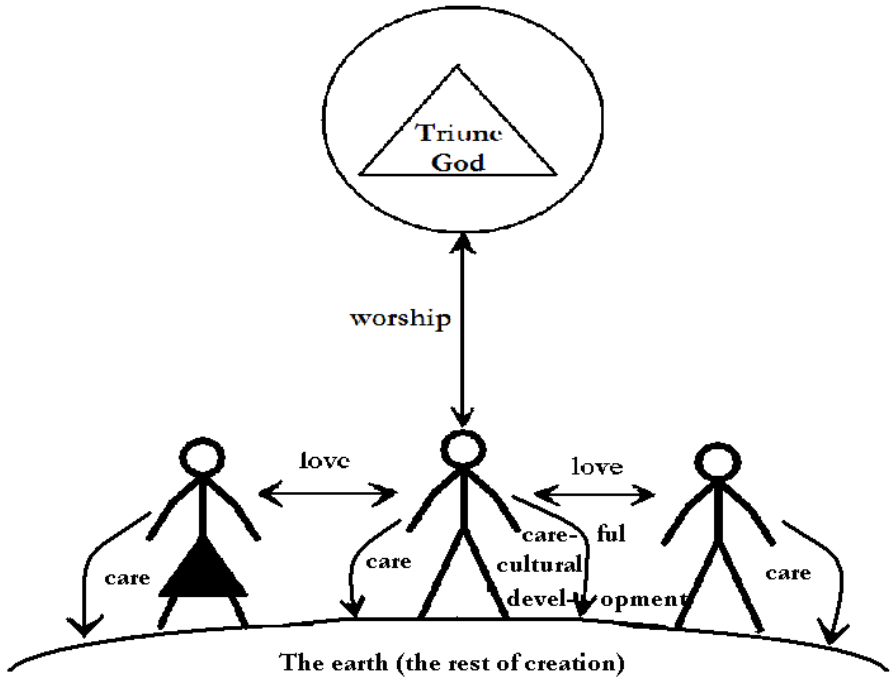
Angels, Culture, Worship, and the Image of God - An Open Letter to Joe Martin

Submitted by admin on Thu, 07/31/2014 - 13:31

A week or so ago, I was in Cambridge lecturing for the Christian Heritage Summer School of Apologetics. I delivered 10 lectures and 3 workshops on "Engaging Popular Culture and Imagination." I had a blast. I particularly enjoyed the discussion generated by Q&A time. One question stumped me (it doesn't happen often). It was asked by an older gentleman who, as I got to know him, was as full of gentleness and wisdom as he was in years. His name is Joe Martin. He worked with L'Abri back in the day, and those folks are generally worth your attention.

I was presenting my views about the image of God (which pretty much rip off Anthony Hoekema's). I



said that the image of God in humans is relational, and that relational quality can be seen as being tri-directional: upward towards God in worship, horizontal towards fellow humans in love, and downward towards non-human creation in careful stewardship. I asserted that the vertical relationship, worship, is what set us apart from the rest of creation. Unlike dogs or dolphins or sea slugs, we are *homo liturgicus* (or *homo adorans* as Dan Strange prefers). Joe raised his hand and we had something like this exchange:

Joe: "What about angels?

Me: I blinked. "What about angels?"

Joe: "They worship. Therefore that can't make us unique, right?"

Me: "Well, yeah, but, um, we're given a unique stewardship over creation, that, um, makes us different."

Joe: "But that has to do with the third relationship, the downward relationship. You said that the first relationship makes us unique."

Me: "Um, well, I need to think about that some more. Mumble mumble."

And I have. He did genuinely stump me, which was a good thing. Because he's right - we share a kinship with the angels in that we are both worshipping beings. But there is something that sets us

apart from angels, and it has to do with what I was groping towards in class: dominion over creation as expressed in cultural creativity. Psalm 8:5-8 says as much. We're lower than the angels, and yet (echoing Gen. 1:26-28) we have been given dominion over creation.

5 Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.
6 You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet,
7 all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
8 the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.

That dominion over the animals is metonymic for our dominion over the totality of God's creation, as stewards of his creation. And that dominion is expressed through all sorts of cultural creativity. This is what theologians call the "cultural mandate," God command to humans to (blended with a hard-wired propensity for) cultural creativity. *This* is what sets us apart from angels.

Look, angels are amazing, and so I don't want to knock them. But in the Bible, their role is fairly limited. They are presented as servants, messengers and warriors. They are never seen as culture creators. I cannot be sure, since there is so much that we don't know about angels, but there doesn't seem to be an angelic culture, angelic art works,



angelic architecture, angelic cinema, angelic games, angelic music (yeah, yeah, I know, the birth of Jesus, Glory to God in the highest, etc.; but look it up - they spoke their praise in a loud voice. The music gets added later by human composers like Handel). I don't think there's an angelic cuisine -- not even angel hair pasta! (*sad trombone*). These matters seem to be uniquely human.

So to answer Joe more fully, we *don't* differ from the angels in the fact *that* we worship. We differ from the angels in *how* we worship, in the mode of our worship. To put into the terms of the tri-directional image, we offer upward, God-ward relationship (worship) only via the means of horizontal and downward relationship. Our worship is ineluctably cultural, filled with culturally inflected creativity. That is our human, creaturely limitation, and our glory. Worship always takes a cultural form.

In fact, the vice-versa is true as well. Culture, rightly conceived, always takes a worshipful form. Cultural creativity is always made in praise of some ultimate good, whether that is God or self or convenience or mankind or the state, or what have you. Culture is always stamped "in praise of _____." That might be difficult to discern, but it is there nonetheless, from the Sistine Chapel to

Skyrim.



And that, Joe, is my answer. Thanks for stumping me.

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