The Image of God in Man:
Destroyed or Distorted?

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Thesis Statement

This following research will determine that the Image of God in man, while distorted and twisted, has not been totally destroyed.

Introduction

Genesis 1:26-27 speak of God creating Adam in a sinless, harmonious and holy state, in His own Image and for a specific purpose. Following the Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden, and the birth of Original Sin, the state of the post-Fall Adam as well as his progeny has been debated and scrutinized. Throughout the history of the church, the natures of the soteriological and anthropological implications have been a source of contention for adherents to God’s Word.

With the rise in what has been deemed “Extreme” Calvinism and the belief that mankind, due to the destruction of the Image of God in man is completely unable to respond to God, a new debate has begun in earnest. It is within the context of this research to outline the definition of the Image of God in man, the effects of the Fall on mankind, as well as the Historical views and modern views of Imago Dei. Finally, the “Extreme” Calvinist argument will be discussed, along with the theological implications of these doctrines.

Definition of the Imago Dei

God said “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness;” indicating that the plan was to create a living being similar to the Triune God. The Hebrew tselem (“image”) and demut (“likeness”) do not refer to something that is identical, but rather something that is similar to the item that it represents or is “in the image of.” Grudem reveals that tselem is used a multitude of times in the Old Testament to indicate a representative object that is similar, but not exact. Examples include statues, replicas of tumors and of mice (1 Sam. 6:5, 11); paintings of soldiers
on the wall (Ez. 23:14), and of pagan idols and statues that represented deities (Num.33:42; 2 Kings 11:18; Ez. 7:20; 16:17).¹

Genesis 5:3 recounts another use of tselem and demut in the description of the birth of Adam’s third son, Seth. While Seth was “like” Adam, just as many sons and daughters represent their parents through looks, personality and characteristics; he was not an exact replica of Adam.² Therefore, Grudem believes “Similarly, every way in which man is like God is part of his being in the image and likeness of God.”³

Following Adam and Eve’s disobedience in the Garden of Eden as depicted in Genesis 3, there were immediate ramifications to their sin. Just as God had promised, death entered into existence; however what kind of death is God warning Adam of?

**Immediate Effects of the Fall**

**Separation from God**

The broken relationship of mankind to God is perhaps the most devastating effect of the fall. God had created mankind to have a relationship and community with Him, and following the disobedience of Adam and Eve, that perfect relationship was forever altered. The relationship that was once characterized by “trust, love, confidence, and closeness were replaced by fear, dread and avoidance of God…whereas they had looked forward with positive anticipation to their meetings with God, after the fall they did not want to see him.”⁴ The overwhelming feeling of guilt and shame overwhelmed the first humans; an immediate result of disobedience and sin.

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² Ibid., 444.
³ Ibid.
Justice defines guilt as “that state of a moral agent after the intentional or unintentional violation of a law or principle established by God.”

A combination of emotions including anxiety, anticipation of punishment, shame, humiliation, grief, depression, the need to hide and a diminished sense of self-worth, dignity or self-esteem accompany the feelings of guilt.

Immediately following Adam and Eve’s sin, this internal indicator alarmed them that they had done something horribly wrong. As recorded in Genesis 3, Adam’s guilt was obvious, as he and Eve sewed fig leaves together to hide their nakedness and shame, and in fear of punishment, they hid from the Lord in the Garden.

**Death**

Just as God promised, death entered into the picture as a result of man’s sin. Boice believes that due to the Triune nature of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, mankind is made as a trichotomism; body, soul and spirit. This combination guaranteed that mankind was the pinnacle of creation; however, all three aspects were affected by the Fall. Boice reveals that when man’s relationship with God was broken, his spirit died; lying, cheating and stealing was an indication that his soul had begun to die, and God promised that eventually his lifeless body would return to the “dust of the ground” (Gen. 3:19).

It is the death of the spirit that seems to be the most instantaneous of all the effects of Adam’s sin. John Stott calls it “the most dreadful of all sin’s consequences.”

Erickson believes that the nature of the death attached to the fall is three dimensional, including physical death, spiritual death and eternal death. It appears that the Apostle Paul

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6 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 201.
correlated both physical and spiritual death (1 Cor. 15); that while humans still ultimately die, death’s finitude has been eradicated. Apart from Christ’s physical death and resurrection, mankind would remain both in sin and spiritually dead.\textsuperscript{11}

Louis Berkhof said “The Bible does not know the distinction, so common among us, between a physical, a spiritual, and an eternal death; it has a synthetic view of death and regards it as separation from God.”\textsuperscript{12} Geisler believes that although mankind is fallen and totally separated from God, they are not “completely obliterated by Him.”\textsuperscript{13}

**Internal Effects**

Aside from the immediate and eternal effects that the introduction of death brought to mankind, Erickson list a litany of internal consequences that human beings face following the fall of man in the Garden. Enslavement to sin has devastating consequences upon mankind; and is found in the addictive nature of human beings. This enslavement is explained by the Apostle Paul in Romans 6, when he reminds the Roman readers that they were once “slaves to sin.”

The human ability to deny reality, particularly death, is another consequence of the fall. Erickson says that “A suppressed realization that death is the wages of sin (Rom.6:23) may underlie many of our attempts to avoid thinking about it.”\textsuperscript{14} This consequential ability to deny reality extends to the denial of sin; an unwillingness to assume responsibility and shift the blame to another.\textsuperscript{15} The denial of sin leads to a heart of self-deceit, illustrated by King David’s inability to see his own sin, while declaring judgment upon the Rich Man in Nathan’s parable (2 Sam.

\textsuperscript{10} Erickson, 628.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 630.
\textsuperscript{13} Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free*. (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2010), 63.
\textsuperscript{14} Erickson, 633.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 634.
12); David’s sinful condition exhibited the remainder of the internal effects of sin, which include insensitivity, self-centeredness and restlessness.\textsuperscript{16}

**External Effects**

While there are a multitude of internal consequences of sin upon the image of God in mankind, Erickson lists a plethora of effects that it has on man’s relationships with others. The internal effects of selfishness inevitably lead to conflict through competition and covetousness; exemplified in James 4:1-2.\textsuperscript{17} Another casualty of sin is man’s inability to empathize with others, a condition that comes from a heart that rejects humility and has become self-seeking; contrasting Paul’s mindset in Philippians 2:2-3.\textsuperscript{18} The inability to love and the rejection of authority complete Erickson’s list of external consequences of the fall.\textsuperscript{19}

**Historical Views**

Culver reveals that according to the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine, mankind’s powers of reason and free will constitute the remnants of the image of God. Through the process of reason and deduction from the facts of the created world, man can know much about God and himself. This, Culver believes is a chief evidence that while the fall greatly affected mankind, it did survive intact.\textsuperscript{20} However, in the Tridentine Roman Catholic religion, there is delineation between “image” and “likeness” of God. According to this view, the “likeness of God” refers to primal mankind’s moral and ethical integrity, something that is not part of the basic human constitution, but rather something “imperted by God (donum superadditum) by God to Adam in

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 634-35.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 636.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
addition to the complete humanity (humanitas) or image of God.” According to this view, it is the likeness that was lost in the Fall, not the image.

**Origen and Irenaeus**

This view is found in a seed form in the teachings of the early church fathers Origen and Irenaeus; however the doctors of the Western church have not been in agreement as to what degree and when the “image” was given and if it was conferred at the same time or before the “likeness.” Origen regarded the image as something that was given immediately in the act of creation, while the likeness was “conferred by God at a later time.” Irenaeus offered the distinction between image and likeness; image meant that Adam had reason and free will, and likeness indicated a supernatural endowment that Adam received through a divine Spiritual action.

**Augustine**

Augustine’s believed that before the Fall of Man, Adam and Eve originally possessed a will that was free from the infection of sin. However, because of sin through their original disobedience, all of the progeny of the human race has “inherited a crippled, distorted, bent will.” His ongoing controversy with Pelagius centered on the constitution of the human will; specifically, what was left of the will following the fall?

Pelagius believed that humans possessed the pre-fall ability of Adam and Eve to make right decisions; giving mankind the choice to choose right or wrong without the taint of Original Sin. According to Pelagianism thinking, it was not in the inherent sin of Adam and Eve that

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21 Culver, 254.
22 Ibid.
23 Erickson, 522.
24 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 136.
poses a threat to mankind, it is their poor example.\textsuperscript{27} Pelagius believed that the human will, untouched by Original Sin, is wholly and completely intact despite the Fall; and the controversy between he and Augustine centered on this argument.

Augustine’s ideology of Original Sin and its effect upon humanity revealed much of what he believed about the image of God in man, particularly with regards to God’s Grace. Primarily, he viewed mankind as in need of medical and juridical help; viewing man’s need of God’s intervention for “inherited disease and inherited guilt.”\textsuperscript{28} Augustine believed that when Adam sinned, mankind sinned; a view that bases its understanding of Original sin upon the principle of a “seminal relationship” of Adam to the rest of mankind.\textsuperscript{29} This led to his conclusion that while mankind exists with the inherited infection of Original Sin, the image of God still remains in a distorted or skewed nature.\textsuperscript{30} It is through God sovereign act of Grace through Jesus Christ that mankind can be healed from its slavery to sin, and until that time of divine intervention occurs, mankind will continue to exercise their will in a distorted manner.\textsuperscript{31}

As Augustine aged, his views upon human free will and predestination hardened. In reaction to the Pelagian controversy and their denial of the need of grace, Augustine’s view of God’s grace moved from synergism (human cooperation) to monergism (divine operation alone); a view leading to “Extreme Calvinism” which will be examined later in this work.\textsuperscript{32} Geisler reveals that included among Augustine’s beliefs was the idea that mankind is “unable to bring themselves back to life, that true freedom was lost in the Fall, faith is a gift from God, the doctrine of double-predestination, and that God does not offer redeeming love to everyone.”\textsuperscript{33} As

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 149.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 152.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Geisler, 211.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 212-13.
well, the doctrine of Irresistible Grace and the idea that mankind cannot receive salvation by their own choice are other Augustinian beliefs.\textsuperscript{34}

**Calvin**

The seminal view of sin attributed to Augustinian thought heavily influenced the French theological and Protestant Reformer, John Calvin. Calvin’s views of anthropology directly influenced his view of soteriology. He believed that while mankind has the ability to make good choices, he cannot save himself apart from the divine gracious act of God. Mankind is capable of doing good, and gaining favor with both man and God, but that favor does not extend to the soteriological realm; mankind is unable to “work for their salvation.” As well, the doctrine of Total Depravity purports that the corruption of mankind is so extensive; every aspect of humanity has been violated by sin.\textsuperscript{35}

The understanding of Original Sin intertwines with the total depravity of the human race, as the “inherent corruption of man’s nature which was inherited from Adam.”\textsuperscript{36} Calvinist views today are opposed by the semi-Pelagian reaction of Arminian theology, which not only denies total depravity, the guilt of original sin, the loss of freedom of the will, and views Adam’s sin as a poor example rather that the source of mankind’s sinful nature.\textsuperscript{37}

**Modern Views**

**Substantive View**

The substantive view, according to Erickson, has been the most dominant view of the image of God in man throughout the history of Christian theology.\textsuperscript{38} Supported by such

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 214-217.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Erickson. 520.
theological giants as St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, the substantive view reveals the locus of the image of God in man as the human soul. The focal point of the substantive view is the capacity for mankind to have a relationship with God; incorporating other capacities that contribute to the image of God (emotion, will, reason and conscience). It is the ability to reason that underpins much of the substantive view; as Erickson remarks that human beings are known as “homo sapiens” or the “thinking being.”

Boyd reveals that along with the ability to reason as the “distinguishing mark of the human soul”, others argue that man’s communicative abilities, love, sense of God, and the ability to make moral judgments are other manifestations of the image. The biblical argument for the substantive view gives great support to this ideology. Initially, the contrast of humanity to all other creatures is evidenced through the possession of a soul (Matt. 22:37; 1 Thess. 5:23). This underscores the truth that mankind was created to live forever, and like God, will exist forever spiritually. Because humans possess a soul, the capacity to reason exists; a possession of the desire to pursue knowledge and truth and to think rationally. This truth is supported scripturally in Isaiah 1:18; 2 Peter 3:15; Deut. 30:19; and Joshua 24:15.

Boyd continues his systematic framework of the substantive view with the idea that because humans possess a soul, the capacity exists for moral goodness. This is in stark contrast to animals that live and act instinctively, God has called mankind to pursue holiness, hate evil and to choose to do good (2 Chron. 7:14; 2 Tim. 2:19-22). The possession of a “sense of the

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41 Erickson, 521.
42 Boyd and Eddy, 76.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 77.
45 Ibid.
“divine” (Ps. 19:1-4; Rom. 1:19-20) and the capacity to love (Lev. 19:18; Deut. 6:5; Matt. 22:36-40) are other attributes of the human soul.⁴⁶

According to Hammett, the human spirit is the locus of this relational capacity; divinely established by the means of God’s Spirit relating to the human spirit. It is under this aegis that the view of the image as “marred, but not destroyed” exists; recognizing the spiritual death referred to in Genesis 2:17.⁴⁷ Hammett also believes that the “image of God remains after the fall but as a latent capacity, requiring activation by the Spirit.”⁴⁸

**Relational View**

The relational view of the image of God in man reject the idea that the image is something that actually resides within man; rather it refers to the “image when standing in particular relationship, which indeed is the image.”⁴⁹ Brunner believed that man only existed in the image of God when in proper relationship with Jesus Christ; a state which allowed true understanding of the human nature.⁵⁰ Brunner delineated the image into two senses, the formal and the material. The formal is what makes an individual human, the attributes that separate man from animal (including rationality, responsibility and freedom).⁵¹ Sinful individuals have not lost this aspect of the image; in fact, Brunner believes that the freedom to sin presupposes it.⁵²

Erickson reveals Brunner’s beliefs that the human act of response to God constitutes the material aspect of the image of God in man; the establishment of a relationship with God. The material view can be illustrated by the reflection of a mirror; a temporary image not permanently

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⁴⁶ Ibid.
⁴⁷ Hammett, 387.
⁴⁸ Ibid.
⁴⁹ Erickson, 524.
⁵¹ Erickson, 524.
⁵² Ibid.
imprinted like a photograph. Basically, when mankind is turned towards God, the reflection of God’s image is seen in man.53

Barth also held to a relational view, initially referring to the relationship as that of a mother and a fetus; however, this view experienced several changes as Barth’s personal theology evolved. In the final analysis, Barth’s view held to the belief that while the image of God was still present within a human being, he saw the image as consisting of not only the vertical aspect of man to God, but also in the horizontal aspect of human to human relationship.54

A major stumbling block attached to the relational view is the insistence and reliance upon the philosophy of existentialism.55 The underlying view of Brunner and Barth’s existentialism is consistent with their belief that the “Bible is not inherently the Word of God, but becomes the Word of God when God meet a human person through it or in it.”56

**Functional View**

While the relational view draws upon the philosophy of existentialism, the functional view derives its conclusions from philosophical functionalism or pragmatism; a belief that the image is not something possessed by the human, or acquired through relationship with God, but rather something that someone does.57 This view seeks to find not only how mankind is different from the animals and the rest of creation, but how mankind is like God.58 The exercise of dominion and rule over creation, as decreed in Genesis 1:27-28 illustrates the functional view of mankind in the image of God. Just as God is the Lord of all creation, mankind reflects the image of God by exercising rule over the remainder of creation.59

53 Ibid.
55 Erickson, 527.
56 Ibid.
57 Erickson, 527.
58 Boyd and Eddy, 79.
59 Erickson, 527.
Psalm 8:5-6 is another Scriptural passage utilized by the functional view. The dominion and rule over the “beasts of the fields, birds of the air and fish of the sea” in Ps. 8:5 is likened to Genesis 1 and the mandate that mankind was made in the image of God.\textsuperscript{60} Erickson aptly reveals difficulties within this ideology; while there is a parallel between Genesis 1 and Psalm 8, the words “image” and “likeness” do not appear in the latter text, as well as the fact that Genesis 1 has no clear equation of the exercise of dominion with the image of God.\textsuperscript{61}

In modern society, this view has been extolled as a theological foundation for ecological concerns. Part of the biblical mandate for humans is to have dominion over the earth, and the essence therefore is to be good stewards of nature, including fighting the abuse of creation and the unjust treatment of animals.\textsuperscript{62}

\textbf{“Extreme Calvinism”}

Norm Geisler delineates what he coins “extreme Calvinists” from what has traditionally been called “hyper-Calvinists,” since hyper-Calvinists generally adhere to supralapsarianism; a radical view that “entails double-predestination…denies human responsibility…[and] nullifies concern for missions or evangelism.”\textsuperscript{63} With this in mind, “extreme Calvinists” can be described as being “…distinguished by a particular understanding of the Five Points, which more or less stand or fall together…they are an interdependent unity: If one point is accepted, then logically all should be embraced…if one is rejected, then logically all should be.”\textsuperscript{64} Geisler outlines the extreme view of Total Depravity, and underscores the fact that this ideology believes that the image of God in mankind has been destroyed, not distorted.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{60}Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{61}Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{62}Boyd and Eddy, 82.
  \item \textsuperscript{63}Geisler, 32.
  \item \textsuperscript{64}Ibid., 52.
\end{itemize}
By countering what he considers to be “moderate” Calvinism’s view of the corruption of the image of God in man, he reveals the extreme view as supporting the total destruction of good in man. In this state, man is not only spiritually dead, but has suffered not just the separation from God, but the eradication of the ability to respond to God. The effects of sin are intensive, destroying man’s ability to do good, including receiving salvation.

Geisler has broken down the differences between “moderate” Calvinists and “extreme” Calvinist and presented them within this illustration:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moderate Calvinist View</th>
<th>Extreme Calvinist View</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corruption of Good</td>
<td>Destruction of Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effects of Sin are Extensive</td>
<td>Effects of Sin are Intensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born With Propensity to Sin</td>
<td>Born with Necessity to Sin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Will is Diminished</td>
<td>Human Will is Destroyed</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Clearly, those in the “extreme” see the image of God in man as completely destroyed, along with the human will. While “extreme” Calvinists believe that mankind still has the capacity to think and make choices, the inclination or desire to be obedient to God; and while they possess biological life, they are totally spiritually dead and sin is compulsory.

**Christological and Eschatological Interpretations**

In several instances through the Scriptures, the Apostle Paul, although not specifically referencing the image of God in man, does allude to the Genesis account in such a way that he

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65 Ibid., 53.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
reveals the mission of the Messiah; to restore original righteousness and holiness to mankind.\textsuperscript{69} Jesus Christ is the true image of God (\textit{eikon tou theou}, 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), not in a derived sense but the “very image of his substance (Heb. 1:3); demonstrating for mankind what God’s holy character is like. Culver believes that “in His last redemptive work...He made it possible for human beings to recover the lost moral likeness which was possessed by the man of paradise but lost wholly in the fall.”\textsuperscript{70}

This modern Christological and eschatological interpretation of restoration of the image of God in mankind, as the promises of Christ include redeemed man’s conformity to the image of the Son.\textsuperscript{71} Erickson’s research reveals that Karl Barth believed that only through the study of Christ can humans truly understand humanity; for true, uncorrupted human nature can only be found in Jesus, the fullest illustration of God’s revelation to man.\textsuperscript{72}

Torrance’s theological anthropology understood the \textit{Imageo Dei} to be “…a dynamic and relational reality that not only is given in the interpersonal structure of humanity but is reflected in humanity’s response to and activity with God and other persons in the context of the created world.\textsuperscript{73} Two matrixes outline Torrance’s understandings; first, the image of God in mankind is both perverse and distorted, and secondly, that since Christ alone is described as the image and reality of God, “the image of God is a Christologically determined reality.”\textsuperscript{74}

\textbf{Conclusion}

Alienation from God has left mankind in a helpless position; however the image of God in mankind, although damaged and distorted, remains. Among the evidences for this proposal are

\textsuperscript{69} Culver, 255.  
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{72} Erickson, 525-526.  
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 174.
several areas of the human condition that remain; including intellect, emotion, will and conscience, as well as several biblical references that apply to this theological understanding.

Following the flood, God commissions Noah to establish a death penalty for anyone who murders a human being, “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in His own image” (Gen. 9:6). Even though men are sinful, there remains enough of the image of God in them to facilitate retribution on anyone who attacks or kills the part of creation that most resembles God. In the New Testament, God tells mankind that all of mankind is “made in the likeness of God” (James 3:9); a statement that is not reserved only for believers.

Grudem believes that while mankind is made in God’s image, sin has affected all aspects of humanity. He says:

His moral purity has been lost, and his sinful character certainly does not reflect God’s holiness. His intellect is corrupted by falsehood and misunderstanding; his speech no longer continually glorifies God; his relationships are often governed by selfishness rather than love, and so forth. Though man is still in the image of god, in every aspect of life some parts of the image have been distorted or lost.

The remnant of the image of God in mankind is a doctrine that Jesus taught. In Mark 12:13-17, when Jesus is asked if taxes should be paid to Caesar. Jesus asked for a coin, and proceeded to inquire whose “image” was on the coin. Obviously, it was the image of Caesar, to which Jesus replied, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and render to God the things that are God’s.” In this exchange, the Savior is clearly reminding his hearers that mankind is made in God’s image, despite the consequences of the fall. Christ’s affirmation of this truth reinforces the biblical concept of redemption; although corrupted and distorted, God can redeem and restore humanity through the blood of Christ.

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75 Grudem, 444.
76 Ibid.
Bibliography


