

Voices: The image of God is a theological foundation for race relations

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*“Jesus loves the little children
All the children of the world
Red, brown, yellow, black and white
They are precious in His sight
Jesus loves the little children of the world.”*

There simply isn't a better-known children's song than this one penned in the late 1800s by Clare Herbert Woolston, a preacher from Chicago.

The music comes from an 1864 Civil War tune by George Fredrick Root known as *“Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!”* Ironically, the song was written from a prisoner's point of view to give hope to the Union prisoners of war.

Significantly, the lyrics were inspired by Jesus' words in Matthew 19:14—“Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”

Little did Woolston and Root realize their innocent children's song would become, for some, a debatable and even controversial one a century later.

Race and racism, inequality and prejudice—the issues facing our culture today never have been more definitive nor more divisive. In a world full of protests and people seeming only to talk at each other, how in the world can we even begin to address the real, underlying issues of race and racism in positive and redemptive ways?

I believe the answer lies in an understanding of one of our most fundamental Christian doctrines—the *imago Dei* (the image of God).

The origin of the *imago Dei*

The *imago Dei* is a theological concept that transcends race, creed or color. It is intrinsic in all humanity. Thomas Jefferson's words in the preamble to the Declaration of Independence famously echo what "Jesus Loves the Little Children" affirms: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

The concept of the *imago Dei* is so fundamental to our humanity that it's found in the very origin of humanity:

Then God said, "'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness'" So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:26-27 NIV).

In what we might say is one of its first doctrinal statements, the Bible declares *all* humanity is created in the image of God.

On its surface, that concept sounds simple enough to grasp, and it's a doctrine all theologians certainly affirm, but what does the *imago Dei* really mean? What does it mean for humans to be created as God's image-bearers?

Three meanings of *imago Dei*

Theologians have postulated three possible meanings of the idea, and all three carry sound theological validity. A complete understanding of the doctrine would no doubt include all three perspectives.

Substantive theory

The first theory can be called the substantive theory. This view maintains the image of God is some substantive quality in humanity. Most theologians would agree this substantive quality has to do with the human ability to think and reason.

God certainly is a thinking, reasoning and rational being, and when he created humanity, he instilled in humanity these same qualities intrinsic in his very nature.

Interestingly, even the scientific classification of humanity—*homo sapien*—means “wise man” or “thinking, sensible, intelligent being.” This is a unique, substantive quality God has given to humans alone among all of his created beings.

Relational theory

A second theory is known as the relational theory. This view maintains the image of God has to do with the human capability to be a relational being.

God certainly is a relational being. In his very nature as a triune being, there is an eternal community of relationship among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. If God is relational in nature, it makes sense that when he created humanity in his image, he would instill in humanity this same relational quality.

Humans—and humans alone—have this unique ability to relate to and converse with their Creator and to relate to and converse with each other. These distinctive vertical and horizontal relational dimensions capture the essence of the relational theory of the *imago Dei*.

Functional theory

The third theory could be called a functional theory. According to this

model, the image of God relates to a special function God has entrusted uniquely to the human race.

This function is assigned in Genesis 1:26—“Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

Among all of his creation and creatures, God specifically entrusted humanity alone with the awesome privilege and responsibility of “ruling over” all he had created. The meaning of this idea of “ruling over” is expressed better by the words “managing,” “caring for” or “being stewards of” God’s creation. God gifted humans alone with the function actually of co-managing and stewarding his creation.

God is a creator God, and by placing his autograph on humanity in creating humans in his own image, he has made *all* humanity his fellow creators who now are entrusted with overseeing and caring for his creation.

Imago Dei and race relations

Humanity being created as God’s image-bearers means all humanity—every race, every creed, every color—is intrinsically important and valuable in the eyes of the Creator. The *imago Dei* says every person, somehow, is specially endowed by God with equal dignity and worth.

The *imago Dei* says every person shares the same substantive quality. All can think, all can reason, and all can and should be able to dialog rationally, intelligently and sensibly with one another, even, and especially, about racial issues

The *imago Dei* says every person possesses the same relational quality. We all can communicate with our common Creator in meaningful and relational

ways. And, as relational beings, we, too, should be able to discourse and dialog with—not at—one another in meaningful and relational ways, as equal image-bearers in the human race.

And the *imago Dei* says every person embraces the same functional quality. All humans have been given the responsibility of co-managing and stewarding God's creation.

The *imago Dei* says there absolutely is no substantive, relational or functional difference among God's image-bearers. Truly, this is the theological foundation and starting place for any discussion about race and race relations.

Perhaps the second stanza of Woolston and Root's children's song unpacks an even greater theological meaning:

*"Jesus died for all the children
All the children of the world
Red, brown, yellow, black and white
They are precious in His sight
Jesus died for all the children of the world."*

If Jesus really died for *all* the children of the world—which he most definitely did—it means he died for all God's children. He died for you and for me and for everyone—all races, all creeds and all colors of his own beautifully created image-bearers.

If God so loves all persons this much, doesn't this make the image of God the quintessential theological foundation for any understanding and application of a doctrine of humanity?

Jim Lemons is professor of theological studies and leadership in the College of Christian Faith and the director of the Master of Arts in Theological Studies at Dallas Baptist University. The views expressed are those solely

of the author.