People, who are we?

Text: Genesis 1:26-27

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**Scriptures:** Daniel 3:1-5; Genesis 1:26-31; 5:1-5; 2 Corinthians 3:12-18; Ephesians 4:17-24; Hebrews 1:1-3

**Songs Chosen:** PH 13, [SttL] 96, 347, 468, 489

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism (LD3)

**Theme:** The image and likeness of God in man, created, damaged, restored.

**Proposition:** We are all damaged images of God in need of repair and restoration

**Introduction**

People, who are we? ‘*Well, what sort of a question is that?*’, you might ask me. ‘*We are part of the congregation of this church!*’ ‘*We are residents of New Zealand!*’ My question is broader than the scope of these answers. People, who are we as human beings? What is our origin, our constitution/construction, our purpose? Who are we in our essential being?

This is a vital question, and the answers have an immense impact on the society and culture in which we live. For example, today many people see us, as human beings, existing merely as a composition of material elements with mental, emotional and spiritual life as the by-products of biochemical processes in our physical bodies. Abortion and euthanasia proponents believe that we have the right to take the lives of human beings, both other people and ourselves. Advanced gene editing and artificial intelligence technologies threaten the dignity and sanctity of human life.

Many people today see little or no distinction between mankind and other creatures – especially ‘higher order’ mammals. Some now see humanity as a cancer on this earth – an existential threat to the environment. Increasingly many people accept the supposed ability of people to determine their own gender, irrespective of their biological sex. With ongoing growth in bureaucracy, autocracy and the impact of internet-based mass media there is an increasing depersonalisation of humanity. Some say that the individual person is not primarily responsible for the evil that he or she may do, but society, the education system, the government, housing, welfare, and/or the health system are the culprits. New developments in biology, psychology, and sociology increase the potential for the manipulation of the masses by a powerful elite.

The question of who we are in our essential being is not a new one. For example in the Middle Ages, the scholastic view of man was accepted as Christian, but was actual a combination of pagan philosophy (Aristotle) and Biblical revelation. We still find the results of this today in the idea that evil has its roots mainly in the body. Sins ‘of the flesh’ like adultery or homosexuality are viewed by some Christians as far more serious than ‘sins of the spirit’ (such as pride, jealousy, self-centeredness, and racism). The Scriptures reveal that the most important truth about mankind is that we are inescapably related to God; being made in His image.

Our three points this afternoon reflect this truth:

1. Perfect images
2. Damage images
3. Repaired images
4. **Perfect Images**

Some people say that the Bible is a book about God. Others that the Bible is a book about people. What do you think? The reality is that Scripture reveals truth about the person and work of God, the person and work of people, and the relationship between God and human beings like us. Our text, in the first chapter of the Bible, is a pivotal statement about our origin, people: ‘*Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them*’ (Gen 1:26-27).

There are two key words here which help us to understand who we are: **image** and **likeness**. In the original Hebrew language, these words are almost synonyms; there is only a slight difference between the two.

The word translated ‘image’ is derived from a root which means ‘to carve’ or ‘to cut’. It was used in the ancient world to describe a carved likeness of an animal or a person. For example, we heard from our earlier reading in Daniel chapter three of the time when King Nebuchadnezzar set up an image of himself on the plain of Dura, commanding his subjects to fall down and worship it. An image visibly represents an animal or a person. Man, made in God’s image, could therefore be said to be a representation of God on earth. Just like a faithful ambassador works to advance the best interests of his country, so, as God’s representatives, we are designed to support and defend what God stands for, and promote what He promotes. This representation is seen in the task that God gives to mankind to ‘*have dominion*’ over the His other creatures, including the whole natural environment.

The word translated ‘likeness’ comes from a root that means ‘to be like’. We could accurately say that man was created to ‘mirror’ God. In man, a reflection of God becomes visible on earth. It is true that all creatures, all of creation, declares the glory of God, but only in man do we see a likeness of God. Man, the creature, is like God but is not God, the Creator. In man we see something of God’s person reflected in our being. For example our personhood, our self-conscious awareness, and our capacity for knowledge, thought, and action.

Like God, we are relational beings. Remember that in the beginning God made His creation ‘very good’ (Gen 1:31), but also revealed that it was not good for man to be alone (2:18). Scripture reveals that God - in the persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit - is relational within the very essence of His being. Theologically, the characteristics of God that are reflected in mankind are termed His ‘communicable attributes’. They include love, goodness, kindness, justice, speech, rationality, mercy, speech, truthfulness, and wisdom.

Originally these attributes were an essential part of our first ancestors who possessed them perfectly, but in a limited way. This in contrast to God; who is infinite in His being and characteristics. We should not then be surprised that Christ, in His humanity, as the perfect man, is described as being ‘*the image of the invisible God*’ (Col 1:15) and ‘*the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature*’ (Heb 1:3). The Greek word translated ‘exact imprint’ (character) was used in the ancient world of a stamp or impression as on a coin or seal. All the features of the image correspond respectively with those of the instrument producing it.

It is also helpful here to think about the second commandment "*You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything….*”. (Ex 20:4). God does not want his creatures to make images of him. He has already made images: living, walking, talking human beings like you and me. God has made us body and soul; neither is unimportant, both are part of who we are in this life.

You may be aware of the theological debates that have taken place in past church history over whether we are made up of two parts – body and soul (‘dichotomic’ view) or body, soul and spirit (‘trichotomic’ view). The Biblical terms for soul and spirit are used interchangeably in Scripture. This supports the dichotomic position; although it is better to think of ourselves not as having two parts, but one holistic whole composed of our body and soul.

The Heidelberg Catechism summarises the perfect image of God originally in our first parents in these words from Answer 6: “*God created man good and in his own image, that is in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might truly know his creator, love him with all his heart, and live with him in eternal happiness for his praise and glory*”. As perfect images of God, in the words of Ephesians 6:24 ‘*created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness*’, Adam and Eve were able to enjoy a close, harmonious and joyful relationship with their righteous and holy Creator, until they became damaged images, which brings us to our second point.

1. **Damaged Images**

At times archaeologists have unearthed statues of people carved out of stone by people from ancient civilisations. Facial features often become blurred by the eroding forces of wind and water, limbs may drop off completely or partly, cracks in the stonework render the carving less life-like. Yet often, the fact that this was once a beautiful carved statue of a real person is still evident. Also, think about a mirror, like perhaps the one in your bathroom at home. Such mirrors can become cracked or tarnished over time. Yet even in this degraded state they still enable you to see your reflection, but by no means as clearly or as completely as you can with a highly polished, clear and intact ‘looking glass’.

The fall into sin of Adam and Eve damaged the image of God in mankind, as the Heidelberg Catechism helpfully summarises in Answer 7: “*This fall has so poisoned our nature that we are born sinners – corrupt from conception on*”. It was not that Adam and Eve ceased to become human, nor that they instantly stopped existing. As we heard earlier from Genesis 5, Adam lived to the age of 930 years before he died physically. However, He had died spiritually when He sinned. His relational separation from God was reflected in the banishment of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden (Gen 3:24). Notice then that the fulfilment of God’s words of warning to Adam ‘*in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*’ (Gen 2:17) took place in two stages over time. Firstly spiritual death and then later physical death.

Not only was the image of God in Adam and Eve damaged, but also that fundamental blemish or disfigurement was passed onto their offspring. For example, we heard from Genesis 5:3 that Adam ‘*fathered a son in his own* ***likeness****, after his* ***image*** *and named him Seth*’. All of Adam’s descendants, including you and me, inherit the damaged image of God. Like a mutilated statue or a deformed reflection in a damaged mirror, we are still visibly human beings, but we now display the communicable attributes of God imperfectly. For example now naturally: our love is less than faithful, our goodness inconsistent, our kindness absent at times, our ‘justice’ not always fair, our speech lacking at times in truth and grace, our rationality impaired by minds that have become ‘*futile in their thinking*’ (Rom 1:21), our ‘mercy’ sometimes unforgiving, and our ‘wisdom’ foolish.

The inherited sin that characterises the damage to the image of God in us ‘*came into the world through one man (Adam), and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned*’ (Rom 5:12). The effects of this damaged image of God in mankind are:

* We are now naturally polluted by sin which stains everything we do (e.g. Psalm 14:3; Rom 3:9-18; 7:18). Imagine a single drop of strong poison in a glass of water than makes the whole drink lethally toxic.
* We now experience guilt as Adam and Eve did when they tried to cover their nakedness (Gen 3:7).
* We are now deserving of God’s righteous judgement (Heb 9:27).
* We are no longer able not to die (Latin: posse non mori), as Adam and Eve were before the Fall.
* We are now naturally separated from God (Eph 2:1) as Adam and Eve were after the Fall (Gen 3:24).
* We have now naturally lost the freedom to be able to do the good will of God, instead being bound as slaves to Satan.

All of the troubles, pain and suffering in this world can be traced back to the damaged image of God in mankind. In fact, even the creation itself, beautifully and intricately designed to give glory to God (e.g. Ps 19:1), has become damaged so that it is now in bondage to decay (Rom 8:19-22). Yet, like in us, the reflection of God’s glory in what He has made in this world: the other creatures, the landscapes, the sea and the sky yet still reveal His ‘*eternal power and divine nature*’ (Rom 1:20); as we sang earlier from Psalm 8:1 “*O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*”. God is glorious in His work of creation and also in His work of restoration, which brings us to our third point:

1. **Repaired Images**

Just as repairing a badly broken and eroded stone statue would be painstakingly work for a mason who would have a myriad of small changes to make and just as repairing a badly cracked and tarnished mirror would be no small task for a glazier, so the spiritual work of restoring the image of God in man in this life is a generally slow, careful and progressive task. This is the work of the Holy Spirit’s sanctification which takes place with the cooperation of a person who has first been made spiritually alive.

Theologically this prior spiritual work is called ‘regeneration’. This is explained by Jesus in His words to Nicodemus (John 3:3,5): “*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.” “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God*”. Being born again by the Holy Spirit enables people like you and me to begin to bear the image of God as we were designed to do. Heidelberg Catechism question and answer 8 express this universal truth in these words: “*But are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil?*” “*Yes, unless we are born again, by the Spirit of God*”.

Once a person is spiritually alive, the repair work begins, step by step enabling the image-bearer who is being restored to do works which, though still imperfect, are pleasing to God. The Apostle Paul describes it this way in 2 Cor 3:18: “*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*”.

Think for a moment, not of a hard stone statue needing extensive repairs everywhere, but of a lump of semi-soft clay. This is the medium that the Scriptures use to describe human beings like us (e.g. ‘*we are the clay, and you are our potter, we are the work of your hand’* – Isa 64:8 – also Jer 18:4, 6; Rom 9:21). The idea of being shaped by the Lord so that we more and more display his image and likeness is expressed in the hymn of submission that we’ll sing shortly: “*Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way! Thou art the potter, I am the clay. Mould me and make me after thy will, while I am waiting, yielded and still*”.

The Apostle Paul knew that he was a man ‘under repair’, a ‘work-in-progress’ who was not yet perfect (Phil 3:12). As we heard last week from Romans 7:7-25 he experienced the painful internal conflict between his old self, his sinful nature inherited from Adam and his new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. He said to the Corinthians ‘*Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ*’ (1 Cor 11:1). Essentially, ‘Be like me when I bear the image of God – as Christ does perfectly’.

Brothers and sisters, friends, there is no higher purpose, ultimately no satisfaction or joy in this life than to bear the image of God because this is what we are designed to do. Will you then willingly submit yourself to God’s transforming grace of sanctification? The Lord God, in His Word and in the person of His Son has revealed the true truth about who we are as human beings. We are made in the image of God. We are not merely a set of biochemical processes. Nor to we function as highly evolved organisms that originated from primordial slime.

Because all human beings bear God’s image, killing (apart from in the context of a ‘just war’) is wrong, even if it may at times seem like a good idea to us. Abortion and euthanasia destroy the image of God in a person in this life. Much godly wisdom and care is required to navigate the dangers of gene editing and artificial intelligence technologies because human life is sacred.

As human beings we are fundamentally distinct from all other creatures, for we alone are created in the image of God. Wise, careful and responsible stewardship over all of God’s creatures and the environments in which they are we live is part of our collective responsibility as image bearers who have been given dominion over this earth. In this we are to represent God who cares for all the creatures He has made. So be a tidy Kiwi. Use natural resources wisely and responsibly. Look after any animals and plants in your care.

People, God created us in His image, male and female. Our personal biology does determine our gender. We do not have the right to change this, even if we feel awkward or uncomfortable in the body we have been given.

Ultimately, we are individually responsible for the evil we do. We cannot blame this on society, our education, our parents, our civil government, or our health. These may be factors affecting the wicked behaviour of others. If we are to lead them to Christ, we are wise to understand and to acknowledge this without ever endorsing sin.

Ultimately, everyone needs to repent of their sin and thereby take personal responsibility for it. Have you done this? Come to Christ, the perfect human being, full of grace and truth. He is wonderfully glorious. In Him, brothers and sisters we are broken images of God under repair. The day is coming when we shall be perfected, glorified, never to sin again. Then we will be fully restored image bearers of God. That is a future worth living for now. So whatever you do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31). In summary, bear His image, imitate Christ!

AMEN.