Made in the Image of God: Seeing Humanity as God Sees Us Latasha Hazlett

Abstract

While many within the Christian tradition believe that humanity has been made in the image of God, there are differing views of what happened to that divine image once sin and brokenness entered the world. If we believe that our divine nature has been lost or is something to be attained, it follows that we might easily recognize the image of God in some (such as those we consider "saved") while having a harder time recognizing God's image within others, especially those who are different from us. A colleague of mine shared a statement that summarizes the danger of this phenomenon well: "when we fail to recognize someone's divinity, we fail to recognize their humanity." Great thinkers and social activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Archbishop Desmond Tutu have also stressed the importance of recognizing the divine image that is inherent in all people in order to prevent dehumanization, which leads to injustice and oppression. This paper will explore some of these thoughts in relation to the evolution of St. Augustine's understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God. By applying Augustine's three different perspectives on what sin does to our divine image, we will see the consequences of failing to recognize the divinity of others. This reality can show up today in everyday situations such as fearing or distrusting our neighbors, hurting others through attempts to show God's "love", and even in atrocities such as treating civilians and children as "collateral damage" in war. When we are truly able to see the image of God in ourselves and each other, we are compelled to genuinely love those who are different from us, including those we believe to be our enemies.

Introduction

Many know the famous words "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now I'm found; was blind but now I see." Few would flinch at the singer labeling themselves as a "wretch" and describing their previous state as "lost" and "blind", but what if the speaker was using those same terms to describe someone else's current state? Suddenly those words feel inappropriate and insulting, yet this is how many Christians are taught to think about unbelievers, even though they may be embarrassed to say so out loud. Many believe that since Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit in "The Fall", humanity is inherently sinful and evil and thus God must purge our iniquity- including the hearts of infants and young children. This posture may seem benign on the surface, and in some cases may be beneficial, but it can also cause us to deny

the presence of the divine in those we deem "unsaved" and prevent us from seeing His glory revealed in those who live outside the Christian tradition. Failing to see the divine image of God in others can lead to fractured relationships, divided communities, and the perpetuation of injustice, even when our actions are done in the name of "love." When we are truly able to see the image of God in ourselves and each other, we are compelled to love those who are different from us, even those we believe to be our enemies.

Jesus taught that we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:39 & Mark 12:31), on the assumption that we love ourselves well. While much could be written on what it means to love, for the purpose of this paper I will show how love is closely related to understanding ourselves and others as image bearers of God. To correct our vision of ourselves and others we need to see all people as God sees them; beloved children who carry His divine image. In order to get there we will first explore whose image it is we bear. Who is the God that Jesus reveals?

The Image of God Revealed in Jesus

Scripture tells us that when we want to know what God is like, we can look to Jesus as our best example. The Apostle Paul explains in Colossians 1 that "The Son is the image of the invisible God" and that "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him", and again in Colossians 2: "For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form". Jesus himself affirms this when he states in John 14 "If you really know me, you will know my Father as well" and "it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me".

When we consider the crucifixion as God on the cross in the form of Jesus, we can let go of the idea that God demanded Jesus as a sacrifice to appease His divine wrath. Jesus reveals a God who is nonviolent and desires "mercy, not sacrifice" (John 9:13). Walter Wink sums up the nonviolence of God, stating that "only by being driven out by violence could God signal to humanity that the divine is nonviolent and is antithetical to the Kingdom of Violence...Jesus' message reveals that those who believe in divine violence are still mired in Satan's universe." Because Jesus is the revelation of the fullness of God, references to divine violence in Scripture which "do not correspond to the character of the God revealed in Jesus should be regarded as distortions of God's nature." These distortions are the result of the polyphony of voices found in Scripture which, at times, reveal

¹ Walter Wink, Engaging the Powers (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 149.

² Eric Siebert, *Disturbing Divine Behaviour: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 227.

our "propensity to demand retributive justice," which is contrasted and satisfied by the revelation of "the voice of self-giving love" found in Jesus.³

In the Bible we see Jesus consistently leaning toward the most vulnerable and marginalized, seeking to heal and address real life issues including sickness, hunger, impairments, and even death. He eats with tax collectors and sinners, those whom society would cast off or hate, and touches those deemed untouchable. 1 John 4 tells us that "God is love", and Jesus shows us that God's love is actively reaching out in merciful service for the flourishing of humanity.

The divine love of God is also revealed through the humility of Jesus. Philippians 2:7-8 states that "Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

Welcoming little children, humble and gentle, Jesus was not the conquering Messiah that the Israelites expected. Yet Jesus is not only a reflection of God's meekness but rather reveals a bold activist who has come to break the chains of sin and darkness, set the captives free and end all oppression; teaching faith in action which caused the religious leaders to drive Jesus out of town in the hope that they could throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:18-30). Jesus tells his disciples in Matthew 10:24 "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." Far from being a call to violence, this statement highlights the fact that there will be division and opposition because of Jesus' teachings. The God that Jesus reveals is a bold activist, fighting for the good of humanity while maintaining a nonviolent approach.

Jesus as the ultimate image bearer reveals that God is the fullest expression of love; merciful, humble, nonviolent, and actively working for humanity's liberation. Now that we have a clearer picture of who God is through the revelation of Jesus, we can turn our attention to how humanity mirrors Jesus' example and bears His image of the divine.

Humanity Made in the Image of God

"Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God

³ Bradley Jersak, *A More Christlike Word: Reading Scripture the Emmaus Way* (New Kensington: Whitaker House, 2021), 202.

⁴Jon Huckins and Jer Swigart, *Mending the Divides: Creative Love in a Conflicted World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 122.

created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Genesis 1:26-27 NIV

In Genesis 1 we read that God has imbued humanity with his likeness, and part of that role includes having dominion; ruling over the earth and everything in it. Old Testament Scholar Matthew Lynch affirms that this form of rule is not meant to be one of violent means, but rather is the responsibility to care for the earth He states that "Humans weren't meant to just 'let nature be.' The physical would be shaped and cultivated by humans, but for the sake of unlocking its life-giving potential." Humans are called to bring out the best in the earth through our work and creativity. Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes dominion in this way: "not in an authoritarian or destructive manner, but to hold sway as God would hold sway- compassionately, gently, caringly- enabling each part of creation to come fully into its own and to realize its potential for the good of the whole, contributing to the harmony and unity which was God's intention for the whole of creation." A challenging but beautiful call to action.

Another important aspect of being image-bearers is that humanity was made for community. As Genesis 1:26 states, "Let *us* make humankind in *our* image" (emphasis added). Humans were meant to journey together, reflecting the three-in-one nature of the trinity. In cultivating the earth, humanity was also invited to cultivate healthy relationships with each other and with God. Peace activists Jon Huckins and Jer Swigart describe how, as image-bearers of God, all people are called to be "global peacemakers" by "seeing the image of God in others, immersing themselves into their stories, and contending for their flourishing." In this way we fulfill Ephesians 5:1-2; "Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us." This loving posture encompasses all people, regardless of their faith or cultural context. Archbishop Desmond Tutu asserts that since each person is "made in the image of God and is a God carrier... we should not just respect such a person but have a deep reverence for that person," taking after the Buddhist by "bowing profoundly before another human as the God in me acknowledges and greets the God in you." To be made in the image of God is to be full of compassion for everyone, as they too carry the same divine spirit.

Humans reflect the image of the divine in many ways as we work and create, and as we assert our freedom to make choices. Tutu describes how freedom is an essential part of being an

 $^{^{5}}$ Matthew Lynch, A Sword for the Lord?: The Challenge of Old Testament Violence, 29.

⁶ Desmond M. Tutu, "The First Word: To Be Human Is To Be Free," *Journal of Law and Religion*, vol. 30, no. 3, (2015): 387.

⁷ Huckins and Swigart, *Mending Divides*, 38

⁸ Tutu, "To Be Human," 387.

image-bearer: "To be a person is to be able to choose to love or not to love, to be able to reject or accept the offer of divine love, to be free to obey or to disobey." Though humans were made to reflect the image of God, it is apparent that we don't always live up to the example set by Jesus. It didn't take long for the first humans to trip up in this respect either. While some may argue that after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit the inherent goodness and worthiness of humanity was lost, there are many ways to interpret the doctrine of original sin. These interpretations have a significant impact on how we view non-believers, and also influence how we understand what it means to love our neighbour.

In his book *A New Kind of Christianity*, Brian McLaren challenges "the idea that humanity has become detestable to God and that it's only the people who become Christians that God can truly love; that their being loved by God through just being God's creatures is somehow destroyed by original sin." ¹⁰ In Genesis 3 we see that despite Adam and Eve's disobedience, "God saw their humanity and their dignity" and sought restoration by clothing them, covering their shame with compassion." ¹¹ Romans 5:8 echoes this, as "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Though humans all fall short of God's glory (Romans 3:23), we are never separated from the love of God (Romans 8:38) and as God showed Peter, we "should not call anyone impure or unclean" (Acts 10:28). While most Christians affirm this unconditional love for all, we may find ourselves only paying lip-service to this idea when we maintain the view that non-Christians are sinful and unworthy, separated from God's loving mercy and deserving of hell. When we see others in this way, we may even unwittingly participate in creating hell on earth for those whom we fail to understand as made in the image of God.

Dangers of Viewing Humanity as Broken or Lost

In his article *Human Dignity after Augustine's "Imago Dei"*, Ethics Professor Matthew Puffer outlines how Augustine's view of humans as image bearers evolved over time, highlighting three distinct interpretations of "Imago Dei" that have influenced the Christian understanding of the image of God. Each of these different interpretations can help or hinder the growth of our capacity to love ourselves and others.

⁹ Ibid., 388.

¹⁰ Lillian Kwon, "Interview: Brian McLaren on Sin, Hell, New Kind of Christianity." *Christian Post*, March 8, 2010.

¹¹ Huckins and Swigart, *Mending Divides*, 38.

1. Augustine's First Interpretation: Imago Dei as Extrinsic

In Augustine's earlier writings he envisioned image bearing as something humans *aspire* to; rather than an intrinsic characteristic of humans, this image of God was an extrinsic telos or goal to orient oneself toward. A positive aspect of this view is that we may see ourselves as pilgrims on a journey toward perfection, always seeking to improve ourselves, and holding grace for others as we remember that we are all on this quest together. The danger here is that if we view our ability to reflect God's image on a continuum, we are more apt to see a hierarchy of perfection where others may not be as close to perfection as we are. When the image of God is something outside of ourselves that must be achieved, this can lead us to judge others as being better or worse reflectors of what we believe to be the image of God.

A hermeneutic of image-bearing as something extrinsic that humans must work to acquire can lead to a quiet sense of superiority at best, and at its worst, those who don't measure up may be regarded as less than human, lacking the human dignity possessed by those who are thought to better reflect the image of God. Such thinking laid the foundation for the Doctrine of Discovery in the 15th Century, which "provided religious authority for Christian empires to invade and subjugate non-Christian lands, peoples and sovereign nations, impose Christianity on these populations, and claim their resources." Because non-Christians/ non-Europeans were seen as savages and pagans, less than human, colonizers were justified in assimilating them, extinguishing them, or taking them as slaves. Dehumanizing others in this way was not new to the colonial period, as Archbishop Desmond Tutu points out that despite all his wisdom, Aristotle also believed that human dignity "was not possessed by all human beings, as slaves in his view were not persons." 14

Failing to see the image of God within Indigenous individuals and their culture justified the colonial objective of "killing the Indian in the child" which led to multiple abuses within the Residential School System; a system that was abusive itself as it stole young children away from their families. ¹⁵ While some may have sought to convert Indigenous peoples to Christianity out of a sense of love, wanting to save their souls from damnation, this method of forced conversion and assimilation has created vast intergenerational harm and trauma. A harmful conversion rhetoric still persists today in those who believe the best way to love someone is to convince them to become a

¹² Matthew Puffer, "Human Dignity after Augustine's 'Imago Dei': On the Sources and Uses of Two Ethical Terms." *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2017): 69.

¹³ Tomchuck, Travis. "The Doctrine of Discovery". *Canadian Museum for Human Rights*, accessed April 5, 2023, https://humanrights.ca/story/doctrine-discovery.

¹⁴ Tutu, "To Be Human," 387.

¹⁵ Bryanne Young, "'Killing the Indian in the Child': Death, Cruelty, and Subject-Formation in the Canadian Indian Residential School System." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 48, no. 4, (2015): 63.

Christian, renouncing any former religion and praying the "Sinner's Prayer" to receive their ticket to heaven and be exempt from the punishment we all deserve. Rather than being an expression of Christ's love for humanity, the Church has often alienated others by judging and condemning non-believers in the name of God. Though there are other doctrines and hermeneutics that influence and reinforce this posture, such as atonement theories and the notion of hell as eternal conscious torment in the afterlife, understanding Christians as "saved" and non-Christians as "lost" is heavily influenced by our interpretation of The Fall and Original Sin.

2. Augustine's Second Interpretation: Imago Dei as Lost in The Fall

In Augustine's next interpretation, the image and likeness of God is reserved for humanity's pre-Fallen state, and all those born after Adam and Eve have been born into depravity and are inherently evil and therefore separated from God. Matthew Puffer writes that "Martin Luther mirror's Augustine's second account of the image of God as intrinsic but not inherent; as something lost but potentially restored." While the language of restoration rather than aspiration may be a bit easier to swallow, the problem here is that all have lost their likeness of God and only some have had this image restored. Puffer argues that "it is not difficult to see how this conception of the image of God corresponds to less stable notions of human dignity in which even basic rights might be forfeited or lost," leading us once again to the inhumane treatment of those who are unsaved and unrestored.

In light of this, pastor and theologian Brian McLaren asserts that "the popular understanding of original sin too often aids and abets the expansion of sin. It promotes a dualistic, judgemental, accusatory mind-set that embeds in us an oppositional identity that in turn breeds hostility and rivalry, thus formenting the very sin it intended to expose." In contrast, McLaren describes a more beneficial understanding of The Fall in which "the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents a godlike knowing that infects the consumers of its fruit with the tendency to accuse, to judge, and condemn the *other* as evil and to crown *us* as good." When we consider Original Sin as humanity grasping for the knowledge with which to judge some as good and others as evil, we can begin to break free of the insidious urge to divide ourselves into "us" and "them". In a great twist of irony, with this perspective our image of God is only "lost" when we fail to see that image of God in others!

¹⁶ Puffer, "Human Dignity," 77.

¹⁷ Ibid., 77.

¹⁸ Ibid., 77.

¹⁹ Brian McLaren, Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?: Christian Identity in a Multi-Faith World (New York: Jericho Books, 2012), 113.

²⁰ Ibid., 113.

Yet as we've just discussed, understanding image-bearing as something that can be lost is more dangerous than helpful. How then do we account for the fact that although we are all made in God's image, we don't always reflect the perfect image of God with our words and actions? Augustine's third account can help us find a way forward in this respect.

3. Augustine's Third Interpretation: Imago Dei as Veiled

In Augustine's later writings, he reimagines the image of God not as something that was lost in The Fall, but as something inherent that has been *veiled*. Puffer writes that "Augustine cites 2 Corinthians 3:18 as a warrant for this revised interpretation" which states "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with everincreasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." In this third interpretation, Augustine argues that the "image transformed from glory to glory" is not a recovery of what was lost but an uncovering of that which has been veiled." Here we see that "the image of God is no longer something extrinsic to the human toward which it is oriented... nor is the image of God something lost in the fall and restored only to those who are reformed... Rather, the image of God is persistently present in the nature of the rational soul itself as an intrinsic capacity, regardless of whether the soul willingly exercises this capacity and participates in the divine self-love" In this view, humanity is invited to recognize and live into our identity as image bearers by loving ourselves and others. Because the image of God is not something separate from our humanity, but is infused into our DNA, deeply embedded within us, even when we fail to see the image of God in others, this divine light is not lost from us but instead is veiled behind our harmful actions.

In her book *Original Blessing*, Danielle Shroyer articulates the goodness that God bestowed on humanity as "both an origin and a goal" because "from our origin of goodness, we can grow into and live into the goodness God intends for us."²⁴ She notes that humanity received God's blessing by being called his good creation, and from this indestructible gift come many more blessings.²⁵ Importantly, she also declares that "original blessing means we don't have to believe we must work against our human nature to live with God... our humanity is the very reason we're able to have a relationship with God in the first place."²⁶

²¹ Puffer, "Human Dignity," 77.

²² Ibid., 77.

²³ Ibid., 74.

²⁴ Danielle Shroyer, *Original Blessing: Putting Sin in its Rightful Place* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 11.

²⁵ Ibid., 12.

²⁶ Ibid., 14.

Our identity as image-bearers is intricately woven into our nature as human beings; it cannot be lost or separated from us. We are called good, and even though we may fail to love our neighbors, nothing can remove or reduce the love that God has for us. God wants to heal us by reminding us of humanity's true identity as His beloved children (1 John 4:7-12).

Understanding Humanity as Divine

Living into our true identity means loving ourselves and others as God loves us. To love ourselves we need not degrade our former "lost" or "unsaved" state, as we recognize that God's love was already given from the start despite our shortcomings. When we are aware that we are beloved children of God, "we no longer have to live hindered by image management and legalism. Embracing our identity as the beloved unshackles us to imitate the one who loves us so."²⁷ The beauty of God's love is that while it overflows in us toward others, it fills us up as well.

When we hold a compassionate posture toward ourselves, having grace for our past mistakes, we can get a glimpse of how God sees us: beloved, always. Once we see ourselves in this light we can better recognize the divine light in others as well. Holding firm to the belief that this light resides in every other human, even though it may be veiled, can help us to pull back the veil covering our own eyes when we look toward the other. Choosing to see the goodness behind the veil in others lifts our veil in the process, which is reflected in Jesus' admonition that we clear the obstacles in front of our own eyes so that we can more clearly see our brothers and sisters and refrain from judging them (Matthew 7:1-5). When we recognize the dignity in others, the veil shrouding our own divine light is pulled back, and we are able to place our light "on its stand" so that it shines "for everyone in the house" (Matthew 5:15-16). When we are able to see others the way God sees them, we have a much greater capacity to love God by loving our neighbours as we were made to love ourselves, and in doing so we contribute to humanity's flourishing as well as our own.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes how the image of God "imbues each one of us with profound dignity and worth. As a result, to treat such persons as if they were less than this, to oppress them, to trample their dignity underfoot, is not just evil as it surely must be; it is not just painful as it frequently must be for victims of injustice and oppression. It is positively blasphemous, for it is tantamount to spitting in the face of God."²⁸ This is reflected in Matthew 25:35-40 when Jesus commands his followers to care for the marginalized and condemns the mistreatment of others, as he says "whatever you did to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did to me". Thus, an injustice such as slavery is not only "an abominable affront to the dignity of

²⁷ Huckins and Swigart, *Mending Divides*, 42.

²⁸ Tutu, "To Be Human," 387.

those who would be treated as if they were mere chattels" but also "should have been recognized as completely contrary to the central tenets of Christianity about the unspeakable worth and preciousness of each human person."²⁹ In the same vein, Tutu argues that war is also unjustified because "war is without doubt the most comprehensive violation of human rights. It ignores reverence for life in its wanton destruction of people."³⁰ We are not just called to treat others the way we want to be treated, we are called to treat others as if they were Jesus himself- including those we may wish to call enemies. In doing so we reflect the nonviolence of the God in whose image we were made.

When we embrace our identity as image bearers by imitating Christ who sees all humanity as beloved children made in the image of God, we cannot allow the injustice of genocide, slavery, wars, or any form of oppression to occur. Because we are all made in the image of God, we are all equal before God and therefore any violation of human rights, and any form of discrimination, whether on the basis of culture, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc. can never be justified. When we are able to truly view ourselves and others as made in the divine image of God, we are freed to view our enemies as neighbours and to love them as we ourselves. We are invited to erase the lines that divide "us" and "them" and seek reconciliation with those we have feared or misunderstood, and join together in the quest for communal flourishing for all humanity.

Though we are called to be perfect (Matthew 5:48), no one can measure up to the perfection of Christ (Romans 3:23). Because our goodness is both an origin and a goal, we recognize that we are still developing within the unveiling process. Augustine also saw himself developing as he recognized that his interpretations changed over time, stating: "I should wish no one to embrace all of my teaching... I have not always held to the same views. Rather I believe I developed while writing... We can have good hope for someone if the last day of this life finds him still developing." Yet rather than using this understanding of progress as a measuring stick with which to judge others, as our true selves are unveiled, we begin to see others more clearly as image bearers themselves, worthy of all the dignity possessed by Christ himself.

Conclusion

We began by looking at a familiar hymn, and now we'll turn to another song, titled "Tears of the Saints" written by Leeland. The lyrics are as follows: "There are many prodigal sons, on our city streets they run, searching for shelter. There are homes broken down, people's hopes have fallen to

³⁰ Ibid., 389.

²⁹ Ibid., 390.

³¹ Puffer, "Human Dignity," 78.

the ground from failures. This is an emergency! There are schools full of hatred, even churches have forsaken love and mercy. May we see this generation in its state of desperation for Your glory. There are tears from the saints for the lost and unsaved. We're crying for them, come back home. And all your children will stretch out their hands and pick up the crippled man. Father, we will lead them home."³²

What if, as the singer seems to suggest, we understood the "lost" and unsaved" in our midst as people who are living in situations of poverty and oppression, caught in a system of injustice in this world, rather than destined for hell in the next world? What if the "home" we long for isn't just reserved for heaven in the afterlife, but to "come back home" was understood as a call to return to our true selves as image bearers who see the image of God in everyone? Rather than encouraging people to see themselves as sinful wretches, what if "leading others home" meant helping them become aware of their divine dignity? In seeing ourselves and others this way, we just might feel called to participate in bringing heaven down to earth. As Jon Huckins and Jer Swigart write, "it is out of our identity as the reconciled and our experience of being God's beloved that our lives begin to reflect the costly, creative, restorative activity of God." Coming home to our true selves as image bearers is more than just a change in perspective, it is a change in how we act toward others as well.

Even when motivated by love, we can cause great harm by failing to see that the image of God is inherent and alive in people of all faiths and cultures. In doing so we fail to live into our own identity as image-bearers, but this image is never lost. Though we may be on a journey of being transformed into the likeness of Christ, this is a process of unveiling our true selves, rather than something external to strive for. No matter how far away we are from the perfection of Christ, we are always held in the compassionate embrace of a Father who loves us unconditionally and invites us to live into our true nature by seeing ourselves and others as beloved image bearers.

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³³ Huckins and Swigart, *Mending Divides*, 43.

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