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# The Image of God in Pauline Preaching

JEFFREY PETERSON

The image (*eikon*) of God is a motif that appears only a few times in Paul's letters; if we judged by frequency of occurrence, we would suppose that it was a minor element in his theology.<sup>1</sup> To conclude thus, however, would be "the substitution of counting for thinking," a fault that Austin Farrer observed even in eminent students of the New Testament.<sup>2</sup> We can better appreciate the importance of the image of God in Paul's theology when we observe that the contexts in which it appears allude to the instruction preparing converts for baptism that Paul employed in forming messianic communities "from Jerusalem and around as far as Illyricum" (Rom 15.19).<sup>3</sup> Seen in the context of his missionary catechesis and his converts' initiation, Paul's appropriation of "the image of God" and related motifs from Gen 1.26–28 (and also 5.1–3) expresses fundamental convictions and hopes of believers in Christ.

The earliest Pauline allusion to the divine image occurs in Gal 3.28. Paul describes baptism into Christ as eradicating basic distinctions marking ancient society from the perspective of a free Jewish male: "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no 'male and female.'"<sup>4</sup> The conclusion of the passage quotes a portion of Gen 1.27 in its Greek version: "And God made the human being. After the image of God he created him; *male and female* he created them." The allusion to Genesis is strengthened by the sentence that concludes Gal 3.28, which uses a masculine pronoun: "you are all one [man] in Christ Jesus." Paul describes baptism as ushering us into a new order of existence constituted by one human being whose life is not circumscribed by the norms of the world as it presently exists; by implication, Christ appears here as the antitype of Adam, whose life defines "the present evil age" (Gal 1.4), as Paul will detail in Romans.

As numerous commentators have noted, this passage recalls the baptismal experience of the Galatian Christians. It forms a point in Paul's crucial argument that because these Gentiles have already received God's Spirit, they have no need to submit to the Torah's requirements for proselytes. In their conversion, the Galatians have "received the Spirit [not] by works of the Torah . . . [but] by a report of faithfulness" (Gal 3.2).<sup>5</sup> God has "sent forth the Spirit of his Son into [their] hearts crying, 'Abba, Father!'" and so attested

1. James D. G. Dunn, in his *Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 284–85, mentions the divine image only in exegesis of Phil 2.5–11. Moyer V. Hubbard refers to the *eikon* as an "important theme of Paul's gospel" with which the Corinthians were familiar "from his previous ministry among them," yet he devotes only two pages to its treatment (*New Creation in Paul's Letters and Thought* [NTSMS 119; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 157–58). Neither study recognizes the extent to which Paul's statements about the image reflect interpretation of Gen 1.27 and related scriptural texts.

2. Austin Farrer, "The Eucharist in I Corinthians," in R. E. Clements et al., *Eucharistic Theology: Then and Now* (London: SPCK, 1968), 29.

3. Translations of biblical texts are the author's.

4. Thales and Plato were remembered as expressing thankfulness "that I was born a human being and not a beast, next, a man and not a woman, thirdly, a Greek and not a barbarian" (Diogenes Laertius 1.33; Lactantius *Divinae institutiones* 3.19; Plutarch *Marius* 46.1). A rabbinic adaptation states, "Blessed [art thou], who did not make me a gentile; blessed [art thou], who did not make me a woman; blessed [art thou], who did not make me a slave" (Babylonian Talmud, *Menahot* 43b; translation adapted from Wayne A. Meeks, "The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," *History of Religions* 13 [1974]: 168).

5. The last phrase can also be rendered "hearing with faith" or "faithful hearing." The translation above finds an allusion to Isa 53.1 (cf. Rom 10.16), with Isaiah's account of the Servant's passion and exaltation understood as a "report of [Christ's] faithfulness."

their adoption as his sons, with full rights of inheritance (Gal 4.4–7). Their baptism into Christ marks the point at which they became sons of God and heirs (Gal 3.26–29). Paul stakes the whole of his appeal in the letter on this argument from experience (“This alone I want to learn from you,” Gal 3.2), which he buttresses and clarifies with an argument from Scripture (Gal 3.6–22).

For the argument from experience to be persuasive, the Galatians must recognize their incorporation into the one eschatological man Christ and the transcending of their past earthly life as having taken place in their conversion. It is thus evident that this imagery derives from the instruction they received in connection with baptism or from the baptismal ceremony itself, as is suggested also by the language and imagery that appears in other reminiscences of baptism in the Pauline letters (1 Cor 12.13; Col 3.9–11).<sup>6</sup> The allusion to Gen 1.27, which does not clearly figure in the line of Paul’s argument, suggests that in the process of conversion the Galatians came to understand that their status as bearers of Adam’s image had been transcended through incorporation into Christ.

The evidence of Galatians is strikingly confirmed by the latest appearance of the divine image in the Pauline corpus, in the letters to the Colossians. This letter is addressed to recent converts and aims to confirm them in their baptismal commitments.<sup>7</sup> The divine image appears twice, first in the celebration of Christ in Col 1.15–20 and again in the reference to conversion in 3.9–10, the latter with an unmistakable verbal echo of Gen 1.27. In the appropriation of the divine image in the baptismal theology of Colossians, we thus find three terms: the Creator, the image of the Creator (i.e., Christ, 1.15), and the new human being who is being “renewed after the image of the one who created him” (3.10).<sup>8</sup> That Paul can employ these terms in a hortatory appeal with no introduction and scarcely any explanation strongly suggests that he is here drawing on the understanding of conversion already formed in the letter’s recipients through the missionary work of his associate Epaphras (1.6–7). The parallel passage in Eph 4.20–24 does not refer explicitly to the divine image, but it is presented as a reminder of the way in which the recipients initially “learned Christ . . . [and] heard and were instructed in him” (4.20–21).

In 1 Cor 11.7–12, Paul appeals to the divine image in his notoriously problematic argument that women should be veiled in the church’s worship.<sup>9</sup> Paul’s designation of the man (or husband) as, strictly speaking, “the image and glory of God,” while the woman (or wife) is “the glory of a man” appears to reflect an interpretation that harmonizes Genesis 1 and Genesis 2; more specifically, this interpretation treats Genesis 1.26–28 as a summary statement introducing the more detailed account in chapter 2, particulars of which Paul reflects in his statements that “man is not derived from woman, but woman from man” (1 Cor 11.8; cf. Gen 2.23) and “man was not created for the sake of the woman, but woman for the sake of the man” (1 Cor 11.9; cf. Gen 2.20b–22). Paul relativizes this understanding of relations between male and female in 1 Cor 11.11–12, which like Galatians 3 implicitly contrasts the first creation with the new creation in Christ, where “there is neither woman without man nor man without woman in the Lord.” The distinctions and separations that mark the existing order are transcended in Christ.

In 1 Cor 15.45–49, Paul offers an adventurous interpretation of one verse of the creation account. In this passage, Paul uses techniques commonly employed in the citation and interpretation of Jewish Scripture

6. Meeks, “Image of the Androgyne,” 180–83; Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 88; J. L. Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33A; New York: Doubleday, 1997), 378.

7. See my “‘The Circumcision of the Christ’: The Significance of Baptism in the Letter to the Colossians and the Churches of the Restoration,” *Restoration Quarterly* 43 (2001): 65–77.

8. A similar exegesis of Gen 1.27 is found in Philo (e.g., *Who Is the Heir* 230–31), who sometimes distinguishes the image, identified with the Word (*logos*), from the human being crafted “after the image”; see Thomas H. Tobin, *The Creation of Man: Philo and the History of Interpretation* (CBQMS 14; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1983), 63–64, 162–76.

9. See Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1997), 182–92.

to claim the authority of Torah for his contention that the dead in Christ will be raised.<sup>10</sup> Paul finds in Gen 2.7 a warrant for the conviction that a second Adam follows the first, an eschatological “life-giving Spirit” corresponding to the protological “living soul.”<sup>11</sup> This breathtakingly free reading includes a number of motifs that Paul elsewhere mentions in allusions to his missionary instruction or to his converts’ initial response to this teaching.<sup>12</sup> The plausibility of this interpretation is thus enhanced by the familiarity that Paul can presuppose in his converts with such motifs from their earliest Christian experience. As 1 Cor 15.1–12 shows, this is the argumentative strategy Paul pursues in the chapter as a whole.

The passage concludes by drawing a contrast between “the image of the earthly [man],” which we “have borne,” and “the image of the heavenly [man],” which “we shall bear” (1 Cor 15.49). Here Paul follows Gen 5.1–3 in distinguishing between the image of God, the pattern after which Adam was created (Gen 1.26; 5.1), and the earthly image of Adam himself, which his son Seth inherited (Gen 5.3). The passage thus assures believers that our final transformation into the heavenly image of Christ awaits us in the eschatological future, whether we live or die (cf. 1 Cor 15.51–53).

Our progress towards this transformation, begun at conversion, is the subject of the two references to the divine image in 2 Corinthians. When we turn to the Lord in conversion, a veil is removed from our mind so that we can perceive the truth of Israel’s Scriptures (2 Cor 3.16) and from our face so that we can behold the glory of the Lord (2 Cor 3.18). In beholding his glory, Christians are progressively “being transformed [into] the same image from glory to glory” (cf. “the new human being, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of his creator,” Col 3.10).<sup>13</sup> In 2 Cor 4.4, the Christ proclaimed in Paul’s gospel (vv. 3–4) is identified as himself “the image of God.” Here the echo of Gen 1.27 is faint, but perhaps not entirely absent; the phrase “the God who said, ‘Out of darkness light shall shine’” (2 Cor 4.6) evokes Gen 1.3, which suggests that Paul here associates Christ, the image of God, with the light of the first day of creation, perhaps drawing on the same sort of exegesis that informed Philo’s *Logos* doctrine. In any case, the passage presents Christ as the divine image to which believers are conformed, just as in Col 1.15 and 3.10. The whole context (2.14–4.6) concerns the missionary circumstances in which Paul proclaimed Christ as the image of God and believers responded by opening themselves to transformation into the image of Christ.

In Romans, Paul offers a compressed summary of his missionary catechesis to a church founded by other apostles and previously acquainted with him only by reputation; he characterizes this summary as a reminder (Rom 15.15) of the “pattern of teaching” to which the Romans were “entrusted” (Rom 6.17).<sup>14</sup> Especially significant is his characterization of their baptism as the death of the old human (Rom 6.6). Paul’s strong assertion of this understanding (“knowing this,” Rom 6.6) presupposes that the Romans already understood their baptism as Paul’s converts also did, as the death of the old self (cf. Gal 2.19–20) and their incorporation into the eschatological man Christ. Paul has earlier elaborated the contrast between Adam, the representative figure of the present age ruled by sin and death, and Christ, the founder of a new order, the bringer of grace and the eschatological life of resurrection (Rom 5.15–19). He then introduced baptism as the means of transition from Adam’s domain to that of Christ (Rom 6.3) and the beginning of the moral transformation that the life-giving power of God effects (Rom 6.4–8.14) At one of the high points

10. This understanding of the text is pursued at length in my dissertation, “The Image of the Man from Heaven: Christological Exegesis in 1 Cor 15.45–49” (Yale University, 1997).

11. Paul interprets the Torah verse in light of two apocryphal Jewish texts that make allusion to Gen 2.7: 2 Macc 7.23 and Wis Sol 15.11.

12. Besides the image motif itself, these include the image of a “spiritual body,” which is anticipated in the recollection that “by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12.13), the motif of wearing the image (Gal 3.27; Eph 4.22–24; Col 3.9–10), and the description of Christ as the “man [yet to come] from heaven” (1 Thess 1.9–10).

13. See Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 32A; New York: Doubleday, 1984), 215. Cf. 1 Cor 11.7; Rom 3.23.

14. On the significance of this characterization, see my comments in “The Extent of Christian Theological Diversity: Pauline Evidence,” *Restoration Quarterly* 47 (2005): 9–10.

of his argument, Paul affirms that it has been God's purpose from eternity to transform human beings into "the image of his Son" (Rom 8.29). This transformation begins with the moral renewal of believers and is completed with the transformation of the body in the age to come (Rom 8.3–11).<sup>15</sup>

Paul's missionary catechesis on the image of God, refracted through the prism of his churches' pastoral needs but still discernible in his letters, sets a high standard for those who would follow in the Christian ministry today. Far from a peddler of cheap grace whose message was "Let us do evil that good may come," Paul held out before his interested listeners, his converts, and his fellow Christians the prospect of being transformed into the very image of Christ, beginning with the renewal of our mind and conduct. Those bearing the name Christian have too often failed to manifest this transformation; many of our contemporaries scorn the Christian profession of faith because of these failures.<sup>16</sup> The church's prayer in our time must be that by the power of the Spirit we may truly be conformed to the image of God in Christ and bear his glory to the world he would reclaim.

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15. On transformation as a theme in Paul, see James W. Thompson, *Pastoral Ministry According to Paul: A Biblical Vision* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006).

16. These failures of charity cast shadows on Christian history but should not eclipse the many good works done by Christians, which Robert Royal usefully surveys in *The God That Did Not Fail: How Religion Built and Sustains the West* (New York: Encounter Books, 2006).