

# Kings and Queens on Mission: The Image of God in God's Plan for Disability

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## God Crowned Us at Creation

“We are all kings and queens,” said Lucy as she marveled at her siblings’ group coronation.<sup>1</sup> Fully aware that the image of God might be difficult to grasp, C. S. Lewis gave us a simple picture of reveling crowned children with all their failings and immaturity. The trouble is, we can have a misunderstanding of belief and praxis that suggests that people with disabilities are not quite as royal as others. Their crown is conspicuously damaged or missing. But Scripture will not support that idea. Lucy had it right. This has implications for Christian global health as we seek to engage with people with disability in our practice.

Every baby born is a gift from God (Psalm 127:1), is fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14), and is created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26–28). This study about the image of God will address how all people, including those with disabilities, have dignity, what it means to have dignity, and why we have a responsibility to honor that dignity in every person.

Being created in the image of God endows each of us with dignity and value.<sup>2</sup> We write to you as two fathers of daughters with severe disabilities. This dignity gives us great joy and purpose in our relationships with our daughters, the rest of our families, and our churches and communities. Under this worldview, people with the greatest needs, particularly those marginalized by society, do best. In a nutshell, we tend to treat people with dignity if we believe that all people, without exception, are created equally in God’s image.

An understanding that we all—including people with disability—were created in God’s image is a simple and powerful truth. Even a basic understanding of the Image of God should transform Christian engagement with disability and impact our bioethics stances, for example in regard to disability-driven selective abortion and euthanasia. But what is the image and how did God give it? In our unpacking the meaning of the *imago Dei*, the image of God, we have taken one approach, but we also accept that there are many other interpretations that have validity. And most modern interpretations reinforce dignity in disability.

## The Story of God’s Image

At the dawn of creation, God pronounced his unfinished heaven and earth, “good.” But next, God made humans in his image from the clay of the ground like a potter sculpts a statue. God then proclaimed his finished creation “very good” because the image completed the creation mission. God’s image bearers resided in a garden sanctuary to worship and fellowship with the Creator. Human beings have dignity

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deriving from God's image. The Fall did not change the image. But sin marred or harmed people who bore that image. The image was hidden and remained untouched.

From the very start, God intended for people to be "like" Him. That family resemblance we refer to as the *imago Dei*. Not only should humans, in contrast with the animals, be like God, humans also seek their destiny with God. In the words of an ancient church father:

*"Our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee." –Augustine of Hippo*

Humans are already fully in God's image; but they themselves are not yet fully like God. Strictly speaking, the image is not in humans; people are created *in* or *according to* the image of God.

Humankind fell (Genesis 3), but God's intentions for them remained unchanged. Jesus, the God-man who "is" God's Image (Colossians 1:15), left heaven's splendor to dwell among men (John 1:14). Only Jesus is God's image. As such, he models the image for renewed image-bearers. The fully renewed image, although not yet attained, fulfills God's intent for creation. Humans reach their destiny and become fully "like" the God-man forever.

Why is God's image a story, not an event? Returning to our story of God's image in scripture, if we look at the image in Genesis alone, we are limited in our understanding of what it is. That is because the image of God requires that we see it as an unfolding story, a process that begins with God's single creative event in which he formed humans from the dust of the ground. Only in Jesus, the true image, and in New Testament instruction do we get a complete and consistent picture of what God's image entails. In short, we must have a full perspective of the image of God from Genesis to Revelation. Yet, we must not lose sight of the creation event as God's original intention. The confusion arises when we fail to see the image as already realized in some ways, but not finished in others. Our primary concern is for God's intentions for the image in humans. So, what specifically is the image?

### What Does the Image Represent?

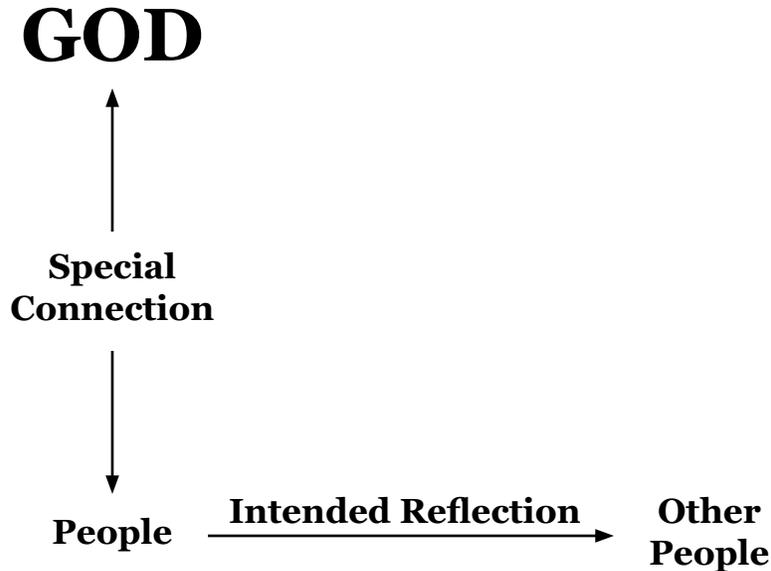
The image consists of both our connection with and reflection of God. What is more, it is already fully in place. All people, including those with disabilities, are created in the image and never lose it. Although sin has entered this world, and all have sinned, the image of God is not lost or damaged. The image gives all people full dignity. On the other hand, people, both Christians and non-Christians, are blemished by sin. Sin has damaged them. They await God's full renewal as they grow spiritually. They have not arrived at God's destiny intended for them or what is referred to as an "already, but not yet" plan.<sup>3</sup> The New Testament also describes the image as a process in which God renews us through the Spirit-empowered process of spiritual maturity.

The image of God or his likeness<sup>4</sup> described in Genesis 1: 26–28 is more about God and who he is rather than us who are in his image. God's purpose for the image centers on his intentions, his will to fulfill his determination for us to live and grow in reference to his standards for humanity. Godly growth in us is God's intention for the image.<sup>5</sup>

Who gets the image? All people in Adam are created in God's image and this image demands that we respect the sanctity of human life in our global health practice. What is more, none of God's intended attributes can be lost or marred. If that were true, it would run the risk of degrading people with disabilities. For example, if we argue that the attribute of reason is marred or damaged in people who are developmentally or intellectually disabled, we have missed the point of the image. And we have unbiblically segregated and excluded them.

How does the image function? It is important to recognize that "*actual* likeness to God is not what being created in God's image involves. Creation in God's image is God's expressed intention that people exhibit

the special connection they have with God through a meaningful *reflection* of God.”<sup>6</sup> Being in the image of God entails special connection as well as intended reflection. As illustrated below, this means that the image of God connects God with people; people reflect God's image to other people:



Viewed thusly, the image includes the perception of who people are as God's creation. It is on display for a watching world. He made us to be like him, and other people should see this. This not only gives us a special connection to him, but it shows others who we are as well as God's intentions for where we are going in his plan.

There is a common misconception about where the image actually is. We sometimes refer to the image of God being *in* people. But the relevant biblical passages do not teach that the image of God is in people, but that people are in the image of God. That is because the image concept is not talking about traits and attributes that we actually have—that are in us—but about our special connection with God and God's intention that those connected with him should reflect his attributes increasingly, according to the model of Christ, as much as possible.<sup>7</sup>

Our dignity is in our connection with God and in God's intention for us—not in how much it is actually in us. That is why disability is irrelevant to dignity—disability may limit much that is actually in us but being in God's image is not about what is actually in us.<sup>8</sup> What then does it mean for us, to be renewed in God's image as the New Testament tells us?

### How Does God Renew Us?

In the Fall, humans neither lost the image nor was the image marred in any way. Humans certainly suffered loss! But the image does not change; people do. The image is the standard or goal to which God is renewing people. When we come to Christ, the image is not renewed for it does not need renewing. But people need renewal through transformative growth according to the standard of Christ's image. We are renewed in or according to Jesus, the image of God. He is the standard toward which we grow spiritually and are renewed.

How is the image renewed? New Testament passages that refer to image commonly call the reader to be renewed. And, importantly, all these passages use “God's image” to admonish us to treat others well (James 3:9; 1 Corinthians 3:7; Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 4:24). This alone should impact the way we act

toward people with disabilities. Although the image is about a human's connection with God, all these verses talk about how God's connection results in people treating other people with dignity, thoughtfulness, and kindness, as Jesus did. This informs how we treat patients in a global health setting and is crucial to this study's argument.

How we treat people with disabling conditions is, therefore, a reflection of the image in Christ. If we fail to include people with disabilities in all aspects of the church and its work, we are violating what scripture teaches us about how the image of God should manifest in our lives. When we love others, we are living out God's intentions for his image in which we were made. But those of us who mistreat people with disability by intention or neglect have rejected the renewal of the image in their own lives.<sup>9</sup>

## **We Are a Kingdom of Families Being Renewed**

God intended families to be in Christ and to grow spiritually to be like him. David G. Peterson says, "The apostle's concern is to urge and enable Christians, individually and corporately, to move towards maturity that is God's will for them in Christ."<sup>10</sup> Both each individual and individuals together in communities and societies that are made in the image of God, intended to reflect the attributes of Christ.<sup>11</sup> The individual who is in God's image—God's first institution, the family—participates collectively—to be clear, wives, husbands, children, grandparents, and grandchildren. You and your family are recipients and practitioners of the image. What are families supposed to do? Family members should not only grow spiritually and live righteously, but also build up the church and its outreach role.

*It should not surprise us to have a discussion about family with disability being renewed in the image of God and sent out to serve.*

How do we know this? When God commissioned humans in the first chapter of the Bible, it was the newly created couple that received the dispatch, female and male. The image of God is the starting point in a mission of love for each other and the pathway to acceptance of disability. When we look at our daughters, even in times when their disabilities cause us exhaustion or sadness, we see and think of God's image. Perhaps it is easier to appreciate God's image in one's own child but we must appreciate the image and its meaning to the entire human family, the church, and the praxis of our faith in areas including global health outreach. Our belief in the image of God should inform our loving response to a child displaying aggressive behavior in our church's disability program. He is an "image-bearer" like my daughter.

When working in global health in rural India, Nathan remembers visiting a girl with disability in a rural village. She was sweet, cheeky, but dirty, unkempt, and uncared for. He was shocked as her parents explained, in front of her, that she would "be better off dead." With a tear in his eye, he put his arm around this precious girl and whispered in her ear, "You are beautiful. You are created in God's image and he has a purpose for you." Maybe such feelings are a reflection of the image of God in himself, appreciating the image of God in this girl?

## **What Does 'The Image' Mean to People with Disabling Conditions and Their Families?**

The image of God endows people with a dignity that demands humanity's attention and best effort in support. After all, perception is key in how people view and treat others. Recall that being renewed in the image means treating and being treated better. If I perceive that you are less than me or someone else, then I will treat you in that way. It is inevitable. But there is a remarkable mutuality in the way that God's image works.

If I perceive that you are created in God's image and deserve my best efforts, I will reflect the image of God by doing something that God wants me to be and do for you. In a nutshell, "It requires of others—who are also created in God's image—that they reflect such divine attributes as love and justice in their individual

and societal response to the needs of those with such disabilities.”<sup>12</sup> When viewed this way, the image of God has a certain systemic quality, which, when working as it should, has the potential to resolve many of humanity's problems.<sup>13</sup>

We find resurrection hope in God's image. John Kilner reminds us, “God intends them [people with disability] to become a reflection of God as well. For persons with disabilities, as for others, God's intentions must await resurrection after death before it can be completely fulfilled.”<sup>14</sup>

One can hardly imagine a more fitting invitation for the church to embrace this: “Humans' dignity is bound up with their destiny, and so honoring one another's dignity also requires working together toward a shared destiny.”<sup>15</sup>

As our bodies age and disability sets in, we paradoxically grow closer to having the complete image of Christ revealed in us. We are growing closer to becoming the full reflection of the image of God. The light of the eternal kingdom peeks back into mortal realms, into our mortal bodies, to reflect the image of God.

### Conclusion

An ancient king once boasted of his royal accomplishments describing himself as “completing every mission.”<sup>16</sup> Our Lord, the High King of Heaven completes every mission, but often through the agency of his people, many of whom have disabilities.

But there is a problem. Some brothers and sisters who are vulnerable, powerless, or disabled are not treated as valued image bearers within our churches and Christian service agencies. Instead, they can be seen as mere objects to whom we minister. We, on the other hand, believe people with disability are those with whom we minister, care, and reach out to the world and, more radically by whom we are ministered to, cared for, and reached. This is because all bear the image of our God; to rob them of the opportunity to co-labour in God's work is to go against our very calling and their calling too. People with a disability are full image bearers. Churches and agencies that send out cross cultural workers should work with people with disability to remove barriers and enable their participation in the church's purpose.

Returning to Narnia where it is spring and Aslan reigns as High King, Lucy's declaration, “We are all kings and queens,” calls for us to appreciate our royalty, but perhaps more crucially, the royalty of those around us. We each wear a crown that marks our role in God's reign, a reflection of God's image. We were created in and are presently being renewed in God's image. Being renewed in God's image describes our growth into that royal position and its attendant royal mission, not yet fully realized. But the image itself belonging to God is Jesus Christ our king, and that has never changed, not from the dawn of time.

## Acknowledgements

The authors are indebted to Dr. John Kilner for his publications and his personal support in our writing of this article. Although beyond the scope of this study, John Kilner's interpretation of the image and likeness is close to that of Old Testament scholar Gordon Wenham's view—in the image represents God on earth and man relates to God in heaven—and refines it by extending it to include the entire process in all-of-Scripture connection and reflection.

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## Notes

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1. Lewis C S, *Prince Caspian, The Chronicles of Narnia*. (Collier, 1951).
2. Wenham G J, *Genesis 1–15 WBC* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 30–32.
3. The expression “the already but not yet” is credited to Gerhardus Vos and developed by George Eldon Ladd.
4. The terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness,’ although having a nuance of difference in some contexts, are used interchangeably in Genesis 1 as they were in an ancient inscription from ancient Syria at Tell Fekheriyeh. See Millard A, “A Statue from Syria with Assyrian and Aramaic Inscriptions,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 45 (1982): 135–41.
5. Kilner J F, ed., *Why People Matter: A Christian Engagement with Rival Views of Human Significance* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 140–151.
6. Kilner J F, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 79.
7. This explanation was provided by Dr. John Kilner (Personal correspondence received November 3, 2020.)
8. Stahl D and JF Kilner, “The Image of God, Bioethics, and Persons with Profound Intellectual Disabilities,” *The Journal for the Christian Institute on Disability* 6:1–2 (Spring/Summer|Fall/Winter 2017): 22.
9. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 79.
10. Peterson DG, “Maturity the Goal of Christian Mission,” in Peter Bolt and Mark Thompson eds, *The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul's Mission* (P. T. O'Brien festschrift; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 185.
11. This explanation was provided by Dr. John Kilner (Personal correspondence received November 3, 2020.)
12. Stahl and Kilner, “The Image of God,” 20.
13. Kilner J, *Dignity and Destiny*, xi.
14. Stahl and Kilner, “The Image of God,” 26.
15. Stahl and Kilner, “The Image of God,” 30.
16. King Nabonidus of Assyria.