

Renewal in Love:

Living Holy Lives in God's Good Creation

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I intend to explore with you the biblical and Christian teaching that human beings are created in the image of God. This can only be undertaken in the light of the New Testament proclamation that Jesus Christ is the image of God, and that through Jesus Christ fallen human beings can be renewed in the divine image.

Each of these convictions – that humans are created in God's image, that Jesus Christ is God's very image, and that through Christ human beings may be renewed in God's image – is crucial to a Christian theologian anthropology. But what is entailed in these ideas? For example, what does the phrase “image of God” actually mean, or even imply? What does it suggest about our relationship to God on the one hand, and to the rest of God's vast creation on the other? Why is Jesus necessary to the renewal of human beings? What exactly is being renewed, and why? How does this renewal or restoration occur? Further, how ought our answers to such questions shape our everyday behaviors in this world – a world that we affirm to be God's own good creation? These are critical questions.

The proposition that we are created in the image of God is a universally affirmed teaching in both Judaism and Christianity. It is, after all, clearly stated in the opening chapter of Genesis (1:26-27). But what it actually means for us to be created in God's image is far less clear. The list of possible interpretations is considerably long. There may be considerable wisdom in many of those interpretations. However, I have become convinced by contemporary biblical scholarship that the essence of this idea that we are created in God's image, or that we are created to ‘image’ God, is a function, or vocation, to which we are called. That function is the human role and responsibility to protect and to nurture the world's well-being, fruitfulness and beauty, in the great hope that God's good creation may enjoy a viable, even rich, future. This idea lies at the very heart of my reflections today.

There is a deep problem facing us, however. While Christian tradition as a whole has affirmed the idea that human beings are created in God's image, it is also generally believed (and widely acknowledged) that we human beings have distorted, marred, or perhaps even entirely effaced this image through our resistance against our Maker. This, of course, is the problem of sin. Differing streams within the Christian faith have disagreed regarding the extent to which sin has damaged human existence and thus compromised the human vocation to be the image of God.

Given this conference's explicit attention to John and Charles Wesley and, in their wake, the Wesleyan tradition, it should not be surprising that we will give primary attention to their wrestling with this deep problem of human sinfulness. Certainly the reality of sin challenges any premature celebrations of our having been created in the divine image! Nonetheless, I hope to demonstrate in what follows that the Wesley brothers placed a particularly strong emphasis upon this doctrine of the image of God in their understanding of salvation through Jesus Christ. In other words, the Wesleys maintained high hopes for what God's redeeming grace might accomplish for, in and through human lives; for them, accordingly, the power of sin can be overcome and human beings can indeed be restored to living in God's image. Of course they are not alone in this emphasis, by far – and yet it is arguable that under their leadership the Wesleyan tradition has developed an especially robust understanding of salvation as renewal in the image of God. Further, it is clear that Colossians 3:10 – which speaks of a “new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its Creator” – provided the Wesleys with the biblical warrant for their rhetoric of renewal.

The Wesley brothers' emphasis ought to help us to appreciate the idea that the doctrine of salvation is concerned not simply with “going to heaven when we die.” Rather, far more profoundly, salvation through Jesus Christ raises hopes about the kind of lives we can live here and now, in this world, through the renewing grace of God. Realizing that salvation is intended to make a profound difference in this life, in turn, helps to underscore the important biblical teaching about the goodness of this material creation, in which each of us is a participant, in the eyes of its Maker. Life in this world is not simply a place to wait for the next world – even if occasionally we hear sermons and hymns that suggest otherwise. The recurring Wesleyan theme of sanctification as renewal in the image of God underscores this important idea that Christian redemption does not involve escape from the world, but instead a deep and enduring participation in God's good creation.

Renewal in the Image of God

Let us, then, explore some examples of this emphasis on renewal in the image of God in the Wesley brothers' preaching. In Charles's 1736 sermon “The One Thing Needful,” he insisted that God's fundamental goal for humanity – that “one thing needful” – “is the renewal of our fallen nature. In the image of God man was made . . . but sin has now effaced the image of God.” Accordingly, this renewal in God's image is “the one end of our redemption as well as our creation” – meaning that God's purpose both in creating us and redeeming us is that we might truly reflect or ‘image’ our Creator within the realm of creation. In “Original Sin,” John Wesley proclaimed that “the great end [or purpose] of religion is to renew our hearts in the image of God.” In “The Means of Grace,” John insisted that God has given us practices such as prayer, corporate worship, reading the Scriptures and the sacraments so that we, by grace, might attain “a heart renewed after the image of God.”

For the Wesleys, then, salvation is not merely God's forgiveness of our sins, nor is its end simply our being rescued from hell and someday going to heaven. Even when preaching a passionate sermon on the final judgment – where perhaps it may have been easy simply to try to scare people into “getting their ticket to heaven punched” – Wesley still emphasized the idea that salvation is the Christian's journey “by faith to spotless love, to the full image of God renewed in the heart.” But what did that mean for the early Methodists? What was our original creaturely status to which human beings can be renewed?

Most fundamentally, we can answer such questions with one term: love. The Wesleys believed that the simple proclamation of 1 John, “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16), was the central and controlling truth regarding God's character; accordingly, they taught that the basic purpose of human life was to represent (re-present) and reflect God's love within the realm of creation. Consider for example John's rhetoric in his sermon “The Image of God,” where he wrote that, in the beginning,

man's affections were rational, even, and regular – if we may be allowed to [use the plural term] ‘affections’, for properly speaking he had only one [affection]: man was what God is, Love. Love filled the whole expansion of his soul; it possessed him without a rival. Every movement of his heart was love: it knew no other fervor.

It is not difficult to suspect this sermon of overstating the case for original human perfection, even if we are thinking not of absolute perfection but simply in terms of the perfection of love. There is really nothing in Genesis to encourage such strong, unqualified descriptions of humanity in the beginning – that from the very outset humanity was what God is: purely love. It would be better, I suggest, to interpret John Wesley's description of Adam and Eve in Eden as more the ideal to which humanity is called rather than as a perfection from which humanity has fallen. But even putting it that way is probably too strong. In traditional Christian teaching, the ideal for humanity is really never identified with Adam but with Jesus; in the words of Paul, Adam is but “a type of the one who was to come” (Rom. 5:14). In Jesus Christ we confess and believe that true human nature is unveiled; Jesus is the “last Adam,” the ultimate revelation of human existence as intended by God (cf. 1 Cor. 15:45-47). We are led to confess that “God is love” not by the life of Adam in Genesis, but by the self-giving life of Jesus who “laid down his life for us” (1 Jn 3:16). There is precious little in Genesis that would even begin to suggest such love in the lives of our earliest parents.

Nonetheless, we acknowledge that the Wesleys tended to describe humanity in grandiose imagery:

Love was [the human's] vital heat; it was the genial warmth that animated his whole frame. And the flame of [love] was continually streaming forth, directly to him from whom it came [i.e., God], and by reflection [from the human] to all sensitive natures,

inasmuch as they too were [God's] offspring, but especially to those superior beings who bore not only the superscription, but likewise the image of their Creator.

Even if we do in fact question such exuberant speculations about the perfections of Adam – and again, I believe we should – we can still appreciate that in this description we uncover a fundamental point in a Wesleyan theological anthropology. God is love, and human beings are created by God to be creatures from whom “the flame of [divine love] was continually streaming forth” – streaming back to God, its Source, and thus also inevitably streaming forth also to all that God has created, including and especially all of our fellow human beings who bear “the image of their Creator.” But note that John assumes that this divine love is intended by its Source to “stream forth . . . by reflection” from human beings “to all sensitive natures” – by which he clearly means all animals who experience any measure of pleasure or pain – “inasmuch as they too were [God's] offspring.” It is worth noting that Wesley here described non-human creatures as the “offspring” of God! That is intriguing language, but the main point for now is that the Wesleys offer us a remarkable description of God's intention for human beings: we are created to reflect or ‘image’ God's love back to God, to all fellow human beings, and even beyond humans to “all sensitive natures.” This, for the Wesleys, is what it means to be truly and faithfully human.

It comes as no surprise, then, that in his very early sermon “The Circumcision of the Heart” (1733) John Wesley preached to his Oxford listeners that holiness is “being so ‘renewed in the image of our mind’ as to be ‘perfect, as our Father in heaven is perfect’.” It may be instructive to note the immediate context of these words of Jesus directed to his disciples, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). Jesus has just observed that whereas human beings tend to love those who love them back, God loves all – the good and the evil, the just and the unjust. Jesus appeals to the evidence of nature to substantiate his message that God loves all people unconditionally: the blessings of sunshine and rain flow indiscriminately to everyone. Likewise, Jesus's disciples are called to love not only their neighbors but also their enemies – and this is precisely the substance of what it means to “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” It is the perfection of divine love.

There is one other important consideration that will help to round out our discussion of the Wesleys' understanding of humanity created in God's image. In his sermon “The New Birth” (1760) John Wesley, under the influence of ideas derived from the famous hymnist Isaac Watts, suggested that the concept of the image of God could be analyzed under three different aspects or expressions: the natural, the political, and the moral. Under the category of the natural image, we find Wesley describing humanity as “a picture of [God's] own immortality, a spiritual being endowed with understanding, freedom of will, and various affections.” The natural image, then, refers to the capacities that we identify as more or less unique to human creatures, which tend to distinguish us from the other species. John further identifies these capacities as abstract and comparative thought; the power of willing, i.e., of being aware of the desires and drives that move us; and liberty, or the capacity for responsible choice when presented with meaningful

options, particularly between good and evil. It is noteworthy that, as he grew older, he became less willing to draw a bold line between humans and other animals of higher intelligence in regards to such capacities as these. Even so, for Wesley the “natural image” generally meant those relatively unique capacities which tend to distinguish us humans from the rest of our fellow living creatures.

It may be mildly surprising that by the political image John Wesley did not mean that humans are political animals in the way we often use that phrase. Rather, it has to do with the human calling and function to exercise godly rule among all of the rest of God’s creatures. The political image refers to the human as created and called by God to be “the governor of this lower world,” reflecting most particularly the language of Genesis 1:26 (“have dominion”) and Psalm 8:6 (“all things under humanity’s feet”). In his classic sermon “The General Deliverance,” Wesley wrote that the human is created to be God’s “representative upon earth, the prince and governor of this lower world.” Thus, it is specifically as the political image that we humans are called to be, in Wesley’s words, “the channel of conveyance” between the Creator and all other creatures so that “all the blessings of God” should “flow through [us]” to the other creatures. “Thus,” writes contemporary Methodist theologian Theodore Runyon, “humanity is the image of God insofar as the benevolence of God is reflected in human actions toward the rest of creation. This role as steward and caretaker of creation presupposes a continuing faithfulness to the order of the Creator.”

Both of these aspects of the image of God – the natural and the political – bear important implications for my present argument. Thus far, admittedly, we have concerned ourselves primarily with the moral image: humanity’s God-given and God-graced potential for godliness, or godlikeness, as revealed in Jesus Christ. This should not be surprising, though, since for the Wesleys the most important dimension of the image of God that is restored through Christ is the moral. “God is love”; . . . In this image of God was man made,” Wesley preached. Presumably, however, these three aspects of the image of God are not airtight; surely we may anticipate, for example, that a restoration of the human being toward wholehearted love for God and neighbor (the “moral”) will have immediate ramifications for how such a restored person lives in relation to the more-than-human world of material creation (the “political”). In other words, if the moral image is essentially divine love, and if human beings can be restored or renewed in that love through Jesus Christ, then such a life of love must necessarily find expression in actual, practical, everyday relationships with all other creatures. Put even more simply, the life of holiness must include careful reflection (a capacity associated with the “natural”) upon questions of how we may most effectively reflect the love of God to all of creation – and to every one of God’s creatures.

The Image of God in Genesis 1

But why “every one of God’s creatures”? Is there scriptural warrant for this claim? My argument is that in fact the claim is rooted precisely in Genesis 1, and so within the context of our considerations of what it means to be made in the image of God. In other words, the Wesley brothers do provide us the beginnings of an ecological theology. Indeed, my project is simply to root their reading of humanity in the image of God more deeply in the earthiness of Genesis 1. One of the immediate benefits of this strategy is that it should help to keep our ideas about humanity as God’s image enmeshed with the reality that is described in the opening of our Bible: this world in which we live. As we have already noted, too often the common assumption regarding Christianity is that it is not about this earth upon which we live and upon which we depend, nor about the atmosphere above us from which we receive our breath and our warmth. And yet, of course, that is precisely what “the heavens and the earth” of Genesis 1:1 are. Our Scriptures – thanks to the Jewish tradition’s ancient, divinely-guided wisdom – begin not in some other world, some far-off spiritual realm of angels and demons, but with the creation of this material world of trees and seas, of light and night, moon and monsoon, fish and fowl, whales and quails. Further, the Creator repeatedly offers a highly positive evaluation of what is coming into being: “God saw that it was good.” Indeed, that little stanza is announced six times before human beings have even made their first appearance in the story. God sees that creation is good prior to – and thus quite apart from – the creation of adam, humankind.

It is also critical to note that in Genesis 1, God speaks to nonhuman creatures before there are any human beings at all. “God blessed [the creatures of sky and sea, including the sea monsters], saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth’” (v. 22). All of God’s creatures are blessed by their Creator to thrive, to produce generations of offspring far beyond themselves. We should recall, too, that the creation of adam is on the sixth day – along with the other land animals. We do not even have a day for ourselves! We are *adam* from the *adamah* – earthlings, we might say, from the earth. We are creatures of the land, finite and frail.

Nonetheless, in the creation of humanity we do encounter a new style of divine discourse. It is no longer “Let there be” or even “Let the earth bring forth.” It is, instead, “Let us make humankind [*adam*] in our image, according to our likeness” (1:26). We encounter perhaps a more careful, a more self-reflective act on God’s part. Further, we encounter the somewhat baffling plural pronouns in God’s self-reflective activity. What do we make of the “Let us”?

It is true that the Hebrew term *elohim* translated as “God” is plural in form, such that it can, in literal terms, be translated “gods.” (Indeed, it often is so translated at times in the Old Testament, including, perhaps most significantly, in Psalm 8:5.) But the verbs are all singular, as are most of the other divine pronouns throughout the chapter. Further, Israel’s confession that God is One is a treasured inheritance of the Church (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:32). It seems, however, of potential significance that it is precisely here in the creation narrative, when its subject is the

creation of *adam* as male and female in the image of God, that we encounter “Let us” and “in our image.”

While it would be hasty and unwise to assume a full-blown Trinitarian teaching in these verses, we might nonetheless venture in that direction. We could at least say that the text seems to gesture toward some kind of sociality in God’s being, vague and unformed as that gesture might be. God is One, and yet God may also speak forth in a “plural” voice. Again, given that God creates the adam as a singular reality (“human”) and yet also a plural reality (“male and female”), we find the tantalizing possibility that it is somehow in our human plurality and diversity that we are created and called upon to “image” or reflect God. Human community is, in some way and to some extent, intended by God to represent (or “re-present”) God within the creaturely realm.

We can assume with great confidence that the prologue to the gospel of John (1:1-18) overtly offers a reading of Genesis 1 that contributes to this discussion. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” – or, more precisely, “and what God was, the Word was.” God is the Creator, to be sure, but “all things came into being through [the Word], and without [the Word] not one thing came into being” (Jn. 1:3). This Word is not a human being until the point in history of the incarnation: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (1:14). When much later in this same gospel the Word that become flesh prays, “Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed” (17:5), it becomes obvious that John’s gospel directs its readers to read the language of Genesis 1:26, “Let us make adam in our image, according to our likeness,” as a kind of ‘conversation’ between God and the Word.

For us who confess and believe that the Word became flesh and lived among us in the historical person of Jesus, then, the life and mission of Jesus become of critical importance for how we interpret Genesis 1. If the speech God employed in the labor of creation has become a human being in the miracle of incarnation, then that divine speech, as well as its creative intention, must be heard through the gospel of Jesus Christ. This intimate, loving and revealing relationship between God and the Word, or between the Father and the Son, is proclaimed in John’s gospel to be the basis and ground for restored human community. This in turn reinforces the earlier suggestion that humanity as “male and female,” i.e., as plural, social and relational, is created to function as God’s image. Jesus’s high priestly prayer in John 17 certainly inspires such a notion. “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us . . . They glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, so that they may become completely one” (17:21-23). This “glory” God has given Jesus, a glory that Jesus in turn shares with his followers, is explicitly described as a glory “which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (17:24). Thus, in Jesus’s fellowship of disciples there is a kind of fulfillment of the intentions stated in Genesis 1:26; the “Let us” of Genesis is God and the Word, a relation that becomes enfleshed and realized within creation through the incarnation. The Incarnate Word, in turn, provides the

opening (“I am the door”) through which humans may return to the kind of divinely constituted communion for which we were, and are, created.

We ought to – we must – bring this Christological principle with us when we read the language of Genesis 1 in its description of the human vocation. “Be fruitful and multiply” – and we immediately should recall that this same command had already been issued to all of the other creatures in God’s good world. Hence we may readily assume that our human multiplying ought not to be accomplished at the expense of all the other creatures to whom God has already spoken the same Word. Further, that same Word became flesh and lived among us as a servant, washing his disciples’ feet and even laying down his life for them (1 Jn. 3:16). If my argument is right, Jesus’s life provides the model for the restored human community’s life together in the world amongst all of God’s creatures. We are to replenish ourselves, and care for all human children, in ways that bespeak humble, self-giving love for all of the rest of God’s beloved creatures on the land, and in the waters and the sky as well – and not at their expense.

Granted, the language of Genesis 1 is strong: “fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over” all the nonhuman creatures (v. 28). The Hebrew term generally translated as “dominion” (*rada*) does suggest a kind of “treading” or “trampling” upon these other creatures. However, if we take seriously our Christological lens for interpreting Genesis 1, we cannot run amok with the rhetoric of *rada*. If the Creator we are to image has been revealed in Jesus, presumably we are called to live gently and peaceably upon the earth. Indeed, the term “dominion,” from the Latin *dominus* or “lord,” itself takes on radically new meanings when the lord in question is Jesus of Nazareth.

We can certainly continue to take seriously the fact that the language has a certain kind of vigor to it. Even when we understand human “dominion” Christologically, there is something about the term that realistically recognizes that there are elements in creation that call for real struggle. We humans have to work hard to make a home in this world – but we are also called upon by God to the same kind of hard work, utilizing all our intellectual and creative gifts, to ensure that all of God’s beloved creatures have a home, an environment conducive to life. We build dwellings, cities, dams, dikes; we establish animal and land preserves; we labor to protect and nourish the diversity of animal species; we consider dietary issues; we seek alternative modes of energy and agriculture; we recycle; and the list goes on. Obviously we do not all devote our energies to such activities, and obviously some of these activities at times work at cross-purposes with others, even in our best intentions. It is difficult work. It requires serious thought and exertion. The fact that we can exercise our minds and wills in these ways is, for Wesley, a direct expression of the “natural image.”

Renewal in “the Whole Image of God”

But do we human beings possess the collective will necessary to act redemptively in behalf of God’s creation, of which we are inextricably a part? We acknowledged at the outset that the Christian doctrine of sin would tend strongly to reply in the negative. This is why Wesley’s insisting that all true religion is concerned with humanity’s renewal of the image of God is so critical. In a second sermon entitled “What is Man?” (1788) Wesley proclaimed that through active faith in Jesus Christ human beings may be renewed and restored “into the whole image of God. And being restored both to the favour and image of God, thou shalt know, love, and serve [God] to all eternity.” This is the true end of all human beings, the fundamental reason that “[y]our life is continued to you upon earth.”

Whatever Wesley may have meant when he wrote about being restored “into the whole image of God,” it surely does include the human role of representing the Creator, in conscious and intentional ways, within creation. In other words, it includes what he meant by the political image. It falls to us human beings to exercise this sort of power – and to be increasingly conscious that we do so. We might say that both the natural image and the political image are “givens”; we cannot avoid our human capacities for knowledge about the world and the power to alter it (the “natural”), nor can we shy away from the brute fact that this knowledge and this power exercise inestimable effects upon ourselves, other creatures and our planet as a whole (the “political”). So much depends upon what we human beings choose to do, collectively speaking, with the power entrusted by the Creator to us.

This is why we desperately need the transforming grace of God in Jesus Christ. To be restored “into the whole image of God” most particularly demands our renewal in what Wesley called the moral image, embodied perfectly in Jesus Christ. This is also why Wesley, in the conclusion of “The General Deliverance,” could hope that his preaching might “encourage us to imitate [God] whose mercy is over all his works,” that it might “soften our hearts” toward all of God’s creatures, that it might “enlarge our hearts towards those poor creatures to reflect that . . . not one of them is forgotten in the sight of our Father which is in heaven.” It is safe to assume Wesley believed that softened and enlarged hearts would lead inevitably to concrete acts of compassion and love for the nonhuman world. To imitate the compassion of God for all of God’s creation is, in essence, what is implied in the political image when the human being is renewed in the moral image of God through Jesus Christ. This renewal issues in a sobering call to responsibility for the well-being of the more-than-human world, to the extent that human beings may collectively discern what actions we can and must take in order to “imitate [God] whose mercy is over all [God’s] works.”