**In His Image**

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A key to understanding of our humanity is the teaching in Genesis 1:26, 27 and 5:1-2 that God created all men and women in his image. Since that has bearing on many of the most contentious debates in the church and in the world, I would like to summarize what is meant by that momentous assertion.

The two main terms in these three passages are “image” and “likeness”. The more concrete term “image” is used elsewhere in the Old Testament for a painted picture of Babylonian soldiers (Ezek 23:14) and the statues that served as idols of Baal (2 Ki 11:18). The more abstract term “likeness”, derived as it is from the verb “resemble”, is used elsewhere for the resemblance of Seth to his father Adam (Gen 5:3) and the assumed resemblance of an idol to its deity (Is 40:18). Thus they are virtual synonyms, even though they are used to make a fine distinction in Genesis 1:26 between creation in God’s image and as his likeness. Even though each human being is made to be like God, no human is divine; unlike a pagan idol.

The Scriptures tell us four things about our creation in God’s image. First, unlike the idols of pagan gods in the ancient world and the kings of Egypt, Adam and Eve were not created as images of God, but were made “in His image”. They were to resemble the living God by reflecting Him in what they were and what they did. They were to be holy as God Himself was holy (Lev 11:45; 19:2; 20:26; 1 Pet 1:16). Additionally, the New Testament teaches that God’s Son, Jesus, is the image of God the Father, the one in whose image human beings were created (2 Cor 4:4; 1 Cor 15:49; Col 1:15; cf. Rom 8:29; Col 3:9-11; Heb 1:3). To be in God’s image is to be like Jesus by union with him, sharing in his righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24).

Second, humans were created in God’s image as male and female. In Hebrew the terms male and female describe both their biological sexuality (Lev 12:2, 5, 7; 15:33), which they share with all the animals (Gen 6:19; 7:3, 9, 16), and their corresponding gender, their sexual identity (Lev 27:3, 4, 5, 7; Num 5:3). Both are given by God in their creation. Both their sexuality and their gender are aspects of their creation in God’s image. Man and woman, husband and wife, were to reflect God’s character and his activity in their marital union with each other. Yet the Old Testament does not explain how they were to do this. The answer is given by Paul in Ephesians 5:22-33. They were created in God’s image as male and female to reflect the Son’s self-sacrificing love for the church as his bride and her respectful subordination to him.

Third, God made the whole of them in His image in order to represent Him. The mention of their sexuality shows that this includes their bodies. Likewise in Genesis 9:6 the reason for the capital punishment of murderer is God’s creation of the victim in his image. The violation of a human body is an attack on God. The whole human being was designed by the living God to show Him, however partially and imperfectly, in its life on earth. The body of each person was made for theophany, for God’s manifestation on earth, the visible disclosure of his glory in human terms (Is 43:7).

Fourth, the passages that speak about the creation of Adam and Eve in God’s image describe what they were meant to do as creatures made in His likeness. As God’s vice-regents they were to “have dominion” over all the fish and the birds and the land animals (Gen 1:26, 28). Just as God maintained the cosmic order and supervised its proper operation, all human beings, rather than just a few powerful kings, were to maintain proper order in the animal kingdom on earth, so that all animals, each in their own niche and in their own way, would thrive on earth together with all mankind. As managers of God’s earthly estate they were to “subdue” the earth by farming it properly and protecting it from exploitation and abuse, so that its vegetation would provide food to maintain and sustain animal and human life on earth (Gen 1:28-30).

So we do not chose our identity, physically or sexually, socially or spiritually. Our identity is given to us by God for life in this world and in the world to come.