

THE “IMAGE OF GOD” AS THE INTERPERSONAL CAPACITY

Virgil Warren, PhD

Much of my creative energies lately have been directed toward tracing through the implications of interpersonal relationship as the organizing reality for Christian truth. Nowhere has this observation appeared more relevant than in the study of the nature of mankind.

Over the centuries extensive thought has gone into the interpretation of Genesis 1:26-27 and related materials: “*Let’s make mankind in our image after our likeness.*” There have been four proposed aspects of the “image of God” together with their effects. Reason heads the list. The ability to think abstractly relates to the capacity for language communication, creativity, responsibility (dominion), conscience, even humor, self-transcendence, and the ability to project consciousness over behind the eyes of another person. People can penetrate a situation in thought and imagination.

Emotion distinguishes us from much of the created realm because we can care, have feelings, experience affection from other persons. Our will enables us to choose between alternatives. Consequently, we are not limited to a stimulus-response existence where response answers the most intense stimulus in the environment. We have a spirit, an aspect that continues after the death of the body. Traditionally we have been regarded as in God’s image because we have rational, emotional, volitional, and spiritual capacities.

While these proposals offer valuable insights into our nature, Genesis 1:26-27 suggests a larger, more inclusive truth that correlates with interpersonalism. **The first factor** is the plural pronoun us. “*Let us make mankind in our image*” draws attention to the interpersonal character of God himself. In our understanding of the text, (1) “us” refers to the three-person oneness of God. (2) It is not majestic plural, we take it, since 3:22 soon speaks about “one of us.” “Majestic plural” is a Semitic idiom that using plurality to indicate size—in this case the greatness of God. But there could be no speaking about “one of” such a plurality: “*Adam has become like one of us.*” An alternate approach supposes that (3) “us” means God and the angels. But angels have not appeared in the context so as to be antecedents of the pronoun. “Angel” does not appear until Genesis 16:7. “Cherub” does appear in 3:24 in reference either to an order of angels or a figure for the angelic order. Nevertheless, even this term occurs a full two chapters past the “image of God” usage. Furthermore, (4) the text says we are created in the image and likeness of God, not only here but elsewhere (Genesis 5:1—likeness; 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; James 3:9; cp. Acts 17:28-29). Such phraseology does not occur for likeness to angels anywhere. It seems only

natural to take “us” as indicative of God’s interpersonal. Since we bear the image of that interpersonal God, the image of God in us refers primarily to our interpersonal nature.

A second factor that highlights the interpersonal character of mankind comes from the parallelism in Genesis 1:27. *“In the image of God he created mankind”* stands parallel to *“male and female he created them.”* The image relates in some way to the male-female nature of humanness. Since God is spirit, physical sexuality is not the point even though marriage does provide the most intense, permanent, and all-inclusive interpersonal relationship in human experience. Marriage has the character that it does primarily because in it we most distinctively demonstrate the intense, permanent, and all-inclusive oneness of the godhead. We can say that the plurality-in-oneness of marriage is analogous to the plurality-in-oneness of trinity even though it does not refer to the same thing.

Of special importance regarding marriage is that its interpersonal character precedes its physical distinctiveness. Not until there is compenetration of personhood can there properly be compenetration of physical natures. Marriage is mutual commitment and common identity of persons before it is pleasure and procreation. (We are unique in being able to reproduce face to face.) Consequently, we place the relevance of image to male-female, not directly in the physical domain, but contextually in its interpersonal framework in which the body and human sexuality are parts. Physical relationship occurs in interpersonal relationship, and physical relationship bonds interpersonal identity uniquely between husband and wife. As a result, analogy to the trinity teaches us about the divine intent in marriage as an interpersonal experience, and the interpersonal marriage experience helps us comprehend something about the divine trinity in whose image we are created. In other words, the image of God in us lies at the corporate and the individual level.

The individual capacities traditionally cited do have a place in the image, not because they are the image, but because they make it possible. Reason, emotion, will, *etc.*, are abilities necessary for operating interpersonally.

We see several advantages to putting the image at the level of interpersonal capacity. For one thing, it **(1)** fosters wholeness. The image does not reduce us to one essence like rationality, nor does it fragment us into a series of parts like reason, will, *etc.* Our wholeness in God’s image can involve even the physical body so as not to create unnatural division between body and spirit or depreciate the physical aspect of the total self. The image can include the body by analogy. The socio-physical unit that marriage is bears analogy to the socio-spiritual unit that Father-Son-Spirit is (note implications of 1 Corinthians 6:17).

The image as interpersonal capacity **(2)** clarifies the man-animal distinction. No animal is said to be created in God’s image. No mate for the man existed in the animal kingdom (Genesis

2:18-20). Animals could be killed but not man (Genesis **9:6**). Cohabitation between man and animal was punishable by death (Leviticus **20:15**). To be distinguished from animals, we do not have to be unique in any or every respect. Rather, the degree to which we possess these abilities is sufficiently greater than in combination they produce our uniqueness—the interpersonal capacity. Our uniqueness from animals is not jeopardized by rudimentary intelligence seen in crude tool making (*vs.* tool using) or perhaps in elementary language learning—which has not actually been demonstrated despite claims to that effect.

The image as interpersonal capacity (**3**) provides a theological foundation for interpreting sexuality. It affirms the equal worth of both sexes (Galatians **3:28**) and defines the proper relationship between them (1 Corinthians **6:13-20**). That variance participates in the larger truth of the divine image common to both and expressed in the union of the two (Genesis **2:24**). The dignity of marriage nevertheless harmonizes with the validity and wholeness of personhood in those not married, because the interpersonal capacity accentuated in marriage also finds expression in all other social relations. The total, permanent, exclusive identity of husband and wife is analogous to the Father-Son-Spirit. In his own image, God created us male and female.

Finally, the *imago dei* as interpersonal capacity (**4**) connects the natural and ethical usages of the “*image of God*” expression (Genesis **1:26; 5:1; 9:6**; 1 Corinthians **11:7**; James **3:9** *vs.* Romans **8:29**; 2 Corinthians **3:18**; Colossians **3:10**). Not only were we created in the image of God; we are redeemed from being sinners in order to “*put on the new humanity that is being renewed to knowledge after the image*” of our creator (Colossians **3:10**). Ethics and morality apply only to interpersonal circumstances. The natural image amounts to the interpersonal capacity; the ethical image amounts to proper use of it. The use of *image* to mean ethical character confirms our understanding of the creatable image as the interpersonal capacity.

“Image,” then, is used in a nature sense (Genesis **1:26-27; 9:6**; 1 Corinthians **11:7; 15:49**; James **3:9**), in an ethical sense (Romans **8:29**; 2 Corinthians **3:18**; Colossians **3:10**; 2 Peter **1:4**), and perhaps in an eschatological sense (Romans **8:29?**).

In summation, when Genesis **1:26** speaks of the image of God, it does so in connection with (a) mankind, not with some aspect of mankind, with (b) both male and female, and with (c) humans individually and in combination.