

Christian Reflections on Anthropology, Bioethics and Genetic Engineering

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Lesson 1: Theological Anthropology and the Image of God – *What does it mean to be a human?*

1. Introduction and Relevance:

- a. Recent case: “Infant with rare, incurable disease is first to successfully receive personalized gene therapy treatment.”¹
 - i. “A team of researchers at the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) and the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn) developed the customized therapy using the gene-editing platform CRISPR. *They corrected a specific gene mutation in the baby’s liver cells that led to the disorder. CRISPR is an advanced gene editing technology that enables precise changes to DNA inside living cells. This is the first known case of a personalized CRISPR-based medicine administered to a single patient and was carefully designed to target non-reproductive cells so changes would only affect the patient.* “As a platform, gene editing -- built on reusable components and rapid customization -- promises a new era of precision medicine for hundreds of rare diseases, bringing life-changing therapies to patients when timing matters most: Early, fast, and tailored to the individual,” said Joni L. Rutter, Ph.D., director of NIH’s National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences (NCATS).
 - ii. Raises ethical questions:
 1. *What if applied at earlier stages? What if applied for enhancement? Etc.*
- b. The question “what is man?” has acquired a new urgency, and how we answer it impacts all areas of life.
 - i. *Anthropology*
- c. Different non-Christian answers²:
 - i. *Idealistic* anthropologies consider the human being to be basically spirit, his physical body foreign to his real nature.
 1. Body is in a lower order of reality; denial of resurrection.
 - ii. *Materialistic* anthropologies consider man as a being composed of material elements, his mental, emotional, and spiritual life being simply by-products of his material structure.
 1. Marxism, evolutionism, etc.
 - iii. “If, as the Bible teaches, the most important thing about man is that he is inescapably related to God, we must judge as deficient any anthropology which denies that relatedness.” (Hoekema)
 - iv. Often crept into so-called Christian anthropologies.

¹ <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/infant-rare-incurable-disease-first-successfully-receive-personalized-gene-therapy-treatment>

² Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 1994, pp. 2-4.

2. Biblical Anthropology: *Man is a created person in the image of God*³.
 - a. Created – the human being does not exist independently or autonomously but is a creature of God.
 - i. Completely dependent on God (Acts 17:25,28).
 1. “We cannot lift a finger apart from God’s will”.
 2. We are limited, temporal, finite, subject to His law.
 - b. Person – means to have a kind of relative independence.
 - i. Ability to make decisions, set goals, and moral responsibility.
 1. *“To be a creature means that I cannot move a finger or utter a word apart from God; to be a person means that when my fingers are moved, I move them, and that when words are uttered by my lips, I utter them. To be creatures means that God is the Potter and we are the clay (Rom. 9:21); to be persons means that we are the ones who fashion our lives by our own decisions (Gal. 6:7-8).”*
 - c. Image of God – the most distinctive feature of the biblical understanding of man. The “heart of Christian anthropology” (Hoekema).
 - i. In the Old Testament: only dealt with explicitly in Genesis 1:26-28, 5:1-3, and 9:6.
 1. Genesis 1:26-28,31:
 - a. ²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” [...] ³¹ And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.
 - b. Key points:
 - i. Man is uniquely, specially created.
 1. Preceded by a divine counsel or deliberation (v. 26)
 2. Plural indicates that God exists as a “plurality” (NT Trinity), and man reflects that.
 3. God created the man and the woman from whom all humankind would descend.
 - ii. Image and likeness.
 1. In Hebrew, no clear essential difference between these words.

³ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 1994, chapters 2 and 3.

2. The words together tell us that man is a representation of God, who is like God in certain respects. Notice how it's *comprehensive*.
 - a. Dominion.
 - b. Male and female (fellowship).
 - c. Persons, responsible beings.
 - d. Cultural mandate.
 - e. State of integrity, innocence, and holiness (v. 31).
2. Comment on the Fall and the gravity of sin. Genesis 5:1-3 and 9:6:
 - a. This is the book of the generations of Adam. When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God.² Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created.³ When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.
 - b. *"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image."*
 - c. Key points:
 - i. Man is still the image of God after the fall, although tarnished and corrupted.
 - ii. To touch the image of God is to touch God himself.
3. "The Old Testament passages we have looked at so far teach that man was created in God's image, and still exists in that image. In fact, we ought to say not only that man *has* the image of God but that man *is* the image of God. From the Old Testament standpoint, to be human is to bear the image of God." (Hoekema)
4. "The whole human being is the image and likeness of the whole divine being."⁴
5. "Reformed theology does not hesitate to say that it [the image of God] *constitutes* the very essence of man"⁵.
- ii. New Testament Teaching:
 1. James 3:9: "With it [our tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God."
 - a. "Human beings as here described have at some time in the past been made according to the likeness of God and *are still bearers of the likeness*. For this reason, it is inconsistent to praise God and curse men with the same tongue, since the human creatures whom we curse still bear the likeness of God."
 2. Jesus Christ is the perfect image of God:

⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, p. 561

⁵ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 276.

- a. 2 Cor 4:4: ⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the *image of God*.
- b. Heb 1:3: ³He is the radiance of the glory of God and the *exact imprint of his nature*, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.
 - i. What the Son is in an absolute sense, humans are in a relative sense (Bavinck).
- c. “But, presumably, it was only because man had been created in the image of God that the second person of the Trinity could assume human nature. That Second Person, it would seem, could not have assumed a nature that had no resemblance whatsoever to God. In other words, the Incarnation confirms the doctrine of the image of God.” (Hoekema)
- d. “Since Christ was totally without sin (Heb. 4:15), in Christ we see the image of God in its perfection” (Hoekema).
 - i. If this is true, then the heart of the image of God must be love, for God and for man.
- e. *The believer is being renewed according to His image*: Rom. 8:29: ²⁹For those whom he foreknew he also *predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son*, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.
- f. Col. 3:9-11: ⁹Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, *which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator*.¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.
 - i. “The fact that the image of God must be restored in us implies that there is a sense in which that image has been distorted. Though, as we have seen, some Bible passages teach that there is a sense in which even fallen man is still an image bearer of God, these texts clearly imply that there is a sense in which we no longer image God properly because of our sin, and that therefore we need to be restored to that image. The image of God in this sense is not static but dynamic, it is the pattern according to which our lives are being renewed by the Holy Spirit and the eschatological goal toward which we are moving.”

- iii. Summary: “To be faithful to the biblical evidence, our understanding of the image of God must include these two senses” (Hoekema):
 - 1. “The image of God as such is an unlosable aspect of man, part of his essence and existence, something that man cannot lose without ceasing to be man.” (Hoekema)
 - a. Image of God in the *broad* [structural] sense, “the whole human being is that image—soul and body, in all faculties and capacities, in every condition and relationship.”
 - i. Soul and body!
 - 2. “The image of God, however, must also be understood as that likeness to God which was perverted when man fell into sin and is being restored and renewed in the process of sanctification.” (Hoekema)
 - a. Image of God in the *narrow* [functional] sense, includes human actions, as well as their relationships with God and with others, and the way they use their gifts and capacities.
 - 3. The two realities—broad and narrow—are inseparable, and the image of God must be viewed as a whole, even though functioning is primary (i.e., the end) and structure is secondary (i.e., the means).
 - 4. Berkhof also puts it like this: “To sum up it may be said that the image consists:
 - a. In the soul or spirit of man, that is, in the qualities of simplicity, spirituality, invisibility, and immortality.
 - b. In the psychical powers or faculties of man as a rational and moral being, namely, the intellect and the will with their functions.
 - c. In the intellectual and moral integrity of man’s nature, revealing itself in true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10.
 - d. In the body, not as a material substance, but as the fit organ of the soul, sharing its immortality; and as the instrument through which man can exercise dominion over the lower creation.
 - e. In man’s dominion over the earth.”⁶
- 3. Application: what are the implications for how we understand technology, and particularly bioethics?
 - a. We can’t change our nature, to treat humans as purely material or, at the bottom, the product of their genetics is reductionistic and fails to account for his being *imago Dei*.

⁶ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 276.

- b. “The Christian sees the individual, though corrupted and defaced, as the created image of God. God's love and care continually reach out to the individual. Therefore, we must love every one of our fellow human beings. Out of this love we can use scientific technological possibilities to combat sickness and relieve suffering, as is done in medical science. But the Christian’s view of human beings is based on the inviolability and integrity of every individual, as well as on the realization that we can only *moderate* human suffering and can never entirely repair the effects of his corruption. Viewed from the perspective of creation and fall, the origin of this corruption lies in human beings willfully breaking their communion with God. This religious failure *cannot* be remedied by science and technology.”⁷
 - i. Inviolability and integrity of every individual.
 - ii. Suffering can only be moderated but not entirely repaired.
 - 1. Its source, and the source of all corruption, is sin, which cannot be remedied by science and technology.
- c. Garden-model; technology in the service of life and for the glory of God.
 - i. ¹⁵ The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. (Genesis 2:15)

Bibliography

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⁷ Schuurman, *Technology and Christianity*, p. 300.