

making the invisible visible

The Image of God & the Adventist Pioneers—1 of 4

KEY TEXT—COLOSSIANS 1:15

INTRODUCTION

The Bible begins with the declaration that "God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27) This image defines what it means for you to be human.

But what is the image of God? This is critical to understand because sin has entered into the world and has corrupted everything—including the image of God in us. If our mission as a Christianity community is to restore the image of God, we need to know what the image of God is supposed to look like, otherwise we don't know what we are rebuilding.

Not knowing this is like getting a large box from Ikea without any pictures or instructions. What are we building? What are those pieces for? How do the different pieces fit together? Five men could easily build five different pieces of furniture. But we are designed and are supposed to be rebuilt according to one design—God's own image. We don't want to get this wrong.

But we have a challenge. When trying to explain the image of God, one person made a wisecrack based on Churchill's famous declaration: never in the history of theology, has so much been written, by so many, about so little. This was said because the phrase "image of God" is mentioned in only 6 verses in the whole Bible, with the term "likeness of God" in only a further 4 verses.

COLOSSIANS 1:15

making the invisible visible

While Genesis says all humans are created in the image of God, Colossians affirms that Jesus is the image of God:

The Son is the image of the invisible God... (Col. 1:15)

The key idea in this phrase is that Jesus as the image of God is making the invisible visible. Both Old and New testaments say that no-one has seen God. So one of the purposes of Jesus coming to earth is make visible what has always been hidden.

"image" in the greek

In biblical Greek, the word for image (εἰκών / icon) has two facets of meaning 1) representation or symbolism, 2) manifestation. This second facet is what dominates. Jesus has not simply come to symbolise God's presence on earth but has come to manifest God—to show us what God is actually like. Hebrews emphasises this idea, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being..." (Hebrews 1:3), with John explaining, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God

and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known." (John 1:18)

So what is it that Jesus has come to make known—make visible—about His Father? To answer this, I will illustrate with some insights and testimonies from the Adventists pioneers.

THE JOURNEY OF THE PIONEERS

God has a body

When the early Adventists emerged in the early 1800's, the view within Christianity was that God is only spirit, with people insisting that "man cannot be in the image of God in respect to bodily form, for God is without form, body or parts."

The idea that God is an immortal spirit is where the concept of the immortal soul comes from. Adventists realised that if people believed that we are made in God's image, and if God is only an immortal spirit, then we must have an immortal spirit also. But that idea contradicted the evidence of Scripture, and was instead rooted in Greek philosophy. So Adventists set out "to prove: first, that God has a form, and in the second place that this is the divine definition of image" (Advent Review and Sabbath Herald, 29 August, 1854). Consequently, this meant that the early Adventists rejected the idea that the image God was his character. Even James White concluded "the premise that the image of God means his moral image is false." (ARSH June 18, 1861). This upset many other Christians.

impressed with God's character

It is only really in the 1880's that the definition of image began to shift from being only the body of God to the moral character of God. As Ecclesiastes 7:29 says that "God created mankind upright", EJ Waggoner argued in 1886 that to be made "upright" means you have to be made in the character of God. Later in 1895, AT Jones wrote,

In the beginning man was made 'in the image of God.' And that signifies a good deal more than the shape of God. One looking upon him would be caused to think of God. He reflected the image of God; God was suggested to whoever looked upon the man.

Two years later, J. H. Kellogg is even more encompassing when he wrote that the image of God in Adam was the fullness of what is available in Jesus:

This expression, 'the image of God' means that God put into the mass of clay, out of which man was made, everything of God that it is possible to manifest through the human form," arguing that "in Christ we have the

same sort of an image of God that we had in the first Adam. (GC Daily Bulletin Feb 18, 1897, 77).

To emphasise the image of God as His character, a number of writers begin to demonstrate this with 2 Corinthians 4:4-6. Eventually, Adventists fully embraced the image of God as His character. J. A. Brunson writes that to bear the image of God is, in the words of Paul, to put on

bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness" and to be to be renewed by the attributes of Jesus, "mercy, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering, forbearance, love," concluding that "every individual who bears the image of God, is one who has these qualities of heart that we have just described. Then, since God made man in his own image, and place him here on earth, this being, bearing the image of God, bore also the characteristics of God.

Corliss continues by explaining Colossians 1:15,

I wish that word "image" could be understand more literally than the English presents it. When we find its meaning in the language that underlies the English, we find it is this, 'Who is the pressed-forth one;' that is, pressed forth as features are pressed in wax. Then to be in the image of Christ is to be pressed forth, and his features are to be our features, as if they were pressed in wax. That is the way we are to be.

the view from the pew

During the mid 1850's while the Adventist theologians had not yet embraced the image of God as His character, many of the church members certainly did, and this is reflected in the letters they wrote to the Advent Review. Here are some snippets from their letters:

1. Dear brethren and sisters, let us strive to die daily unto sin, and not be conformed to this world, but, be transformed into the image of God, for he loves to see his people bear his likeness.

2. I want to reflect the lovely image of God more fully and be meek and lowly in heart.
3. The nearer I live to God, the more I enjoy, and the more I want to be moulded into the image of God. O I want to get into that place where I shall abide in God, and have his word abide in me.
4. I long to be conformed to the image of God in all things. I long for holiness and a pure heart, that I may walk worthy of the vocation wherewith we are called.
5. Though oftentimes I do not reflect the image of God as at all times it is my heart's desire to do, yet my determination is to hold out unto the end.
6. I think it is time the remnant of God's people should let go of the little, petty trials and cares of earth, and begin to reflect the lovely image of God. O for holiness of heart, and a firm reliance on God every hour. I want to walk humbly before God, and daily striving for the victory over every sin.
7. God grant that we may so take heed to our ways that we may by every word and act reflect the lovely image of God, and be found among the holy ones at last.

TAKING IT HOME

Paul wrote that "The Son is the image of the invisible God..." and therefore Jesus came to earth to make the invisible God visible. But now Jesus is in Heaven and is 'invisible'. So how is God going to made known—made visible on the earth today?

Paul answers this in 2 Corinthians 3:18—

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory...

So when you enter into communion with God and through His Holy Spirit gaze on His glory in the Bible and in nature, you have the possibility to imitate the life of Jesus, by revealing the image of God, and therefore making the invisible God visible in the world.

1

LIFE POINT

Jesus came to make the invisible God visible

2

LIFE POINT

to image God is to make God manifest

3

LIFE POINT

to reveal God is to reveal His character

4

LIFE POINT

communion with God enables me to make the invisible God visible