

“Oneness”

Spring Series 1

Lesson 1

“From Creation”

Objective: To examine the Scriptures in order to seek understanding and guidance on how we are to work together as the people of God using all the gifts and resources that God has bestowed upon the Church. Through the centuries the relationship of men and women and their service to God has been hotly debated and continually examined. We consider what we are undertaking here to be a continuation of that debate and dialogue as we carefully and prayerfully seek the guidance of God through His Word and His Spirit. We are people of the Book and it is to the book that we look for answers to our questions, not to traditions, to science, or to society.

Materials: The Bible, Ancient translations, Commentaries, both ancient and modern, Books, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet, inscriptions, Ancient letters, Ancient Documents, lectures and other resources as may be appropriate.

Procedures

1. To explore the message of God in the hope of understanding more fully its meaning first as it was understood by the original audiences of Scripture and what they will have understood as God’s will for their lives in community.
2. To understand how Scripture has inspired, challenged, and educated people down through the centuries guiding them not only in their personal lives, but in their vocation as image-bearers of God.
3. We will seek to find out how beliefs have played a role in the history of Christianity and how they continue to impact our existence and service to Jesus Christ in the world today.
4. We will provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of these matters and their application in order to live out daily our eternal destiny. This sheet can be used as a discussion guide for small group discussion.

As we come to any issue of practice, or belief, regarding the Kingdom of God we surely must seek to understand the directions and teachings of our King. Especially in our tradition, among Churches of Christ, it has been understood that of the highest earthly authority in regard to such questions is the Word of God. We have in the past understood this, and still today this is very much our understanding and desire, though at times less our actual practice. We are people of the Book and we must look to the Book for our answers. As we approach this topic of study, Scripture will stand at the core of our discussions as it stands at the core of our motivations for looking at issues that concern our working together as God's community of faith.

One of the difficulties involved in this endeavor, however, is found in defining what an interpretation and understanding of Scripture actually means for the Church. We today are separated by many centuries, and by significant cultural differences from the audiences for which these writings were initially produced. Throughout the history of the church there have been many different methodological approaches used in the quest to comprehend the message of Scripture. In our own era the



historical-critical approach has been the most widely accepted and certainly has been the methodology that has been dominate among Churches of Christ throughout their history as a modern movement.

The historical-critical methodology grew out of the Age of Enlightenment. This age values reason, logic and systematic methodology. With such an approach comes a certain amount of baggage that will certainly not have been borne by the original audiences of these sacred texts. Our perception of how the world works as a whole is just one example. They would not have shared our modern conceptual understanding of how the world operates at all. For historical-critical methodology to be truly good methodology it must consider matters like this and a host of others as well. Things like idioms that are unique to a particular language and culture are also important. Reading Scripture for us today can actually be fraught with a great many pitfalls. We are reading a document produced in another language, for another culture, in another era, in another place. Opportunities for misunderstanding abound and without careful research, consideration, and detailed analysis, we are bound to come off the

rails and miss the original point intended by those Scriptures and therefore to misunderstand the message of God for that original audience, and therefore also His message for us today.

Hopefully, we are not so arrogant as to believe that we have God, and His message for us, all figured out, so that we understand perfectly and precisely what He means and what He wants from us in each and every instance. For those of you who are married do you fully understand your spouse, is there never any misunderstanding? If you can answer each of these questions in such a manner that you have these things figured out perfectly I would say that you are either deluded, or that we need to talk so that you can share with the rest of humanity your great wisdom and understanding. God is far more complex and far more difficult to understand than your spouse. Certainly a part of what makes God who He is, is the fact that He knows and understands far more than we do. God is in so many ways still mysterious to us. His capacity for infinite love is one of those ways; a love that knows no bounds and moves God to perform unfathomable sacrifices on behalf of His beloved.

All of these thoughts must act as a prelude to this study, indeed to all good study of Scripture, which seeks to explore the will of God and His desires and goals for His children, His image-bearers, as participants in His Kingdom, and as participants in His plans of redemption for His creation. We seek His face and His will with all of our being and with all of our heart, while we know that what we seek is lofty and grand beyond even our wildest imaginations, it is still our goal. We must approach God, and the seeking of His face, with a certain humility and with the realization that in our weaknesses and limited understandings there are a great many opportunities for misunderstanding. (We approach the presence of God as we seek His will with reverence and humility, knowing that He seeks to guide us and that He sent His Holy Spirit to aid us in this task.) Please be prayerful and open to His Spirit as we examine the Scriptures for the will of God in our lives as His people. We will examine many intricate details and our hope and prayer is for unity. A unity that can only come through the interceding of God's Spirit, a unity that is the true mark of the presence of God, a unity that stands near to His heart. God has a desire for our relationship with Him and with each

other to become as one. In unity we have an opportunity to reflect His nature more fully and bear His image more completely in this dark and damaged world. We seek to honor the words delivered in the prayer of Jesus given in John 17:21-23: **I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me. ²² I've given them the glory that you gave me so that they can be one just as we are one. ²³ I'm in them and you are in me so that they will be made perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you have loved them just as you loved me.**¹

As we begin this study we will start with creation. God had a design, a plan, for His creation. We trust God, we know that He knows what is good, desirable, and what is great beyond even our wildest dreams. We start with His creation of the first human beings and their purpose. At Genesis 1:26 we have a verse indicating that God sets out to create “a human,” “an earthling,” (One made out of the dust of the ground - אָדָם - *Adam* - ἄνθρωπον - *Anthropon in Greek*) in His “image” (צֶלֶם - *tselem* in

¹ CEB.

Hebrew - εἰκών - *ikon* in Greek). The Hebrew word used at 1:26 for “image,” (צֶלֶם - *tselem*) indicates something that has been “cut out,” “molded,” “painted,” or made in the “semblance,” or “image” of something.

It is found sixteen times in the Hebrew Scriptures. Five times it is used of mankind as created in the image of God. Twice it is used of the golden copies that were made by the Philistines of mice and tumors that afflicted them (1 Samuel 6:5, 11) when they captured the Ark of God. Twice this word is used of a ghostly image like a phantom (Psalm 39:6 and Psalm 73:20). The most frequent usage of this word is when it is used to refer to an idol.² One has to wonder why God would then use such a word to describe His making of human beings. Is God making an idol of Himself? So often what human beings do is in some way mimicry of what God does, only counterfeit, not the reality. An idol made by the hands of men is certainly not really like an “image” made by God. There is no negative connotation to what God does in making an image of Himself. Who else could actually make an image of God?

² R, Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Chicago IL: Moody Press, 1980), pp. 767-768. s.v. צֶלֶם.

There are certainly times when the word “image” (צל - *tselem*) is used to name that which is created as a physical representative, an image, or a type, sometimes of pagan gods such as at Amos 5:26³ (צל - *tselem* - Hebrew: τύπος - *typos* - Greek), Ezekiel 7:20⁴ (εἰκών - *ikon* Greek); and 16:17⁵ (εἰκών - *ikon* Greek). Sometimes it refers to molten images Numbers 33:52⁶ (צל - *tselem* - Hebrew: εἶδωλον - *idolon*, χωνευτός *choneutos* [molten idol] - Greek), or to painted pictures of men in Ezekiel 23:14⁷ (εἰκών - *ikon* Greek). At an excavation in Northern Syria a statue was found of King Hadduyiti, of Guzana. The inscription on the statue in Aramaic indicates that the statue is the “likeness” (*demuta*) and “image” (*tselem*) of the king.⁸ These two words stand as synonyms. They are interchangeable with one

³ You will take up Sakkuth your king, and Kaiwan your star-god, your images, which you made for yourselves. CEB

⁴ From their beautiful ornament, in which they took pride, they have made horrible and detestable images! Therefore, I’ve declared it an unclean thing for them. CEB.

⁵ You took the beautiful gold and silver jewelry that I had given to you, and you made male images for yourself and prostituted yourself with them. CEB.

⁶ you will drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. You will destroy all their carved figures. You will also destroy all their cast images. You will eliminate all their shrines. CEB.

⁷ but she was even more promiscuous. She saw men carved in wall reliefs, images of Chaldeans outlined in vermilion, CEB.

⁸ Moshe Reiss, “Adam: Created in the Image and Likeness of God,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39:3 (2011), pp. 181-186.

another. Hebrew often will use words in this method for emphasis.

However, at Psalm 39:6⁹ and Psalm 73:20¹⁰ (צלם - *tselem* - Hebrew: εἰκών - *ikon* Greek) the word is translated as “an empty semblance,” “a shadow,” or “a ghost.” Here the word conveys something that is more ethereal than solid. This word has a richer diversity of meaning than at first it might appear to have and its meaning is not strictly confined to that which is physical, solid and corporeal. Certainly Scripture teaches us that God is not to be found in that which is merely physical. God is Spirit.¹¹ Our tendency is to focus on the physical, despite the fact that the earliest usages of this term in the Hebrew Scriptures would challenge us to see more than simply the physical if we understand anything at all of the nature of God as being Spirit.

In Genesis 5:3 we are informed that Seth is in the “likeness” (דְּמוּת - *demuta*) and “image” (צלם - *tselem*) of Adam, his father. In Genesis 9:6 we once again find the word

⁹ Surely people go through life as mere ghosts. Surely they accumulate worthless wealth without knowing who will eventually haul it away.” NET.

¹⁰ They are like a dream when one awakes; on awaking you despise their phantoms. NRSV.

¹¹ John 4:24.

“image” (צלם - *tselem* - Hebrew: εἰκών - *ikon* Greek), this time used of mankind as being special in creation.¹² Human beings must not be killed because they bear the image of God. There is no indication here that it is merely because mankind physically looks like God. In many ways human beings resemble closely primates that live with us on this planet and yet we are not told that they reflect the image of God.

In Harris’s account of the meaning of the word “image” in Genesis 1:26 he indicates that it is obvious that being made in the image of God does not consist in man’s physical body which was formed from earthly matter, dust; but consists of God’s spiritual, intellectual, and moral likeness that came from the animating breath of God Himself.¹³ This then would mean that as God’s image-bearer we fulfill this particular role in ways other than merely through physical reality, or our bodily form. We convey the image of God through love, compassion, a sense of justice, creativity, an ethical nature, and much more. We can see the image of God conveyed in the arts, through our desire to express

¹² Moshe Reiss, “Adam: Created in the Image and Likeness of God,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39:3 (2011), pp. 181-186.

¹³ R, Laird Harris, ed., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, pp. 767-768. s.v. צֶלֶם.

the force that resides within us, animated and set in motion by the breath of God. The image of God in us differs incredibly from the false images created by human hands, with earthly materials.

What it means to be made in the image of God has been debated continually for centuries. This debate is part of the great mission of humanity, to explore what it means to convey an image that is as complex and multi-faceted as is God Himself. The current population of the earth is 7.7 Billion people. If every person were to equally fulfill their destiny of displaying the image of God, at the same time, even then, I believe there would still be more facets left to display, and explore: His image is greater, larger, more complex.

The only human being ever to fully convey the “image” (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ) of the invisible God is His Son, Jesus. In Him, the image went beyond the earthly, physical appearance, this was what Paul meant in Colossians¹⁴ and his physical appearance is referenced in Isaiah.¹⁵ His obedience, His love, and His

¹⁴ Colossians 1:15-16 **The Son is the image of the invisible God, the one who is first over all creation, 1:16 Because all things were created by him: both in the heavens and on the earth, the things that are visible and the things that are invisible. Whether they are thrones or powers, or rulers or authorities, all things were created through him and for him. CEB.**

¹⁵ Isaiah 53:2 **For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. NRSV.**

willingness to suffer for others reflected the image of God. In Jesus we are able to see God as He truly is, without our preconceived notions and misunderstandings getting in the way. He became God's representative on earth: healing the sick, raising the dead, and freeing people from the domination of demons. Many times people have seen a sharp disparity between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. Some have argued the two are not even the same God. Jesus helped to clarify this confusion and distorted thinking. He brought an understanding of the nature of God that had never before existed. In Jesus' words, actions, and presence we are finally able to see the heart of who and what God is; we are able to see His image fully.

Genesis 1:26 makes it clear that what distinguishes mankind from the animals, who share the sixth day of creation as their point of inception, is that human beings are "made" in the "image" of God. As I indicated earlier a variety of answers have been proposed for what it means to be made in the image of God.

1. Some have said that it consists merely of the physical form.
2. Some have indicated that it is the spiritual quality of mankind that is meant by this terminology.
3. The term may indicate an

immediate relationship between God and man. 4. Some would say that man is not actually made in the “image of God” since God has no image of His own, but is made as God’s image, or rather to be God’s image, to deputize in the created world for the transcendent God who remains outside the physical world order. This would then mean that mankind is representative rather than a representation.¹⁶

I think so often we seek a simple, either or answer and in reality it is both/and; in other words all of the things listed above are a part of what it means to bear the image of God. I want to focus our attention on two crucial aspects of being made in the image of God. First in Genesis 2:7 we are told that God “breathed” into that dust and it became a “living being” (נִפְשׁ תַּיָּה). What it is to be made in the “image” of God comes from the “breath” of God Himself. God made all of creation, but only in human beings are we told of His forming them from the dust of the ground and then breathing His own breath into what He had formed.

Notice secondly, in Genesis 1:27 we are told that God created humankind in His image; “male and female he created

¹⁶ Moshe Reiss, “Adam: Created in the Image and Likeness of God,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 39:3 (2011), pp. 181-186.

them.” The image of God is reflected in this “community” of male and female, not simple in a singular physical form.¹⁷ Some have seen in the fact that the male was made first that He is therefore the leader, the superior of the two beings. If order is truly the critical matter then all the rest of creation must be superior to mankind, because everything else was created before mankind. If what is last is superior then it is the woman who was the crowning pinnacle of creation. We seem so intent upon finding a hierarchal order here though it is not the focus of the text. Rather, it seems the focus is that God created a man and a woman, and both were to be His image-bearers to the world, together. This first chapter of Genesis gives no indication of hierarchy, or superiority, or of anything but symmetry and unity among the two human beings. Both were in the Garden of Eden and both served as image-bearers. **So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.**¹⁸

¹⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in the Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching series (Louisville KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), p. 34.

¹⁸ Genesis 1:27 CEB.

These two beings complemented one another and served a purpose to each other and to creation. They also were both subservient to the creator, God. At 1:28 God blesses them both and gives both the same charge (all plural verbs here; they are given these commands as a community), to **“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 air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”**¹⁹ There is no indication of hierarchy, of either the man over the woman, or the woman over the man, but only the man and the woman who together are to “rule” (רָדוּ) over all the living creatures of the earth complementing and partnering with each other in this task, representing the sovereignty of God over the earth. God Himself stands over all as its sole sovereign. Humans serve God as His image-bearers, to represent Him to all of creation, as a God of majesty, power, love, compassion, beauty and justice. Male and female bear that image together.

Just as earthly kings would at times leave behind them, after their conquest of a land, images in order to remind the residents

¹⁹ Genesis 1:28 CEB.

of that land of the sovereignty of that king over that land: In a similar way human beings stand as God's representatives on the earth reminding creation of God's sovereignty. They serve as His "sovereign emblem." Human beings are called to be the image of God, as His representatives for His claim to dominion, sovereignty, and to maintain his rule over the earth.²⁰ This concept has been greatly misunderstood by the people of God. Their concept of dominion was one of harshness, domination and at times downright abuse. Jesus came to correct our misunderstanding of dominion, by showing us a different way. We see this expressed beautifully in Philippians 2:6-11 **Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God something to exploit. ⁷ But he emptied himself by taking the form of a slave and by becoming like human beings. When he found himself in the form of a human, ⁸ he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore, God highly honored him and gave him a name above all names, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth might bow ¹¹ and every**

²⁰ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis A Commentary*, in The Old Testament Library series, Revised edition (Philadelphia PA: The Westminster Press, 1972), p. 60.

tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God

the Father.²¹ Jesus, as the perfect image-bearer of God, fulfills His mission by leading in service and obedience as a reflection of the nature of God.

Too often we have been greatly influenced by our fascination with Greek philosophy, which deeply influenced the Enlightenment and our current understanding of hierarchy. Of particular influence was Aristotle (Born 384 B.C. - Died 322 B.C.), called by some the father of science, because of his methodology of systemizing study. He and many others from Greece and Rome have had a dramatic effect on the thought processes and methodologies of study within the world and within the church. The river that runs through Greece and Rome carries much sediment that has been deposited within the belief systems of the church. We must ask how much this influence has created for the modern church, traditions, that were not a part of the early church?

This single text of Aristotle perhaps has had more influence on our modern perceptions than it should have had. Aristotle

²¹ CEB.

wrote, “Also, as between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject. And the same must also necessarily apply in the case of mankind generally;¹³ therefore all men that differ as widely as the soul does from the body and the human being from the lower animal (and this is the condition of those whose function is the use of the body and from whom this is the best that is forthcoming) - these are by nature slaves, for who to be governed by this kind of authority is advantageous, inasmuch as it is advantageous to the subject things already mentioned.”²² This passage states a clear and unwavering belief in the superiority of males over females, the strong over the weak and the clever over the less clever. His argument seems much more closely aligned with the views of the world than with the views of God. In Scripture we are told repeatedly of God defending the weak, the poor, the widow, and the orphan.²³

Martin Luther, the great reformer of the church seems to have brought into Reformation the ideas and concepts of Aristotle too as he says: “Men have broad and large chests and small,

²² Aristotle, *Politics* 1254b 13-14. H. Rackham, trans., *Aristotle: Politics*, in Loeb Classical Library, vol 264 (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), pp. 21-22.

²³ Exodus 22:22-27; Deuteronomy 10:18-19; 14:28-29; 24:17-22; Psalm 82:3-4; Isaiah 1:17; Jeremiah 5:28; Micah 2:9; Zechariah 7:9-10; Malachi 3:5; James 1:27.

narrow hips, and more understanding than women, who have but small and narrow breasts, and broad hips, to the end they should remain at home, sit still, keep house, and bear and bring up children.”²⁴ The equal worth ascribed by God at creation has been heavily eroded through the centuries not only in the wider world, but also within the community of the church.

What can we learn from this early part of Genesis? We can learn that the image of God is borne in both the male and the female. We also learn that they are different and yet both complement one another as they serve as God’s image-bearers. Bearing that image involves both the physical and the spiritual. Jesus gives the perfect picture of being an “image-bearer” as Paul describes in Philippians 2. His Lordship is not tyrannical, or oppressive, but serving, self-sacrificing, and loving.

Nowhere in Genesis 1 do we find the hierarchy, or inferiority as stated by Aristotle and Luther. They were wrong, and are wrong. Male and female are of equal worth and equally image-bearers of God; they are equal and yet somehow different. We

²⁴ Martin Luther, *The Table Talk or Familiar Discourse of Martin Luther*, trans. W. Hazlitt (Neuilly sur Seine, France: Ulan Press, reprint, 2012), p. 299

know that they are different. Both in their unique and God-given ways bear the image of God.

Synopsis

As we come to any text within Scripture we must be aware of the variety of influences that can lead us to a wrong understanding of that Scripture. We are separated by centuries, by culture, and by language from the original audiences of Scripture. These challenges can be overcome to some degree by careful consideration and examination of what we know from the time, the culture, and the language of the original audience. Even then, our task is difficult and must be approached in humility and prayerfully seeking the help of God's Spirit. At the core of our hopes and aspirations is the desire that we will express the unity that God calls His people to share as a mark of His presence.

This study begins with the very first account of the creation of humanity. Male and female are said to have been created in the image of God. There is no indication in the text of any hierarchical ranking among them in this passage. They are both commissioned with the same task of being fruitful and multiplying and as standing as God's sovereign image in ruling the earth as His representative. They are as a community to stand as God's image

and act as guardians and masters of all the earth. This commission comes to them after God's blessing to them.

Very often in the church male and female have been interpreted through the lens of ancient Greek philosophers like Aristotle and reformers like Martin Luther. The influence of Greek and Roman civilization has heavily influenced the interpretations and practices of the church. That lens stands out of focus with what was originally given to the people of God. The residue of Greece and Rome weighs heavily upon modern understandings of the ancient texts of Scripture. Through the Reformation and the Enlightenment the influence of these sources have increased in brightness and intensity often obscuring the original meaning of the text and causing our practice to reflect these Greek and Roman understandings when they should not do so. This then causes us to fail in our task of standing and exploring what it means to stand as God's image-bearers in the world; a task that is to be reflected in both the male and the female gender.

Questions

1. What are some ways that interpreting things from another time, culture, and language can prove challenging?
2. What are some tools, or techniques that can be used to overcome the difficulties of understanding another time, culture, or language?
3. Why do you think it is important to understand what a passage of Scripture meant to the original audience as a part of understanding what it means for us today?
4. Why do you think it is so easy for us to misunderstand the will of God for our lives?
5. When you think of the word “image” what are some thoughts that come to your mind? Why?
6. Does God live in community, or alone? How have you come to this understanding?
7. What are some ways that human-beings might demonstrate their role of being sovereign over creation that would reflect the nature of God?
8. What are some ways that we as God’s representatives in the world should reflect His nature more fully?
9. What are some ways that you see in the life of Jesus a different understanding of sovereignty expressed?
10. What are some ways that being made in the image of God should change the way you live your life each day?
11. What are some ways that community expresses the image of God in ways that the individual cannot?

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12. Why do you think there has been such a strong tendency in the church to follow Greek ideas that are not a part of Scripture or the history of God's people?
 13. What do you think it means that male and female both reflect the image of God?
 14. What are some ways that you have seen the church reflecting the concept that the image of God is borne by both the male and the female?
 15. What are some questions that are still left in your mind with regard to human beings bearing the image of God?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to know that both male and female are made in the image of God, not the male only, or the female only. It is important to know that the call to bear the image of God in the world is man's highest calling. It is their destiny to act as God's representatives together, in unity, to the world. It is important to know that often our modern perceptions of Biblical things have been impacted by thoughts and understandings that come from outside the Bible. These thoughts and concepts are ancient to us, but not a part of the original understandings of Scripture and God's people. What are some ways that you seek to understand the will of God for your life today?

Where is God in these words?

God is in these words challenging us to fulfill our destiny as His people, as His image-bearers to the world. He challenges us to rule in His name and therefore in the way that He would rule. He created a beautiful earth filled with goodness and order and He challenges us to be agents of goodness and order in this world. What are some ways that you think the church should more powerfully reflect the image of God into the world?

What does any of this mean for how I live my life?

Understanding one's reason for existence is important. Only in understanding the reason for existence can one come to understand what they are called to do in order to fulfill that calling. If life is merely about comfort and existence then it will mean that I will pursue those things that bring me comfort and insure my continued existence. If life is about being God's representative in the world then that will change how I spend my time and it will change the things that I pursue. What is determinative in deciding your direction in life?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

The Word of God is challenging us to fulfill our destiny as image-bearers, as God's representatives in this world. It does not matter whether we are male, or female the challenge is for both genders to pull together in unity to convey the image of God in creation. We must surely begin by recognizing the equal worth of both genders before God as expressive of His nature. Failure to do so divides us from the beginning and stops us from expressing His nature. God is the God who defends the weak, the poor, the foreigner, and the orphan. How is your life changed by your calling from God?