

The Many Paradoxes of God, part 1

Understanding paradox is essential to spiritual growth as it is at the core of the nature and character of God.

Catherine Skurja ~ Excerpted from *Paradox Found: Full of Crap and Glory*
Illustrations by Mary Welch

Christianity got over the difficulty of combining furious opposites, by keeping them both, and keeping them both furious. ~ G.K. Chesterton

Blind Men and the Elephant

In the ancient parable of the “blind men and the elephant,” locals in a remote Indian village were arguing over the nature of the divine. The squabble was brought before the wise man of the village, who summoned an elephant and six men who were born blind. Placing each man at different vantage points of the elephant, he asked them to describe the animal.

Holding on to the tail, one man said an elephant is like a rope. Another, touching a leg, said an elephant is like a tree; the man exploring the trunk said an elephant is like a snake. The other three blind men described the elephant as a wall, a spear, and a fan.¹ Upon hearing the descriptions from each blind man, the wise man declared that none of them were right and yet all of them were right. No single perspective was true, yet each contained an element of truth. Had the wise man commissioned an artist rendering of the animal described by the blind men, it would be a grotesque and bizarre sight indeed.

Our wisdom is foolishness compared to God² and our understanding will always be finite; we will truly operate as blind leading the blind as long as we insist that our part of the elephant is *the* truth. We may find that we are actually merely holding on to the tail and end up standing in a pile of manure.

A Paradox or Conundrum?

The parable of the elephant deftly illustrates the idea of paradox. Understanding paradox is critical to spiritual growth because it lies at the heart of the nature and character of God. Though many people confuse the two terms, a paradox is not the same thing as a conundrum. A paradox seems improbable as it holds two opposites together in one Truth, while a conundrum is a problem with no apparent solution. A paradox by nature is a “yes and amen”³ proposition, leading to a win-win dynamic. A conundrum on the other hand leads to a win-lose at best and a no-win situation at worst. A paradox sets you free; a conundrum keeps you stuck.

Though a paradox is often referred to as a “both/and” proposition as opposed to “black/white” thinking, a more accurate description of a paradox is “neither and

both.” To use the elephant as an example, none of the descriptions of the elephant are accurate and yet all of them are accurate in part. An elephant is neither like a tree nor a rope, but an elephant is like both of them in some way.

Because we are created in the image of a paradoxical God, we cannot understand the nature and character of humans apart from paradox. The fact that we, as humans, are capable of great good and great evil can only be understood inside paradox. Without such understanding, we end up in a conundrum such as: *God is angry at me for my sin, so I must try to be perfect so that I can please God, but I will never be perfect so I hide and deny my sin from God and others.*

Outside of paradox, we end up with a conundrum wherein we have to choose between being *either* good *or* evil. In this false dilemma, we must deny either our capacity for evil (and the ways we are guilty of participating in evil) *or* our capacity for great goodness. In the latter scenario – denying our goodness - we lose sight of the image of God within and can get stuck in the shame of believing we are nothing more than a POS (piece of shit). At the other end of the spectrum – denying our capacity for evil - a person can fall into believing the lie of NOS (*I have NO Shit*).

Though it may be obvious, POS thinking denies the glory of being “in the image” of God. On the other hand, it may seem counterintuitive to the religious mindset, the NOS position is negating the “created” part of being made in the image of God. NOS thinking denies our finite and imperfect nature as humans. Both of these conditions deny the paradoxical Truth of our being: “created” and “in the image.” When we fail to hold the tension of opposites found in paradox, we end up with a distorted and sometimes grotesque view of God, self, and others.

The Elephant in the Room

From an orthodox⁴ Christian perspective, the Elephant is the triune God: Father, Son, and Spirit. As the central doctrine of faith, the Trinity describes God as relational by nature, other-centered, and inviting. The early church fathers described the union of the Trinity as “perichoresis” meaning mutually indwelling. As a divine role model for human relationships, there is a mutual submitting of one to another.

The fourteenth-century icon by Rublev beautifully illustrates the perichoresis nature of God in the Trinity. In traditional iconography, icon images are said to be “written,” not painted, because they are meant to tell a story. Each detail is purposeful and full of meaning. In this icon, each figure is wearing purple to illustrate the divine nature of all three. To the left is the Father, seated under the house of Abraham with an open door. The Holy Spirit is on the right wearing green to signify the earth: being everywhere and filling all things. Jesus is the only one wearing a brown tunic to declare his humanity: coming into our skin. Though he was God, he took the form of a slave.⁵



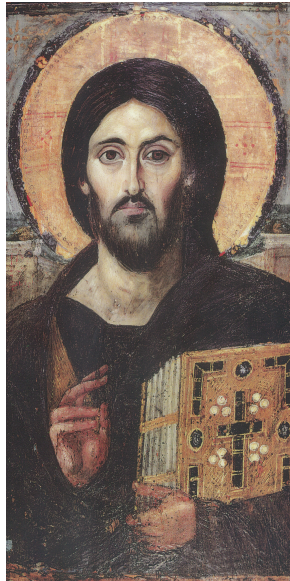
In his letters to the early church, Paul makes some astonishing declarations about Christ: He is the exact image of the unseen God⁶ and all the fullness of the divine was pleased to dwell in Christ.⁷ From a Christian perspective, that means to engage with Christ is to engage with the fullness of the Trinity.

The image of God, as seen in Christ, can give us a lot of clues to the nature and character of God and about what it means to be created in that image. If it is not true about Christ, it is not true about God; if it is not true about Christ, it is not true about what it means to be a human created in the image of God.

Far too often, we live in a way that has divorced our understanding of God from our understanding of what it means to be human. Yet, there could not be a more important marriage than to bind these two together in a holy matrimony. What we think about God impacts every aspect of life, including how we view ourselves. Conversely, what we think about ourselves influences how we view God.

Christ: The Image of God

Another image I use frequently to explore aspects of God is the icon of Christ Pantocrator, meaning the omnipotent lord of the universe. One of the earliest known icons, it was *written* to teach some of the fundamental and paradoxical truths about the nature of Christ.



Notice how the eye on the left is different than the eye on the right. The left side is softer, kinder, and gentler than the right, which has an arched brow and a fierceness to it. The hand on the left side of the icon is in the sign of a blessing, while the other hand is holding the book of the law. The two sides represent some of the many paradoxes held in Christ: gentleness and strength, mercy and justice, grace and truth, lamb and lion.

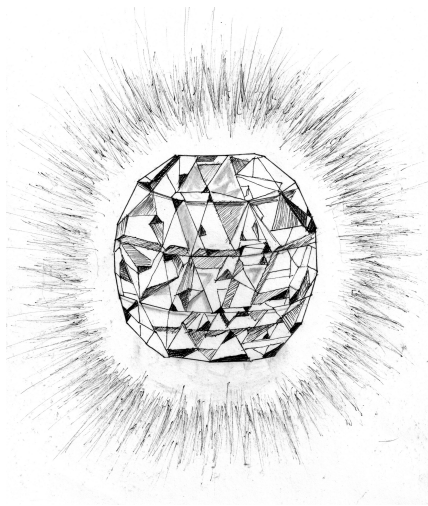
Together these two images can be used to tell a story about the character and nature of God that says a lot about the nature and character of us as human beings. Paul uses the image of a great treasure inside a jar of clay to describe humanity.⁸ We are of the earth, part of creation, and contain a treasure. It is the light in all people, which is Christ.⁹

A Great Treasure

The great treasure held inside each person is the Imago Dei¹⁰ – Latin for the “image of God” within. It is the light that is in all:

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. (John 1:3-4)

An image I use to describe the Imago Dei is a prism. It is multi-faceted, reflects light, and is like an indestructible diamond of inestimable worth.



The fullness of God that is in Christ is in each of us. We are all ultimately defined by the same spiritual reality. The world is not divided into “haves” and “have-nots” regarding the Imago Dei. We all bear the image of God. There is no such thing as being created in the image of anything else. Because of this mystery, every human being has equal value before God. We are the living, breathing manifestation of God on earth. As Jesus was God incarnate, we are created and called to be “Jesus with skin on.”

Being created in the image and likeness of God is the Original Blessing¹¹: "In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."¹² The next thing God did was to bless them and he showed them all he had created. "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good."¹³

There are several noteworthy things in this passage: 1) God is creator; 2) humans are created; 3) male and female share something unique among the creation - the image of God; 4) God calls creation good.

If we all have this great treasure inside, why is it so difficult to operate in the fullness of the fruit of the Spirit?

Diamond in the Dung

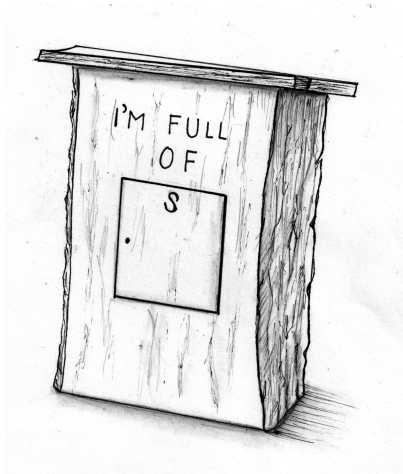
As a counselor and spiritual director, most of my work is with people who describe themselves as Christians of one stripe or another, yet I frequently hear statements such as: “I am a piece of crap.” “I feel like shit.” “I am a shitbag.” “I feel like a worthless piece of shit.” (You get the idea.) The Imago Dei is hidden below the weight of feeling unworthy.

In this context, these words describe the universal experience of shame. Shame is the felt experience of being judged as “not good enough,” whether by another or by the voices in our own head. Partly because so many people use words like these to

describe their shame and partly because, like literal crap, we don't like to talk about it in polite company, the best metaphor for shame is: crap.

It is so common to hear such words from people who are hurting that I advise my students: if they are called to the work of helping people heal from shame, they must learn to not flinch when someone uses colorful language to describe their inner world of turmoil.

Instead of feeling like they are radiating light, people who are stuck in shame often feel more like:



Where did that come from?

A seed of fear was sown that somehow it was not enough to be created in the image of God and share life with God.¹⁴ The seed's name was "Not Enough." It was not enough to be the created – the first Man and Woman believed they needed to be like God, the creator. "Not enough" is a cornerstone belief of shame, which precedes and drives sin. We humans get stuck when we believe we are not enough: not rich enough, powerful enough, smart enough, beautiful enough, perfect enough, holy enough, etc., etc.

This fear of Not Enough sown by the serpent *is* the Original Shame that caused the first Man and Woman to doubt their true identity and set them up for disaster. This seed of shame is a weed growing in the internal garden of the soul, choking out the life God designed. It is a seed that grows doubt, discontent, and division. Its fruit is a belief that it is not enough to be human- a mere mortal who shares life with God. It produces doubt in our relationship with God (*Did he tell you the truth?*), and doubt that it isn't enough to be the created (*You can be like God*). The temptation is to be like the Creator. Before there was Original Sin, there was Original Shame: *You are not enough to be merely human.*

Original Shame, the belief of “not enough,” preceded and drives sin. It is a vicious cycle that goes like this: We believe we are not enough (shame), so we try to be something we are not (sin). When that doesn't work, it brings more shame (we are not enough), which causes us to try harder to be perfect or give up and turn to something to numb our shame (sin). We can see that cycle playing out in first Man and Woman's story and their descendants. You might see it in your story.

What keeps us from living in the freedom of the Imago Dei?

Big “R” and little “r” Reality

While in my graduate program, there were two words I encountered frequently during lectures and in the massive amounts of readings: ontological and phenomenological. Ontological is about big “R” Reality and phenomenological is about little “r” reality. Phenomenological speaks to our personal experience that shapes our reality: if we are only holding on to the tail of the elephant, we will describe the animal like a rope.

Big “R” Reality is God’s larger view and little “r” reality is our finite, limited view. We can think of truth in much the same way: there is big “T” truth and little “t” truth. These two types of truth and two types of reality are distinct, and understanding these differences is essential to understanding shame. Our little “t” truths create our little “r” realities that we confuse for the big “R” Reality. In other words, our distorted perception becomes our truth.

Shame affects our perception and becomes our reality, even though it is not *the* Reality.

The Disease of Shame

For anyone with experience working with people in their shame, a quick check of Merriam-Webster for a definition of *disease* shows that shame indeed can be viewed as a disease. Shame fits every one of the following definitions:

- an illness that affects a person, animal, or plant: a condition that prevents the body or mind from working normally
- a problem that a person, group, organization, or society has and cannot stop
- a condition of the living animal or plant body or of one of its parts that impairs normal functioning and is typically manifested by distinguishing signs and symptoms¹⁵

As with any disease, if the root causes are not understood, the treatment is not likely to be effective. A distorted understanding of the root causes of shame has led to some disastrous effects on human relationships. The antidote that has been

prescribed for far too long has actually made the disease of shame worse: *Don't talk about it.*

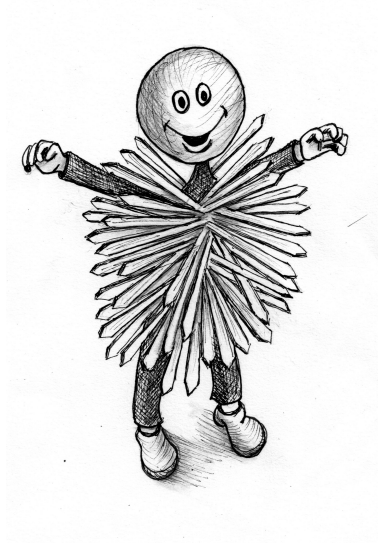
Whether we recognize it or not, we all suffer from the disease of shame to one degree or another. It is part of our human condition. Like any disease, there is a cause, there is a predictable pattern to the symptoms, and there is a cure.

Akin to bolstering the spiritual immune system, learning the Truth about our identity as created in the image of God builds resilience to shame. Like a force field, living in the Truth will keep other people's crap from finding a place inside our soul. Conversely, those living in their personal reality that they are no better than a POS become shame magnets, easily absorbing other people's crap.

While Original Shame causes us to believe it is "not enough" to be a mere mortal, Original Sin causes us to desire to be like God: judging good and evil, including ourselves and others. We judge in little ways and big ways every day, even when we are not aware we are doing it. All are guilty of it.¹⁶ We compare, we justify, we blame, and we deny our own culpability. *At least I am not as bad as those people.* Sin is driven by and a symptom of shame.

Because acknowledging shame – the aspects of us we judge as less than, bad, or ugly - is so painful, we do our best to cover it, deny it, pretend it is not there. We put on our best ball-of-sunshine smiley face to show the world that we have it all together. The façades we show the world are the aspects we deem more divine; the ways we try to be *like God*. The aspects we hide are what we deem to be *not God* or deserving of *mere mortal* status. While shame is rooted in the belief of *not enough*, sin is rooted in the ways we try to be *enough* to raise us up above mere mortal status to the level of divine.

Shame can be heard in the "I am not..." statements we use to distance ourselves from our finite human nature: *I am not weak. I am not mean. I am not needy. I am not vulnerable.* By contrast, sin is rooted in the "I am..." identity statements we make to set us apart from mere mortal status: *I am powerful. I am above it all. I am holy. I am sacrificial.* These identity statements become the driving force for behavior, causing us to act in very un-Christ-like ways. Both shame and sin are formed out of the judgments we make about self and others as we experience pain in the world. Neither shame nor sin is able to accept the fullness of being *created in the image of God*.



Smiley-face Theology

Shame is such a powerful force that it defies description with simple words. The image of the outhouse gives a visceral sense of what people often feel on the inside, behind the smiley face exterior.

Because there is an injunction on the words attached to the sense of shame (especially in religious circles), it conveniently keeps shame in the dark and silent places of the soul where we don't have to look at it or talk about it. We can safely keep our smiley face façade intact a little longer.

Jesus had a name for people who lived like this. He called them whitewashed tombs. He said we wash the outside of the cup while the inside is dirty.¹⁷

When we promote a smiley-face theology, we are not being honest about our own human struggles and we do not create a safe space for those who are keenly aware of the darkness below the exterior.

Smiley-face theology is dangerous because it fosters shame disease. It demands people present as having it all together, causing them to deny any emotional reality that does not line up with their version of "happy, happy." It causes us to deny our humanity.

Like mold, shame grows in the dark and musty places devoid of light and air. Only in bringing it out into the light does it begin to lose its power. In order to help people in their shame, we need to learn to not blush and to even be able to use their colorful language back as a way of diffusing the power of the words. If we cannot be with someone in their shame without grimacing, we cannot create a safe space to bring that shame into the light where it can be healed.

A Bunch of Nuts

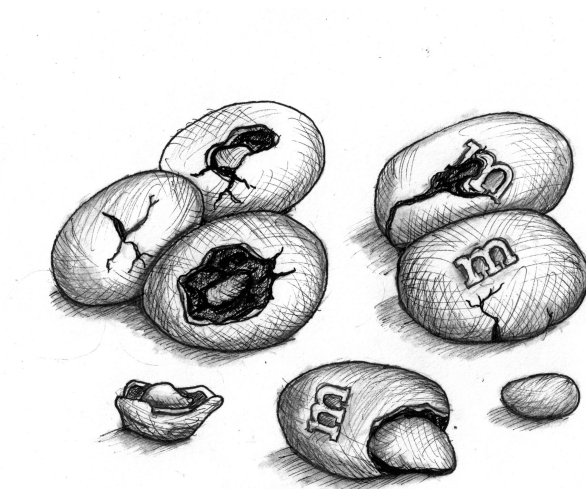
The best metaphor I have found to explore these theological and psychological concepts relating to the complex nature of the Imago Dei and the brokenness of humanity is... a Peanut M&M®.

The Imago Dei is like the peanut inside of a Peanut M&M®. The peanut is the only part of the candy that has any significant nutritional value. As with the Imago Dei, even though the peanut is not visible, you know it is there. The peanut is the great treasure in all people.

The chocolate layer represents our shame: the aspects of ourselves that we do not like or are ashamed of—the “stuck” parts of us we want to hide from God, ourselves, and others.¹⁸ The chocolate does not destroy the peanut underneath, just as our brokenness does not destroy the fact that we are created in the image of God. However, the chocolate effectively hides the peanut.

The potential mess of the chocolate layer is the reason for the outer layer: the candy shell. It keeps the chocolate in its place so that it “melts in your mouth, not in your hand.”™ The candy coating represents our False Self, the masks we wear to hide the undesirable parts of ourselves. It is our protection, our attempt at pulling our act together and making ourselves acceptable to others. Sadly, it also conceals the treasure of the peanut underneath.

Like the candy, our shiny coatings come in many different colors, shapes, and sizes. Underneath the layers, we are all a bunch of nuts: the Beloved of God. Some of us have our layers firmly intact. Others are developing cracks here and there as our defenses break down. Still others have allowed God to reach through their layers and uncover the Imago Dei. It is important to remember that all of us “nuts” are in process somewhere along the journey.



God created us in his image and is far more aware of all of our messy layers than we are. Yet he calls us his adopted children, his friends, his beloved, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation.¹⁹ He is able to see all our brokenness and shame, and love us completely. He created us, so he defines us—not by the candy coating or the chocolate—but by the Imago Dei.

The Imago Dei in each person is like a diamond worth millions and millions of dollars, a “pearl of great price.” If a priceless diamond was dropped in an animal pen and covered under a pile of dung, would its value change? What if it were lost in a gigantic, mountain-sized pile of manure? Would it no longer be worth millions? Would it be worth searching through the mess to find it?

So why is it so difficult to live from the Imago Dei? Is it possible to heal shame? In order to answer these questions, we need to first explore three major paradoxes held in Christ and the heresies that result when the paradox is split apart.

The material in this three-part essay is drawn from the writings of Paradox Found and from a presentation at the Open Table Conference in June of 2016. Audio recordings available at:

<http://opentableconference.com>

For more information on Imago Dei Ministries, visit us at: <http://www.idmin.org>

For more information on Trinitarian theology, see: Baxter Kruger’s work at <http://perichoresis.org> ; Paul Young’s work at <http://wmpaulyoung.com> and Brad Jersak’s work at <http://www.bradjersak.com>

¹If you search “Blind Men and the Elephant,” you will find several versions of this parable.

² 1 Corinthians 1:25

³ 2 Corinthians 1:20

⁴ Orthodox simply means “right thinking” in accordance with the teachings of the Church. Livingstone, E.A. *Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church*, Oxford: University Press. p. 420.

⁵ Philippians 2:6

⁶ Colossians 1:15 (See also Hebrews 1:3)

⁷Colossians 2:9

⁸ 2 Corinthians 4:7-9

⁹ John 1:4

¹⁰ There are two common pronunciations for the Latin *Imago Dei*: “*Im-AH-go Day*” or “*Im-AH-go DAY-ee*.” We have always used the first: *Imago “Day.”*

¹¹ Fox, Matthew. *Original Blessing*.

¹² Genesis 1:27

¹³ Genesis 1:31

¹⁴ Genesis 2-3

¹⁵ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disease>

¹⁶ 1 John 1:8-10

¹⁷ Matthew 23:25

¹⁸ Many people, ourselves included, have objected to equating the deliciousness of chocolate with anything negative, but the metaphor works too well.

¹⁹ Romans 8:15b-17; Ephesians 5:1-2; John 15:15; 1 Peter 2:9.