of unsettled, uncultivated land on this planet. God’s command to multiply and fill the earth is still valid today.

Christ the True Image

Sadly, the human race has failed miserably in fulfilling the glorious destiny held out to us at our creation. In two weeks we will discuss the origin and effects of sin, but we all have a vivid experience of the devastation of sin within us. We might ask, when there is so much evil in the world, has the image of God disappeared entirely? With so much slavery, murder, and pollution, how can we possibly expect the human race to achieve God’s plan? On our own, we would have little hope. But God provided for the fulfillment of His plan by sending His only begotten Son to rescue us. The book of Hebrews opens by saying,

God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...

Hebrews 1:1-3

God’s original image sinned and has spoiled everything he has touched. But finally God sent another image, the true and perfect image – His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus came as the true man, the perfect image of God. Jesus did what Adam failed to do – He perfectly obeyed God’s commands. Later the writer of Hebrews compares Jesus with Adam’s descendants.

But one testified in a certain place, saying: “What is man that You are mindful of him, Or the son of man that You take care of him? You have made him a little lower than the angels; You have crowned him with glory and honor, And set him over the works of Your hands. You have put all things in subjection under his feet.” For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone.

Hebrews 2:6-9

Jesus is the image that died in our place and now rules from heaven. The apostle Paul tells us that Jesus is the second Adam, the new man who has created a new human race. All those who believe in Him are converted from the old humanity to the new. Adam's descendants lost the rule over the earth because of sin, but that rule is restored in Christ. We who believe in Him participate in that rule. In Christ we enter anew upon the work of ruling the earth as God's representatives.

And that is why you are here at Lehigh – to learn how to build bridges, and subdue diseases, and teach children, and engage in commerce. You are here to gain the knowledge and skills to rule the earth in obedience to God. The Christian life is not merely a matter of believing that Jesus is God and practicing good morals. It is working along side Christ to fill and subdue the earth – to make the whole earth a garden. Mature Christians are not waiting for Christ to return. They are busy exercising the rule of Christ everywhere on earth. If this is not your goal, if this is not your purpose in coming to Lehigh – why are you here? Did you come here to get a good job for yourself? To make friends? To find a mate? Repent of such small goals! Such goals are inadequate to give your life real meaning and fulfillment. Instead commit yourself to serving Christ by entering your studies and your profession with energy and enthusiasm to rule the earth under God. And if you don't yet believe in Jesus, that is your first step. Trust in the one who died for you and follow Him all your life.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
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Scale of Being

<u><i>False</i></u>		<u><i>True</i></u>
God	<hr/>	God
		Man
Man		
Apes		Apes
Reptiles		Reptiles
Fish		Fish
Worms		Worms
Plants		Plants

Psalm 8

- 1 O LORD, our LORD, How excellent is Your name in all the earth, *
Who have set Your glory above the heavens!
- 2 Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have ordained strength, *
Because of Your enemies, That You may silence the enemy and the avenger.
- 3 When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, *
The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,
- 4 What is man that You are mindful of him, *
And the son of man that You visit him?
- 5 For You have made him a little lower than the angels, *
And You have crowned him with glory and honor.
- 6 You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; *
You have put all things under his feet,
- 7 All sheep and oxen; *
Even the beasts of the field,
- 8 The birds of the air, And the fish of the sea *
That pass through the paths of the seas.
- 9 O LORD, our LORD, *
How excellent is Your name in all the earth!