

Are we made in image of an invisible God?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Something has puzzled me since the days when studying and preaching the Bible was central to my life in ministry. I wouldn't normally think about it, but I hear it said so often I'm reminded how much it makes me wonder. I'm sure you've heard it, or said it yourself: "We are made in the image of God." The Book of Genesis presents two creation stories – the first explains that humans were created last, after animals, and the second says one muddy man was molded first. These stories are obviously different, but both express the same odd statement that humans are shaped, molded, constructed, formed as representations of the Almighty. The Creator's mini-me.

This is one origin of our universal "anthropomorphic (human form) problem." We can't seem to help ourselves. If we look like the Creator, the Creator must look like us. In fact, anyone or anything that is "spiritual" takes shape in our minds. Christians might say,

"Thank God for Jesus, at least now we can See Him!" Except ... wait! ... we're not supposed to have an image.

As you may remember, the second commandment clearly states there shall be no "graven images" of the Lord. Yet, even if we didn't carve a statue, paint a picture or (heaven forbid) conjure up an image in our mind, there would still be one glaring problem: Human beings are, in a sense, the graven images of God. So, strange to say, any image of a human being might be a violation of that command.

Was the original intent for the Creator to create one creation – a minuscule copy of His (male) self? As the second creation story goes, the Invisible Inventor got down in the mud and blew on the dirt to bring the tiny creature alive. There was no living being until it took its first breath. The Creative Force noticed that this new, small animated being was alone (as He must have felt to make him in the first place), so a companion (woman) was pieced together.

All this brings us back to the "imago dei" (Latin for "God image"). In Hebrew the term is "Tzelem Elohim," or "likeness of God," in Greek "ikon of Theos" or "Icon of God." Now we see that a human being, as a visible "icon" of the Invisible Deity, is a graphic (graven) breaking of

the commandment forbidding an artistic rendering of the Invisible: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

Where does this lead us? Straight to the most glaring puzzle of all: How can there be any image of the Image-less? How can we make the invisible visible? Think about it. An ancient story tells us we are made in the Maker's image, so are we to assume God actually looks like us? A form, a body, all the parts, that were copied in the prehistoric muck? This goes far beyond and much deeper than our "iconography" or our entertainment (American Idol). We idolize other humans we admire or reverence (Jesus, Krishna, Buddha, etc), but they can't be "more divine," more "god-like."

I once believed that being made "in God's image" was spiritual, intangible. This wasn't about our fleshly body, but our soul, spirit, mind. Is that what the text in Genesis says? No. As with many other biblical texts, "inspired authorities" try to convince us to interpret verses "spiritually," supernaturally ... invisibly. Was this the intent of Jesus' life and teachings, to place the focus on the "otherworldly," or practical ethics?

Many people who are marginalized feel they are invisible. How do we see them, if we truly want to see them? We choose to see. We know there are invisible things unrecognized by our senses, but our "sense" of reason can lead us to choose to see. Science helps our vision through amazing inventions such as microscopes, telescopes, ways of identifying and measuring what we can't see with the "naked eye." Reasonable means to view the unseen.

In both Jewish and Muslim traditions, there is no "imago dei." In fact, they teach it is blasphemous – it does injury to religious belief – to imagine or give form to God. The creation cannot create the Creator. Adam cannot mold Elohim in the image of Adam. And yet, isn't that precisely what we've done in religious history? Even when we refuse to give form to the Maker, we imagine "He" looks, acts, feels in very human ways. By imagining the image of a Divine Man, we not only break a commandment. We fracture our reason.

The invisible cannot be visible except in theological imagination.

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