

# Our Unique Purpose Unveiled

What “*Made in the Image of God*” Really Means

By Dick Staub

Christians are told that they are “made in the image of God.” It’s a nice thought, and probably one to cling to when we need a reminder of our own value. But what does that even mean? “Made in the image of God” is an audacious claim—and one that probably carries some responsibility with it. We all know we are not gods—though if we’re honest, we know we often think we are the god of our own lives, even if we’d never admit it. The truth is, you are not God. But you are godlike.

Our confusion about whether or not we are God arises from our *godlikeness*. It’s described in the first chapter of the Bible. Genesis 1:26-27 reveals, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness’ ... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

To be fully human is to fully reflect God’s creative, spiritual, intelligent, communicative, relational, moral and purposeful capacities.

So, what *does* it mean to be created in God’s image? The Hebrew root of the Latin phrase for image of God—*imago Dei*—means image, shadow or likeness of God. You are a snapshot or facsimile of God. At the very least this means humans occupy a higher place in the created order because we alone are imprinted with godlike characteristics. Your godlikeness is the path to your greatest fulfillment. You will feel the greatest pleasure and wholeness when who God made you to be is fully developed and expressed.

Your godlikeness can also be a pitfall, because in our hubris we often confuse being like God with being God. Mystery writer Nevada Barr learned this after returning to faith from her long sojourn on the wild side, and concluded: “It was a number of years of crashing and burning before I made the discovery that I was not God. Finally I realized that though I was not God, I was of God.”

But in what *way* are you an image of God? How are you godlike? Theologians have long debated this question, but the answer becomes clear when we read the description of God in Genesis 1 and then ask: If we could take a snapshot of God, what would we see and what would it reveal about humans created in God’s image?

First, the truth about you is that you are creative because God is creative: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). We know that God is creative. Every human makes things. Artists make things with paint. Poets, writers, philosophers and lawyers make things with ideas and the compelling use of words. Doctors make people healthier; consultants make organizations better. Manufacturers make things with raw materials; chefs make things with fruits, vegetables, meats and spices. Every human has the capacity to make things, to create, because we are all made in the image of a creative God.

The second truth about you is that you are spiritual because God is Spirit: "The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (Genesis 1:2). Every human possesses spiritual aptitudes and capacities. We are more than the sum of our physical parts. Our spiritual nature, though unseen, is as real as our physical nature. Nurturing our spirit is as important as eating, drinking and exercising are to our physical body.

The very essence of God is relational, and that essential quality has been imprinted on humans.

A third truth about you is that you communicate because God communicates: "God said, 'Let there be light'" (Genesis 1:3). Anthropologists agree that the emergence of symbolic language—first spoken, then written—represents the sharpest break between animals and humans. The human ability to think and reason, to use language, symbols and art, far surpasses the abilities of any animals. This gift was bestowed when the communicative God's image was imprinted on us.

A fourth truth about you is that you are intelligent because God is intelligent: "In the beginning was the Word [*logos*, a Greek word meaning reason, or logic] and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Logical sequential thought flows from the orderliness of God's mind. As a result, though we are not all intellectuals, we each possess a mind and a way of thinking and learning, so Jesus commanded us to love God with our minds (as well as our hearts and all our strength). Because of God's intelligent image imprinted on our lives, though we possess different kinds of intelligence, each of us is to develop our mental capacities to their fullest.

A fifth truth about you is that you are relational because God is relational: "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness. ... It is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 1:26, Genesis 2:18). The phrase, "Let us make man in our image" reveals an "us-ness" in the very nature of God. The very essence of God is relational, and that essential quality has been imprinted on humans. This capacity for a relationship with God extends to

humans, which is why the Genesis story declares that God created Eve for Adam because "it is not good for man to be alone."

A sixth truth about you is that you are morally responsible because God is a moral being. "And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die'" (Genesis 2:16-17). Just as there are natural laws that govern the universe, universal moral laws govern human behavior. The Bible teaches that these laws are written on human hearts and are universal.

When we fully grasp what it means to bear God's image, we are at once struck with the grandeur of our possibilities and the tragedy of our unrealized potential. To be fully human is to fully reflect God's creative, spiritual, intelligent, communicative, relational, moral and purposeful capacities, and to do so holistically and synergistically. Furthermore, though all humans possess these godlike capacities, each of us has the potential to express them distinctively, because God's image has been imprinted uniquely on each of us. In God's infinite creativity there are no duplicates; you are the *only* you there has ever been or ever will be.

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