

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine biblical anthropology. Dr. Spencer, what do you want to discuss today?

Dr. Spencer: I'd like to discuss what it means to be made in the image of God. In Genesis 1:26 we read, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness'".¹ Which raises the obvious question, "What does it mean to be made in the image and likeness of God?"

Marc Roby: In Session 95, when we were discussing 1 John 3:2, which says in part that when God appears at the end of the ages, "we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is." You quoted the theologian John Murray who said that "it must not be thought that likeness to God is absolute. There is a sense in which to aspire after likeness to God is the epitome of iniquity."²

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. We need to be very careful with this concept. Murray also said that the "genius" of the devil's temptation to Eve was to twist the meaning of being made in God's likeness. Man was made in the image of God, he severely defaced that image when he sinned, and if we are in Jesus Christ, then God is working through his Holy Spirit to restore that image. We are, as Paul said in Romans 8:29, being "conformed to the likeness" of Jesus Christ, who is God.

But nowhere are we told that we will be "like God" in the sense the devil implied in tempting Eve. We will always be creatures. We will never possess deity. We will not have omnipotence, omniscience, self-existence or any other of God's attributes to the full degree God does.

Marc Roby: In other words, we must always be mindful of the Creator/creature distinction.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. God is self-existent, we are created. God is immutable, we were made mutable as is evident from the fall.

Marc Roby: Although in heaven we will be confirmed in righteousness and unable to sin.

Dr. Spencer: Praise God that's true. But even then we won't be immutable, we will still learn and grow in knowledge and understanding for example. We will never be God, but we were created in his image.

Marc Roby: And so we return to our original question. Bearing in mind the Creator/creature distinction, what does it mean to be made in the image and likeness of God?

Dr. Spencer: Wayne Grudem points out that our English words image and likeness do a pretty good job of representing the Hebrew words they translate. An image of something can be a statue or photograph for example and it can be used to represent the original. For example, Federal office buildings in this country typically display a picture of the current president in the

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² John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pg. 306

lobby. The picture is there to honor him and could be said to represent him as the head of the government. Grudem proposes that to the original audience the statement in Genesis 1:26 would simply have meant, “Let us make man to be *like* us and to *represent* us.”³

Marc Roby: That’s reasonable. But it still leaves open the question of what it means to be like God.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, Grudem points out that there have been three main views in the history of the church about what this means.⁴ One is, “the substantive view, which identifies some particular quality of man (such as reason or spirituality) as being the image of God in man”. This view was held by Luther and Calvin, and many early church writers. Secondly, there have been “relational views, which held that the image of God had to do with our interpersonal relationships”. For example, Karl Barth saw the image as having to do with man being created male and female. Thirdly, there was “the functional view, which holds that the image of God has to do with a function we carry out, usually our exercise of dominion over the creation”.

Marc Roby: Well, those all seem like reasonable possibilities.

Dr. Spencer: And I think they all have merit and, in fact, are probably all correct. I suspect, as Grudem says, that “The expression refers to every way in which man is like God.”⁵ And yet, I do think there is value in spending some time looking at a few of the specific things that this expression represents.

Marc Roby: Very well, which of the possibilities do you want to explore?

Dr. Spencer: Lets take a look at what the Westminster Confession of Faith says. It deals with this in Chapter IV, which is on Creation. In Paragraph 2 it says in part, “After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after his own image; having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfil it”. We are told seven important things in this statement, all of which I think are involved in what it means to be made in the image of God. The first thing stated was that God created man male and female.

Marc Roby: How is that related to being made in the image of God?

Dr. Spencer: Because God is triune, or we could say tri-personal, the fact that man was created male and female makes us better able to mirror his nature. When Jesus taught his disciples that they should not divorce, he said in Mark 10:6-8, “But at the beginning of creation God ‘made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two, but one.”

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 443

⁴ Ibid, see footnote 8

⁵ Ibid

Marc Roby: I think it is important to point out that in a proper biblical marriage the expression “the two will become one flesh” has a much deeper meaning than just the physical union of a husband and wife.

Dr. Spencer: That is very important. There is a profound emotional and spiritual unity in a proper marriage. The physical relationship alone can never make a successful marriage.

Marc Roby: Which may be part of the reason so many marriages end in divorce. People, especially men, tend to focus on external appearance and the physical relationship.

Dr. Spencer: I suspect you’re right about that being a significant contributing factor to the high divorce rate. The most important aspect of a successful marriage is the spiritual aspect. That is why God commands Christians to only marry “in the Lord” as we’re told in 1 Corinthians 7. In that passage the apostle Paul is giving instructions about marriage and he wrote, in Verse 39, that “A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord.”

Marc Roby: And that command applies to men as well as to women and it also applies to being married the first time, not just after a spouse has died. We can infer that from what Paul wrote to the church in Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 6:14 he commanded, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.” To be “yoked together” speaks, of course, of two oxen being connected by a wooden yoke and working together to pull a plow or cart. And Paul goes on to explain why we should not be yoked together with unbelievers, he writes in the last half of Verse 14 on through the first part of Verse 16, “For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God.”

Dr. Spencer: Paul doesn’t leave much room for doubt, does he? He asks four rhetorical questions, starting with, “what do righteousness and wickedness have in common?” The obvious answer to that question is, “nothing”. And the others are equally obvious. Light cannot have fellowship with darkness. There is no harmony between Christ and Belial – which is referring to Satan. A believer and an unbeliever have nothing in common when we speak about the most fundamental issues in life, and there can be no agreement between the temple of God and the temple of idols. Paul then seals the whole argument by pointing out that “we are the temple of the living God.” Because God lives in his people by the Holy Spirit, we cannot form the most intimate relationships with unbelievers, we cannot be “yoked together”.

Marc Roby: This does not prohibit us from normal day-to-day interactions with unbelievers of course. We must still live in the world, and that even includes entering into contractual obligations with unbelievers and so on.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. But I think the modern church has gone very far into the opposite error of living as if there were *no* truly significant difference between believers and unbelievers. That cannot be true. We’re getting too far off topic to spend any significant time on that now, but the Bible speaks from beginning to end about the need for separation. We are not to live as the world

lives. We are to represent Christ, in other words we are to function as God's image bearers, which brings us back to our topic.

A Christian husband and wife have a very deep spiritual unity in addition to the physical and emotional unity present in a healthy marriage. And that union of two persons does a better job of representing the triune God than an individual person can.

Marc Roby: I can imagine someone asking why, given that we are made in the image of a triune God, there are only two in a marriage.

Dr. Spencer: Grudem deals with this question.⁶ He points out that the analogy between marriage and the Trinity is not perfect and secondly, and most importantly, that the Bible does not explicitly answer that question. Nevertheless, we can speculate that the difference may be a reflection of the fact that God is much greater than we are. Also, when a human father and mother have a child, there are three. Which makes the analogy to the Trinity somewhat better.

Marc Roby: But what about single people? There are also made in the image and likeness of God.

Dr. Spencer: They certainly are. And they are not in any way inferior to those who are married. Nor are married couples who can't have children in any way inferior to those that do. We don't want to make too much of this aspect of our being made in the image and likeness of God. But we also don't want to make too little of it. The fact that human beings exist as male and female is a very important part of who we are. And for people who are still single, or childless, there are still other important relationships that express the fact that we do not exist as individuals in isolation. The most important human relationship for a Christian is with our brothers and sisters in Christ. And that is expressed most tangibly in our being an active part of a local church.

Marc Roby: Alright. Getting back to the statement in the Westminster Confession of Faith, it goes on to say that God "created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls".

Dr. Spencer: And the fact that we have "reasonable and immortal souls" is a very important part of our being made in his image and likeness. First of all, we have a soul. There is some debate among Christians as to whether there is a difference between the soul and spirit or whether those are two names for the same thing, but I want to put off that discussion for a later podcast. For the moment, let's use the words soul and spirit as being interchangeable. The main point is that "God is Spirit" as Jesus told us in John 4:24, so our being made in his image includes the fact that we also have a spirit or soul.

Marc Roby: And the Confession says that our souls are "reasonable and immortal".

Dr. Spencer: Which is also very important. Man's ability to reason is one of the things that clearly separates us from animals. I'm not denying that some animals have the ability to reason in a limited sense, they can solve certain puzzles and problems and some of the higher animals can clearly communicate in various ways, but there is a clear difference between even the highest

⁶ Ibid, pg. 455

animals and man. I don't want to spend time trying to quantify or specifically delineate the difference, I'll just assume for the moment that the difference is obvious to all, or almost all, of our listeners.

The second thing said is also critically important; our souls are immortal. The clear teaching of the Bible is that when we die physically, our bodies cease functioning and are separated from our souls. But we go on living. The body is, in some sense, a physical habitation for the soul. But the essence of our being is immaterial, it is our soul. And that does not cease to exist when our body dies.

Marc Roby: The best passage I can think of to support that statement is in the book of Hebrews. In Chapter 12 the writer tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus and his heavenly kingdom. In Hebrews 12:22-24 we are encouraged by reading, "But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."

Dr. Spencer: Praise God! He offers us salvation through Jesus Christ and that salvation culminates in our spending eternity with him in heaven. And, as you noted, this passage speaks about the immortality of the soul, because we are told that there is a great assembly right now in the heavenly Jerusalem, and that assembly includes thousands upon thousands of angels as well as "the spirits of righteous men made perfect."

If we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ as a result of being united to him by faith, then when we die our souls, or spirits, are instantly perfected and come into the very presence of God. We then live in that perfected but disembodied state until God finishes his work of creating the church. At which time Jesus will come to earth again to judge the living and the dead and we will receive our resurrection bodies.

Marc Roby: What a glorious hope that is!

Dr. Spencer: I agree, and we will spend more time on all of that when we get to soteriology and eschatology, but for now we want to stick to the fact that man has both a material part, which is our physical body, and an immaterial part, which is our soul or spirit. The immaterial part is by far the most important. We can live without a physical body, but without a soul or spirit to animate them our bodies would be nothing but dead lumps of highly organized chemicals.

Marc Roby: That isn't a particularly flattering way to put it, but I think that your meaning is clear.

Dr. Spencer: And, of course, we must also point out that our spirits are not the same as God's spirit. As always, there is the Creator/creature distinction. God created us, body and spirit. Our spirits are immortal *only* because God has determined to keep them so. We don't have the power of life within us. We are not self-existent. We are *made* in the image and likeness of God. We are not God and we never will be.

Marc Roby: Very well. Are we done with what you want to say about the soul for now?

Dr. Spencer: We are. And to recap, in examining the statement made in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter IV, Paragraph 2, we have noted that we are made in the image of likeness of God in terms of our being male and female, and in terms of having reasonable and immortal souls. The next thing that the Confession mentions is that we have knowledge.

Marc Roby: And I look forward to discussing that, but I think this is a good place to end for today, so let me remind our listeners that they can email questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. And we'll do our best to answer.