

Life as an image bearer

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When I first became a veterinarian, image mattered a lot. I was young and female in a profession that valued experience and was overwhelmingly male. I quickly learned to use everything I could to look like “the doctor” was supposed to look: business professional clothing, white coat, stethoscope, name tag labeled “Doctor Janisch.”

Yet even after I introduced myself as Doctor Janisch and began taking a history and doing an exam, people looked over my shoulder to the equally young male veterinary technician. They told him the answers to the questions I was asking them. For many people a woman simply was not a veterinarian, regardless of the name tag, degree or competence.

Still, the more professional the image I portrayed, the easier it was for me to do my job. At work, online, in the car we drive and the house we live in—image matters.

Christians claim that all people bear God’s image. In the ancient world, images of gods were not an attempt to depict the god so much as a way to show particular qualities. Maybe bearing God’s image means embodying particular attributes of God. What might that mean? How should we act in the world?

Historically, humans have tended to think that bearing God’s image allows us to use the natural world any way we want. We have thought that bearing God's image separates us, places us above the rest of creation. But this is inconsistent with the God revealed in scripture. The biblical God is intimately and actively involved in the world.

We Christians believe that when we look at Jesus we see God. If we take both Jesus and the Genesis creation account seriously, we see that bearing God’s image requires a particular and peculiar sort of life: a life poured out for others. It’s nearly impossible for me to imagine living my life intentionally as an image bearer of God. I can do it for ten minutes or so; then I’m back in my self-centered existence.

But the older I get, the less my life is about doing and the more it is about being. As a newly graduated veterinarian, I had to work to look the part. Later, I didn't need to worry so much about looking like a veterinarian—because I *became* a veterinarian. I developed confidence in my knowledge and abilities. I accepted and internalized the identity my degree conferred. With time and experience, being the doctor became less awkward.

I didn't have to earn my status as an image bearer of God; it's how I was created. But to live this way, I have to accept it. It's about being, not doing—yet living into this is the work of a lifetime. Who am I to think of myself as one who bears the image of God? According to Genesis, I don't have a choice. It's who I am.

Some days my life as an image bearer seems like a bad idea on God's part. I am preoccupied, self-centered, oblivious to whatever doesn't directly affect my little world. But every once in a while, for a little bit, I get it. And I live it.