

THE *IMAGO DEI* IN BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Introducing the *Imago Dei*

Throughout the centuries the meaning of the *imago Dei* has been frequently debated to the degree that when approaching the subject, as one author writes, “the reader must . . . be disabused of the illusion that there has been unanimity in any camp, or that there has been an unbroken continuum of view in any school.”¹ While this diversity is present both in the discussion as a whole and within each individual perspective there are three main camps that have formed over the course of time. This paper aims to examine the major views that have developed and in turn posit an alternate hybrid-holistic view that capitalizes on the strengths of these views while avoiding their individual weaknesses. Furthermore, this paper aims to approach the topic at hand in a way that both systematic and biblical theological, noting the development of the *imago Dei* throughout the biblical metanarrative.

The Importance of the *Imago Dei*

An immediate corollary to an orthodox understanding of the image of God is the intrinsic value granted to humanity as those created in the image of God. Nancy Pearcey notes, “The Bible does not begin with the Fall but with Creation: Our value and dignity are rooted in the fact that we are created in the image of God, with the high calling of being His representatives on earth.”² Furthermore, when viewed within the creation-fall-redemption-

¹Charles Lee Feinberg, “The Image of God,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (1972): 239.

²Nancy R. Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 87.

restoration framework the entire *telos* of man is caught up in the *imago Dei*. Man was created in the image of God; this image was damaged in the fall, is subsequently being restored via progressive sanctification, and will be completely restored in glorification. Approached from this teleological perspective it is also clear that one's understanding of the image of God has profound affects upon numerous other areas of theology. The far-reaching influence of the *imago Dei* beyond mere anthropology marks its study with critical importance.

Survey of Positions on the *Imago Dei*

Despite the aforementioned lack of unanimity within the spectrum as a whole or within any particular camp there are three major approaches to defining the *imago Dei* that have taken shape over the course of history. This section will provide an overarching definition of each perspective, examine its various forms throughout history, and then address the weaknesses of each view.

The Substantive View

The first approach focuses on one or several aspects of man's substance. The substantive view roots the image of God as primarily consisting in one or more of man's physical, mental, or spiritual attributes. Noting the early prevalence of this view Louis Berkhof states, "the early Church Fathers were quite agreed that the image of God in man consisted primarily in man's rational and moral characteristics, and in his capacity for holiness; but some were inclined to include bodily traits."³ Many have traced this emphasis upon reason back to the influence of Greek philosophy and Gnosticism.⁴ Such external influences are not limited to the substantive

³Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1941), 202.

⁴Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology: Historical, Biblical, Systematic, Apologetic, Practical* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 124.

perspective, as Hendrikus Berkhof has noted. He noted that, “by studying how systematic theologies have poured meaning into Gen. 1:26, one could write a piece of Europe’s cultural history.”⁵

When explaining the Gnostic heresy Irenaeus notes the Gnostic view, creation via Demiurge, that the “image” is closely tied to man’s physical nature while the “likeness” is related to man’s spiritual being.⁶ Later in this work when stating his own position he succumbs to this same dualism, only with an expanded understanding of the term “likeness.” He expands the meaning of “likeness” by explaining that “man, and not [merely] a *part* of man, was made in the likeness of God”⁷ and yet continues to further the likeness-image dichotomy as he states, “the admixture of that fleshly nature which was moulded [*sic*] after the image of God.” This distinction was later embraced by medieval Catholic theologians who claimed that “to enable man to hold his lower nature in check, God added to the *dona naturalia* certain *dona supernaturalia*.”⁸ Millard Erickson further explains this perspective noting that “the likeness consisted of the moral qualities of God, whereas the image involved the natural attributes of God.”⁹

Many of the substantive perspectives have advocated that the image resides in several different areas of man’s substance of these are man’s physical body, soul, rationality, intellect, holiness, and/or righteousness. Of the numerous individuals who would hold to the substantive

⁵Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Faith*, trans. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 179.

⁶Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.5.5, trans. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe under the title *Against Heresies*, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325 [ANF] (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985), 1:323.

⁷Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 5.6.1 (ANF 1:531).

⁸Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 208.

⁹Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 522.

view are Justin Martyr, the above mentioned Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Carl F. H. Henry, and Walther Eichrodt.¹⁰

While the image-likeness dichotomy of Irenaeus and many medieval theologians was rejected by later individuals such as Martin Luther and John Calvin this perspective still suffers from several inherent weaknesses. First, it limits the *imago Dei* to one aspect of human nature. Second, as demonstrated above, the aspect of human nature to which the image is limited is often driven by cultural factors, as was the case with the early emphasis upon reason and its roots in Greek philosophy and Gnosticism. Third, such conclusions are often the result of mere speculation as Scripture does not delineate the faculty to which the image must be confined. Finally, as Erickson notes, if the image is to be limited to man's reason then why are some unbelievers "more intelligent and perceptive than are some highly sanctified Christians [?]"¹¹

The Functional View

The functional view defines the *imago Dei* according to how an individual acts, namely, the way in which one functions as an image bearer. The proponents of this perspective almost unanimously focus on the function of man as God's vice-regent who exercises dominion over creation. This has also been known as the royal interpretation of the image of God. J. Richard Middleton, who holds to this view, describes it as seeing "the image of God as *the royal function or office of human beings as God's representatives and agents in the world, given authorized power to share in God's rule over the earth's resources and creatures.*"¹² Further, in defense of his position Middleton notes that there is a "virtual consensus among Old Testament

¹⁰James R. Beck and Bruce Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology: A Biblical Anthropology for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2005), 145-47.

¹¹Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 531.

scholars concerning the meaning of the *imago Dei* in Genesis.”¹³ Before considering the particular nuances of Middleton’s argument the development of this position over the course of history should be examined.

Among the earlier supporters of this view is Pelagius who “identified the *imago* as the power of reason to know truth, free will to choose the good, and dominion to rule over the created order.”¹⁴ His view is a combination of the substantive and functional views, as he also notes man’s ability to reason and choose; however, he is still one of the earlier theologians to posit dominion as the image of God. Holding a similar perspective the Socinians, in their *Racovian Catechism*, note, “the phrase properly imports the authority of man, and his dominion over all inferior creatures, which result from the reason and judgement [*sic*] communicated to him; as may clearly be perceived from the very passage itself in which it is first employed.”¹⁵ Within modern times this has come to be known as the cultural mandate “because it tells us that our original purpose was to create cultures, build civilizations—nothing less”¹⁶ This view has gained considerable support in the twentieth-century due to the rise of pragmatism and utilitarianism.¹⁷

Returning to Middleton’s view he does an exemplary job of arguing for a royal interpretation of Genesis 1:26-27, especially as he contrasts the biblical account with that of other Near Eastern understandings of anthropology. In the end, however, he inadvertently points

¹²J. Richard Middleton, “The Liberating Image? Interpreting the *Imago Dei* in Context,” *Christian Scholars Review* 24.1 (1994): 12.

¹³*Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology*, 142.

¹⁵Thomas Rees, *The Racovian Catechism, with Notes and Illustrations, Translated from the Latin: To Which is Prefixed a Sketch of the History of Unitarianism in Poland and the Adjacent Countries* (London: Longman Hurst Reese Orme and Brown, 1818), 21.

¹⁶Pearcey, *Total Truth*, 47.

¹⁷Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 529.

to the inadequacy of his view as he notes how the church functions not as a mirror but as a multi-sided prism, “reflecting and refracting the Creator’s brilliant light into a rainbow of cultural activity and socio-political patterns that scintillates with the glory of God’s presence and manifests his reign of justice.”¹⁸

The inadequacy of the functional view is demonstrated by Berkouwer who, noting the fact that Genesis 1:26 does indeed confer to man a unique ruling task, explains that “this does not imply that the content of the image of God should be sought in this lordship, or that Genesis 1 is concerned with this *dominium* over other creatures as an image or representations of the complete and absolute sovereignty of God.”¹⁹ The issue here is not that the exercise of dominion or representative rule is not an aspect of the image of God; the issue is that the image cannot be limited to a mere exercise of rule. This is demonstrated by Pelagius’s and the Socinians’ inclusion of substantive characteristics within their conception of the functional perspective. Furthermore, it is demonstrated by Middleton’s prismatic description of dominion, which points to a multifaceted rule that reveals the multifaceted character of God. Simply stated, dominion alone does not comprise the image of God; other characteristics which shape and guide this dominion must be present for it to adequately image the rule of God.

The Relational View

The relational view posits that “the human person is *imago Dei* in that he or she has been created to relate with God and with other humans in community.”²⁰ This view has received

¹⁸Middleton, “The Liberating Image,” 25.

¹⁹G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1962), 71.

²⁰Beck and Demarest, *The Human Person in Theology and Psychology*, 143.

major support by the Neo-Orthodox theologians Karl Barth and Emil Brunner as well as others such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Barth explains,

“it is essential and natural to man not only to be with God but also, on the horizontal level and in analogy with this togetherness with God, to be with his fellow-man: not in isolation . . . there can be no I without the Thou, no man without the fellow-man, any more than there can be any man without God.”²¹

More specifically addressing the *imago Dei* Barth notes, “The command of God comes to man and woman in the relationship and order in which God created them to be together as His image.”²² At first it would appear that Berkouwer would hold to a relational view as he notes, “Man never appears as an isolated self-contained entity, or in the pure factuality of his weakness or strength or poverty or riches, but always and exclusively in that relationship which so decisively defines man in the full actuality of his existence.”²³ However, he critiques Barth explaining that “he is wrong in further concluding that this relation is the specific content of the image of God.”²⁴

Like the other views the relational view is also inadequate as its conception of the *imago Dei* is too narrow. Furthermore, the modern emphasis upon this view has been strongly influenced by existentialism. Erickson also notes that this view suffers, like the functional view, in that there must be substantive aspects to the image that allow humanity to exist within relationship.²⁵

²¹Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: A Selection with Introduction by Helmut Gollwitzer* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961; reprint, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 187-88.

²² *Ibid.*, 202.

²³Berkouwer, *Man*, 196.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁵Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 530.

A Hybrid-Holistic Perspective of the *Imago Dei*

If all of the above perspectives on the *imago Dei* are too narrow in their construction , what is needed is a holistic approach that takes seriously the task of biblical exegesis, engages the *imago Dei* from a biblical theological perspective, and takes into account the full spectrum of historical theology. After all, “we are no merely the image of some divine attributes; we image God himself, who is inseparable from all his attributes. . . All of God’s attributes describe his control and authority, and all equally describe his presence in the world.”²⁶

Creation

Commenting on Genesis 1:26 Wayne Grudem explains that, “the Hebrew word for ‘image’ (*tselem*) and the Hebrew word for ‘likeness’ (*demût*) refer to something that is *similar* but not identical to the thing it represents or is an ‘image’ of.”²⁷ As mentioned above, Irenaeus among others held that the words ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ indicated different aspects of the image of God; however, neither the Genesis text nor the New Testament make a distinction between these terms²⁸ as they “are used synonymously and interchangeably, and therefore do not refer to two different things.”²⁹ There are three aspects explicit to the image of God in the Old Testament, all of which must be briefly discussed. Genesis 5:1 begins a genealogy of the line of Adam and then restates their having been made in the image of God. Genesis 9:6 is critical to the discussion of the post-fall *imago Dei* as it points to man as continuing to bear God’s image after the fall.

²⁶John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God, A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 396-97.

²⁷Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 442-43.

²⁸James P. Boice, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1887), 213.

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:26-27).³⁰

Critical to correctly understanding this text is understanding the Near Eastern context into which it was spoken. “In the ancient world, images were viewed as representatives of the entity they designated. . . . In addition, images were often thought to represent and even mediate the presence of the one who is physically absent.”³¹ In what way then is man made in the image of God meant to represent Him? J. I. Packer gives the following answer,

“It was this—that when God made man, he *communicated* to him qualities corresponding to all of these. This is what the Bible means when it tells us that God made man in his own image (Gen 1:26-27)—namely, that God made man a free spiritual being, a responsible moral agent with powers of choice and action, able to commune with him and respond to him, and by nature good, truthful, holy, upright (Eccles 7:29): in a word, *godly*.”³²

Before further discussing the relationship between the communicable attributes of God and the *imago Dei* there are several other factors which must be considered.

Continuing to examine the Genesis text, throughout Genesis 1 and 2, one frequently reads that the creation was good. On this Goldsworthy explains, “There is no suggestion of a self-evident standard of goodness and harmony outside of God . . . God, who is the source of both, must define them by setting forth an arrangement that is the expression of his goodness and harmony.”³³ Understanding this is of extreme importance when, in Genesis 2:18, one reads, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” It is not good for man to be alone because God is not

²⁹Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 203.

³⁰Scripture quotations are the English Standard Version.

³¹Stanley J. Grenz, “The Social God and the Relational Self: Toward a Trinitarian Theology of the *Imago Dei*,” in *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 88.

³²J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 100.

³³Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 93.

alone; He has always existed in the Trinitarian community. In this sense those positing a relational view of the *imago Dei* were correct, this is one aspect of the image because the Triune God in who's image man was created in a God existing within eternal relationship.

Fall

Prior to integrating aspects of the functional and substantive perspectives into a holistic-hybrid understanding of the *imago Dei*, one must consider the pervasive effects of the fall upon this image. There have been two major understandings of the effects of the fall upon the image of God. The first view, building on the image-likeness dichotomy of Irenaeus, posits that the image has both structural and functional characteristics. Anthony A. Hoekema explains, "when man was created, he possessed the image of God in the structural . . . sense, and at the same time . . . in the functional . . . sense. After man had fallen into sin, however, he retained the image of God in the structural or broader sense but lost it in the functional or narrower sense."³⁴ The second view understands the image of God to be unified and thus the corruption is holistic and pervasive. "Though man is still in the image of God, in every aspect of life *some* parts of that image have been distorted or lost."³⁵

The first view is inadequate as it suffers from both improper exegesis, by propagating the image-likeness dichotomy, and it presents a limited understanding of the image of God, by limiting the image to purely structural essence. The second view properly accounts for the effects of the fall upon the image of God. Structurally man's mind and heart has become darkened (Rom 1:21; 2 Cor 4:4) and his conscience has been seared (1 Tim 4:2). Functionally man fails to exercise dominion and rather than mastering creation, he is mastered by it; as

³⁴Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 72.

³⁵Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 444.

Geerhardus Vos explains, noting the climactic nature of the curses found in Genesis 3 he translates it as, “thy hard labor will finally slay thee.”³⁶ Relationally man has been alienated from and is hostile towards God (Rom 5:10; Col 1:21; Heb 10:26-27), a hostility that not only sets man against man (Rom 1:28-31) but also sets a man against himself (Jas 4:1). The effects of the fall upon the *imago Dei* are pervasive; man does not cease to be an image bearer, and yet every aspect of that image is distorted by sin and the curse.

Profoundly affected by the fall, man is something less than human, he is something less than what he was created to be. Man is by default an image bearer and yet the image he bears is distorted and corrupt; it is an idolatrous image bearing witness to a false God. It is as Jesus rebuked the Jews saying, “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” (John 8:44). This reality sets the stage for man’s redemption and the restoration of the *imago Dei*.

Redemption

“The resplendently glorious fact about Christ as man is that in Him we have the perfect realization of the moral image of the Father.”³⁷ Christ came not merely to restore the image He came as the image; “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15). Commenting on John 1:18 Kenneth S. Wuest exclaims, “Jesus Christ is the exegesis

³⁶Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 48.

³⁷James Orr, *God’s Image in Man: And Its Defacement in the Light of Modern Denials* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1905), 271.

of God.”³⁸ When discussing the *imago Dei* during this current age the discussion must not be centered upon Old Testament texts; it must begin there, but it must progress and develop until it centers upon Jesus Christ. Earlier the teleological function of the image was mentioned; now, within this Christ-centered framework it is clear that, “humanity created in the *imago Dei* is none other than the new humanity conformed to the *imago Christi*, and the *telos* toward which the Old Testament creation narrative points is the eschatological community of glorified saints.”³⁹

Building upon a biblical theological development of the relational aspects of the *imago Dei* Middleton explains the ecclesiological nature of the image noting,

“Since Christ is head of the church, this community of faith inherits his revelatory, representative task. The ‘body of Christ’ is no mere metaphor; it is the calling of the church to continue the incarnation and mission of Christ by manifesting God’s redemptive purposes and coming kingdom.”⁴⁰

Earlier the communicable attributes of God were mentioned and now within this ecclesiological framework it is possible to briefly discuss their relation to the *imago Dei*. By the *imago Dei* it is not meant that man is made in the image of a monad but a triad who comprise one Triune Godhead. “The Trinity gives a model for human social life, because it implies that both individuality and relationship exist within the Godhead itself.”⁴¹ Using wisdom as an example, the Trinitarian-ecclesiological nature of the *imago Dei* can be observed. Wisdom deals chiefly with the application of knowledge. As a divine attribute God always conducts Himself wisely. As an image bearing community the church is wise not simply when they as individuals make right decisions but when they as a community help one another live wisely (Colossians 3:15-17; I Thessalonians 5:14).

³⁸Kenneth S. Wuest *Golden Nuggets: From the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1940), 86.

³⁹Grenz, “The Social God and the Relational Self,” 88.

⁴⁰Middleton, “The Liberating Image,” 24.

Restoration

The image lost in the fall and progressively, though not completely, restored through sanctification will one day be completely restored through glorification. “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:29). It is in this final restoration that the *telos* of the *imago Dei* is finally realized. Relationally man is reconciled to God, functionally man is now able to worship God, and substantively man is restored in an imperishable image bearing body.

⁴¹Pearcey, *Total Truth*, 132.

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