

Images and Intimacy

About four years ago I was sitting in my office in the middle of an unusually quiet week. Hardly anyone had come to see me for pastoral advice, there was little to do in the way of administration and sermon preparation was not pressing. Inwardly, however, I became inescapably aware of a growing feeling — I felt no joy at all, no enthusiasm in what I was doing.

As I was left with my own thoughts I became conscious of a sense of wanting to be in a different job. It didn't seem to matter which one; whatever caught my mind seemed preferable to the ministry situation in which I found myself. A Bible verse came out of nowhere: "Well done, good and faithful servant ... enter into the joy of your master" (Matthew 25:23 RSV). How empty and impossible this all seemed.

I resolved to see a well known Christian counsellor. After a while he asked me: "What did you do with your father when you were young?" I really couldn't think of anything that Dad and I did together, nor anything I did which gave him joy. Suddenly it all came together for me, my image of God in His relating to me was a reflection of my experience of my earthly father.

It was this realisation, and the liberation which followed, that first led me to reflect on what sort of a distinctive contribution Christian systematic theology might have to make in understanding why so many people in Western cultures struggle to experience that face-to-face relationship with God which we call intimacy.

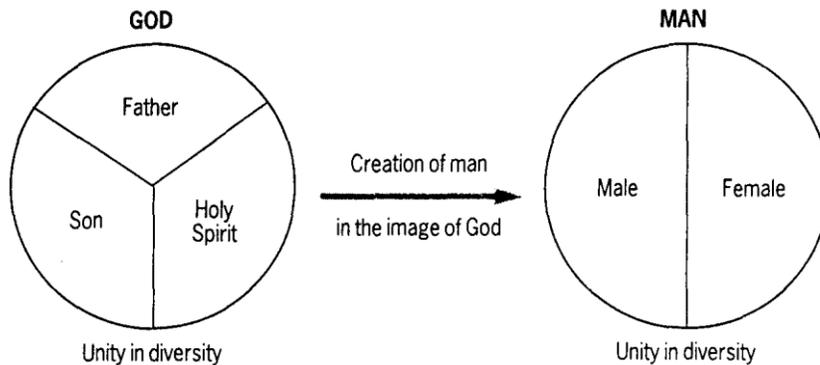
The proposal advanced here: that knowing God intimately is impossible if we have a deep-level negative image of Him, is not new. A popular book published some years ago along these lines included images of the "resident policeman"; "grand old man"; "god of one hundred per cent"; "managing director" and so on. What is usually lacking, however, is a suitable framework of interpretation.

Eternally loved

Christians accept that the statement "God is love" (1 John 4:8,16) points to the fact that God is an inner plurality. Or, in traditional theological language, a Trinity: three Persons in one essence, It is because the three Persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit have eternally loved each other in the form of what could be called a divine community, or even family, that it makes sense to say that God is love. Love constitutes God, it is what He essentially is. It is as love that God created man in His own Image. "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness ...' So God created man in his own Image, in the Image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26—27 NIV capitals own).

Although this text has been subject to endless scholarly speculation, it was the Protestant theologian Karl Barth who was the first to connect the stated intention of God to create: "let us make", with the result that man was made "male and female".

According to Barth the plurality indicated by “us” is a divinely inspired reference to the Trinity, as God is a being who exists in relationship so the Image of God in man cannot refer to a single property or bundle of properties but must be relational also.



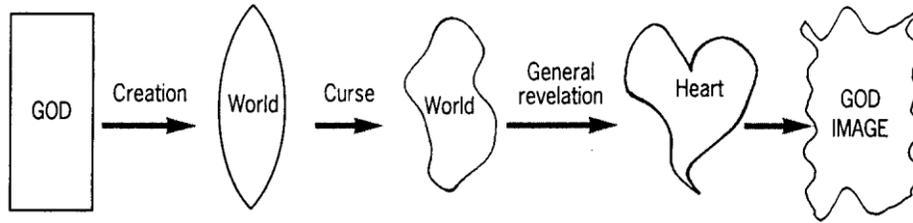
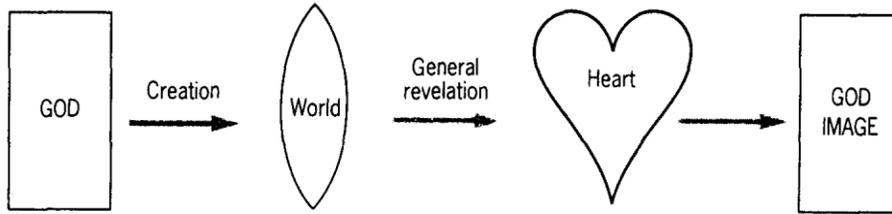
As there is a face-to-face relationship in God, using Barth’s language, an “I—thou” relation, so man exists as man, that is, as the Image of God, in a face-to-face relationship. What Genesis is saying is that this face-to-face relationship in its most concrete form is that between man and woman. This view could essentially be represented by the diagram above.

It needs to be added that although Barth emphasises the man—woman relation, the notion that the Image of God is relational is taken to include all the other combinations in which we exist as human persons (man—man, woman—woman). The significance of these observations only becomes fully apparent when they are combined with what theologians call “general revelation”.

General revelation is the communication of God’s nature to all people through the structure and operation of the natural order. “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world” (Psalm 19:1—4 NIV).

This same principle is put more expressively in the teaching of the apostle Paul: “What may be known about God is plain to them because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made. (Romans 1:19—20 NIV).

In a world where the relationship between humanity and God had not been disturbed, we would have had the invariable sequence shown below



The total result of general revelation would have been a perfectly accurate working image of God imprinted upon the deepest part of man the Bible calls the “heart”. The centerpiece of this process of general revelation would have been our parents; their character, their relationship with one another and their relationship with us. must be so because, as we have seen, personal relationships constitute the Image of God. If our parents had perfectly reflected God’s loving character to us we would have formed a perfect image of God as well as being perfectly formed in the Image of God. Intimacy with God would have flowed because in the God-ordained structure of creation intimacy was to have been first learned in the family.^o

The penetrating nature of this pattern will elude us if we miss the fact that what we are dealing with is a revelatory structure. The parent—child order was so arranged in the plan of creation that the picture of God conveyed by the parent was designed by God to bear His own authority. Mother and father were meant to be a living word of God to their children. The tenacity and depth of the image of God formed through the parents can only be explained in terms of a revelatory structure and not merely by learning and observation. This is why the expression, “concept of God” is too weak to express the impact of the parental relation on the child’s grasp of who God is. “Concept” suggests something merely intellectual and not a matter of the “heart”.

None of the above would be of practical interest if the foundational structures of creation were temporary. The Bible, however, never suggests that the entry of evil into the world undoes the original created orders. The task of man is still to have dominion over the earth, he still has authority over the animals and so on (Genesis 1:28; 2:19). God still expects parents to be a word from Him to their children about His character and children are creatorially designed to receive such.

In general terms the effect of evil upon the pattern of general revelation can be represented by the diagram above. God remains the same but the Image of God in man has become distorted and obscured because of evil. (This is represented in the diagram by the distortion in the shape of the “lens” of the world.)

The apostle Paul implies as much when he talks about putting off the old sinful self and putting on “the new self, which is being renewed [restored] ... in the image of its Creator” (Colossians 3:9—10 NIV). Added to this the “heart”, designed to receive the picture of God, is itself “deceitful above all things” (Jeremiah 17:9 NIV). Its tendency is to twist even what truth it receives. The net result is that everyone holds a distorted image of God. More specifically, the following process takes place to one degree or another in all families. Parents both possess and express love in a deficient way towards their children, that is, their intimacy with their children is at best incomplete.

On top of this children have an inborn bias against receiving whatever image of God is being truly communicated in the family. Until a miracle of God’s gracious love occurs there necessarily resides deep in every human heart a distorted image of God. Such distortion is not general but highly specific; counselling experience establishes what could be termed a “principle of parallelism”. The dominant negative features of the parents will invariably be perceived to be negative characteristics of God?

Below are a couple of case studies. Peter was a sincere young Christian but was deeply distressed by what seemed to him an impossible task of getting close to God. Praying was like talking to a brick wall, and he admitted when pressed that he deeply feared that if he ever did get intimate with God he would be forced to make a decision that would be against his will.

It turned out that Peter came from a farming family. His father was a hard working man who spent long hours out of the house. When he was home he was often too tired for talk, besides which he was a shy and withdrawn person who hardly ever initiated conversation. The mother of the family was almost the opposite. She exerted a powerful presence in the home and expected the children always to do what she said. Consultation was unknown.

Introspection

As we discussed these things it dawned on Peter that he had constructed a composite image of God drawn from his experience of a distant inaccessible father and an authoritarian controlling mother. This simple yet profound realisation has proved to be a major turning point in releasing Peter from both introspection and struggles with praying. It is a truism that no human being trusts a person whose character is assessed as untrustworthy. When a child has experienced rage, arbitrary discipline, lack of emotional affection, abuse, repeated criticism and so on, the resultant image of God carried into adulthood will make the sort of trust and vulnerability which are prerequisites for intimacy impossible.

Personality change

Elizabeth's early years were spent at home with her mother, as her father was away at the war, the two had an intense relationship and most of the time she felt loved. On occasions however, suddenly and unpredictably, Elizabeth's mother would act out a dramatic change in personality. She would become a wicked old hag who threatened to do the most horrible things to the child. Yet as soon as Elizabeth was distraught, the mother would resume her usual character and comfort her with hugs and kisses.

Elizabeth has generally had no difficulty accepting God's love for her. Recently though she has become aware of God calling her to a deeper level of trust and for the first time in her spiritual journey she has become aware of an image of God combining light and darkness. In a dream she saw Jesus calling her to come close but as she approached his appearance suddenly changed into that of a mocking devil. Although at one level, Elizabeth has been helped through counselling to see how she superimposed her experience of her mother onto God she has yet to experience emotional release.

Conclusion

Where the intellectual concept of God, however accurate, does not correspond to a true heart image of God the result will be spirituality based on a false foundation. Since these matters are rarely dealt with in the Christian church it should be expected that many people who present for counselling have a relationship with God motivated by guilt, dominated by legalism, characterised by outward conformity but inward rebellion and so on. This is a topic in itself.

The above limited observations on images and intimacy go to the root of what it means to be a human being. Whatever else happens, there can be no essential healing of the person whose image of God remains infected by false elements imbibed from the parental relation. Knowing that this is so and understanding how such problems arise, opens the way to help others turn away from distorted images of God and to come to know Him as a true Father. 0

Endnotes

1. To avoid confusion "Image" is used in a capitalised form in referring to man as the image of God, in the tower case it indicates the image or picture a person has of God.
2. Phillips, J.B., *Your God is Too Small*, Epworth Press, Westminster, UK, 1952 covers this ground.
3. Barth, K., *Church Dogmatics: 111/1 The Doctrine of Creation*, ed. G.W. Bromiley, and T.F. Torrance, tr. J.W.E. Edwards, O. Bussey. H. Knight, T & T Clark. Edinburgh. UK, 1958, pp. 18 1—206.
4. Support for this view can be found in empirical psychological studies. e.g. Long, M., *Acquiring our Image of God*, Paulist Press, New York, USA, 1983; Rizzuto, AM., *The Birth of the Living God*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago. USA, 1979.

5. See Bingham, G.C., *The Meaning and Making of Man*, New Creation Publications, Adelaide, Australia, 1990, p.71
6. This is the process described in Romans 1:21—23: “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles” (NIV).
7. See G.C. Bingham, *Oh Father! Our Father*, New Creation Publications, Adelaide, Australia, 1983, p.5.
8. This model suggests that it is more accurate to think in terms of the impact of the parent on the child as forming a sort of psychological grid through which God is viewed, rather than leading to a projection or extrajection of parental properties onto God.
9. Phillips, J.B., *op. cit.*
10. Although A.W. Tozer’s language is somewhat inadequate the point he makes is vital: “Were we able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, ‘What comes into your mind when you think about God?’ we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man.” *The Knowledge of the Holy*, Kingsway Publications, Eastbourne, UK, 1961, p.12