

THE IMAGE OF GOD AND THE GOAL OF DEVELOPMENT

by Bob Moffitt

When I worked in inner-city ministry with delinquent youth, the team with which I worked operated an alternative school for young people who could not cope with the public school system. These young people often came to school not groomed, looking as if they had slept in their clothes. One therapeutic strategy our team developed was an opportunity for the students to volunteer at an institution for mentally handicapped persons. The students were given a few days of orientation. They were informed that one of the greatest needs of the mentally handicapped was human love and friendship, which they could provide through regular visits.

On the day the students were to go to the institution as official volunteers, we observed an amazing change. They arrived at school well groomed and in clean clothes. Instead of their usual stooped posture, they stood tall with dignity. The transformation was remarkable.

What made the difference? I suspect much of it was the opportunity to be significant—the opportunity to "write their names on the universe." Seeing themselves as people who could make a positive contribution was a radical change—they no longer seemed insignificant. These are important reasons, but there is more. In the following pages, I will explain what I believe was the reason behind their "miraculous" change.

God's Agenda and Our Mission

God's agenda is enormously vast, as vast as creation. Those of us in development and/or mission ministries are particularly interested in His agenda for that part of creation known as man.

Practically, we are interested in God's agenda for man, in helping man move toward God's intentions. That is the essence of Christian mission. We are agents of God's agenda. We are servants of restoration—restoration from the brokenness caused by sin, to the *biblical shalom* of God's intentions for all of life. God's agenda for man defines our vocation.

Theologically, we are interested in God's agenda for man because God's Word reveals that human beings are the crown of creation. It was only after the creation of man on the sixth day that God changed His positive assessment of creation from "good" to "very good." Although "very good" could have been God's evaluation of the total creation, it is reasonable to infer that there was something distinct in the work of the sixth day. I believe that this distinction was the creation of man, the image-bearer of God. As such, man is the crown of God's creation.

Man: The Image-Bearer of God

Man's uniqueness has important implications for development. Made in the image of God, man has a number of the attributes of God that are not shared by the rest of creation. The following list is not complete, but illustrates characteristics which describe both God and man:

- Creativity—making something new from existing resources

- Linguistic ability—communicating through words
- Relationships—intentional and purposeful interaction with people, nature, and work
- Moral choice—choosing between the constructive/destructive
- Loving, sacrificial service—acting in righteousness ("right doing") and selflessness^{3/4}in relationship to God, others, and the rest of creation.

These characteristics tend to increase in importance as the list progresses. Loving and sacrificial service^{3/4}the last characteristic^{3/4}is the most important mark of God's image. Why? Without sacrificial service, the other attributes of God become corrupt in man. For example, without loving, sacrificial service:

- Creativity can produce an atom bomb
- Linguistic ability can produce pornography
- Relationships can lead to tyranny
- Moral choice can be used to justify ethnic cleansing and partial birth abortions.

God's Agenda Obscured

Throughout the Old Testament, man was never able to fully see what it meant to bear the image of God^{3/4}especially the attribute of loving and sacrificial service. After creation, man quickly turned the attributes of God's image to his own selfish advantage. God intended for man to use those attributes in the service of the rest of creation, but man acted selfishly. He worshipped self. Self-worship was a distortion of the image of God. This distortion continued throughout human history.

Romans 1:22ff describes this selfishness and its results. In selfishness, man exchanged the eternal image of God for an image of corrupted man and animals. Man made symbols of uncritical devotion. Man did what he wanted to do—he worshipped himself. The Apostle Paul graphically describes the consequences of this selfishness:

- Sexual impurity and worship of the creature rather than the Creator
- Envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, and slander
- God-hating, insolence, arrogance, boasting, evil intent, and disobedience
- Living in ways that are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless
- Approving others who do the same.

However, God loved His creation so much that He wasn't going to let selfishness destroy His agenda for man, the crown of His creation. In the biblical accounts of the Flood, Babel, the Law, and the captivities, God can be seen protecting His agenda from man's selfish choice.

God's Image Revealed (I): Jesus

In the New Testament, we can see God's multifaceted plan to restore His agenda. It

can be seen in two phases. The first phase is the coming of Jesus. The second is the establishment of the church.

The first phase was the coming of Jesus. At the appointed time, God sent Christ, the heir of His complete agenda for mankind. Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). He was and is the exact representation of God's being (Hebrews 1:1-3b). In Jesus, we see not only divinity, but humanity^¾humanity that perfectly models for us what it means to be made in the image of God. For the first time, we can look at someone and see what God is like. When we look at Jesus, we see not only the crown of creation (man created in God's image), but we also see the brightest jewel in that crown. That jewel—that shining feature^¾is the most important attribute of God's image that we see in Jesus.

What was that jewel, that shining feature, in Jesus? I suggest that it was not Jesus' wisdom^¾the wisdom that exceeded that of the Pharisees. Neither was it his perfect spirituality, nor the relational skills that endeared the humble and silenced the proud, nor the physical stamina and strength of the carpenter. It was not even a combination of these. I believe it was servanthood.

Jesus affirmed His servanthood when He replied to James' and John's mother, when she asked that her sons sit on thrones next to Him in the Kingdom:

. . . the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28)

Consider, also, Paul's description of Jesus to the Philippians:

[Jesus], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even the death on a cross. (Philippians 2:6-8)

As the passage continues, we see the results of Jesus' servanthood:

Therefore God exalted him to *the highest place* and gave him *the name that is above every name* . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. [Italics added.] (Philippians 2:9-11)

Jesus' servanthood brought glory to God. Why? I believe He was honored because Jesus fully reflected what God intended when He created man. The highest expression of God's image in His creation is sacrificial servanthood. God is a servant, and Jesus modeled that servanthood. Man, created in God's image, was also created to serve^¾and to serve sacrificially. When we sacrificially serve others and the rest of creation^¾as Jesus did^¾we most fully bear the image of God.

The high calling of servanthood is born out other places in Scripture, too. In Isaiah 58, God tells Israel that He is pleased by their sacrifice of service to the oppressed. In Matthew 25, Jesus tells His disciples that the distinguishing mark of those in the Kingdom is their service—they feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those sick and in prison. According to James 1:27, pure and perfect religion is summarily defined as serving the widow and the orphan—those who need protection. Finally, in Mark 12:31, Jesus emphasized the priority of loving our neighbors as ourselves.

God does not command sacrificial service for its own sake. God desires service as obedience to God^¾for His purposes (His agenda), with His motives and manner (His

image), and with His power.

What if we have not been servants? Picture the Christian life as a journey on a long road. We sin, travel down the road in the wrong direction, listen to the Holy Spirit, and turn around. Now, we face the other direction on the road. We believe Jesus would say, "Go and sin no more." Do we stay at the same place on the road, feet planted but facing a new direction? No, we walk in the new direction, toward the righteousness that God intends. In Ephesians 4:20-32, Paul encourages believers to put on the new self—and become like God. Liars become truth-tellers, thieves become givers, unwholesome-talkers become edifiers, and bitter people become forgivers. In a similar way, where we have served our self-interests, we turn and walk in the other direction—toward God's agenda, serving the interests of others.

Granted, biblical servanthood is not possible without the indwelling Christ, but it is possible through the power of God's Spirit. Paul reminds his readers that both God and man work to achieve the purposes of God:

. . . continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.
Philippians 2:12b-13.

Other Scriptures which illustrate the believer's call to service include John 17:18, II Corinthians 4:5, Ephesians 4:12, and Hebrews 9:14.

God's Agenda Revealed (II): The Church

The second phase in God's plan was the establishment of the church^¾that which would birth and disciple others to bear the image of God. Christ was appointed the head of the church. Christ's purpose, and therefore that of the church, was to reconcile all things to Himself. Indeed, He did make possible the reconciliation of all things. Again, it was through service, this time on the cross:

And he is the head of the body, the church . . . and through him to reconcile to himself all things . . . by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.
(Colossians 1:18-20)

It is through the church that God intends to continue this process of restoration^¾the reclaiming of God's agenda^¾which Jesus began.

His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Ephesians 3:10-11)

What, then, is God's agenda for the church? First, God's agenda is that the church itself be the bearer of God's image. Second, God's agenda is that the church serve as God's agent of reconciliation and restoration. The church is God's representative to bring healing to the world broken by man selfishly using God's attributes for himself.

Further, if Christ came to reconcile all things and the church represents Christ in the world, then the church must have a broad, wholistic vision and praxis for ministry. It must be involved not only in evangelism; but it must be a leader in proclaiming and bringing the reign of Christ to all aspects of personal, family, community, and national life.

Implications for Development/Missions

What a different image we would have of our work if we understood that stewarding, governing, or subduing nature is sacrificial service. What a different image we would have of "developed" mankind if we understood that man's goal is not self-sufficiency, independence, self-esteem, education, or material affluence^{3/4}but *servanthood*. How different our work would be if we measured success not by the number of people saved, converted, fed, or housed, but on the evidence of their servanthood. How our vision would change if we understood that the chief purpose of our work is to produce men and women who serve others.

Most of us in ministry understand the importance of service. Service is our vocation. Yet, do we disciple others to serve^{3/4}even from the beginning of their Christian walks? If we neglect this area of discipleship, do we rob those we serve of the most significant thing we can do to help them bear God's image?

As I reflect on the student volunteers in the opening paragraphs, I reiterate that the dramatic change came because they had a chance to serve. Service, though, is more than a therapeutic means to enhance self-image and increase a sense of significance. Service is inherent in the image of God. Created in His image, we are designed to serve. When we do, we act in accord with our design. Why did the opportunity to serve bring drastic change to the students? One of the major reasons was that they were doing what they were created to do.

If it is true that servanthood holds a primary position on God's agenda, there are important implications for ministry. I offer the following possibilities for consideration:

- A result of discipleship should be servanthood. Individuals must be disciplined to serve.
- If people are served without being given the opportunity to serve others, they are denied an opportunity to express the image of God.
- One of the most significant ways a ministry helps individuals reach their highest potential is to offer opportunities for sacrificial service.
- Creativity, time, and effort will be necessary investments as disciplers model, teach, plan, encourage, and monitor others in servanthood.
- Local churches should be servants, also.
- Local churches should be planted and disciplined to serve their members and communities in ways that reflect Jesus' concern for all of the broken creation.

May God grant us the ability both to serve and to disciple those we serve, so that they will reflect this high expression of the image of God.

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