

The Image of God and the Responsibility of Man

Samuel Watterson

Introduction

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* begins by asking, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer highlights God’s purpose with the creation of man: man should “glorify God” and “enjoy him forever.” When Satan tempted Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, it was this purpose of God which he intended to thwart. The catechism bases this conclusion on the fact that we have the *responsibility* to do all things to God’s glory (I Cor. 10:31) and that *all* things are for His glory (Rom. 11:36).

The clause “enjoy him for ever” makes it evident that the *Catechism* has in mind especially how the redeemed glorify God in new obedience (or how Adam glorified God before the Fall). God’s purposes are never thwarted and yet the reprobate wicked will not enjoy God. He has a different purpose with them, such as to display His power and just judgment (Rom. 9:22). This was God’s stated purpose with Pharaoh (Rom. 9:17). Nevertheless, as the *Catechism* emphasizes, God’s purpose with the elect is man’s *chief* end and, therefore, His purpose with the reprobate must serve that *chief* end. Isaiah presents God’s purpose with the elect as being especially created (or re-created in regeneration) for His glory: “Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him” (Isa. 43:7).

The elect glorify God in a more direct and higher sense—in the sense for which man was ultimately and originally created. Other men will be *given* to serve this glorification of God by the elect: “Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life” (Isa. 43:4).

But, in contrast to the simple approach of the *Catechism*, when Scripture first presents man’s creation, we are shown more particularly *how* man was created to glorify God:

And 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 fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them (Gen. 1:26-27).

God's purpose in man's original creation here is presented as man being made after the *image* or *likeness* of God. God's purposes do not change and, therefore, we may conclude that it is still God's purpose that man should glorify Him by being in His image. If we recognize that the *Catechism* is implying, in light of God's purpose, that all men have the *responsibility* "to glorify God, and enjoy him for ever," then, in light of His stated purpose at creation, we must likewise recognize the weighty responsibility of all men to bear the image of God. In this article, we will examine various parts of Scripture, often misunderstood and misapplied, which deal exactly with this responsibility.

Cursing and Lying

There are especially two passages in the New Testament which unequivocally refer to the Christian's responsibility with respect to the image of God in the regenerate. These are the verses that the Reformed confessions especially point to when referring to the image of God:

But now ye also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds; And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him (Col. 3:8-10).

That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man

truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another (Eph. 4:22-25).

Much more could be quoted from these passages, for they teach us more about how we must walk according to the new man. But notice, first of all, that these implications for Christian living are derived especially from the consideration of how the new man is *after* God or *after* the image of Him. Second, notice that both passages refer to the creation of the new man. This is not referring to God's work of creation in Genesis 1 but to His work of re-creation, which we call regeneration (Eze. 36:25-27; II Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:10). These two distinct works are similar in the sense that both involve creation in God's image. If regeneration in this image carries these responsibilities, man's original creation in God's image also carries these responsibilities.

Likewise, if the image of God in the new man consists in righteousness, true holiness and knowledge of God, so was this image in the original man. This is how the *Heidelberg Catechism* presents man's original creation after beginning to discuss the misery of fallen man:

Q. 6. Did God then create man so wicked and perverse?

A. By no means; but God created man good, and after His own image, in true righteousness and holiness, that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal happiness to glorify and praise Him.

Especially the second half of this answer is basically identical to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*'s answer as to what man's chief end is. But here the *Heidelberg Catechism* connects God's purpose to man's original creation in God's image, referring to Genesis 1:26-27, Colossians 3:10 and Ephesians 4:24. This is instructive, since the *Heidelberg Catechism*, after speaking of the Fall, goes on to consider man's *responsibility* after the Fall.

Q. 9. Doth not God then do injustice to man, by requiring from him in His law that which he cannot perform?

A. Not at all; for God made man capable of performing it; but man, by the instigation of the devil, and his own wilful disobedience, deprived himself and all his posterity of those divine gifts.

It is not the purpose of this article to demonstrate that the divine gifts to which the *Heidelberg Catechism* refers include the image of God spoken of in Q. & A. 6 or that those in the Reformed tradition who have spoken of man retaining certain remnants of God's image after the Fall are mistaken. For now, let us consider the principle that, though man was deprived of the gifts which he was given in his original creation, his responsibility has not been diminished. This anticipates the objection to the doctrine that fallen man no longer bears the image of God, that he, therefore, no longer has the attached responsibilities. But, in fact, as our *Catechism* explains, man's wilful disobedience in depriving himself of the capability to perform the required obedience does not remove his responsibility.

The reason that the epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians mention the image of God or *imago dei* in connection with these responsibilities is not, therefore, that fallen man does not also have the responsibility not to lie, etc., but that the Christian has this capability restored to him (along with the actual doing of these works, although not yet perfectly). Having this real capability gives us encouragement to perform our duties (Eph. 2:10; Phil. 2:13). We also have even greater responsibility than man in his original creation, since we have also been re-created by receiving this gracious wonder of regeneration. Our higher responsibility, however, does not remove fallen man's responsibility also to bear God's image.

There are many sins mentioned in contrast to the image of God in these verses but perhaps most emphasized are those sins related to the abuse of the tongue. Bearing God's image requires putting away these sins of the tongue: filthy or corrupt communication, lying and blasphemy. Instead of these, edifying words should proceed from our mouths: we must speak the truth, and we must give thanks and praise to God, teaching and admonishing one another with the Psalms of the Spirit (Eph. 5:19-20).

Ephesians 5:1 summarizes this: "Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children." We must speak the truth because "He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he" (Deut. 32:4). As God cannot lie (Titus 1:2), so His children, who bear His image, must not lie. Likewise, as God glorifies His holy name (John 12:28), so those who bear His image must sanctify and praise His name. Since God's words are pure (Ps. 12:6), our communication must also be pure.

So far, we have looked at our responsibility from the viewpoint of how we ought to bear God's image according to our original creation and our regeneration, but that others are also in God's image also has implications for our responsibility. Regarding the use of the tongue, and specifically this sin of blaspheming mentioned above, James 3:9 is very closely related. Blasphemy is especially to curse or speak evil of God Himself (Lev. 24:11-16). James 3:9-10 highlights an absurdity of some who are careful not to blaspheme: "Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be."

We, James observes, do not blaspheme God with our tongues, we bless Him, even praising Him with Psalms (James 5:13). Yet how do we speak of others who bear His image? With the same tongue, we speak evil of them and curse them. This verse has commonly been understood as implying that all men are in God's image, even unregenerate men after the Fall. But, simply from the grammar, this is not necessarily the case. The clause "which are made after the similitude of God" can either identify particular men to which James is referring or else it merely describes all men.

Besides the many arguments that could be brought to argue that the unregenerate are not in God's image, there is one compelling reason which proves that this cannot refer to all men: there are many examples in Scripture of righteous men of God rightly pronouncing curses upon God's enemies. For example, recall those who stood upon mount Ebal to curse according to God's instruction, to which cursing all the people answered "Amen" (Deut. 27:13-26; Josh. 8:33-34). Or consider the inspired song of Deborah and Barak, in which the angel of the Lord calls the people to curse those who did not come to help (Judg. 5:23). Noah also prophesied by cursing Canaan (Gen. 9:25). In case any with Marcionist tendencies think that God's moral law has changed in the light of the New Testament, Paul pronounces *anathema* (i.e., calls down a curse) upon those who love not the Lord (I Cor. 16:22) or who preach any other gospel (Gal. 1:8-9). James is not condemning these curses but the curses against those who are in God's image. They cannot be, and may not be, cursed.

Balak and Balaam discovered this when they attempted to curse God's people (Num. 24:10). Again, because we bear God's image, we ought not

curse those whom God has blessed. But now we see from this verse that God's image in others (the regenerate) also has implications for our responsibility. We may not curse, for example, our Christian brethren who disagree with us on important doctrines, since they are nevertheless in God's image. Even if their teachings or practices might grievously offend or scandalize us or might compromise other more fundamental doctrines (if carried to their logical implications or held more consistently), if correction or doctrinal polemics is necessary, this does not provide any excuse for cursing our believing (though erring) brothers and sisters in Christ who bear God's image with us (Rom. 14:4, 10; Gal. 2:11-14). The warning for us is that cursing will come to those who take pleasure in cursing (Ps. 109:17). Erring brethren are not what Paul calls "enemies of the cross of Christ" or what John calls "antichrists" (Phil. 3:18; I John 2:18, 22). Other passages also deal directly with our responsibility in relation to God's image. It is commonly supposed that Genesis 9:6 is one of these passages, so we will now consider how God's image relates to our responsibility not to murder.

Hating and Murdering

Before we examine Genesis 9:6, we should first consider the passage in the New Testament which discusses murder in the most detail: I John 3:1-19. John identifies hatred as the essence and source of murder, such that the one who hates his brother is actually a murderer (v. 15). In this, John is simply following the explanation given by Christ with regard to the sixth commandment (Matt. 5:21-22). John draws our attention in particular to the example of Cain and Abel. As evidence that Cain was "of that wicked one," he "slew his brother" (I John 3:12). This hatred in contrast to love is ultimately, says John, how the difference between the children of the devil and the children of God is manifest (v. 10). This love is so fundamental to being a child of God, that John presents it to us as a comforting proof that we are no longer dead in sin but alive to God (v. 14). By this love, we ought to know and even assure ourselves that we are "of the truth" (vv. 18-19).

This entire passage is intimately connected to the image or likeness of God. Cain was "of that wicked one" and "not of God" (vv. 10, 12), because he was like the devil and did the works of the devil (cf. John 8:44). The whole idea

of the children of God versus the children of the devil is predicated upon the similarity or likeness of the children to their father. The child bears the image of the father (Gen. 5:3; John 8:39-47). Bearing the image of God, therefore, in the context of I John 3, is especially to be like God by a self-sacrificial love for the brethren (v. 16)—the very opposite of Cain’s murderous hatred. In this context, the love of God dwelling in us is our bearing the image of God (v. 17). Conversely, how is the image of God in those in whom the love of God does not dwell?

Murder, in this passage, is such a monstrous and devilish evil because it is hatred, which is exactly contrary to, and incompatible with, love. Cain, as a descendent of Adam who was originally created in God’s image, had this responsibility to love his brother and thereby show himself to be “of God,” but instead he demonstrated that he was a murderous child of the devil. He behaved contrary to God’s purpose with the creation of man, showing that the love of God did not dwell in him and that he bore Satan’s image rather than God’s.

Cain also hated his brother because Abel’s works were righteous (v. 12). In other words, Cain hated the image of God in Abel, whose righteous works showed that he was like the righteous God for he was born of God (v. 7). John’s application to us is that the world will hate all of us, the sons of God who bear His image, just as Cain hated Abel (vv. 12-13). Notice that it is not particularly Abel’s innocence which makes the crime so wicked (after all, Abel was not sinlessly perfect either)—but chiefly Cain’s hatred.

This lengthy passage may be rightly considered as an apostolic interpretation of the rather brief and less clear treatment of murder in Genesis 9:6. This verse has often been used to attempt to prove that even unregenerate man is still in God’s image. This is done by making two assumptions. First, that the clause “for in the image of God made he man” chiefly refers to the victim of the crime and, second, that the clause actually means that all men are *still* in the image of God. The second point merely begs the question. Grammatically, the verse only says, *in the past tense*, that man was made in God’s image. But we will focus on the first often unspoken assumption.

We have already seen that man’s responsibility with regard to the image of God can relate to the responsibility to bear that image on account of God’s

purpose in man's original creation or to walk according to that image on account of our regeneration or even to consider that image of God in others. There are logically three parties, then, to which the final clause in this verse could refer: the murderer, the victim or the executioner (leaving aside for the moment the questionable interpretation of some that this is not a command but merely a statement of God's intent to use a human instrument to bring judgment on the murderer). Clearly, we know from other passages in Scripture and a general understanding of the image of God that it could reasonably refer to all three in different senses but, rather than assume, we would like to consider which of these may be intended *primarily*.

First, the executioner has a responsibility to bear God's image in justly executing justice by punishing the murderer with death. In this too, man must bear God's image, for man was given dominion over the creation (Gen. 1:26-27) and must execute his office justly as God is just. As a judge and as "children of the most High," man must be like God in righteous judgment (Ps. 82). Neglect of this duty is especially grievous in those who are office-bearers in the church. However, all other crimes besides murder also require proper justice to be executed. This would then only be a more general exhortation to judges rather than a particular reason for murderers to be executed, which does not really fit the context which is emphasizing the crime of murder.

Second, if the victim is in God's image, this crime is especially wicked. To attack and kill God's children is to touch the apple of His eye (Ps. 105:15; Zech. 2:8). To hate one who is in God's image is an expression of hatred against God. We saw that Cain hated his brother because Abel's works were righteous. Undoubtedly, this makes the crime more detestable in God's sight, as a murderous hatred against His own image and His children whom He loves. Nevertheless, if the intention is to establish the need to punish murder, it cannot be with a reason that depends on the victim.

Murder is a very serious crime, worthy of execution, irrespective of how vile or innocent the victim is. Killing a helpless baby in the womb is certainly more despicable than the murder of an adult mass-murderer or a paedophile. Yet all murder must be condemned. If this verse is meant to establish that all murderers must be executed, it makes no sense to relate this to the quality of the victim. Even those who claim that fallen man still retains some remnants

of God's image would have to admit that the Christian, according to their view, bears God's image to a greater extent. This verse cannot be speaking primarily about the victim, therefore.

Third, as we have considered from I John 3, murder is a crime that is especially contrary to God's image. It is a manifestation of hatred towards a brother according to the flesh, since we are all of one blood (Acts 17:26), whereas God is love (I John 4:7-8). As a violation of God's image and as the work of the devil, it is to be punished by execution. The first and greatest commandment is that we should love God and the second is that we should love our neighbour. Such a gross violation of this commandment and such a defiling of the image of God which man was created to bear, is to be punished with death at the hand of a human executioner. There are other considerations as to why murderers must be executed but the emphasis of this text is based upon the murderer's responsibility to bear God's image.

In the context, it is one thing for a beast to kill a man, considering that man was originally created in the image of God in the beginning. In this case, the beast must be put to death (Gen. 9:5). But then the awful crime is intensified when considering the case of a man wilfully murdering another man—a notoriously common crime prior to the Flood, for which men were previously banished rather than executed and as a result of which the earth became full of violence (Gen. 4:8-15, 23-24; 6:11-13). As part of God's covenant promise not to send another such flood, He gives provision for preventing the earth becoming filled with violence again in a way that would require such a flood (Gen. 9:9-15). If the life of a mere beast must be required for such an atrocity, how much more a rational, wilful man, who unlike the ignorant beast ought to display the image of God in holiness, righteousness and knowledge of God? Finally, in the extreme case, a man murders his own brother. In response to this, the seriousness of the command reaches its pinnacle and is repeated in the form of poetic justice and firmly established with reference to man's responsibility to bear God's image.

Various Implications

Once we begin to recognize that the image of God is implied by language such as “of God” or “after God” or “like God” or “as God” or “children of

God,” we can begin to see very many places in Scripture which speak of our responsibility in those terms. Many examples could be given. “But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy” (I Pet. 1:15-16). Here we are called to be holy because we ought to be like God, bearing His holy image. True peacemakers also bear God’s image because He is “the God of peace” (Phil. 4:9): “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God” (Matt. 5:9). The children of God must bear His image by loving and doing good to the unthankful, unjust and evil, since while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5:6-10):

That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect (Matt. 5:45-48).

Because He is “the only wise God” (I Tim. 1:17) understanding His own will (I Cor. 2:9-16), we must bear His image in being wise:

See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is (Eph. 5:15-17).

The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children (Matt. 11:19).

To be the children of light, bearing the image of the One who is light and in whom is no darkness at all (I John 1:5), we must believe in the light and walk as children of light:

While ye have light, believe in the light, that ye may be the children of light (John 12:36).

For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light (Eph. 5:8).

Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness (I Thess. 5:5).

Examples could be multiplied and far more could be written on this subject. Indeed, all our responsibilities according to God's law could be related to our responsibility to bear God's image according to His purpose with our creation.

Finally, after saying this much about man and his creation, let us consider how the rest of creation relates to man as he is called to bear God's image:

For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom. 8:19-21).

All of creation awaits the day when man will once again bear the image of God in perfection, when the children of the devil who bear his image are cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15). All of creation has been groaning for the children of God to be revealed bearing His glorious image ever since that image was lost at the Fall.

The loss of that image is the source of the creation's pain and frustration, because all creation was placed under the dominion of man. It was good for the creation when man bore the divine image but the creation was subjected to vanity when man cast aside that image for the devil's. This too was God's purpose even in the beginning. Because God made man to bear His image, there was and is nothing that the devil could do to prevent that image being restored to man, through our Lord Jesus Christ who is the image of the invisible God (II Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3).