

The Image of God: Created, Lost and Restored

If we are to understand our call to be steward leaders, we must start with a definition of the godly steward. Everything I will develop will flow from this definition: As God's people, we are called to reflect the image of our Creator God through whole, redeemed relationships at four levels—with God, with our self, with our neighbor and with creation—bringing glory to God and practicing in each the ongoing work of the faithful steward. This definition follows the central story of Scripture from creation to Fall to redemption and its promise of final restoration. Our call to be image bearers of the triune God must be understood in all three parts of the story and at all four levels of our created nature. Simply put, our fourfold nature was created in perfection, lost in sin and restored in Christ. Our understanding of our vocation as steward leaders emerges from this fourfold nature and three-part story. Let me walk with you through the beauty of this wonderful story as it relates to our call as leaders in God's kingdom. The image created—meaning and purpose. We were created to have meaning and purpose in our existence as image bearers of God. In the first three chapters of Genesis, we find that we were created for whole relationships that reflect the image of God on four levels:

- our relationship with God,
- with our self,
- with our neighbor
- and with creation.

As Adam and Eve lived out those four levels of relationship, they reflected the image of God. And so do we. The meaning of our lives is to be image bearers of our triune God in all four of these relationships.

1. Relationship with God.

On the first level our life has meaning when we are at peace with our Creator. The reality of our created nature is that we are shaped and formed for the distinct purpose of living in relationship with our Creator God.

Without such a relationship we are set afloat to spend our lives searching for ways to find meaning. When called to lead we are plagued by a restless spirit. We are easily knocked off balance if we try to lead others when we are not at peace with our Creator and do not have an internal sense of life's meaning in Christ. [This can also affect Christian Leaders if they have a Sacred/Secular divided way of thinking, and do not have a "Whole Life" discipleship style of living.]

Wandering, unsettled leaders cannot provide certainty and meaning to the people they lead. The first couple (Adam and Eve) knew this peace and intimacy in the absence of sin. Today, it is in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ that we are restored and reconciled again to God. We cannot do it for ourselves. This relationship has been bought for us with the highest possible price, the blood of Christ.

God's original intent in creation is now the gift given to us to steward with gratitude and praise. If we were created for intimate relationship with God, then our purpose is to love God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind.

[**Mark 12:30** *And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*] This is our first and highest calling and joy. Worship, sabbath rest, devotion, prayer, fasting, study, praise and presence are ways in which we fulfill our purpose in our relationship to God. Intimacy is not something we create; it is the result of total surrender that allows God to do something in us and for us. God draws us near as we submit ourselves to him. And our first and highest response is praise. Purpose at this first level is measured in intimacy and doxology.

2. Relationship with our self.

Meaning on the second level—our relationship with our self—is found in a self-understanding and an acceptance of ourselves that is balanced and honest in the light of our true relationship with our triune Creator and redeemer God. This balance keeps us from being pulled into self-satisfaction on the one hand and self-self-criticism (negative) on the other. Honesty plants our feet on the solid knowledge that we are prone to rebel through our sinful nature, yet also empowered to live holy lives through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit.

Leaders who are at peace with themselves can lead others with humility and grace. Leaders who find meaning in both their weaknesses and the wonder of God's work within them can provide balance, honesty and integrity to the organizations they serve. The first couple needed only the presence of God and the certainty of their place and calling in relationship to him to know that peace.

If we were created for relationship with our self, our purpose is to have absolute certainty of who we are, why we are here and what we are to do. This self-understanding was a part of God's loving intent for us when he created humanity in his image.

His purpose for us is found in the balance in our self-perception between the beloved child of God and the sinner saved by grace. It is humility and courage; it is the simplicity of the clay vessel and the complexity of being the workmanship of God. It is the amazingly powerful place between our recognition that apart from Christ we can do nothing and our recognition that in Christ we can do all things. [The Miracle of Leadership]

Purpose at this level is measured by balance in our self-image and the extent of our reliance on God as the sole caretaker of our reputation.

3. Relationship with our neighbor.

Meaning on the third level—our relationship with our neighbor—comes from an investment in the lives of others as a response to our nature as relational beings and the outworking of our relationship to God through Christ and in the Spirit.

As God is triune in his very nature, so we were created to find meaning in our existence in community. Leaders who find meaning in their relationships to others create in people a sense of individual worth and communal connectedness. When relationships are valued, communities, teams and

families are endowed with meaning that reflects our created state before our triune God.

The first couple lived in fellowship and community with one another as the natural expression of being image bearers of the triune God. If we were created for relationship with our neighbor, our purpose is to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. **We were created to see our neighbors and their well-being in the same way we see our own, which calls us to value relationships as ends, not as means to be used for our own benefit.**

Purpose at this level is measured by the needs of our neighbor, and not our own needs. [***Philippians 2:3, Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.***] [***Mark 12:31a, The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’***]

It is the extent to which we build and value relationships as God’s gift and as ends in themselves.

4. Relationship with creation.

On the fourth level—our relationships to the created world—meaning is derived from our status as caretakers of the created world.

From Genesis we see that we were created primarily for this activity. The first task given to God’s image-bearing creatures was to tend the garden.

Genesis 1:28-30) And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” And God said, “Behold, I have given

you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.

When we reflect God’s caring nurture of us by caring for and nurturing his creation, we find meaning in a world that screams at us that “meaning is found only in the hoarding and consumption of resources.”

Instead, scripture demonstrates for us that we were created to find meaning in the sharing and careful stewardship of God’s abundance. Leaders who love the creation that God loves and who value the stewarding of all of God’s resources can lead people to the same ends. If we were created for a relationship with creation, our purpose is to live in harmony with creation; to love it, to tend it, to take care of it. God’s command is that we have dominion, rule over and subdue the earth just as God has dominion, rules over and subdues us. [Transformation by the Holy Spirit].

Purpose at this fourth level is measured by how loosely we hold to our possessions and how closely we heed our call to be caretakers of creation. Our identity as children of the triune God lies in our lives lived in and through community in holistic relationship, mutually interdependent and seeking the unity of the Spirit. That is how we reflect the image of a triune God.

This life glorifies God because that is precisely why we were created. That is our purpose. We fulfill this purpose when we live as we were created to live—in whole, healthy and productive relationships that reflect the image of God

on all four levels. [Whole Life Discipleship]. In each we find the purpose of our lives as God's new creation.

- **(with our Creator) Without such a relationship (with our creator) we are set afloat to spend our lives searching for ways to find meaning.**
- **Today, it is in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ that we are restored and reconciled again to God. We cannot do it for ourselves. This relationship has been bought for us with the highest possible price, the blood of Christ.**
- **(With ourselves) Leaders who are at peace with themselves can lead others with humility and grace. Leaders who find meaning in both their weaknesses and the wonder of God's work within them can provide balance, honesty and integrity to the organizations they serve.**
- **If we were created for relationship with our self, our purpose is to have absolute certainty of who we are, why we are here and what we are to do.**
- **Purpose at this level is measured by balance in our self-image and the extent of our reliance on God as the sole caretaker of our reputation.**
- **(With our neighbors) Meaning on the third level—our relationship with our neighbor—comes from an investment in the lives of others**

as a response to our nature as relational beings and the outworking of our relationship to God through Christ and in the Spirit.

- **We were created to see our neighbors and their well-being in the same way we see our own, which calls us to value relationships as ends, not as means to be used for our own benefit.**
- **(With Creation) On the fourth level—our relationships to the created world—meaning is derived from our status as caretakers of the created world.**
- **Instead, scripture demonstrates for us that we were created to find meaning in the sharing and careful stewardship of God’s abundance. Leaders who love the creation that God loves and who value the stewarding of all of God’s resources can lead people to the same ends.**

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