



The Foundational Image

Summary and Goal

In the creation story, God created human beings in His image. What does that mean? The basic foundation of our value and identity is found in this doctrine.

Main Passage

Genesis 1:26-27

Session Outline

1. Eavesdropping on a Divine Conversation (Gen. 1:26a)
2. A Holy Job Description (Gen. 1:26b)
3. Male and Female He Created Them (Gen. 1:27)

Theological Theme

Recognizing that humanity is made in God's image is foundational for understanding the importance of every human being.

Christ Connection

Christ, who was a part of the divine conversation to make man in His image, became a man Himself to redeem God's image bearers.

Missional Application

Understanding that every human being is created in the image of God frames the worldview through which Christ followers seek to share the hope of Christ with those whom He came to save.

Historical Context of Genesis

Purpose

Genesis lays the groundwork for everything else we read and experience in Scripture. Through Genesis we understand where we came from, how we got in the fallen state we are in, and the beginnings of God's gracious work on our behalf. Genesis unfolds God's original purpose for humanity.

Genesis provides the foundation from which we understand God's covenant with Israel that was established with the giving of the Law. For the Israelite community, the stories of the origins of humanity, sin, and the covenant relationship with God helped them understand why God gave them the Law.

Author

Since pre-Christian times authorship of the Torah, the five books that include the Book of Genesis, has been attributed to Moses, an enormously influential Israelite leader from the second millennium BC with an aristocratic Egyptian background. At the same time, evidence in Genesis suggests that minor editorial changes dating to ancient times have been inserted into the text. Examples include the mention of "Dan" (Gen. 14:14), a city that was not named until the days of the judges (Judg. 18:29), and the use of a phrase that assumed the existence of Israelite kings (Gen. 36:31).

Background

The Torah (a Hebrew term for law) was seen as one unit until at least the second century BC. Sometime prior to the birth of Christ, the Torah was divided into five separate books, later referred to as the Pentateuch (literally, five vessels). Genesis, the first book of the Torah, provides both the universal history of humankind and the patriarchal history of the nation of Israel. The first section (chaps. 1–11) is a general history commonly called the "primeval history," showing how all humanity descended from one couple and became sinners. The second section (chaps. 12–50) is a more specific history commonly referred to as the "patriarchal history," focusing on the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants: Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's 12 sons. Genesis unfolds God's plan to bless and redeem humanity through Abraham's descendants. The book concludes with the events that led to the Israelites being in the land of Egypt.

Special Features

The Book of Genesis is the great book of beginnings in the Bible. True to the meanings of its Hebrew and Greek names (Hb *bereshith*, "In Beginning" [based on 1:1]; Gk *Geneseos*, "Of Birth" [based on 2:4]), Genesis permits us to view the beginning of a multitude of realities that shape our daily existence: the creation of the universe and the planet earth; the origins of plant and animal life; and the origins of human beings, marriage, families, nations, industry, artistic expression, religious ritual, prophecy, sin, law, crime, conflict, punishment, and death.



Session Plan

The Foundational Image

Introduction

- ❓ What does seeking approval from others indicate about where one's value lies? Do you see that as dangerous or healthy?
- ❓ Describe some items in our culture that are defined by who made them. How does the identity of the maker impact the value of those items?

In this week's session, the writer of Genesis detailed the events of creation. Specifically, the text shows the intentional Trinitarian conversation that decided the specifics of man's creation. No other part of creation was made in God's image, only humanity. For that reason, being made in God's image set humanity apart as the zenith of His creation.

1. Eavesdropping on a Divine Conversation (Gen. 1:26a)

Verse 26 begins with a conversation among the three persons of the Trinity. Notice the plural pronouns in the verse. God said, "Let us . . . our image . . . our likeness." The question that demands to be answered is who God was talking to. The answer resides within the dialogue. The only one in whose image man was created was God; no angels were involved. Therefore, this conversation could not involve heavenly created beings. The rest of Scripture makes clear that the creation event was a Trinitarian event. All of this points to the fact that at the height of creation, a Trinitarian decision was made to complete the perfect creation by adding to it human beings. There is no other recorded divine deliberation for any other aspect of creation.

- ❓ How does realizing that the decision to make man in God's image was a communal decision within the Trinity shape your understanding of who God is?
- ❓ Application: What does man's creation at the height of God's creation mean for your view of the value of all human life? What challenges does that realization present to you in the way you treat others?

2. A Holy Job Description (Gen. 1:26b)

The list of duties that came after the decision to create man in God's image only serves to underscore the implications of being made in the image of God. Man was created with a job description already in hand—he had a job. Work is holy because it is an imitation of the work that God did in speaking all that is into existence during creation. All of this existed pre-fall.

- ❓ How would you describe the significance of working as an aspect of being made in the image of God? Explain.
- ❓ Application: How do you view your own work as it pertains to bringing God glory? How does the mandate in Genesis 1 find a way into your relationship with God and the way you serve Him?

3. Male and Female He Created Them (Gen. 1:27)

Verse 27, perhaps because it deals with the design of the man and woman being made in God's image, might seem like a surprising place to dwell on human sexuality. Rest assured, however, it would have been obvious to the original audience. There was no aspect of human experience overlooked when God made man in His image, including the most intimate of relationships. As in so many other areas of God's creation, the covenantal relationship between a man and woman was equal parts functional, in pursuing God's promises, as it was a blessing from God, for the mutual joy of each person.

- ❓ How was the creation of man and woman both functional and relational? What are the implications for the relationship between husband and wife?
- ❓ Application: If you are married, how have you experienced the reality of the way marriage both glorifies God and also brings joy to the husband and wife? If you are not married, how have you seen this in the marriages of others?

Conclusion

- ❓ Which relationships in your life have given you the greatest sense of God's holiness when you are with those people? How can you best discern if the relationships you engage in are God-honoring?
- ❓ What spiritual disciplines help you remember God's love most effectively? Why is remembering God's love for people a key to understanding what it means to be made in His image?
- ❓ How does working, according to your holy job description, reconcile with the biblical teaching for Sabbath? What areas of serving others invigorate you the most? What percentage of your time do you get to engage in that sort of work?



Expanded Session Content




The Foundational Image

Introduction

American culture is consumed with image. Fueled by an unrelenting concern to maintain an appropriate image, many Americans obsess to an about physical appearance, perception of life, influence over others, and the personal brand that is communicated through a variety of social media platforms. Television channel programming is increasingly filled with half-hour infomercials about the latest and greatest workout regimen. Both self-esteem and body image issues are at an all-time high.

In addition to the physical aspect of one's personal image, there exists a perpetual desire to find significance and worth through the approval and validation of others. This includes the tension of wanting to fit in, but needing to stand out. Consider the various avenues of social media that allow us to do this. Regardless of the platform, the explosive growth of these various services hinges on the attempt in some small, or not so small, way to elevate one's image to celebrity status. This compulsion to elevate personal status is nested in trying to derive value from the wrong sources.

The opening chapter of Genesis speaks of humanity being made in God's image. The ramifications of understanding such a distinction include, in part, the blessing of a person knowing who he or she is. Being made in the image of God clarifies value, gives purpose, and orients a person according to God's demonstrated love for him or her. For those reasons, understanding what it means to be made in the image of God is foundational for understanding the world.

-  What are some ways you recognize others attempting to establish or create value for their own lives? What impact do those efforts have on those who know them and/or care about them?
-  What does seeking approval from others indicate about where one's value lies? Do you see that as dangerous or healthy?
-  Describe some items in our culture that are defined by who made them. How does the identity of the maker impact the value of those items?

Session Summary



In this week's session, the writer of Genesis detailed the events of creation. Specifically, the text shows the intentional Trinitarian conversation that decided the specifics of man's creation. No other part of creation was made in God's image, only humanity. For that reason, being made in God's image set humanity apart as the zenith of His creation.

1. Eavesdropping on a Divine Conversation (Gen. 1:26a)

The verses immediately preceding today's focal passage detail the events of creation. Those details include the Holy Spirit's involvement in creation (v. 2), the power of God's spoken word to create from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), the orderly and progressive way in which God moved from chaotic void to even the smallest crawling creature on the earth, and the creation of the spiritual realm as well as the physical. A tremendous amount happens in these first twenty-five verses of the Bible.

Beginning verse 26 with "then" linked it to the events of the previous verse. Immediately prior to this verse was God's repeated pronouncement that all that had been created was good. Everything was splendid, beautiful, and perfect. With every passing day, its majesty grew. This is important to understand because it meant that whatever came last in the order was the climactic, suitable crown of creation. The poetic structure of the writing of Genesis builds increasing tension toward the creation of humanity as the peak of God's creation.

As if such a lead-in were not powerful enough, verse 26 begins with a conversation among the three persons of the Trinity. Notice the plural pronouns in the verse. God said, "Let us . . . our image . . . our likeness." The question that demands to be answered is who God was talking to. The answer resides within the dialogue. The only one in whose image man was created was God; no angels were involved. Therefore, this conversation could not involve heavenly created beings. The rest of Scripture makes clear that the creation event was a Trinitarian event. All of this points to the fact that at the height of creation, a Trinitarian decision was made to complete the perfect creation by adding to it human beings. There is no other recorded divine deliberation for any other aspect of creation.

-  How does realizing that the decision to make man in God's image was a communal decision within the Trinity shape your understanding of who God is?
-  Application: What does man's creation at the height of God's creation mean for your view of the value of all human life? What challenges does that realization present to you in the way you treat others?

God's Good Creation



The Hebrew word for "good" (*tob*) carries many meanings throughout Scripture. As scholar Kenneth Mathews points out, the meaning "is quite fluid . . . indicating for example that which is happy, beneficial, aesthetically beautiful, morally righteous, preferable, or superior quality, or of ultimate value." When evaluating the result of His own creative word, the meaning has in mind both that which is exceedingly splendid and also fully accomplishes the created thing's ultimate purpose.¹

Human beings are completely unique from the rest of creation in that they were created in the image of God. Being in the image of God is a theologically rich distinction. First, this meant that man was created to perform a function that was similar to God—namely, that humanity would tend and shepherd what God had spoken into being. Second, it meant that humanity was created to commune with God in a way no other aspect of creation could. Third, there was an element of sonship connoted in being created in the image of God. While not being divine in nature, humanity was created to participate in a familial, father/child relationship with the Almighty.

2. A Holy Job Description (Gen. 1:26b)

The list of duties that came after the decision to create man in God's image only serves to underscore the implications of being made in the image of God. Man was created with a job description already in hand—he had a job. Work is holy because it is an imitation of the work that God did in speaking all that is into existence during creation. All of this existed pre-fall.

The job description for humanity is described in 1:26b as exercising dominion, and it is expanded in verse 28. After the creation of humanity, God blessed them and gave them the command to “be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it.” This command was foundational to the covenantal structure between God and His people for the rest of the Bible. It is essentially a two-part job description: (1) God was going to use them to make a people for Himself that would (2) dwell with Him in a land that He would provide. A survey of the major epochs in the Bible would reveal the consistency of God's design, even after the effects of the fall. The root of God's dealings with His people was established in the divine command in Genesis 1 to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it.

-  How would you describe the significance of working as an aspect of being made in the image of God? Explain.
-  Application: How do you view your own work as it pertains to bringing God glory? How does the mandate in Genesis 1 find a way into your relationship with God and the way you serve Him?

Once the Bible student turns the page, so to speak, to the New Testament, he or she realizes that this holy job description is still very much a reality. If part of what it means to be made in the image of God means that humanity has a holy work to do, then it would be no surprise that Jesus described Himself as a servant who did not come to be served, but to serve. However, the people of God that were being built under the new

covenant were not established through the physical bloodline of Abraham, but through the faith bloodline of Abraham (who believed God, which was attributed to him as righteousness). The work of the Christian, then, as described in Ephesians 2:10 and other places, was to continue the work of Christ as His craftsmanship for whom good works were created in advance. The summation of that work, per Revelation 21, will be that God's people from every tribe and tongue will dwell with Him in New Jerusalem, the land which He will prepare for them. Part of what it means to be created in the image of God is that humanity participates in the work of God in a manner congruent with the character of God.

3. Male and Female He Created Them (Gen. 1:27)

Verse 27 chronicles the completion of the divine directive. Interestingly and helpful to a theology of the Trinity, where God was referred to in the plural in verse 26, He was referred to in the singular in verse 27. Whereas verse 26 focused on the community and intimacy within the Trinity, verse 27 focused on the unity of the direction and will of God.

The latter portion of verse 27 points to the gender distinctions inherent in the creation of humanity. In speaking of creating "him" earlier in the verse, the writer referred to the collective of humanity as a singular person. However, when more thoroughly explaining the nature of how man was created (illuminated more in the Genesis 2 explanation of creation), the writer specified that in order for man to be created in God's image, there must be both male and female human beings. So what is one to make of this?

First, part of what it means to be created in the image of God is functional. Specifically, according to the job description that God gave to Adam and Eve, they were to be fruitful, multiply, shepherd, and tend to creation. In order to be fruitful and multiply, there must be a man and a woman. Remember, this was in the perfected creation prior to the fall. This was by God's design. Mathews explains that "male and female human members are image-bearers who both are responsible for governing the world. Although the man and woman complete each other, making the full complement of 'man,' it can be said that an individual alone bears the 'image.'"²

Second, there was also a relational component to being made in the image of God. Remember verse 26 where the reader is allowed to peek behind the eternal curtain, so to speak, and eavesdrop on a conversation between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. The reader is allowed to witness the seamless unity and intimacy that exists within the Godhead. Part of being made in the image of God, then, is that the relationship

between a husband and wife is the closest humanity would come to understanding the intimacy that exists within the Trinity. Again, this was all within the perfection of pre-fall creation. It was one of the ways in which God chose to bless humanity in His holy design.

Be Fruitful and Multiply

The Hebrew terms used here for male (*zakar*) and female (*neqeba*) “particularly express human sexuality.”³

The normal terms for man and woman were substituted to make clear the centrality of the blessing of human sexuality in fulfilling the role as image bearers by filling the earth and increasing dominion through subsequent generations.

- ❓ How was the creation of man and woman both functional and relational? What are the implications for the relationship between husband and wife?
- ❓ Application: If you are married, how have you experienced the reality of the way marriage both glorifies God and also brings joy to the husband and wife? If you are not married, how have you seen this in the marriages of others?

Verse 27, perhaps because it deals with the design of the man and woman being made in God’s image, might seem like a surprising place to dwell on human sexuality. Rest assured, however, it would have been obvious to the original audience. No aspect of human experience was overlooked when God made man in His image, including the most intimate of relationships. As in so many other areas of God’s creation, the covenantal relationship between a man and woman was equal parts functional, in pursuing God’s promises, as it was a blessing from God, for the mutual joy of each person.

Conclusion




These two verses carry a degree of familiarity that can frequently rob readers of the profundity of their meaning. Mentally coasting through the creation narratives can cost the reader the richness of what it means to be created in the image of God. Holding these verses in contrast to the various avenues of seeking worth today yields several important points of consideration.

First, because nothing else in creation was created in God’s image, humanity holds a unique position at the pinnacle of God’s creation. This truth is absolutely astonishing considering the majesty that resides in the various corners of creation. Most could imagine being hushed with awe while gazing on the majesty of sunlit mountains, pondering the depths of the oceans, or attempting to consider the vastness of the cosmos. Even in the face of all those things, humanity is the pinnacle. That means that every single human being is an image bearer whom God loves. Christians, then, must continually grow in their view of other people to reflect God’s own view.

Second, being created in the image of God means being about the business of God. Discipleship and service for the Christian have to do with continuing the work of Christ in the world, utilizing the spiritual gifts and abilities that God has given. God modeled work as a holy endeavor

through creation. Jesus modeled work as a holy endeavor through His death, burial, and resurrection (among other things). So, too, must Christians pursue the holy job description of being ambassadors for Christ in obedience to His Great Commission.

Third, being made in the image of God means that humanity was created for community. Some of those relationships include even the most vulnerable and intimate relationships a man and woman can have. Those relationships, however, are not aimless or purposeless. They all work to fulfill what it means to be an image bearer. There is nothing in human experience that can compare to the community that exists seamlessly and eternally in the Trinity. However, God has created humanity with the capacity for deep relationships. Whether or not those relationships are God-honoring according to His design depends on the faithfulness of believers in the manner they engage one another.

-  Which relationships in your life have given you the greatest sense of God's holiness when you are with those people? How can you best discern if the relationships you engage in are God-honoring?
-  What spiritual disciplines help you remember God's love most effectively? Why is remembering God's love for people a key to understanding what it means to be made in His image?
-  How does working, according to your holy job description, reconcile with the biblical teaching for Sabbath? What areas of serving others invigorate you the most? What percentage of your time do you get to engage in that sort of work?

Prayer of Response

Pray and thank God that He has made all people in His image. Pray that you would live in a way that honors Him by loving others who are made in His image.

Additional Resources

- *Created in God's Image* by Anthony Hoekema
- *The Christian View of Man* by J. Gresham Machen
- *Identity and Idolatry* by Richard Lints

For Next Week

Session Title

- An Unduplicated Image

Main Passage

- Exodus 20:4-6

Session Outline

1. Accept No Substitutes (Ex. 20:4-5a)
2. God is a Jealous God? (Ex. 20:5b)
3. God's Desire Is for Covenant Love (Ex. 20:6)

Memorize

So God created man in his own image; he created him in the image of God; he created them male and female.

-Genesis 1:27

Daily Readings

- Monday - Genesis 1:26-27
- Tuesday - Psalm 139:13-16
- Wednesday - Genesis 9:5-6
- Thursday - Exodus 4:10-11
- Friday - James 3:9
- Saturday - 1 John 3:1-2

Extended Commentary

Genesis 1:26-27

1:26 God’s use of plural pronouns (Us... Our... Our) to refer to Himself has raised many questions (3:22; 11:7; Isa 6:8). At least five different suggestions have been put forward to explain them: they may be references to (1) the Trinity, (2) God and His angels, (3) God and creation, (4) God’s majesty as expressed by a literary device known as the “plural of majesty,” or (5) a polytheistic view of God. Since the Bible teaches elsewhere that there is only one God (Dt 6:4; Mk 12:29; 1Co 8:4), the fifth option is not tenable.

The two Hebrew words translated as image and likeness are often understood as having the same meaning. But some interpreters suggest that “image” refers to the ability to reason, with “likeness” referring to the spiritual dimension. What exactly is the “image” of God? Since the Bible teaches that God is Spirit (Jn 4:24), many commentators believe it refers to the non-material aspects of a person—our moral sensibilities, intellectual abilities, will, and emotions. Based on God’s commands in Gen 1:28, others have suggested that it consists of the role humans are to play on earth—their rulership over the planet and its resources, and secondarily the physical, mental, and spiritual abilities that enable them to fulfill that role. The NT teaches that Christians will someday bear the image of Christ (1 Co 15:49; 1 Jn 3:2).

1:27 The creation of humanity is the crowning event of chapter 1, as shown by the fact that created is repeated three times. The verb “created” (Hb bara’) is the same one used in 1:1, referring to a kind of creative activity that only God can do. The term “man” (Hb ‘adam) is used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to refer to humanity in general, not just males (7:21); all people, both male and female, are created in the image of God (cp. Jms 3:9). People are the only beings that are created in the image of God (Gen 9:3-6). The Bible never lumps people into the category of animals. Instead, it separates the creation of people from all other beings and attributes the most privileged roles in creation to humans alone.⁴

References

1. Mathews, Kenneth A. *Genesis 1-11:26*. NAC. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. *HCSB Study Bible*. Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2015.

Author Bio

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Kenneth A. Matthews (ThM, Dallas Theological Seminary; PhD, University of Michigan) is professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, where he teaches Old Testament, Hebrew, and biblical hermeneutics. His noted publications include two commentaries on Genesis and (as coauthor) the Leviticus Scroll from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Anthony Hoekema (Made in God's Image)

Anthony A. Hoekema (1913–1988) was professor of systematic theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan. His other widely read works include *The Christian Looks at Himself* and *The Four Major Cults*.

J. Gresham Machen (The Christian View of Man)

J. Gresham Machen (1881–1937) was professor of New Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. He was also the author of *Christian Faith in the Modern World*, *What Is Faith?* and *The Origin of Paul's Religion*.

Richard Lints (Identity and Idolatry)

Richard Lints (PhD, University of Notre Dame) is the Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor of Theology and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. An ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America, he is an accomplished church planter and has served in a variety of other pastoral positions. He is a frequent preacher and conference speaker and is on the board of the Gospel Culture Center, serving as its Theologian in Residence. Lints is the author or editor of books such as *Renewing the Evangelical Mission*, *Progressive and Conservative Religious Ideologies: The Tumultuous Decade of the 1960s*, *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, *The Westminster Dictionary of Key Terms in Philosophy and Their Importance in Theology* and *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theory*. In addition to teaching at Gordon-Conwell, he has lectured at Yale Divinity School, the University of Notre Dame, Trinity College (Bristol, UK), Westminster Theological Seminary and Reformed Theological Seminary. He and his wife Ann reside in Magnolia, Massachusetts, and have three grown children.