BRIDGES CHRISTIAN COLLEGE & SEMINARY

Addressing the Identity Crisis with the Doctrine of the Imago-Dei

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Audrey Perry

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Contents

Introduction

The concept of the imago Dei, the image of God, has been a topic of discussion throughout the history of the Church (Johnson 2009). The confusion surrounding identity and purpose in modern society, for both individuals and the corporate body of Christ, has made it increasingly apparent that we must return to the study once more (Félix-Jäger and Shin 2023, 112). The church's response to those wrestling with identity confusion is pivotal when considering the vast scope of diversity present within our communities today. Inconsistent teachings about the imago Dei are dividing the body of Christ, negatively affecting individuals with disabilities, those struggling with identity confusion, and others in minorities (Connor 2022, 278-286). Consequently, they feel estranged from the body of Christ.

To dismiss this topic or to treat it with indifference is to shirk our duty to minister to those in our midst. Church leaders must engage in a robust discussion about the imago Dei to minister to those wrestling with identity issues with empathy and grace. Clarifying what it means to be created in the imago Dei is critical. A Pentecostal approach with an open conversation to this understanding within the fellowship of the Assemblies of God will empower our leaders with the knowledge they need to respond to those asking difficult questions and grappling with identity confusion, as "belief guides perception" (Johnson 2009, 81).

We will begin our discussion by briefly explaining the three most prominent theological positions held by theologians throughout church history. Then, we will examine the Genesis narrative. The following section will also address several challenges associated with the image of God that influence contemporary Christian culture. We will consider the rising questions from recent scientific advancements that challenge the validity of the church's traditional views of the doctrine. These challenges demand a fresh approach. Exploring this topic will help us define and

compassionately respond to the interconnected problems associated with long-held traditional approaches to the doctrine of the imago Dei.

Background

Historically, there has been much confusion surrounding the creation accounts in Genesis. This confusion has created stumbling blocks. Genesis 1:26 first mentions image and likeness and reads: “Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the livestock, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” ([Modern English Version] MEV). The terms also appear together in Genesis 5:3: “Adam lived a hundred and thirty years and became the father of a son in his own likeness, after his own image, and called his name Seth” (MEV).

In the 1970s, Joseph Fletcher drew considerable attention to the topic by publishing a list of indicators that described personhood (Biola University 2017). The top four on Fletcher’s list included self-awareness, neocortical brain functioning, relational ability, and happiness. On account of his redefining personhood, Fletcher ultimately disqualified masses of individuals. Apart from a definition grounded in Scripture and appropriately interpreted, how personhood is viewed is highly subjective. Theologians have consistently held three dominant positions explaining the imago Dei, including functional, substantial, and relational views. The following section includes a brief overview of these traditional views.

Those with a functional perspective believe functional actions or expressions humans can perform describe the imago Dei (Peppiatt 2023, 83). Some indicators that Fletcher identified would fit into this category. This view depends on works and human capabilities, such as those required to fulfill God’s will on the earth by ruling, reigning, and having dominion (83). This

view is also appropriately described as the “vocational or missional view,” focusing on an individual’s calling and purpose (32).

Peppiatt (2023) explains that the substantive view is the most widely taught (15). Substantialists believe that because God does not have a body, the image of God “can only refer to spiritual qualities” (Tenney 1969, 370-371). Grudem (2020) identifies Luther and Calvin as holding this view (442). Athanasius, a theologian in the early church, also employed this approach and emphasized reason, claiming this ability differentiates people from animals (Peppiatt 2022, 20). Other attributes that would be considered to reflect God’s image by those adhering to this view include “the ability to love and be loved, spirituality, conscious memory, language, and personhood” (16).

There are variations of opinions among scholars who adhere to this view. A person’s ability to relate to the Lord with prayer and praise describes the relational perspective (Grudem 2020, 442). Theologians holding to this view include Brunner and Barth (442). Grudem stresses the essence of relationships specific to gender (442). Deuel and Grills (2023) teach that these relational aspects can be reflected progressively (76-78). Jack Levison's image connotes the capacity to live a holy life (BioLogos 2015). Others integrate different aspects and believe the imago Dei also encompasses an individual’s immortality and other non-physical traits, such as their ability to reason, logic, and learn (Grudem 2020, 442).

Macchia (2023) writes that when Scripture teaches that God created both male and female, it “indicates that the image of God is relational and to be shared within covenants that involve justice and compassion” (166). Being made in God’s “image” involves all of our capacities for God, for communion, worship, and stewardship. He further defines the image of

God as the “capacity for consciousness, language, love, justice, creativity, emotions, and intelligence, among other things” (458).

Implications of the Fall

Now that we have briefly described the most prominent schools of thought regarding the imago Dei, it is crucial to mention another point of disagreement that modern theologians continue to research. Perspectives of God’s image in humanity after the fall vary. There are noteworthy differences among theologians regarding how the fall impacted the image of God in humanity. Some hold that the image was marred but not lost due to the fall, whereas others believe it was lost entirely. Still, other scholars believe that the image did not change after the fall, while some teach that the image was never created in man. This next section investigates some of these positions. Some even claim, like Milton, that she was less in the image of God than Adam (Newsom, Ridge, and Lapsley 2012, 49).

One highly debated point connected with this ideology includes whether the fall marred God's image in humanity. Grudem’s (2020) position, which encapsulates a blend of the previously mentioned dominant historical views, subscribes to the belief that God’s image in man has been marred from the fall but not wholly lost (444). He explains his reasoning, speculating that humanity is no longer as holy as he once was before the fall (444). He defends this claim, arguing that, as a result of the fall, humanity’s “moral purity was lost,” their “intellect was corrupted by falsehood and misunderstanding,” and they no longer glorified God with their speech (444). He further asserts that relationships are also affected by the fall, driven by selfishness (444). His descriptions entail characteristics and attributes observed inwardly and outwardly (444). He boldly asserts that Scripture does not need to elaborate further on what he speculates is implied in the chosen terms since they have such “clear meanings” (Grudem 2020,

443). Grudem's assumptions and deductions are unconvincing, though his definitions are long and drawn out.

Similar to Grudem, Menzies, and Horton (1994) explain that God's image is not to be understood as physical but as "natural and moral" (chap. 4). With that in mind, they insist God's image was "distorted and weakened" due to the fall (chap. 4). They also teach that the fall distances relationships between an individual with God and each other (chap. 4).

Fee and Stuart (2003) believe that Adam and Eve, as image-bearers, were created to be stewards of the rest of creation (94). They stated that Adam and Eve exchanged God's image for the one who deceived them and became enemies of God in need of redemption (94). Like Grudem, Fee and Stuart highlight Adam and Eve's actions and roles associated with God's image.

Deuel and Grills (2023) argue that God's image has not been lost or damaged due to the fall (75). Their explanation stems from the belief that the Genesis passages speak more about God's character than they believe it speaks to humanity bearing His image (75). Recognizing that all humanity has sinned, they insist that sin hurts people, not a corrupted image (75).

Critical Analysis

Now, we return to the statement posed at the beginning of this study: is it reasonable to assume that certain presentations of the doctrine of the imago Dei negatively affect others around us? Specifically, do individuals with disabilities, those struggling with identity confusion, and others in minority groups receive these teachings today? We will now identify some factors that question some assumptions about the structure of these beliefs.

Consistency

What most scholars seem to agree on is described by Roberts (2012), who states, “We alone of all creation have been made in His image. This is true of all people: male and female, black and white, young and old, born and unborn, able-bodied and disabled, whether mentally or physically” (30). Likewise, most would also agree with Grudem (2020), who asserts that “No matter how much God’s image is marred by sin, illness, weakness, age, disability-a person’s status as a human being made in God’s image should be honored and respected as such” (450). However, when studied in the context of the rest of their teachings, such bold egalitarian assertions in non-Pentecostal theologies are misleading and inconsistent.

Consider how Grudem (2020) insists that God’s purpose of creating a man and a woman together represents God’s image in their “harmonious relationships, equality in personhood and importance, and difference in role and authority” (454). His emphasis on separate but equal roles and authority solicits the idea of Jim Crow laws, which were logically deduced in our legal courts by a culture blinded by their racist beliefs. Grudem will find himself on the wrong side of history, just as those who advocated for segregation with their legalistic cover of *separate but equal* (Volle 2023). Macchia (2023) agrees and states that “Galatians 3:28 can hardly be restricted to salvation. There was no such thing as “separate but equal” for the races in the church!” (442) He continues his explanation and insists that the flesh does not determine functions and roles, but the Spirit (442).

Have we allowed cultural preferences to influence our theology so much that we blindly exclude others who are different from us? There is a danger of dehumanizing others when we see ourselves as more important or educated. Do we recognize this danger when we base our perception of their identity in the image of God solely on functional abilities or capacity? (Félix-

Jäger and Shin 2023, 60-62) Another inconsistency to consider and discuss more openly concerns marriage and singleness. Are they viewed through the lens of these different views of the imago Dei? Some harmful teachings are easier to identify, such as those promoted by Warren Fay Corothers (Qualls 2018, chap. 4). He insists that church leadership be male. He grounds his reasoning in his belief that God's image is only revealed in men (chap. 4). Teachings like this have led to an overemphasis on authority and, in some cases, marriage. Such teachings likely make single individuals feel like second-class citizens, overlooked and less valued. (Peppiatt 2023, 101).

Functionality

As findings reveal deeper levels of functionality in animals, scholars are left with more reasons to insist upon a fresh analysis and new discussion of the imago Dei (Peterson 2013, 147). Recent research has focused a great deal of attention on the scientific differences between animals and people (Conrad 2019, 3). The results have led some scholars to adjust their definitions of the imago Dei since functions once deemed particular to humanity are now understood to be evidenced in animals, too (Peterson 2003, 247-256). Keener (2016) explains that if we are honest with ourselves when we approach the text, we may need to "adjust our presuppositions" (26). Conrad asks, "What function esteems humans worthy of dignity, honor, protection, or rights? Is our theology stressing the quality of life more than its sanctity?" (148)

Identifying the leading perspectives surrounding the doctrine of the imago Dei has led us to consider how definitions, similar to Fletcher's, encompassing human capacity, intelligence, ability, and general functionality, are problematic and discriminatory. Professor Erik Thoennes from Biola University contributes to this conversation by challenging the subjective nature of the functional perspective, deeming it incredibly problematic (Biola 2010). He compels his students

to consider what deems people “worthy of forgiveness, compassion, advocacy, or help” (Biola 2010).

Thoennes further explains that the development of this line of thinking can enable us to “reason our way to genocide” when we evaluate and categorize people according to their functional abilities. History agrees with this reasoning as evidenced by the inhumane research, mass genocide, segregation, antisemitism, and mass sterilization that occurred in the holocaust, driven by the Nazi regime (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2013). Perhaps we have become so focused on discovering our giftedness and individuality that we have neglected to give the glory back to the One whose image we bear. Author Lucy Peppiatt (2022) firmly insists, “We need to be careful not to idolize physical perfection over everything else” (118).

Catherine McDowell recognizes the need for such conversations. She suggests that “humanity’s royal status is defined by image and likeness. That is, humans are endowed with royal status because they are made in the image and likeness of God” (Wheaton College 2015). In her lecture, McDowell explains that the language of Genesis 1 and 5 imply a kinship relationship, referring to a specific kind of species. McDowell states that the creation narrative paints God as Adam’s Father and points to the “sharp distinction” that is made between God’s creation of humanity and the rest of God’s creation.

As suggested earlier in this paper by Deuel and Grills (2023), the image described in the Genesis account is likely more about God than humanity (75). In a culture obsessed with redefining an individual’s identity, Christians must reevaluate the nature of personhood for themselves. Our culture is prone to appreciate, value, and esteem those who appear more perfect or gifted than others as more like God than others. Charles Finney makes an important point about the purpose of images in religion being to “spark worship, not to be worshipped” (Peppiatt

2023, 13-14). Critically considering these pitfalls could eliminate several hindrances that divide the body of Christ.

Unity

We must have a unified approach that extends equal dignity and value to everyone without reservation. Further research should focus on how we can present the image in a way that will separate our understanding of identity and functionality. McKnight (2008) explains that when Adam was split into two, this was done so they could enjoy oneness together, which he explains glorifies God and is humanity's purpose and destiny (86, 161). He asserts that this oneness "took a hit" as a consequence of the fall (86).

Connor (2022) explains that the image is completely revealed when everyone is included (280). This idea broadens the scope of a complete revelation of the image being revealed in a man and a woman together, claiming that "imaging God is a communal activity" (280). Connor's rational perspective aligns with a New Testament outlook, agreeing with Galatians 3:28, which reads: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" ([New International Version] 2011).

One assumption resulting in grave consequences when the doctrine of the imago Dei is presented as marred can lead to the belief that individuals can be defective, some more than others (Lebacqz 1997). Conner (2022) states that "people are not a problem to be solved but trustees of a blessing without which the church cannot bless the world" (282). Connor's view strikes me as profound and enlightening since we naturally categorize people according to their differences before seeing them as equals in Christ. His emphasis on community and interdependent relationships within the body of Christ allows all to participate as equally significant parts. This inclusive conceptualization of the imago Dei unifies all believers in Christ

despite our giftedness and ability, with its definition characterized in essence. A theology of the imago Dei that unifies humanity allows for unique expressions of functionality and diversity to flow out of essence.

Disabilities

Connor and Dr. Amos Yong have researched the doctrine of the imago Dei as it connects with their philosophies of marginalized groups, such as those with disabilities and extreme learning differences (Azusa Pacific University 2017). Connor (2022) proposes that a relational approach allows individuals to explore their identity in ways that go "beyond the boundaries of cognition and intellect" (283). Raising awareness of this ideology, Connor (2022) underlines the importance of friendships within the body of Christ, explaining that when a person's identity is found within their community of the church, they are "no longer part of an amorphous group, excluded and alienated from sources of value and self-worth (283).

In Theology Breakdown with Dr. Josh Samuel (2021), Dr. Amos Yong, referencing Jesus' scars, suggests that "disabilities are not necessarily evil or blemishes to be eliminated." Dr. Amos Yong's research is inspired by his younger brother, Mark, who has Down syndrome (Azusa Pacific University 2017). Yong explains his belief that "What's wrong with Mark is less Mark's problem than a world that doesn't know how to engage with him." He predicts that perhaps "what heaven involves" has less to do with his brother getting fixed than others finally being able to "enjoy Mark and his contributions." The relational model should be seriously considered and respected as it equalizes all humanity, no matter their ability, capacity, intelligence, or giftedness. Aligned with the message of Christ, its hopeful messages teach that we "are each called to foster one another's growth in faith and service" (Connor 2022, 283).

Missiological Implications

Applying these theologies in practice influences the church's response to the current identity crisis, which requires becoming acquainted with it first. To continue with our purpose, let us now turn to the missiological implications associated with the doctrine of the imago Dei. Several questions have been guiding our study. We must ask if the doctrines preached from the pulpits are consistent. We must ask if a person's identity differs from how they function. How is our identity distinct from what Scripture informs us can be *taken off* and *put on*? Equally important, we must ask what questions our culture is asking and which questions we are attempting to answer. How are ministers going about providing these answers?

Similar to how those involved in missions study other cultures to understand their concepts of sin, those in the church should also consider the same strategy (Hibbert and Hibbert 2014, 309-329). This approach would allow the Scriptures to be understood in light of a culture from which much of the church has removed itself. As a result of this removal, the relationships that once helped ministers identify how to meet people's needs and answer their questions are no longer there. A bridge must be built to fill in this gap. Yip (2017) writes of disabilities and personhood and concludes, "I am not defined by my rationality, not by my autonomy, not by my achievements, not even by human love. Even when I lose them all, I have still God and therefore yet all" (127).

How are we to move forward and fulfill the Great Commission? Individuals are not alone in their struggle with identity. Pastors and congregations wrestle with the same questions. The world is confused about their identity, questioning their existence and attempting to redefine themselves according to their gender and sexual preference. Are Christians attempting to blend in

or live in the world as a "distinctive kind of people, countercultural, to showplace to the nations what it means to live in a relationship with the Father" (Wheaton College 2015)?

Mark Young (2022) states that the church has been driven by "Scottish common sense, post-enlightenment, left brain, obsessive-compulsive, white males reveal we are suppressing a part of the image of God, suppressing the witness of the spirit and not in line with historic Christianity" (105). If our culture has suppressed the image expressed within our communities due to limiting what is being taught about the doctrine, repentance is necessary. To move forward, Christian leaders of all backgrounds and gifts should come to the table to seek truth together. Chloe Sun (2020), asserts that it is God's desire for "the image, and thus the knowledge of Him, to permeate the globe. No race gets the monopoly" (88).

The Gospel of Jesus Christ has been preached in several different ways in America since the Protestant Reformation. Christian denominations have expanded as our country has grown. Several denominations already had schools and universities training their ministers when the Assemblies of God began forming in the early 1900s. We have only begun developing dependable, quality Pentecostal resources to equip pastors in our fellowship. For years, pastors serving in the Assemblies of God have relied on resources that do not teach the same doctrines and or hold the same positions of the fellowship. Unfortunately, many resources that oppose the fellowship's beliefs are being promoted ("Indiana a/G Women | Women of Virtue," n.d.).

Providing the answers the world seeks without promoting and providing quality resources will not be easy. If the world's questions are ignored for much longer, it will no longer look for answers from the church. Furthermore, if pastors cannot account for the theological contradictions congregants ask about, they will likely turn away from the church and possibly the faith.

If we do not allow fear to prevent us from searching for answers, we can confront these crises with wisdom and discernment. The church must take her stand as a shining light to minister the Gospel to a world desperate for the message of Jesus Christ. There is no other choice for the souls dying who have not heard of the God who lovingly created their very existence. Many claim that "the development of clinical psychology and advances in psychiatry helped to fill the void left by religious communities that were, by and large, abandoning their historic calling to care for and cure the soul" (Johnson 2009, 26). Therefore, the approach to the imago Dei doctrine must be at the forefront of our conversations.

Summary

"Why do we want the term image of God? Why does it drive us into the heart of personhood?" asks McKnight (BioLogos 2015). He answers, "Because science can't do it all." Too many conflicting views are pouring out of our pulpits, causing confusion. Will the church unite in humility, reason, and the Scriptures to respond to our modern issues? Problematic resources that add to the confusion must be filtered out and replaced. McKnight makes an important point when considering addressing doctrines that must be reconsidered. He admits, "I don't want my students to lose their faith because I taught more than the Bible actually teaches" (BioLogos 2015). Looking forward, we, too, must share the same concern.

These significant concerns are directly related to the identity crisis in the world and our churches. The various presentations of the doctrine of salvation, original sin, and the image of God have divided the body of Christ in several ways. Teachings that center their concepts of identity around human ability demean, divide, and destroy the body of Christ (Félix-Jäger and Shin 2023, 60-62). A faulty belief system exists when roles, levels of capacity, reason,

intelligence, and higher functioning are recognized to express the image of God more than what the Scriptures describe as spiritual fruit. These systems must be torn down.

Another relevant matter in this paper includes the need for Pentecostal scholars to enter into respectful, open conversations about theological matters, with teachable spirits and an appreciation for diversity, without fear of repercussions from their denominations should they come to conclusions that contradict positions officially held by their fellowship. To address difficult theological questions, improvements must be sought to bridge the gap between those serving in academics and missions. A logical solution to our culture's identity crisis embraces a unified, ontological characterization of God's image, which would necessitate conversations about God's image and the doctrine of original sin.

If the body of Christ is to perform greater works than Jesus, then the body of Christ must be unified. The Lord created the world and everything in it to be good, not perfect. Therefore, when we understand that "Adam and Eve were not created all they could become," we should be encouraged to know that no one person, besides Jesus, will ever fully represent the image of God (Menzies year, chap. 4). It will take a community and time. The mission is no longer about one family of Israel singled out of humanity (Keener 2014, 662). The mission now includes all nations. The cross has invited all nations to come to the Lord. As we make disciples, we will see how they, too, may share some of our likenesses and express their differences, and all expressions will then provide us with another opportunity to praise the Lord.

Conclusions

This research indicates a solution to the issues mentioned earlier in the summary and will require several steps. First, it is paramount to recognize and teach that all humanity is created in the image of God, insisting that identity be drawn from their belonging to God, not by their

functioning capacity or works. Second, it is important to open the conversation for Pentecostal scholars to openly discuss these and their related doctrines. Third, consideration should be given to the presentation of their conclusions in light of the diversity in our culture so as not to exclude individuals from participating in the body of Christ, regardless of their gifts, talents, education, or abilities. Fourth, these resources must be made available to local pastors serving in their local churches. Implementing a platform to marry the academic and missional fields of ministry would be ideal. An emphasis on addressing the intellectual crisis in the church will help address our culture's identity crisis by resourcing ministers appropriately and effectively. Lastly, healthy, positive communication skills should also be encouraged with humility for those attempting to address hot-topic issues, such as identity and inclusion, while ministering the Gospel to those within their reach.

McKnight accurately asserts that "all roads lead to Adam in much of Evangelical theology" (WTC Theology 2015). Therefore, equipping ministers with the tools to continue their missional journeys should lead us to develop culturally relevant responses grounded in well-thought-out Pentecostal theology. As more Christian leaders embrace unity and critical thinking, welcome hard questions, and respond in humility, the image of Christ will become more evident, bearing witness to Christ.

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