

Christian Identity: Who You Are in Christ

I am a Creature Made in the Image of God¹

Our secular society is plagued with confusion these days because it has rejected the biblical view of human identity. Scientists assure us that humans are the result of random, chance, meaningless evolutionary processes, rendering human life no different in value from any other form of life. Philosophers tell us that human life is meaningless and irrational. Pop culture urges us to assume whatever identity we happen to feel whenever we want. Is it any wonder that society is so confused?

If I am no more than the product of random evolution, then it doesn't really matter how I identify myself. If I feel like a woman or an animal, I can behave that way. If I am convinced that I am no more than molecules in motion, then I may as well just follow my inner appetites. "Eat, drink, and be merry." Our culture today is more than willing to affirm me in virtually any kind of deviant or dysfunctional identity I prefer to assume. Many of those in power are happy to affirm me in whatever identity I prefer. Society demands that we recognize those who identify themselves in irrational and ridiculous ways.

Christians have a source of identity that the world rejects. God in his word tells us what and who we are. The psalmist asked the question, "What is man...?" and the Bible gives us the answer to that question. We know who we are and why we are here. We don't just make it up or come up with it ourselves. We affirm what God says about us. We obtain our identity from God and from his word. We obtain our identity from the facts about how God has made us and where he has placed us in the world. God's word and God's world tells us who we are, and we are obligated to identify ourselves accordingly.

One of the first things the Bible affirms about human identity is that man is a creature made in the image and likeness of God.

Genesis 1:26–27 Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, 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.

Genesis 9:6 Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.

¹ Much of this material based on Jerry Bridges book *Who Am I? Identity in Christ* (Cruciform Press, 2012). Kindle edition.

What does being made in the image and likeness of God imply about identity?

I. I'm identified as the pinnacle of God's creation.

The Bible begins with a statement that immediately establishes a relationship—"God made the heavens and the earth." With that basic fact in mind, we grasp the difference between God and ourselves. God is the Creator; I am a creature. I have a place and a purpose in God's creation. My identity is largely based on the fact that I am part of God's creative activities.

A. As a creature of God, I am utterly dependent upon my Creator.

Acts 17:25 ... [God] gives to all life, breath, and all things.

Acts 17:28 in Him we live and move and have our being...

Colossians 1:16–17 For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, ... All things were created through Him and for Him. ... and in Him all things consist.

1. Dependent for life: Our existence comes from God and continues as God allows us to remain alive.

We may think of ourselves as quite tough and robust, but in reality, humans are fragile and vulnerable to all manner of injury, mishap, and illness. Sudden, unexpected tragedy and death are common. Yet within the providence of God, we keep living until our allotted time comes to an end. Even if we are currently healthy, we should recognize our total dependence on God for continuing our lives.

2. Dependent for food: Even though humans (normally) have to work to get food, God is still the ultimate provider of it.

Ps 145:16 You open Your hand And satisfy the desire of every living thing.

3. Dependent for abilities: Our talents and skills come from God (1 Cor 4:7). Every ability we have—mental, artistic, athletic, financial, etc.—comes from God. We could do nothing without Him (John 15:5); with Him we can do all things (Phil 4:13). There is no such thing as a self-made man/woman.

4. Dependent for successful completion of plans: Plan-making seems to be part of our human nature; we're almost always making plans. It's not wrong to make plans, but we must submit our plans to God's sovereign design for all things. Our plans may not correspond to God's plans. That's why we must always say "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that" (Jam 4:13-15). We must avoid presumption in our planning. Our plans are always contingent on God's plan.

This is not the way people think today. People see themselves as independent and self-made.

Quote by William Ernest Henley in his poem *Invictus*: "I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul."

What is he saying? It's a statement of defiance and independence from God. It's a declaration of human autonomy. It asserts that God is not in control of my fate. I am the master of my fate.

Here is a statement from the Humanist Manifesto II: We can discover no divine purpose or providence for the human species. ... Humans are responsible for what we are or will become. No deity will save us; we must save ourselves.

That's the claim of our secular culture—we are *not* dependent upon God because there is no God. We must depend on ourselves to find success.

Secular people do not believe that God has given them an identity; they have to make their own. Since there is no God, they feel free to adopt whatever identity they want. They don't have to respect anything that God might say about them; they don't believe in God. They believe only in themselves and in their right to do whatever they want.

Christians deeply disagree with that claim. We don't have the authority to identify ourselves in any way we want. We must identify ourselves the way God identifies us. I am a creature who is utterly dependent on my Creator for everything that I am and everything I have. That's my identity.

B. As a creature, I am morally accountable to my Creator.

1. Do animals understand moral standards? Perhaps in a very basic way some do. But humans have a far greater appreciation for morality because of the image of God impressed on them.

2. God has revealed His moral expectations to mankind, and man is accountable to God for obeying His will in the moral realm. God gave man moral responsibilities from the very beginning of creation. He commanded Adam and Eve not to eat from one particular tree in the Garden (Gen 2:16-17). God held our first parents responsible for their failure.
3. The Bible contains many commandments and principles designed to guide and limit human behavior. We are free to obey or disobey these commands. Moral accountability means that our behavior has consequences, both now and for eternity.

What attitudes follow from the fact that I'm a creature who is totally dependent on and accountable to God? We ought to respond to these truths with *humility* and *gratitude*. Our desire should be to give glory to God for creating us and providing everything we need.

Our identity as created, dependent, accountable people should lead to humility, gratitude, and obedience.

II. I'm identified by my reflection of the image of God.

Genesis 1:26–27 *Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, 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.*

- A. Mankind is like and yet unlike the rest of creation. Adam is a creature, yet there was nothing else among creation that corresponded to him. He was unique, one of a kind among all creation. God had to create a corresponding creature specifically for him—the woman.
- B. The Bible asserts that God made man in His image and likeness. This is what sets man apart from all the rest of creation.

BTW, there is no major distinction between *image* and *likeness*. They are synonymous ideas—"in our image, after our likeness"—means basically the same thing.

Genesis 5:3 *And Adam lived one hundred and thirty years, and begot a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.*

C. What is the image of God in man? The image of God in man is man's personal, spiritual, and moral resemblance to God.

1. The image of God is a personal resemblance: Man is a person; he has personality or personhood. He is not an animal or inanimate object; man is a person.

What makes you a person? Typically, we consider capacities like intellect, emotion and will the marks of personhood. God has all of these and so does man.

Intellect in particular seems to set man apart from the rest of creation. Man is capable of understanding the creation. It's natural for humans to study and discover the laws of the universe. Animals may have a form of intellect, but they don't write books or build museums.

Of course, some people have very low intellectual and emotional abilities, but they still reflect the image of God.

2. The image of God is a spiritual resemblance: Man has capacity for spiritual life. Animals don't have a soul and they cannot know their Creator in the way that we do. They are purely physical and have no spiritual nature.

Mankind has the ability to know God, to worship God, to pray, and to understand the difference between right and wrong. Those made in God's image understand morality and spirituality.

Jer 9:24 But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.

3. The image of God is a moral resemblance: Man has the capacity for moral sensitivity. That is, he can understand the difference between good and evil. God will hold man accountable for the moral choices he makes.

Animals cannot be properly charged with sin. Man, because he has a conscience, he has moral responsibilities/obligations. When he violates these God-given responsibilities, he has committed a sin.

Even very immoral people have some sense of morality. No one is as sinful as he could be. Everyone has some degree of moral sensitivity.

Another way to think of the image of God in man is that humans are God's representatives on earth. We image God in certain ways.

Quote: Humans are created as God's imagers—they function *in the capacity of* God's representatives. The image of God is not a quality within human beings; it is what humans *are*. ... Every human, regardless of the stage of development, is an imager of God. ... Being created as God's imagers means we are His representatives on earth—the only qualification for this is that we are human.²

- D. Being made in the image of God pertains to all humans, no matter what their condition. An embryo in its mother's womb reflects the image of God. A hardened criminal on death row still reflects the image of God. Every human—good, bad, and ugly—reflects the image of God and is therefore worthy of respect and honor.
- E. Further, both men and women are made “in the image of God” (Gen 1:27). Both male and female reflect the image of God. And both saved and lost people reflect the image of God. The fall marred the image but did not erase it; it was effaced but not erased.
- F. Human identity is directly related to bearing the image of God. Value comes from this image. Animals certainly have value, but human value is far superior to animal value (Mt 10:31). All human life of any condition has value because it reflects the image of God.

Unfortunately, society today does not recognize the difference between the value of a human and the value of an animal.

Illus.: I recently heard about an effort to have an elephant declared a person and thus possessing civil rights. A group called the Nonhuman Rights Project brought a lawsuit alleging that Happy the elephant, housed at the Bronx Zoo in NYC, is really a person—“an autonomous, cognitively complex elephant worthy of the right reserved in the law for a person.”³ The NY court of appeals ruled that the elephant does not have the same rights as a person does.

² Michael S. Heiser, “Image of God,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

³ <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/14/1105031075/bronx-zoo-elephant-not-person-court-rules>

I wonder if that organization argues for the personhood of pre-born humans. I bet it does not.

I would not doubt that in the near future, that judgment will be reversed. Animals will be given human rights. If evolution is true, what distinguishes us from the animals? Nothing.

A biblical worldview helps us reject that kind of thinking. Animals have value, but they do not bear the image of God. Animals deserve protection and proper treatment, but they do not deserve the same set of rights that humans deserve.

- G. Taking innocent human life is so heinous because it violates the image of God in man. Murder destroys an image-bearer, a representative of God. Humans are part of the creation—they are creatures—yet they are the height of creation, distinct from everything else, and worthy of special treatment. Human dignity is directly related to being made in the image of God.

Genesis 9:6 *Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.*

Capital punishment is necessary and appropriate because murder is the destruction of God's image as reflected in a human being. Killing an animal is not murder, but killing an innocent human is murder.

Question I heard recently: If you could save *either* your beloved pet dog *or* a total stranger from a burning building, which one would you save? If you would save your pet dog instead of another human being, you have the wrong understanding of human value. I imagine that the majority today would save the dog, not the stranger.

- H. The big issue in our time in abortion. Abortion supporters demand that the pre-born baby has no rights. Even if it is a person, it has no rights. Christians recognize that the pre-born baby is a human made in the image of God, and thus possessing rights that all humans should have.
- I. In western culture, human/civil rights come from this idea, that man is made in the image of God. E.g., the Declaration of Independence states that our “unalienable rights” come from our Creator. People should not be able to take away our rights because these rights come from God.

J. If we are *not* made in the image of God, then identity does not matter. If there is no God, then nothing about human existence has any ultimate meaning. Do whatever you want; identify yourself any way that you please; nothing really matters. Humans are not uniquely valuable.

K. All of this depends on the creation account in the Bible. Ideas have consequences. If the Genesis story is nothing but myth, then humans are not made in the image of God. If we don't reflect the image of God, then we have no special value; we are not inherently different from any other life form. We are not endowed by our Creator with unalienable rights if Genesis is not true.

As Christians, we assert that the creation story is true. God made humans in his own image, and that's what gives us dignity and value. That's what sets us apart from all the animals. That's what gives our identity meaning.

L. One final implication of being made in the image of God: Because we are made in the image of God, we dare not degrade ourselves by engaging in depraved behaviors.

1. If we are mere animals, then it doesn't matter how we behave; we can just follow our instincts and appetites, just like all the animals do.

2. But if we are creatures made in the image of God, we must not degrade ourselves by engaging in degrading behavior, such as homosexuality, same-sex marriage, or trans-genderism. We must not act like a pack of barnyard animals. We bear the image of God; we are God's representatives on earth. That should give our lives dignity and value. That truth should prevent us from engaging in debased, depraved behaviors.

3. We also must recognize the value of *all* human life, no matter what its condition. The baby in the womb is a human life worth protecting and valuing. The elderly person on his death bed is still worthy of dignity and respect. Even the hardened criminal is a human being made in the image of God and must be treated as such.

Christians must anchor their identity in biblical truth. Who am I? I am a creature created by God, dependent upon God, accountable to God, and reflecting the image of God. These facts give me both value and moral obligations. This is perhaps the most basic and foundational aspect of human identity, and we dare not deny it.

We must accept and acknowledge this identity. God made us to reflect his image, and we must not identify ourselves in ways that violate God's image within us.

Because of God's image within us, we must behave as God's representatives on earth. We are like God in certain ways; we image God. It's important that we live according to that identity.