

# **The Power of the *Imago Dei* & the *Imago Dei* in power**

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## **5 Impediments to Understanding**

*or why many evangelicals just don't (want to?) get it...*

***(i) The Blindspot of the Enlightenment?***

***(ii) The Reductionism of Critical Theory?***

***(iii) The Currency of victimhood?***

***(iv) The Insecurity of Privilege?***

***(v) The Aversion of a Generation?***

# 1. The Abolitionist's Cause: Am I not a Brother?

Slavery - the ultimate abuse of power over another human being (barring execution)

## **Wilberforce**

*Speech to Parliament (12 May 1789)*

As soon as ever I had arrived thus far in my investigation of the slave trade, I confess to you sir, so enormous so dreadful, so irremediable did its wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for the abolition. A trade founded in iniquity, and carried on as this was, must be abolished, let the policy be what it might,—let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest till I had effected its abolition.

## **Hannah More**

What wrongs, what injuries does Oppression plead  
To smooth the crime and sanctify the deed?  
What strange offence, what aggravated sin?  
They stand convicted — of a darker skin!  
Barbarians, hold! the opprobrious commerce spare,  
Respect His sacred image which they bear.  
(from 'Slavery')

## **Frederick Douglass**

You hold,—and so do I, that the image of our common God ought to be a passport all over the habitable world. But bloody and tyrannical governments have ordained otherwise; they usurp authority over you, and decide for you, on what conditions you shall travel.  
(*Letter to Henry C. Wright, Manchester, 22 Dec 1846*)

Join no political party, which refuses to commit itself fully, openly, and heartfully, in its newspapers, meetings, and nominations, to the doctrine, that slavery is the grossest of all absurdities, as well as the guiltiest of all abominations, and that there can no more be a law for the enslavement of man, made in the image of God, than for the enslavement of God himself.  
(*Letter to American Slaves, 5 Sept 1850*)

# II. The Purpose of a Human Power: whose wellbeing?

## **(i) Human Power and Truth**

### **Josef Pieper**

Whoever speaks to another person—not simply, we presume, in spontaneous conversation, but using well-considered words, and whoever in so doing is explicitly not committed to the truth—whoever, in other words, is in this guided by something other than the truth—such a person, from that moment on, no longer considers the other as partner, as equal. In fact, he no longer respects the other as a human person. From that moment on, to be precise, all conversation ceases; all dialogue and all communication comes to an end. But what's then is taking place? (Pieper 1992, 21)

Rather, he has become for me an object to be manipulated, possibly to be dominated, to be handled and controlled. Thus the situation is just about the opposite of what it appears to be. It appears, especially to the one so flattered, as if a special respect would be paid, while in fact this is precisely \*not\* the case. His dignity is ignored. I concentrate on his weaknesses and on those areas that may appeal to him—in order to manipulate him, to use him for my purposes.... an instrument of power (Pieper 1992, 22)

This lesson in a nutshell says: the abuse of political power is fundamentally connected with the sophistic abuse of the word, indeed, finds in it the fertile soil in which to hid and grow and get ready, so much so that the latent potential of the totalitarian poison can be ascertained, as it were, by observing the symptom of the public abuse of language. (Pieper 1992, 32)

## (ii) *Human Power and Freedom*

### *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

God did not make others as I would have made them. God did not give them to me so that I could dominate and control them, but so that I might find the Creator by means of them. Now other people, in the freedom with which they were created, become an occasion for me to rejoice, whereas before they were only a nuisance and trouble for me. God does not want me to mould others into the image that seems good to me, that is, into my own image. Instead, in their *freedom from me* God made other people in God's own image. I can never know in advance how God's image should appear in others. That image always takes on a completely new and unique form whose origin is found solely in God's free and sovereign act of creation. To me that form may seem strange, even ungodly. But God creates every person in the image of God's Son, the Crucified, and this image, likewise, certainly looked strange and ungodly to me before I grasped it. (Bonhoeffer 1996, 71-72) my emphasis

First of all, it is the *freedom of the other* ... that is a burden to Christians. The freedom of the other goes against Christians' high opinions of themselves, and yet they must recognize it. Christians could rid themselves of this burden if they didn't release the other person but did violence to him, stamping him with their own image. But when Christians allow God to create God's own image in others, they allow others their own freedom. Thereby Christians themselves bear the burden of the freedom enjoyed by these other creatures of God. All that we mean by human nature, individuality, and talent is part of the other person's freedom—as are the other's weaknesses and peculiarities that so sorely try our patience, and everything that produces the plethora of clashes, differences, and arguments between me and the other. Here, bearing the burden of the other means tolerating the reality of the other's creation by God—affirming it, and in bearing with it, breaking through to delight in it. (Bonhoeffer 1996, 78-79)

### *Enlightenment Liberty*

- ◆ American Declaration of Independence: 3 inalienable rights given to them by the Creator - “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”
- ◆ US Constitution Preamble: Union exists to ‘secure the blessings of Liberty’

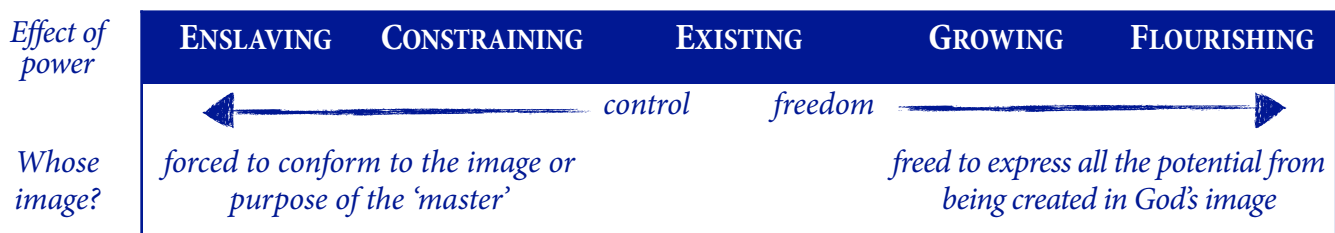
### *Kingdom Liberty*

Genesis 1 artfully shatters both ancient and contemporary rhetorical expectations and, instead, depicts God as a generous creator, sharing power with a variety of creatures (especially humanity), inviting them (and trusting them—at some risk) to participate in the creative (and historical) process. In Brueggemann's summary, the picture of God in Genesis 1 and of humanity as *imago Dei* foregrounds “the creative use of power which invites, evokes and permits. There is nothing here of coercive or tyrannical power, either for God or for humankind.’ Drawing both on the text's rhetoric of God's “gracious self-giving” as the model for human action and its protest against ancient Near Eastern views of human servitude, Brueggemann concludes: “The text is revolutionary.” (Middleton 2005, 267)

### (iii) *Human Power and Flourishing*

#### ***Spheres of influence in church leadership:***

- ◆ Culture and Vision
- ◆ Pulpit and Training
- ◆ People management



#### ***Ministry Temptations***

When I ask myself the main reason for so many people having left the Church during the past decades in France, Germany, Holland, and also in Canada and America, the word “power” easily comes to mind. One of the greatest ironies of the history of Christianity is that its leaders constantly gave in to the temptation of power – political power, military power, economic power, or moral and spiritual power – even though they continued to speak in the name of Jesus, who did not cling to his divine power but emptied himself and became as we are. The temptation to consider power an apt instrument for the proclamation of the Gospel is the greatest of all. We keep hearing from others, as well as saying to ourselves, that having power – provided it is used in the service of God and your fellow human beings – is a good thing. With this rationalization, crusades took place; inquisitions were organized; Indians were enslaved; positions of great influence were desired; episcopal palaces, splendid cathedrals, and opulent seminaries were built; and much moral manipulation of conscience was engaged in. (Nouwen 1989, 58)

One thing is clear to me: the temptations of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many Christian empire-builders have been people unable to give and receive love. (Nouwen 1989, 60)

Powerlessness and humility in the spiritual life do not refer to people who have no spine and who let everyone else make decisions for them. They refer to people who are so deeply in love with Jesus that they are ready to follow him wherever he guides them, always trusting that, with him, they will find life and find it abundantly. (Nouwen 1989, 63)

### III. Acid Tests - Some diagnostic indicators

- ◆ weak and strong
- ◆ questioners and doubters
- ◆ disciplines and discipliners
- ◆ strategies and the strategic

#### Lessons from Corinth and 1 John

### Suggested Reading

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