

Position Paper #1: Biblical Anthropology and the Imago Dei

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Biblical anthropology examines who humanity is in relation to God, and the doctrine of Imago Dei examines the theological notion that human beings are created in the image of God (King & Whitney, 2015; Threlfall, 2019). The doctrine of Imago Dei is believed to be fundamental to biblical anthropology, and theologians have offered multifaceted interpretations (Threlfall, 2019). This paper aims to understand the theological notion of Imago Dei in the view of biblical anthropology and examines implications for counseling approach.

Imago Dei and Biblical Anthropology

Imago Dei means "the image of God," as declared in Genesis 1:26-27 "let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness...So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Holy Bible, New International Version [NIV], 1973/2011). Imago Dei reflects a foundational Christian tenet that humanity is the image-bearer of God, and biblical anthropology attempts to explore the meaning as the image-bearer of God (Threlfall, 2019). The notion of Imago Dei profoundly influences many essential aspects of being human, including human identity, value, rights, relation, and purpose. According to Peppiatt (2022), Imago Dei's interpretation is multifaceted and constantly evolving as humans develop over time. However, there are three predominant conceptualizations.

First, an ontological account of Imago Dei explains that being image-bearers of God is humanity's fundamental nature and essence (Gunton, 2005; Hughes, 1989). It is the inherent characteristics or qualities of humans that mirror the attributes of God. The embodiment of God's divine image communicates humanity's intrinsic worth, dignity, and beauty to God (Peppiatt, 2022). God has also given them unique abilities to reason, create, love, distinguish between good and evil (moral awareness), and relate to one another (Bentley, 2017). Apart from a static

conceptualization, King and Whitney (2015) further posit a directional and dynamic perspective that as image-bearers, humanity can thrive to conform to Christ-likeness in the eschaton.

Second, a relational account of Imago Dei informs that humans are created for God and each other; humankind is intended to live in peace and harmony with God, one another, and creation (King & Whitney, 2015; Threlfall, 2019). Various understandings exist among different theologians. For example, the notion of reciprocating selves explicates that humans are unique individuals living in interdependent relationships with God and each other (Balswick et al., 2005). Threlfall (2019) further delineates a vertical and a horizontal relationship implied in the notion of Imago Dei as sonship and dominion, respectively. The primary sonship was implied from the words "image" and "likeness," which express a relationship between father and son as supported in the bible and ancient Near Eastern literature (Jones & Barbeau, 2016; Threlfall, 2019). With this vertical sonship, humanity is given the children's status to represent God's lordship to have dominion over the rest of the creation (Threlfall, 2019). This dominion naturally leads to the functional meaning of Imago Dei.

Third, the functionalist account of the Imago Dei postulates that God has an intended purpose for humans and has given the ability for them to serve the purpose (King & Whitney, 2015; Threlfall, 2019). It is evident in Genesis 1:26 that God has commanded humans to rule over creation, alluding to their responsibility to care for all creations and maintain order and balance in creation. In addition, Isaiah 43:7 states that "everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made" (Holy Bible, New International Version [NIV], 1973/2011), therefore, the ultimate purpose of man is to glorify God. Threlfall (2019) proposes that "Christ, the only unfallen human, perfectly satisfies everything God intended for his image-bearers," revealing a growing resemblance to Christ as humans' purpose to glorify

God. Threlfall (2019) further posits that, due to sin in the fallen world, the consummation of the glorious image of God will only be accomplished through Jesus' redemption.

Implications for Counseling Approach

Accept and Treat Clients with Respect and Dignity

Through the lens of Imago Dei, all human beings are created in the image of God and possess traits of God and intrinsic value; everyone is equal and precious in the eyes of God. Therefore, a counselor should accept all clients with respect and honor their dignity regardless of their disorders, races, faith, culture, ability, or other traits. Though sin has brought about a distortion of human ability to live up to the image of God, and some clients may have committed crimes that are not acceptable morally, such as murder; however, as they are by nature the image-bearers of God and deeply loved by God that Jesus died to save them also. This writer is reminded that she should respect and treat every client with equality to help them experience the love and healing of God nonjudgmentally. Moreover, as everyone is equal, this writer must practice humility, remembering that everyone, including herself, is a sinner in need of grace and salvation from God. Christian counselors are indeed tasked with a calling to facilitate healing and treat every client like they are treating God. As Jesus told his disciples, "truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:40, Holy Bible, NIV, 1973/2011).

Relationship with God and One Another as the Foundation of Counseling

The relational account of Imago Dei informs the vitality for humans to form a harmonious relationship with God and with one another. Walton (2015) posits that human dominion on earth is a process obtained through collaborative relationships because only with continuous showering of wisdom and instructions from God, who is the origin of wisdom and

creativity, as well as cooperation with one another and even non-human creatures, can humans be able to maintain an orderly world, cultivate the earth, and develop flourishing cultures. Because of the meaning of the relational process, the writer emphasizes the importance of spending daily devotional time with God so that she can always be closely connected with God to draw strength, wisdom, peace, rest, and the power of healing to fulfill her counseling responsibilities. Quality time with God is indeed an essential self-care practice to ensure she is in the optimal condition to build therapeutic relationships with clients. And only through meaningful collaboration with clients can healing and progress be achieved.

Advocate for the Marginalized and Needy

The functional perspective of the Imago Dei suggests that humans are created with a purpose to care for God's creation and maintain order and balance in creation. Specifically for counselors, they are tasked with the responsibility of caring for God's most precious creation—human beings. In this fallen world, inequality and discrimination exist based on race, socioeconomic class, ability, age, sexual orientation, and other traits. These marginalized groups are suffering, and many are suffering in silence. Therefore, as a representative of Jesus in this world, apart from whole-heartedly serving clients with her clinical skills, the writer is reminded to incorporate the principles of justice, mercy, and advocacy into her practice of counseling and also to join forces with other counselors to advocate and minister for the poor, vulnerable, oppressed to restore God's intended harmony and balance in the human world.

Conclusion

To summarize, through the ontological, relational, and functional views of Imago Dei, humankind is firstly inherently valuable due to the nature of being the image-bearer of God, is secondly given the sonship to God and to relate to one another, and is thirdly given purpose to

rule over creation and bring glory to God. The meaning of Imago Dei allows the writer to see the image of God reflected in every person to whom she serves. Therefore, she is reminded to serve all clients, regardless of their differences in race, ability, and other traits, equally with respect and dignity. Furthermore, to best serve her role as a counselor, this writer emphasizes the relationship with God as the foundation to form trusting therapeutic relationships with clients and bring healing. Last but not least, as a Christian counselor, this writer represents a loving God who provides for the poor, the needy, the alien, the ill, and those who are cast out; therefore, she is encouraged to practice justice, advocate for, and serve the poor, oppressed, and marginalized like she is serving Jesus. As Colossians 3:23-24 says, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Holy Bible, NIV, 1973/2011).

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