

The “Imago Dei” and Its Personal Implications for Mental Health Counseling

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God made all of mankind in His likeness. He made all of mankind in His image, or the “imago dei.” This Latin term suggests only human beings bear God's image. (Genesis 1:27 NIV) (The Holy Bible, 2019, Gen. 1:27) This idea encapsulates why I, as a Christian, would like to help others through the field of mental health counseling.

Only human beings have the capacity for rational thought and structure, self-actualization, free will and creative freedom. (Glossary Definition: Imago Dei (“Image of God”), n.d.) However human beings that are not typically developing or have disabilities do not always have these capacities. Therefore, the imago dei is not necessarily explained by a single quality or by a strict set or subset of qualities. Instead, it is a process of becoming human beings who are unique because we have been created with the capacity to be transformed and redeemed by God. Being made in God's likeness, all human beings have inherent worth and value. God called the creation of humanity “very good.” (Genesis 1:31 NIV) (The Holy Bible, 2019, Gen. 1:31) Our bodies and our emotions are declared good by God. This is in contrast to a doctrine of original sin that falsely equates mankind’s unworthiness as sinners to our worthlessness as creatures. (King & Whitney, 2015)

All human beings, whether Christian or not, have the capacity to develop and grow toward what God really desires for humanity. God’s purpose, or “telos,” (a Greek word translated literally as “purpose”), is for us to be conformed to the likeness of Christ. (Kim van Daalen, 2012) In Matthew 22:15-22, the Pharisees tried to manipulate Jesus into speaking against the Roman Empire. They showed him a denarius, a unit of Roman currency that bore Caesar's image, and asked if people should still submit to Caesar by paying the imperial tax. Jesus successfully outsmarted and amazed them by saying, “...give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” (Matthew 22:21 NIV) (The Holy Bible, 2019, Matt. 22:21) My

interpretation of this passage is that if we are made in His image, we must choose to hand ourselves over to him. However, there are those who do not belong to him. They are the unredeemed, or non-believers, who do not acknowledge God and turn away from His commandments.

God still gives gifts of psychological, spiritual, physical, and relational well-being to non-believers. Even if someone is not saved, God's goodness can still fall upon him or her through the doctrine of common grace. Common grace is a merciful work of the Holy Spirit allowing all of God's creation to flourish by hindering evil and raining blessings, talents, gifts, and discoveries on both the unredeemed and redeemed. The gifts of common grace make it obvious that God is good and gives all people a taste of His future Kingdom where the redeemed will be completely whole. (King & Whitney, 2015) Embedded in the doctrine of common grace is God's commitment to fallen humanity even as sin corrupts the world.

The counseling profession has a unique ability to partner with the Holy Spirit in promoting morality and restraining sin. (McMartin, 2015) Furthermore, the counseling profession can aid in developing healthy and thriving humans by halting dysfunctional ways of thinking and behaving. Because all human beings have inherent worth, all human beings deserve a chance to be the best they can be, or be in a thriving state of self-actualization. In order to truly thrive, one has to affirm and develop the self as well as affirm and develop the relational contexts unique to that particular self. For believers, this also includes an ability to cultivate a thriving relationship with God (King & Whitney, 2015). Even though sin corrupts how much we can thrive on Earth, it does not corrupt the commitment God has to the redemption of humanity.

As a Christian and future clinician, I am called to support a client's right to thrive according to their personal definition even if that definition is different from my own. I am also

called to show the world who Jesus is. He is someone who is close to the brokenhearted. (Psalm 34:18 NIV) (The Holy Bible, 2019, Psalm 34:18) He is patient, and kind. (1 Cor. 13:4-8) (The Holy Bible, 2019, 1 Cor. 13:4-8) Most importantly, he is God’s son sent to redeem us from sin. (1 John 4:15) (The Holy Bible, 2019, 1 John 4:15). I believe that by embodying Christ-like qualities, I can draw people to Christ through my vocation. (Morrison, 2021)

I have wanted to go into psychology since I was 8 years old. I was a Girl Scout and went to Girl Scout Camp during the summers in elementary and middle school. When there was a group of pre-teen girls together, drama usually followed. My behavioral intuition uniquely positioned me to understand why the girls would act the way they did. My camp counselors, although they were much older than me, would ask me for clarity on uncertain situations and incidents with campers. During one of these times, a counselor mentioned I would make a good psychologist. I’d never heard of that before and when I got home from camp I googled it. I was shocked that there was a whole profession rooted in listening to people; which was something I was naturally very good at already. I found out about the world of mental health counseling, I also found out about the world of Community Health and health disparities. I am very passionate about working with historically oppressed communities of color because I come from one. As a Black woman who wears hearing aids and has also struggled long-term with depression, I know what it is like to feel otherized and marginalized. Even if a person isn’t a member of a historically marginalized group, everyone knows what it’s like to feel small, abandoned, trapped, and hopeless. (Morrison, 2021) My deepest desire is to help people because they bear God’s image. The imago dei states that the worth of a human being is not determined by his or her job, ability to contribute to society, age, culture, or religious beliefs. The imago dei embodies the sacredness of just being human.

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