

Essay:

“Christ is the Image of the Invisible God”

Is the New Testament use of this term helpful today?

Jurgen Hofmann

Word Count: 1242

Introduction

Humans are created in God's image but Christ *is* the image of God. How do we approach this aspect of Christ? Can it be that it explains what human nature is supposed to be, or does the New Testament's view on Christ entail a more radical transformation if it comes to the overall salvation story? This paper will indeed answer the latter positively. Furthermore, it will demonstrate that the history of humankind evolves around Christ, making this a valuable contribution to contemporary theological discussions.

The Word 'Image'

Paul used this phrase for Jesus several times in his writings.¹ He used the Greek word '*eikōn*' (image) which, in New Testament Greek, has to do with a replica, a precise copy, a representation.² The word *eikōn* appears several times throughout the New Testament. However, whenever humans are mentioned as the *eikōn* of God, it is in the sense of creation *in* the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Conversely, Paul depicts Jesus as *the* image of God. Thus, Jesus is the replica of the Father, He is the 'perfect reflection of the prototype.'³

New Testament's Theology

Answering False Teaching

Paul's writing (Colossians 1:15-20) to the Christians in the city Colossae was not without reason. This city was being inundated by false teachings. There are several theories about the identity of these false teachers. Several theories entail gnosticism: Gnostics saw the spirit as good and matter as evil.⁴ The implications thereof would have been that God could not create *and* He could not become a man, as that would mean that a good God created evil and by becoming a man He would dwell in an evil space (the body). If Jesus was a lesser being than God He would not be perfect and

1 2 Corinthians 4:4; Philippians 2:6; Colossians 1:15

2 Strong, *The exhaustive*, 1621.

3 Porteous, 'Image,' 684.

4 Puskas, *The Letters*, 120-123.

thus not able to carry the full guilt of humankind. Thus to depict Jesus as *the* image of the Creator, Paul reassured the Colossians that they had the perfect redeemer. In addition, writing about Christ as image of God, he is not portraying Him as the second or last man, like he did when he named Him the last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45-49), but as 'the firstborn of every creature' (Colossians 1:15b) in Divine glory (Phillipians 2:6).⁵

Christocentric understanding

The Old Testament idea of humankind as created in the image of God seems to be replaced with the thought of Christ as being *the* image of God. It is primarily Paul who develops the New Testament Christocentric understanding of the image of God. He drew these conclusions from the Old Testament texts and his conviction that God's plan from the beginning found its fulfilment in Christ. Psalm 8:5 (cf. Genesis 1:28-30) states that God 'hast crowned' man 'with glory and honour.' Paul compares and contrasts Jesus' work of salvation to Adam's work of rebellion.⁶ Satan could mislead the first Adam but was unsuccessful with the second Adam (Matthew 4:1-11).

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul, just like in Colossians 1:15, is focusing on Christ's glory as the image of God (v.4). The glory of God radiates on the face of Jesus (v.6). Paul intentionally alludes to the creation of humankind in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27). The texts have a narrative focus, which can be seen in the implied allusion to the creation of humans in God's image (Genesis 1:26–27), and can now be understood through the lens of Christ as the Second Adam. However, some state that *eikōn* in 2 Corinthians 4:4 needs to be explained from the idea of the wisdom (*Sophia*) in later Judaism. Colossians 1:15 would then be a combination of wisdom *and* the gnostic idea of primal man. In other words, in these verses one is talking about a gnostic man, who had the name 'image of God' but was not yet connected with Genesis 1:27.⁷ Nevertheless, 2 Corinthians 4:6

⁵ Ridderbos, *Paul*, 84-85.

⁶ Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:22.

⁷ Sanders, *The New Testament*, 75-87.

clearly points to Genesis 1:3. Furthermore, Colossians 1:15-20 narrates the creation account with the 'image of God' implanted in Genesis 1:27, Christ as the Beginning, the First-born, and the Ruler of everything. Knowing this, it is hard to deny the link with Genesis, and one can see the Christological interpretation of Genesis 1.

The transformation can also be seen in the New Testament writings where this glory and honour is centralised in one man, which is Jesus. Hebrews 2:6-9 highlights Psalm 8, but instead of attributing the image of God to humankind, the writer places the whole idea on Christ—making Him the ultimate representative of all humanity. Additionally, Hebrews classifies the Son of God with the Son of man. In this sense God had put all things under Christ's feet (Psalm 8:6). Hebrews 1:1–3 considers Jesus as the fulfilment of God's image for He is the Son through whom God spoke, heir of all things (cf. Psalm 2:8), by whom God 'made the worlds'.⁸ The climax of this fulfilment is when he 'had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high'.

Contemporary Discussions

The idea of Jesus as the representative of humankind, who was created in the image of God, is not a widely discussed theme in evangelical theology. Some scholars use the term 'image of God' more in the anthropological concept rooted in original creation.⁹ Likewise, the concept of Jesus, as the image of God, is viewed as example of what human nature proposed to be.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the view of man, as being in the image of God, seems to fade away compared to the revelation of God *in* Christ, making Him the ultimate image of God.¹¹ In other words, Jesus was both the perfect reflection of God *and* by His works of salvation the perfect human in God's image. Just like David, who was the representative of Israel in his fight with Goliath, Jesus is the representative of God's initial creation.

8 Buchanan, *To the Hebrews*, 28. Cf. Ephesians 1:22, 1 Peter 3:22.

9 Erickson, *Christian*, 513; Grudem, *Systematic*, 444.

10 Erickson, *Christian*, 514.

11 Porteous, 'Image,' 684.

Post-modernity

By explaining human nature wholly on the creation account with Christ as the ultimate example, one is in danger of using the first Adam as criterion for the second. This presumes Jesus' relation with Genesis as arbitrated through the story of the fall, which would result in a humanised creation doctrine. As explained, however, it is Christ who is Master over creation and in *Him* humankind will ultimately find its calling as the image of God. In post-modern theology, it is important to communicate a clear Christological doctrine on the image of God. Without, one is in danger of narrating a Liberator of mainly worldly aspects,¹² and consequently loosing sight of Christ's ultimate goal: to be the image of God and to inaugurate a new humanity of those who are transformed to *that* image, and finally restoring the human vocation from the beginning.

Conclusion

A merely anthropological approach of Christ as the image of God, cannot fully justify the New Testament's concept. This anthropocentric approach undermines Christ's real vocation—the ultimate Saviour of humankind—changing Him into a Saviour of worldly conflicts instead.

Because of the New Testament's transformation of this view one can state: “For in him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

12 Inbody, *The Faith*, 214.

Bibliography

All biblical references are taken from *The Holy Bible: King James Version* (1611).

Buchanan, G. W., *To the Hebrews*, 2nd ed., New York: Doubleday, 1972.

Erickson, M. J., *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990.

Grudem, W., *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

Inbody, T., *The Faith of the Christian Church: An Introduction to Theology*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005.

Porteous, N. W., 'Image,' in G. A. Buttrick (ed.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopaedia*, Vol. II, New York: Abingdon Press, 1962.

Puskas, C. B., *The Letters of Paul: An Introduction*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1993.

Ridderbos, H. N., *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, (trans.) J. R. de Witt, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975.

Sanders, J. T., *The New Testament Christological Hymns: Their Historical Religious Background*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Strong, J., *The exhaustive concordance of the Bible*, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Inc., 2007.