

*The*  
INDELIBLE IMAGE

The Theological and Ethical Thought World  
of the New Testament

VOLUME ONE

*The Individual Witnesses*

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## THE OVERTURE

### *The Grand Story in Miniature*

*And we all, who with unveiled faces reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

—2 CORINTHIANS 3:18

It is my conviction that the relationship of theology to ethics, at least in the New Testament, is not an abstract thing but rather something very organic. To sum it up succinctly: God wants his moral and spiritual character (and behavior) replicated in his people. As God is holy, just, righteous, loving, compassionate, merciful, and so on, so also he expects his people to be. The way this transformation of fallen human beings happens is through the new birth, progressive sanctification (referred to in the quotation from 2 Corinthians), and finally glorification. In other words, this transformation and conformation has everything to do with one's final salvation. The way this transformation happens involves the initiative of God's grace, but it also involves the human response, the imitation of Christ, and the doing of works of piety and charity. Ephesians 2:10 puts it this way: "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." It appears that the Christian life, from the dawning moments of divine intent, was not only about belief and trust in God, however correct, but also about behavior as something necessary for final salvation where there was time and opportunity for it, behavior being the working out of belief in living practice.

Interestingly, the biblical language used to describe the relationship of God's character to human character and God's behavior to human behavior is

the language of “image.” This language is pregnant and has both theological and ethical components to it. On the one hand, Christ is seen as one who in the fullest sense bears the divine image and character on earth, such that “He who has seen the Son has seen the Father.” Image language is applied to the Son in various places in the New Testament (e.g., Col 1:15; Heb 1:1-4).

Also interestingly, on the other hand, “image” language was already applied to human beings in general going back to Adam in order to describe the relationship between God and human beings: they were created in the image of God. But then there was the disaster of the fall, and the image was distorted, disgraced, warped, bent, but not totally effaced or erased. Salvation history could be described as the story of the attempt to restore human beings so that they once more properly reflect the image of God on earth, which they were always intended to do.

But the way that process of restoration transpires is ultimately and finally through a mediator—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. And thus restoration of the *imago Dei* in humankind is directly linked to the person and work of Christ on earth and afterwards. Indeed, in describing the process of sanctification and glorification, Paul can say in Romans 8:28-30 that it is a matter of being conformed to the image of the Son, such that Christ’s history becomes our destiny.

The process of being conformed to the image of God in Christ involves both divine activity and human activity. God works in the believer and in the believing community to will and to do, but the individual and the community must work out its salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12-13). This involves, among other things, imitation of the virtues and behavior of Christ, but all the while God’s Spirit is working those virtues, and that character transformation, into the believer. This is what is being affirmed in places such as Galatians 5 in the well-known discussion of the fruit of the Spirit.

The Spirit’s work does not replace or supplant the need for human effort and imitation of Christ; indeed, it enables it. Although humans could never imitate Christ, even approximately, without incessant empowerment and grace, they are expected and required to do so nevertheless, precisely because that grace superabounds and is constantly being given by the all-loving God, who sent his Son with the desire and intent that none should perish but all participate in everlasting life, indeed participate in becoming like the Son and so reflect the indelible image. The goal of this whole process of salvation and restoration of the image is stated boldly in 2 Peter 1:3-4: “God’s divine

power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these things he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them we may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”

It is clear from the context that the author of this passage is not talking about “theosis,” or the divinizing of human beings or human nature. He is not, for example, talking about humans becoming omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, and the like. What he is talking about is the actual transformation of the human heart and life into a holy heart and life that mirror the moral character of God. And this brings us to the question of the role of faith and knowledge in this whole process of becoming more like God.

The author of 2 Peter says that God’s power and all the moral equipping comes to us “through our knowledge of him” and through the embracing of what we know, including embracing the promises that God has made. In other words, both faith in God and a certain knowledge of God are a prerequisite to, and an ongoing component of, the process of sanctification and glorification. Put differently and in a more Pauline manner: initial salvation happens by grace but through faith in Christ, through the believing of certain things about Christ and God, and the trusting of those truths and the God who revealed them. The objective means of salvation and restoration is God in Christ; the subjective means is both the internal work of the Spirit and the faith response, on an ongoing basis, of the believer.

The implications of all this are striking. God originally created human beings in his moral image. God created them not only with a capacity for relationship with God, but also with a capacity to reflect the divine moral character on earth and serve as God’s representatives, God’s witnesses, God’s talismans on earth. The image of God was effaced in the fall but not completely erased. God then set out on a restoration and reclamation project called “salvation” so that once more the divine image could be reflected more purely and perfectly on earth in God’s greatest creation. The process culminated in the sending of the last Adam, Christ, who perfectly bore the image of God, indeed bore not just the image but the very nature of God, and so became the means of the renewal of that image in human beings through divine action but also through belief, behavior, and more specifically the behavior called imitation—the imitation of Christ. This imitation, however, is quite impossible unless one knows something about the historical Jesus, his pattern

of life, and his words, deeds, and personal nature. And here we must add that salvation is not viewed as an end in itself but rather as a means to an end, the end being a right relationship with God and a life of worshiping God and of loving fellowship with one's fellow human beings.

The process of salvation was not all a purely divine work, nor could it ever have been a purely human work of fallen human beings. The dominant player and participant in the reclamation project is, of course, God, but God chose not to be the only player. God chose to save us not apart from our own willing participation because salvation was meant to result in a personal relationship between God and his people whereby love was freely given and freely received. If predetermined, this love would cease to be love in the biblical sense, for love is the ultimate expression of both divine and human freedom. Self-sacrificial engagement with and for the other results not just in communication but also in communion, not just in response but also in everlasting relationship.

Theology, then, as found in the New Testament, is ultimately about describing the person and work of God, in particular the person and work of God in Christ by means of the Spirit, since the Spirit is the only full manifestation and perfect reflection of the divine character on earth. There is indeed an aspect of theology (e.g., the description of the ontological character or God) that has no analogue in the ethics of the New Testament. But the focus of the New Testament is actually more on the moral character of God, and for that there absolutely is an analogue when it comes to human behavior and character. In other words, ethics in the New Testament is primarily the application of the theology of God's moral character and behavior to human beings, who are enabled to become imitators, not just of other godly humans (e.g., Paul), but of Christ and so of God.

The full efforts of God's saving grace and the full efforts of human striving after moral perfection have as their goal one and the same thing: the full conformity of the believer to the image of God's Son, so that we might not merely reflect God's glory, but also better glorify God and edify each other. The only ethics that we have in the New Testament really is theological ethics, so closely are the indicatives of moral theology linked to the imperatives given to God's people. The goal is that the indelible and perfect character of God be indelibly stamped on his creatures such that God's image is perfectly reflected in those creatures. Just as when one looks on the Son, one sees the spitting image of the Father, the very character of the Father, so too when

one looks on the spiritual brothers and sisters of Jesus, one ought to be able to see the image of the Son. The original heart cry of God, “Be holy, as I am holy,” is to be answered not only in God’s Son, but also through the Son in the lives of his spiritual family.

One further implication should be mentioned. Theology and ethics in and of the New Testament should never have been severed, with the former glorified and the latter sometimes even vilified, or at least trivialized. There is such a connection between the two that we cannot understand the theology unless we understand the ethics, and vice versa. One cannot understand the theological implications unless one also understands the ethical applications. Ethics is mostly the application of the theology to the human sphere in regard to human character and behavior.

It has been said that we become what we admire. In the New Testament we are urged to look on Christ, to adore him, to praise him, and then to be conformed to his image through the internal work of God and the imitating of Christ, thus becoming sons and daughters of God. It is a consummation devoutly to be wished, and one on which both God and his people have always been working.

If we need further proof of the close nexus of theology and ethics in the New Testament, we need look no further than the chief of the virtues, which is also said to define God: *agapē* (“love”). It is, frankly, amazing how many things in the New Testament can be said to be summed up by this word. For example, the major moral noun predicated of God in the New Testament is *love* (1 Jn 4). When God is said to be holy, just, righteous, compassionate, and merciful, this is true, but all these are adjectives referring to attributes. God is not called “holiness,” “righteousness,” and so on, but he is called “love.” At the same time, 1 Corinthians 13 tells us that love is the chief of human virtues. Or we may think of Romans 13:10, which says that love is “the fulfillment of the law,” or Colossians 3:14, where love is called “the bond of perfection.” Jesus himself, when he exhorts his disciples to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect, is clearly enough exhorting them to love as God loves (Mt 5:43–48). In fact, Jesus says that loving enemies as God does is what allows one to be a child of the Father. Christian behavior is once more modeled on the moral and spiritual character of God, particularly as it is revealed in Christ. It can be no accident that Jesus says that the essence of the law, what God most requires of us, is to love God wholeheartedly and to love neighbor as self. Love and law are not antagonists; they are partners in the service of

the King. But in order to bear the image, we must first behold it, hence the need to understand both the theology and the ethics of the New Testament if we are to understand God, ourselves, and the interpersonal relationship between God and ourselves. Consider this study as an attempt to bring these things into view.