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# The Image of God in Man: A Report of the BEC Theological Study Conference, 20-22 March 2000

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**B**EC Theological Study conferences are not unique, but they have features which set them apart from other conferences. They start and end with lunch, on Monday and Wednesday, but, except for meals and sleep, there is little time for any activity apart from discussion, the longest sessions lasting for two hours. The papers are distributed beforehand enabling the conferees to familiarise themselves with them and prepare questions and comments. In the discussions people inevitably think aloud, which sometimes makes for interesting cut and thrust in debate, but not everyone would want their contributions to be held against them later! A great responsibility falls on the shoulders of the chairman, Mark Johnston, which he carries out with considerable wisdom and aplomb.

**The first paper** was introduced by Ian Hamilton. This was a historical survey of the doctrine, beginning with an introduction which defined terms and focused on the interpretation and implications of Genesis 1:26-27. This paper established that it was more accurate to speak of man as the image of God: *God's image is not located somewhere in man; man, in all that he is, is God's image*. The conference seemed to be agreed that this was the correct way to look at the image. Ian spelled out the importance and relevance of this doctrine: *No biblical truth more confronts and challenges the naturalistic presuppositions and amoral values of our modern (or post-modern) world. It challenges the perceived autonomous character of man; it establishes an infallible bulwark against the trampling on and despising of the poor, the dispossessed, the infirm and the unborn; it speaks hope to the lonely; it challenges the rampant individualism that scars our world (and the Church); it condemns racism and anti-Semitism; and it clarifies the essential equality and dignity of men and women*. Discussion included the way this subject relates to the creation/theistic evolution debate (a point taken up in the second paper) and the importance of the corporate life of the church revealing the image of God, 'the reality of God triune'. The conclusion of the paper raised a problem that was to underlie a great deal of the discussion, *How then are we to take seriously the fact of total depravity and man continuing to be in the image of God?* All agreed that both facts must be taken seriously, but some seemed to want to stress the one, and some the other.

**Paper two** was introduced by Randal Macauley, *Twentieth Century Developments in the Discussion of the imago dei*. Not surprisingly this was set against the background of a culture in which man has lost all sense of his identity as man: *For to relinquish a world-view which begins with the God of the Bible and concludes with salvation through his Son is not simply to relinquish 'religion', it is to forfeit meaningful identity as man*. Randal pointed out that at the end of the nineteenth century this was not recognized as it should have been and since then evangelicals have consistently overlooked it: *Had evangelicals understood this they would have been less defensive... They would have regained the intellectual high ground by compelling their opponents to face 'the unflinching consistency' of their own presuppositions: not only is God obliterated by the new 'science', so also is mankind*. There was an interesting quotation from Moises Silva referring to biblical anthropomorphisms: *The notion that God*

*accommodates to our imperfect human understanding contains an element of truth, to be sure, but perhaps we are approaching the issue from the wrong end. Our use of this term reflects our human-centred perspective. Indeed, it is not altogether far-fetched to say that descriptions of what we are and do should be termed 'theomorphisms'! ... our human qualities are themselves but a reflection of God's person and attributes ... the real question is not 'How can God speak (since he does not have a body)?' but 'How can we speak?' The answer to this is: we are made in the image of a God who speaks.* This insight proved useful later in the conference. Ranald spoke of the problem posed by pietism and the way this had kept evangelicals from critiquing culture, and this was illustrated in the discussion which centred around evangelism and apologetics. There seemed to be some danger of developing an either/or. Should we be out to persuade by argument, or do we rely on preaching? And where does the Holy Spirit come into the picture? Somewhere there is a balance which we found hard to attain.

Geoff Thomas presented *The imago dei and the Fall*. This paper was illuminated by some striking illustrations. He began by demonstrating that all men today are in the image of God and that God continues to create every man in his image. He then moved on to show that as a result of the fall the image of God is corrupted in all men. He very ably pictured the contradiction that is man in sin; man is like a broken mirror, so the image it reflects is also broken. Nevertheless some questions seemed unanswered. If rationality is an aspect of the image, is that rationality itself damaged by sin, or is it that rationality is used for sinful ends – to deny the existence of the very God whose image is borne, for instance? To put it another way, what is inalienable and what has become fractured? Sin has affected the whole person, yet the image is still seen, sometimes strikingly, in unbelievers. One suggestion from the last paper which was not taken up in discussion was this, *Is it true to say that it is God's common grace which preserves the remnants of his image in human beings?*

Because of the illness of Bill James, Kelly Kapic stepped in at a comparatively late stage to provide the fourth paper, *The imago dei in Redemption*. This was a draft of a chapter of his thesis, which, while it fitted into the overall structure of the conference, in certain respects went beyond the conference remit. Kelly introduced the word *anthroposensitivity*: *For want of a better term, 'anthroposensitivity' signifies how Owen's anthropological methodology always kept his reader's longing heart for God at the front of his mind. For him, to speak of human being after the fall, void of the painful reality of existence in a sinful and dying world, neither satisfies the soul nor correctly presents true theology – which for Owen are directly linked.* This was a valuable reminder that all true theology should be anthroposensitive (this also, presumably, arises from man being made in God's image).

Because man is God's image, incarnation is possible, and it is only in the incarnate Jesus Christ that *the complete image and perfect representation of the Divine Being and excellencies* are found. The incarnation is the necessary foundation for redemption – *on the cross the unique theandric Jesus can now take on the sin of the world* – and thus the restoration of the image in those who are in Christ. In opening up his paper Kelly reflected on the humanity of Christ, something which evangelicals have neglected. He pointed out that many people in evangelical churches have no difficulty with Jesus as God, but they do struggle with him as human. He asked whether Jesus knew the human heart as God, or as a person in relationships with others. For example, how did Jesus know the hearts of the Pharisees? Was it by observation? Owen asserts the sinlessness of Jesus as human, but he also says, *he had the heart of a man, the affections of a man, and that in the highest degree of sense and tenderness. Whatever sufferings the soul of a man may be brought under, by grief, sorrow, shame, fear,*

*pain, danger, loss, by any afflictive passions within or impressions of force from without, he underwent, he felt it all.*

The fifth paper, by Alex MacDonald, brought us to practical application, *the imago dei in ethics and Mission*. The doctrine of the image of God gives a real basis for ethics. *Why is man a being that has ethical concepts, a moral sense, an appreciation of right and wrong?... We are creatures of a different order of being from animals. As God is rational and moral, so we were created rational and moral, capable of understanding and relating to moral commands.* Application was made to the sanctity of human life, ecology, equality and community. The final area of application was the consequences for mission. The concluding point here was the worth and dignity of the individual human being: *No matter how way-out or depraved or disabled or down and out people may be, they still have a worth and dignity as those who are the image of God. Jesus' story of the lost coin in Luke 15 illustrates this. The coin was really lost. It may have been covered in grime and dust. It may have been scratched and chipped. But it still retained its intrinsic value. It was no use to the woman it belonged to as long as it was lost, but it still did not cease to be a coin.*

Discussion ranged far and wide. What about cremation (most seemed to be against)? *in vitro* fertilisation and cloning? the just war? capital punishment? From marriage, singleness and equality the discussion moved to the church as the community where people of every sort and from every background should be welcome. The practical problems this presents were not overlooked, but here is the ideal which Scripture sets before us.

The final paper followed the usual pattern of summing up the others (in this case only three of them), and highlighting some of the issues they raise. This was in the hands of Stephen Rees and he also followed the tradition of reflecting (during the night!) on the whole conference up to that point and giving an almost *ad lib* address of some power on the doctrine of the Trinity. After setting out points of agreement, he elaborated on the importance of theomorphisms, giving several examples. His final section took up some hobby-horses (his word). He pointed out the importance of imitating God: *Paul appeals to the Ephesian Christians that they should consciously imitate God in his actions and attitudes. God's image-bearers are God's children, sharing the family likeness. And as devoted children, they are consciously to imitate their Father. It is as they imitate God that his image is renewed in them.* More controversially he considered the image of God and cultural confrontation. His final point related the *imago dei* to the doctrine of hell. Ian Hamilton had quoted John Murray, ... *it is the fact that man is in the image of God that constitutes the unspeakable horror of eternal perdition*. Stephen, however, argued that in hell the image is finally and completely lost, and thus also that those there have lost their humanity. *Evangelicals have sometimes objected that such a position mitigates the horrors of hell. To myself, the contrary appears to be true.* How far this view carried weight with the conference members is difficult to tell.

We finished, however, with the Trinity. Have we clearly understood the doctrine of God as triune; how many of us have an intellectually clear and emotionally vibrant doctrine of the trinity? This is crucial for man is to mirror the trinitarianism of God. We were not entirely agreed even about the trinity. Do we stick with the Nicene formulation or incorporate the refinements of Calvin and the Reformation? But it was a fine note to end on. The conference was tiring, but invigorating. The relevance of clear and accurate theology to modern life and witness was fully exhibited.

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