

The Likeness We Bear:

A Primer on the Image of God in Man

By Stu Kerns

Introduction:

I call my dog a ‘kid.’ He loves to be right by my side. I can barely take a step without bumping into his faithful fur. When I was recently on vacation he got so nervous that he started eating his bed, and when I arrived to pick him up again he shook like an autumn leaf in the Nebraska wind. He can be sad, mad, peaceful, and agitated. But in spite of all this *he is a dog!* When he dies, I will bury him in the ground just east of my home. He won’t warrant a \$5,000 coffin, wake, church-filled memorial service or professional burial.

The same could be said for my ducks, geese, chickens, cats, and horses. As enjoyable and interesting as they all are, they rank somewhere behind my dog, and my dog—as loved as he is—ranks far beneath the lowliest person I know. Why is this so? That is the subject of this booklet. God has established our status. We have been created in His image.

His view of our value, our purpose, and our rank is worth studying. It affects our self-worth, our esteem of others, and our relationship to the world around us. In short, if it is true that men are uniquely created in the image of their Creator, *that truth changes everything.*

1. What is the image of God?

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness . . .’” (Genesis 1:26)

A centerpiece tells a lot about an occasion. The pulpit in many churches is placed in the center of the stage because the word of God is to be central. At Christmas time the manger or tree often becomes the focal point to draw our attention to the holiday. In theatre, the place of

preeminence is center stage.

When God created the world He started with nothing. Theologians call this: creation *ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing). In the days of creation God formed the earth and sky, the light and darkness, the water and dry land, and the plants and the animals. But on the sixth day, after creating everything else, God made the pinnacle of His creative effort. He made man. Adam was placed securely on center stage for he was created unlike the rest of all the plants and animals. He was created in the image of God.

The Bible makes it clear that God has no body. He is a Spirit.¹ So what does it mean to uniquely bear God's image? Whatever that image is, it was perfect in Adam and Eve for they were created and declared by God to be "very good."² We can see, by extension, that our sinful imperfection must somehow distort God's image in us, but not destroy it. Actually defining the image of God in man has proved to be a bit slippery. However, there is a fairly strong consensus among theologians that the image of God includes elements of *morality* and *intelligence*.

Morality

When my cat hunts down a mouse and has it for dinner I don't accuse it of murder and send it to a judge. That is what cats do. They hunt and kill smaller wild animals, but they aren't held morally accountable.

When we first started raising chickens I learned something about 'the pecking order.' It is a literal principle of the chicken coop. The strongest rooster is willing to fight the other roosters to have his position of preeminence. When one of the roosters proved to be a bit weaker than the others they ganged up on him and pecked him to death! From that day onward the family referred to the roosters as "murderers!" Although we felt horrible about the abuse the

¹ John 4:24.

² Genesis 1:31.

rooster suffered, we used the term somewhat in jest. ‘Murder’ is a morally charged word. Can a chicken be a murderer? Of course not. They are not moral creatures. But when men kill one another we hold them accountable. They can claim that they are only acting in accord with their nature, but it will not get them off the hook of moral responsibility.

God’s morality is seen in his holiness and perfection. He does not sin. He does not cause us to sin. He is perfectly responsible for all His actions, and He holds us responsible for all our actions. In fact, Adam was created to perfectly share in God’s holiness. Yet Adam chose to abandon God’s pathway of perfection and to misuse his moral choice. We continue to be morally responsible creatures. Cats and chickens aren’t tried for murder, humans are. This is the image of God expressed in our morality.

The Apostle Paul touched on this truth in his letter to the Ephesians. He reminded them of their sinful past and exhorted them to “put on the new self, *created to be like God* (emphasis mine) in true righteousness and holiness.”³ This is the blueprint embedded in the human mind: a righteous and holy standard that reflects our Creator. We are not animals; we are morally responsible creatures, made uniquely in the image of God.

Intelligence

Humans clearly have an intelligence that exceeds all other forms of creation. There is an exponential difference between a beaver dam and Hoover dam. A friend of mine mused that his dog never sat and appreciated the beauty of a sunset (In fact, he is fairly certain his dog is an atheist!). My horses have no esthetic sense of how I stack the hay in the barn; they just want to be fed. These concepts of intelligence, rationality, self-awareness, beauty, and knowledge of God are aspects of God’s image.

As I learn more about the universe I gain a growing awareness of God’s enormity and my

³ Ephesians 4:24.

own smallness. In the countryside you can gaze at the stars without the interference of city lights. On a clear night they beam like a million beacons. They speak of God's power, but they also declare his intelligence and creativity. Each star is different. Our own planet, as far as we can tell, is entirely unique!

As you stare into the heavens, bask in the glow of a sunset, or marvel at the beauty of a garden, you are really standing in awe of the one who made them. The image of God is displayed in His handiwork. So it is with men. We reflect our Creator's intelligence and creativity. A well-built home, a medical cure, or a beautiful composition all demonstrate that same creative energy and intelligence that is a shadow of God's creativity and intelligence.

The image of God in man *is that unique reflection of God's being that humans alone bear*. Since we live in a world of sin, much has happened to mar and nearly destroy that image. But it remains. The most gifted genius and the most dysfunctional simpleton bear it alike, for even at our best we are a dim reflection of God's image. But the good news is that every human person, regardless of our personal status, has a unique place in the universe. We bear, however dimly, God's image.

2. How is this concept opposed to the dominant thinking of our day?

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. (Colossians 2:8)

Years ago I first saw the footage of a hairy man walking through the woods. We were told it was a documented sighting of "Sasquatch", otherwise known as "Bigfoot." This hairy ape-man was supposed to be the missing link between the evolution of man and ape. If such a creature could be found it would prove that mankind was merely the result of endless variation, genetic mutation, and natural selection. It would substantiate Darwinism.

Most of us (and our children) have been raised in a culture that accepts the idea of Darwinian evolution without question. We are told that man is merely the highest form of evolved life. The top of the food chain. We are only a step above the apes and who knows but that we are only a half step above Bigfoot! According to evolutionary thought, we are all merely the product of time, mutation, and natural selection. There is nothing unique about mankind other than the sheer exercise of our power over the rest of the animal world.

What difference do origins make? What counts is that we are here, right? But origins do make a tremendous difference. If we are merely the result of time, mutation and natural selection then we are merely *animals* with no unique value. If our thoughts, questions, values, and fears are no more than a series of highly complex chemical reactions, then life is profoundly meaningless.

The animal world lives by instinct. Animals all eat, play, sleep, and hunt according to their instinctive urges. They don't use forks and knives. They don't cook their food. They engage in sex whenever the instinctive urge strikes them. Even my dog—who sleeps in a bed, roams through the house, covets attention and affection, and seems nearly like a child—lives by his animal instincts. He eats raw meat, drinks from a bowl, and simply must bark incessantly when a skunk invades our yard! We expect that kind of behavior from an animal. However, if your neighbor started behaving that way you would surmise that he had a mental problem. The Darwinist says we are just highly evolved animals; but intuitively we know that the distinction between man and beast is much more than that. In our minds-eye we can see the differences separating a dog and a horse is like a small ditch, but the differences separating a dog and a man is like a canyon! Is this just a simple matter of evolution?

The Bible teaches that men are *uniquely* created in the image of God. This capacity for morality and intelligence separates us from the rest of creation. We are not merely the products

of time, mutation, and natural selection. We bear God's image. When a man eats without manners or practices sexual promiscuity or treats life carelessly we say he is *acting like an animal* (and its usually not a compliment!). If Darwinism is true and we are just highly evolved animals, then *why not act like an animal?* Intuitively, we know that we are distinct. We live by a higher standard. That reflection of God within us strives for a higher standard.

3. The right to rule

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." (Genesis 1:26)

If men are just highly evolved animals, then we have no claim to rule over the rest of creation. We just happen to be more powerful. This 'food chain' way of thinking has been exploited by many science fiction books and films. In many sci-fi tales the earth is invaded by superior life forms that only want to use mankind for food! Is a 'Martian' eating a man the same as a man eating a cow? According to the evolutionary model, yes! The differences in the animal world are just distinctions of degree, not distinctions of essence.

However, Christianity says that God has granted a unique status to mankind. We are to rule over the rest of creation. (Some consider this 'rule' a part of the image of God in man.) He has placed the fear of man on the animal world.⁴ In the Garden of Eden God gave Adam and Eve the right to eat plants.⁵ A few generations later God gave Noah the right to eat animals as well.⁶ Plants and animals are now said to be part of a man's diet. It is no crime to 'kill' a carrot or a chicken as a portion of your supper.

However, if we don't accept man as uniquely bearing God's image, then ruling over the animal world—and having it for dinner—is an act of *might*, not *right*. According to the

⁴ Genesis 9:2.

⁵ Genesis 1:29.

⁶ Genesis 9:3.

evolutionary model there is nothing intrinsically more valuable about the human than the chicken (or for that matter, the carrot!).

Because of our authority over the plant and animal world, God has also imbued men with the duty to manage, maintain, and guard it. We are the moral guardians of the planet. Its proper management is our duty! Christians should be the most avid environmentalists because they recognize their obligation to be good stewards of the earth's vast resources.

This interest in preserving the planet and managing its resources doesn't stem from being 'tops on the food chain' but from being created in the image of God with the distinct calling to rule over the plants and animals. Our interest in the environmentalism actually *increases* because we realize we have been entrusted with the care and stewardship of the world and its creatures!

4. The sanctity of life

... you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. (Psalm 139:13-16)

There are two clear choices: either men are highly evolved animals who are the result of time, mutation, and natural selection or men are specially created in the image of God, designed to rule over the earth as the pinnacle of God's creation. If men *do* bear the image of God, then our worth is not based on being the strongest, the smartest, or swiftest. Our worth is based on God's declaration that we uniquely bear His likeness.

There is another important corollary. If our value is based on our *personal attributes* then there are no two people of like value. To put it bluntly, there are others who have superior attributes to you and me. For example, Bill Gates—according to this way of thinking—is more valuable than you. He is likely smarter and surely richer than anyone who will read this booklet.

But don't fear, according to this logic you are likely more valuable than a bum in the gutter. And the bum in the gutter shouldn't fret, for he is likely more valuable than a thief in the county jail. And the thief in the county jail is likely more valuable than the murderer on death row. You get the idea.

However, if our value is based on *God's declaration* that He created us in His image, then each one of us—from Bill Gates to the murderer on death row—has a similar value despite how smart we are or how rich we have become. Our value isn't based on *our* self-opinions but on *God's declaration*. This perspective powerfully affects the way we look at those around us.

On a recent trip to New York City I walked the streets extensively. The walkways surrounding the Waldorf Astoria were dotted with well-dressed people of money. As they say in this district, if you have to ask, 'How much?' you can't afford it. A couple of miles away, there were more ordinary people on the sidewalks. The bulging middle-class of New York. But if you looked closely, from time to time, you would see someone sleeping on a city heating grate. A homeless person. Dirty. Smelly. A societal castoff.

As you walk past such a person, what is your reaction? Natural selection would teach us that this 'bum' is suffering because of his own inferiority. If he fit, he will survive. If he is not, he won't. Those who don't survive are mere casualties of natural selection. Why should we feel any more pity for the homeless man in the gutter than we feel for the squirrel caught under the wheel of a car? But we *do* feel some kind of pity, and so we *ought* to. As I walked past each of these wayward souls I repeated the truth in my mind, "Created in the image of God!"

Our ultimate value is not determined by our productivity, our wealth, our intelligence, our notoriety, or our power but by a declaration from God: "So God created man in his own image."⁷ This principle must be applied to the most divisive issues in American culture.

⁷ Genesis 1:27.

Abortion

Throughout the Bible, God’s heart is moved by the plight of the weak.⁸ This is the heart of the gospel message: while we were suffering and weak—indeed dead—God came to our rescue. There is certainly no weaker group than the pre-born. Does God recognize the pre-born as bearing his image? Does He regard them as ‘persons’? Does a child in the womb have value? The answers to these questions form the foundation of our approach to abortion.

Historically, the Christian Church has affirmed that human life—from conception to natural death and burial—is valued by God. This understanding is rooted in the fact that humans distinctly bear God’s image. The scriptures have many references to the relationship that God establishes with pre-born children.⁹ Babies are said to be “filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth”¹⁰ and to “leap for joy!”¹¹ while yet in the womb. Many ancient Church documents and catechisms speak specifically against the practice of abortion. Their words are clear: *do not murder a child by abortion!*¹²

However, if we reject the image of God and embrace a naturalistic viewpoint, anything is possible. In this way of thinking, pre-born children are merely weak links in the evolutionary chain. They are disposable. In fact, they’re not the only ones who are disposable.

Old age and incapacity

Colorado’s former Governor shocked the country when he suggested that older people who are incapacitated ought to consider getting out of the way of younger healthier people. The shock of that statement has long worn away. Jack Kevorkian has killed dozens of suffering people in the state of Michigan by “assisted suicide.” Convinced that their suffering was

⁸ For a sampling, see Deuteronomy 10:18, 24:17-21, 27:19; Psalms 10:14-18, 68:5, 82:3-4, 146:9; Isaiah 5:28, 7:5-7, 22:3; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5; James 1:27.

⁹ Job 10:8, 11; Psalm 139:13-16; Isaiah 44:2.

¹⁰ Luke 1:15.

¹¹ Luke 1:41.

¹²For examples see the *Didache*, 2.2; *The Epistle of Barnabas*, 19.5.

meaningless and their lives were useless, many turned to Dr. Kevorkian to end their lives. This is the logical outcome of evolutionary naturalism. When a horse breaks a leg, you shoot it. When a dog contracts rabies, you put it to sleep. When you are tired of raising pets, you throw away the goose eggs, give away the kittens, and flush the goldfish. According to naturalism, you may experience a moment of sadness, but it eventually fades because these are not moral choices, they are naturalistic decisions. They have no moral weight!

However, if all of us—from the strongest to the weakest, from the richest to the poorest, from the youngest to the oldest—are image bearers of God, then the value of all life, especially human life, is determined by God's declaration of its worth.

In the mid-1990's, Former President Ronald Reagan entered what he called the twilight of his years. He had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. His memories, his functioning, and his very life would soon be claimed by it. Many Americans have been touched by similar tragedies. The people we once knew and loved are a shell of themselves. Their function and memory is shattered. How should we care for them?

Evolutionary naturalism would have them clear out of the way. They are using up precious time, money, and energy. They are no longer fit and should not survive. But if we are each, indeed, reflections of God's image no matter how weak, poor, or old, then we possess a dignity and value that cannot be calculated in terms of power, money, or age. There is as much dignity to the 90-year-old Alzheimer's patient as there is to the 45-year-old surgeon. God says that all human life is precious and worthy of protection.

Capital punishment

It is because of the enormous *value* of human life that God initiated the highest possible penalty against the *taking* of human life. In the days of Noah, God set down the rules of life and death: *Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God*

*has God made man.*¹³

It is such a serious matter for a man to intentionally kill another man that God requires the ultimate price be paid: the death penalty. There are strict guidelines attached. It is not to be an act of personal vengeance, but an act of the state. The governing authorities are God's agents, promoting the good and punishing the evil.¹⁴ They have been ordained by God for this very purpose.¹⁵ That doesn't mean they are perfect or that they never make mistakes or that they never abuse this authority. They clearly sometimes do. But just as we imperfectly reflect God's image, the state also imperfectly reflects God's justice. The imperfection does not negate the reflection. Paul wrote about submission to governing authorities in an age of intense corruption. These same corrupt authorities were the enforcers of justice—and the death penalty—that Paul wrote about. He said, about the Romans, that they were “established by God”¹⁶ and did not “bear the sword for nothing.”¹⁷ This is as true of the corrupt Romans as it is true of today's corrupt governments. The only cause for resistance is the free exercise of our religion. We have the right—even the obligation—to disobey laws that force us to sin against God.¹⁸

The Bible paints a consistent portrait of the sanctity of life. We are valuable from our beginning to our end. We are valuable whether productive or incapacitated. We are so valuable that to strike out against us is to strike out against the very image of God. An attack against God's image—against God Himself—is so serious that it can only be paid for by the ultimate price of the death penalty.

¹³ Genesis 9:6.

¹⁴ Romans 13:3-4.

¹⁵ Romans 13:1-2; see also John 19:10-11a.

¹⁶ Romans 13:1.

¹⁷ Romans 13:4.

¹⁸ Acts 5:28-29.

5. Portraying God's image to others

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted. (Rom. 13:1)

Before I ever took a trip to ocean, I had an idea of what oceans are like. Even Nebraska has lakes! The small lakes of the Midwest are bodies of water that hold fish, carry boats, refresh swimmers, and reflect the sunset. A simple trip to the lake told me a lot about what an ocean was like, long before I ever saw one with my own eyes. This is because we learn, not only by first hand experience, but also by extension and analogy.

Now it's true, a lake is not an ocean! My first trip to the Pacific Ocean was unforgettable. The power of the waves and the enormity of the shoreline make the ocean entirely distinct from a Midwestern lake. Nonetheless, by extension and analogy, they are much alike.

God uses similar analogies in His relationship with us. He has established certain roles in society that teach us about who He is and what He is like. There are several relationships that God uses in this way:

Parents

God teaches us much about Himself by asking us to call Him "Father."¹⁹ He refers to Christians as having been adopted into His heavenly family with the unique privilege of crying out to him, "Daddy!"²⁰ God uses the institution of fatherhood to give us an image of what He is like. When we hear that word "Father" it conjures up memories of strength, love, guidance, and concern that only a father can give.

But what about *bad* fathers? You know many people whose memories of their father are not so stellar. Some are positively abusive! Why would God describe Himself in terminology that can be misunderstood? Just as the lake is a dim reflection of the ocean, so the earthly father

¹⁹ Matthew 6:9.

²⁰ Romans 8:15; Galatians 4:6.

at his *best* is only a dim reflection of the heavenly Father. When fathers do their jobs poorly God is twice angered. Angry once because we have failed to properly fulfill our calling and angry again because *we have misrepresented Him to our children!*

The same caution goes out to mothers. While it is more rare, God also uses maternal imagery to describe Himself. He is loving, nurturing, and longing to comfort His people.²¹ A good mother and father teach their children much about what God is like. They teach by extension and analogy. Their parental efforts are always a dim reflection of God's perfect nature, but nevertheless they are used by God to teach us about Himself.

Husband and Wife

The relationship of a husband to a wife is another important mirror. A marriage is not merely a convenient social contract. It is much more! It images the relationship between Christ and the Church.²² The role of husband is designed to reflect the loving, serving, sacrificial headship of Christ.²³ The role of the wife is designed to reflect the supportive, serving, submissive dedication of the Church.²⁴ God endows these earthly relationships with deeper heavenly meanings. They mirror, here on earth, the spiritual realities of Christ and His Church.

Institutions

²¹ Isaiah 49:14-15; Matthew 23:37.

²² Ephesians 5:31-32; Revelation 19:7; 21:2,9.

²³ Ephesians 5:25-33.

²⁴ Ephesians 5:22-24.

God has also ordained certain institutions to mirror aspects of Himself and His Kingdom. The Church is the visible presence of His Kingdom on the earth. The Church is called to proclaim the gospel and demonstrate the mercy of the gospel in her actions. On the other hand, God has ordained the state to demonstrate His wrath against wickedness. Though the Church sometimes mirrors wrath (i.e. excommunication) and the state sometimes mirrors mercy (i.e. a governor's pardon) that is not their primary calling.

What happens when these institutions fail to perform their distinctive duty? What happens when the Church fails to preach the gospel and the state fails to punish evil-doers? The image God designed to present is ruined. When we follow God's pattern for parenting, marriage, Church, and state the 'mirror' yields a bright reflection, but when we follow the world's pattern these 'mirrors' are dingy, cracked, and distorted. We lose a clear reflection of God's character.

6. How is this image twisted? How can it be restored?

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. (Romans 8:20-21)

A few years ago my wife, Kelli, and I bought a farmhouse. No one was bashing down the doors to buy this place because it was a wreck! Windows were broken. Pigeons were living in the attic! When we first saw it Kelli wouldn't even go inside. I would have felt guilty letting a homeless person sleep in it (Actually, I would have felt guilty letting my *dog* sleep in it!). There was so much work that would need to be done. It needed new siding, new windows, new dry-wall, new ceilings, new plumbing, new wiring, new fixtures, new foundation, new everything! By the time we were done it was easier to simply ask what was 'original' rather than asking us what had been replaced. Some asked us why we didn't tear the whole house down and start from scratch. The answer was simple: the frame was sound and the design was good. As much work as it required, it had the framework of a good home.

As we consider the implications of the image of God in man, you may be saying to yourself, ‘God’s image among us is so deeply distorted that it cannot be fixed!’ How can we change the cultural tide and restore the dignity of men uniquely created in the image of God? The short answer is that though there is much work to do, the framework is present. We must be busy making repairs.

Dialogue

Which flatters you more, to believe you are created to reflect the image of Almighty God or that you are the top of the food chain? This is a question that very few people stop to consider. We need to be busy dialoging with our community, prodding our friends and neighbors to consider the implications of evolutionary naturalism. Your friends don’t think of themselves as ‘highly evolved animals.’ Every birth, life-transition, and funeral presents us with an open doorway to discuss the things that really matter. How many funerals have you attended where the leader did not express a hope in life after death? Through creative conversation we can help those around us to see what they already know: men are more than highly evolved animals. We bear the image of our Creator.

Many of us may also need to learn the basics of evolutionary naturalism.²⁵ You don’t need to be a scientist to have a powerful knowledge of the primary arguments for (and against) intelligent design and evolutionary naturalism.

Restoration of the Full Gospel

Christianity has a wonderful message to bring to the world: You were created for the express purpose of a relationship with the Creator of the Universe! You mirror God’s likeness in a way that no other creature ever could. This is a message of hope, meaning, and fulfillment in an age of despair.

²⁵ One of the best books for this is Philip Johnson’s *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds*.

The largest stumbling block that prevents this message from going forward is not the culture; it is our own sinfulness. Our sins have separated us from God and distorted His image in us.²⁶ The gospel calls us to be restored to our Creator by faith in His only Son, Jesus Christ. When we trust in Jesus alone as our redeemer we not only begin a journey of personal salvation, we begin a large-scale project of restoration. Christians must mirror Christ, reforming our marriages, our parenting, our churches, and our government so that they might all brightly reflect God's image to the world.

²⁶ Isaiah 59:2; Romans 8:5-7