**Unity and Diversity in the Local Church**

*Class 3: The Image of God in Our Unity & Diversity*

**I. Introduction**

Now, I know this is core seminar, but it’s gonna feel like Praise Factory for a second, OK? Cause we’re gonna have a little read aloud with uncle Isaac. From The Big Picture Story Bible. Here we go (read 24-28). Does being made in God’s image make you very, very happy? If it doesn’t, I wonder if you’re as happy as you could be when you try to love others who aren’t like you. Or do you just do it because God said so? But let’s say God didn’t say so: why should we then love people who are different from us? What are some reasons?

* All people are equal (reference T’s article or WaPo Oscar’s)
* Most people contribute to society (what about the handicap? Cite Dawkins)
* People can give us what we want (relationships, comfort…)

I think, even as Christians, sometimes we’re not too sure why we should love others. Gritting our teeth, we assume we should because of the reasons we just talked about or because God says so. But these reasons aren’t sufficient to help us *happily* love one another. Don’t hear me wrong: Obeying out of duty is usually good and shows our faith. But let’s strive for one better — let’s strive to obey with joy. That’s the kind of obedience that makes God very, very happy and us very, very happy. And that’s what we want to be, right? Happy with God!

So today we’re gonna talk about the image of God, what’s sometimes called the imago dei, so that we might more *happily* love one another. My prayer is that growing in wisdom in this area will change our duty to delight. And that this delight changes how we see and interact with one another. And make no mistake: if we don’t understand God’s image at least two things are at stake:

1. **God’s glory:** If we don’t work to understand the Image of God, this biblical doctrine, our love for others will be hindered. Which means our unity can’t shine as brightly and so God’s glory can’t shine as brightly through us, and that’s God’s plan for (Eph. 3:10). Love is the first fruit of the Spirit Paul mentions (Gal. 5:22ff), the most important aspect of our service (1 Cor. 13:2), and I hope by now you’re seeing that it is the theme of this course.
2. **Our maturity in Christ:** There’s a general poverty in understanding how this doctrine shapes not just our ideas of ethnicity, but our entire worldview and how we relate to one another. When you’re around a lot of people who are like you, you’re not challenged with peoples’ differences. So you’re not forced to think about how they’re made in God’s image. And too often, we like ignoring this doctrine because thinking about it is uncomfortable. But Christian, it’s our job to present one another as mature in Christ, as uncomfortable as that might be (Col. 1:28). So we must strive to renew our minds so we can put off our old ways and conform to our new, holy ways (Rom. 12:2).
And let’s not forget the imminent, tangible dangers that come from misunderstanding this doctrine. It is no secret that in the past, some who called themselves Christians, have botched this doctrine in horrifying, blatantly sinful ways. This has resulted in the dehumanizing pain of countless people — whether they are Polish, Jewish, African-American, and we could list more. It’s also resulted in the marginalization of other people like the poor. Given their susceptibility to injustice, it’s no wonder why God speaks so often of defending their rights in Scripture.

So given these high stakes, we’re looking at the image of God in humanity because it gives us layer upon layer of motivation to love those who are not like us. At Christmas my mom makes a birthday cake for Jesus. It’s got four distinct layers of flavor. Imagine today that the image of God is our cake and we’re going to look at four layers:

**Layer 1:** **The Image of God from Creation & Our Equality
Layer 2: The Image of God from Creation & Our Value
Layer 3: The Image of Christ from Redemption & Our Corporate Value
Layer 4: The Image of Christ from Redemption & Our Forbearing**

With each layer, I pray we’ll value one another more, and practically live out that reevaluating in the world and especially in the church. So to that end, here’s our first question: How does being *created* in the image of God give us value?

**II. The Image of God in Creation Makes Our Value…**

* **…Equal (Gen. 1:26-28) | Layer 1**

We read in Genesis that at the beginning of time, God said*, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness…” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God Said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth...”* So all humans, Christian or not, have an inherently *equal* value given to them by God in creation and they are responsible to fill the earth with God’s glory. There’s not one type of people who does this better than the other.

**Implication: Peers, not Projects**

So here’s one way this equal image-bearing fleshes out: It means we must not look at others as if they are less than us. You might think you’ve never done this. But I wonder who it is you prefer to talk to right after the service is over? Who do you seek to invite to church? It is always people who seem like you? And if you do reach out to someone different, does it feel like an arduous task, almost like a project?

We often see others we perceive to be different as projects. And so we quickly think, “I’m going to befriend them because I have to or because they need help.” But there’s always a self-elevation in that thought. Instead, we must work to see each other on the same playing field. This way we’ll think, “I’m going to befriend them because *like me*, they’re made in God’s image. That makes them, regardless of their socio-economic status, regardless of their color, even regardless of their creed, a peer — worthy of love, not a project worthy of my condescension.” Brothers and sisters, we’re so quick to judge a book by its cover, to judge each other by our covers, yet we forget that we are all books in the first place. So, do you only deem worthy those who can who you can help?

Let’s move on: Second, the image of God in creation makes our value…

**…Derived Not Earned (Gen. 1:26-28) | Layer 2**

Notice that the image man is made is…God’s image! Men and women both are essentially little, loved copies of God. Their value isn’t based in what they made or could make for themselves or others, but in who made them, in who loved them, in who they look like. So if we are to love God, we must love all those who look like God. And who looks like God? Everyone! Do you see how in creation we’re united in our parents Adam & Eve, though we’re diverse? There are now 7 billion different image-bearers on earth (there’s the diversity) depicting one God (there’s the unity). This is why the Russian novelist Dostoyevsky said that, "To love someone is to see them as God intended." And as our pastor said in a sermon a few weeks ago, “man is not valuable because of what he can give me, but because He is created in God’s image.”

**Implication: Treating Others Rightly**

So an implication of seeing someone’s derivative value is seeing them as valuable because who they are necessarily says something about God. And when this person is different from us, we usually can’t notice that something. So here’s an example of how this motivates us to love others:

The most awesome person in this room is my beautiful wife, Megan. I love her. She loves me. But we’re sinners, and that means we argue from time to time. And during those hard times, my affections for her wane; I can’t rely on them to help me love her at that point. I can’t even rely on her amazing good looks! *But* when I remember, “what I’m thinking of her says something about what I think of God *because* she is made in God’s image” then I’m put in my place. Then I remember that people are always linked to the God who made them. In other words, how we treat our horizontal relationships always implies how we’re treating our vertical one. So being made in God’s image means 1) we all have equal value and 2) our value necessarily speaks about God. Because He gives it in the first place.

**So I’ve spoken a lot, so here’s a question for you: How might our common creation in God’s image shape how we understand others in a way that’s NOT just related to ethnicity? Eg: extroverts v. or homeless …Any other questions?**

So per usual, we’ve waited to define our working term until later. How I would define “the image of God” in creation is: “mankind’s uniquely blessed, derived, and valuable capacity to display God’s glory” or, that which makes man worthy of love. The image of God in creation is mankind’s uniquely blessed, derived, and valuable capacity to display God’s glory, or that which makes him worthy of love. And so we should love those who *seem* different because they’re made in God’s image, and that makes them, in a sense, not really that different from us at all.

**Wrong way to take this…**

Now we can take being made in the image of God in the wrong way. We can think…“I’m so special because I’m made in God’s image.” Remember, mankind is not made above the animals (Ps. 8), we’re not deemed “very good” in creation to point to ourselves, but to God. We’re entirely recipients of His blessed image, so there is no room for pride. The Holy Spirit is a great example of this. Though He is God, He seeks to point glory to Jesus, not himself. How much more, as just images of God, should we do that?

**For Christ’s sake…Let’s get to Christ**

But it’s funny: those first two layers, all of what I just said, can be said apart from Jesus Christ. But we are Christians — *Christ-*ians — in a *Christ*ian church, so let’s talk about…Christ!

Remember the mission God gave his image bearers at creation? The human race was supposed to fill the earth with his glory. But we failed that mission; we fell short of it. The Bible literally says, “*All* [people] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Rom. 3:23). Now our sin doesn’t mean we lose the image of God. Genesis 5:3, you can read it on your own, makes clear that even after the Fall, we kept the image we got at creation, that it spread to all of Adam’s descendants, and that it was still of the *highest* value. Even after the flood when God essentially recreates humanity, Genesis 9 affirms that all people still have God’s image. And they still have God’s mission to glorify him in the earth. But we keep sinning…

So, raise your hand if you have a smart phone? Lower your hand if you’ve ever seen a cracked smart-phone? I don’t know about you, but whenever I see one, I’m like “Ugh!…how can I use this thing now?” In the same way, in creation we were like new smart phones made to transmit and depict the message of God’s glory. But now we’re broken; we have cracked screens.

This is why we praise God for Jesus, who came and died for broken image-bearers as a substitute. He carried out the mission to image God perfectly. The Bible tells us He was the perfect image of his Father (Col. 1:15, 19; Heb. 1:3 cf. 2 Cor. 4:4)! The Bible says the men who saw Jesus Christ saw God (John 12:45, 14:9)! So when we turn to Jesus and believe in Him, we get His perfect reputation of bearing God’s image. And so, in Christ we become new creations (2 Cor. 5:16-21). So now, Jesus, above all is our new identity. Speaking of this new identity, Paul says in Colossians:

*“But now you must put [your earthly ways] all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the* ***old self*** *with its practices and have put on the* ***new self****, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free; but Christ is all, and in all.”*

Jesus has remade his redeemed people in an image that is wholly different than the one we got in creation. To be clear, the writers of Scripture do consider the image of Christ to be an image of God. But unlike the image given on earth in creation, the “earthy” if you will, the image of Christ relates to glory, to heaven. It doesn’t replace or restore the image we got in creation. Rather it supplements it in the greatest way. So how does being redeemed or being *re-created* in the image of Christ give us value?

**III. The Image of Christ From Redemption Makes Our Value Supernaturally…**

* **…Corporate (1 Cor. 12:26, Eph. 1:16, Gal. 5:13) | Layer 3**

When we were talking about our unity in creation, in Adam, we made clear that all humans comprise one race. And though there’s good, precious unity in that, we focused on our *individual* dignity. But as we’ve seen in earlier classes: the Bible makes clear that in Jesus, Christians are one new race, and even one new family (Eph. 2). As the Bride of Christ, we have one new corporate identity and dignity that surpasses all others. One day, the Final day, we will be unveiled as the most diverse yet most united body. That day – when our diversity is united around God’s throne – will be the main event of history. But until then, we’re in local churches on earth. I think it helps to think of local churches as the dress rehearsals for that main event. So how do we live out our corporate value in Christ in our local dress rehearsals?

**Implication: Seeing, Cherishing, and Pursuing Our Unity Before Our Diversity**

Thabiti helped me understand this tremendously. Let’s say we walk into the main hall. On one side of pews are those we perceive to be like us. On the other side, there are those who we perceive to be different. So immediately, at the speed of thought, we start calculating. We think the one side seems “like me, therefore safe; safe, therefore, something to be gained...” and the other is “unlike me, therefore dangerous; dangerous, therefore potential for harm and loss; potential for harm and loss therefore I’ll ignore them…” Understanding our unity in the image of God at creation helped us to say to the supposedly different side, “Wait! “They’re made in God’s image, like me; a descendant from Adam like me; a fallen sinner like me, with potential to get saved, like me…” And in Christ we say, “Hallelujah! They’re miraculously saved, like me! Bought by the blood of Christ, like me! Co-heir in glory, like me! Part of God’s family, like me.” Sinclair Ferguson puts it beautifully when he says, “our reality is not that we just share a lineage of Adam in the earthly; Christ’s blood creates a deeper lineage than our genes.”

So what does this mean? It means do everything we can to protect our unity in the gospel, and we do this *together*. How? Well as a congregational church we protect our church by recognizing our elders, *together*. We watch the messages Mark is preaching *together,* lest we be like the Galatian church who was responsible for allowing heresy. We watch our witness by disciplining members, *together.* We vote on how we spend our money *together.*

I think sometimes it’s easy to take members meetings for granted. Ya know, Sundays been a long day. The projection screen is a little rickety. But at the next one consider what is happening with each vote, with each “aye”. We are roaring *together* that we are united by the blood of Christ. Because I haven’t been in many churches, I assumed our meetings are business as usual. But then I hear folks who have been in other churches make clear that members meetings, especially when it comes to the budget, in most churches are anything but unified. But that’s why we should praise God that the image of Christ from our redemption also makes our value supernaturally…

* **…Progressive (2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29, 30; 1 John 3:2) | Layer 4**

2 Corinthians 3:18 says, “And we *all*, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same *image* from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit…” Did you hear that, “*Being* transformed?” That verse from 2 Corinthians means we are grow*ing* (present tense) in Christ’s image until the last day when we see him fully and are like him. But until then, we’re stumbling toward that day. That means that, even though we’re kept by the Holy Spirit, growing in the image of Jesus is going to be a long, messy work. So for us in this church, that means joyfully bearing with one another.

**Implication: Joyfully Forbearing With Others in the church Until We’re The Church (Col. 3:12-13)**

In *The Meaning of Marriage* Tim Keller introduces a revolutionary concept. He talks about how on his wedding day, he and his wife looked great. And now when he does weddings, he’s tempted to quip to the bride and groom: “enjoy it now, because it’s all down hill from here.” And it’s easy to believe that. But then he realized that’s not true. Because in glory, we will have the greatest image that makes our earthly image look like rags. But until then, the husband and wife are teammates who help each other get to that last day; the husband is cheering his wife on and presenting her to God. In the same way, brothers and sisters, we are to cheer one another on until that last day. Until our little church joins the rest of the universal Church, the rest of God’s Bride.

But…cheering each other on is hard! Especially when we sin against each other. So what do we do? Sit and say, “well God forgave me so I gotta forgive them!” Yes, but does that really help you happily love that person? I think it’s in those moments that we don’t just remember that we’re made in God’s image, though that’s helpful. We remember that God is at work in that other person, transforming them, for their most glorious day. And thinking that God is including you in that person’s transformation, hard as it may be, is motivation to happily love them. Thinking of that person as God’s cherished, work in progress, and thinking of what that person might be when God is done with them, gives you joy to bear with them. Yes, that person is forgiven like you’re forgiven: and that means that God is redeeming them in Christ’s image. So joyfully love ‘em, like family, ‘til that last day.

**IV. Conclusion**

We could explore so much in this doctrine, brothers and sisters. There are so many implications for how we bear the image of God in the world, and how we bear the image of Christ in the Church. But for now, here are my closing exhortations for you:

1. **Praise God for our unity and our diversity (Eph. 1:15-16)**

We often skip over Paul’s introductions in his letters because they sound routine. But look at chapter one of Ephesians and see what Paul says. He says in verse 15: “For this reason*, because* I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus *and* your love toward *all* the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers…”

I think what made the news of the Ephesian church’s faith travel *was* their love toward *ALL* the saints. The Jewish Christians loved the Gentile Christians and vice versa. This united love was the proof that gave Paul confidence in the Ephesians’ faith. And he responded by praising God. In the same way, we should praise God for the uniting love he is developing here between his image-bearers. Have you ever praised God for that?

As I said, there’s much to explore here. Explorers usually use telescopes — telescopes allow us to inspect without getting close; they allow us to see what a desired item can yield *for us*. I think we often look at each other through telescopes. But when we cherish our unity and our diversity, it almost feels like looking through a kaleidoscope. We’re dumbfounded by the diverse array of colors we see and how they work together to brighten the others shades and hues. That’s what God is doing here.

1. **Secondly, keep working on perfecting your image in Christ (Phil. 2:12)**

This class can be frustrating because there is so much to discuss. But take this as an invitation to learn more on your own; continue the conversation outside these walls. I know Kellyn Springer who’s attended our classes just hosted a conversation about unity and diversity. Jamie and I hope that it becomes regular for regular, equally valuable image-bearing members of our church, to do things like this. That it’s normal for normal people in our church to have these conversations. Isn’t this what Mark invites us to pray for on Sunday nights? That we would be unified amidst our diversity, and that conversations about theological things like this would become normal.

Of course these aren’t the only conversations we should have. Joyfully sharing our similarities is good and right, and we’ll talk about that next week. But we must also have these tougher theological conversations. That’s how we prevent history from repeating itself. That’s how we love one another better. That’s how we mature in Christ’s image. And as John Piper said, “When we achieve that image of Christ fully in glory, we will have achieved the greatest image possible.” We will be very, very happy. Let’s pray.