



RESURGENCE

Christian Image is Everything

Christopher Castaldo

Image is everything in modern culture. Take for instance the shopping mall. More than just selling merchandise, malls have become virtual houses of worship not unlike ancient temples or medieval cathedrals, where the spirit is lifted and the heart fulfilled. These modern-day monasteries are a sight to behold, with their luxuriant foliage, sparkling fountains, and colorfully illuminated vistas. Along with designer jeans and exotic coffees, you can fashion for yourself a new and improved image, one that reflects the qualities in which people take pride.

Such pride is of a personal quality, residing in the privacy of one's soul, and also public, existing in the wider culture. On the other hand, personal pride takes inventory of one's perceived assets and celebrates them with a feeling of superiority. It looks condescendingly upon the less glamorous and says, "God, thank you that I am not like this other man." Public pride, on the other hand, is the lifestyle extolled by society. It is the television commercial that portrays the kind of image everyone should pursue. It flashes by on a moving bus and assaults us through an unexpected popup window.

Concern for image sometimes reveals itself in ways that are less than subtle. Consider, for instance, the following personal ad from *New York Magazine*:

Strikingly Beautiful

Ivy League graduate. Playful, passionate, perceptive, elegant, bright, articulate, original in mind, unique in spirit. I possess a rare balance of beauty and depth, sophistication and earthiness, seriousness and a love of fun. Professionally successful, perfectly capable of being self-sufficient and independent, but I won't be truly content until we find each other. . . . Please reply with a substantial letter describing your background and who you are. Photo essential.

Over against this sort of self-focused personal ad, there is a kind of image projection that is necessary for authentic Christian faith. God calls the church to display this image in such a way as to impress other people. It appears less spectacular than the colorful pictures that flash across our television screens, but is far more captivating.

The apostle Paul says, "Christ is the visible image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). To properly understand what this means, we must consider God's original creation of Adam and Eve in the garden—the place where image projection started.

God created Adam in his image. As such, Adam was designed to function like an angled mirror. Positioned faithfully beneath God, divine reality shone down on the newly created man and reflected out along a horizontal plane a compelling visage of glory.

Unfortunately, the first couple committed high treason against the Creator. And with the juice of the forbidden fruit still dripping from their lips, the reflective image of Adam and Eve was shattered. No longer able to reflect divine beauty and holiness as they had previously, in brokenness and shame they were expelled from the garden. This legacy of disgrace is our birthright.

With this shameful heritage, the human race, now separated from God, has tried desperately to restore its shattered image by accumulating for itself the trappings of the world: money, leisure, sex, power, fashion, corporate promotions, and personal fulfillment all promise wholeness. Sadly, many people reach the end of their lives surrounded by these hollow icons only to find that their promise of prosperity and personal satisfaction were in fact a cruel sham.

Thankfully, God hasn't left his creation to die in this deception, duped by such illusory hopes. Jesus, the visible image of God's glory—the pristine mirror postured faithfully beneath the Father—personally addressed our problem. As God's Son projected divine beauty and holiness, he did something that no one had anticipated—he died. As a substitute for humanity, the sacrificial love of Christ conformed to the cross. On this instrument of Roman torture, the Savior was judged so that broken humanity would be renewed.

The work of Christ has direct bearing upon humanity's image problem. In his resurrection, God started renewing the world, providing liberation from the seduction of self and the worship of cultural icons. With Christ's image, the church can now emanate divine beauty and holiness (2 Corinthians 4:4–6). Indeed, this is our calling, the very reason for which we exist.

As we look at the church, we would do well to consider the kind of image we are reflecting. Intentionally or not, we reveal something: the question is whether our image is in keeping with Christ's, or is it just a semi-religious version of society? Are we an angled mirror postured beneath the Lord or a vanity mirror standing at attention before the world? The former is captive to the liberating rule of Christ and mediates divine glory. The latter masquerades as freedom and flaunts the ephemeral whims of humanity. What follows suggests a course toward promoting the former.

We can improve our reflection of Christ by observing a fourfold routine that entails reading, contemplation, prayer, and witness. *Reading* is the thoughtful study of Scripture that seeks to appreciate its truth. *Contemplation* considers the ways in which society displays or lacks this truth. *Prayer* is the turning of one's volition toward God, the One who is Truth. And *witness* is the active reflection of truth into the world. We might say reading ingests the fruit, contemplation chews it, prayer savors its flavor, and witness extends its nourishment to one's neighbor. Further still, reading pursues the sweetness, contemplation understands it, prayer asks for it, and witness shares it.

READING

As we read Scripture it is like placing a freshly picked grape into the mouth, with its sweet sensations to fill the soul. Wishing to acquire a deeper understanding of God, the soul, like a wine press, chews on the grape, as the flavor stirs our faculties and affections.

The sweet stirring of Scripture has a culminating effect upon our image. Paul says, "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"

(2 Corinthians 3:18). In the background of this text is Moses. When Moses spoke with God in the Tent of Meeting, his face was physically transformed. In time, the imagery of a shining face became a symbol of renewal in the faith of Israel. Consider, for instance, 2 Baruch 51: "Their splendor will then be glorified by transformation, and the shape of their face will be changed into the light of their beauty so that they may acquire and receive the undying world, which was promised to them." This was Israel's hope.

According to Paul, Israel's long-awaited hope for renewal was properly fulfilled in Jesus the Christ. When we look to him—the Word—a spiritual transformation occurs. This is done by looking at Scripture, which exposes us to the sunlight of God's presence. Divine light causes Christ's image to be indelibly burned into our soul. To the extent that we maintain exposure and welcome his light, idolatry of self and the surrounding culture loses its seductive appeal.

CONTEMPLATION

Have you ever been surprised by how much juice is contained in one little grape? Even more surprising is the amount of flavor that is generated by slowly savoring its flavor. The longer the juices are held on the pallet, the more flavor is produced. Conversely, the one who hastily rolls the grape across his tongue and into the throat is unfamiliar with such pleasure. He has eaten the grape but not tasted it. Contemplation is in keeping with the former. It is concerned with savoring the truth of Scripture for all it is worth.

Opinions differ as to the hallmark of contemplation. The Jewish tradition helps us appreciate memorization; others emphasize the practice of repetition and visualization. I would like to suggest that, in addition to these, a crucial part of contemplation involves relating scriptural truth to what we observe in society. Borrowing the title of John Stott's book on preaching, it is living "between two worlds," with one eye on the ancient text and the other on the values and practices of our modern context. Contemplation considers how these worlds relate.

The challenge of contemplation is to take the image of Christ that we behold in Scripture and connect the dots between it and what we observe in the modern context. Sometimes what we see around us will be an accurate reflection of Scripture—a mother nursing her child, an adult child caring for an elderly parent, a businessman advocating on behalf of the unborn or a poor refugee. These reflections of God's grace should be celebrated and promoted. On other occasions we will observe reflections of idolatry—the dehumanization of women as objects of pleasure, excessive material consumption, college professors asserting an anti-Christian agenda overlaid with a thin veneer of political correctness. Or it may just be the idols fashioned in the factories of our own hearts. Either way, these reflections of evil must be called out and vigorously challenged.

PRAYER

The human soul, seeing that it is powerless to grasp the sweetness of God in its own strength, must humble itself in the form of prayer. Like those who would pass through the Church of the Nativity's so-called "Door of Humility" (the small rectangular entrance created in Ottoman times), a requisite posture of submission must be assumed. In doing so, God's people are positioned to properly understand and fulfill their calling.

After reading Scripture and considering how it speaks to society, we are compelled to pray. Prayer recognizes that we are incapable of advancing God's kingdom without the animating movement of the Holy Spirit—a movement that can't actually be seen with the naked eye; it can, however, be perceived in the context of prayer.

I am constantly amazed at how diligently Jesus prayed. One such example is in Luke's account of the Transfiguration. It says, "Now about eight days after these sayings he [Jesus] took with him Peter and John and James and went up on the mountain to pray. And as he was praying, the appearance of his face was altered, and his clothing became dazzling white" (Luke 9:28). Here again, the image of a luminescent face depicts the renewal of Israel. This time, however, the radiant face belongs to the person of Jesus. Such glory was apprehended in prayer.

Perhaps a less than positive example is found in the statement of Peter. Mark's account of the Transfiguration indicates that instead of praying, Peter spoke from fear and ignorance. In response to what he observed, he offered to make three tents, as Mark tells us, "For he did not know what to say" (Mark 9:6).

Personally, I can relate to Peter more than I care to admit. In our fast-paced, running-all-the-time society, we find it is easier to speak than pray, for the latter requires not only action but also faith. Thankfully, God gives the church faith, and with faith we can pray, and when we pray, God's Spirit infuses into our lives a conspicuous measure of his glory. Such is how God uses prayer to fashion our image.

WITNESS

The love and compassion of God would have us savor the sweetness of his presence to the point of ecstasy. We are, however, never permitted to hoard it. Having read Scripture, related its truth to society, and bathed it in prayer, we are poised to serve as a witness—the *angled* mirrors whose posture reflects the life of God into the world.

Have you ever wondered why the world doesn't recognize the beauty of Christ? The apostle Paul tells us the reason—he says it is blindness: "The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Corinthians 4:4). Divine light shines through the church, but the darkness doesn't comprehend it.

On account of sin, the human heart naturally gravitates toward idolatry over God's image. Interestingly, the terms "idol" and "image" are cut from the same bolt of lexical fabric; that is, depending on context, the Hebrew word *tselem* and the Greek *eikon* both can be rendered either "image" or "idol." It is probably true that this principle also applies to us. Very often, depending on our situation, we will reflect one way or the other: with Christ's beauty or selfish pride, toward salvation or damnation.

Even though society is unable to recognize God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ, and our role of reflecting it is inconsistent, there is still hope. For the light of salvation doesn't emerge *from* darkness but rather proceeds *into* it. This is the essence of image reflection. Through the church's proclamation and embodiment of the gospel, truth about Christ's kingdom radiates into society. It forcefully advances, and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. In this way God displays his victory over idols and provides renewal to the languishing elements of creation. Shattered souls are transformed and eternally captivated by the indescribable beauty of the Creator.

As a follower of Christ, I have a desire to submit my own personal ad to *New York Magazine*:

Strikingly Beautiful

Easily accessed in the Bible, desperately needed, energized with supernatural power, died for your sins, rose from the dead, and eager to embrace with eternal love all who draw near to him—Jesus the Christ.

This is why Christian image is everything.