"IN THE IMAGE OF GOD" August 15, 1982
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"Then God said, 'Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created a human being, male and female he created them." Genesis 1: 26-27.

Have you ever received a letter in which you puzzled for hours over a single word "What does it mean?" you ask yourself. Is he making a job offer? Is she saying that she doesn/t want to see me any more? Is he coming for a visit? You worry that one word in a sentence like a child worrying a loose tooth. The chances are that you read all sort of meanings into it that the writer never intended.

Multiply that experience several million times and you have the sort of word-worrying that has been going on down the centuries in connection with certain words in the Bible. Of all these worried words none has been subject to more pulling this way and that than the word "image" in the phrase, "image of God". What a field day the theologians have had with this one! What tremendous castles of thought have been constructed on interpretations of this single word! For example, in the second century, Irenaeus made much of distinguishing between the two words translated "image" and "likeness" in the line from Genesis One:

'Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness!. . .'

Centuries later castles of thought developing from that distinction rose above the ramparts that divided the Roman Catholic from the Protestant interpretation of the Christian message.

One of the most famous theological essays in our own century had the simple title in German, "Nein!" In this article the Swiss theologian Karl Barth said "No" to an essay by another Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, concerning the question of whether the image of God remains in sinful humanity.

Barth himself admitted that when it came to the image of God most interpreters through the centuries have simply taken whatever human quality was judged most important by their own culture and read that into the Bible. So the Greek fathers understood the image to be the rational or intellectual element in humanity that sets us off from the beasts. In more recent times stress has been put on the human power to make moral decisions, on human freedom and responsibility. Some interpreters, wishing to stick close to the original context, see a connection between the image of God in Adam and Eve and in God's giving them dominion over nature. Still others, noting that the expression "image of God" appears in a story about God as Creator, suggest that human beings reflect the divine image as they themselves engage in creative activity. I myself have liked this line of interpretation. And I have added the suggestion, not original with me, that we complete God's creation through our appreciation of it much as a listener, a reader or a spectator is needed to complete a work of art.

Perhaps there is some truth in all these ways of understanding the image of God within ourselves. None of them, however, is explicitly set forth in the Bible. It is doubtful that the biblical authors intended that people should make so many thing out of their little phrase. If we want to get at their meaning, it probably is best not to split too many hairs over words, but to try to see how the Bible as a whole looks at people as a whole in their relationship with their Creator.

From this prespective it seems to me that many Bible interpreters today stress three things about this notion of the image of God.

First, the image has to do not with some special feature in us, such as blue eyes, but rather with our human nature as a whole. Perhaps we should say, with our personhood as a whole. It is not just as thinking creatures, or as loving creatures, or as value-judging creatures, but in the totality of our life as persons that we reflect the divine mystery.

Second, the image is not so much something about us as individuals, (like blue eyes, once again) as it is a potential realized in relationships with others. It was the martyr to the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who gave this point special emphasis. God, he said, is the one who is "for us," who is for creation in love and care, who in Christ comes to us in "the man for others." So we bring to light the image of God as we live lovingly and responsibly for others. The image then has to do with relationships. Karl Barth connected up the image idea with the assertion that God creates human beings male and female. Individuals are not complete in themselves but are made for fellowship with each other and with God.

Third, the image of God is not fixed, but dynamic. It is something we are challenged to become. Speaking of the prohibition against graven images, Abraham Heschel said, "We are not to make an image of God, we are to become the image of God." In the New Testament the goal set before us is to become like Christ in whom the Divine Image appears in its fullness. "He is the image of God, the first-born of creation" we read in the letter to the Colossians, and then later in that letter we are admonished to put away bad language and destructive attitudes and to tell the truth, "seeing that you have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its Creator."

Perhaps these ways of thinking about the image of God can help us get at the meaning of this much-worried phrase as it appears in the book of Genesis. We find God reflected in the potential of human persons for loving and responsible relationships. In Jesus Christ we find this image made clear. It is God's intention, God's purpose in creating us, that the image become clear in us, too.

So much for doctrine. Does this teaching have practical implications?

I has important practical implications, I think, for how we regard other people, especially people who are different from us. There is a persistent tendency among human beings to want to exclude everyone but the people like us from the human species. A sociologist of religion, Marie Augusta Neal, whom I heard speak recently, has gathered quotations indicating how reluctant some of our classical theologians were even to allow that women were made in the image of God. Yet Genesis 1:27 seems quite explicit on that score.

I am sure that were we to delve into the dark dunghills of racist literature we would come across some argument seeking to make a case that certain races were not meant to be included when God created humanity in God's own image. Even though people may not go that far in theory, they often do so in practice. As far back as Colonial times, the Quaker, John Woolman noted that it was easy to think of black slaves as subhuman precisely because they were treated that way.

> Placing on men the ignominious title slave, dressing them in uncomely garments, keeping them to servile labour in which they are often dirty, tends gradually to fix a notion in the mind that they are a sort of people below us in nature, and leads us to consider them as such in all our conclusions about them.

In other words, there was a kind of vicious circle. Because blacks were kept as slaves they appeared to be subhuman: because they appeared to be subhuman they were kept as slaves. In more subtle ways the same vicious circle may be at work in our thinking about people today. They are poor; they lack education; they are

distinguishable by race or ethnic background. We are tempted to assign them to a status in creation somewhat lower than that of people like ourselves.

But the teaching that all people are created in God's image gives to all people a sacred dignity. We have no right to exclude anyone from that dignity because one is less privileged than we or comes from an ethnic inheritence different from our own. That the image of God has ethical implications in the Bible is shown by the fact that in Chapter Nine it is connected to the prohibition against murder. But the implications are also more positive. John Woolman summed them up when he wrote:

> To consider mankind otherwise than bretheren, to think favours are peculiar to one nation and exclude others, plainly supposes a darkness in the understanding. For as God's love is universal, it begets a likeness of itself, and the heart is enlarged toward all men.

"God's love begets a likeness of itself..." That is what the image of God means when put into action.

If the image of God has implications for how we treat other people, it also has implications for how we treat ourselves. Think what a difference it might make if we took seriously the biblical teaching that we are made in God's image.

Suppose, when we have lost our self-respect and are thoroughly depressed about ourselves, we reminded ourselves; "You are a creature made in God's image. There is a special sacredness to your life as one created with the purpose of reflecting God's nature on earth. No one, not even yourself, can take away from you that sacredness or that high purpose which God bestows on you."

Suppose, when we were tempted to some course of action that is wrong and debasing, we told ourselves, "This is unworthy of yourself as one created in God's image. Every time you act this way you smudge over that mirror of God's goodness that you were made to be."

I think it could make a difference in how we felt about ourselves and therefore about how we behaved if we truly believed this teaching about the Divine Image in humanity and took it to heart.

Certainly it might increase our sense of responsibility.

In one of my dialogues with the prophet Jonah there is an exchange that goes something like this;

"You were right," I told him, "in identifying yourself to those heathen sailors by saying you were a worshipper of YAEWAH. For in the deepest sense, all men are known by their gods."

"A deep thought," Jonah agreed, "but not very original. It's more illuminating if you turn it around. The gods are known by their men."

"I don't understand," I told him.

"Think of Moses," Jonah said. "He was a cautious chap. When YAHWEH appeared in the burning bush Moses demanded some credentials. So YAHWEH answered--

> 'I am the God of your forbearers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob.' "

"I get the point now," I told him. "But I never heard of YAHWEH saying, 'I am the God of Honah.' You must admit that your're not much of a divine advertisement in that book about you. From start to finish you hold on to your narrow, nationalistic religion. You refuse to share God's compassion for the heathen...indeed, compared to you the crew of that ship were very decent men. I think they spoke rather well for their gods."

Replied the prophet, "My God likes a challenge. YAHWEH gets a kick out of turning incorrigibles sinners into Holy Writ."

"This idea troubles me," I said. "If the gods are known by their men, it puts a tremendous responsibility on the men."

"And on the women too," added the prophet. "Now that they are liberated they must bear the burden too, In fact, they always have borne it."

> So God created humanity in his own image, in the image of God he created a human being, male and female he created them.

It does follow from that, I fear, that God is known for better or worse by the men and women God has put in the world. This image of God business does place on us an awesome responsibility. But as Jonah told me, "YAHWEH likes a challenge."

It's up to us to accept the challenge, too.

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