

In the Likeness of God in Spiritual Formation

-Sanctification - spiritual formation-

The primary purpose of this document is to show how human spiritual formation (justification and sanctification) notes God's desire to see humanity restored to its original state of reflecting the image of God.

Humanity was created in God's image—pure and in right relationship with the Creator. However, because of sin, humans fell from grace and thus require supernatural remedy to be restored to their original design. The theological terms to describe this supernatural remedy is spiritual formation, justification, and sanctification.

Spiritual formation (justification and sanctification) refers to the process of people being restored to a right relationship with God and conforming to the image of God. As humans conform to the image of God—the Lord's intended state—they find purpose and experience the “abundant life” promised by Jesus.¹

¹ John 19:10

INTRODUCTION

Some reject the supposition that there is a God. Dr. Sigmund Freud, whom some call the founder of modern psychology, said “Religion is an illusion based on the infantile need for a powerful father figure.”² More recently, Dr. Erik Wiesenberg, an atheist professor of philosophy at DePauw University, Indiana, postulated the “godless normative realism” theory which states that morality and higher moral truths are naturally ingrained in “human character, and not derived from natural facts or any more fundamental metaphysical facts.”³

Some philosophers repudiate a belief in God but acknowledge that belief in Him impacts culture in a positive way. For example, moral nihilist and philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1887) did not believe that God exists but wrote: “Holding that God does not exist undermines the reality of western morality.”⁴ For Nietzsche, morality and theology were linked, and cultures benefitted when citizens believed in God and strived to conform to His image.

Eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant allowed for the existence of God, but impugned organized religion. He wrote that belief in God was a “postulate of practical reason” and argued that a rational, moral being must reflect a higher, moral, source. For Kant, this was equivalent to belief in God.⁵ Though falling short of being a true disciple and follower of Christ, Kant, like Nietzsche, observed the benefit, for individuals and nations, of striving to conform to the will and image of God.

² Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (W.W. Norton & Company, NY. 1927), 18

³ Dr. Wielenberg, Erik, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). 2005. (part 3, 2014, and Ch. 2. 2020)

⁴ Nietzsche, F. *The Genealogy of Morals*, translated by Horace Barnett Samuel (Courier Dover Publications, 1887 [2003]).

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith, (Macmillan, 1781, 1787 [1965]).

Genesis 1:26-27 states that humans are made in the image and likeness of God. In his book titled, *The Existence of God*, Richard Swinburne wrote that there is no “great probability that moral awareness will occur in a Godless universe.”⁶ At the heart of humanity’s “moral awareness” is the X factor that separates humans from other life forms on earth. The X factor is not strength or cranial capacity—it is the fact that we are made in the image and likeness of God.

Genesis 1:26 reads: “*Then God said, “Let Us make mankind **in Our image, according to Our likeness**; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the livestock and over all the earth, and over every crawling thing that crawls on the earth.”*”

Genesis 1:27 states: “*So God created man **in His own image**, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*”

The phrases *in His image* and *in His likeness* reveal something about God and something about humanity. The text reveals God’s fathomless power and His desire to be in special relationship with humans; it also reveals the elevated, pure relationship humans once enjoyed with God. As an act of grace, God created humanity in His image and made people to be pure and in right relationship with Him.⁷ However, humanity’s original, pure state was soon lost.

Genesis 3 recounts the Fall of humanity from grace. Tempted by the enemy, humans chose to sin and thus marred their beautiful, pure, and right relationship with the heavenly Father. Most agree that humanity fell from grace—but few can articulate what that means. Meaningful discussion on

⁶ Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd edition. (Oxford University Press, 2004). 218

⁷ Genesis 1:26-27

this point seems to hinge on one's understanding of several verses in Genesis and Paul's New Testament challenge to "be conformed to the 'image of the Son.'"⁸

From Genesis 1:26-27 flow two key questions: 1) What does it mean to be made in the *image* of God? and 2) What does it mean to be made in the *likeness* of God? Resolving these questions allows one to consider what was impacted by humanity's fall from grace. That is, how did the entrance of sin into the world impact humanity's *image* or *likeness* of God? And resolving that question helps one understand Paul's challenge in Romans 8:29 to "*be conformed to the image of his Son.*"

Romans 8:29 serves as a kind of a bookend to Genesis 1:26—it reveals humanity's need, why Jesus came (beyond salvation, to facilitate the coming of the Holy Spirit, who makes transformation possible), and highlights God's desire to see humans transform toward the pure state enjoyed in Eden long ago.

The terms to describe the process of renewing and transforming into what God desires us to be include *spiritual formation*, *sanctification*, and *justification*. The incredible moral transformation repentant humans can experience confirms that God exists and that people are made in God's image. Because the transformation process moves us toward purity, holiness, and perfection, we can know that the triune God is pure, holy, and perfect.

⁸ Romans 8:29

UNDERSTANDING THE TERMS *IMAGE* AND *LIKENESS*

Where are the terms found?

The Hebrew word *tselem* (image) is found sixteen times in the Old Testament text. The word is translated *image* eleven times, *statue* five times, and *expression* once. The Hebrew word *tselem* (likeness) is found 24 times in the Old Testament and is most commonly translated *likeness*, *like*, *resembling*, or *pattern*. These terms find their greatest import in Genesis 1:26-27, 5:1; Daniel 3,4, 2 Kings 16:10; 2 Chronicles 4:3; Psalm 58:4; Isaiah 13:4, 40:18; Ezekiel 1:5, 10, 13, 16, 22, 26, 28, 8:2; 10:1, 10, 19, 22, 23:15; and Daniel 10:16.

What the terms *image* and *likeness* do not mean

The familiar phrase “God is great” is not to be understood as a measurable, scientific, literal, or quantifiable phrase. It does not reveal how many pounds God can lift or how fast, in miles per hour, God can move. The phrase simply points to the truth that God is mighty—*He is all-seeing, all-knowing, and all-powerful*, and so we say, somewhat poetically, that “God is great.”

Similarly, the phrases, “*in God’s image*” and “*in God’s likeness*” are likely more rich in imagery than they are precise descriptors.

Mostyn Roberts observes⁹ that the same Hebrew word for “image” (*tselem*) in Genesis 1:26 is used to describe Nebuchadnezzar’s image in Daniel 3. The golden statue in Daniel 3 did not mirror Nebuchadnezzar’s likeness as much as it conveyed power and perceived glory. The terms *image*

⁹ Mostyn Roberts. Academic Paper titled *The Image and Holiness of God* (Pg. 1). This article is based on a paper given at the John Owen Centre in April 2005 at a seminar entitled ‘*Style or Substance? 21st Century Holiness.*’

and *likeness* mean resemble, but also point to higher truths—humanity’s need for redemption and God desire to facilitate the process of human restoration/transformation toward purity.

Dr. Celia Deane-Drummond¹⁰ argued that the *imago Dei* (Latin for *image of God*) noted in Genesis 1 is not relegated to humans but is in fact manifest in all life. She writes: “The better option is to speak of...animals as being in the likeness of God...animals bear the likeness of God in their own way.”¹¹ Some theologians, such as David Clough, Professor of Theology and Applied Sciences at the University of Aberdeen, believe that the *imago Dei* in animals is possible but is exegetically “radically underdetermined.”¹²

This writer humbly contends that the *imago Dei* of Genesis pertains only to humans and has profound spiritual meaning.

The challenge of understanding the terms *image* and *likeness*

Dutch pastor and scholar J.C. Sikkel wrote: "Genesis 1:26 is one of the most mysterious passages in all of Scripture. For man since the Fall, it is a deep secret, but we cannot analyze it, but we must understand it and respond to it in adoration.”¹³

The human mind cannot fully grasp the great mysteries of faith. For now, we see through the

¹⁰ Celia Deane-Drummond, *A Roman Catholic Inquiry: Animals as Religious Subjects: Transdisciplinary Perspectives*, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 259–277

¹² Clough David L. *On Animals: Volume 1, Systematic Theology* (Bloomsbury T&T, Clark, 2012), pp. 64–65.

¹³ J.C. Sikkel, *Het Boek der Geboorten*, 1st ed. (Amsterdam: J.W.A. van Schaik, 1906), 96.

mirror dimly¹⁴ and must be at peace in knowing the wisdom of man is but foolishness to God.¹⁵ And so God communicates His truth in simple phrases, stories, celebrations, songs, miracles, prophecies, and teachings that all can understand. These may not provide extensive specific information regarding the *what, when, how, where, or why*, but they always provide enough for those with faith to believe and understand who God is and what He expects.

The phrase “God is great” is true but difficult to define or qualify. How does one define greatness? What matrix can be used to measure God’s power or knowledge? As no good answers are available to these questions, we must understand the statement as a general truth that must be accepted by faith. I believe the same is true with the phrases “God’s image” and “God’s likeness.”

Establishing a foundation for understanding the terms

Dr. Henry Vander Kam observed that some notables in the early centuries of the New Testament Church drew a sharp distinction between the terms *image* and *likeness*, but that more modern scholars have argued for a broader interpretation. Vander Kam wrote:

*“The early church fathers and later the Scholastics believed that there was a difference between the image and the likeness of which Genesis 1 speaks. The Reformers and virtually all the Reformed dogmaticians since their time have rejected this distinction. **The Bible uses the words interchangeably.** It should also be observed that it is more correct to speak of man as the image of God rather than the image bearer of God.”*¹⁶

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:12 (NKJV)

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 3:19

¹⁶ Henry Vanderkam, Mid America Journal of Theology 1/2 (1985) 142-154

This writer agrees that the biblical usage of the terms *image* and *likeness* are best viewed as synonyms and indicate how humans are different from all other life on the planet.

Genesis is not a history, science, or medical book. The book's narrow focus conveys humanity's need for God and relationship to God. Students of the Word should therefore interpret the text through a spiritual rather than scientific lens—a macro rather than a micro lens. That is, the stories, while true, may primarily point to higher spiritual truths (as opposed to providing precise details of particular happenings). Therefore, more important than *how* God created the heavens and the earth is *that* God created the heavens and earth. More important than information on *how long it* took for God to create all there is, the focus of Genesis is that *God created* all there is. Similarly, the terms *image* and *likeness* likely have layered meanings, which we will explore in this paper.

Why is a proper understanding of the phrases *image of God* and *likeness of God* important?

Over the centuries, influential individuals have used a misinterpretation of Genesis 1:26-27 to advocate that some humans are somehow of lesser value—subhuman, because they no longer reflect the image of God. The view that the Fall led to the utter destruction of what was embodied in the *image of God* and that only some have regained it, has been used to justify horrific acts and institutions such as slavery and genocide.

Philosophers W. Sibley Towner¹⁷ and George Forell¹⁸ hold the view that the image of God referenced in Genesis 1:26 was “completely lost” in the Fall. Last century, Adolph Hitler used a variant of this teaching to support the oppression of the Jews and ultimately, the Holocaust. Scholar Dr. John Kilner noted that in Hitler’s 1927 book, *Mein Kampf*, the madman identified the stronger members of society as “images of the Lord” in contrast to the weaker members who are mere “deformities” of that image and must be “cleansed from society.”¹⁹

Various theories on what was lost in the Fall

There has been much debate and diversity of thought regarding the precise meaning and ramifications of Genesis 1:26 and what was lost in the Fall. Dr. John Kilner, holder of the Forman Chair of Ethics and Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, argues that the *image of God* in humans did not change after the Fall. He writes: “The understanding that the image has been damaged is unfounded.” Kilner adds, “Nothing has transpired or intervened since the original creation to change the fact that a man is the image of God.”²⁰

Most theologians hold that the *image of God* was partly lost or damaged in the Fall. Philip Hefner, Stanley Leavy, and Ellen Ross are contemporary theologians who have articulated this view in scholarly works.²¹

¹⁷ Sibley W., Towner, “Clones of God” (Int 59, 2005). 351

¹⁸ George Forell, *The Protestant Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975). 126–27

¹⁹ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939) 606

²⁰ John F. Kilner, academic paper, *Humanity in God’s Image: Is The Image Really Damaged?* JETS 53/3 September, 2010. 603, 611

²¹ - Philip Hefner, “The Creation” in *Christian Dogmatics* (ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). 335.

- Stanley Leavy, *In the Image of God: A Psychoanalyst’s View*. Yale (University Press, 1988). Xi

- Ellen Ross, “Human Persons as Images of the Divine,” ed. Alice Bach (Trinity Press. 1990). 102

Eva van Urk-Coster's scholarly paper titled *Created in the Image of God: Both Human and Non-Human Animals* argues that the *image of God* is still evident in all of humanity. Further, Coster states that understanding this truth is fundamental to order, civility, and harmony in society. She writes: "Simply put, what we think has implications for how we act."²² That is, how we view others has a direct bearing on how we will treat others—a *simple yet profound truth*.

Similarly, the esteemed William Baker, who served as a professor of theology and hermeneutics at Philadelphia Biblical University, John Brown University, Philadelphia College of Bible, and the Moody Bible Institute, wrote that understanding Genesis 1:26-27 and what it means to be made in "in the image of God...has been the primary influence in the world to maintain the value and dignity of human beings."²³ For Coster and Baker, the phrase, "made in the image of God" has tremendous import for culture.

Dr. John Kilner argues that the *image of God* was not impacted by the Fall, but humans were. He writes: "It is not the image of God that is damaged by sin—people are. It is not the image of God that needs to be restored—people need that." Kilner adds: "There is no language [in Scripture] indicating that any sort of image is changing. Rather, God is changing people; and the image of his Son is that to which people are being conformed."²⁴

Dr. Kilner makes a reasoned argument, but perhaps the idea that *people* were impacted by the Fall, and the supposition that the *image and likeness of God* was impacted by the fall, are not

²² Eva van Urk-Coster *Created in the Image of God: Both Human and Non-Human Animals?*, (Theology and Science, 19:4, 343-362, DOI:10.1080/14746700.2021.1982248. 2021). P 2

²³ William H. Baker, *In the Image of God: A Biblical View of Humanity* (Moody Press, 1991).

²⁴ John F. Kilner, academic paper, *Humanity in God's Image: Is The Image Really Damaged?* JETS 53/3 September, 2010. 614-615

mutually exclusive thoughts. Rather than an either-or supposition, this writer maintains that both were impacted and hence, the process of reverting/transforming toward the *image of God*, in mind and body, honors God, brings joy and purpose to the person, and is ultimately accomplished in heaven. In heaven, at the end of our journey of transformation, we will be made perfect, a pure reflection of God, who Himself is holy and perfect.

How the terms *image* and *likeness* take on a higher meaning?

Strong's Concordance²⁵ presents the Hebrew terms *image* (tselem) and the *likeness* (demuth) as being related—the surface-level meaning is *resemble or resemblance*. Though Augustine drew a severe distinction between two terms, writing that *image* refers only to the intellectual element in man, and the *likeness* refers only to his moral faculties,²⁶ most Bible scholars today view the words as synonyms and believe the terms are more poetic in nature than precise.

It is likely that *image* and *likeness* are two sides of the same coin—one side pointing to behavioral attributes and the other side pointing to the mental attributes or capabilities that resemble qualities found in God. I believe these attributes and capabilities (which will be profiled later in this paper) emanate from when God breathed into humans, the “breath the breath of life.”²⁷

It is this *breath of life* that makes people different from other forms of life on earth. Humans are *like* God in that they have life, have a spirit (the breath of life), can plan, build, plant, harvest,

²⁵ Strong's Concordance: Updated Edition, KJV (Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts) 2009

²⁶ Carol Harrison. *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Clarendon Press, 1992). Pp 140–191

²⁷ Genesis 2:7

restore, show mercy, extend kindness, and appreciate the beauty of creation. People reflect the *image* of God when they serve, worship, sacrifice, love, forgive, help, extend grace, and more.

The male/female/relationship ties to the terms *image* and *likeness*

The Hebrew word *tselem* (image) is a masculine noun and the word *demuth* (likeness) is a feminine noun. Placing these terms in the same verse (Gen. 1:26) may point to how humans, like God, are complex and compound creatures. Humans are designed to be at their best when in relationship with others (woman completes man). Individuals find happiness and completion in relationships more than in solitude (for God said, it is not good for man to be alone²⁸).

Ultimately, humans are made complete when in perfect union with God. The late Dr. Ray Anderson, former Senior Professor of Theology and Ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary wrote that people were designed to be linked with one another (he called this “co-humanity”) and with God. Dr Anderson wrote, “The actual form of humanity in its original form is co–humanity, from which all of our knowledge of the human is derived.”²⁹

Being created in the image of God facilitates a yearning for God

Humans are more than flesh and bone—uniquely created with a body, mind, and spirit—a dim reflection of the triune nature of the Creator. Humans are also created with a yearning to know

²⁸ Genesis 2:18

²⁹ Ray, Sherman Anderson. *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology*. (Fuller Seminary Press. 1991). 45

and worship the Creator. Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician and philosopher wrote:

“There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing but only by God the Creator, made know through Jesus Christ.”³⁰

Humans have an intrinsic yearning to know God. Like Salmon drawn to swim upstream, humans are drawn to know God, for in this they find peace, hope, answers, and fulfill their purpose. The wise know that people can only experience the peace *of* God if they are at peace *with* (in right relationship with) God. To be in right relationship with God requires that people transform to reflect the image of God. Touching again on the Salmon illustration, the transformation process (sanctification or spiritual formation) is akin to our migration home to where humanity’s journey began—a time marked by purity and a special bond with God.

THE FALL, ITS IMPACT ON HUMANITY, AND GOD’S RESPONSE

It is likely the human mind cannot comprehend the fullness of what was lost in the Fall. One can glimpse the wonder of the pre-Fall world by considering how, before the Fall, humanity was pure and lived in harmony with God but after the Fall people are called the “enemy of God.”³¹

We can see how the Apostle Paul, who was among the best of men, called himself “wretched”³² in the eyes of God. We can read Zechariah and ponder how the high priest, who represented the best of humanity, stood “in filthy rags”³³ when measured against the brilliant purity of God’s intended design.

³⁰ Ben Rodgers. *Pascal: The Great Philosophers Series* (Orion Publishing, 1999). 21

³¹ Romans 5:10

³² Romans 7:24

³³ Zechariah 3:3

Dr. Lindsley, Vice President of Theological Initiatives at the Institute for Faith Work and Economics argued that the brilliance of what it meant to be made *in the image* and *likeness* of God may have dimmed but was not altogether extinguished in the Fall. He wrote: “While the image of God remains after the Fall, it is certainly marred and defaced.”³⁴ Though we may not know precisely what was lost in the Fall, we can know it was profound—and it prompted Almighty God to immediately announce a plan to send His Son to redeem humanity—at great personal cost.

God’s remedy (two acts of grace)

1. **Justification:** Amazingly, inexplicably, through faith in Jesus Christ, sinful humanity is declared justified (righteous and pure) before God. The late theologian George Eldon Ladd wrote: “The root idea in justification is the declaration of God, the righteous judge, that the man who believes in Christ, sinful though he may be, is righteous—is viewed as being righteous, because in Christ he has come into a righteous relationship with God”³⁵

In Old Testament times, humans were justified by faith³⁶ and found a covering for their sins via attention to the sacrificial provisions in the Law. Jesus’ sinless life, crucifixion, and resurrection ushered in the New Covenant of grace. Today, repentant sinners who place their faith in Jesus, find atonement, salvation, and justification in Christ.

2. **Sanctification:** Justification assures one of salvation but is separate from sanctification.

1 Corinthians 3 notes that ***all*** believers (those who are justified) will stand before the throne of

³⁴ Art Lindsley, Academic Paper titled *The Image of God*. 2013. Pg. 1

³⁵ G. E. Ladd. *A Theology of the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1974). 437

³⁶ Romans 4:3

God and their life works will be judged. This judgment, sometimes called the Bema Seat Judgment, does not determine who will go to heaven, but rather, what reward or recognition a person will receive in heaven. Our reward will be based on three things:

1. How we allowed the Spirit to transform our life so to conform to the image of Christ.
2. How we cultivated the gifts and presence of the Spirit in our life to fulfill His will.
3. How we developed our spiritual walk and moved toward the kind of pure and perfect relationship humanity had with God before the Fall.

The three items above summarize what is changed or transformed through the process of sanctification or spiritual formation.

THE JOURNEY BACK TO WHERE GOD WANTS US TO BE

The objective of sanctification (spiritual formation): Dr. Jeremy Rios wrote: “The Christian life is not static, but marks an expected, if often unspecified, trajectory of growth into maturity. these practices that encourage growth is often called Spiritual Formation.”³⁷

Dr. Willard argues that “Christian spiritual formation is the process through which the embodied/reflective will takes on the character of Christ's will.”³⁸ Paul wrote to the Romans that

³⁷ Jeremy M. Rios. *Spiritual (Mal)Formation: Toward an Analytic Account of Christian Formation*. (University of St. Andrews / TheoLogica, 2020). (*An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology*). 175

³⁸ Dallas Willard. *Spiritual Formation: What It Is, and How It Is Done*. Dallas Willard. 2019.
<http://www.dwillard.org/articles/individual/spiritual-formation-what-it-is-and-how-it-is-done>.

believers are to grow to become like Christ. We read: “Christians are being “conformed to the image of His Son.”³⁹

Various schools of thought regarding spiritual formation encourage believers to bring into conformity different aspects of their life. Dr. Jimmy Tan, professor at Southeast Siaan Theological College, wrote that spiritual formation results from a focus on prayer and “deepening our communion with God in Christ Jesus through the Holy Spirit.”⁴⁰ Other scholars encourage believers to focus on transforming the heart, the mind, the body, on sacrificial giving, fasting, or spiritual service.

Dr. Jeremy Rios believes a holistic approach to spiritual transformation is best as humans are “composite” creatures with many parts in need of refinement. He writes: “Christian Scripture—as well as reason, introspection, and intuition—documents in the human person a complex composite of parts.”⁴¹

Dr. Dallas Willard believes that sanctification changes the *will* and shapes one’s *character*. He writes: “The fact is that spiritual formation of one kind or another **happens to everyone**. It is the process by which the human spirit or will is given a definite ‘form’ or character.”⁴²

³⁹ Romans 8:29

⁴⁰ Jimmy Boon–Chai Tan. *Christian Spiritual Formation in a Southeast Asian Theological College*. *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 11 (2). 2018. 163–179. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1939790918796844>

⁴¹ Jeremy M. Rios. *Spiritual (Mal)Formation: Toward an Analytic Account of Christian Formation*. (University of St. Andrews / TheoLogica, 2020). *An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology*. 176

⁴² Dallas Willard and Paul Cavill. *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ*. (Nottingham: Inter–Varsity. 2002).

The process of sanctification: The old must die

With the objective of sanctification now in sight, let us now review the process that aids in moving the disciple to where God wants them to be. In John 3, we read that John the Baptist looked at Jesus and said, “He must increase, and I must decrease.”⁴³ The simple but profound phrase aptly describes the process of sanctification.

Dr. William Barrick, a professor of Old Testament and contributor to 13 Bible translation projects, writes of sanctification as being one with regeneration—two strands of the same cord. He writes: “Sanctification is inseparable from regeneration; where there is one, the other must also exist.”⁴⁴ Regeneration implies a new birth or new life. Just as Jesus spoke of how a grain of wheat must die to fulfill its purpose,⁴⁵ so too must our old ways die so to yield control to the Spirit. Barrick is one of many who concurs with 19th-century scholar J.C. Ryle, who wrote in 1879: “In a word, where there is no sanctification there is no regeneration, and where there is no holy life there is no new birth.”⁴⁶

The principal agent and our part in the process of sanctification

Proper consideration of this weighty issue must begin by affirming the principal agent in the sanctification process. New Testament Scholar James D. G. Dunn noted that the “Holy Spirit

⁴³ John 3:30

⁴⁴ William D Barrick, *Master’s Seminary Journal* 21/2 (Fall 2010). 179

⁴⁵ John 12:24

⁴⁶ John Charles Ryle, Forward in *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, & Roots* (1879; reprint, Moscow, Idaho: Charles Nolan Publishers, 2002) viii–ix.21

brings about a significant transformation in every believer's moral character and behavior."

Dunn added: "A spiritless Christian would [be] a contradiction in terms"⁴⁷

New Testament scholar Gordon Fee concurs, and wrote that "appropriate changes in attitudes and conduct [is possible] precisely because the Spirit empowers this new life."⁴⁸ In his work, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, & Roots*, Dr. William Barrick noted the Holy Spirit leads in the sanctification process, but humans have a role to play as well. He wrote: "The believer progresses in his own sanctification [comes] through the ministry of the Holy Spirit and through attention to the Scripture, but humans also have a role in sanctification. They must live out what they possess by the grace of God."⁴⁹

Philosopher William Alston wrote that the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit leads in the process of changing one's personality or character—particularly in the areas of desires, values, and perspective—all of which heavily impact behavior.⁵⁰ Alston also emphasized Paul's admonition to "sow to the Spirit" rather than "sowing to the flesh"⁵¹ to ensure believers focus on the source of power that moves one along in the process of spiritual formation.

Specific changes one would expect to see as one transforms toward the *image of God* include:

- **Spiritual maturity and growth:** Paul wrote to the Corinthians, a group he specifically challenged to grow or mature in their spiritual walk and set aside "childish ways,"⁵² that

⁴⁷ James D. G. Dunn. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1996). 423

⁴⁸ Gordon D. Fee. *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson. 1994). 880

⁴⁹ IBID. 179

⁵⁰ William P. Alston. *The Indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In Philosophy and the Christian Faith*. Edited by Thomas V. Morris. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). 121–50.

⁵¹ Galatians 6:8

⁵² 1 Corinthians 13:11

they should grow beyond being “like the earthly man and...someday be like the heavenly man [Jesus]”⁵³

- **Speaking with truth and living a life of integrity:** Sadly, after extensive research, Kinnaman and Lyons found there was little difference in the behavior of people who identify as followers of Christ and those who do not.⁵⁴ To be sanctified is to be *set apart*, to be in the world but not of the world.⁵⁵ Satan, the deceiver and father of lies whispers that a white lie is acceptable or that cheating is just good business. These lies create a false perception of *the image of Christ*, which is what every believer, through sanctification (spiritual formation), should move toward. Beware the well-timed and often perfectly articulated temptation.
- **Generosity and a servant’s heart:** In studying the behavioral patterns of those who identify as Christian and those who do not, Dr. Brooks found that “those who regularly attended religious services were 25% more likely to give, 23% more likely to volunteer, and in 2000, gave away 350% more money to charitable causes. Being quick to serve, love, give, and forgive are hallmarks of a vibrant Christian faith and models the example set by Jesus Christ.
- **Effectiveness in service:** Scripture notes that all believers receive the Gift of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁶ The Spirit provides the “seal of our salvation”⁵⁷ and “testifies”⁵⁸ that we have been justified⁵⁹ by God through Christ. Peter writes that believers also receive at least

⁵³ 1 Corinthians 15:49 (NLT)

⁵⁴ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons. *Unchristian: What the New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books. 2007).47

⁵⁵ Romans 6:5-14; 2 Timothy 2:21; 1 Peter 2:9

⁵⁶ Acts 2:38

⁵⁷ Ephesians 1:13

⁵⁸ 1 John 5:7

⁵⁹ Romans 5:1

one spiritual “gift.”⁶⁰ This gift aids in our spiritual service and in the process of “being transformed into the image [of Christ.]”⁶¹

In his paper titled *The Image of God*, Dr. Lindsley noted how the skilled craftsmen in the days of Moses were particularly empowered and anointed by the Holy Spirit to accomplish their work in preparing the Tabernacle.⁶² Exodus 31 reminds believers that humanity’s best efforts fall short of what could be (or what was) if not in perfect relationship with the Lord and fully conformed to the image of God. Dr. Lindsley wrote that our best gifts or abilities are “withered, deformed, and misdirected because of the Fall [but] can be developed, unfolded, redirected, and brought to their potential through the Spirit’s help.”⁶³

Interestingly, Christian B. Miller, a Christian philosopher specializing in character development noted that growing in key spiritual disciplines (such as prayer or tithing) often helps one to mature in other areas. He writes that a person who grows in the area of giving will often also grow in the area of humbleness and gratefulness.⁶⁴

As one transforms to better reflect the image of God, they experience more peace and more of a sense of personal accomplishment, knowing they are fulfilling their purpose and honoring the Creator.

⁶⁰ 1 Peter 4:10

⁶¹ 2 Corinthians 3:18

⁶² Exodus 31:1-5

⁶³ Art Lindsley. Academic Paper titled *The Image of God*. 2013. P. 3

⁶⁴ Christian B. Miller, *Atheism and Theistic Belief*. In *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*. Edited by Jonathan Kvanvig. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, vol. 4. 2012). 108

Conforming to *the image of God* and the *likeness of God*

The key terms in the original text of Genesis 1:26-27 for *image* and *likeness* are synonyms and can perhaps be viewed as describing two aspects of the process of sanctification— our quest to grow to be more and more like Christ.

This author believes that conforming to the *image of God* could reference internal change— thinking as God thinks and embodying divine attributes. These attributes are identified in Galatians 5 as the *fruit of the Spirit*. The list includes “...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control...”⁶⁵ Conforming to the *image of God*, then, means that we grow in experiencing (and exuding) love, joy, peace, etc. in a new way and at a new level. In John 14, Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you; *My* peace I give to you; [but] not as the world gives...”⁶⁶ Here Jesus is speaking of a higher or better peace than is found in the world. Similarly, God promises to help transforming disciples experience and manifest higher and better levels of the attributes noted in Galatians 5:22-23.

The *likeness of God* is perhaps more outwardly focused. The goalposts for external evidence of spiritual formation is expressed in the Ten Commandments. There we read that we honor God by:

- Recognizing, honoring, and serving the Lord (have no god before Me)
- By putting God first in all we do (have no graven images)
- Through righteous speech (take not the name of the Lord in vain)

⁶⁵ Galatians 5:22-23

⁶⁶ John 14:27

- Via expressions of worship (we are to honor the Sabbath)
- By honoring parents (honor thy father and mother)
- By respecting life (they shalt not kill)
- Via sexual purity (they shalt not commit adultery)
- By living life and conducting business with integrity (thy shalt not steal).

The process of sanctification produces change from the inside out. It is facilitated by the Spirit; it takes root in the heart; it modifies character; and it is expressed outwardly in word and deed. Dr. Millard Erickson, a former dean at Southwestern and Western Baptist Theological Seminaries, describes the process of sanctification as “the continued transformation of moral and spiritual character so that the life of the believer actually comes to mirror the standing which he or she already has in God’s sight.”⁶⁷ Writing of the process of sanctification, pastor and author John MacArthur wrote: “To be sanctified is to be made holy inwardly and to be able, in the Spirit’s power, to live a righteous life outwardly.”⁶⁸ Through the process of sanctification, we grow in *conforming to the image of the Son*, which moves us both toward humanity’s beginning which was marked by purity, and our glorious end—where we will receive glorified bodies and join Christ in heaven.

⁶⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995). 875.

⁶⁸ John MacArthur, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody, 1984). 143.

Encumbrances to sanctification (two issues)

- **Confusing or replacing *imitation* with *image*:** Scripture notes that “Satan himself “masquerades as an angel of light.”⁶⁹ Satan is the “deceiver,”⁷⁰ the “father of lies.”⁷¹ He will present false goals, advocate for compromise, prompt one to walk the wrong path, twist sacred Scripture, and attempt to imitate the divine so that we conform to the image of the world rather than the Lord.

Studies in Lari Launonen’s scholarly work *Is Sanctification Real? Empirical Evidence for and against Christian Moral Transformation*, note a significant gap between what God expects and the witness of many who identify as *followers of Christ*. Launonen wrote: “New Testament authors [taught that] all true believers are empowered by the Holy Spirit and are expected to undergo a significant moral transformation...

However, cheating, porn viewing, and prejudice are just as common or more common among Christian believers than among non-religious people.”⁷²

As Christians are empowered by the Holy Spirit to transform into the image of Christ and exemplify Christ-like behavior, many struggle to explain how behavior in Christian and non-religious people is similar. I argue it is not because the power of the Holy Spirit is insufficient to affect change, but because the enemy deceives and prompts many to conform to a false or imitated standard, image, or goal. Therefore, one must identify God’s specific plan for transformation, as indicated in His Word.

⁶⁹ 2 Corinthians 11:14

⁷⁰ Revelation 12:9

⁷¹ John 8:44

⁷² Lari Launonen. *Is Sanctification Real? Empirical Evidence for and against Christian Moral Transformation*. (Religions 14:26. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14010026>. 2023). 1-2

- **Unconfessed sin:** The truth is not difficult to grasp—unconfessed sin impedes spiritual growth, invites God’s discipline (for God disciplines those he loves⁷³), and inhibits our ability to conform to His image as there is no sin in Him.⁷⁴ David said, “When I kept silent [about my sin], my bones wasted away...my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer...Then...I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.’ And you forgave the guilt of my sin.”⁷⁵

Unconfessed sin steals joy and energy and compromises our ability to conform to the image of the Son. David was not exalted because he did not sin, but because he was quick to confess his sin and repent when he did. Sin is forgivable. The admonition from the prophet Joel is instructive.

*“Yet even now the Lord declares, ‘Return to me with all your heart...Return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love;’ and He relents over disaster.”*⁷⁶

Conclusion

Humanity is set apart from other life forms on earth in that God breathed into us His Spirit and formed us in His image and in His likeness. The terms image and likeness point to internal (matters of the mind and heart) and external (actions and language) qualities that reflect the Creator. The dynamic nature of these qualities, and the purity of humanity’s relationship with God was impacted by the Fall from grace as recorded in Genesis 3. God moved to restore what

⁷³ Hebrews 12:7-11

⁷⁴ Hebrews 4:15

⁷⁵ Psalm 32:3-5

⁷⁶ Joel 2:12-13

was lost via a redemptive plan that included provisions in the Law for covering sin and sending His Son to live a perfect life, die, rise again, and make atonement for sin.

In Christ, we find salvation—through faith in Christ one is saved and declared *justified* by the Father. Justification guarantees our place in heaven, but as His Children,⁷⁷ we are to emulate our Father—as Christians we are to be Christ-like. Paul wrote that we are to *conform to the image of the Son*. This is an echo of Genesis 1:26 where we read, we were made in the *image of God*. In a sense, believers are to strive to return to the pure, perfect relationship with God humans enjoyed before the Fall.

As this challenge is beyond our ability, the Father gives believers the Holy Spirit to lead in the transformation process. It is the Spirit that helps us conform to the image of the Son. The supernatural work in our lives serves as a proof for the existence of God. And as we are refined and transformed toward perfection, we can know that God is perfect and holy for through sanctification, we conform to His image.

In Philippians 2, Paul challenges believers to “work out your...salvation with fear and trembling.”⁷⁸ Sanctification is a process. It takes effort. It requires sacrifice. It is a journey—but take heart for the journey is both glorious and ends in glory.

⁷⁷ John 1:12

⁷⁸ Philippians 2:12b

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