Education and the Image of God

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ABSTRACT: Christian educators rightfully desire to offer an education that reflects both the goals and processes which are consistent with biblical truth. This requires that educators be sensitive to those doctrines and concepts which best inform theory and practice. In this article we examine the doctrine of the image of God and its implications for education. Threats to the image which can be seen in the society are briefly presented as well as some suggestions for the administration and practice of schooling

Any philosophy of education must inevitably address the question—what does it mean to be an educated person? The content of the curriculum, unit and lesson objectives, appropriate methods of instruction, or relevant types of assessment only have meaning or merit in so far as they help to produce a functional and socially competent individual. Yet, to be well-educated is nested within the broader and foundational worldview question, "what does it mean to be human?" From this perspective, the doctrine of the *imago dei*, or the image of God, becomes crucial in developing and implementing educational practices which are biblically consistent, God-honoring, and assist the student in becoming all that God intends for them to be.

To claim that an approach is consistent with a biblical worldview first requires an explanation of what a worldview is and the functions that it serves. Unlike philosophies, which are individually espoused systems of belief, worldviews are sociocultural formations which direct how a group of people view the world and themselves descriptively (who we are) from a normative ideal of how things, including ourselves, should be. Just as corrective lenses help a person see a distorted world with proper vision, a worldview helps members of a group evaluate the actions, values, or attitudes of the society (or themselves), from some sense of an ideal. Institutions, like family, church, and school, help socialize young people into the dominant worldview of the group, so that they can be functional adults whose values, attitudes, and behaviors are consistent with its vision of good society. From a worldview perspective, the structure and practices of school are not value neutral; they are designed to develop individuals who embody the values and ideals of the culture.

For education to be consistent with a biblical worldview, it must acknowledge God's creative purpose and intent for human beings. This type of understanding can only be found in God's revealed word—the Bible. While the Bible certainly contains descriptions of learning and examples of teaching, it is insufficient as a textbook for educational psychology or instructional pedagogy. The Bible is sufficient, however, in providing the normative ideal and biblical standards that should direct educational theory and practice. By "normative" we mean that God is the one who provides the standards of correctness. Such standards are biblical if they are consistent with theological principles and processes designed to glorify God and work toward His will. Since the goal of a biblically-based education is to guide, direct, and assist young people to be all that God intends, much of this ideal can be found in the biblical doctrine of the image of God.

What is Image-bearing?

Theologians generally present the doctrine of the *imago dei* in three descriptive categories.[1] The **substantive view** emphasizes the shared characteristics, such as reason, will, or morality, which allow a person to have a relationship with God.[2] The **functional view** highlights the role human beings serve as God's representatives to share in the rule or administration of the Earth and its resources.[3] More controversial is the **relational view** which asserts that a person must be in a relationship with God in order to possess the image. While human beings can exhibit substantive traits like reason, sin has (in the words of John Calvin), "utterly defaced" or even "obliterated" the image of God in humanity.[4] Critics of this perspective are more muted, noting that it is the relational character of the image of God that allows human beings to form complex social relationships that reflect a spiritual component.[5]

While each of these descriptive categories provide critical elements to an overall understanding of the *imago dei*, educators are keenly interested in student learning and the development of the image of God. While the descriptive elements cannot be posited without a normative ideal, it is the ideal toward which Christian educators must work if their labor is to be God-honoring and kingdom-oriented. This requires an understanding of who human beings are relative to God and others (relational), what responsibilities they have within these relationships (functional), and what abilities and aptitudes can be developed to help them fulfill these God-given roles (substantive). In turn, these three aspects of image-bearing can be understood educationally as a means of directing the practices of schooling.

Relational (Intrinsic / Instrumental)

Matthew 13:44–46 records the parables of the Treasure in the Field and the Pearl of Great Price. In each case the protagonist sells all they have simply to possess the object which is a metaphor for the kingdom of heaven. In each case, the object is not obtained for its investment value, or desirable as a means to obtain something greater, but for the sheer joy of its possession. The parables emphasize the ultimate value of God and the worth of being in a relationship with Him as a citizen of His kingdom, and desiring that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The parables underscore Jesus's statement in the Sermon on the Mount when He declares, "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these will be provided for you" (Matt. 6:33); where everything else is secondary to pursuing God and His will.

To claim that God has ultimate value is to state that He is wholly intrinsic. Not only is God uniquely complete, but the beauty and glory of His holiness are unrivaled and cannot be minimized to the value of anything else. As a result, "God's ultimate goal is to preserve and display his infinite and awesome greatness and worth, this is, his glory."[6] As recorded in Isaiah, God declares, "I will

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[1] Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 37–66
[2] Akin, *A Theology for the Church*, 387
[3] Middleton, *The Liberating Image,* 27
[4] Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 43.
[5] Brunner, *Man in Revolt,* 138.
[6] Piper, *Desiring God,* 43.

act for my own sake, indeed my own . . . I will not give my glory to another" (48:11). As Creator, the value, attributes, and function of His creation are determined by God toward ends that align with His person and will. Thus, all of creation, including human beings, are secondary and instruments of God to bring glory to Him (cf. Luke 19:37–40). For this reason Paul instructs the Corinthian believers, "For you were bought at a price. So glorify God with your body" (1 Cor. 6:20). Or, in the words of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

To identify something as instrumental is to note that it can be used, or its value determined, by its ability to secure that which is greater (or more intrinsic). If I spend my money to buy coffee, I am determining that the value I get from the coffee is of greater worth than the money. Yet, the coffee can also have instrumental utility since it provides me with the more valuable caffeine rush that I used to write this article. The relationship between intrinsic and instrumental, however, is not binary; being apart from God all created things can have varying degrees of intrinsic and instrumental value. For example, while human beings are not wholly intrinsic, they have greater value than things—a designation we see in Genesis 1 where God declares His creation "good" but that human beings are "blessed" and given authority over the rest of creation by Him (cf. Gen. 1:26–28). That authority, however, is not autonomous of God but must be exercised within the parameters of His will—a will succinctly summarized by Jesus when He says to "Love the Lord your God with all heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Luke 10:27).

The intrinsic–instrumental distinction is useful for helping us understand our actions in light of our relationships. To designate something as intrinsic is to place other things as instrumental or as an object useful to attain the intrinsic. Money becomes an object useful to me to obtain coffee. Yet, because we are sinners, we can place things above God, making them more intrinsic; reducing God to an object only useful in obtaining that which we desire. Biblically, such designations are called idolatry, but note that ultimately it is human will, other than God's, which seeks to determine the relative value of all things. While human beings may have some latitude in determining the use of divinely provided resources (as part of being a functional image-bearers), they must align their actions with God's priorities and seek first His kingdom or will. Thus, to seek God first is to acknowledge that He is the ultimate intrinsic; wherein all that we do should seek to glorify Him (cf. 1 Cor. 10:31). It also means that, in acknowledgment of His will, we are to esteem others, as image-bearers of God, as greater than ourselves. To do otherwise would be to objectify them as instruments to one's own goals or ambitions (cf. Phil. 2:3–4).

Functional (Image / Likeness)

The first reference to the *imago dei* in the Bible is found in Genesis 1:26 where we read, "Then God said, 'let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground." This verse is often used as the initial basis for human authority over the creation; yet the terms "image" and "likeness" also highlight two relational

aspects of stewardship relevant to education. The term "likeness" (Hebrew, *demuth*) indicates a similarity of shape or feature. For example, in noting that God is spirit (John 4:24), the 17th century Puritan theologian Thomas Watson wrote "God is an immaterial substance of a pure [subtle], unmixed essence."[7] It is this immaterial or spiritual essence that separates God or makes Him transcendent from the physical world. The likeness of God in humanity not only provides the basis for human eternality, but also provides for human will, freedom, and moral responsibility and the capacity to be sensitive to God's will and leading.[8] While humans, as physical beings, possess bodies that inhabit space and time, require air, water, and food to sustain life, and grow weary and demand rest; it is the likeness of God that allows humanity to extend beyond themselves, to connect with both God and others beyond the physical. It is this spiritual nature which gives human beings higher intrinsic value than the rest of the physical creation and why, of all living things, only human beings are said to possess the "breath of life" (Gen. 2:7).

The "image" (Hebrew, *tselem*) highlights humanity's physical nature and role played in the created order. Often translated as "statue" (cf. Dan. 2:31–35; 3:1–9), *tselem* highlights the immanence of humanity and, combined with *demuth*, the ethical dimension of human beings as reflections of God on the earth. Possessing both spiritual and physical dimensions, human beings can creatively direct their will in ways which activate their behavior toward a particular vision of the good. Biblically, those actions should represent the will of God in the world. Yet, God has no need for humanity to either reflect Himself back to Him, nor do human actions enhance or detract from God's glory. Human actions, as a result, are a means of reflecting one's love for God by working for their physical and spiritual welfare of others. For this reason actions done, even to the least of them, are done as if to God (cf. Matt. 25:40). While the behavior of merely physical entities are, in essence, passive and reducible to explanations consistent with physics, chemistry or biology, the spiritual dimension of humanity, human *demuth*, infuses agency into our actions. It is this element of agency which makes human actions moral and mere physical explanations for their origins, whether simple or complex, tenuous.

These ethical dimensions of the *imago dei* underscore its importance for a biblical approach to education. Relationally, being an image-bearer places one in obligation to both God and to others. Functionally, human beings are to act in ways that glorify God while also caring and working for the benefit of others. Yet, God provides only general guidelines regarding these stewardship obligations; allowing human beings to use their knowledge and skills, creativity, and moral judgment in determining the most God-honoring course of action. A biblically-based education should enhance the learners' abilities to fulfill these ontological obligations. Ideally, such an education requires knowing God, knowing His will through His word, and providing opportunities to serve others as part of the learning process. As a result, one's education is not a personal possession but a divine resource given to an individual for the sake of the community. It is a resource that requires development to be fully utilized. This others-oriented approach to education is in stark contrast to viewing education as a personal possession or means of self-

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[7] Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 45.
[8] Verduin, *Somewhat Less Than God*, 84.

enhancement which allows one to pursue their own goals. It is this idea of learning, enhancement, or development that brings us to the last dimension of the image of God—the substantive view and its ramifications for education.

<u>Substantive (Potential and Development)</u>

To start, let's ask the question, "would there have been learning before the Fall?" Unless you wish to hold to some notion of pre-Fall humanity as both omniscient and omnipotent, finite humanity would have had to learn because there would be a gap between their functional responsibilities as required by God and human abilities, both individually and corporately, to fulfill them. This gap would have prompted a close and continual relationship with God in order to ascertain His will, gathering information and developing tools like logic and methodologies to systematically collect and analyze new knowledge, and creating and developing skills and technologies to better manipulate the physical world over which humanity has been given dominion. This gap between current and future performance is called potential, and its development lies at the heart of the educational process. It is the enhancing and developing of these abilities, which theologians often identify as substantive traits, upon which the obedience to both the functional and relational responsibilities of the *imago dei* depend. As a result, a biblically-based education must serve to make people better image-bearers of God.

The substantive view of the *imago dei* focuses on those attributes that human beings share with God. From a more conservative theological position, the substantive view has several consequences for educators. First, given that these attributes are both human and shared, except in the case of a genetic defect or trauma, they would seem to be innate or bestowed by God. This would stand in contrast to more prevalent views of human beings as "blank slates" or beings created by their environment. While making the biblical case for a distinctive human nature, including the sin nature, does not deny the influence of nurture, it does contradict many of the more prominent views among most educators.[9] Second, combined with divine sovereignty, it could be that certain substantive traits may be viewed as universal or given be God to all (e.g. reason or will), while other aptitudes or abilities, similar to spiritual gifts, are more selectively allocated (cf. Exod. 31:1–6). Third, again combined with divine sovereignty, it cannot be assumed that any substantive or allocated attribute is equally distributed or in equal degree. For example, not everyone may possess musical ability and, of those who do possess it, it may be in varied degrees.[10] Finally, the relative value placed on certain abilities is not a divine assessment but human—one which could reflect human priorities and be tainted by the sin nature. That is, God grants abilities and aptitudes for the benefit of the community which reflect His goals and priorities, and placing no hierarchical value on them (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4–24). That society may value mathematical ability more highly than musical talent, and allocate resources toward each accordingly, can reflect more

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[9] Pinker, *The Blank Slate,* 2.

[10] I would like to make quite clear, that I am denying any type of between group differences normally associated with eugenics. I am more open to the type of within group difference which may be tied to genetics as described by deBoer, *The Cult of Smart*, 23–24, 122–142.

human concerns. In all such cases, those with lesser attributes or abilities in the view of society, are no less image-bearers worthy of dignity. This reality, however, underscores the moral obligation to enhance those abilities as part of the obligation to prepare image-bearers to serve others.

It is the intersection of human potentiality, a recognition of the diversity of divinely allocated abilities and their creative use, and their ethical purpose of glorifying God while serving and being served by others which form the doctrinal basis for the image of God being foundational to a biblically-based education. It is the type of education which, in the words of J.I Packer and Thomas Howard, renders "Christianity [as] the true humanism, since it has for its purpose the forming and freeing and exalting of our true humanness."[11] It is, in many ways, a counter-cultural vision of education; one which the world will seek to reject or undermine as it desires to claim humanism for itself.

Denial and Defacement

In opening, we noted that any approach to education must define what it means to be human. As Emil Brunner states, "Man must be defined theologically; only then may the philosopher, the psychologist, and the biologist make their statements."[12] Given its central importance, and sinful humanity's desire to dismiss the Lordship of Christ, worldly approaches to education must deny or redefine these theological aspects of the image of God in an attempt to, essentially, normalize the sin nature. Denial is utilized most prominently against the relational and functional aspects of the image of God, which deal most specifically with our relationships to God and others and our ethical obligations as stewards in the world. In modern Western culture, the denial of the *imago dei* generally takes the form of stripping away all aspects of the immaterial or spiritual aspects of humanity, leaving humans as simply biological beings. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries this form of denial was most prominent in the genetic determinism associated with the eugenics movement. More recently, behavioral psychology or neuropsychology seek to reduce immaterial aspects of humanity, like the mind, to scientific and quantifiable physical explanations, like the brain, with alarming consequences.[13] As behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner has noted, such a view of humanity reduces all human action as comprehensible by science, and renders concepts such as "freedom" (i.e. the possession of will) and "dignity" (i.e. concepts of moral accountability) as moot.[14]

Still, human beings have potentiality, agency, the capacity for learning, and ability to acquire and develop skills. In light of such clear evidence, using denial as a tactic of rebellion will not suffice. In such instances defacement, or vandalizing the ones God has "crowned with glory and honor" (cf. Heb. 2:6–7), is more prevalent. While defacement can take many forms, we can reduce it to two types. The first can be called external defacement. This occurs when one's

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[11] Packer and Howard, *Christianity: The True Humanism*, 52.

[12] Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, 102.

[13] Thagard, *The Brain and the Meaning* of *Life*, 42.

[14] B.F. Skinner, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, 42–44.

energies, abilities, or creative potential are redirected by those with power or position to do so. In such cases, those in power subjugate certain aspects or abilities of the *imago dei* toward goals that will benefit themselves. External defacement can be seen in Samuel's forewarning to Israel that having a king will result in their lives, skills, and possessions appropriated for the king's work (1 Sam. 8:16). External defacement can also lead to ignoring or devaluing certain God-given abilities in favor of those considered more valuable or useful to those in a position to utilize them. Hence, musical or artistic tendencies in children may be discouraged in order to cultivate more economically favorable abilities such as mathematics or science.

The second type of defacement is internal—a form of self-inflicted debasement which denies aspects or responsibilities associated with being an image-bearer of God. Theologically, God is the source of all a person's energy, abilities, and creative potential; given so that a person can glorify Him and work for the benefit of others. In internal defacement individuals consider these attributes as their own possessions that can be utilized or disposed of as they wish. Such a view is often encouraged by the culture, for example when we tell young *they* can be whatever *they* want to be (and, extension, their knowledge and abilities are tools at their disposal). Social obligations, if they exist at all, are viewed as voluntary and incurred only through individual choice. Theologically, internal defacement renounces the place of image-bearers in God's communal arrangement to love God and others.

Educational Implications

To claim that the image of God is foundational to an enterprise as vast as education is to acknowledge that the breadth and depth of its implications cannot be sufficiently summarized. That stated, any approach to education sensitive to the biblical implications of the *imago dei* must acknowledge and include the components of acquiring knowledge, developing skills, enhancing creativity, and cultivating a sensitivity to use these for God's glory and the benefit of others. Also, education is distinctly an ethical enterprise; as such, it involves choice and resource allocation. These choices regarding the allocation of time and finances are indicators of our values. As Christ notes, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matt. 6:21). While teachers and schools may lack the resources to fully address all of these areas, how they proceed must consciously address these components of a biblically-based education. Educators must also identify the cultural threats to the image of God and not simply adopt the priorities of the dominant society which can undermine the goals and values of a Christian school education.

Administratively, the aspect of personhood expressed by the *imago dei*, means that education is an act of caring for another. It is an ethical action that makes the teacher, peers, and the community in general, recipients of the educative process. That is, as a teacher develops the personhood of their students they also assist in developing and enhancing their own personhood and contribute to the flourishing of others and the greater community.[15] It also means that teachers and schools must acknowledge the sovereignty of God in His allocation of abilities to students. As a result, teachers and schools do not form students but must steward them, assisting them to

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[15] Christian Smith, *What is a Person?* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010), 408.

become better image-bearers in ways which God has intended. This requires a sensitivity to the varied types of abilities that students have as well as providing opportunities to explore aspects of personhood which they may not receive in other settings. Further, it requires that teachers and schools cultivate a variety of interests and abilities as a means of encouraging students to discover those areas in which they may be endowed by God.

Instructionally, teachers and schools must incorporate curriculum and teaching methods that not only provide students opportunities to learn, but also creatively employ the ethical use of knowledge and skills. While several means can be used to achieve these goals, I will highlight two. STREAM education (Science, Technology, Religion, Arts, and Mathematics) has been championed as Christian-sensitive alternative to traditional STEM or STEAM models. Originally developed by Catholic schools and universities, STREAM models emphasize both spiritual and academic priorities and use authentic learning opportunities to employ classroom experiences into the community and foster the ideas of spiritual and ethical responsibility in the use of knowledge and skills. For example, the National Catholic Education Association (ncea.org) provides resources to assist teachers and schools promote educational goals consistent with the *imago dei*. Similarly, the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) has increasingly emphasized service-learning models as a means of worldview development and as a means of developing students, and enhancing the school, and the greater community.[16]

The centrality of the image of God means that any attempt to accept, reject, or redeem educational theory or practice must start from a proper understanding of the *imago dei* and the role of education in its enhancement and development. Failure to properly embrace and articulate this biblical foundation may well result in an alternative vision of the good filling the void ceded by Christians. While parents, teachers, and schools may not be able, realistically, to foster and develop all areas of knowledge, ability, or student interest, any attempt to address teaching or educational administration must seriously consider these three aspects of the image of God. Regardless of how we choose to educate our students, a biblical understanding of the image of God must play a prominent role in our construction of the educational enterprise.

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[16] Roger Erdvig, "Service Learning in Christian Schools," last modified November 30, 2017, https://blog.acsi.org/service-learning-pedagogy-in-christian-schools

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