

CARLA SUNBERG with KERI MITCHELL

REFLECTING THE IMAGE

*Our Call
to Mirror Christ
to the World*

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CARLA D. SUNBERG with KERI MITCHELL



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Dedicated to my precious family,
Chuck, Christy, and Cara,
who have embodied reflecting the Image!

A NEW-OLD UNDERSTANDING OF HOLINESS

Growing up in the holiness tradition, I used to think that holiness was all up to me: my choices, my behavior, my thoughts. To be the person God wanted me to be meant that I needed to follow a list of dos and don'ts to the best of my ability. I tried to live this way—and I failed.

A number of years ago, while on my spiritual journey, I began to learn something that changed my life: Holiness is not about us. It's all about Christ. He is *the* living and embodied Image of our very holy God, and every single human being is called to be a reflection of Jesus Christ in this world. His very nature screams holiness, and to be a holy people, we need to turn toward him and reflect his image.

This understanding came more and more into focus as I worked on my doctoral dissertation. We had spent thirteen years in Russia as missionaries, and throughout this time, I had to study the history of the Eastern church, because that was the context in which I served. I discovered that this part of Christianity is quite unfamiliar to much of the Western church. However, I also learned that John Wesley, the father of Methodism, had studied the early church fathers and that they had influenced his understanding of holiness. This led me to study some of the most influential individuals in Eastern church history, the fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers and the women related to them, women I've chosen to call the Cappadocian Mothers. My own reading of these individuals is informed by my Wesleyan heritage, and so I read them through that lens. At the same time, hidden in the pages of history, they taught me a great deal about the optimism that humanity can be restored in the image of God. Over and again they used "mirror imagery" in their teachings about what it means to be growing as a Christian and, specifically, in our relationship with Jesus Christ.

These days, it seems we are trying to teach people "Christianity lite" with five-minute devotionals and podcasts on the go. We find it marketed and sold as fast-food religion. Although we are incredibly busy people, we can't have a relationship with God in that short amount of time. It won't happen.

In Fort Wayne, Indiana, where I pastored a church with my husband, Chuck, we had the opportunity to bring a number of new people to Christ, and part of discipling them was teaching them to be in the Word and prayer every day. We followed the daily Scrip-

ture readings prescribed by Rev. Wayne Cordeiro, author of *The Divine Mentor*. He encourages “sitting at the feet of the Savior” and emphasizes that this is the primary job we have as Christians. When Chuck and I moved to Ohio to be co-district superintendents of the East Ohio District of the Church of the Nazarene, I wanted to continue this discipleship. I felt God leading me to do this through a daily blog, telling me, “As a spiritual leader in the church, let people know you’re spending time with me every day and making me a priority.” So that’s what I do—I spend time in the Word in the mornings, and I ask, “Lord, what do you want me to learn from this today?” And then I write.

The blog is titled “Reflecting the Image,” a theme based on my doctoral dissertation and guided by Cordeiro’s Scripture selections. This book conflates a number of these daily devotional writings to tell the story of how our lives can change when we begin to understand holiness differently.

It changed my life. I hope and pray that it changes yours too.

ONE

THE REDEMPTION OF TARNISHED MIRRORS AND LOST COINS

You wouldn't learn what I look like if you visit my blog. That's because my profile photo is not a picture of me but a work of art by the Italian Baroque painter Domenico Fetti. It depicts a woman searching for her lost coin, based on a parable Jesus tells:

Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.” (Luke 15:8-9)

In the fourth century, the Cappadocian Fathers likened the story of the lost coin to the loss of the image of God within humanity. They believed that because of sin, humanity had tarnished the reflection but that no human was so lost that the capacity to reflect God had been destroyed.

The coin is somewhere in the house. The ability to reflect God is still within us, somewhere. This is the grace of God, constantly reaching out to humanity. The woman had to search the house. We must be willing to search our own hearts. The woman knew that this was a most precious possession, so she searched intently and even asked others to help her. The loss of God’s image in humanity is so great that it ought to be the passion of our hearts—that which is lost must be found!

The coin probably was buried under dirt in a corner somewhere, and when the woman found it, she and her friends rejoiced. The image of God may be dirty and beaten up by the lifestyle we have led, but God can restore the image in us, for this is the purpose for which we were created.

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” . . .

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, “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.” . . . God saw everything

that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (Gen. 1:26a, 27-28, 31a)

In this scene from Genesis, we read about the first wedding, a party in paradise for Adam and Eve, who were created to be equal partners, together ruling over the earth. And at this wedding, God is celebrating. He rejoices when he creates humanity, for both male and female are created in his very image.

This first wedding foreshadows the wedding invitation that weaves throughout all of Scripture. Those who are reflecting the image are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb—to be the very bride of Christ! The whole story from beginning to end is the story of an invitation to God's creation to be united with him. From Genesis to Revelation he is saying, come! We were created to be at the wedding! We are invited.

We have to ask ourselves, have we ever responded to the invitation? For you and for me, the invitation is to turn around and face in the direction of God, our Creator, and to be mirrors that reflect his image. This invitation has been sent out through the eons and continues to be sent out today, to all of us. We must be willing to take our dirty, cracked, and broken mirror and face it in the direction of our loving Creator. When we do, he cleans us up until we are shiny and new, and then we become a reflection of our Creator.

Even for the most unlovely, those who are covered with dirt and beaten up by life, the coin is still in the house. The capacity is in humanity, and God never, ever turns his back on humanity. As long as we turn around, we can reflect him.

In the late 1980s, Wanda came wandering into our church in Austin, Texas. She had strayed about as far away from God as you possibly could. She'd had a baby two years before while unmarried and since then had embraced a lifestyle that included partying and frequenting numerous bars to get drunk. When she stumbled into our church, it was because she knew her life was a mess, and she remembered attending a little holiness church as a girl.

I went to visit her and BJ, the woman she lived with, and wound up convincing Wanda to come with me to the district's women's retreat. That was an adventure. I put her in my room because I knew her story, and it turned out that the woman rooming with the pastor's wife had packed Jack Daniel's and drugs in her luggage. I caught her drunk and confronted her. "All right," she told me. "I'm ready to get rid of it all." So we poured her alcohol down the drain. Little by little, over the next number of years, Wanda cleaned up and one day had a transformational experience in her life when she was overcome by the Holy Spirit. She never went back to her old life. A few years later the Lord revealed to her that she was to marry a man in her church. She married him, and her son grew up as a Christian. Today she's involved in a large Pentecostal church in Florida and gives God all the credit for what happened in her life.

It's tempting for us as Christians to dismiss people like Wanda as hopeless, but her story reminds us that no one is beyond the reach of God's redemptive love. As Wanda turned around to face God, he healed her and restored her into his image. He can do the same for anyone.

Christ Is *the* Image

If we've been in church long enough, we've heard the Christmas story and the Easter story and all of the Jesus stories in between hundreds of times. Perhaps somewhere along the way, the reality that God came to Earth to live among us, to be *with* us, has lost some of its wonder.

I always loved my childhood Christmases in Germany. Instead of Santa Claus, Saint Nicholas paid a visit to our home in early December and left either candy or coal in our shoes. None of us children ever received coal, though as a little girl, I used to think my brother Kurt ought to be given a few lumps of it. (Today Kurt and I are the best of friends, but when we were younger . . . oh my!)

Saint Nicholas, however, was not the big event—Christmas Eve was. We had an Advent calendar and opened one window every day, counting down to Christmas Eve, when we would worship at church. I remember the little German poem we would recite as we lit the candles in the Advent wreath. Translated to English, it says: “Advent, Advent, / A little candlelight burns. / First one, then two, then three, then four, / Then stands the Christ child before the door.” When we arrived home from worship, the gifts were under the tree because the Christ child—the Gift—had arrived.

The excitement of Christmas was always about the coming of the Christ child. It wasn’t about Santa Claus coming; he had already come, and he didn’t bring the gifts. All he brought was chocolate. The German celebration of Christmas emphasized to me the real reason we celebrate—the incredible reality that God came in the flesh to minister to all of humanity.

Hebrews 1:3 says, “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” The “he” in this text refers to Jesus. From the onset of this epistle, the writer wants to make clear who Jesus is—God in the flesh. If we want to know what God looks like and acts like as a human being, we need only to look at Jesus, who is the “exact imprint of God’s very being.”

The implications of this for humanity are huge. Christ assumed human flesh, and in doing so, he healed human flesh. He set right the things that had gone wrong. The writer tells us that Jesus created a pathway for all of humanity to be “purified,” or restored into the image of God. Everyone who seeks his face can be a reflection of Jesus to the world.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.
. . . He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was

pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:15, 18-20)

Here again, in this letter to the Colossians, the writer makes abundantly clear that Jesus Christ is the Image. God sent his Son to be the visible Image of the invisible God, and it is Christ's image that we are to be reflecting to the world around us. When we do, people see Jesus. As I read this passage of Scripture, the words "peace" and "reconciliation" resound in my ears. What would it be like if we, his "image bearers," were reflecting his peace and reconciliation to the world?

I remember a day my husband and I spent driving around east Ohio, making stops at different churches along the way. In a back "holler" near the Ohio River stands a beautiful church building that once upon a time was filled with worshippers. Today it has only a handful of members who can barely afford to keep the doors open. It's one of two churches in town, and both are suffering serious decline.

The community is depressed. The coal mines and steel mills have shut down. The latest census shows that 418 people are left in this town, and nearly everyone lives below the poverty level. Drug and alcohol abuse are rampant in this depressed part of the country. The entire community has become "unchurched." In an effort to reach out to children, the church held a weeklong vacation Bible school, and every evening only one child attended.

What people need is Christ! They need the living, incarnated Jesus Christ who can transform their lives. He is the solution to the problems that ail this little town in Ohio as well as the towns and cities across our country and throughout the world. So often these days, however, people say, "I want Jesus, but I don't want the church." So church members have to ask themselves, "How do we become Jesus to the communities around us?"

This is when things get personal. We have to take a long, hard look at our lives. If an entire church were made up of individuals

who were a reflection of Jesus to the world, what would happen? Could we effectively minister to a community that has lost all hope? Isn't that what Jesus did when he entered this world, brought hope to a needy and dying world?

We are living in that needy and dying world today, and the hope, peace, and reconciliation of Jesus Christ found in the Image is what the world needs so desperately. Colossians 3:10 tells us we "have clothed" ourselves "with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator." In other words, the Image is being renewed in us so that we look like him. It doesn't matter who we are; we can all be renewed into his image and then serve as a reflection of him to the world around us.

This is the call of the deeper walk with Jesus Christ—to be transformed into his image—so that as we walk this earth, people see Jesus in us and experience Christ, and hence God, here on earth.

The Image of a King Who Foreshadows the Image of the King

Since the dawn of creation, God has been reaching out to humanity, giving us glimpses of the Image. He is present in the opening chapters of the creation story, putting his imprint on all that we see around us. God is revealed in his relationship with Adam and Eve, Abraham and Moses. All of these are moments when God is breaking into human history.

There's an interesting little story in Genesis, not long before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The story of how God saves Lot and his family may be the one about Abraham's nephew that we know best, but it wasn't the first time God rescued Lot from Sodom.

Soon after God's call to Abram (before God renamed him Abraham) is a story of the kings of the region, who govern what appear to be little principalities. These kings make war against Sodom, and Lot and his family are taken away as plunder in that battle. When Abram learns of his nephew's fate, he leads the men of his household to pursue the kings and save Lot and his family. Though Abram was

fighting against several kings, he was victorious. Genesis 14:16 says that Abram “brought back all the goods, and also brought back his nephew Lot with his goods, and the women and the people.”

Then we meet Melchizedek, king of Salem.

After [Abram’s] return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King’s Valley). And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said,

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
maker of heaven and earth;
and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”

And Abram gave him one-tenth of everything. Then the king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself.” But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have sworn to the LORD, God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal-thong or anything that is yours, so that you might not say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’ I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me—Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre. Let them take their share.” (Vv. 17-24)

Melchizedek is one of the “good” kings in the region and was not involved in the battle. He is identified here as a priest but appears in the Old Testament long before the line of Levi is established—the line from which all of the Israelite priests would later come. And he is not part of Abram’s family, so he is not an Israelite; he’s something completely other and different. Melchizedek comes from outside the structure.

God already has declared that he will make Abram the father of many nations, yet even Abram recognizes Melchizedek as a priest and worships God through this king of Salem by giving the king a tenth of all his plunder. Melchizedek was an earthly ambassador of God on high, and Abram, honoring him, gave him the title of victory.

Abram knew that he wanted God to have the credit for what had happened, and not human beings. This is found in his very purposeful response to the king of Sodom. Abram could have had considerable additional wealth as a result of the plunder from this altercation, but instead he refused to keep it and gave it back to the king of Sodom. He returned to the earth what was the earth's and gave in worship to God what was to be given to God—and God was given the glory for all that happened in his life!

Melchizedek's arrival on the scene was a completely countercultural event. Where in the world did he come from? Why is he serving the true God? We see him for a moment, and then he disappears again from the pages of history. It is almost as if the curtain is pulled back on the future, that he is a foreshadowing of the coming Messiah. The story of God's people is just beginning, and already this king begins a trajectory that will culminate in the life of Christ here on earth.

Melchizedek is king of Salem, which we know today as Jerusalem. Salem means "peace," which is symbolic. Could it be that he is laying the groundwork for the "Prince of Peace"? In his worship of God, Melchizedek broke the bread and shared the wine. Here, Abram was already partaking of a meal like that which would become, for all of time, the Lord's Supper.

We don't meet Melchizedek again in the Old Testament, but we revisit his story in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews:

Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood—for the people received the law under this priesthood—what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. Now the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar.

For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

It is even more obvious when another priest arises, resembling Melchizedek, one who has become a priest, not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life. For it is attested of him,

“You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.” (7:11-17)

We don't know who wrote the letter to the Hebrews, but we know that the author is writing to the Jews. The writer is telling us that when Jesus came, he was remembered as being a priest forever in “the order of Melchizedek.”

This is significant because Melchizedek came from outside the order, superseding the whole system of the Jews. There was no need for the priests of Levi. Somehow Abram understood that Melchizedek was special and unique, and he responded to the ministry of this king. Abram's response to him shows us the importance of our response to the Messiah.

Jesus, like Melchizedek, was completely “other.” He came from outside the system to establish a new system, a new covenant that went beyond the bounds of the traditional religious practices of the day. It was a frustration to the religious leaders, but this had been God's plan for centuries. He knew that this was what would need to happen to be able to set people free. The Levitical priests always had to make sacrifices for themselves, but Christ is the sacrifice for all, breaking the order of the Levites. And it's not just about that sacrifice; it's following after something completely new and different. Jesus came to earth, and his life, death, and resurrection changed the whole system.

What's exciting about Melchizedek's story is that this Old Testament king reveals a moment when God steps into history and nudges humanity in the right direction. Melchizedek is a foreshadowing of Christ, a visible image of God. God so wants to reconcile humanity

to himself that he is already revealing a glimpse of his image in this odd Old Testament story.

Abraham is the father of our faith, and for the Jews reading the letter to the Hebrews, no one on earth was more revered. So if Abraham worshipped God through Melchizedek, then this superseded the Levitical system of priests and sacrifices. Jesus was in the order of Melchizedek. It's a new order. It's a new day.

There are moments in our lives today when we have experiences that foreshadow what lies ahead. What are we responding to and seeing these days? Our lives are also to be a foreshadowing of Christ, for his image is stamped on us. The world is hungry for Christians whom it can truly respect. This is a humbling message, because it was not often that there were faithful individuals, like Melchizedek, who broke into time and space for the world to see the coming Messiah. The challenge is to live each and every day in the grace of God, allowing his image to be brought into clearer focus so that our lives touch the world and give a momentary glimpse of what is to come.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you know anyone who epitomizes the lost coin, someone who seems too buried in sin to be found by God? Have you ever felt like a lost coin?
2. Genesis talks about us being created in the “image of God.” In the light of this chapter, what does that mean?
3. What is your response when you think of God coming to Earth and putting on human flesh to be with us?
4. What do people mean when they say, “I want Jesus, but I don't want the church”?
5. What about Melchizedek's story stands out to you?

6. Can you think of a time that God has broken into your life to reveal himself? Perhaps through someone else who is reflecting God's image?