

§ 10. Doctrine of Man

Lecture 4

Evaluating Construals of the Image of God

In our study of the doctrine of man we now come to evaluation. Let's talk first about man in the image and likeness of God. What might we say about these alternative construals of the image of God by way of evaluation?

I think, first of all, that we have to agree with the Protestant Reformers that there is no difference between the image and likeness of God. I already indicated that when we looked at the biblical material from Genesis that these words are used in parallel and synonymously. To say that man is created in God's image and according to his likeness is just an example of Hebrew parallelism. The terms have virtually the same meaning. So they are not meant to indicate two different aspects of human being. Rather, these are synonymous ways of designating man as in some way reflecting God in a special way that sets him apart from the rest of creation.

But then I think we have to say, contrary to the Reformers, that the image is not lost in the Fall because fallen man clearly is in the image of God as we saw. In Genesis 9:6 fallen man is referred to as being in God's image. Therefore the image of God is not the original righteousness or something of that sort which could be lost in the Fall. We shouldn't think of the image of God as something that is given up or lost as a result of man's fall into sin. So the first point is that the image and likeness of God are identical. They refer to the same thing. And they are not lost in the Fall.

When it is said that Christ is the image of God, here I think we are dealing with a totally different concern. The word may be the same – “image” – but it isn't in the same sphere of discussion as when we talk about man created in God's image. In Colossians, Paul is saying that Christ is the visible exemplification of the invisible God. When you look at Christ, you're looking at God. He is God in the flesh. He is God incarnate. This just isn't the same sphere of discussion as when we talk about what it means for man to be in God's image.

Similarly when the Scriptures talk about Christians being in Christ – being conformed to the image of Christ – that is again just a separate discussion. It's not relevant to the question of what it means for man to be created in God's image. With respect to being conformed to the image of Christ, the concern there is ethical or spiritual. Man is being conformed to the character of Christ through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit. This is about the sanctification of believers. So, again, even though the vocabulary may be the same (using the word “image”), it's not the same discussion as what it means to say that man is in God's image.

Man, then, is in the image of God even as a sinner. His relationship with God may be broken because of sin. He finds himself estranged from God, spiritually alienated from God, condemned by God's justice, and under God's wrath, but nevertheless he still is in God's image. What does this mean then? This is a question which comes down to whether you take the image of God to be an ontological term or a relational term or a functional term. Is it specifying some aspect of human being that resembles God's nature or is it merely a way in which we relate or function? This is going to depend on how you interpret a couple of Hebrew prepositions – *ba* and *ka*. According to Genesis, man is created *in* God's image – the Hebrew word there is *ba* – not *as* God's image. It says further that man is created *according to* God's likeness, and the Hebrew word there (the preposition) is *ka*. Not *as* God's likeness, he is *in* or *according to* God's image and likeness. But it doesn't say he *is* God's image and likeness. The text doesn't say that, *prima facie* at least, man is God's image or likeness; rather, it says he's created *in* his image and *according to* his likeness. Scholars agree that these two prepositions basically mean the same thing. However, the first of these prepositions (*ba*) can be taken in the sense of identity. It could be taken or interpreted to mean that man *is* God's image; that he is created *as* God's image, rather than *in* God's image. But the second – *ka* – cannot be taken to mean “as” or to indicate an identity relationship. Still, in Genesis 5:1-3 these prepositions are reversed with regard to Adam's son Seth whom it says is created “in his likeness and according to his image.” You have the prepositions switched in Genesis 5:1-3 – in his likeness and according to his image. Even though *ka* does not mean “as” – doesn't indicate identity – nevertheless the word “likeness” could also be used with *ba* in which case one could interpret it to mean identity, that we are God's likeness and we are his image. So these Hebrew prepositions are not decisive in guiding our interpretation of what it means to be created in God's image and likeness, though an interpretation taking man to just *be* God's image and likeness does involve interpreting these prepositions differently than their normal meanings of “in” and “according to.”

In his highly acclaimed book, *The Liberating Image of God* (subtitled *The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*), Richard Middleton distinguishes between what he calls a substantialistic, a relational, and a functional interpretation of the image of God. Middleton plumps for a functional rather than either a substantial or relational interpretation of the *imago dei*. In fact, he reports that today there is virtual unanimity among Old Testament scholars concerning the meaning of the image of God. The context in Genesis 1, he says, has a predominantly royal flavor beginning with the close linkage of the image of God with a mandate to rule and subdue the Earth in Genesis 1:26 and 1:28 where God commands man to have dominion over the Earth and its creatures and to rule. Moreover, the God in whose image and likeness human beings are created is depicted as the king or the sovereign over the cosmos. He rules by royal decree – “let there be” and something

ensues, and even addresses the divine council of the heavenly court of angelic beings in saying, "Let us make man in our image." So the writer portrays God as a king presiding over the heaven and Earth. Humanity is created like this God with the special role of representing or imaging God's rule in the world.

Certainly Old Testament scholars are correct in seeing man as having this royal duty and role on the Earth. It's clearly assigned in Genesis 1:26 and 27. But that itself does not imply that the image of God just is that function. Man's royal duty may be the role that God has given to man. But Middleton says the royal function or purpose of humanity in 1:26 is not a mere add-on, separable in some way from man's essence or nature.

Middleton says that while rule may be grammatically only the purpose and not the definition of the image in 1:26, an initial look at the overall rhetorical world of the text suggests that it is a necessary and inseparable purpose, and therefore virtually constitutive of the image. But again I think Middleton's conclusion is overdrawn. A thing's having an essential function is just not the same thing as a thing's definition. Rather, what is key to Middleton's case is his second reason for the consensus among Old Testament scholars, and that is the Ancient Near Eastern ideology of kings in Mesopotamia and Egypt that describe their function as the images of the gods. Many would draw our attention to the fact that these ancient kings would often set up statues or images of themselves in distant lands under their control. Middleton recognizes that the kings did often have this practice of setting up statues of themselves in distant lands. This is well-attested. But he says the meaning of this practice is contested. The images could just be monuments to the kings and their accomplishments. Many of these images are votive objects which are dedicated to the gods. But he says the Egyptian pharaohs did set up images of themselves as symbols of their authority in distant lands. The statue represents the absent king in some way. Middleton thinks that since this representative notion is intrinsic to the understanding of images in the Ancient Near East, it seems quite plausible to regard the kings' practice of setting up images of themselves as a legitimate parallel to the creation of humans in the image of God. We – man – is God's image and represents God and his authority on the Earth.

While this kingly practice is interesting, it's not clear to me at least that it is a legitimate parallel to man's being created in God's image and likeness. Genesis does not portray the Earth as being like a distant land from which God is absent. Rather, God is himself active in the world. He doesn't need some surrogate to stand in his place. Moreover, notice that the king's statue in a distant land doesn't really function in the king's place. It doesn't do anything. It just represents his authority over the land. The king's statue is rather like the pictures of the President on the walls of police stations and post offices. They represent his authority. But humans are living images of God. They are not images of God in this Ancient Near Eastern sense of a statue. Middleton says, however, that the best Ancient

Near Eastern parallels are texts that describe the various kings and priests as themselves images of a god. Not that they set up images of themselves in a distant land, but rather there are many Ancient Near Eastern texts that described the king himself as an image of a god. This is the most widely cited set of parallels for Genesis 1. Let me read you a sample of these texts. To give just a couple examples.

Pharaoh Ahmose I is described as “a prince like Re, the child of Qeb, his heir, the image of Re, whom he created, the avenger (or the representative), for whom he has set himself on earth.” Queen Hatshepsut, is described as “superb image of Amon; the image of Amon on earth; the image of Amon-Re to eternity, his living monument on earth.” Amenhotep II is described variously as “image of Re,” “image of Horus,” “image of Atum,” “holy image of the lord of the gods,” “foremost image of Re,” “holy image of Re,” “holy image of Amon,” “image of Amon like Re,” . . .¹

Middleton comments on these texts,

To understand the meaning and function of this idea, we need to grasp something of the wider ideology of kingship in Egypt. Central to this ideology was the divinity of the pharaoh, by which he was set apart from all other human beings. . . . The notion of the pharaoh as an image of a god must be understood in this context. In one sense, the notion of image is but one among many other ways of expressing the pharaoh’s divine origin and kinship to the gods. . . . The pharaoh was thought, in a fairly strong sense, to be a physical, local incarnation of deity, analogous to that of a cult statue or image of a god, which is also such an incarnation. . . . “The king as the living image of god was . . . like the cult statue, a place where the god manifested himself and was a primary means by which the deity worked on earth.”²

These texts are said to support a functional interpretation of the image of God. Middleton says,

On this reading, the *imago Dei* designates the royal office or calling of human beings as God's representatives and agents in the world, granted authorized power to share in God's rule or administration of the earth's resources and creatures.³

There are however two major flaws which undermine Middleton's case. First, Middleton admits that a functional interpretation does not preclude, and even presupposes, a substantial interpretation. Listen to what he says in a footnote on page 27:

¹ J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Publishing Group, 2005), p. 109.

² Ibid., pp. 109-110.

³ Ibid., p. 27.

Both functional and . . . relational interpretations of the image are, like substantialistic interpretations, strictly speaking metaphysical, in that they also make ontological assumptions about human nature. . . . a functional interpretation might be seen as consonant with some version of action theory. . . . focus is on persons as agents who act responsibly (or irresponsibly). Action, on this model, includes all that an agent does, including thinking, as an integral unity.⁴

This admission completely undermines Middleton's case for a purely functional interpretation for he recognizes that the function is rooted in ontology. More than that, it is rooted in personal agency, and personal agency is not a function. It's a property of personal agents; that is to say, personal, causally effective beings. Notice as well that the relation between ontology and function is asymmetric. Functions are grounded in ontology, not vice-versa. The substantialist is quite happy to recognize that human persons have been created by God to carry out a function. They can carry out that function, however, because of what they *are*, namely personal agents. So the first point is that the functional interpretation actually presupposes the substantial interpretation in grounding function in the ontology of human beings as personal agents.

The second point is that the Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts cited do not support a functional interpretation but rather a different fourth interpretation. As Middleton convincingly shows, when the Ancient Near Eastern texts speak of an idol or of the pharaoh as a God's image, what they mean is that the idol or the pharaoh embodies or incarnates the god. The deity is present in and lives through the idol or the king. The problem is this is not a functional interpretation. It is a metaphysical view of the relation between the idol or king and the god. It is better therefore to call it, I think, an incarnational interpretation. The king is the incarnation of the god; the idol is the embodiment of the god. But then this interpretation is irrelevant for the interpretation of the Genesis texts for those texts do not think of human beings as incarnations of God through which he lives and acts in the world. An anti-iconic religion like Judaism that prohibited images of God would have recoiled at the idea that human beings are embodiments of God.

So it seems to me that a substantialist interpretation is practically unavoidable. In order to function as God's co-regent on this planet, man must have certain faculties like rationality, self-consciousness, freedom of the will, and so forth. So in fact we shouldn't be playing off functional versus substantial understandings of God's image. The reason that we can function as God has commanded us to is because we are created in God's image, that is to say we have some ontological similarity to God which enables us to serve as his representative and co-regent.

⁴ Ibid.

In Genesis 5:1-3, Seth is said to be born in Adam's image and likeness. That, I think, is decisive for a substantialist interpretation for Seth was not Adam's representative or co-regent. The functionalist might say but being in "the image of" is a transitive relation (like less than) so that Seth is in God's image not just in Adam's image. The problem is that the resemblance relation is not transitive. A daughter may resemble her mother, and the mother may resemble her mother, but the granddaughter may not resemble the grandmother. Seth is said to be born not in God's image and likeness (as Adam was created) but rather in Adam's image and likeness. In other words, Adam brought forth another human being like himself.

Think back to our discussion of the attributes of God. Remember we saw that God is an infinite, personal being. Insofar as man is finite there is a great chasm that separates man from God. Man is like the rest of creation in his finitude. So how is man like God? He is like God in that he is personal. Then the chasm separates man and God from the rest of creation in that the rest of creation are not persons. On this view, the reason that man can serve as God's co-regent and representative on this planet and to govern the Earth is because he is in the image of God. That is to say, he is a person in the same way that God is personal and thus has the attributes of personhood.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I'm hearing that image to mean . . . can it also mean it's a God-given responsibility . . . there's certain responsibilities not only in the sense that you just illustrated but to carry it a bit further, is the expectation that he (man) will carry out God's plan?

Dr. Craig: I don't see that as part of the image. As I said, someone can have a function, that function can even be essential to that thing, but that's not a definition of the thing. I think that the image of God is man's ontological resemblance to God, but that God has then given man this responsibility to rule the Earth and to steward it and to manifest God's reign upon this planet. So there is an essential function that man is given to carry out and is responsible for. I just don't want to conflate that with the image.

Student: And there's nothing there embedded into it that would say that God has chosen to use man to implement, if you will, his will?

Dr. Craig: Yes. I would even say it stronger. Not just use but that he created man in order that man might represent God's reign upon the Earth and subdue it and take care of it.

Student: And implement his plan.

Dr. Craig: Yes. Of course. Then there's the broader plan, of course. God's intention, I think, was not the Fall but rather to bless Adam and his progeny. But once the Fall occurred then God has Plan B which involves the call of Abraham in Genesis 12 and the

election of the nation of Israel through which he would bring a savior of the world. In the end, as he says to Abraham, all the nations of the world will be blessed. That original blessing intended for Adam and Eve and their progeny will be fulfilled in Christ.

Student: Two questions. One is: are you familiar with . . . I haven't been familiar with Middleton . . . what about John Walton's work? Because I know he proposes something similar about a temple creation . . .

Dr. Craig: I thought of Walton as I was offering this critique of the Ancient Near Eastern parallels of setting up a statue in a distant land to represent your authority in your absence. But on somebody like John Walton's view, far from being absent, the world is God's temple in which he resides! So he doesn't need a cult statue or image in his temple. He's there himself. Now, I'm not persuaded by Walton's interpretation, but nevertheless that popular interpretation is completely at odds with this construal of the image of God as being on the parallel of a statue of a king in a distant land from which he is absent.

Student: I guess my question would be: Do they acknowledge or concede that it's not a perfect parallel, but they put it out there anyway to say that initial account in Genesis is a polemic against those . . .

Dr. Craig: I couldn't speak for what Walton thinks on this. Middleton isn't really very persuaded by this analogy or parallel of the king setting up his statue in a distant land. Rather, he puts his money on the second argument – that the king or pharaoh himself (like a cult statue) is an embodiment or incarnation of the god. That's what he thinks is the true parallel. Notice these two interpretations are incompatible with each other. In the one, the statue incorporates or embodies the deity. He is present in the statue. In the other interpretation, the king is absent and the statue is there in his place to kind of represent him. It's so funny that you've got these two sets of Ancient Near Eastern texts that are appealed to by scholars when in fact they support contradictory interpretations of the image. I think, as we saw from the very text I read, that the second stream of texts supports what I call an incarnational interpretation of God's image.

Student: I wouldn't call it incarnational. But just like talking about the two images of God in Christ's image – the more you change to be like him, you see him as he is, you start attaining his authority. So you rule with him, like he says. And so that's not an incarnation but you are ruling with him and you have authority. In the same way a pagan, when they're doing the will of the intermediate sin, then he has authority from that deity. So they are both very similar.

Dr. Craig: Well, I'm not persuaded that's right. One of the strange things is how in the world could these ancient Egyptians regard the pharaoh as divine when they know he was born. They know he's going to get sick and die. They prepared his body for burial with a mummy and embalming and built the tombs of the pharaohs. How could they regard

them as divine when they're so obviously mortal? The answer is, I think as Middleton shows, that they incarnate the deity. Incarnation comes from Latin – “in” plus “carnas” – in the flesh. So they literally incarnate god. Now, a cult statue doesn't incarnate god because it's not made of flesh, but it does embody god. So the cult statue embodies the deity, and therefore that's why the idol is divine even though it's made out of stone. The pharaoh, even though he's made out of flesh, he embodies or incarnates the god. So I do think the language is appropriate.

END DISCUSSION⁵