

HUMANITY

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Created in the Image of God¹

The first crucial and fundamental biblical truth about the divine design of humans is simply that we are creatures made by God. But that assertion is immediately modified by what is the most important and distinctive characteristic of humans. Of all God's creatures, we alone are made in God's image and likeness. We share many elements of our created nature with animals, but only humanity was created with special deliberation and with this special feature.² Moreover, as we will see, the image of God indicates that humans are created for special purposes and special relationships.

The image of God is important in a variety of ways. Biblically, it jumps out of the opening description of human creation in Genesis 1, with "our image," "image of God," "his own image," and "likeness of God" all used to describe humans in the space of two verses (Gen 1:26–27). Historically, it has been an important and much discussed issue, with major directions in the history of theology being affected by different interpretations of it. Theologically, it is not only important in itself, but also leads us into discussions of the effects of the fall and regeneration, and must be related to Christology, for Christ is the perfect image of God. Practically, the image of God is the basis for human dignity and the sanctity of all human life. A

¹ Part of the material in this chapter appeared previously in John S. Hammett, "A Whole Bible Approach to Interpreting Creation in God's Image," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 63, no. 2 (Spring 2021): 29–47. Used by permission.

² The creation of humans is not introduced with the divine fiat, "Let there be," as in Gen 1:3, 6, and 14, but with the deliberative, "Let us make" (v. 26).

correct understanding of it is the basis for truly Christian and truly human relationships.

Biblical Parameters

In view of the theological importance of human creation in the image of God, it is surprising to note the relatively small number of texts this doctrine is built upon. As some scholars have noted, the texts are found at “critical turning points” in the biblical narrative and “have a special urgency and importance” beyond what the mere number of references might suggest, but even so there is a striking paucity of biblical data.³ And in the verses where our creation in the image of God is affirmed, there is nothing resembling an explicit definition.⁴ As this chapter will discuss, definitions for the image of God vary and emphasize different aspects of humanity. The lack of a single definition within the biblical text may itself signify the complex nature of the *imago Dei*. Just as the image of God cannot be reduced to a single capacity or characteristic, Scripture does not provide a single definition. However, biblical teaching does establish some boundaries or parameters. Whatever the image of God is, it must fit within these parameters.

One weakness in some who discuss this topic is to give the teaching in Genesis 1 an inordinate emphasis. Richard Middleton writes an entire book on the image of God but limits his study to Genesis 1.⁵ Marc Cortez notes that biblical scholars have reached a “general consensus” on what is called a functional view of the image of God (see below), based on their interpretation

³ Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, Contours of Christian Theology, ed. Gerald Bray (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 30–31; G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, trans. Dirk Jellema (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 67.

⁴ Richard Briggs makes this point of the foundational texts in Genesis in an aptly titled article, “Humans in the Image of God and Other Things Genesis Does Not Make Clear,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, 4, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 111–26. He views the phrase “image of God” in Genesis as a “relatively under-determined place-holder for something that can only be defined by seeing how the canonical narrative develops, beyond Genesis, and indeed, beyond the Old Testament” (122).

⁵ J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

of Genesis 1.⁶ But that is to ignore all the rest of biblical teaching, none of which mentions the function of dominion. By way of contrast, David Kelsey chooses “to privilege New Testament uses, rather than Old Testament uses, of the phrase ‘image of God,’”⁷ but Kelsey may be critiqued for unduly minimizing the importance of a foundational text like Genesis 1.⁸ The approach here will be to survey all of biblical teaching and try to draw out all the clues or parameters it yields.⁹ Then we will evaluate major historical interpretations and test them by how well they fit these parameters. The relevant texts fall into three categories: Creation, Christological, and Renewal. Each of these categories is addressed at a later point in this chapter.

By way of general definition, we can understand an “image” as being both a resemblance and a representation. Unlike the rest of creation, human beings both resemble and represent God.¹⁰ The Lord Jesus confirmed this in his response to the Pharisees who attempted to discredit him. Holding a Roman coin, Jesus pointed out that imprinted on the currency was Caesar’s likeness. The image both resembled the Roman ruler and carried his authority in purchasing power as well as in determining the coin’s valuation. So it is with human beings: “Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). Although this passage does not directly pertain to the subject of the *imago Dei*, it is nonetheless instructive in forming our definition of the term. To be in the image of God means that we both resemble him and are distinct from him; that we represent his

⁶ Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 30.

⁷ David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 2:900.

⁸ See the critique of Kelsey in Marc Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 103–6.

⁹ We are following here the recommendation of D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 204. He notes the infrequency with which the phrase “image of God” is used but insists nonetheless that the content or meaning of the phrase “must be specified from the story.” He says, “The content of the ‘image of God’ may be teased out inductively.” That is the approach taken here.

¹⁰ John Frame, “Men and Women in the Image of God,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 225.

authority and have conferred value.¹¹ With this in mind, we begin by exploring the foundational biblical passages related to the *imago Dei*.

Foundational Creation Texts

First, four texts affirm God's creation of all humans in his image: Gen 1:26–27; 5:1–2; 9:6; and Jas 3:9.¹² They may be called foundational texts because, in the case of the Genesis references, they are first and foremost the background for many of the later references, and for all the references, they give image-bearing as the defining characteristic of all humans. They may also be called creation texts because, in these verses, humans are image-bearers of God because they are created as such. Being created *imago Dei* here seems to be something true of all humans as that which constitutes them as humans. Genesis 1 and 5 both specifically mention “male and female” as created in God's image and likeness. Genesis 9 and James 3 refer to humans generically (*adam* and *anthropos*) and give their creation in God's image and likeness as the ground for treating them with dignity.

As noted above, the initial text, Gen 1:26–27, is emphatic, using “image” three times, and using “likeness” once as well. Specifically, the text says we are made “in” God's image and “according to” his likeness. What is the importance of these prepositions (the Hebrew letters *beth* and *kaph*)? Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum believe both prepositions could be translated with the word “as,” and say, “God indeed created man *as* the divine image.”¹³ Others believe the prepositions serve to distinguish between humans and God's image itself; humans are not the image or likeness itself but made in some

¹¹ As David Meconi puts it in summarizing the views of patristic writers on the image of God, “The human person is both related to God as well as distinct from God” (David Meconi, “The Dual-Functionality of the *Imago Dei* as Human Flourishing in the Church Fathers,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Joshua Farris and Charles Taliaferro [Routledge: Oxford and New York, 2016], 193).

¹² First Corinthians 11:7 is sometimes listed with these texts, but see the discussion below for why it is omitted here.

¹³ Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom Through Covenant* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 198. They see support for their interpretation in 1 Cor 11:7, where “Paul says that man *is* the image of God.” But actually, Paul says “man *is* the image and glory of God,” and glory is the main point of the passage.

sense like God's image. While not wanting to separate Christ and humans unduly, John Kilner does affirm “that only Christ *is* the image of God (as opposed to being created according to that image).”¹⁴ The distinction is important in that Christ *is* the image of God in a way humans can never be. Christ is God incarnate; our creation “in” or “according to” the image of God is crucial to our humanity but does not entail deity. Trying to go further and make a clear distinction between “in” and “according to” seems unwarranted; “in” can be paired with “image” (Gen 1:26–27) or “likeness” (Jas 3:9) and “according to” can be paired with “likeness” (Gen 1:26) or “image” (Col 3:10). They seem to be used interchangeably. Gordon Wenham concludes, “‘According to our likeness’ [in Gen 1:26] therefore appears to be an explanatory gloss indicating the precise sense of ‘in our image.’”¹⁵

The other two verses in this category of foundational texts, Gen 9:6 and Jas 3:9, see our creation in God's image and likeness as bestowing on all humans a special dignity. In the former, to kill a human is such a heinous and serious crime that the offender forfeits his or her own life; in the latter, even to curse one made in God's likeness is improper.¹⁶ The fact that Noah is given permission in Genesis 9 to kill and eat animals (v. 3) implies that, as image-bearers, humans have a unique status and transcendent value not shared by any other animal.

The key terms in these verses—*image* and *likeness*—also seem to be used interchangeably. Some verses use “image” (*tselem*) alone to describe humans (Gen 1:27; 9:6); some use “likeness” (*demuth*; *homoiosis*) alone (Gen 5:1; Jas 3:9); Gen 1:26 uses both. Though some in the Catholic tradition sought to make a distinction between the two,¹⁷ the essentially synonymous

¹⁴ John Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 79.

¹⁵ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, gen. eds. David Hubbard and Glenn Barker (Waco: Word, 1987), 1:29. For a more thorough study of the meaning of these Hebrew prepositions, see W. Randall Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism*. Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

¹⁶ Perhaps here James is remembering the teaching of Jesus that put cursing a brother on the same level as murder (Matt 5:21–22).

¹⁷ Irenaeus and much of the Catholic tradition argued that the “likeness” of God was a gift of original righteousness lost at the fall, while the “image,” usually seen as reason and free will, remained intact and unaffected. For Irenaeus, see 4.36.2.

nature of the two terms is one of the areas of general consensus today.¹⁸ For example, both Hebrew terms are used to refer to the same carved figures in Ezek 23:14–15.

Some hear echoes of Genesis 1 in the description of humans in Ps 8:4–8, and Paul's address to the Athenians in Acts 17:24–29 sees some reflection of the divine nature in humans since they are "God's offspring," but neither text is clear or explicit in affirming our creation in the image of God. So the three texts from Genesis comprise all the explicit Old Testament teaching on our creation in the image of God.

In the New Testament, Jas 3:9 is the clearest text. Another text, 1 Cor 11:7, is somewhat problematic. It affirms man as "the image and glory of God," while women are described as "the glory of man." This verse should not be seen as denying that women are created in the image of God; Gen 1:27 is explicit and all the other foundational texts refer to humans categorically. The contrast between man and woman in this verse has to do with the word "glory," not "image," thus making this verse less fitting in a list of foundational texts, but it may be worth noting that Jas 3:9 uses "likeness" (*homoiōsis*), while 1 Cor 11:7 has "image" (*eikōn*), again showing the essentially synonymous use of the two terms.¹⁹ Though "image" has been more used in Christian theology, in Scripture there is no clear distinction between "image" and "likeness."

While none of these texts give us anything resembling a definition of what it means to be created in the image of God, they do allow us to draw some parameters. First, whatever the image of God is, it is something true of all humans. It seems to constitute humans as humans. It is specifically affirmed of males and females and is nowhere limited by age, race, social class, or any abilities. As an image-bearer of God, every human being inherently possesses dignity. Originating from the Latin term *dignus*, meaning "worth," the property of human dignity is inalienable. The late R. C. Sproul

Heresies. For an exposition of the thought of Irenaeus, see David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*, rev. ed. (London: Collins, 1973), 80–84.

¹⁸ See Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 16 and Paul Sands, "The *Imago Dei* as Vocation," *Evangelical Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2010): 29.

¹⁹ Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 515.

noted that humanity derives its dignity solely from God, rather than from any self-generated attribute: "Christianity teaches that human dignity is rooted in the holiness of God; it reflects God's dignity."²⁰ For Sproul, that human dignity reflects God's dignity infers that human dignity is not intrinsic to human nature. Since God alone has intrinsic value and significance, and since dignity itself is grounded in God's glory, humanity's dignity is not intrinsic to itself but derived from God.²¹ This view does not demote the significance of human beings as God's image-bearers. Rather, it reinforces that human dignity is conferred by God, and thus, cannot be reduced or redefined according to cultural or ideological beliefs.

A human being's worth comes from the fact that he or she images God. Thus, human dignity is an essential aspect of every human being as well as an intrinsic quality that can never be separated from other essential aspects of humanity.²² The image of God, and consequently, human dignity, are qualitative, rather than quantitative properties. In other words, the image of God is a substantive quality, rather than an attribute or capacity such as one's intelligence, physical abilities, or stage of development. Moreover, human dignity is a continuous quality, rather than a conditional quality. This means that a person cannot lose his or her dignity however one transgresses human dignity. With good reason, the world recognizes the heinousness of "crimes against humanity." Finally, human dignity is holistic, rather than solely material or immaterial; in other words, it includes one's whole person (material and immaterial), rather than only one's physical being or one's immaterial soul.

Second, whatever the image of God is, it is something that sets humans apart. It is hard to read the account in Genesis 1 and not note the special treatment of the creation of humans. It is positioned last in the account, is given more space, is introduced with a distinctive formula ("Let us make"

²⁰ R. C. Sproul, "We Are not Germs: The Case for Human Dignity," Ligonier Ministries, March 19, 2021, <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/we-are-not-germs-case-human-dignity/>.

²¹ R. C. Sproul, "What Is the Biblical Basis for Human Dignity?" Ligonier Ministries, November 26, 2016, <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/what-biblical-basis-human-dignity/>.

²² James S. Dalton, "Human Dignity, Human Rights, and Ecology," in *Made in God's Image: Catholic Vision for Human Dignity*, ed. Regis Duffy and Angelus Gambatese (New York: Paulist, 1999), 27.

versus “Let there be”), includes the distinctive terms “image” and “likeness,” and, of all God’s creatures, it is only humans to whom God speaks. Indeed, God’s creation of humanity appears to be the pinnacle of his creative activity, and all non-human creation is put under humanity’s authority. In Genesis 9, the killing of a human is viewed in a more serious light than the killing of an animal, further implying a unique status for humans. James 3:9 underscores human dignity by prohibiting even the cursing of them.

Third, all the texts discussed here, with the exception of Genesis 1, describe humans after the fall. Thus, whatever the image of God in humans is, it is not something destroyed by our fall into sin. In the words of John Collins, “Once [humans] fall into sin, they do not lose their position as head of creation, but they have lost the perfect purity, sensitivity, and good sense that they need to carry it out well.”²³ Whether the image is in some sense damaged by our fall into sin is a question not answered in these texts.

Christological Texts

At least two texts (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15) speak explicitly of Christ as the image (*eikōn*) of God; Heb 1:3 has the same idea in slightly different terms (Christ is the “exact representation” [*charaktēr*] of God’s being). John 14:9 describes it in visual terms: “The one who has seen me [Jesus] has seen the Father.” These verses, at first sight, would seem to distance Christ, as *the* image, from humans, who are made *in* or *according to* the image. These prepositions are important in distinguishing humanity from Christ. The context in Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1 suggests that calling Christ the “image of God” and “exact representation of his being” are ontological claims, claims of deity. This is also obvious in John 14:9. What ordinary human says, “The one who has seen me has seen the Father”? As God incarnate, Christ is the image of God in a way that humans can never be. This refers not only to degree, as though humans could, even in theory, attain to the qualitative status of Christ. Rather, to see the Lord Jesus is to see the Father because both the Lord Jesus and the Father are God.

²³ C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 69.

But if that is the case, what does Rom 8:29 mean in speaking of our destiny to be conformed to the image of the Son? The answer is that Christ is not only the image of God in his deity; as human, he is also “according to” or “in” the image of God, and he alone lived out image-bearing in a perfect way. The Son *is* God. Humans *reflect* God. As Michael Horton says, Jesus is “the first human being who finally does not resist the Holy Spirit but obeys the word of the Father in full acquiescence to the Spirit’s power—and he does all of this *for us*, in our name, as our new Adamic head.”²⁴ And it is this perfect image-bearing that is our destiny in conformity to Christ. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, in his study *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ*, writes:

Thus the Son, who *is* the Image, by becoming man became *in* the image, without however ceasing to *be* the Image. It is as consubstantial with God that he *is* the Image and as consubstantial with us that he identified himself with our human existence *in* the image; and thus he who is truly God revealed what it is to be truly man.²⁵

On this point, Marc Cortez differs. While not denying or undermining “the fundamental truth that the eternal Son is consubstantial with the Father and the perfect reflection of the divine being,” Cortez argues “that the specific language of the *imago Dei* is fundamentally anthropological language,” such that the claim that the Son is the image of God is “a claim about the concrete humanity we see in the gospels.”²⁶ But if we allow for a distinction between being the image and being created in or according to the image, we can both give the texts affirming Christ *as* the image their likeliest exegesis, and still see creation *in* the image as “fundamentally anthropological language.”²⁷ As the eternal Son, Christ is the true image of God; as human, Jesus was made “in” or “according to” that image. This gives us a further biblical parameter in

²⁴ Michael Horton, “The Holy Spirit in Redemptive History,” *JETS* 62, no. 1 (March 2019), 61.

²⁵ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 29.

²⁶ Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology*, 129.

²⁷ Cortez, 117, 122. Cortez acknowledges that there are “compelling arguments” for seeing Col 1:15 and even more for seeing Heb 1:1–4 as applying *imago Dei* to the Son “in virtue of his divine nature.”

understanding our creation in the image of God: it is something that Jesus lived out perfectly in his humanity, and something to which we will one day be perfectly conformed.

Renewal Texts

The idea of growing in conformity to the image of the Son in Rom 8:29 is a fitting introduction to a final category of texts on the image of God in humans, all found in Pauline letters: Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10; and Eph 4:24. All these verses presuppose that sin has in some way damaged the image of God in humans and that in Christ the image is something being renewed, restored, or somehow formed in Christians as part of their salvation. Oliver Crisp even says, "Other human beings are made in the image of God to the extent that they are conformed to the image of Christ," but that is to overlook the teaching of the foundational texts that all humans are created in the image of Christ.²⁸

Some in church history have taken the idea of damage so far as to conclude that the image of God in humans is "completely lost." John Kilner catalogs a list of those affirming such a position, including Augustine, Luther, and Wesley, and notes that it is called by some the position of "classical Protestantism."²⁹ Others take a slightly more guarded position, not affirming that the image is lost, but rather that it is significantly damaged.³⁰ Against all these, Kilner argues that these texts (and others he includes in his survey) teach that *people* have been damaged and are in need of restoration, renewal, and even transformation, but give no indication that the *image* of God (Christ) has been damaged. At the same time, he acknowledges that there is no explicit text that says the image of God has not been damaged in

²⁸ Oliver Crisp, "A Christological Model of the *Imago Dei*," in *Ashgate Research Companion*, 217.

²⁹ John Kilner, "Humanity in God's Image: Is the Image Really Damaged?" *JETS* 53, no. 3 (September 2010): 602–3, n. 9. An even fuller listing is given in Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 160–75.

³⁰ After placing dozens of figures in categories which see the image as "virtually lost," "partly lost," and "appearance compromised," Kilner gives some of the language used to describe the damage, terms such as "all but obliterated . . . perverted . . . corrupted . . . distorted" (Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 175).

the fall, but argues further that using the language of damage with reference to the image of God in humans is unwise. He fears that the language of damaged image diminishes the protection afforded to all humans when they are seen as being fully in God's image, and such protection is especially needed by those seen as most expendable by society.³¹ We would agree that no one's status as being created in the image of God has been reduced by the fall.

At the very least, Kilner is right to caution us as to how we use language. Those who affirm the image of God as completely lost in the fall are at odds with the fact that Scripture describes humans as still created in God's image after the fall (Gen 9:6 and Jas 3:9 particularly). Furthermore, to be precise in our language, if Christ is the image of God, then Kilner is right. Christ is not damaged by our fall. Humans are not the image of God *per se*.³² Yet, it is in keeping with Scripture to say that the way humans manifest, or exhibit, or live out their status of being created *in* or *according to* the image of God has been impacted and damaged by the fall; not the image itself, but the way in which humans live it out has been damaged. That would be the most correct and precise way to state the impact of the fall. However, since the language of the image being damaged and restored is so prevalent, we will use such language in this discussion as shorthand for the more precise idea that the way we live out God's intentions in creating us in his image is what has been damaged and is in need of transformation and renewal. Finally, for our purposes here, the importance of these passages lies in how they can further our understanding of what it means to be created in the image of God. What further biblical parameters or guidelines emerge from these texts?

Romans 8:29 sees being "conformed to the likeness of his Son" as the ultimate goal of God's saving work. While the final glorification of believers is certainly in view, C. E. B. Cranfield thinks that conformity to Christ also includes sanctification as the "progressive renewal of the believer into that likeness of God which is God's original purpose for man."³³ There seem to

³¹ Kilner, "Humanity in God's Image," 615–17.

³² Meconi, "The Dual Functionality," 192, notes the language in Genesis stating that Adam was created "according to" God's image and likeness and suggests that this indicates "that the human person is not an unqualified image. This is the role of the Son."

³³ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1. ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1975) 437

be two assumptions undergirding Paul's statement here. As mentioned above, it is assumed that something happened to the image of God in humans as a result of the fall. Adam's disobedience has left the image "sin-marred," and it is that image he has passed on to his descendants.³⁴ The second assumption is that conformity to the image of Christ is essentially the same as having the image of God in us fully restored.³⁵ Douglas Moo also sees here Paul's teaching of Christ as the Second Adam, who replaces the imprint of the fallen image with a new, true image.³⁶ Stanley Grenz says that Christ as the image of God is in the background here, even though it is not explicit in the text, and that as such, "he is the pattern according to whom those who are stamped with the divine image are conformed."³⁷ The power behind the image restoration is that of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is part of our personal renewal as redeemed humanity, effectuating the work of Christ in our earthly lives and being the guarantee of our future perfection (Eph 1:13–14).

First Corinthians 15:49 builds further on the Second Adam idea, dealing with the idea of the resurrection body. The argument is that just as we have borne the image of the first Adam in a natural body, subject to death due to sin, so we will also bear the image of the Second Adam, "the man from heaven," in a "spiritual body."³⁸ It does not seem too far a stretch to connect bearing the image of the Second Adam to bearing the image of God. This verse gives some support to those who think the image of God includes

³⁴ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 534, n. 151.

³⁵ Kilner, "Humanity in God's Image," 615, objects. He distinguishes between the image of God as giving a "status" to humanity, and the image of Christ as establishing a "standard" for humanity, but no such distinction is clearly indicated in any text, and since Christ is himself the image of God, image of God and image of Christ would seem to be very closely related.

³⁶ Moo, *Romans*, 534.

³⁷ Stanley Grenz, "The Social God and the Relational Self," in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, ed. Richard Lints, Michael Horton, and Mark Talbot (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 81.

³⁸ While acknowledging the reference to the resurrection body, Gordon Fee, drawing on a textual variant in v. 49 ("let us bear"), believes that this verse also calls on the Corinthian believers to bear the likeness of the man from heaven in the present, sharing "his character and behavior." See Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. 795.

our physical aspect or bodily nature, an idea that has not been widely followed in Christian thought as a whole, but has been getting more attention in recent years.³⁹ Romans 8:11 and 1 Cor 15:42 reveal that our resurrected state will include our physical beings. Upon Jesus's ascension, he introduced redeemed humanity to the presence of God. Our union with the physically resurrected Lord, who is our forerunner in all things related to salvation, indicates that we, too, will retain our physical, material selves at our resurrection. The restoration of all things will include a restoration of humanity before sin, a time in which everything—including the physical world—was good. This fact further negates the claims of Gnosticism, which believed the physical self was evil and the spiritual self was good. This also has significant implications for a forthcoming conversation on the relationship between our physical bodies and our sense of self. All that God created—the material and the immaterial—will be redeemed.

The third Pauline text, 2 Cor 3:18, speaks of a process of believers being "transformed into his likeness" as they "reflect the Lord's glory." Paul's reference to the "likeness" and "glory" here anticipates 2 Cor 4:4, where Christ is specifically described in terms of "glory" and "image of God." Here again we see the persistent Pauline connection between Christ as the image of God and the restoration of the image of God in the lives of believers. Philip Hughes, commenting on this verse, makes the connection explicit and definite: "This process of transformation into the image of Christ is none other than the restoration of the image of God which was marred through the fall of man."⁴⁰

Colossians 3:10 and Eph 4:24 are virtually parallel texts. Only Colossians has the specific language of renewal in the image of the Creator, but the

³⁹ For example, H. D. McDonald, *The Christian View of Man* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1981), 34, lists "corporeal form" as the least likely of seven interpretations of the image of God, but Marc Cortez notes that today most scholars "view the *imago Dei* as something that refers to the whole person and not 'just' the spiritual aspects of the person" (Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology*, 194). Cortez argues more forcefully on the importance of embodiment in *Embodied Souls, Ensouled Bodies: An Exercise in Christological Anthropology and Its Significance for the Mind/Body Debate* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

⁴⁰ Philip E. Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1962) 119

reference to our creation *kata theon* ("according to God") in Eph 4:24 seems to be an allusion to Gen 1:26. F. F. Bruce says, "The phrase 'according to God' means 'in the image of God.'"⁴¹ Both texts thus reflect the idea that how humans are bearing the image of God has been defaced and that it is now being restored as part of the life of a believer.

These verses allow us to draw a final biblical parameter for our understanding of the image of God. Whatever the image of God in humans is, it must be something that is somehow damaged, but not totally eliminated by our fall into sin; something that can be restored, renewed, or transformed in Christ; and something that will be completed in final glorification, including the reception of a glorified, spiritual body.

Summary of Biblical Parameters

As we have already noted, most theologians do not see the relevant verses or the terms used as giving a clear or explicit definition of the meaning of the image of God. Carl Henry speaks for most interpreters when he says, "The Bible does not define for us the precise content of the original *imago*."⁴² However, we have drawn from biblical teaching a number of parameters that can give us help in evaluating the various options in interpretation offered by history. Before we embark on that task, it may be helpful to summarize the parameters. Whatever the image of God is, biblical teaching places it within these boundaries.

1. Creation in the image of God is something affirmed for all persons; it constitutes humans as humans (Gen 1:26–27; 5:1–2; 9:6; Jas 3:9).
2. Creation in the image of God is something affirmed only for humans, implying that humans are unique among God's creatures and of transcendent worth and dignity, simply because they are image-bearers (Gen 9:6; Jas 3:9).
3. Even after the fall, humans are spoken of as being in the image of God (Gen 9:6; Jas 3:9), so the image isn't completely lost in the fall.

⁴¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 359.

⁴² Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols. (Waco: Word, 1976), 2:125.

4. Since Christ is both the perfect image of God in his deity, and the perfect representation of what it means to live out creation in God's image in his humanity, the image of God in us must be something that allows for some correspondence between Christ and humans. It is something that Jesus lived out perfectly in his humanity.
5. The numerous renewal texts require us to consider our creation in God's image in dynamic terms. It is not that the image itself has changed, or that we ever lose the status of being creatures created in God's image. But the living out of the meaning of being created in God's image has been impacted in some way by sin. Now, in Christ, the living out of God's intention in creating humans in his image is progressively being realized in believers in renewal and transformation, and will one day lead to complete conformity to the image of Christ.

But these parameters are all that Scripture clearly affirms. Thus, in interpreting what the image of God is, we will follow these biblical clues, and seek to stay within the biblical parameters, and assess what ideas seem to make the best sense of all the data we have, or what approach best ties all of Scripture together. In view of the lack of a definition and the paucity of data, it is not surprising to find that theologians have interpreted the image of God in a variety of ways, and we are fortunate to have twenty centuries of the reflections of our forebears to draw upon in understanding Scripture's teaching on this issue.⁴³

Historical Options and Theological Analysis

While there is some variety among scholars as to the number of options developed in the history of Christian thought, most affirm three major approaches or families of approaches, with differing combinations of the three forming a fourth approach.⁴⁴ John Collins alliteratively calls them resemblance, rep-

⁴³ For a sampling of some important primary sources on the image of God, see Marc Cortez and Michael Jensen, *T&T Clark Reader in Theological Anthropology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 73–128.

⁴⁴ McDonald, *Christian View of Man*, 34–41, lists seven interpretations, with

resentational, and relational; Millard Erickson uses substantive, functional, and relational; Marc Cortez prefers structural, functional, and relational, and terms the fourth approach "multifaceted."⁴⁵ Despite the differences in nomenclature, they are all referring to the same approaches.

Resemblance/Substantive/Structural Approaches

The first group of approaches (resemblance/substantive/structural) sees the image of God in humans as some capacity, property, or characteristic (or set of such) that makes humans in some way like God. This has been the most common approach in Christian history, perhaps because many think that such an approach is implied by the most basic meaning of "likeness" or "image." In some way, we are like God, or reflect something about him.

The quality, capacity, or property most often associated historically with the image of God has been reason. In the early church, rationality was widely seen as that which most clearly distinguished humans from other animals, and so they focused upon reason as central to the image of God. J. Patout Burns says the Christian Platonists of the patristic era identified the image of God in humans "as rationality, the human capacity for knowledge of God."⁴⁶ Thomas Aquinas and medieval Catholics also highlighted the centrality of reason, a position that has remained dominant in Catholic thought to today, and has found some support among evangelicals as well.⁴⁷ While not identifying the *imago Dei* with rationality alone, Carl Henry says, "It should be clear that the rational or cognitive aspect has logical priority."⁴⁸

Others focus on the soul as the locus of our creation in the image of God. Joshua Farris advances a view of the image of God as "a rich property

Biblical, Historical & Evangelical, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 1:394–402, catalogues eight options.

⁴⁵ C. John Collins, *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 124–25; Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 457; Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 18–29.

⁴⁶ J. Patout Burns, "Introduction," in *Theological Anthropology*, trans. and ed. J. Patout Burns, Sources of Early Christian Thought, series ed. William G. Rusch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 7.

⁴⁷ Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 1:396.

⁴⁸ Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* 2:125

of the human soul," a kind of property that is itself "synonymous with the human soul," as Farris understands it. Further, he says that this view "is commensurate with the Medievals, Roman Catholicism, and much Reformed Scholasticism," including Calvin.⁴⁹

Among the Reformers, Calvin set the Protestant paradigm for viewing the image of God. In the *Institutes* he says:

The likeness of God extends to the whole excellence by which man's nature towers over all kinds of living creatures. . . . And although the primary seat of the divine image was in the mind or heart, or in the soul and its powers, yet there was no part of man, not even the body itself, in which some sparks did not glow.⁵⁰

Some aspects of that "whole excellence" that Calvin specifically mentions are reason, true knowledge of God (Col 3:10), and original righteousness (Eccl 7:29). Some aspects of the image may have been completely lost at the fall, but Calvin affirms that human beings are still different from other animals.⁵¹

Many other evangelical theologians have built on Calvin's general approach and have specified various elements or characteristics as involved in the image. J. I. Packer believes qualities like rationality, creativity, righteousness, moral discernment, and others are involved.⁵² John Collins lists reason, will, language, conscience, and the ability to form relationships.⁵³ Millard Erickson reasons that the image refers to the elements of personality that enable us to fulfill the purposes for which God created us, specifically engaging in relationships and performing certain functions. The elements

⁴⁹ Joshua Farris, "A Substantive (Soul) Model of the *Imago Dei*: A Rich Property View," in *Ashgate Research Companion*, 166, 170. As an example of contemporary resistance to this model, see Joel Green, "Why the *Imago Dei* Should Not Be Identified with the Soul," in *Ashgate Research Companion*, 179–90.

⁵⁰ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:188 (I.xv.3).

⁵¹ There is some controversy over whether Calvin believed the image was totally lost in the fall, or only horribly damaged with a relic still remaining. For a helpful assessment of the debate, see Mary Potter Engel, *John Calvin's Perspectival Anthropology*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series, no. 52, ed. Susan Thistlethwaite (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 58–59.

⁵² J. I. Packer, *Knowing Man* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1979), 19.

⁵³ Collins, *Science and Faith*, 124–25.

of personality necessary to accomplish these purposes are intelligence, will, and emotions.⁵⁴

By way of evaluation, this approach has some strengths. In terms of the parameters above, it does seek to highlight those capacities that set humans apart from all other animals. Those capacities endure after the fall, and Christ, in his humanity, would seem to share these capacities in common with us. The capacities, or at least the proper functioning of them, could be understood as having been damaged by the fall and restored in Christ, progressively in sanctification and finally in glorification. These strengths help explain the widespread support of this approach in the history of theology.

However, it also has a number of weaknesses. For example, this approach raises questions about the first parameter, the idea that all humans are image-bearers of God. This is especially the case when there is an emphasis on reason. For example, would this mean that babies, who do not fully exercise reason at birth, are only potentially created in God's image? Would it mean that the more intelligent are more *imago Dei* than others, or that those who suffer from mental disabilities or a disease like Alzheimer's or those in a coma are no longer bearers of God's image?⁵⁵ The fact that all humans seem to bear God's image equally while possessing reason unequally raises questions as to how central reason, or any other capacity humans share unequally, should be in our understanding of the image.⁵⁶ Moreover, as we stated above, the *imago Dei* cannot be located or segmented into any capacity that is not universal, since bearing the *imago Dei* is universal.

Concerns like these seem to be involved in John Kilner's sharp critique of those who understand the image of God as how people are like God and unlike animals. He fears that if we define the image of God as humans

⁵⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 470–71.

⁵⁵ See Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952), 57. He upholds a structural or substantive aspect of the image of God, which he says "cannot be lost," and "only ceases when true human living ceases—on the borderline of imbecility or madness." One wonders if Brunner would judge the severely mentally handicapped or Alzheimer's victims as no longer possessing the image of God.

⁵⁶ Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 20, says, "It is nearly impossible to find a structural capacity that applies to all human beings," and, as a result, "any structural definition of the *imago* runs the risk of excluding certain categories of human beings from its definition of humanity."

having certain "human excellences," then those not having such excellences would be excluded from those seen as created in God's image and lose the protection that should be accorded all those with such status. He laments, "History attests to how many have borne the brunt of such exclusion."⁵⁷ Rather, he argues that paying careful attention to the language of "being created in God's image" should lead us to conclude that this is "about the likeness God is intending at creation, not a descriptive statement about the way that people actually are."⁵⁸ The fall may have caused people to lose some of their ability to reflect God, but that has not changed the fact that we were created with that intention.

Moreover, others might raise questions as to whether any given set of characteristics truly sets humans apart. A number of species of animals possess at least some measure of intelligence, will, and emotions. Also, the fact that interpreters have not been able to come to full agreement on what the proper set of characteristics is may be seen as a weakness. Marc Cortez notes the lack of any list of essential attributes separating humans from animals in Scripture and thus sees the "most glaring weakness of this approach" as its "lack of exegetical support."⁵⁹ Cortez shares John Kilner's concern that any structural understanding of the image of God will inevitably leave some persons outside such a definition, as "it is nearly impossible to find a structural capacity that applies to all human beings."⁶⁰

Finally, it may be asked whether the various sets of characteristics fit the fourth and fifth parameters well. There is some evidence in Scripture that reason is darkened by the fall, and in Christ there is a renewal of the mind, but does the same apply to other characteristics listed, such as emotions, creativity, or language? They may certainly be used for different purposes or

⁵⁷ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 107. He refers to chapter 1 of his book for examples of those excluded from the status of being created in God's image and thus devalued. J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), notes the conclusion of a 1981 World Council of Churches consultation that "the doctrine [of creation in God's image] has traditionally been a source of oppression and discrimination against women."

⁵⁸ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 131.

⁵⁹ Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 19.

⁶⁰ Cortez, 20. For Kilner's concern on this same point, see Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 100–101.

with different motivations pre- versus post-conversion, but are the capacities themselves renewed or restored in salvation and sanctification, and will they be perfected in glorification? Perhaps, but the fit is not immediately evident and obvious. At any rate, despite its dominance historically, the traditional ways in which the substantive or structural approach has been understood and argued for have lost favor today. While acknowledging the criticisms that have been made against the substantive or structural approach, could it be formulated in a way that does not fall under these critiques? We will leave that as an open question at this point.

Functional/Representational Approaches

Noting some serious weaknesses in the substantive approaches, other scholars have adopted a second approach, called functional or representational. Functional views see the image as something humans do. The most common function associated with the *imago Dei* is that of dominion, or ruling over the created order. Those who hold this view note the close association of the command to rule in Gen 1:26 and 28 with the creation of humans in God's image in Gen 1:26–27. The idea is that in exercising the function of dominion, humans represent or reflect or image God.⁶¹ Support for this view has been strengthened by the way it resonates with the Ancient Near Eastern background of Genesis. Gerhard von Rad describes the representative function against such a background:

Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear, so man is placed upon earth in God's image as God's sovereign emblem. He is really only God's representative, summoned to maintain and enforce God's claim to dominion over the earth.⁶²

⁶¹ Another way to see humans as representing God would be to see humans as intended to represent certain of God's attributes, but the only scholar who seems to develop it in this way is Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 273.

⁶² Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 57.

While this view has long enjoyed some support among Reformed theologians, it has gained wider support among Old Testament scholars in the latter half of the twentieth century, and received a full-length defense by J. R. Middleton in *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*. He claims that most earlier interpreters ignored the “royal flavor” of the context of Genesis 1, in which humans are given “the special role of representing or imaging God's rule in the world.” Alongside this contextual clue, he spends several chapters showing how pervasive the idea of kings being represented by images was in the ancient Near East. These clues from context and background lead Middleton to affirm “a functional—or even missional—interpretation of the image of God in Genesis 1:26–27.”⁶³ He claims that there is a “virtual consensus in Old Testament scholarship” on this point.⁶⁴

Similarly, David Clines defines humanity as God's “visible corporeal representative of the invisible, bodiless God.”⁶⁵ Humankind's representative nature is not ontological, referring to essence, as much as it is existential, referring to being: “It comes to expression not in the nature of man so much as in his activity and function.”⁶⁶ In other words, humanity images God when they fulfill the activity of ruling over creation. This leads to the practical question: What comprises ruling over creation? What activity does one perform to demonstrate ruling over creation? And what about human persons who are cognitively or developmentally incapable of

⁶³ Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 27.

⁶⁴ Middleton. In addition to the scholars cited by Middleton, Gordon Wenham, *Genesis*, 1: 31–32, affirms that “the strongest case has been made for the view that the dominion image makes man God's vice-regent on earth.” Kenneth Mathews, *Genesis 1:1–11:26*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 1A: 166, states that the functional view is now dominant. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 32, concurs, saying there is now general agreement on the functional or representational view. But see the rebuttal by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 17 and Paul House, “Shaped into the Creator's Image: Spirituality and Spiritual Formation in the Old Testament,” in *Biblical Spirituality*, ed. Chris Morgan (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 59. Both cite Old Testament scholars who focus on relational themes rather than functional ideas in interpreting the image of God in humans.

⁶⁵ David J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *TynBul* 19 (1968): 101.

⁶⁶ Clines

such ruling activity? These questions show some possible weaknesses in the functional approach.

Some in the Reformed camp connect a functional view of the image with the so-called cultural mandate of Gen 1:28. While he affirms a structural or substantive aspect of the image, Anthony Hoekema emphasizes more the functional aspect of the *imago Dei*, which he sees as involving proper relationships with God, others, and creation. He extends the command to rule over and care for creation to include not just care for the environment (a responsibility underemphasized by most in past evangelical teaching and practice), but the responsibility to use all the resources of the created order for the glory of God and the good of others. Hoekema says that the command to steward creation “embraces the advancement of scientific investigation, research, and experimentation, including the continuing conquest of space, in such a way as to honor God’s commands and give him praise.” In short, the functional idea of the image of God gives a basis for a distinctively Christian contribution to culture as an expression of our stewardship of creation.⁶⁷ But Hoekema represents a minority interpretation among those who champion the functional approach; most focus more narrowly on the functions of representation and dominion.

One strength of this view, noted by most Old Testament scholars, is the close connection of the statement of creation in God’s image in Gen 1:26 with the command to exercise dominion, a command given once in v. 26 and repeated in v. 28. The implication to them seems obvious: to image God is to exercise dominion. That this exercise of dominion is representative of God’s exercise of dominion is drawn from the numerous ancient Near Eastern parallels. But does it fit the parameters drawn from other relevant texts beyond Genesis 1?

This approach can certainly be understood as fitting a number of them. Simply by existing, especially by existing as embodied persons, all humans represent or reflect God, though it may be difficult to see how infants or quadriplegics or those with dementia exercise dominion. Also, the exercise of dominion over the animals could possibly be seen as distinguishing humans from the animals, with the function of representing God perhaps being the ground for human dignity. It could be argued that we maintain this

representative function even after the fall, and perhaps the connection with Christ is as the one who perfectly represents God.

It may be possible to see some connection between the other parameters noted earlier and the functions of representation and dominion, but all the parameters fit much better if instead of the functions of representation and dominion, we look to the *imago Dei* itself as denoting the capacities utilized in exercising those functions. This is strengthened by the observation made by several Old Testament scholars that the grammar of Gen 1:26 is in the form “that typically expresses the result”; that is, we are created in God’s image, with the result that we exercise dominion. In other words, exercising the function of dominion is a *consequence*, but not the *content* of the image.⁶⁸

While humanity’s dominion is seen throughout the Bible, humanity was not solely created for this functional task. God did not create humans so that he could avoid getting his “hands dirty” with creation, nor did he primarily create us for labor. Instead, God created humanity in his image so that they would have a relationship with him. In his work *Dominion*, Tom Holland notes the contrast between the Hebrew and Babylonian perspectives of humanity’s relationship to the divine. The Babylonian pagan god, Marduk, created humanity primarily to work. Rather than compel the other gods to the humiliation of work, he created humans, beings that were lower than the gods, to do their bidding. Humankind was made to inhabit and serve the earth, as well as to build shrines to the gods. “Humanity, molded out of dust and blood, has been bred for labor.”⁶⁹ The God of the Bible, however, is different from the pagan ancient Near Eastern deities. As Holland notes, humanity “had been endowed with a uniquely privileged status. . . . they alone had been granted master over every living creature. . . . Humans

⁶⁸ Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 66. He explains in a footnote on the same page that “the syntax is *waw* followed by a volitional form, which commonly indicates a purpose or result clause.” Wenham, *Genesis*, 32 and Mathews, *Genesis*, 164 agree that the grammatical structure of Gen 1:26 indicates that exercising dominion is a consequence of being created in God’s image, not the content or meaning of the image. Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 53, objects, saying that the syntax of Gen 1:26 implies that dominion is the purpose of the image, not simply the result or consequence, but is there a substantial difference between purpose and consequence or result? Even if there is, purpose is not content.

⁶⁹ Tom Holland, *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 52.

⁶⁷ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 88.

shared in the dignity of the one God, who . . . had crafted the entire cosmos unaided and alone.”⁷⁰ Our functional status of having dominion, therefore, is not the exclusive substance of our identity as God’s image-bearers, but an expression of it.

In light of this, the functional theory of the *imago Dei* seems incomplete. Further, it risks reducing the differences between male and female to be primarily pragmatic rather than relational. And, as we will discuss in a later chapter, the relationality of man and woman is foundational and primary to grasping the significance of their equality and distinction.

A final weakness of the functional view comes from hermeneutical concerns. This concern is highlighted by Richard Briggs. In a perceptive article, he notes that the Old Testament scholars who have been most in favor of the functional view interpret Genesis 1 by “a frame of reference extrinsic to the Genesis account,” namely, the ancient Near Eastern background in which image language is commonly used for a royal/representative function.⁷¹ He suggests that since Genesis 1 functions “as prolegomena to the canon of Scripture,” it should be interpreted in the light of the rest of Scripture, not ancient Near Eastern culture.⁷² For the image of God specifically, this would mean interpreting Genesis 1 in light of New Testament teaching concerning the image of God. When that hermeneutical approach is taken, the functional-representational approach is not nearly as attractive because no other text after Genesis 1 points to a representative function nearly as clearly as it does.

Despite all these weaknesses, the functional/representational view can still be helpful. If the exercise of these functions is the consequence of being created in God’s image, what does that tell us about the content of God’s image? What capacities or qualities must humans possess if they are to be able to exercise dominion over creation and represent the invisible God on earth? That question may be useful in evaluating some of the understandings offered for the meaning of our creation in God’s image. Moreover, the functional view provides an occasion by which we may see how God’s image-bearers may express their identity. Collins describes that, while the language

⁷⁰ Holland.

⁷¹ Briggs, “Humans in the Image of God,” 115.

⁷² Briggs. 115. 123.

of Genesis 1 is interpreted by some as exploitative or connoting dominance, to rule and reign over the earth requires strength and wisdom, qualities that reflect the characteristics of God.⁷³ Only the Lord can create *ex nihilo*, but human beings can cultivate beauty from his creation.

Relational Approaches

A final approach has been what is called a relational interpretation of the *imago Dei*. In a sense, Kilner describes the relational approach when he claims that the *imago Dei* includes “connection and reflection.”⁷⁴ To connect and reflect presumes an object to which humanity is connected and that it reflects: God himself. Within the “connection and reflection” understanding, other approaches to the *imago Dei* could be included or expressed in human relationality: that humankind is entrusted by God to rule and reign over the earth expresses their relationship to God as his vice-regents; that humankind is like God in structure also presumes the relational similarity between God and humans. It is in relationship, both with God and with others, that we fully image God.

The relational approach is commonly associated with Karl Barth. Barth was strongly opposed to substantive views that attempted to find in the nature of humans some point of contact with God, and to functional views as well. He writes of the image of God, “It is not a quality of man. . . . It does not consist in anything that man is or does.” Rather, “the analogy between God and man, is simply the existence of the I and the Thou in confrontation. This is first constitutive for God [referring to God’s triune existence] and then for man created by God.”⁷⁵

He thinks earlier interpreters overlooked the obvious clues in the immediate context of Genesis 1. He notes that God says, “Let us make.” The “us,” while not explicitly teaching the Trinity, does hint at the fact of relationship within the nature of God. In a corresponding manner, God does not

⁷³ Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 68–69.

⁷⁴ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 330.

⁷⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III, Part One, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; trans. J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1958) 184–85.

create a single, isolated creature, but man and woman. Barth sees this point as crucial: "Could anything be more obvious than to conclude from this clear indication that the image and likeness of the being created by God signifies existence in confrontation, i.e., in this confrontation, in the juxtaposition and conjunction of man and man which is that of male and female?"⁷⁶

Male and female are created in relationship with one another, and it is that relationship itself which reflects the relationship within the Godhead. It is the relationship of the human with God that is the image of God. There is no thing within either man or woman that is the image of God; it is the fact of their existence in relationship that mirrors something of God, and is thus God's image, a reflection of something of the divine nature.⁷⁷

Like Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer grounded the image of God in the relationship between male and female. Bonhoeffer's commentary on Genesis 1–3 draws a correlation between the intra-Trinitarian relationship within the Godhead and the relationship between humans. The man is not capable of personifying the *imago Dei* in isolation. Instead he requires human interdependence: "Human beings exist in duality, and it is in this *dependence on the other that their creatureliness exists*."⁷⁸ Bonhoeffer calls this relational interdependence the *analogia relationis*, or analogy of relation. Inasmuch as humans are relational with other humans, they image the intra-Trinitarian relationship within the Godhead. Thus, human beings cannot image God fully apart from an "in-dependence-upon-one-another" relationship.⁷⁹ We are not free *from* others, but rather free *for* others: "Freedom is a relation between two persons. Being free means 'being-free-for-the-other,' because I am bound to the other. Only by being in relation with the other I am free."⁸⁰ For Bonhoeffer, human relationality expresses the essence of the *imago Dei*.

By way of evaluation, we will observe later in this chapter that many discussions of the image of God mention the idea of relationship prominently,

⁷⁶ Barth, 195.

⁷⁷ Katie McCoy, "Recovering a Communion of Persons," *Eichon* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 44–59.

⁷⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, ed. John W. de Gruchy; trans. Douglas Stephen Bax (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 59, Kindle Edition, Loc. 682. Italics in original.

⁷⁹ McCoy, "Recovering a Communion of Persons," 46.

⁸⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*. 58: Kindle Edition. Loc. 666.

and so it may be that Barth and Bonhoeffer are on to something. In terms of fitting the parameters derived from the biblical texts, it would seem that viewing the image of God as the capacity for relationship with God would be a promising approach, one that we will suggest shortly. In fact, Oliver Crisp believes that many views called relational "rely upon implied ontological claims that render them, at bottom, substantive after all."⁸¹ The claim that humans possess a unique capacity for a relationship with God would seem natural if not inescapable. But Barth specifically denies that the image of God is any capacity that humans possess.⁸² His particular relational approach as existence in confrontation is difficult to grasp and thus difficult to evaluate.⁸³ It may be true that every human is created in such existence in confrontation, but is that what it means to be created in the image of God? Some have critiqued Barth's relational approach as derived more from his own "dogmatic presuppositions and assertions" than from the biblical texts themselves.⁸⁴ At any rate, it does not fit comfortably with the biblically derived parameters noted above, especially those derived from the New Testament teaching concerning the transformation and renewal of the image of God in believers.

While Barth's formulation of the relational approach may be faulty, there may be other ways to develop an approach centered on the idea of relationality that do not share in Barth's weaknesses. To be specific, as we will seek to show later in this chapter, there seem to be many converging on the idea that the image of God is the human capacity for relationships, and especially the capacity to engage in a relationship with God. As Crisp astutely remarked, technically, any approach that sees the image of God as a capacity given to

⁸¹ Crisp, "A Christological Model," 222.

⁸² Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 50–52, mistakenly describes Barth's view of the image of God in terms of a "capacity" for relationship with God and others. While such a mistake is understandable, in that existence in confrontation would seem to imply a capacity for confrontation, such a substantive idea is explicitly denied by Barth.

⁸³ G. C. Berkouwer, one of the major interpreters of Barth, criticizes him for a lack of clarity in how he develops and formulates his view. See Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 73.

⁸⁴ See James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 161, cited in van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World*, 137. See also Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 52, and Meredith Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 30ff.

all humans would fall within the substantive family of approaches, but those who take such an approach are rarely identified as such.⁸⁵ J. van Huyssteen critiques Barth's approach, but says "the relational view certainly became the most dominant view in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries."⁸⁶ We will come back to this late twentieth and early twenty-first-century development shortly, but to complete our survey of historical approaches, we must add one more family of approaches.

Composite/Blended/Multifaceted Approaches

In addition to the three major approaches described above, there are others who combine aspects of different approaches into a blended or composite approach.⁸⁷ There are numerous examples of this approach; we will only be able to survey a sampling of them.⁸⁸

The most common blended approach has been found in Reformed theology. G. C. Berkouwer discusses at some length what he calls "the well-known distinction in Reformed theology . . . between the image of God in the broader and in the narrower sense," and cites Herman Bavinck, Abraham Kuyper, and James Orr as some of those who have developed such a distinction.⁸⁹ This distinction is seen as rooted in Scripture's description of humans

⁸⁵ Crisp, "A Christological Model," 222.

⁸⁶ Van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World*, 137–38.

⁸⁷ Collins, *Genesis 1–4*, 63, sees no reason to assume that the three approaches are mutually exclusive.

⁸⁸ Others worthy of study and thought include Michael Horton, "Image and Office: Human Personhood and the Covenant," in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective*, ed. Richard Lints, Michael Horton, and Mark Talbot (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 178–203, who argues that the image is constituted by sonship/royal dominion, representation, glory, and prophetic witness; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 442–52 (see chap. 2, n. 46), who combines substantive and functional elements under the headings of moral aspects, spiritual aspects, mental aspects, relational aspects, and physical aspects; and Kevin Vanhoozer, "Human Being, Individual and Social," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 158–88, who sees the formal image as our "communicative capacity," and the material image as "right relatedness with others and with God."

⁸⁹ Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 38–41. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 59, adds Louis Berkhof as another Reformed theologian who advocates the narrower/

as still bearers of the divine image after the fall, and yet in need of having the image restored due to the effects of the fall. The broader sense is seen as that which remains after the fall, and though there are some differences among individual theologians, there is general agreement in seeing the broader sense in a substantive manner; that is, there are qualities (such as reason, conscience, freedom, etc.) that humans possess that allow Scripture to describe humans as *imago Dei*, even after the fall. The narrow sense is a mixture of substantive and functional (or behavioral) elements that humanity lost or were in some sense damaged: "his religious knowledge, his righteousness, his holiness, his conformity (*conformitas*) to God's will."⁹⁰ Though Berkouwer sets forth five difficulties he has with seeing the image in such a twofold sense, the fact that Scripture sees the image as something true of all humans pre-fall, yet something damaged in some sense by the fall, and as something being renewed in Christians is seen by many to demand some type of distinction.⁹¹

A second composite approach is that of Emil Brunner, who says that the *imago Dei* "is part of the divinely created nature of man," and so "should have both a formal and material aspect."⁹² The formal aspect consists of charges laid upon all humans, such as the responsibility to love God and neighbor, and qualities like reason, freedom, and conscience that help us carry out our responsibilities. Regardless of our actual response, we still remain human and responsible. This is a typically substantive approach and similar to the broader idea of the image held by many in the Reformed camp. The material aspect of the image consists in responding properly to God and neighbor, and would seem to be a primarily functional approach.

A third blended approach is that of Anthony Hoekema. He believes that a biblical view of the image of God must have a twofold sense corresponding to the twofold way the Bible speaks of the image, as both something inherent in humans post-fall and something profoundly affected by the fall. Some

broader sense distinction.

⁹⁰ Berkouwer, 38.

⁹¹ Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 60–61, lists and then evaluates the validity of the difficulties Berkouwer has. In the end, he finds the criticisms lacking in that a denial of some type of two-sense distinction cannot make sense of all of the biblical teaching on the image.

⁹² Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, trans. Olive Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1952), 56.

have used broader and narrower, some formal and material; Hoekema uses structural and functional. By structural, he follows close to Calvin's ideas and sees the image as referring to "the entire endowment of gifts and capacities that enable man to function as he should," things like moral sensitivity, conscience, will, and the ability to respond to God and others.⁹³ These qualities show something of God's greatness, power, and glory. But it is the functional aspect that Hoekema sees as more important. We are created to function in a certain way in relationship to God, the world, and others. The gifts included in the structural aspect of the image enable us to carry out our assigned function, but it is the actual carrying out of the function that he sees as more important.⁹⁴

Marc Cortez criticizes all these for incorporating a structural or substantive sense. While he recognizes that this approach has strong support historically and contemporarily in popular thought, he states that "it has been rejected by most contemporary thinkers," for numerous reasons, such as "lack of exegetical support" and "the growing realization that many of the things we once thought distinguished humans from the rest of creation are, in fact, shared with other creatures as well."⁹⁵ He develops an approach that combines elements of the representational, or functional, approach with a particular version of the relational approach under the ideas of representational presence, personal presence, and covenantal presence.⁹⁶

Oliver Crisp develops what he calls a Christological Model. He sees it as "able to incorporate the central issues of both the substantive and relational views of the divine image," and thus may be rightly seen as a composite view.⁹⁷ On the substantive side, he uses the language of capacities to describe our creation in the image of God. Humans are "created with the capacities and powers necessary and sufficient to be in hypostatic union with a divine person." But that this capacity is used for union with God adds a relational element. Crisp even adds a functional element in seeing our creation in the image of God as enabling us "to represent God in the

⁹³ Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 70–71.

⁹⁴ See Hoekema, 68–82, for a full exposition of his view.

⁹⁵ Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 30, 19–20.

⁹⁶ Cortez, 30–37.

⁹⁷ Crisp, "A Christological Model," 226.

world."⁹⁸ In fact, much of what he says is close to the position we will advocate later in this chapter.

One final approach that is well deserving of consideration is John Kilner's. In one of the most thorough studies of this topic, Kilner offers critiques of two elements of many approaches to understanding our creation in the image of God.

First, he is sharply critical of approaches that see the image of God as describing the way people actually are (either ways they are like God or ways they are unlike animals). Looking carefully at the language of Genesis 1, he notes that humans are not the image of God, but are created in, or according to, the image of God. He interprets this to mean that "being created in God's likeness-image is about the likeness God is intending at creation, not a descriptive statement about the way people actually are."⁹⁹ Our creation in the image of God is not something in us, but God's intention for us. This seems to be addressed primarily to substantive approaches to the image of God, though he does mention the functional idea associating the image of God with rulership or dominion over creation and sees it likewise as "unsound biblically" and "dangerous," as it would exclude those who cannot exercise rulership in the way others can (those with physical or mental disabilities).¹⁰⁰ It also harmonizes with the relational view. He mentions relational approaches very briefly and sees weaknesses in how such approaches are often formulated, but leaves room for the idea of associating the image of God with a "relational capacity" in humans, as long as it is seen as "something that sin does not diminish."¹⁰¹ Indeed, such a view would seem consistent with Kilner's own idea of the image of God as involving some sort of "special connection between God and people."¹⁰²

Second, Kilner sharply objects to language describing the image of God as in any way damaged. Christ is the image of God and the standard for humanity. The image is not damaged and needs no renewal; it is people who have been impacted by the fall and are in need of transformation and

⁹⁸ Crisp, 224–25, 226.

⁹⁹ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 131.

¹⁰⁰ Kilner, 205.

¹⁰¹ Kilner, 214.

¹⁰² Kilner, 116.

renewal.¹⁰³ As we noted earlier, Kilner has a point here in terms of precision of language. We are not the image of God, only created *in* or *according to* the image, and as we said earlier, those prepositions are important. But one of the major ways humans have been impacted and are in need of transformation and renewal is in how they live out God's intentions in creating them in his image. So whether someone says with less precision, "the image of God in humans has been damaged and is in need of transformation and renewal," or more precisely, "the way humans live out God's intention in creating us in his image has been damaged and we are in need of transformation and renewal in terms of how we live out God's intention," the substance does not seem very different. At any rate, Kilner is a minority voice in insisting on reserving the language of damage for us and not God's image.¹⁰⁴

Since Kilner's approach is somewhat unique, why include it among the composite approaches? It is because the two key themes Kilner sees as central to the meaning of our creation in the image of God seem related to some of the major families of approaches above. Thus Kilner's approach fits within the composite family, though with unique nuances. The first key term for Kilner is *connection*. It is a special connection in that it is something "that cannot be damaged and that serves as the basis for human dignity and human destiny."¹⁰⁵ He allows that this idea may be in line with some limited forms of the relational approach. The second main term for Kilner is *reflection*. Humans are intended to be "a glorifying reflection of God," and as humans are transformed and renewed, they become more and more able to reflect some of the divine attributes.¹⁰⁶ This last idea, of reflecting certain divine attributes, seems related to the idea of representation, except that Kilner sees this reflection as God's intention for us, not something he affirms of humans now. Despite the distinctive nuances, this understanding of our creation in the image of God ("specially connected to God and

¹⁰³ Kilner, 143.

¹⁰⁴ Kilner's position on this point is very much a minority position among scholars. See Craig Blomberg, "True Righteousness and Holiness: The Image of God in the New Testament," in *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey Barbeau (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 68, n. 7.

¹⁰⁵ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 214.

¹⁰⁶ Kilner, 289.

intended to meaningfully reflect many God-glorifying attributes") does seem to have some affinity for carefully formulated relational approaches and for the functional approaches that stress the function of representation (via reflection).¹⁰⁷

Since all of these blended approaches combine elements of the three major approaches that were evaluated above, we will not pause to evaluate them individually, but would argue that they all share the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches they utilize. Some do a better job than others in accenting the strengths of the views they utilize and minimizing the weaknesses, but the fact that they vary so widely with one another shows that we have yet to discover a view that commands wide adherence.

Image as Telos of Human Identity

While not among the historical approaches to the image of God, one recent proposal deserves consideration.¹⁰⁸ This approach avoids locating the *imago Dei* in any aspect of humanity, including its capacity for relationship. Instead, this theory focuses on the purpose, or *telos*, of humanity's creation. The question of *why* God created humanity is a significant one. As with all of creation, the Lord chose to create freely; he had no need of his creation as if dependent on it for his own subsistence. The New Hampshire (1883) and Second London Baptist (1689) Confessions state that God created everything visible and invisible because it pleased him.¹⁰⁹ He wanted to create the world and its human inhabitants. That God created all things for his pleasure means that every human being is the result of God's creating will; there is not a person alive whom he did not *want* to create.

¹⁰⁷ Kilner, 330.

¹⁰⁸ For one attempt to ground a teleological view in church history, see Dominic Robinson, "Ecclesial-Narrative Model of the *Imago Dei*," in *Ashgate Research Companion*, 297: "An 'ecclesial' and 'narrative' view sees our human identity as the *imago Dei* as teleological and Christological."

¹⁰⁹ J. Newton Brown, "The New Hampshire Confession of Faith," 1883; available from <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/the-new-hampshire-confession-of-faith.pdf>. "The Second London Confession," 1689; available from <http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/the-second-london-confession.pdf>.

Yet, creation, and subsequently, humanity fulfilled a specific purpose, and this purpose has been the subject of no small debate. Dietrich Bonhoeffer identified praise as the purpose behind God's creative activity, a purpose that necessitated human freedom: "If the Creator wishes to create the Creator's own image, then the Creator must create it free. And only such an image, in its freedom, would fully praise God, would fully proclaim God's glory as Creator."¹¹⁰

Other theological traditions, such as Reformed Presbyterianism, anchor the purpose for which God created humanity in the attribute of God's glory, which is manifested both in his sovereignty and in his predestination. For example, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) maintains that God created some persons in order that he might demonstrate the glory of his mercy in salvation, and other persons in order that he might demonstrate the glory of his wrath in condemnation.¹¹¹ Once again, we note how doctrine is interconnected. One's soteriology (doctrine of salvation) and one's anthropology (doctrine of humanity) are not only linked, but interdependent: a shift in one necessarily results in a shift in the other.

In his monograph, *The Imago Dei as Human Identity*, Ryan Peterson contends that Genesis 1 establishes the identity of all the creatures God had made. This identity entailed the creature's purpose: "The emphasis upon divinely assigned teleological functions is maintained without reducing the human creature to being merely the functionary intended for that sole purpose."¹¹² For Peterson, grounding the *imago Dei* in human identity allows us to acknowledge humanity's functions and attributes without reducing humans to those functions and attributes. "Human identity" refers to humanity's relation to God, is determined by God, and is unrelated to whether or not one realizes one's relationship to God.¹¹³ Rather than identifying a particular capacity, Peterson prefers to describe aspects of humanity as "conditions of possibility." Human relationality, personhood, and function are all conditions by which one may be identified as having human identity. But human identity itself cannot be reduced to any one, specific

¹¹⁰ Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*; Kindle Edition, Loc. 648.

¹¹¹ "The Westminster Confession of Faith" (1646); available from <https://bpc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/D-ConfessionOfFaith.pdf>.

¹¹² Ryan S. Peterson, *The Imago Dei as Human Identity*, Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplement 14 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 75.

¹¹³ Peterson, 54.

feature.¹¹⁴ "Condition of possibility" also protects a human being from being de-humanized in the event that he does not have a specific capacity: one may have the identity "image of God" even when the conditions of possibility required for realization of that identity in the world are not present.¹¹⁵

Gerhard von Rad echoes this when he frames the command to rule and reign over creation as a result but not the substance of the *imago Dei*: "This commission to rule is not considered as belonging to the definition of God's image; but it is its consequence, i.e., that for which man is capable because of it."¹¹⁶ Because human identity is determined by God, humanity's goals and direction are not self-directed. Rather, "Humanity is intended to move toward God. Humans can only know themselves truly in light of God as God is for the world."¹¹⁷

Perhaps the metanarrative of Scripture gives us insight into the *why* of creation. The Bible begins and ends with a wedding and centers on the creation of a family. In Genesis 1, God's image-bearers are told to "be fruitful and multiply." Known as the creation mandate, this command represents an aspect of one's identity of a person created in God's image: the capacity to be an instrument of God—from whom all life comes—to increase the number of image-bearers, and to give one's life toward the creation and care of one's children. The creation mandate is carried over into the mission of the New Testament church: "Go and make disciples . . ." God's family (i.e., the church) is charged with being instruments of God—from whom salvation comes—to increase the number of his children. We who carry out the mandate of Matt 28:19–20 give our lives toward the growth of God's family.

The lack of an explicit biblical definition has led to a plethora of competing interpretations of the image of God and the lack of any consensus. Even among adherents of the three major approaches there are significant variations, not to mention the individual blended or composite views surveyed above. This makes the task of a theological formulation of the meaning of our creation in the image of God a daunting one, yet the importance of the image of God for a proper understanding of humans renders it a

¹¹⁴ Peterson, 81.

¹¹⁵ Peterson, 83.

¹¹⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1956), 57.

¹¹⁷ Peterson, *The Imago Dei*, 70.

necessary task for believers, especially for those who venture into writing a theological anthropology. Fortunately, there seems to be developing in recent years something of a consensus. We mentioned earlier J. van Huyssteen's contention that relational approaches became dominant in late twentieth century and early twenty-first-century thought; now we want to explore a common theme in these relational approaches.¹¹⁸

Toward a Contemporary Consensus

It is somewhat surprising but gratifying to see that, after all the centuries of discussion, a degree of consensus is emerging on an understanding of humanity's creation in the image of God. The element of consensus is that of relationship; more specifically, the image of God is being seen as involving a relationship with God or being created with the capacity for relationship with God. Some add secondarily that it includes the capacity for relationships with other persons, or even with creation. Technically, if we see the key element as a capacity, this view would fall within the substantive family of approaches, but the centrality of relationships is causing many to place these formulations within the relational family. Regardless of classification, here are some of the places where we have seen this consensus emerging.

Jason McMartin has gone back to Augustine and developed Augustine's idea of the image as *capax dei* (capable of participation with God) in his treatise *On the Trinity*, into a model of the image of God that sees it as "the capacity for relationship with God."¹¹⁹

From the Reformed tradition as seen by a feminist theologian, Mary McClintock Fulkerson says much the same thing: "To say that we are created in the image of God is to identify the human capacity to be in relationship with God, or better, to claim that relationship with God is the human vocation."¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ J. van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World?*, 137–38.

¹¹⁹ Jason McMartin, "The Theandric Union as *Imago Dei* and *Capax Dei*," in *Christology: Ancient and Modern*, ed. Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 137.

¹²⁰ Mary McClintock Fulkerson, "The *Imago Dei* and a Reformed Logic for Feminist/Womanist Critique," in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Sarah L. Jones (Louisville, Westminster: Lexington, 2015), 107.

Evangelical theologian Kevin Vanhoozer says much the same thing: "To be in the *imago Dei* refers, first of all, to humanity's unique capacity for communion with God."¹²¹

Looking at New Testament teaching on the image of God, Craig Blomberg says first, "Love (or mercy) and justice, the communicable attributes of God, thus summarize the heart of the image." But of how that is reflected in humans, he says, "Moral or ethical living that stems from a capacity to relate to the divine sets humans apart from all other species."¹²² Since in Genesis 1 it is the image of God that sets humans apart from all other animals, it seems fair to see Blomberg as teaching that the image of God is the capacity to relate to the divine (God).

Douglas Moo and son Jonathan combine an emphasis on relationships with a representational aspect. They say, "Our argument, in keeping with that of many interpreters, is that the image of God means being placed into a particular set of relationships with God, each other, and the rest of creation, for the purpose of ruling as his royal representatives."¹²³ In an earlier work, in which Douglas Moo deals with the New Testament teaching on the presence of the image of God in human beings after the fall and yet the need for the image to be renewed, he writes, "If we view the 'image of God' as having to do primarily with the power to form appropriate relationships—between humans and God, among humans, and between humans and creation—justice can be done to both biblical perspectives."¹²⁴ Change the term *power* to *capacity* and Moo's view is very close to the one we are advocating.

Knox, 2006), 95–106, cited in *T&T Clark Reader in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Marc Cortez and Michael Jensen (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 100.

¹²¹ Kevin Vanhoozer, "Human Being, Individual and Social," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin Gunton (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 163.

¹²² Craig Blomberg, "'True Righteousness and Holiness': The Image of God in the New Testament," in *The Image of God in an Image-Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 85.

¹²³ Douglas Moo and Jonathan Moo, *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology for the Natural World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 74.

¹²⁴ Douglas Moo, "Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology," in *Theological Anthropology*, ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 100.

Oliver Crisp also connects the ideas of relationship and representation in his Christological model of the *imago Dei*. He says that it is one's "whole human nature that images God by being made with the capacity for hypostatic union with a divine person."¹²⁵ Hypostatic union is a very special type of relationship, but a relationship nonetheless. He brings in the representational role he sees assigned to humans in Genesis 1 as well, saying, "Humans are able to represent God in the world in virtue of being made in the image of the God-Man, the archetypal image-bearer."¹²⁶

D. A. Carson uses the language of capacity, describing the image of God as involving "a profound capacity for knowing God intimately."¹²⁷ He does not limit the meaning of "image of God" to this capacity for knowing God intimately alone, but he does give it a central place.¹²⁸

Robert Jenson and Colin Gunton do not use the language of capacity, but link the image of God with a human's relationship with God, which seems to presuppose a capacity for such a relationship. Here is how Jenson puts it: "The 'image of God,' if we are to use this phrase comprehensively for humanity's distinctiveness, is simply that we are related to God as his conversational counterpart."¹²⁹ Two statements by Colin Gunton lead to the same conclusion. First, he says, "To be a person is to be made in the image of God." He then adds, "We are persons insofar as we are in right relationship to God."¹³⁰ The clear implication is that the image of God involves being in right relationship with God, which, again, assumes that we have the capacity for such a relationship.

J. van Huyssteen adds, "The concept of the *imago Dei* . . . has always in some broad sense functioned to express the relationship between Creator and

¹²⁵ Crisp, "A Christological Model," 225.

¹²⁶ Crisp, 226.

¹²⁷ Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 205.

¹²⁸ Carson. Other aspects included by Carson are "human beings are moral creatures with special privileges and responsibilities . . . that we have a hunger for creating things . . . that we have a capacity for personal relations with other persons."

¹²⁹ Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 95, cited in *T&T Clark Reader in Theological Anthropology*, 350.

¹³⁰ Colin Gunton, "Trinity, Ontology, and Anthropology: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the *Imago Dei*," in *Persons, Divine, and Human*, ed. Christoph Schwöebel and Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 58.

creatures, God and humans."¹³¹ Paul House says much the same thing of a wide range of scholars from the early church to post-Reformation to contemporary: "All agree that in Genesis 1–2 'image' means that humans can relate positively to God in ways that the rest of creation has not been made to do."¹³²

J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays cite numerous scholars in Old Testament studies and other disciplines that are coming to see relationship with God as "a critical part of the *imago Dei*."¹³³ For example, Robin Routledge, in discussing relationships as one of the implications of creation in God's image, states, "human beings are made for relationship with God."¹³⁴ Brevard Childs says of the image of God, "In spite of its unclarity, at least one can say that it denotes a special relationship between God and mankind."¹³⁵ These scholars do not use the precise language of the image of God as a capacity for relationship with God, but what they do say seems to presuppose it.

Finally, Jonathan Threlfall claims that one point of agreement among the varying interpretations of the image of God in Christian history is that "humans are somehow fundamentally oriented toward God," or as he himself puts it, humans "are constituted for a relationship with God and the rest of creation."¹³⁶

¹³¹ Van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World*, 160.

¹³² Paul House, "Shaped into the Creator's Image: Spirituality and Spiritual Formation in the Old Testament," in *Biblical Spirituality*, ed. Chris Morgan (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 59. House points the reader to Andrew Louth, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament*, vol. 1, *Genesis 1–11* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 27–45, for opinions of early church figures; to Kenneth Mathews, *Genesis 1:1–11:26*, NAC 1A (Nashville: B&H, 1996), 126, for a survey of opinions since the Reformation; and to Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 147–58, for a summary of recent interpretations (59, n. 11).

¹³³ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *God's Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 17.

¹³⁴ Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008), 140.

¹³⁵ Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 34.

¹³⁶ Jonathan Threlfall, "The Doctrine of the *Imago Dei*: The Biblical Data for an Abductive Argument for the Christian Faith," *JETS* 62, no. 3 (September 2019): 543–44, 546.

These writers differ slightly in that some define the image as the capacity for relationship with God, while others link the image of God to an existing relationship with God, and others include relationships with others and/or creation. But even in those who include other relationships, the relationship with God has precedence. And if one has a relationship with God, one could argue that it assumes that one has the capacity for relationship, and so we think all these authors are referring to the same reality.

While we see this breadth of support as indicating a coming consensus, some do object to seeing the capacity for relationship with God as the proper understanding of our creation *imago Dei*. John Kilner includes “relationship” as one of the “misunderstandings” of the image of God. Here is his concern: “The special connection involved in being created in God’s image is a fact of creation that sin cannot alter. It assures human dignity and sets the stage for human destiny. In contrast, relationship involves communication, faithfulness, and other qualities that sin does indeed damage.” He adds, “Actual God-honoring relationships flow from being in God’s image, to the degree that sin does not interfere.”¹³⁷ Kilner’s objection holds against those who identify being created in God’s image with living in an actual relationship with God, but not against those who see being created in God’s image as being created with the capacity for a relationship with God, because that capacity is not removed by sin. Sin may damage that capacity, but humans still have it, and it still grounds human dignity and destiny. And, when that capacity undergoes renewal, restoration, and transformation, Kilner is correct: “Actual God-honoring relationships” flow from it.¹³⁸

The relational aspect of the *imago Dei* is reinforced by the motive for God’s creation of humans. The creation narrative of Genesis contrasts with the creation accounts of other ancient Near Eastern cultures. The Babylonians believed their god, Marduk, created humans to do the bidding of the gods. As Tom Holland describes, the Babylonian cult believed humans were “bred for labor,” condemned to complete tasks that were beneath their panoply of gods. According to the Genesis narrative, however, humans had a privileged status in creation—they alone shared in their Creator’s dignity.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 229–30.

¹³⁸ Kilner, 229.

¹³⁹ Holland, *Dominion*, 58.

Westermann notes that the Genesis narrative highlights the significance of the mode of the creation of humans: “The most striking feature of the creation of humans, and in this it differs markedly from all other works of creation, is that it is not described as creation by the word.”¹⁴⁰

In his massive two-volume work on theological anthropology, David Kelsey argues that “human creatures are constituted as personal beings by God relating to them, rather than by certain types of creaturely capacities.” So he advocates seeing the image of God as a triple helix, with the three strands being the three ways that God relates to us, rather than involving a human capacity to relate to God.¹⁴¹ But does God relating to people not suggest a corresponding capacity in people for a relationship with God? Would that not fit well with the very idea of an image? We do not see either of these objections as weakening the movement toward a consensus of seeing the image of God as indicating a capacity for relationship with God. The defense of such a view lies in simply seeing how well it fits the biblical parameters identified in the prior chapter.

In his work *Inventing the Individual*, Larry Siedentop demonstrates that Western culture owes its value of the individual to the Christian faith. He claims: “The Christian conception of God provided an ontological foundation for the individual, first as a moral status, and then, centuries later, as the primary social role.”¹⁴² The Western value of an individual as an individual—apart from his or her status or capacity—signifies the Christian influence on society. Siedentop goes on to say: “Christian moral beliefs merge as the ultimate source of the social revolution that has made the West what it is.”¹⁴³ Indeed, the Western value of an individual is derived from Christianity.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1974), 143.

¹⁴¹ Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, I: 291. See II:895–921 for his argument for the *imago Dei* as a triple helix.

¹⁴² Larry Siedentop, *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Individualism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 353.

¹⁴³ Siedentop.

¹⁴⁴ John Gray: “Western liberalism is actually parasitic on Christianity. The high view of the human person in liberalism, he says, is derived directly from Christianity.” Quoted in Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 220.

The regard for a human being as a moral being reflects the Christian concept of God as the personal Creator of every human being.

The Image as Capacity for Relationship with God

We now offer a formulation of this view and then the defense: we believe all humans are created in the image of God and that this involves the gift of a capacity for a particular type of personal relationship; everyone is created in the image of God and is made for relationships, primarily with God. This right relationship with God should lead to good relationships with other humans and with creation, though numerous conditions and extraordinary situations may hinder us from realizing the extent of these relationships. In any case, all humans are made in the image of God with all the dignity entailed in that status. This capacity for relationship with God, we contend, is centered in the human spirit, but may utilize other human capacities such as reason, conscience, and emotion, without necessarily requiring the use of them. Our creation in the image of God also has a representational aspect, associated especially with our bodily nature, but such an aspect is secondary.

The exegetical defense for such a formulation is found not so much in specific terms (the word *relationship* is not even a biblical term), or a specific verse or phrase, but in the way this formulation fits the parameters we saw in our survey of the whole of biblical teaching on the image of God. We noted earlier Marc Cortez's critique of structural approaches as lacking exegetical support. He states, "One looks in vain for any clear (or even implicit) biblical link between the *imago* and some essential attribute of the human person."¹⁴⁵ We believe we do not fall under his critique, for we do not argue for some essential attribute, but a universal human capacity, and argue that such a capacity is clearly implied in what Scripture does teach about the image of God. We will examine the fit of this interpretation with the biblical parameters, one by one.

The Image as Universal and Constitutive

Take, first, the idea that all persons are created in the image of God, and that this constitutes humans as humans. Is capacity for a relationship with God

¹⁴⁵ Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 19.

something true of all humans? If that capacity is defined in terms of qualities such as reason, will, and conscience, the answer would be no for very young children, the mentally disabled, those with dementia or Alzheimer's, and others who may not be able to exercise the qualities of reason, will, and conscience. This is the concern of John Kilner and others, and for this reason they back away from defining our creation in the image of God in terms of a capacity, for fear that any capacity we can name will be something not all humans possess, or a capacity that some humans possess in greater or lesser measure than others.¹⁴⁶ But there is a growing field of study on theology and disability that affirms the possibility that those suffering some disability of their rational capacities may still be able to experience relationship with God on another level.¹⁴⁷ Marc Cortez narrates the account of the baptism of a profoundly disabled teenager witnessed by a student in Cortez's class who was prompted by the teenager's reaction to wonder "if there is a means of recognition and consciousness beyond the brain." Cortez himself suggests that perhaps "a person may be able to exercise the relevant capacity or capacities in ways that transcend our current ability to understand."¹⁴⁸ We agree and see that possibility as strong if the relevant capacity is seen as lodged in the human spirit.

In spirit, we deal with something that all humans possess, and, we think, something they all possess equally, as a unique aspect of the human constitution.¹⁴⁹ Thus, if we link the capacity for relationship with God, not to

¹⁴⁶ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 3. Kilner says of views that see the image of God in terms of attributes, "People vary in the extent to which they have these attributes—and are in God's image. For many, that means how much people warrant respect and protection varies from person to person." Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 20, sees the same problem, though he uses the language of "capacity" rather than "attribute": "It is nearly impossible to find a structural capacity that applies to all human beings. . . . Thus, it would seem that any structural definition of the *imago* runs the risk of excluding certain categories of human beings from its definition of humanity."

¹⁴⁷ For a survey of key books in this emerging field, see David F. Watson, "Theology, Bible, and Disability: An Overview," *Catalyst*, February 18, 2017, <https://www.catalystresources.org/theology-bible-and-disability-an-overview/>.

¹⁴⁸ Marc Cortez, "Beyond Imitation: The Image of God as a Vision for Spiritual Formation," in *Tending Soul, Mind, and Body: The Art and Science of Spiritual Formation*, ed. Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), 28, 29.

¹⁴⁹ While the biblical words for spirit (*ruach* and *pneuma*) are used in a variety of ways in the Old and New Testaments, they are used in a variety of ways in the

capacities that do vary from person to person, or to a capacity that may be totally missing in some people, but to something that is universally present in all humans, from before birth to beyond death, we have something that is truly universal in humans and excludes no one from the status of created in the image of God.¹⁵⁰

In addition, it seems that spirit is something constitutive of humans, for while both humans and animals can be referred to as creatures with souls, only humans are clearly referred to as creatures with spirit. Anthony Hoekema notes that the word for "soul" in the Old Testament (*nephesh*) can be used in a multiplicity of ways, including at times as a virtual synonym for spirit (*ruach*), but whereas *nephesh* can be used of both humans and animals, *ruach* is used only of humans, with one possible exception (Eccl 3:21), and even that exception is phrased in the form of a question.¹⁵¹ The New Testament gives greater clarity on this, as it strongly associates the human spirit (*pneuma*) with the capacity for relationship with God.¹⁵² If only humans relate to God, and such a relationship is enabled by the possession of spirit, spirit must be something constitutive of humans. This view also enables us to look beyond the ethical questions surrounding an individual's circumstances or capacity and to locate the uniqueness of a human being in an immaterial substance. Thus, our capacity for relationship with God, like our creation in God's image, is constitutive for humans.

Care should be taken here, for we are not arguing that spirit is one "part" of human nature. Humans are made in God's image in their entirety, and spirit is a capacity that interacts with the whole of a person's being.

humans, but true of all humans. Spirit is not a distinct part of humans, but refers to an element in human personality that enables the whole person to relate to God. See W. D. Stacey, *The Pauline View of Man* (London: Macmillan, 1956), 89–90, 141ff.; G. E. Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 458–64.

¹⁵⁰ For from before birth, see Luke 1:44. When the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy at hearing Mary's voice, it would seem to be an act of the baby's spirit prior to the development of the power of reason. Romans 8:16 suggests spirit as the level on which humans communicate with God. For beyond death, see Heb 12:23, where the dead in the heavenly Jerusalem are described as "the spirits of righteous people made perfect."

¹⁵¹ Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 210–11.

¹⁵² Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 463: "It is because man possesses *pneuma* that he is capable of being related to God."

W. D. Stacey says of the Old Testament, "When reference is made to man in his relation to God *ruach* ["spirit"] is the term most likely to be used," but "*the whole man was involved*."¹⁵³ James Dunn says much the same for *pneuma* (spirit) in the New Testament. It denotes "*that dimension of the whole man wherein and whereby he is most immediately open and responsive to God*."¹⁵⁴ Normally one's relationship with God and others, including the created order, involves the use of reason, will, emotions and other capacities, as the spirit energizes, directs, and stimulates them. But these other aspects of personality may not be absolutely necessary in every case. Seeing our capacity for relationship with God as dependent on spirit leaves open the possibility that God can establish relationships with humans in exceptional ways in exceptional circumstances, such as when reason is impaired, or no longer functioning, or not yet functioning.

The Image as Grounds for Unique Dignity

From Gen 9:6 and Jas 3:9, we drew the idea that humans have a unique status that demands they be treated with a special dignity because they have been created in the image of God. Does the capacity for personal relationship with God fit with this parameter? It would certainly seem so. Humans are the only creatures to whom God speaks in Genesis 1 and 2, pronouncing words of blessing and command. He assigns them tasks and holds them accountable. They alone may experience the eternal life that consists in knowing God (John 17:3). And perhaps it is because they alone will face divine judgment that it is unfitting for humans to curse or kill them (Gen 9:6; Jas 3:9).

One question that is seldom discussed in the literature on the image of God is the status of angels. They are by nature spirit (Heb 1:14) and are described as worshiping and serving God (Rev 5:11–12; 8:2–5), which would certainly seem to indicate that they have some type of relationship with God. They are regarded as creatures with a measure of dignity, as Scripture criticizes those who slander angels, and commends the archangel Michael for not uttering a word of condemnation against the devil, but leaving him

¹⁵³ Stacey, *The Pauline View of Man*, 90. Emphasis added.

¹⁵⁴ James Dunn, "Spirit, Holy Spirit," in *NIDNTT*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 3:693. Emphasis added.

to God (Jude 8–9). So are angels also created in the image of God? If they are, does that cast doubt on the adequacy of capacity for personal relationship with God as a sufficient understanding of the image of God, seeing that angels also seem to experience a personal relationship with God, or should angels be seen as sharing the status of created in the image of God?

Here we must enter an area that is somewhat speculative. We are not told in Scripture that angels bear God's image, nor are we told clearly that they do not.¹⁵⁵ We are also not told much about the nature of their relationship with God. Yet, nowhere in Scripture does God call or relate to angels as his children or recipients of redemption. The Lord never calls himself "Father" to any of his angels, nor does he enter into a covenant relationship with them. The angels who fell are separated from God and destined for eternal judgment, with no hope of forgiveness or restoration. But humans, though fallen, may experience renewal "according to the image of your Creator" (Col 3:10) and restoration to right relationship with God through Christ, with the ultimate destiny of conformity to the image of Christ. Indeed, the experience humans enjoy with God is mediated by Christ, and Christ is related to humanity via the incarnation. In all these ways, the relationship with God humans experience due to their creation in God's image seems different than that of angels.

One contemporary theologian who has reflected on this topic is Oliver Crisp. He sees the problem of claiming capacity for relationship with God as the human distinctive because it is shared with angels. Yet he says of angels, "They are not traditionally thought to be image-bearers in the way human beings are." He thinks the resolution may be found if we add our role in overseeing creation as that which "makes human beings unique."¹⁵⁶

Moreover, here is where our embodied nature may also be important for our understanding of the image of God. Even if angels have the capacity for

¹⁵⁵ Calvin thought angels were made in the image of God, and limits human uniqueness in comparison with other "visible creatures." See Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:188–89 (I.xv.3). Herman Bavinck disagrees, saying that the incarnation of Christ, the perfect image of God, suggests that only humans are image-bearers. See Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning*, trans. John Vriend; ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 80–83, 189. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 112, says that "there is no biblical warrant for maintaining that angels are in the image of God" and that saying they are would be to misunderstand the meaning of creation in the image of God.

¹⁵⁶ Crisp, "A Christological Model," 221.

some type of relationship with God, they do not have it as embodied beings as humans do. Being embodied sets us apart from angels, and allows us to serve another role supportive of human dignity, that of overseeing and being God's representatives on earth.¹⁵⁷ We can be *eikōns* or image-bearers of God on earth because we have a visible, embodied nature.¹⁵⁸

Thus, our definition of the image of God as capacity for relationship with God is consistent with the parameter that creation in the image of God is grounds for unique dignity. Though angels are by nature spirit and at least the unfallen angels enjoy some type of relationship with God, it seems different in some important respects from that which humans experience as created in the image of God (which may explain why angels are never clearly described as created in the image of God). Secondly, the uniqueness of humans vis-à-vis angels as image-bearers may be supplemented by the embodied nature of humans.¹⁵⁹ It allows humans to serve as visible representatives of God in a way that angels cannot. That representative function is one aspect of the unique relationship with God which only humans experience, as a consequence of being created *imago Dei*.

The Image as Enduring after the Fall

As noted above, John Kilner objects strongly to any idea that the image of God was damaged in any way by the fall. People were damaged by the fall,

¹⁵⁷ We recognize the strength of those who argue for a royal/priestly/representative aspect of the image of God, but keep it secondary in our formulation of the image of God because it is linked to the image of God only in Genesis 1 and perhaps 1 Cor 15:49.

¹⁵⁸ Perhaps one of the reasons we will bear the image of Christ bodily in the *eschaton* (1 Cor 15:49) is to allow us to represent God bodily in the new heavens and new earth.

¹⁵⁹ Carson, *The Gaggling of God*, 205, sees the image of God language as restricted to human beings. Thus, he reasons, the meaning of the image of God cannot be limited to having a personal relationship with God, since angels share that with humans. He includes "a profound capacity for knowing God intimately" as one part of the meaning of our creation in the image of God, but adds other aspects as well, such as the fact that humans have "special privileges and responsibilities." We agree. We are privileged and responsible to represent God visibly in our embodied nature. This is something we do not share with angels.

but the image of God, seen as “the standard of who people are created to be” and especially that standard as “embodied in the person of Christ,” has not been “diminished in any way because of sin.”¹⁶⁰ And as noted earlier, Kilner has a point. If Christ is the image, he has not been damaged by the fall. To be precise, we should say that what has been damaged by the fall has been the ability of humans to live out God’s intention in making them in his image, and it seems that is what is meant when most speak of damage being done to the image of God in the fall. It is a shorthand way to refer to damage done to our capacity to live out God’s intention in creating us in his image, and such language need not lead to what Kilner fears, the disenfranchisement or minimization of some human beings as no longer being image-bearers of God.¹⁶¹ In this section, we will use the language of the image of God being damaged, though that language should be understood as shorthand for the more cumbersome phrase of seeing our capacity for relationship with God as damaged by the fall.

The fact that all the texts affirming our status as image-bearers except for Genesis 1 refer to humans after the fall is sufficient to sustain possession of the image post-fall as a biblical parameter. How does it fit or conflict with our understanding of creation in God’s image as creation with the capacity for relationship with God, centered in the human spirit? It may give us a way of understanding the damage that the image sustained in the fall, without seeing the image as totally destroyed. God’s warning in Gen 2:17 was that the man would die “the day” he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Wenham says, “Though this phrase [‘the day’] can mean vaguely ‘when’ (cf. 2:4; 5:1), it tends to emphasize promptness of action.”¹⁶² But Adam lived for many years after he ate of the tree. He may have become physically mortal the day he ate; and many would argue that physical mortality is one of the effects of the fall.¹⁶³ The death he died that very day, or at least with promptness,

¹⁶⁰ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 134.

¹⁶¹ See the discussion in Threlfall, *The Doctrine of the Imago Dei*, 545, nn. 8–9. He acknowledges that he uses “image-bearer” as “a shorthand reference to humans as created in the image of God.”

¹⁶² Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 68.

¹⁶³ That would seem to be the implication of 1 Cor 15:53, where the body we have in this life is perishable and mortal. Physical mortality as one of the effects of the fall would fit with the idea that the body also plays a part in the image of God in

would seem to be spiritual death. John Collins notes that the semantic range of the Hebrew word used in Gen 2:17 includes spiritual death, which he calls “estrangement from a life-giving relationship with God.”¹⁶⁴

Could it be that the fall gave a mortal wound to the human spirit in Adam? He remained human, with the spirit within him, still having the value and status of an image-bearer of God, but with the spirit now in a deadened condition. The proof that the spirit endures in human nature after the fall is what happens in salvation; the human spirit must be present to be given new life by the Holy Spirit (John 3:5–8; Titus 3:5). The proof that the spirit (capacity for relationship with God) has been damaged is the need for new life, renewal, and even transformation. Scripture uses the language of renewal and transformation with reference to the image of God in us, but never suggests the total loss of that capacity for relationship with God. God can breathe new life into those spiritually dead; he can reactivate the spirit left dead by the ravages of sin. The capacity for relationship with God is still there, but it requires restoration, which is described as “being renewed in knowledge according to the image of your Creator” (Col 3:10). Thus, the view that sees our creation in the image of God as creation with the capacity for a relationship with God, centering in the human spirit, seems to fit quite nicely with biblical teaching that our ability to live out our creation in the image of God has been affected by the fall; it fits with biblical teaching that the human spirit needs regeneration and with the biblical description of that regeneration as restoration according to the image of God. Such a view does not require that we exclude anyone from the status of created in the image of God, but it does recognize the profound impact of the fall on our ability to live out that status in a vital relationship with God, apart from regeneration and restoration.

Christ as the Perfect Image of God and Perfectly in the Image of God

The identification of Christ as the express image of God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15) raises the question: How does seeing the image as the capacity for a personal

human beings. We continue to have a body after the fall, but it is now a corruptible body.

relationship with God correspond to the idea of Christ as the perfect image of God? In other words, does Christ as the image of God conflict with the view that we are arguing for, that being created in the image of God is being created with the capacity for relationship with God? Answering this question requires us to remember the twofold nature of Christ and to make a careful distinction between being the image and being created in or according to the image.

As the eternal Son, Christ *is* the image of God in a way that we never will be. He is the “image of the invisible God,” in whom “all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Col 1:15; 2:9 NIV). *Being* the image is true only of deity, but being created *in* the image is true of humans. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes gives us the technical theological formulation we noted earlier: “It is as consubstantial with God that he *is* the Image and as consubstantial with us that he identified himself with our human existence *in* the image; and thus he who is truly God revealed what it is to be truly man.”¹⁶⁵ As the God-man, Christ both is the image and is in the image of God. And it is as the incarnate Son, made *in* the image of God, that he exercised the capacity for personal relationship with God in a perfect, unfallen way, such that he was like us in all ways, except without sin (Heb 4:15). In fact, the relationship that the human Jesus enjoyed with his heavenly Father seems so central to his human existence that it strengthens the association of the image of God with the capacity for relationship with God. At the very least, this parameter raises no conflict with the interpretation being championed here of creation in the image of God as being created with the capacity for personal relationship with God.

It would also seem to explain one reason Christ had to become incarnate; humans bear God’s image both in the spirit’s capacity for relationship with God, and also in the body’s representational function (as one way we live out our relationship with God). For Christ to be the perfect image-bearer, he had to perfectly fulfill what image-bearing requires, both of spirit and body. And we are promised that in our future resurrected form, we will “bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor 15:49), so that our conformity to the image of Christ will include a physical aspect as well as Christlike character.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Hughes, *The True Image*, 29. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶⁶ Hughes, 27, notes with regard to 1 Cor 15:49, “Although St. Paul does not speak directly here of Christ as the Image of God, his usage of the term ‘image’ is

The Renewal of the Image

It is a striking fact that many discussions of our creation in the image of God begin and end with consideration only of the foundational passage in Genesis 1. While it is important, consideration only of it will inevitably warp one’s understanding of the meaning of our creation in God’s image. As noted earlier, there are a number of New Testament passages that may be grouped under the heading of the renewal of the image.¹⁶⁷ We think that when we consider that our creation in the image of God must be seen as something capable of being renewed, then many traditional interpretations fall as inconsistent with such a description. But the capacity for a relationship with God seems to fit this parameter especially well.

The first renewal text, Rom 8:29, speaks not of the image of God but of the image of the Son, and not of our creation in that image, but of our eventual conformity to it. But we think there is no sharp distinction. As the one who perfectly lived out all it means to be created in the image of God, conformity to the image of Christ would seem to be us fully living out all it means to be created in the image of God. Our destiny is to experience relationship with God in the same fullness that the Son did in his humanity. More concretely, what will it mean to be completely conformed to the image of the Son? We think that one major aspect of that conformity will be the full development of Christlike character. In agreement with John Kilner, we believe that part of what it means to be created in God’s image is the intention that humans should give “a glorifying reflection of God,” developing increasing likeness to God and “reflecting something of God’s own attributes.”¹⁶⁸ In terms of what this means regarding the image of Christ, conformity to the image of Christ would seem to include fully reflecting Christlike character, which does not

in itself significant, because the bearing of the image of ‘the man of heaven,’ to be experienced in the raising and transformation of our bodies in to the likeness of his glorious body (Phil. 3:21), will bring to fulfillment the divine purpose for our conformity to him who is the True Image.”

¹⁶⁷ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 235–73, identifies six renewal texts. Three he calls “primary passages” (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; and Col 3:10) and three he calls “primary echoes” (Eph 4:24; 1 Cor 15:49; and 1 John 3:2). The 1 John text is omitted because it does not explicitly use “image” language.

¹⁶⁸ Kilner, 132.

seem too different from “reflecting something of God’s own attributes.”¹⁶⁹ This is the natural effect of living fully and completely in relationship with God.

The second primary text is 2 Cor 3:18. Here the language is not renewal but transformation, and the key preposition is not “in” but “into.” We do not think there is a suggestion here that humans are not yet in God’s image until they are transformed into the Lord’s image. Rather, the different texts are speaking of the one reality, our creation in God’s image, in two different ways.¹⁷⁰ Texts that speak of our creation in God’s image (Gen 1:26–27) speak of something that is always true of all humans, something stable. This text on our transformation “into the same [the Lord’s] image” speaks of this same reality, but as something dynamic. As John Kilner interprets this text, it means “Christians are already becoming better able to fulfill the divine intentions that have always marked their lives as created in God’s image.”¹⁷¹ What is one major divine intention that has always marked our lives as created in God’s image? It has always been God’s intention for us to live in relationship with him. This text speaks of that capacity for relationship with God being progressively more and more utilized, or, as another one puts it, it is by this transformation that humans are “realizing the meaning of their original status as creatures in God’s image.”¹⁷²

It is in the third primary passage, Col 3:10, that we have the explicit language of renewal. The verses preceding v. 10 speak of a definitive change

¹⁶⁹ Kilner, 299. Here we differ somewhat with Kilner, who sees “reason, righteousness, rulership and relationship” as the “prime examples of human attributes that God has always intended to reflect God’s own attributes and that are central to what God is renewing in Christ.” We highlight relationship as central to what God is renewing.

¹⁷⁰ More precisely, the language of transformation here is akin to that of renewal in Col 3:10. As Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, puts it, “The process of transformation into the image of Christ is none other than the restoration of the image of God which was marred through the fall of man” (*Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962], 119).

¹⁷¹ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 242.

¹⁷² Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 119. Hughes is citing Arthur Michael Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), 151.

taking place in those Paul addresses, a change that can be described as a death to an old life (vv. 5–7), or a taking off of an old self and a putting on of a new self (vv. 9–10). These seem ways to describe Christian conversion. But even before conversion all humans are created in the image of the Creator. So what happens after conversion in the life of a Christian is described as renewal in the image of the Creator. There is no change in their status as image-bearers; renewal involves Christians living out God’s intention in creating them in his image more and more fully.¹⁷³ Interestingly, it is described as renewal “in knowledge in the image of its Creator.” What is this knowledge? Paul does not specify what he means here, but Col 1:6, 9, and 10 speak of knowledge of God’s grace, God’s will, and God himself. All these would be involved in a growing relationship with God, which, as we have been arguing, is the central meaning of our creation in the image of God.

Overall, we think these three primary passages provide strong support for the idea of creation in the image of God as creation with the capacity for a relationship with God, especially associated with the human spirit. All these verses speak of what we commonly call spiritual growth, or growth in our relationship with God. There may be other aspects and nuances of meaning in these texts, but renewal of our creation in the image of God fits well with the idea of increasingly living out our capacity for relationship with God.

There are two other passages we may deal with much more summarily. Ephesians 4:24 largely echoes Col 3:10, but with less explicit image of God language; and we have already looked at 1 Cor 15:49 as a reminder that the renewal of the image of God includes our embodied nature in the resurrection of our bodies.¹⁷⁴ But these texts together require that our creation in the image of God be something capable of renewal; such renewal is associated with life in Christ; and life in Christ is all about developing one’s relationship

¹⁷³ The verb “being renewed” is present tense, suggesting a continuous, ongoing process.

¹⁷⁴ The idea of renewal is present in Eph 4:23, but there is no specific “image” or “likeness” language in v. 24. According to Markus Barth, the “addition to the Greek text of the word ‘image’ can be justified by a reference to Gen 1:27 and Col 3:10,” texts that seem to be echoed in Eph 4:24 (*Ephesians*, AB, vol. 34A [Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1960], 509).

with God, something the New Testament associates with the human spirit. We think these renewal texts constitute strong support for the interpretation of the image of God being argued for here.

Thus, by the criteria we gathered from Scripture, the interpretation of the meaning of our creation in the image of God as being created with the capacity for personal relationship with God, centered in the human spirit, seems to be well supported. Moreover, the growing consensus around this view noted above seems to confirm this interpretation of biblical teaching.

The Image as Comprising the Whole Person

In our emphasis on humanity's capacity for a relationship with God and other intangible expressions of the *imago Dei*, we are not denying the significance of the physical aspect of humanity for understanding our identity as image-bearers. Although the human body does not comprise the entirety of the image of God, it is still part of the *imago Dei*. The Western tendency to devalue the material traces back to Greek body-soul dualism; the material world belonged to the "lower" aspects of human existence, while the immaterial belonged to the "higher" realms of life. Scripture, however, presents the *imago Dei* as being both physical and spiritual. W. H. Schmidt explains that the notion of separating the corporeal from the spiritual is "foreign" to the Old Testament.¹⁷⁵ W. Zimmerli notes that the first expression of the *imago Dei* is in physical form, "a real external relationship."¹⁷⁶ The body is not portrayed as a mere container of the human spirit, but essential to being fully human, and consequently, to being in God's image. In the words of Westermann: "One will do well to split the physical from the spiritual as little as possible: the whole person is created in God's image."¹⁷⁷ The human body is neither incidental nor accidental to our humanity. Physical form is not in itself the image of God. But the human body is part of what it means to be in God's image. That the entirety of the human person—including the physical body—is created in God's image will prove critical

¹⁷⁵ Schmidt, as quoted in Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 150.

¹⁷⁶ Westermann, 149.

¹⁷⁷ Westermann, 150.

in the following chapter as we discuss the significance of humanity as male and female.

Practical Applications

Being created in the image of God underscores human distinctiveness. The foundational verses in Genesis 1 stand out, and they do so by design. In distinction to the animals and universe that were created by God's fiat, humans were created with special consideration and in God's likeness and image. This gift should make a practical difference in how Christians think of themselves and others in a number of ways.

First, it should give us a proper balance of humility and dignity. On the one hand, we dare not flatter ourselves that we are in any sense divine. We were formed from the dust of the ground. There is one Transcendent Creator, and everything else is of a different order of being, created rather than Creator. But there is one and only one created being that is said to be made in God's image, and that is humans. We are not just like all the other creatures; we are made with a special responsibility and a special privilege. We alone are the image-bearers of God in this world. Any other created image of God is an idolatrous abomination, but we are authorized to bear his image. We reflect his likeness in a way that nothing else in creation does; we are responsible for our use of this gift in a way that nothing else in creation is.

This truth should also profoundly impact the way we see every other human. Recognizing every human as an image-bearer of God means there are no insignificant people, no life that is less than worthy of full respect and dignity. Human life is special in creation, and eternal in its destination. All human relationships should be conducted in this light. C. S. Lewis profoundly comments on this point:

It is a serious thing . . . to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection

proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. . . . It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.¹⁷⁸

All humans are headed toward one of these two destinations because all are created *imago Dei*, with all the privileges and responsibilities involved.

A third practical application of being created in God's image is a different view of what life is all about. Being created in the image of God means not only that we are created *by God* and in some way *like God*, but that we are created *for God*, for relationship with him. Therefore, one cannot experience full humanity apart from a vital relationship with God. The fall did not destroy our humanity. The image remains in humans. But the heart of living as image-bearers of God is living in right relationship with God. The image of God is rooted in the doctrine of creation, but fully realized only under the doctrine of redemption. Here Brunner's distinction of formal versus material image is helpful. The image of God we bear apart from a right relationship with him is largely that of responsibility, with the expectation of judgment. It is only when we turn to him that we fully experience our created purpose, fully experience what it means to be human.

This leads to the conclusion that the fullest and most proper expressions of the image of God in humanity are those actions that flow from a proper relationship with God. To know and love God is to fulfill the intent and meaning of being human. Unbelievers do indeed image or reflect God. The doctrine of common grace supports this; the cancer researcher devoting her mind to discovering a cure, the lawyer dedicating his career to public service, the teacher investing her life in the future success of her students. Consider the words of Paul concerning the good of government—whose leaders were pagans at best, persecutors at worse—for the benefit and earthly security of believers (Rom 13:1–5). But unbelievers live out their status as image-bearers of God unwittingly, often unwillingly, and at best, partially. Various aspects of human culture may reflect some human creativity and ingenuity, but in so doing they reflect the image of God only in a very limited and partial way. It is actions flowing out of a right relationship with God that reflect

full humanity and the full image of God. We are his creatures. We cannot choose to be otherwise.

Christ is our model in his perfect humanity, not so much in doing what he did (miracles and such) but in living in the same type of relationship with the Father as he did. Jesus was a perfect man and the perfect image of God, living in moment-by-moment communion with God. We follow Jesus, not by doing the same things he did, but by following the same Father he followed, and seeking to live in the same type of communion with God in our lives.

¹⁷⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 14–15.