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Article (Advanced) Arts & Popular Culture, Being Human, Image of God

By **Mark Sprinkle** on July 01, 2012

The Broken Made Whole

> No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.
> —1 John 4:12

As Christians who seek to frame what the natural sciences tell us about our physical humanity with what the Bible suggests are our defining human qualities, we tend to focus on what Genesis means when it says Adam was "made in the likeness of God"; but it is helpful to remember that the first mention of God's image in human form looked forward to the full revelation that would come in Christ. Thus, we ought also seek to understand Jesus as the model towards which Adam always pointed, and by which we should understand both Adam and ourselves.

Going one step further, we should also look forward from Jesus to the life of the Church. For if Jesus was the true image of God, then at Pentecost, the new community of believers took on the role of imaging the continuing presence of God in and for the world. The Church was constituted as the very Body of Christ, charged with making him known in their lives as well as their words. Thus in the structure and life of the Church we also see something important about the *imago Dei*.

Perhaps one way to hold in tension the various interpretations of the image—that is, to affirm the incomplete truths available through the relational, functional, substantial, and elective models—is to look at a literal image of the way the social aspect of imaging God via the Church interacts with the intensely individual and personal aspect of imaging God in individuals. Picking up on Kathy McReyolds' sketch of personal transformation through encounters with those with disabilities ("More than Skin Deep"), I'd like to turn our attention towards the work of Chicago artist Tim Lowly, whose monumental portrait of his daughter who has physical and mental disabilities (*Temma on Earth*, 1999), is pictured above. Lowly's work compels us to recognize the image of God even in one who lacks markers of those other roles, capacities, and relationships, and highlights two linked characteristics common to Jesus and Church: brokenness that does not merely equate with imperfection, and a social picture of our essential identity in Christ. By allowing Lowly to place Temma's identity and humanity at the center of our attention, we can reframe our sense of what it means to bear the image of God and reflect the crucified Christ as his Body.

Profoundly Other

Born in North Carolina but spending his youth in South Korea (where his parents were Presbyterian missionaries), Tim Lowly attended Calvin College and began work as an artist in Michigan. But his life and work took an unexpected turn in 1985, when Tim and his wife Sherrie's daughter was born and suffered a medical emergency during her first two days home from the hospital. In 2002, journalist Fred Camper's incredibly sensitive article treated the Lowlys' physical, emotional and spiritual journey with Temma at length, and I encourage

readers to turn to that essay for the full narrative background to Tim's approach to his daughter and his art. But the central facts are that for all of her now 27 years, Temma's host of physical and mental disabilities have made her completely dependent on others, and have meant that the relationship she has with her parents (and they with her) is a radical departure from 'normal.' Temma's "profound otherness" challenges most of our expectations about the human capacity to image God. Speaking to Camper, Lowly describes Temma:

> It's unlikely that she thinks in a way that we would call thinking," he says, "because our ways of thinking are based so much on learning, experience, sight, socialization, and history, and I doubt any of those things have any bearing on Temma. I don't even think comparing her to animals makes sense. There's a certain wholeness to the way animals think that I don't think Temma is capable of. I'm pretty sure she does have an inner life, but I don't think she has the mental mechanisms that would make it correspond in an understandable way to the way we think.

Tim Lowly, *Carry Me*

And yet Lowly has produced hundreds of paintings and other works that feature Temma, some of them monumental in scale, none of them shying away from questions of the purpose, value, and meaning of her life for their family, and for ever-widening circles of community. Certainly there is a political component to Lowly's work that addresses inequity in culture and church. Generally, he says, the church has been compassionate, but "nearly always from perspective of the able-bodied and the 'whole' vs. those who have disabilities, never mind that none of us measure up to complete wholeness." Yet his work also reflects the way Temma, in her "otherness," creates community. Artist-in-residence and gallery director at Northpark University since the mid-1990s, Lowly has often made Temma a physical presence in the studio and classroom. *Carry Me*, 2002 (drawing on panel, 108″ x 48," above) depicts students from an advanced class holding Temma, but they were also involved completing the project. Another large work, *Culture of Adoration*, 2008, shows Temma as the model in a drawing class, with Lowly drawing the parallel between that scene and the adoration of the Magi at Jesus' birth. That comparison pictures the way a community forms around loving attention and worship, but subverts artistic and cultural expectations that only what is beautiful should be valued. Lowly notes that while Temma is often alone, in some ways she's never alone: "She's cared for by her parents, but that relationship extends out to a much broader church outside her family." Both paintings, then, are images of Christ's corporate body as much as they are of Temma or the painting students who carry and draw her.

What bearing, then, does Lowly's particular way of seeing and depicting his daughter have on us, on our sense of the *imago Dei*? Part of his ongoing artistic project is to understand and interrogate the way the traditions of perspective in Western art and culture presuppose and privilege the individual, solitary and unified point of view as the most important, the most true. In the wake of modernist emphases on self-expression in art, Lowly also sees value in pursuing ways of working that bring out the meditative (and even prayerful) craft aspect of painting, and that at least partially de-emphasize his and other artists' subjective positions. He increasingly works from photographs (and collages of many individual pictures), and has more and more sought to bring collaboration into the making of his work. When Lowly takes Temma as his subject, these features of his practice emphasize the way that, in the Church, our individual identity is experienced as a tension between brokenness and wholeness in the Body.

Broken Together

There is a sense in which we look at Temma and we want to *affirm* that she is made in the image of God by *denying* that the image of God has anything to do with her physical, material body. Indeed, one way to approach the problem made visible through Lowly's painting is to imagine the soul as imparted to (or trapped in) the physical frame. This certainly fits with saying that the image-bearing role of humanity in general is an act of the grace of God, not

something dependent on our abilities. But in the election model, we are reminded that God didn't call Abraham just to a "spiritual" identity, but also to physically constitute a people sent into the very concrete physical world.

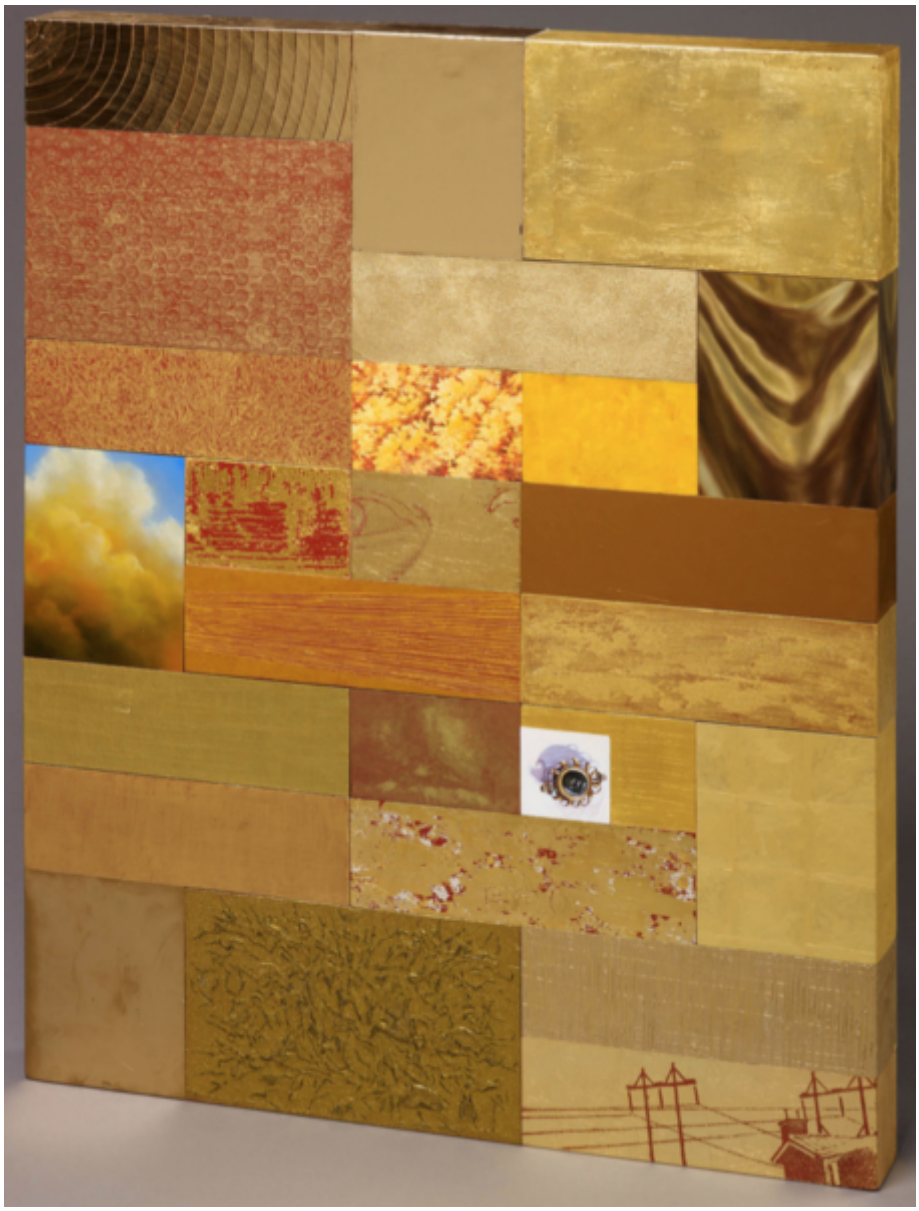
Likewise, if we recognize Jesus as our model for the image of God, we will not deny the physicality of the human experience, nor the incarnation, nor even Christ's suffering on our account. Indeed, we must affirm the goodness of creation and our physicality, even—*especially*—in its brokenness because Jesus, himself, was broken. Even after the resurrection, his wounds were not abolished or erased, but remained tangible marks by which the Lord revealed himself every bit as much as he did in his creative and healing power. And in the Revelation image of the victorious Christ, we have another picture of that essential and persistent sacrificial brokenness in the Lamb who appeared "as if slain."

What of the Church? Similarly, the Church remains a fragmented whole *when it is at its best*—broken open to be dispersed into the world. And though it is also all-too-often broken by own individual and corporate sin, even that finds its meaning and redemption in the image of bread broken in the Lord's Supper—the way that sharing brokenness together unites the individuals in a congregation with each other and with Christ. As a reminder of Jesus' own individual body, communion addresses both of those senses; it is the means of both healing and sending.

Christ's commission to the Church, then, presents a profoundly social model of being the continuing revelation of God for the world. We bear the image of God *together*, and the image of God is only fully realized when we are members of a community, in relation to other human beings (even if that relationship is one of complete dependence), as opposed to seeking independence. This does not and ought not compromise the absolute worth of each individual, but should remind us that part of our worth is tied up in our integration with the whole body of Christ.

Tim Lowly, *At 25*

One last example of Lowly's work gives iconic form to this inter-relation between image-bearing, self, identity, and the community of the Church. Made to commemorate Temma's 25th birthday in 2010, *At 25* (above and below), is a collaborative piece constructed of 25 individual, two-sided panel blocks that fit together something like a puzzle. On one side is a black and white portrait of Temma, while on the reverse, the individual blocks have been painted and gilded in different patterns and techniques. Lowly constructed the piece, but sent each block out to be completed by 30 different artists, either working alone or in pairs. In requesting them to do their sections of the composite portrait in an "artistically neutral" style, he was asking them to subjugate their artistic personae and self-expression to the depiction of Temma. Not every artist was able to do that to the same extent, so the final object is an image of the imperfection of our self-giving—or our inability to see others without looking through our own particular lenses of self—even while being a testament to the compassion and care of Lowly's dispersed community.



Tim Lowly, *At 25*

Most importantly for this discussion, *At 25* suggests that our image-bearing of God does not rest on our individual "fitness," much less how well we "fit in." Rather, it is carried by the whole human community, most fully in the broken Body of Christ. In this respect, brokenness is not something to be corrected; it is something that makes the particular community of the Church possible. Individuals may not be able to fulfill or even recognize the functional aspects of the *imago Dei*, they may not even be capable of the relational aspects—or of returning expressions of love or kindness or thanks, or even awareness. But the whole body, the beloved community, the nation God set apart for himself and the world, is called to be the image of God for each of us—precisely when we can't.

For additional information (including exhibitions and collections) see Tim's personal website. All images within article © Tim Lowly.

About the author

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Mark Sprinkle is an artist and cultural historian, and was formerly Senior Web Editor and Senior Fellow of Arts and Humanities for The BioLogos Foundation. A phi beta kappa graduate of Georgetown University, he received his M.A. and Ph.D. in American Studies from the College of William and Mary, where he studied how artworks embody complex relationships in different cultural contexts. Since 1996 he has been an independent artist and frame-maker, also regularly writing and speaking on the role of creative practices in cultural mediation and renewal, especially in the area of science and Christian faith. Mark and his wife Beth home-schooled their three boys, and are active in the local home-school community in Richmond, Virginia.