Imago Dei: A Theological Grounding for Discussions on Social Issues and Generational Cohorts

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ABSTRACT

Discussing "social issues" and "Gen. Z" can be done from many angles and perspectives. While this is good and necessary, it seems imperative to provide a solid and cohesive theological foundation on which those discussions can stand. This paper proposes the biblical concept of the "image of God" as that platform, and argues that despite the differing views and understandings of "Imago Dei," there is sufficient general consensus on fundamental points which provides both the foundation and the direction for a Christian perspective on "social issues."

INTRODUCTION

A few weeks ago a professor from Andrews University asked me to give him a ride to the South Bend Airport. To provide a little bit of context, his request did not happen in a vacuum, "out of the blue." He and I have been prayer-walking together four or five times a week for almost two years. We exercise and pray, and even talk about professional pursuits. It was in one of our walks that he mentioned he needed a ride to the airport and I gladly offered to do it.

When the day and time came, I went to his house, loaded his luggage into my car and together we enjoyed the 20-minute drive to South Bend. We joked and laughed, talked about personal things, discussed a theological issue or two, tested each other about the latest news and devel-

opments in our worldwide church, conversation that for us was "business as usual." When we arrived at the airport the professor went inside to get a cart for the luggage while I waited outside. In less than two minutes he was back and we loaded his belongings onto the cart. Then he opened his arms, we hugged each other, said our "good byes," he went inside the terminal, and I drove away.

As soon as I got in the car a thought came to my mind which caused me to reflect for a while: This was the first time he and I hugged; or... was it? From a very literal point of view, as far as I can remember, that was our first hug. And maybe it was the last one, who knows? If someone were to judge our friendship and spiritual intimacy based on the number of hugs we have exchanged, it would be obvious to the observer that, at best, we are mere acquaintances. Yet, that would be a misjudgment of disparate proportions.

While the professor and I may have physically hugged only once, I can categorically say that both spiritually and emotionally we have "hugged" each other many times over the last two years. We have walked and prayed together so many times that I've lost count. We have laughed to the point of tears. We have shared personal struggles, and prayed for our spouses and children hundreds of times. We have called each other to pray over the phone when one of us is away preaching or teaching; and the list could go on. Indeed, from a non-literal point of view, yet in very real and even tangible ways, we have embraced each other's soul in a deep manner.

This illustrates a most important point: The parameters we choose to assess a situation or issue will make a significant impact on the conclusions we deduce and the position we eventually take on an issue or situation. Depending on the parameters we choose, we may end up with a very logical and even convincing argument, but our final assessment may be misleading or even outrageously wrong! The seriousness of this matter increases exponentially as we consider social, emotional, and spiritual issues. For example, it is one thing to wrongly conclude that this professor and I barely know each other. It would be much more serious to wrongly conclude that God is not loving because of a deep crisis in my life, or because one of my prayers was not answered to my satisfaction.

FIRST AND SECOND LEVEL THINKING

Howard Marks (2013) contrasted "first level thinking" and "second level thinking" in his book *The Most Important Thing*, a book on investing. "First level thinking"

considers primarily what is in front of you. According to Marks, "It happens when we look for something that only solves the immediate problem without considering the consequences. For example, you can think of this as 'I'm hungry so let's eat a chocolate bar'" (Marks n.d.).

"Second level thinking" goes beyond the obvious and what lies on the surface. "It is thinking in terms of interactions and time, understanding that despite our intentions our interventions often cause harm. Second order thinkers ask themselves the question 'And then what?'" (Marks n.d.).

Marks contrasted first and second level thinking with an example from the world of economics and investments: "First-level thinking says, 'It's a good company let's buy the stock.' Second-level thinking says, 'It's a good company, but everyone thinks it's a great company, and it's not. So the stock's overrated and overpriced; let's sell'" (Jon 2018). In a similar fashion, social issues and generational cohorts can be analyzed and assessed from a "first level thinking" perspective, mainly taking into account what is in front of us, using predominantly societal humanistic tools. Approaching social issues from a "second level thinking" perspective, we consider not only what humans observe and what recent research shows, but we look for God's guidance through the principles found in His Word.

We can tackle social issues merely as "social issues," or we can take into account the biblical worldview with the Great Controversy backdrop, finding a common theological ground upon which we can stand. This doesn't mean we disregard any research, literature or study that does not explicitly espouse a biblical worldview. What I am suggesting is that to discuss social issues and specific sociological generations in a Christian setting calls for a "second level thinking" to make sure our positions and conclusions are not only logically sound but Theo-logically sound.

The question then emerges: Where can a solid, concrete and overarching theological ground for a discussion on Gen. Z and social issues be found? I want to humbly propose the concept of *Imago Dei*, the "image of God", as the theological foundation upon which any and all considerations and discussions on social issues and generational cohorts from a Christian perspective can stand.

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Genesis 1:26-27 (NKJV) reads: "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." This text has been the center of discussion and debates over many centuries. Indeed, responses to the question "What is the image of God?" abound. Thousands upon thousands of pages have been produced on this subject, with a myriad of opinions and versions of the *imago Dei*, both from Christian as well as Jewish and Muslim perspectives. This is a complex and rather obscure notion, one which appears in Scripture only a handful of times. It would be rather naïve or presumptuous to claim to have "the" precise answer as to what the image of God means. Below are some of the debated versions of the *Imago Dei*.

IMAGO DEI AND ITS CHALLENGES

In the chapter entitled "*Imago Dei*" of his book *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Marc Cortez (2010) presented four differing categories or general understandings of the meaning of "the image of God": 1) The *Structural* view: based on the uniqueness of humanity, this view proposes that the image relates to some capacity or set of capacities, such as rationality; 2) The *Functional* view: this position argues that the image is something that human persons *do*; humans reflect God as His representatives by doing certain things, mainly ruling over creation; 3) The *Relational* view: according to this view, at the center of "imaging" God is our relationality (to God, to other humans, and to creation in general); and 4) the *Multifaceted* view: this position combines the three versions listed above and argues that Genesis 1 addresses the person as a whole.

This last all-encompassing position may at first be seen as an ideal solution; but when analyzed in detail, it poses some challenges. Much could be said about these various positions, but Cortez's overall assessment was accurate when he wrote: "The nature of the *Imago Dei* remains an important and unresolved issue in contemporary theology" (Cortex 2010, 30).

IMAGO DEI CONSENSUS

In spite of the various well-founded opinions or versions of the *Imago Dei* and the challenges that come with them, there are a number of areas of general consensus, fundamental points on which most Christian scholars agree. Cortez (2010, 16-17) listed six: 1) *To "image" God means to "reflect" God in creation*. This means that at the most basic

conceptual level, humanity has to be understood in relation to and in dependence of God. 2) *"Image" and "likeness" are largely or entirely synonymous*. While many patristic and medieval exegetes proposed a difference between "image" and "likeness," most scholars today believe otherwise. 3) *The image of God includes all human persons*. All human beings, regardless of gender, race or status, are to be seen as in the image of God. 4) *Sin has affected the image in some way*. In its present condition, humanity is suffering the sin reality and stands in need of renewal and restoration. 5) *The image in the New Testament is a Christological concept*. The New Testament presents Jesus as the "true" image of God (2 Cor 4:4; cf. Heb 1:3). 6) *The image of God is teleological* (from the Greek "telos" = "end, goal"). The image of God, in Christ, is dynamic, developing toward some end, being transformed (2 Cor 3:18).

I propose that these basic areas of consensus on the image of God provide a sufficient conceptual framework on which to build a theological platform to develop our discussion on Gen. Z and social issues. This platform has several implications for our discussions. In the next section I propose five: 1) position; 2) total inclusivity; 3) the sin reality; 4) a Christological approach; and 5) the teleological aspect.

IMAGO DEI IMPLICATIONS FOR DISCUSSIONS ON SOCIAL ISSUES AND GENERATIONAL COHORTS

The first and most foundational implication is a question of "position." The image of God positions humanity in a relation of dependency—in connection to something or someone else—in a situation subservient to an external "Other." This refers to *centrality*, *motive* and *authority*. As we think of and discuss social issues, let us make *God our central point* of reference. It is not all about "us," but ultimately about us in relation to "Him." This implies that we consider God as our ultimate, *authoritative* source. We ought to acknowledge that our perceptions are limited; that even when faced with what seems to us as sound and convincing arguments from respected sources, we ultimately always choose to humble ourselves before God, and always ready to be corrected by His revelation—our most authoritative source. For example, a respected Christian sociologist such as George Barna may be an expert on generational cohorts, but when it comes to the human condition in general as well as to individual complex cases, nobody knows more and better than God; He must have the last word. Furthermore, though we may

agree with various groups and support a good number of excellent causes (climate change, substance abuse issues, etc.), we must constantly remember that our *motives* may be different; and it is important to keep in mind what our deepest motives are. We care for the climate because of Him; we care about our bodies because they are "temples" of the Holy One, etc.

A second implication relates to *total inclusivity*: All human beings are created in His image. This total inclusivity of the image of God is a firmest foundation when addressing issues such as discrimination, racism, human trafficking, abuse in all of its forms and shapes, etc. If ALL humans are indeed created in the image of God, practices like the ones just mentioned have no place whatsoever. This understanding should motivate Christians to care for ALL, not just those in one's back yard. Moreover, this means that human rights are not just "human," but "human" in light of this view of humanity in the image of God.

A third implication relates to *the sin reality*. Based on Scripture, acknowledging the presence of sin as a major negative force affecting the human condition could be a "game changer" when discussing certain social issues. For instance, what our present society may consider as "normal" social behavior can be understood in a very different light if one seriously acknowledges the sin reality. Of course, this is easier to agree with in principle than when addressing a specific issue (such as issues related to sexuality). Still, the sinful human condition cannot be ignored when addressing social issues. We should remind ourselves that at the most foundational level, humanity's starting point is one of brokenness and the real solution to that brokenness only happens in Christ.

Fourth, a *Christological approach* for addressing social issues ought to be central. If indeed Jesus is the true image of God, and if in Him a new humanity can take place, then our solution to the issues of the world must be addressed from this unique approach. In this regard, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words seem relevant:

> Jesus concerns himself hardly at all with the solution of worldly problems. When He is asked to do so His answer is remarkably evasive (Luke 12:13)...His word is not an answer to human questions and problems; it is the answer of God to the question of God to man. His word is essentially determined not from below but from above. It is not a solution, but a redemption (Bonhoeffer 1995, 350).

Those that have read Bonhoeffer know very well how hyperbolic he can be in his writing. His point here is not that the church should be unconcerned with the problems of the world. On the contrary, the context of this quotation proves clearly that he proposed the exact opposite. What he argued is that the church should address the issues of society (social and other issues) from the perspective of revelation.

Fifth and last, but not least, the *teleological* aspect of the *Imago Dei* should greatly inform our discussions and reflections on social issues. The ultimate goal of the plan of redemption is not just to find ways to solve issues momentarily—how to help individuals cope with certain situations in the here and now, even though this undoubtedly remains important. Most certainly, helping those around us here and now is a Christian imperative. However, Christ came to restore the image of God in humanity. That was his ultimate objective. And it should be ours as well.

CONCLUSION

The concept of the image of God (*Imago Dei*) can be a firm theological foundation upon which to elaborate notions and strategies to relevantly address the social issues of today, including those affecting Gen. Z. The value of humanity, the present sinful condition, the solution to the human predicament provided by Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, and eventually the restoration of God's image in humanity as the final objective of the plan of redemption—are all essential components of the biblical *Imago Dei*. God desires to minister through us as we join Him in this most worthy endeavor of restoration toward Christ-likeness.

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