

The Spectrum of Christian Faith

*What does it mean to be made in
God's image?*

So God created humankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

Genesis 1:27 (CJB)

*What does it mean to be made in
God's image?*

The Substantial View

The Definition

The traditional view that in all of God's creation, humans uniquely have a soul. The imago Dei is something humans are by their nature. This view has been articulated throughout church history by Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin among many others.

The Substantial View

The Biblical Argument

- The human soul in contrast to animals is eternal. (1 Thessalonians, 5:23, Revelation 6:9)
- The human soul allows us to reason. (Deuteronomy 30:19, Isaiah 1:18, 1 Peter 3:15)
- The human soul gives us capacity for moral goodness. (2 Chronicles 7:14, 2 Timothy 2:19-22)
- The human soul gives us a sense of the divine (*sensus divinitatus*) (Psalm 19, Romans 1:19-20)
- The human soul gives us the capacity to love. (Matthew 22:36-40)

The Substantial View

Supporting Arguments

- This is the traditional view that has been held throughout church history.
- The view that the imago Dei is part of who we are and not what we do gives dignity and value to the marginalized (the unborn, mentally incapacitated, slaves, etc.)

The Substantial View

Objections

- This view is *not* rooted in Genesis 1:27.
- The five qualities attributed to the human soul (eternal, reason, moral, capacity for love and sense of the divine) are from Greek philosophy and not Hebraic notions.

The Functional View

The Definition

The image of God described in Genesis 1:26-28 is about what humans do (rule over the animals and earth, be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.) This view gained popularity in the 20th century, though it had predecessors in earlier church history. See also Psalm 8:4-6.

The Functional View

The Biblical Argument

- The *us* in Genesis 1:26 refers to the divine counsel/angels.
- Angels (messengers) are given tasks to do throughout the Bible.
- Humans also have a task – specifically to spread God's kingdom over the whole earth and have authority over God's creation.
- Jesus is the ultimate example of God's image (Colossians 1:15) and has been given all authority in heaven and earth (Matthew 28:18). Humans do not have the same substance as Jesus but have the same role on earth.

The Functional View

Supporting Arguments

- This is the only view that relies on scripture alone.
- This view also helps explain other doctrines like the fall and the incarnation.
- This view provides a theological foundation for ecological concerns and creation care.
- Fits in with the ANE idea of an image (idol statue) as a representative or ambassador of a deity.

The Functional View

Objections

- This view was associated with Socinianism in the 16th century which held other heretical ideas like denying the trinity and the divinity of Jesus.
- Humans are created with a certain quality in Genesis 1:27 which is separate from the mandates they are given in Genesis 1:26 and 1:28.

The Relational View

The Definition

This view, which was first fully articulated by Karl Barth in the early 20th century, is that the defining feature of the imago Dei is human relationality. Humans are created in the image of the Triune God and are therefore created to be in relationship with other humans and with God.

The Relational View

The Biblical Argument

- The central command of the Bible is to love since love is the essence of who God is. (1 John 4)
- The *us* in Genesis 1:26 refers to the Trinity and not angels.
- God created male and female and throughout scripture loving relationships are epitomized by the love between a husband and wife. (Genesis 2)
- Jesus as the perfect image of God was one with the Father and calls us to be one with each other (John 17:20-23).

The Relational View

Supporting Arguments

- This is the only view that ties the understanding of the imago Dei to the Trinity and the central Biblical revelation that God is love.
- This view is consistent with modern psychological perspectives where people form their identities in relation to others. The experience of an “I” presupposes the existence of a “you”.

The Relational View

Objections

- This view is also not traditional.
- This view reads the Trinity back into the Hebrew Bible.
- This view accommodates modern psychological paradigms.

Further Reading

- Jews for Jesus: <https://jewsforjesus.org/>
- *Being God's Image* by Carmen Joy Imes, IVP Academic, 2023
- *The Liberating Image* by J. Richard Middleton, Baker, 2005