



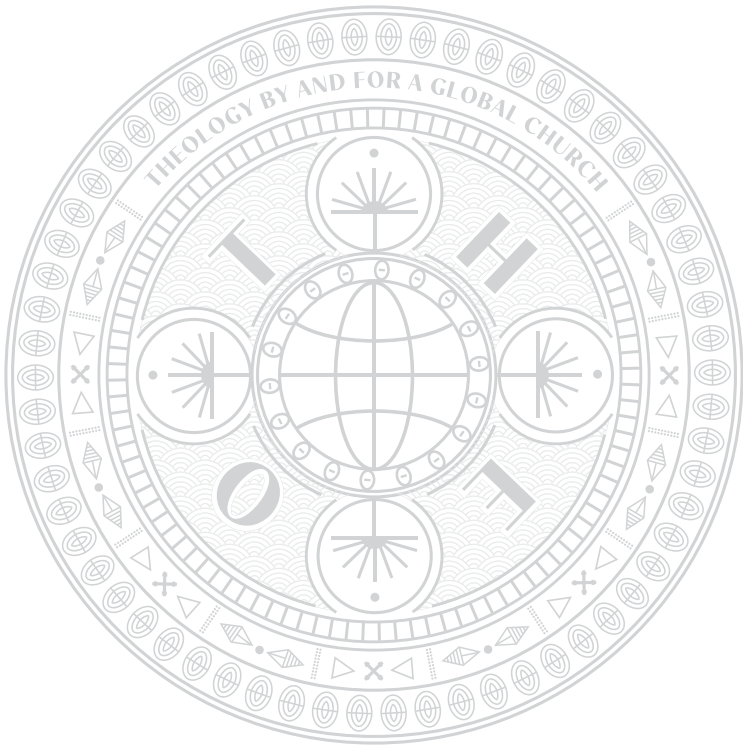
# Theo Global

JOURNAL *Vol. II*

*The Crown of Creation*

HUMANITY, THE IMAGE OF GOD, AND THE FALL





Theo Global Journal, Vol. II  
The Crown of Creation  
Humanity, the Image of God, and the Fall

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# Theo Global

JOURNAL

Vol. II

## *The Crown of Creation*

HUMANITY, THE IMAGE OF GOD,  
AND THE FALL

*Managing Editor*

*Adam P. Smith*



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# Preface

In the second century, Irenaeus wrote in *Against Heresies*, “*gloria enim dei vivens homo*,” that “life in man is the glory of God.” It is a theological affirmation of humanity’s unique place in creation and salvation, a humble yet dignifying place of honoring and glorifying God.

The contents of this volume emerged from four regional Theo Global symposiums in 2025, which collectively concentrated on theological anthropology and the *imago Dei*. These four symposiums, titled *The Crown of Creation: Humanity, the Image of God, and the Fall*, were attended by a body of doctoral-level professors and theologians from South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East & North Africa, and East Africa. Visiting scholars from Latin America, Central Asia, and North America added a further wealth of perspectives and insights in their participation and presentations. A handful of scholars participated in multiple symposiums, bringing considerations, consistency, and continuity from one symposium to the next.

The authors of this volume proposed and prepared papers in advance of the symposiums on self-selected topics, then engaged in group and personal discussions after their presentations. Following these presentations and discussions, they finalized their papers, which then underwent a blind peer review process. The reader will notice two papers each from Michael Horton and Justin Holcomb, who both serve as senior fellows for Theo Global and were thus asked to prepare more than the other participants as extraregional visitors.

A video collection of symposium presentations and discussions is available on Sola Media’s Theo Global YouTube playlist. The reader is encouraged to also refer to these videos as another medium to observe this unique collection of authors and their personalities, voices, tone, and points of emphasis. In this medium, they and their papers are likely to be received less abstractly and more personally.

In the historic Nicene and Apostles’ creeds, Christians throughout the globe and the centuries have held and confessed one holy catholic Church, amongst biblical and central truths to the Christian faith. Fittingly, the Nicene Creed was developed and adopted at the geographical crossroads where East meets West as it addressed challenges to the divinity of Christ and expressed the church’s

catholicity. The Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 likewise gathered, discussed, and corresponded in order to bring clarity and unity regarding the matter of Jew and Gentile distinction that threatened to divide the nascent faith. In later centuries, the Reformers also came together in conversation—convening in assemblies, disputations, and even discreet pubs to work through theological identifications, formulations, and commitments.

Since 2015, Theo Global has facilitated annual regional theological forums, publications, and productions among leading Protestant (for lack of a better label globally) theologians around the world, to do theology together for the health of the global church. These engagements seek to create a place for new regional, cross-regional, and worldwide theological conversations and relationships for the global church by the global church.

After 10 years of Theo Global engagements, how evident it has become that Christianity is both ancient and expanding in the Majority World—brimming with histories and novel horizons of Christian theological insights, articulations, and applications! The essays in this volume recognize and showcase this.

Within the essays contained in this journal, the reader will find unique and insightful interactions with the biblical doctrine of God and its touchpoints in the church's life, worship, history, and culture. Wherever your vantage point may be, may the collective wisdom and insight from theologians of the global church enhance your faith, wonder, and confidence in God's majesty. May the goodness, faithfulness, and mercy of God be written ever more upon your mind and your heart by His Spirit's hand as we *do theology together*, for His glory.

Adam P. Smith

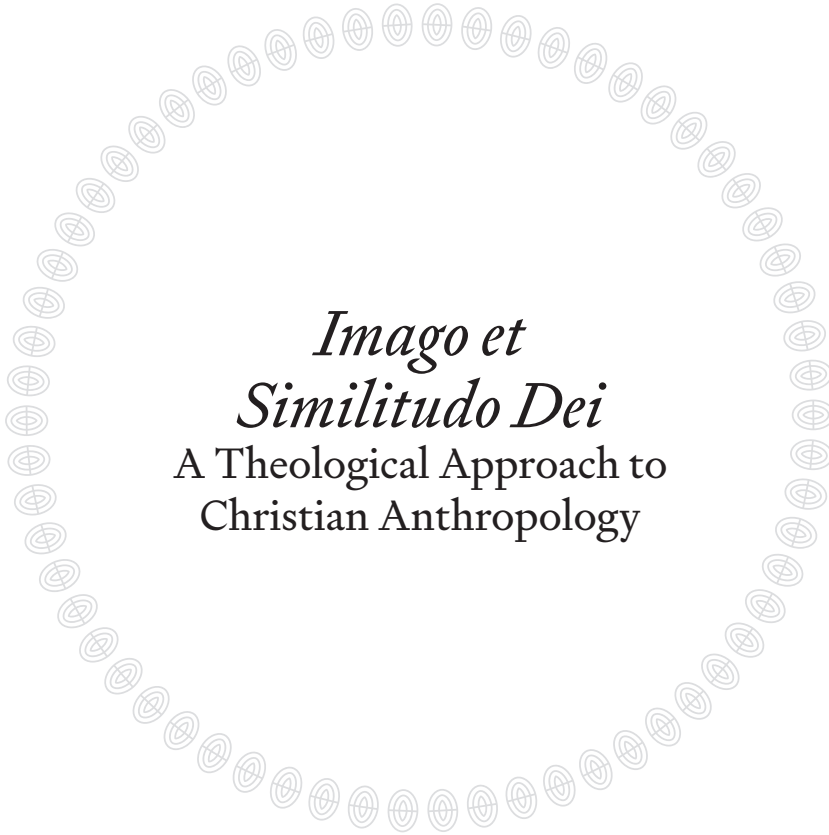
*Adam Smith is Director of Theo Global and has led the Theo Global project since 2015.  
He is a minister in the Presbyterian Church of America.*



IMAGE OF GOD







*Imago et  
Similitudo Dei*  
A Theological Approach to  
Christian Anthropology

**DR. JULIÁN GUTIÉRREZ**

Professor,  
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Imago et Similitudo Dei: A Theological Approach to Christian Anthropology<sup>1</sup>

U pon the revealed testimony in Scripture, theological anthropology—the Christian doctrine of human being—has historically recognized human exceptionality as stemming from a singular divine endowment announced through divine speech at the moment of creation.<sup>2</sup> For the most part, theological and exegetical analyses underscore the distinctive status of humanity, emphasizing that the creation narrative asserts that no other creature was created according to the “image” and “likeness” of their Creator. This specific anthropological feature developed into what is referred to in theological idiom as the doctrine of the image of God, also known as the *imago dei* in its Latinized form. Although scholarly opinions and church traditions diverge on the precise nature of the *imago dei*, it is widely accepted that the biblical terminology from which the concept is derived suggests that the *‘adam* occupy a place of preeminence in the created order, signifying among other things their inherent value and dignity.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the church’s history, there have been different proposals attempting to decipher the precise content of the enigmatic phrase “image of God.” However, decrypting the theological meaning of the *imago dei* has turned out to be a complex task. On the one hand, the Bible does not provide an explicit definition of the *imago dei*, leaving the resolution to overcome a series of intricate interpretative issues primarily regarding the doctrine’s *classical locus* in the book of Genesis (1:26–27; cf. 5:1–3; 9:6). Concurrently, the scriptural allusions to humanity as specifically created in the image of God are relatively scarce, limiting the textual investigation of a major theme in Christian anthropology to a few occurrences.<sup>4</sup> Textual and

1 This paper is inspired and influenced by the “theological theology” approach championed by the late theologian Rev. Prof. John B. Webster.

2 Despite some references about the equal standing between humans and animals, as in Eccles. 3:18–21.

3 In Hebrew, the word translated in English as Adam is a generic term for mankind and thus includes man and woman. Gen. 1:26–27 (ESV): “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.” (Italics not in the original).

4 “Specific references to man as the image or likeness of God are infrequent in Scripture (Gen. 1:26–27; 5:1–3; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9 of the creation of man; 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15, cf. Heb. 1:3 of Christ; Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:10; Eph. 4:22–24; Phil. 3:21; Col. 3:10 of the Christian being restored in Christ). But the allegation (e.g., by Hermann Gunkel, 1862–1932) that the *imago dei* plays a far more significant role in systematic theology than in biblical thought must be questioned. While statistically the phrase is infrequent, the interpretation of man which it enshrines is all-pervasive (cf. with the above Ps. 8; Rom. 1:18ff.; Phil. 2:5–11).” In Sinclair B. Ferguson, “Image of God,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (IVP, 1988), 328.

exegetical challenges have led to derivative theological inquiries that revolve around the enigmatic notion of the *imago dei*. The fourth-century Cappadocian father, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–394) captures the idea well when he states:

What, then, you may ask, is the definition of the image? How is the incorporeal likened to the body? How the temporal to the eternal? That which is altered by change to the unalterable? That which is subject to passion and corruption to that which is impassible and incorruptible? That which constantly dwells with evil and grows up with it to that which is unmixed with any evil? For great is the span between that which is conceived regarding the archetype and that which has come to be in accordance with the image; for the image is properly so named if it keeps the likeness to the prototype, but if the imitation is removed from the subject, then it is something else and not its image.<sup>5</sup>

In the remainder of this essay, I reflect on the theme of theological anthropology with a particular attention to the pivotal concept of the doctrine of the *imago dei*. The theological character of this discussion will be revealed via interpreting a relevant biblical text in Genesis, a brief overview of historical data, and doctrinal exposition. First, I seek to present an understanding of the *imago dei* that corrects the unbalanced view of some accounts in the premodern tradition, while also stepping away from the dislocation of theological anthropology out of the doctrine of creation in some contemporary accounts. Second, I intend to stimulate further introspection on the consideration of a specific framework for formulating a particularly Christian anthropology, one that accounts for the origin, constitution, and destiny of humanity in consideration of God as their ground and the primary object of theological investigation. The subsequent sections of this presentation will begin with a succinct account of the historical development of the doctrine of the *imago dei* in the voice of some representative of the tradition. Subsequently, a theological interpretation of Genesis 1:26–27 will be undertaken to support a holistic understanding of the *imago dei*. Finally, I present some preliminary considerations favoring a methodological approach grounded in a theological understanding of Christian anthropology.

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5 Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Human Image of God*, ed. and trans. John Behr, *Oxford Earlier Christian Texts* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 16.3; 221, 23.

## I. THE *IMAGO DEI* IN THE HISTORY OF THEOLOGY: CASE EXAMPLES

Scholarly attempts within theological history have focused on systematizing the various interpretations of the *imago dei*. Two primary thematic frameworks have been posited as overarching categories for most proposals: the *structural* and the *functional* perspectives.<sup>6</sup> The variations in these perspectives stem from their conceptions of what constitutes being created in the image of God and the extent to which this image is diminished (or obliterated) following the Fall. The structural approach, also referred to as *constitutional* or *substantive*, is the predominant belief which suggests that the essence of the *imago dei* is inherent in a fundamental characteristic of the human nature and hence ubiquitous in every member of the human race and thus essential to defining humanity.<sup>7</sup> The functional perspective seeks to explain the *imago dei* not according to what humans *are* but in consideration of what they *do*. Under the structural view, there are accounts wherein the *imago dei* is linked to some physical, psychological, or spiritual element in the human nature, such as the body (e.g., Augustine, Lombard, Aquinas, Calvin, and Turretin), the mind/soul (e.g., Gregory of Nyssa) and its powers (i.e., intellect, self-awareness, reason, agency of will), and morality (i.e., moral discernment and inherent righteousness).<sup>8</sup> The functional perspective of the *imago dei* suggests a line of investigation centered on particular operational characteristics of humankind. This includes a strong focus on relationships, both with God and with other people, as seen in Barth's work. The functional perspective further associates the *imago dei* with mankind's royal standing and command over the world, as supported by John Chrysostom and the Socinians.<sup>9</sup>

Some preliminary caveats are necessary: (1) The theologians referenced here do not fully capture all the subtleties inherent to their historical eras. Nevertheless, they play a crucial role in the theological history of interpreting the doctrine

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6 Initially credited to ethicist Paul Ramsey in *Basic Christian Ethics* (Scribner, 1950), 250ff. Recaptured in more modern monographs on the image of God, such as Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 142 ff. Probably adapted in Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology. Volume 2: Man and Christ*, 4 vols. (Crossway, 2020), 177 ff. Anthony Hoekema (following Herman Bavinck and Louis Berkhof) speaks about the structural and functional scheme as broader and narrower, or formal and material, in *Created in God's Image* (W. B. Eerdmans, 1986), 72.

7 Though during the Reformation, Martin Luther argued that the *imago dei* is lost after the Fall. *Contra*, Gen. 9:6; James 3:9, and Augustine. Luther notes, "Our adversaries today maintain the foolish position that the image and similitude of God remain even in a wicked person." In *Lectures on Genesis*, Chapters 1–5, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. George V. Schick, vol. 1, 55 vols., *Luther's Works* (Concordia Publishing House, 1958), 90.

8 Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, n. 9, 10, 11; 178

9 Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 183–185.

of the *imago dei*. (2) Though a pattern is evident, agreement with structural or functional interpretations of the *imago* is not inherently linked to the theologian's historical context.

The patristic period arose within the framework of early Jewish thought, concurrently with the ascendance of Gnosticism and the intellectual dominance of classical Greek philosophy. Early Christian theologians confronted several difficulties during Christianity's initial doctrinal development, especially those related to the nature of God, like the doctrine of the Trinity and the metaphysical identity of the incarnated Son. In the theological writings of the second-century Church Father Irenaeus (c. 130–200), who served as the Bishop of Lyon for most of his life, we encounter the initial comprehensive exploration of the concept of *imago dei*.<sup>10</sup> Following the creation account in Genesis, Irenaeus affirmed God created humanity to reflect his *image* and *likeness*. He presents the traditional patristic difference between “image” (*eikōn*) and “likeness” (*homoioōsis*), arguing that the “image” remained after the Fall, unlike the “likeness.”<sup>11</sup> In the account provided by Irenaeus, the “image” of God is identified with psychological faculties of reason and will (freedom to choose), the metaphysical qualities that establish humanity. Properly speaking, however, there is a physical element attached to the “image,” which Irenaeus explains by noting that the true *imago dei* is Christ himself, and humans are thus made according to the image of Christ. Conversely, the human “likeness” to God is established by the gift of the Spirit, demonstrated by their original righteousness and the ability to obey God. Having lost the divine “likeness” (i.e., spirit), fallen man (the *carnal*, the one with an *animal* nature) is now an imperfect being whose restoration depends on Christ and the redemptive work of the Spirit.<sup>12</sup>

Medieval Western theology inherited the *imago dei* tradition through the teachings of Augustine (354–430), whose position became mainstream in Christianity. Augustine's contribution lies in his emphasis on reading the image of the Trinity into the human soul—equating memory (*memoria*), intellect (*intelligentia*), and will (*voluntas*) to the *imago dei*—vis-à-vis how the human intellect operates in the soul in his existential quest for remembering, loving, and knowing God.<sup>13</sup> It

10 Irenaeus appealed to the unwavering support for the *imago dei* concept across the Old and New Testaments to refute Gnostic heresy, particularly Marcion's claim of two different gods.

11 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, vol. 1, 10 vols., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (W. B. Eerdmans, 1953), 5.6.1; p. 532.

12 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.6.1; p. 532.

13 Augustine, *On the Trinity: Books 8–15*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews, trans. Stephen McKenna, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, ed. Karl Ameriks and Desmond M. Clarke (Cambridge University Press,

is in this context that the name of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) surges in our historical survey as the most representative scholastic thinker of the medieval period. As is the pattern in the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas’s treatment of the *imago dei* begins with a seeming rejection, followed by a defense of the concept. Upon further elaboration of Augustine’s theology and integrating his own philosophical perspective based on Aristotle’s philosophy, Aquinas asserted that the *imago dei* is found in the creature’s intellect, thus indicating that only angels and humans are created in the image of God.<sup>14</sup> Rationality, comprehended in relation to God and not as a faculty separate from him, is the ineffable characteristic of the *imago dei* within the creature. In Aquinas’s view, the image of God is present within the human person in a threefold manner: (1) universally, as a natural aptitude (*aptitudinem naturaem*) for knowing and loving God; (2) in the believer, as a disposition or habit (*habitu*) to knowing and loving God imperfectly; and (3) in the blessed (believers in glory), by knowing and loving God perfectly.<sup>15</sup> What sets Aquinas apart is his distinction between the imago as an endowment/ability (*aptitude*) and the *imago* as an action (*habitu*).<sup>16</sup> In Aquinas’s anthropology, humanity in its original state required of a special gift of supernatural grace (*supernaturalis donum gratiae*) to keep itself in submission to God through his reason—the imago! The Fall caused humanity to lose its divine gift, but not the *imago dei*, resulting in uncontrolled passions, rebellion against God, and the need for the restoration of its former grace. In concrete, the characteristic medieval view of the *imago dei*, conceived under the nature-grace dialectic, taught that the “image” was man’s natural powers of intellect and will, whereas the “likeness” an extra gift of grace, namely, original righteousness.<sup>17</sup> In this account, the powers of the intellect and will correspond to the natural attributes of God, and the supernatural gift of grace resembles the divine virtues of faith, hope, and love. The Fall took away the gift of grace (“likeness”) without destroying the natural faculties (“image”).

During the Reformation, John Calvin (1509–1564) emerged as a representative figure among the magisterial reformers in the theological history of the doctrine

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2002), X.12; p. 59.

14 Though in angles more perfectly, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae. Volume I3, Man Made to God’s Image (Ia. 90–102)*, ed. Edmund Hill (Cambridge University Press, 2006), I.93.3; p. 59–60.

15 Aquinas, I.93.3; p. 59–60. Stanley Grenz puts it in this way: The first is “the image of creation or nature,” the second “the image of recreation or grace,” and the third “the image of likeness or glory.” In Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 158–59.

16 David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (Camelot Press, 1953), 115.

17 Thomas’s *gratia non tollat naturam sed perficiat* (grace does not destroy nature but perfects it). First articulated in *Summa Theologiae. Volume I, Christian Theology (Ia. I)*, ed. Thomas Gilby (Cambridge University Press, 2006), Ia.1.8; p. 31.

of the *imago dei*. The *Institutes*' opening section features Calvin's epistemological principle that addresses the relationship between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves. The correlation between anthropological and theological knowledge suggests a symbiotic interaction where contemplation of one leads to recognition of the other and vice versa.<sup>18</sup> Calvin's foundational premise underscores the necessity of theological anthropology being constructed upon God as the source of revelation and sanctification for the human intellect. According to Calvin, the *imago dei* is mirrored in two ways: (1) universally, in the work of creation and (2) particularly, in human beings.<sup>19</sup> The *imago dei* is fully manifested in humanity in a broad sense, encompassing both physical and spiritual aspects, with its primary residence in the faculties of the human soul (mind/heart).<sup>20</sup> Calvin, along with many of his contemporaries, rejects the conventional distinction between "image" and "likeness" based on exegetical grounds and also contests the idea that the *imago* is equivalent to man's dominion over creation.<sup>21</sup> In determining the nature of the *imago*, Calvin posits that it is the embodiment of human moral integrity. In his prelapsarian state, the 'adam reflected the *imago dei* perfectly. Following the Fall, humankind lost its original righteousness yet kept the faculties ("natural gifts") of reason and will, albeit profoundly impaired.<sup>22</sup> Calvin thus concludes that the *imago dei* persists in fallen humanity, though only in vestigial form. In this view, the restoration of the image of God occurs through an act of divine grace by the agency of the Holy Spirit and the Word.<sup>23</sup>

The progression from the Reformation to the Protestant Orthodox era that preceded the Enlightenment and modernity was defined by analogous perspectives on the image of God: The *imago* is inherently connected to humanity and reflected in the entire composition of the human condition in one psychosomatic unit.<sup>24</sup> Protestant theologians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries emphasize humanity's spiritual elements as the location where the *imago dei* is confined.<sup>25</sup> Karl Barth (1886–1968) developed his theology of the *imago dei* in different stages, initially marked by the conviction that the *imago*

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18 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. Ford Lewis Battles, trans. John T. McNeill, 2 vols., *Library of Christian Classics* (The Westminster Press, 1977), I.1.1–2.

19 The goal is doxological in both cases.

20 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.15.3.

21 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.15.3–4.

22 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.15.4.

23 Calvin, *Institutes*, I.15.4; 3.3.9.

24 Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set out and Illustrated from the Sources*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (George Allen & Unwin, 1950), 232.

25 Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 171.

had been totally lost as a result of the Fall.<sup>26</sup> In the later stages of his theological development concerning the *imago dei*, Barth revised his view, maintaining that being human dictates being in the image of God: “He is the image of God in the fact that he is man.”<sup>27</sup> Barth does not interpret the Fall as a definitive loss of the image of God, because a verifiable historical shift from innocence to corruption has not been established.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, drawing upon Genesis 1:27 and 5:1, Barth defines the “image” and “likeness” of God in relational terms as “existence in confrontation” (i.e., association and union) between man and man, man and woman, and between man/woman and God.<sup>29</sup> To put it concretely, the *imago dei* signifies the capability to exist in interaction with both fellow humans and God. The relational connection characterized by the “I”/“Thou” dynamic is from the moment of creation exclusive to man and woman as *imago dei* bearers, precisely because Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the archetype of such relationality. It is important to note that as Barth emphatically rejects any point of contact between man and God, the *imago* cannot be in the intellect or reason. It comes as no surprise within Barth’s theological system that the concept of the image of God finds its expression primarily through an analogy of relation (*analogia relationis*) rather than through an analogy of being (*analogia entis*).<sup>30</sup>

## II. TOWARD A THEOLOGICAL ACCOUNT OF THE *IMAGO DEI*: THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

In a recently published monograph, Ryan Peterson asserts that “reflection on the *imago dei* is primarily a matter of biblical interpretation.”<sup>31</sup> The validity of such a statement affords an opportunity for engagement with the biblical text through a hermeneutical method that seeks to read and interpret Scripture theologically and canonically (in the presence of and with the church) for the ultimate purpose of knowing and loving God.<sup>32</sup>

Genesis 1:26–27, the *classical locus* for discussions regarding the image of God, provides the theological exegetical framework for the ensuing doctrinal and

26 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Volume I, the Doctrine of the Word God*, § 1–7, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (T&T Clark, 2009), 235.

27 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Volume III, the Doctrine of Creation*, § 40–42, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (T&T Clark, 2009), 183.

28 Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Volume III, the Doctrine of Creation*, § 40–42, 200.

29 Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Volume III, the Doctrine of Creation*, § 40–42, 193.

30 Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Volume III, the Doctrine of Creation*, § 40–42, 193.

31 Ryan S. Peterson, *The Imago Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation* (Eisenbrauns, 2016), 18.

32 I am referring to what has been known as “theological interpretation of Scripture.”

constructive assertions within this paper. It is, however, pertinent to offer two clarifications: (1) Due to space constraints and in consideration of the scope of this essay, the following theological exegesis of Genesis 1:26–27 will be concise and limited to highlighting critical theological elements in the text that are directly relevant to the subsequent dogmatic presentation; and (2) while it is acknowledged that a comprehensive interpretative analysis of the biblical text concerning the doctrine of the image of God, whether through theological exegesis, historical-grammatical, historical-critical, or any other hermeneutical approach, should and must include other passages from the Old Testament and New Testament, our objective here is satisfied with the theological reading of the selected text only.

The primeval history comprised in Genesis 1–11 has been known for posing a highly complex explanatory challenge to its interpreters. The number of seminal themes for the Christian faith in these chapters of Scripture are many, including a theistic cosmogony, the origin of humanity, the source of evil, the Fall, the flood and the destruction of the world, just to name a few. Critical exegesis has focused on identifying the composition of the text (e.g., Moses, documentary hypothesis), source materials, and literary genre, alongside intricate debates about linguistic and grammatical analysis of Hebrew syntax, and investigations of historical context. Conversely, theological exegesis focuses on the Bible in its canonical form, and more significantly, it emphasizes the theological interpretation of the text within the communion of the saints, past and present.<sup>33</sup>

The prologue (1:1–2:3) in the book of Genesis is about God. More specifically, it is an account of how the Creator brought the universe into existence “in the beginning” and gave structure to the “formless and empty darkness.” The opening phrase “in the beginning” is relevant as it signals to the irreducibly primary instance in the sequence of events known as time history and also provides an explanation for it by introducing the existence of an uncreated, eternal, self-existent being who requires no beginning—God the Creator. Moreover, Genesis 1:1 denotes an ontological distinction between the causal agent of creation, “God,” and the object created, “the heavens and the earth.” God is the cause of creation but is not ontologically constituted by it, nor is creation an extension of God’s being. God is, therefore, introduced as the agent responsible for creation, not merely

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33 Canonical as J. T. Pennington says: “the normative context for reading the Bible theologically within the church.” See “Biblical Theology,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell (Baker Academic, 2017).

in the sense of providing architectural structure to matter already constituted but as the one who creates everything out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) by virtue of his infinite power and the mediation of his commanding speech, his Word: “Then God said ... ” The apparent existence of matter in a state of unproductive emptiness—“in the beginning”—have led some modern interpreters to conclude that creation begins in verse 3, and thus verse 1 cannot support the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>34</sup> Such a conclusion is not necessarily the only possible explanation; God could have simply created matter (v. 1–2) and then shaped it according to his creative plan (v. 3ff.). It is a movement from the general to the particular.<sup>35</sup> This suggests that God created “the heavens and the earth,” thereby bestowing upon the latter the qualities of fruitfulness and habitability.

The six-day creation narrative detailed through verses 3–25 reaches its climatic point with the creation of humanity, the *‘adam* (ha-adam) of verses 26–27. That God announces the creation of the *‘adam* by emphasizing his direct participation (“Then God said, *‘let us make ... ’*”) suggests a momentous event indicating a qualitative distinction between humanity’s being and that of the remaining of creation. The distinctive characteristic is disclosed immediately: Among all the creatures, only the *‘adam* is made in the “image” and in the “likeness” of the Creator. The significance of the enigmatic plural form in the divine speech (“Let us make ... ”) has been the focus of extensive investigation for centuries. Several interpretations have been proposed to identify the “us” to whom God is referring in Genesis 1:26. A mythical reading of the passage suggests that the “us” is a reference to other gods somehow missed by the editor of Genesis; others believe it is a reference to the earth (Cf. Gen. 2:7 man formed from the dust of the earth) or even angels; still some affirm, on grammatical grounds, that it is a plural of majesty or a plural of deliberation. Of further interest, a body of mostly ancient biblical scholars posits that the plural form in Genesis 1:26 suggests, if not a distinctly Trinitarian implication (e.g., John Calvin, Wolfgang Musculus), at least an understanding by the biblical author of the concept of plurality within unity.<sup>36</sup> A thorough examination, using critical exegesis, has been conducted to assess the respective strengths and weaknesses inherent in each position, resulting in a pending stalemate. Nonetheless, a number of interpretations would be

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34 Augustine also noted the paradox posed by preexisting matter vis-à-vis *creatio ex nihilo*. See, “Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis,” in *The Works of St. Augustine, Vol I/13: On Genesis* (New City Press, 2002), 119.

35 Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (W. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 117.

36 Cf. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 134.

dismissed from a theological and canonical perspective due to their implications, which undermine the cohesive biblical account of God, leading to a deficiency in doctrinal consistency. For instance, Christian theology recognizes that the alleged gods from ancient mythical accounts lack in their nature the excellence to account for the existence of the universe in the way Genesis depicts it. Moreover, from a theological perspective, suggesting that God would deliberate with anything or anyone regarding the creation of the sole creature designed to reflect his image and likeness would be questionable. After all, the Bible nowhere states that humankind is created in the image and likeness of anything or anyone other than God himself. Thus, provided that it is not interpreted as a direct reference to the Triune nature of God, the “us” in Genesis 1:26 may be understood as a “plural of fullness,” symbolizing inherent plurality and outward unity.<sup>37</sup> Following this, the substance of the divine pronouncement is disclosed: Humankind is created “in [God’s] our image, in [God’s] our likeness ... ”

Following the earlier analysis of various interpretations of the *imago dei*, the subsequent discussion will be centered on a theological reading of the text, rather than expanding the history of its interpretation. As the text moves from the impersonal (“Let the ...”) to the personal (“Let us make ...”), the creative sequence takes on significance. The narrative of Genesis 1 suggests the deliberate placement of the creation of the ‘*adam*’ as the final act of creation, signifying the glorious culmination of God’s creative work. As Lord of the created order, God delegates ruling authority to humankind, empowering them to govern over every other living creature. In this scheme, the gift of creation is followed by the attribute of dominion. The ‘*adam*’ is appointed “king of the lower creation” so that they can benefit from its goodness and excellencies and to honor God by resembling his righteous heavenly ruling. The Leyden theologians summarize this point well in Disputation 13 of the *Synopsis Purioris* (1620–1624): “Man is clearly the high point and goal of nature’s lower order, yet he also belongs to a higher order, he is the ‘sum’ of everything and the bond that links earthly and heavenly things.”<sup>38</sup> It should be stressed that dominion is not synonymous with the *imago dei* but rather its consequence. Humanity’s ruling prerogative over the lower order is subsequent, according to the order in Scripture, to God’s announcement to create mankind in his image and likeness. The *imago dei* is further elaborated by disclosing the nature

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37 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 134; Andrew E. Steinmann, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, ed. David G. Firth and Tremper Longman III (IVP, 2019), 57.

38 *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae: Synopsis of a Purer Theology*, ed. Dolf te Velde, trans. Riemer A. Faber, vol. 1, *Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions*, ed. Rein Ferwerda et al., vol. 187 (Brill, 2015), 315.

of the *‘adam* in terms of bisexual plurality, thus the statement: “male and female he created them.” The foremost ethical ramification stems from the recognition of men and women’s equal value and dignity as created in God’s image bearers. Sexual differentiation is not explained as the result of something purely biological, much less accidental, subjective, or arbitrary. Instead, it originates from God’s original design, characterized by completeness and complementarity—a concept intrinsically linked to the gift of procreation and the divine mandate to “be fruitful and multiply” in verse 28.

### III. DOCTRINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is likely safe to argue that the doctrine of the *imago dei* makes up a core principle of theological anthropology, providing a framework for theological discussions regarding the nature of human existence. However, for anthropology to be theological, it must not stop at a biblical study of man (something good in itself), but it must extend its reflection to the relation between man as a creature and God as the Creator.

Previous observations indicate that most interpretations of the *imago dei* typically associate it with something originating at the moment of creation, either as an inherent aspect of humanity’s constitution (structural: physical, mental, or moral) or as a specific activity or role humans do (functional: dominion, relationality). Though these interpretations contribute meaningfully to our understanding of the *imago dei*, their inherent limitations prevent them from being fully satisfactory. Structural understandings are taken at the expense of functional proposals and vice versa. Classical Reformed theology offers an initial corrective by rejecting the bifurcation between the two. Take, for instance, Francis Turretin (1623–1687): “These [gifts bestowed in creation] were not only essential or only accidental, but both at the same time: internal as well as external, by which he was placed in such a degree of nature, perfection and authority that no visible creature was either more like or more closely allied to God.”<sup>39</sup> An integral view of the image of God incorporates essential/constitutional and operational/performative components, enabling an explanation of the Fall’s destructive effects on humankind (i.e., the loss of original righteousness) while still acknowledging the remnants of the image in fallen individuals (reason and will). In addition, consider the following: If the *imago dei* consists, at a minimum, in resembling/mirroring God, a theological

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39 Francis Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae*, 3 vols. (Geneve: Samuel de Tornes, 1689), 465–66.

argument may be constructed to the effect that, as the divine works reveal the divine nature, humankind must, analogically (not identically!) mirror God in this respect. Hence, the *imago* should include both structural and functional elements relative to God.

To speak theologically about anthropology requires defining the proper *locus* of the study of humankind within the overall thematic structure of Christian doctrine. Traditionally, the doctrine of creation has been the place from which the doctrine of humanity originates and logically develops. However, contemporary anthropological perspectives have deviated from its initial positioning within the doctrine of creation to what some have termed a doctrine of “incarnate grace” and other “incarnational Christologies” and then to eschatology, culminating in the doctrine of the Trinity. The first move is prompted by an understanding of saving grace that is interpreted in its incarnated form in the person of Jesus. The second move is motivated by the pivotal role of the New Testament’s eschatology in giving testimony about Jesus as the one who inaugurates the kingdom of God ahead of time. Finally, the third action stems from an ontological understanding of personhood, as proposed by the Church Fathers, and considers the statement: One God, three persons. It remains, however, a matter worthy of reconsideration whether a theological doctrine of humanity is best understood as positioned within the doctrine of creation, and by extension articulated from a direct consideration of God in himself.

The doctrine of creation is critical for theology as it emphasizes a more foundational concept: God, as the proper object of theological inquiry. Creation teaches us about the essential constitution of created reality, but it also communicates knowledge related to the perfection of God’s existence as the one who brings everything into being *ex nihilo*. Concerning the former, creation speaks about the subordinate status of reality and thus of its ontological dependence with respect to its creator as creaturely beings subsist and are sustained only by divine fiat and power. As such, creation receives from God rather than determines for itself its meaning and purpose. Regarding the latter, creation suggests that God is of infinite power, self-existent, eternal, and that he acts according to the determinations of his will and intellect. Since the creation of humankind is not isolated from creation *ex nihilo*, it must be doctrinally susceptible to similar considerations. If so, the doctrine of the *imago dei* as theologically interpreted above points to the greatness of God as Creator, and to humankind as his created analogy. Speaking about the dignity of creatures, the late dogmatician John Webster noted: “Dogmatic and moral theological teaching about the dignity of creatures is an extension of teaching

about God and the works of God.” I suggest then that whatever the nature of the *imago dei* is, it is an ectypal resemblance of an archetypal aspect stemming primarily from God in himself as revealed in the economy of grace, which has its starting point in the act creation.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This essay aimed to provide a theological perspective on Christian anthropology through a detailed analysis of the doctrine of the *imago dei*. The historical study showed that interpreters have historically differed in their perspectives on humanity’s image of God, oscillating between structural and functional understandings. From Irenaeus’s delineation of image and likeness to Barth’s relational ontology, including Augustine’s trinitarian psychology, Thomas Aquinas’s synthesis of nature and grace, and Calvin’s stress on moral integrity, every theological era has provided worthwhile perspectives while simultaneously demonstrating specific weaknesses. The tendency to bifurcate structural from functional interpretations or to privilege one dimension at the expense of the other has resulted in incomplete accounts of this central anthropological doctrine.

In this investigation, the theological examination of Genesis 1:26–27 demonstrates that the *imago dei* is not limited to either inherent qualities or functional abilities. Rather, the biblical text presents humanity as both structurally constituted by God’s creative act and functionally oriented toward reflecting divine attributes through dominion, relationality, and moral agency. The Genesis narrative’s climactic presentation of human creation, the preceding divine planning, and the detailing of sexual differentiation collectively underscore the *imago dei* as a thorough concept that encapsulates all aspects of human existence, encompassing physical, psychological, moral, and relational dimensions. This holistic understanding corrects the imbalanced emphasis found in some premodern accounts that located the image exclusively in the soul or intellect, while also challenging contemporary approaches that have dislocated anthropology from its proper locus within the doctrine of creation.

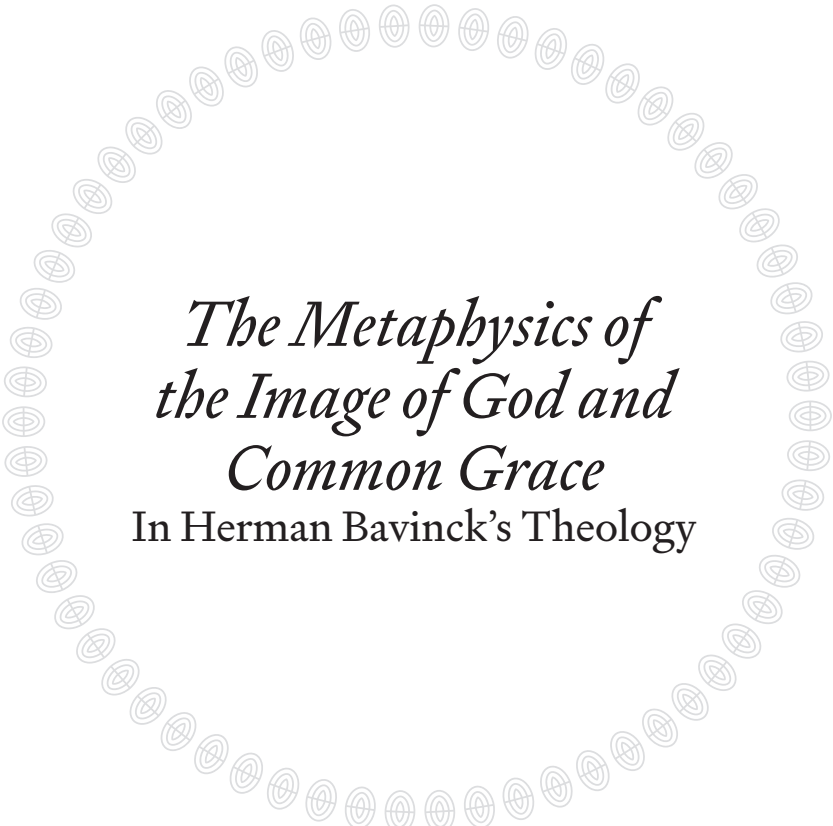
The constructive proposal advanced here maintains that theological anthropology must be grounded in the doctrine of creation and, by extension, in God himself as the primary object of theological inquiry. To speak theologically about humanity requires more than biblical or phenomenological description of human nature; it necessitates constant reference to the Creator-creature distinction

and recognition of humanity's ontological dependence upon God. The *imago dei*, properly understood, signifies an ectypal resemblance to the archetypal perfections of God as revealed in the economy of grace beginning with creation *ex nihilo*. This understanding preserves both the dignity inherent in humanity's created constitution and the dynamic vocation to mirror God's character in action and relationship.

The methodological ramifications of this research stretch beyond the *imago dei*, impacting Christian anthropology at large. For anthropology to remain truly theological, it must counter current trends that ground human identity mainly in Christology, eschatology, or pneumatology, despite the value of these doctrines in understanding human redemption and destiny. Conversely, an appropriately structured theological anthropology commences with God, the Creator, and subsequently analyzes humanity in terms of its created being, its fallen status, and its gracious renewal. This particular method of analysis respects the scriptural progression starting with creation, then the Fall, and subsequently redemption while putting due importance on the fundamental aspect of mankind as creatures made in the image of God.

Thus, the doctrine of the *imago dei* constitutes a necessary framework for understanding human nature, dignity, and purpose within Christian theology. It confirms that humanity's unique position within creation stems not from random evolution or social constructs but from divine purpose, manifested through God's creative Word. It underscores universal human dignity, irrespective of ability, role, or ethical standing, and simultaneously challenges humanity to embody the Creator's character in all aspects of life. As such, the *imago dei* remains not merely a theological curiosity or exegetical mystery but a dynamic doctrine with significant implications for how Christians understand themselves, relate to others, and worship the God in whose image they are wonderfully made.





*The Metaphysics of  
the Image of God and  
Common Grace*  
In Herman Bavinck's Theology

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arc Cortez has rightly identified that the Christian doctrine of humanity has long affirmed these three principles:

1. The *imago dei* is central to a properly Christian understanding of the human person.
2. The *imago* can be fully understood only in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ.
3. Jesus Christ himself can only be properly and fully understood in light of the person and work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

This paper attempts to build upon these convictions and add one more important principle that is less commonly recognized:

Therefore, the Christian understanding of the human person and humanity as a whole can only be adequately explained by the concept of *imago Trinitatis*.<sup>2</sup>

To that end, I present and improve upon Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian anthropology by unpacking one programmatic statement from him, that "the entire deity" or "the triune being, God, is the archetype of man."<sup>3</sup> I first analyze and clarify what Bavinck (could) mean by such claims in these terms: (A) that the *imago dei* should be understood not only Christologically but also pneumatologically; (B) that the *imago dei* should be understood not only individually but also collectively; (C) and the *imago dei* should be understood not only in an essentialist way but also eschatologically. I also show how this Bavinckian anthropology coheres well with how Bavinck conceives the doctrine of common grace by highlighting its pneumatological convergence. Finally, I lay out the promise of this Bavinckian

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1 Marc Cortez, "Idols, Images, and a Spirit-ed Anthropology: A Pneumatological Account of the *Imago Dei*," in *Third Article Theology: A Pneumatological Dogmatics*, ed. Myk Habets (Fortress, 2016), 267.

2 See e.g., David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, 2 vols. (Westminster John Knox, 2009), 922: "The *adam* who is said in Genesis 1:26–28 to be created 'in' and 'according to' the 'image of God' is not an individual living human personal body. 'Image of God' is not an abstraction from humankind considered as the aggregate of human beings, each and all of whom are created in the image of God. Rather, it is humankind as some sort of corporate whole that is created according to or after the image of God. Humankind as a whole exhibits the image of God in general. However, just what this means, just what the image of God is, remains unclear." Unfortunately, as I understand it, Kelsey ends up describing the image in largely and exclusively Christological terms and/or categories without further linkage to how Trinitarian theology informs the corporate dimension of that image in humanity.

3 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Baker Academic, 2003–2008), 554. Hereafter all references to these sources will be in the parentheses.

account in solving some long-standing conundrums in Christian theology, which include (i) the search for a more precise definition of what counts as the *imago dei* in humanity by maintaining the threefold conventional definition of the *imago dei* (i.e., structural, functional, and relational) though with important qualifications; (ii) the inclusion of the physical human body as part of the *imago dei*; and finally (iii) the way to make sense of the metaphysics of deification within the Reformed tradition.<sup>4</sup>

## I. HERMAN BAVINCK'S TRINITARIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Bavinck's theological anthropology begins by emphasizing that "the essence of the human being lies in that he is the image of God" (2:530) rather than having or bearing the *imago*. He further explains using the traditional Reformed archetype-ectype distinction that the "'image' expresses that God is the archetype and the human being is the ectype; 'likeness' adds that this image corresponds in all parts to the original" (2:532). An *archetype* of something means that it is not only the prototype but the original and perfect form of its *ectype* or copy. In relation to the *imago dei*, Francis Turretin explains the significance of such a distinction:

Image signifies either the archetype (*archetypon*) itself (after whose copy something is made) or the things themselves in God (in the likeness of which man was made); or the ectype itself, which is made after the copy of another thing, or the similitude itself (which is in man and the relation to God himself). In the former sense, man is said to have been made in the image of God; in the latter, however, the very image of God.<sup>5</sup>

What Turretin does here, according to Ximian Xu, is to posit an ontological distinction without separation of the creature from the Creator: "In terms of archetype, the word 'image' indicates that the human existence depends upon

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4 A brief note on the secondary aims of this paper, aside from the obvious that it contributes to Bavinck studies: It is an exercise in analytic-theological construction where I not only perform a conceptual analysis on the metaphysics or, if you will, the ontological features of the image of God and how the doctrine of common grace is closely tied to theological anthropology. Readers might recognize a similar title by Oliver D. Crisp, *Jonathan Edwards and the Metaphysics of Sin* (Ashgate, 2005); or Michael C. Rea, "The Metaphysics of Original Sin," in *Persons: Human and Divine*, ed. Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman (Oxford University Press, 2007), 319–56. For more on analytic theology, see Oliver D. Crisp, James M. Arcadi, and Jordan Wessling, *The Nature and Promise of Analytic Theology* (Brill, 2019); James M. Arcadi and James T. Turner, eds., *T&T Clark Handbook of Analytic Theology* (Bloomsbury, 2021).

5 Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols., ed. James T. Dennison Jr (P&R Publishing, 1992–1997), 5.10.3.

God. In the sense of ectype, the human being is the *imago dei*.<sup>6</sup> In short, as Bavinck puts it, “The entire deity” or “the triune being, God, is the archetype of man” (2:554).

This way of thinking is in line with Bavinck’s Trinitarian-participatory account of creation, which he inherited from the classical tradition following Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and many others. In his own words, “Every creature is a revelation of God and *participates* in God’s being” (2:206). Of course, Bavinck did not understand participation as emanation “as if God’s own being flowed out into his creatures and so unfolded in them, like the genus in its species” (2:419), since only God is “a self-subsistent necessary being (*ens per essentiam*),” but the creature is existent by participation (*ens per participationem*)” (2:419). However, participation does not mean that creation has an independent existence apart from God, although every creature is said to have “a being on its own” and “its efficient and exemplary cause in the being of God” (2:419).

What does this amount to? Bavinck writes its theological import as follows: “Just as God is one in essence and distinct in persons, so also the work of creation is one and undivided, while in its unity it is still rich in diversity” (2:419).<sup>7</sup> He elaborates:

The Father is the first cause; the initiative for creation proceeds from him. ... The Son is not an instrument but the personal wisdom, the Logos, by whom everything is created; everything rests and coheres in him (Col. 1:17) and is created for him (Col. 1:16), not as its final goal but as the head and master of all creatures (Eph. 3:10). And the Holy Spirit is the personal immanent cause by which all things live and move and have their being, receive their own form and configuration, and are led to their destination, in God. (2:423)

Insofar as all the persons of the Trinity are involved in creation, Bavinck rightly stresses further that God the Son “stands in a peculiar relation” to creation, according to the Old Testament references to the Son as the divine Word who created all things (Gen. 1:3; Pss. 33:6; 148:5; Isa. 48:13; John 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15–17; Rev. 3:14), who established the heavens and the earth by Wisdom (Ps.

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6 Ximian Xu, *The Digitalised Image of God: Artificial Intelligence, Liturgy, and Ethics* (Routledge, 2025), 32.

7 Cf. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck on the Image of God and Original Sin,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18, no. 2 (2016): 174: “Creation displays an organic ontology of diversities in unity precisely because in God there is an archetypal unity and diversity.”

104:24; Prov. 3:19; 8:22–31; Job 28:21–27; Jer. 10:12; 51:15), and who is the beginning and end of all things (Rev. 1:17; 21:6; 22:6), “for whom all things have been created ... in order to be again gathered up into him as the head (Eph. 1:10)” (2:423). In short, while creation bears the marks of the triune Creator, it is the Second Person of the Trinity who, like humanity, should be called the crown of creation first and foremost.<sup>8</sup>

Does Bavinck’s doctrine of creation imply that everything in existence is “Trinitarian,” thereby diminishing the unique application of this qualifier to God? It is instructive to discuss briefly Bavinck’s position on the idea that creation bears *vestigia trinitatis* (“marks” or “traces” of the Trinity; 2:322–324).<sup>9</sup> James Eglinton is correct, first of all, to mention that Bavinck thinks “the three-in-one nature of the Godhead is an utterly unique concept.”<sup>10</sup> In this regard, Bavinck adheres to the general posture of the Reformed tradition, especially Calvin, in not wanting to speak of the *vestigia* in creation, as it is deemed too speculative (that is, in trying to find “triads” everywhere) and makes too much of the so-called natural theological approach to proving the Trinity from below.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Bavinck was careful to adopt and develop the Augustinian and the medieval scholastics’ move in invoking the *vestigia* to confess their belief in the triune Creator, especially in speaking of humanity as reflecting the “*imago Trinitatis*” more clearly. “For Scripture itself,” says Bavinck, “points to this truth [of the unity of God’s work *ad extra*] by saying that all created beings will show these *imprints* and human beings will exhibit the *image* of the triune God” (2:330).<sup>12</sup>

The *imago Trinitatis* unfolds in humanity at two levels—individual and collective. At the individual level, the image of the Trinity is reflected more richly and

8 See Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 91: “At the heart of a Trinitarian participatory account of divine exemplarity is the idea that the Son, as the eternal Image of the Father, is the archetype for all creation.” For further discussion, see Bruce R. Pass, *The Heart of Dogmatics: Christology and Christocentrism in Herman Bavinck* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020).

9 See further, James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck’s Organic Motif* (T&T Clark, 2012), 82–89.

10 Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 87.

11 Cf. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to 1725* (Baker Academic, 2003), 4:157–65.

12 Like the scholastics, Bavinck mentions a kind of hierarchy within the created order that displays the vestiges at a different level of intensity, so to speak: “The higher a thing’s place in the order of creation, the more it aspires to the triad” (2:333). Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2017), s.v. “*vestigia Trinitatis*,” 391, notes that the Protestant Orthodox theologians “do allow that there are triadic imprints of the divine in creation, sometimes making a distinction between *imagines Trinitatis* as traces of the trinitarian identity found in rational creatures and *vestigia Trinitatis* as traces identifiable in the nonrational creatures, namely, in the created order in general.”

beautifully in human beings than in other creatures, and for that they can also called as “micro-divine-beings.” So Bavinck says:

All creatures are embodiments of divine thoughts, and all of them display the footsteps or vestiges of God. But all these vestiges, distributed side by side in the spiritual as well as the material world, are recapitulated in man and so organically connected and highly enhanced that they clearly constitute the image and likeness of God. The whole world raises itself upward, culminates and completes itself, and achieves its unity, its goal, and its crown in humanity. (2:563–564)

At the collective level, humanity as a whole shows a somewhat more vivid *imago Trinitatis*, albeit in a qualified sense.<sup>13</sup> In his discussion on the Trinity, Bavinck makes several comparisons between divine nature and human nature while noting their significant differences. As Bavinck writes at length:

*Human nature is far too rich to be embodied in a single individual. It is therefore present in many persons and comes to its full development only in humanity as a whole. The divine nature similarly develops its fullness in three persons, but in God these three persons are not three individuals alongside each other and separated from each other but a threefold self-differentiation within the divine being. This self-differentiation results from the self-unfolding of the divine nature into personality, thus making it tri-personal. In the case of human nature there is a dual process of unfolding: in the individual, human nature unfolds itself into personality; in the race as a whole, human nature unfolds itself into many individuals, who in turn together constitute a unity or personality, just as Christ and the church together constitute one full-grown person (1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 4:13). (2:303, emphasis added).<sup>14</sup>*

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13 Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas*, tr. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Brothers, 1947–1948), I, q. 93, a. 5: “Now the mode of origin is not the same in all things, but in each thing is adapted to the nature thereof; animated things being produced in one way, and inanimate in another; animals in one way, and plants in another. Wherefore it is manifest that the distinction of the Divine Persons is suitable to the Divine Nature; and therefore to be to the image of God by imitation of the Divine Nature does not exclude being to the same image by the representation of the Divine Persons: but rather one follows from the other. We must, therefore, say that in man there exists the image of God, both as regards the Divine Nature and as regards the Trinity of Persons; for also in God Himself there is one Nature in Three Persons.”

14 Cf. Bavinck: “*Human nature as it exists in different people is never totally and quantitatively the same. For that reason people are not only distinct but also separate. In God all this is different. The divine nature cannot be*

Two points are worth noting. First, Bavinck observes the crucial difference between the divine nature, which is always numerically one and simple and thus exists perfectly in each of the three persons—and the human nature, which can only exist distinctly and separately in each human person.<sup>15</sup> Second, because humanity is the image of the Trinity, it cannot be contained, so to speak, by only one or two individuals. Rather, humanity in its final form and collective sum in the *eschaton* can thus reflect the *imago Trinitatis* more fully and beautifully:

Only humanity in its entirety—as one complete organism, summed up under a single head, spread out over the whole earth, as prophet proclaiming the truth of God, as priest dedicating itself to God, as ruler controlling the earth and the whole of creation—only it is the fully finished image, the most telling and striking likeness of God. Scripture clearly teaches all this when it says that the church is the bride of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the dwelling of God, the new Jerusalem to which all the glory of the nations will be brought. (2:577)

Here, we can also see how the concept of *vestigia Trinitatis* plays an important role in Bavinck’s construal of the *imago dei*. Each human being images God in a partial yet unique way, and one individual could never bear the full *imago dei* by himself or herself. Just as it takes the whole created world to reflect the completeness of the *traces* of God in creation, it also takes the whole humanity to reflect the fullness of the *image* of the triune God. This is why Bavinck highlights the importance of seeing the *imago dei* in humanity as the image of the *triune* God in contrast with the more common affirmation that mankind is to be conformed to the image of Christ. While Bavinck acknowledged that many places in Scripture seem to indicate that humanity is created to be like Christ (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:3; Rom. 8:29; Phil. 2:7–8; 3:21; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10; Heb. 2:14; 1 John 3:2), he thought it best to interpret those allusions as saying “that we, having been conformed to the image of Christ, are now again becoming like

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*conceived as an abstract generic concept, nor does it exist as a substance outside of, above, and behind the divine persons. It exists in the divine persons and is totally and quantitatively the same in each person. The persons, though distinct, are not separate. They are the same in essence, one in essence, and the same being. They are not separated by time or space or anything else. They all share in the same divine nature and perfections. It is one and the same divine nature that exists in each person individually and in all of them collectively. ... Among creatures diversity in the nature of the case implies a degree of separation and division. All created beings necessarily exist in space and time and therefore live side by side or sequentially” (2:300, emphasis added).*

<sup>15</sup> See further Sutanto’s exposition of Bavinck’s organicism in relation to his doctrine of divine simplicity that is important to guard a social-trinitarian interpretation of Bavinck’s trinitarian theology, in his *God and Knowledge: Herman Bavinck’s Theological Epistemology* (T&T Clark, 2020), 22–30.

God” (2:554).<sup>16</sup> Granted, Bavinck might be a little too hesitant to state that the *imago dei* is Christological (see 2:554), but I think we can catch the rationale behind Bavinck’s rejection of seeing the *imago dei* as *strictly* Christological, namely because of his second level of understanding humanity at the collective level, involving many individuals united as one big organic whole. In short, the Trinitarian affirmation accents the *eschatological* nature of the *imago* precisely in its collective level, since the telos of humanity is thus more perfectly realized in the consummation of all things.

And here we can further explore in what sense the *imago dei* is *pneumatological* by underscoring the role of the Spirit in sustaining, concurring, and governing all humanity to secure their telos in God: “And the Holy Spirit is the personal immanent cause by which all things live and move and have their being, receive their own form and configuration, and are led to their destination, in God” (2:423). Bavinck elsewhere explains how the *imago dei* is forged in humanity as they experience a mystical union with God through the Holy Spirit:

Religion is communion with God. Without it humans cannot be truly and completely human. The image of God is not a superadded gift but belongs to human nature. That communion with God is a mystical union. It far exceeds our understanding. It is a most intimate union with God by the Holy Spirit, a union of persons, an unbreakable and eternal covenant between God and ourselves, which cannot be at all adequately described by the word “ethical” and is therefore called “mystical.” It is so close that it transforms humans in the divine image and makes them participants in the divine nature (2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 2:20; 2 Pet. 1:4). (3:304)<sup>17</sup>

We can thus see a better link between the Spirit’s role and Bavinck’s view on humanity’s participation in the triune God as their exemplar cause *and* their archetype. It is the Spirit who not only gives life and sustains his creation, but

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16 Cf. Aquinas’ comment as he follows Augustine’s logic: “Because if man were made only to the image of the Son, the Father would not have said, ‘Let Us make man to Our own image and likeness’; but ‘to Thy image.’ When, therefore, it is written, ‘He made him to the image of God,’ the sense is not that the Father made man to the image of the Son only, Who is God, as some explained it, but that the Divine Trinity made man to Its image, that is, of the whole Trinity” (*Summa Theologica*, I, q. 93, a. 5, r. 4).

17 Cf. Bavinck: “A human being, that is, a human being in a full and true sense, is and must be an image of God, a child of God, God’s own offspring, living in communion with him by the Holy Spirit. Thus, also before the fall, a human being was the dwelling place of the entire holy Trinity, a most splendid temple of the Holy Spirit” (2:559).

he also works in and through human beings to realize and complete their telos as images of the Trinity until the eschaton—from the very beginning, even in prelapsarian humanity.<sup>18</sup> This line of thinking, I would add, does not commit what Cortez called the “pneumatological abstraction” and “eschatological addendum” problems in construing the *imago dei*, where the former simply refers to the tendency to construe the *imago* as essentially non-pneumatological concept and the latter the tendency to discuss the Spirit’s role exclusively for the restoration of the image in fallen humanity.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, this pneumatological-eschatological augmentation to our understanding of the image helps to shield us from a strictly essentialist view of the *imago dei*. Essentialism in theology and philosophy, as applied to anthropology, asserts that there is a set of properties or attributes that define human beings—that make humans or humanity truly human. Thus, in the classical categorization, there are three common views typically used to explain what humans possess and/or do as the *imago dei*: the structural view, which teaches that humans reflect God because they possess reason and intellect that set them apart from other created beings; the functional view, which teaches that humans reflect God through fulfilling the cultural mandate—caring for and developing the created world; and the relational view, which teaches that humans reflect God through the relationships and love they display within family and society.<sup>20</sup> From an essentialist perspective, these three aspects are typically construed as “fixed” properties that must be identifiable in a human being for him or her to be seen as truly human. However, the problem that an essentialist commonly faces is how to account for those one or more features in an infant, an individual with disabilities, or in other cases where those necessary features are difficult to detect and/or measure (e.g., how smart/useful/friendly one should be to be considered as truly human)?

Bavinck, however, retrieves Hermann Witsius’ view that the *imago dei* certainly includes the three aspects (ontological and ethical) but places it within a teleological or eschatological perspective, which asserts that the first human

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18 As Bavinck explains, “Original righteousness (*justitia originalis*) was a free gift of God, and it was also from moment to moment maintained in man by the providence of God. It is not for a second conceivable without communion with God. Just as the Son was already the mediator of union before the fall, so also the Holy Spirit was even then already the craftsman of all knowledge, righteousness, and holiness in humanity. ... It is perfectly true that man in the state of integrity only possessed the virtues of knowledge and righteousness by and in the Holy Spirit” (2:558; cf. 3:292).

19 Cortez, “Idols, Images, and a Spirit-ed Anthropology,” 267–82.

20 Bavinck holds to the structural as the broader and ontological aspect, with the functional and relational as the narrower and ethical aspects of the *imago dei* (2:550).

(Adam) did not yet fully possess the *imago dei*, so his existence—which was already very good (*being*)—still needed to become even better (*becoming*) (2:550). This eschatological augmentation helps us to understand that a human being, at the individual level, need not necessarily possess a certain level of intelligence, functionality, and/or relationality to be truly human on this side of eternity—even without those, they are already truly human! Also, the eschatological perspective helps us see why it is an ever-futile attempt to find a list of properties that qualifies one as a human being, for people are graced with manifold, diverse gifts of the Holy Spirit (e.g., Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12:1–11).<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, at the collective level, based on Genesis 1:26; 2:18, 24; Ephesians 5:31–32, Bavinck envisions humanity encompassing all people numbering in the billions as a necessity for reflecting the triune God (see further, 2:576–579). In short, the collective humanity can only be fully understood from an eschatological perspective, which automatically shields us from a strictly essentialist view of the *imago dei*.

## II. PARTICIPATION IN GOD AND COMMON GRACE

We can now consider how Bavinck’s doctrine of common grace sheds further light on the pneumatological accent in one’s account of the *imago dei*. Common grace is typically defined as God’s abundant goodness and blessings given to all believers and nonbelievers alike. Bavinck describes it in Trinitarian terms: “Every good and perfect gift, also among the nations, comes down from the Father of Lights (James 1:17). The Logos, who created and maintains all things, enlightens each man coming into the world (John 1:9). The Holy Spirit is the author of all life, of every power and every virtue (Gen. 6:17; 7:15; Pss. 33:6; 104:30; 139:2; Job 32:8; Eccl. 3:19).”<sup>22</sup>

Notice, however, that Bavinck specifically attributes common grace to the role of the Spirit. Charles Hodge similarly writes, “The Bible therefore teaches that the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth, of holiness, and of life in all its forms, is present with every human mind, enforcing truth, restraining from evil, exciting to good, and imparting wisdom or strength, when, where, and in what measure seemeth to Him good. ... This is what in theology is called common grace.”<sup>23</sup> From this,

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21 To be sure, it does not mean that Bavinck’s account is strictly non-essentialist. See further, Jordan Stefaniak, “Retrieving Reformed Philosophy of Mind: Herman Bavinck’s Eclectic Harmonism as Gateway to Neo-Aristotelianism,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 94 (2023): 30–2.

22 Herman Bavinck, “Common Grace,” trans. R. C. van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989): 51.

23 Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (W. B. Eerdmans, 1968), 2:667, emphasis added.

we see how God's goodness is demonstrated more specifically through both the restraint of sin and moving people toward the good even when he or she is not yet a believer. And this coheres well with the Reformed emphasis that the *imago dei* in the state of corruption (i.e., postlapsarian humanity) is not lost but remains in all human beings (cf. Gen. 9:6; James 3:9). As Bavinck explains further with reference to Calvin:

Thus it is that Calvin, in dependence upon and with an appeal to Scripture, comes to distinguish between general and special grace, between the working of the Spirit in all creation and the work of sanctification that belongs only to those who believe. God did not leave sin alone to do its destructive work. He had and, after the fall, continued to have a purpose for his creation; he interposed common grace between sin and the creation—a grace that, while it does not inwardly renew, nevertheless restrains and compels. All that is good and true has its origin in this grace, including the good we see in fallen man. The light still does shine in the darkness. *The spirit of God makes its home and works in all the creation.* Consequently, traces of the image of God continue in mankind. Understanding and reason remain, and he possesses all sorts of natural gifts. In him dwells a feeling, a notion of the Godhead, a seed of religion.<sup>24</sup>

The obvious point here is that humanity and the universe continue to manifest God in the state of corruption, albeit in a limited way, so that creation is still able to radiate “some spark of the divine glory” and even “a magnificent display of the divine wisdom”; and human beings in particular still possess “a consciousness of God.”<sup>25</sup> More specifically, Bavinck sees the role of the Holy Spirit as continuing to give life and enabling humans to reflect God in a limited way, so that they do not lose their “nature” as the *imago dei*.<sup>26</sup> In other words, therefore, without the Holy Spirit's constant gifts of common grace to all creatures, and especially in human beings, there will be no trace of the *imago dei* left in fallen and depraved

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24 Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 51, emphasis added. Cf. Herman Bavinck, “Calvin and Common Grace,” trans. Geerhardus Vos, *The Princeton Theological Review* 7 (1909): 454–55; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster, 1960), 2.2.15.

25 Bavinck, “Calvin and Common Grace,” 9.

26 Bavinck, “Calvin and Common Grace,” 9: “Especially the human race is still a clear mirror of the operation of God, an exhibition of His manifold gifts. In every man there is still a seed of religion, a consciousness of God, wholly ineradicable, convincing all of the heavenly grace on which their life depends, and leading even the heathen to name God the Father of mankind.”

humanity. The Holy Spirit's continuous work in the world is what upholds and preserves the remnants of God's image within us, enabling even those who have not come to faith to exhibit aspects of God's nature such as love, creativity, and a sense of justice. This underscores the importance of the Holy Spirit's presence not only in the lives of believers but in the entire creation, making it evident that common grace is an essential aspect of God's overarching plan for redemption and restoration of all things.

### III. THE THEOLOGICAL PROMISE OF THE BAVINCKIAN ACCOUNT

As I mentioned in the beginning, the Bavinckian concept of *imago Trinitatis* can give us the advantage of bringing to the fore the pneumatological, collective, and eschatological features that are largely missing in the past and contemporary discussion. In this final section, I conclude with three brief suggestions for how the Bavinckian account can be helpful to solve some long-standing conundrums related to theological anthropology.<sup>27</sup>

The first problem concerns the basic definition of whether the *imago dei* should be understood as structural, functional, or relational. It is well known that the structural view dominated the premodern era and the functional and/or relational the modern and postmodern era. The current trend, regrettably, shows that the three views are typically upheld in opposition to each other, with the majority leaving the structural view in the bygone era while the majority of biblical scholars champion the functional and the majority of systematic theologians the relational.<sup>28</sup> While proponents of a more holistic or multifaceted approach that attempts to integrate the three is growing, they still lack a biblical-theological model to weave the threefold aspects together. What I suggest is that the Bavinckian *imago Trinitatis* can certainly provide the way toward a more coherent and holistic approach.

For example, as Cortez has rightly noted, the main difficulties with the holistic approach are, firstly, the exegetical support for the structural aspect as well as the difficulty of avoiding some of its insurmountable objections.<sup>29</sup> While

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27 For other advantages on going Bavinckian in constructing theological anthropology, see N. Gray Sutanto, *God and Humanity: Herman Bavinck and Theological Anthropology* (Bloomsbury, 2024); Xu, *The Digitalised Image of God*.

28 Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (T&T Clark, 2011), Kindle, chap. 2.

29 Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, Kindle, chap. 2. Cortez himself is pessimistic about the possibility of

Cortez’s judgment here is in many ways valid, I propose that Bavinck’s use of Genesis 1:26–28 (among many others) as the grounds for saying that the entirety of humanity, individually and collectively, is the *imago Trinitatis* may be stronger than what many have perceived.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, some of the common objections to the structural view can be defused, in my opinion, by putting it through a more eschatological lens in contrast with the strictly essentialist one as discussed above—and this is why the Bavinckian pneumatological-eschatological augmentation can be helpful. Secondly, Cortez mentioned the difficulty of retaining the functional and relational aspects together without negating or eliminating the others. However, I do not see how that should be the case from my Bavinckian view, especially once the *imago* in humanity is understood as both individual and collective. Presupposing the eschatological once again and the image-vestiges distinction, the relational need not be construed as a “function” or vice versa, for it thus negates the other. We can say that the relational is much clearer in the case of husband-wife, parent-children, even among neighbors, and that the functional serves as a way not just to actualize our own personal gifts but also to complement and complete one another to live as the society of God—both as church and state.

The second issue relates to whether the human body should be included as part of the *imago dei*. Throughout church history, the soul is primarily regarded as the seat of the *imago*, and the corporeal body is seen as only a shadow of the *imago* since God is incorporeal (cf. Jn. 4:24). At the same time, however, our anti-Gnostic intuition often prevents us from devaluing the body even when we do not think of it as part of the *imago dei*. This is evident in theologians like Irenaeus, perhaps among the first defenders of the body as integrally part of the *imago dei* against the Gnostics, and Bavinck, who stands with quite a few stellar Reformed thinkers.<sup>31</sup> As Bavinck asserts, “The body is not a prison but a marvelous piece of art from the hand of God Almighty, and just as constitutive for the essence of humanity as the soul” (2:559).<sup>32</sup>

How can we chart a path for the contemporary theological reception of the body

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incorporating the structural view.

30 I defend a Trinitarian interpretation of Genesis 1:26–28 in Wilson Jeremiah, “The Transmission of Original Sin: A Bavinckian-Dogmatic Account and Defense” (PhD Diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2024), 73–77. I basically retrieved many of the premodern readings of Genesis—most prominently, Augustine, and followed the Belgic Confession’s position (see art. 9 on the “Scriptural Witness of the Trinity”).

31 See further, Isaac Whitney, “The Body and the Image of God in Bavinck and the Reformed Orthodox,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* (2024): 1–12.

32 For more discussion on Bavinck and philosophy of mind, see Steffaniak, “Retrieving Reformed Philosophy of Mind,” 26–50.

as belonging to the *imago dei*? For starters, as Bavinck describes it, “The human body is part of the image of God in its organization as instrument of the soul, in its formal perfection, not in its material substance as flesh” (2:559–560). Bavinck himself teaches that the soul reflects the *imago dei* more than the body, and this is based on the image-vestiges distinction, which stipulates that although the *imago* “extends to the whole person ... it comes out more clearly in one part than another” (2:555). Furthermore, we can follow Bavinck, who uses the logic of the Incarnation and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to support his inclusion of the body as an essential component of the *imago dei*: “Just as God, though he is spirit (*pneuma*), is nevertheless the Creator of a material world that may be termed his revelation and manifestation, with this revelation coming to its climax in the incarnation, so also the spirit of man is designed for the body as its manifestation” (2:560). Again, the eschatological spin of the Bavinckian account helps us to turn our eyes and imagination not just to the present situation but also toward the coming of the kingdom (cf. 1 Cor. 15:35–55).

The last puzzle to solve is the reception of *theosis* or deification of glorified human beings among the Reformed and Protestant tradition. As of late, there is a growing amount of scholarship affirming that the Reformed tradition largely teaches salvation as deification through the major figures like Huldrych Zwingli, Johannes Oecolampadius, Martin Bucer, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and many others.<sup>33</sup> To cite just one example, Oecolampadius in his commentary on Genesis 1:26 says (to the effect of rehashing my Bavinckian *imago Trinitatis* while relating it specifically to deification): “The image of the divine nature has been engraved on humankind, when the Holy Spirit was breathed in. For he himself is the Spirit of life, since God is life according to nature. For in no other way than by receiving the gift of the Spirit are we able to bear the divine image.”<sup>34</sup> And with the state of glory in view, Oecolampadius continues: “When we are conformed fully to the image of the Son, then the beauty of the entire Trinity is in us. For the sole highest beauty is in them, to which we are also conformed, provided that we are sealed into sonship through the Son in the Spirit.”<sup>35</sup> Likewise, in the words of Calvin, to be deified is to be made “partakers of divine immortality and

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33 E.g., Carl Mosser, “John Calvin and Early Reformed Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Deification*, eds. Paul L. Gavrilyuk, Andrew Hofer, O.P., and Matthew Levering (Oxford University Press, 2024), 317–33; Kyle Strobel, “Jonathan Edwards’s Reformed Doctrine of Theosis,” *Harvard Theological Review* 109 (2016): 371–99.

34 Johannes Oecolampadius, *An Exposition of Genesis*, trans. Mickey L. Mattox (Marquette University Press, 2013), 97, as cited in Mosser, “John Calvin and Early Reformed Theology,” 320.

35 Oecolampadius, *An Exposition of Genesis*, 97, in Mosser, “John Calvin and Early Reformed Theology,” 320.

the glory of blessedness” and “made one with God so far as our capacity allows,” resulting in “the image of God ... reborn in us.”<sup>36</sup> In sum, without the concept of *imago Trinitatis*, all these references to deification lack a significant theological-anthropological grounding.

To link these lines of thought to my proposal: The Spirit’s work of perfecting the *imago dei* in us all throughout creation to glorification extends to all elect and adopted people of God in Christ. While this additional emphasis on the pneumatological-eschatological collective humanity is by and large Bavinckian, it is unfortunate that we should part ways with Bavinck himself who rejected deification as a coherent and important category in his theological system.<sup>37</sup> It does not mean, of course, that my constructive Bavinckian account of *imago Trinitatis* fails without Bavinck’s acceptance of deification, but that it is regrettable that Bavinck was not able to incorporate the biblical theme of deification due to his own limitations—since he obviously has resources within his theology to explain the doctrine without violating his Reformed sensibility (i.e., “*finitum non est capax infiniti*”).

This exercise of philosophical-dogmatic theology, I hope, sheds more light on much-uncharted territories in the field of theological anthropology, particularly on the doctrine of the *imago dei*. There are indeed many questions left and objections that could be raised.<sup>38</sup> For now, it is appropriate to end with Lucy Peppiatt’s advice to Christian theologians across the globe:

The doctrine of the *imago dei* is multifaceted and constantly evolving. It corresponds both to what we believe to be true of God and to what we believe to be true of humanity; thus each generation and each culture will develop and revise this doctrine, bringing new insights and perspectives to what this

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36 John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and The First and Second Epistles of St Peter*, trans. W. B. Johnston (W. B. Eerdmans, 1963), 331, as cited in Mosser, “John Calvin and Early Reformed Theology,” 332. Cf. Lucy Peppiatt, *The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God* (Cascade, 2022), 130, who mentioned Cyril of Alexandria’s similar teaching in his Commentary of John 1:32–33 specifically on Jesus’ baptism event with the Spirit: “And God created man, in the Image of God created He him. But that through the Spirit he was sealed unto the Divine Image, himself again taught us, saying, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. For the Spirit at once began both to put life into His formation and in a Divine manner to impress His own Image thereon.”

37 For a good discussion of why Bavinck himself rejected deification, see Myk Habets, “Herman Bavinck’s Rejection of Theosis: An Explanation,” *Journal of Reformed Theology* 18 (2024): 50–75. Cf. Cambria Kaltwasser, “Karl Barth’s Critique of Deification,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Deification*, 466–78.

38 Interested readers can consult my “Transmission of Original Sin,” as I have dealt with some possible objections there. For those who doubt the metaphysical validity of my account, see Rolfe King, “The Body of Christ: An Aligning Union Model,” *Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 30, no. 3 (2021): 345–70.

claim means for humanity, for God, and for our relations with one another and the world. To my mind, the open-endedness of the conversation is a strength rather than a weakness. It contributes to the sense of mystery associated with this doctrine and reminds us of the need for an element of apophaticism in regard to what we can and cannot articulate.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Peppiatt, *The Imago Dei*, 140. I would like to thank the participants of Theo Global Southeast Asia 2025 at Chiang Mai, Thailand, for the wonderful and meaningful interactions on my paper, especially to Drs. Michael Horton, Edmund Fong, and Chandra Wim who gave thoughtful feedback to sharpen my thinking.







*“To Be Created Imago  
Dei Is to Be Created  
Imago Christi”*

A Christological Reading of  
the Imago Dei

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If anthropology can be defined as answering the age-old question “What is man (or humanity)?” theological anthropology can be defined as answering the same question put in a different vein by the psalmist in Psalm 8:4: “What is man that you (O God) are mindful of him?” And surely in its answer, every theology worth its salt will highlight the creational account of humanity:

26 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.

27 So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:26–27)

From the above verses, humanity being created in the image of God stands as the *sine qua non* for what distinguishes human beings from the rest of creation. That each human being is created *imago dei* is also, in Christian theology and ethics, what guarantees the basic dignity and worth of every human person. This much is undoubted.

The natural follow-up question, however, “What does it mean to be created *imago dei* or in God’s image?” is one that has left biblical commentators and theologians—past and present—pondering. So much so that this question could rightly be said to remain the central focal point in theological anthropology today.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter advances a Christological reading of the *imago dei*, that is, in essence, to be created *imago dei* is to be created *imago christi*. To be created in the image of God is to be created in the image of Christ. The mention of Christ here is with reference to the one true God-man Jesus Christ—specifically, his human nature. In this reading, the image of God is borne by one individual, Jesus Christ, in his human nature. Other human beings are made in the image of God by being patterned after *Christ’s* human nature. Human beings thus form the ectypes of both the prototype and archetype of the divine image first found in the human

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1 The next burning question could be the question of human constitution: Is humanity constituted according to substance dualism or monism, that is, are we constituted human persons with a body and soul, or purely a body (while not excluding mental entities or forms of mental representation)?

nature of Jesus Christ. In other words, the Christological reading of the *imago dei* is a way of looking at the image of God that begins with the human nature of Jesus.

The argument begins with a section laying out the common contenders for what the image of God is or what it means. This is followed by a deeper description of the Christological reading of the *imago dei* as fleshed out by theologian Oliver Crisp—the original proposer of the idea—who calls the concept the “Christological doctrine” of the image of God.<sup>2</sup> The next section outlines a possible pathway for this view, showing how the Christological *imago dei* sits comfortably with the early patristic fathers, how it fell out of prominence during the late patristic and medieval periods, and how, interestingly, the Christological *imago dei* could once more reclaim its ground within Reformation and Reformed theology, especially under the concepts of Christ the eternal mediator and the covenant of redemption conceptualized within a supralapsarian framework. The chapter ends with a listing of the advantages of the Christological reading in answering the crucial question of what it is about the *imago dei* that makes humanity unique and so highly esteemed within the whole of creation.

## I. COMMON CONTENDERS FOR THE *IMAGO DEI*

Over the course of theological deliberation, at least four categories for what the *imago dei* is or means have been proffered, with variants within each distinct category.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Structural-Substantive (Soul) Image*

The first category—the structural-substantive way of reading the image of God—occupies the lion’s share in terms of how the *imago dei* has been understood throughout history. On this account, what forms the image of God and hence

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2 Oliver Crisp, “The Christological Doctrine of the Image of God,” in *The Word Enfleshed: Exploring the Person and Work of Christ* (Baker Academic, 2016), 51–70.

3 See Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2010), 16–17, for a list of criteria to aid our consideration of the *imago dei*: (1) The image of God should reflect God in creation in a manner befitting its scriptural context; (2) “Image” and “likeness” (Gen. 1:26) are assumed to be synonymous; (3) The “image” extends to all human persons regardless of gender, race, status, or capability; (4) the Fall and sin have affected the “image,” although after the Fall, mankind is still said to have the “image” in them (Gen. 9:6); (5) the image of God in the New Testament turns out to be Christological in nature, in that Jesus Christ is the true image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; cf. Heb. 1:3; Col. 1:15); and (6) The image of God is teleological, something that grows over time. To the list I add another criterion: (7) How is the “image” invoked? Is it something that is fundamentally and intrinsically there, that is, some metaphysical entity? Or is it something that is manifested only upon some action or response on the part of the human being, that is, some “actualized” entity?

is reflective of God is some capacity or a set of capacities constitutive of being human. The most common contender has been the human intellect or humanity’s capacity for rational thought. Stated by Marc Cortez, a contemporary theological anthropologist, “Humans image a rational and wise God in their capacity for rational and wise thought.”<sup>4</sup> Cortez states that “this was the predominant view in the early church and (at least) through the Middle Ages.”<sup>5</sup> Cortez’s statement can be nuanced by adding that rather than locating the *imago dei* in the particular structural quality of rationality in itself, the patristic up to the medieval theologians tended to locate the *imago dei* in the soul of the human being with all its features and properties. It is the entire substance of the soul that “images” God. In this view, “individual human souls are the ‘image’ necessarily and essentially, yet have other accidental and telic properties that are actualized in an appropriate dynamic structural context,” so states one of the view’s prime advocates Joshua Farris.<sup>6</sup> But certainly, patristic and medieval theologians would see human rationality and intellect as the quality or property of the human soul that does the “imaging.”<sup>7</sup>

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4 Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 18. While rationality is the capacity most often referred to, Cortez points out that other capacities have been upheld as the primary feature that distinguishes humanity (e.g., symbolic reasoning, self-determination, moral agency, consciousness, and even self-transcendence).

5 Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 18.

6 Joshua R. Farris, “A Substantive (Soul) Model of the Imago Dei: A Rich Property View,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Theological Anthropology*, eds. Joshua R. Farris and Charles Taliaferro (Routledge, 2016), 166. The contemporary philosopher J. P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei: Human Persons and the Failure of Naturalism* (SCM Press, 2009) 4–5, espouses a similar view.

7 The following survey substantiates the view that patristic and medieval theologians saw the soul with the particular quality or property of rationality as the *imago dei*.

Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, trans. A. Roberts and W. H. Rambaut, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1868–69. Reprint, W. B. Eerdmans, 1979), 4.4.3, speaks of human beings “being endowed with reason, and in this respect like to God.” In 5.6.1, Irenaeus differentiates between the “image” and the “likeness,” allowing the view of “fleshly nature” (human nature?) to be moulded after the image of God, but it is only by partaking of the Spirit and allowing the Spirit to be blended with the soul that the human person is said to take after the likeness of God.

Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Catholic University of American Press, 2002) 1.13; *Dialogue with Heraclides*, trans. Robert J. Daly (Paulist Press, 1992), 15.30–16.16, *Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles Prol 2*, states explicitly that the image of God refers to what is “invisible, incorporeal, incorruptible and immortal,” which he calls the “inner man.” In *Fragments on Genesis* (Karin Metzler ed., *Die Kommentierung des Buches Genesis* (Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 160.22–26, Origen locates the image of God in the rational soul [τῆ λογικῆ ψυχῆ], and it is this rationality that allows humans to do good and act righteously.

Gregory of Nazianzus, *Select Orations*, trans. Martha Vinson (Catholic University of American Press, 2003), *Oratio 22.13*, locates the “image” (εἰκόνα) in the capacity of “spiritual intellect” (νοῦς). As Gabrielle Thomas, *The Image of God in the Theology of Gregory of Nazianzus* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 4, rightly points out, Gregory’s understanding of νοῦς is more associated with the aspect of the soul through which human persons experience and perceive God in the spiritual realm than it is with what a straightforward English translation as “mind” or “rationality” might connote.

Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* (Aeterna Press, 2016) 8.4, sees the human soul as the high point of the “evolution” of the soul, consisting in all three divisions of “the vegetative” (seen in plants), “the sense-perception” (seen in irrational animals), and “the rational” (seen only in human beings). Rationality forms the defining feature of the human soul for Gregory of Nyssa.

The view that it is rationality or intellect within the human soul that constitutes the *imago dei* could confidently be said to be cemented by Augustine. In Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, eds. Johannes Brachtendorf and Volker Drecoll (Brill, 2021), III.20.30, Augustine concludes that the image of God is located in the soul of humans, and in the highest part of the soul, the *ratio* (reason) or *mens* (mind). It seems that Augustine

In summary, the structural-substantive reading sees the human person as created in the image of God by virtue of the person possessing a specific capacity (often rationality or intellect) in light of the person having or being a human soul.<sup>8</sup> Critics of the structural-substantive view often highlight the following three reasons for their objection: 1) lack of exegetical support from the biblical text; 2) the structural quality or capacity that encapsulates the *imago dei* seems to be an arbitrary choice; and 3) most seriously, this view potentially discounts members of humanity who do not display the structural capacity chosen from being considered ones created in God's image—for example, if rationality or intellect, then infants, intellectually disabled people, or comatose persons would be excluded.<sup>9</sup> Naturally, there will be serious ramifications for our ethical and moral consideration.<sup>10</sup>

### *The Functional Image*

The second view maintains at its core that the image of God is something that human persons do rather than something that human persons are, with the specific activity being that of rule or dominion. Human persons made in the image of God reflect the divine reality by serving as God's representative rulers in the created realm.<sup>11</sup> Proponents of this view draw their support from, first, the similar way the concept of an image of a divine being is understood in other cultures of the Ancient Near East; and, second, the exegetical move that reads in

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found his backing in the Apostle Paul's injunction to "be renewed in the spirit of [one's] mind ... according to the image of his Creator." Whatever Augustine had to say about the *imago dei* in *De genesi ad litteram* not only finds its continuation in *De Trinitate* but is expanded. The *imago dei* in *De Trinitate* is truly seen as an *imago Trinitatis*. This conviction led Augustine to demonstrate how trinities exist in the intellect (or mind), which is meant to reflect the Holy Trinity, his most famous examples being that of mind-knowledge-love and self-consciousness, self-understanding and self-love/willing. Laela Zwollo, St. Augustine and Plotinus: *The Human Mind as Image of the Divine* (Brill, 2019), shows the pervasive influence the Greek Platonist philosopher Plotinus had over Augustine.

Finally, representative of medieval theology is Aquinas, who deals with the question of the *imago dei* in *Summa Theologica* (hereafter abbreviated ST), trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 22 vols. (Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1912–36), 1.93. Aquinas affirms the presence of the image of God in human beings (ST 1.93.1), since image connotes likeness, and there is in man a likeness to God, albeit an imperfect one. In ST 1.93.2, he confines the image to the intellectual soul: "It is clear, therefore, that intellectual creatures alone, properly speaking, are made to God's image," even allowing for angels to image God better than human beings in this respect (ST 1.93.3). Aquinas further states in ST 1.93.4 that the imitation of the intellectual nature is best seen in human beings understanding and loving God, going so far to say that wherein we find in human beings "a procession of the word in the intellect, and a procession of the love in the will, there exists an image of the uncreated Trinity" (ST 1.93.6). We find here strong echoes of Augustine's doctrine that the *imago dei* is really the *imago Trinitatis*.

8 Needless to say, the structural-substantive view presupposes body-soul dualism.

9 Although the author is helpfully reminded by an anonymous reviewer that the tradition that appeals to rationality—for example, Thomas Aquinas—did not in principle exclude infants or the intellectually disabled, who could be seen to have the potentiality for rationality, whether realized or not. Rather, the appeal to rationality was to distinguish between animals and human beings.

10 See Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 19–21 for a further elaboration of the objections against the structural-substantive reading of the *imago dei*.

11 Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 21.

close juxtaposition the two statements of Genesis 1:26: “Let us make man in our image” and “Let them have dominion ...”<sup>12</sup> As sinful human beings, we still retain the image and serve as God’s representatives or vice-regents over creation, but the carrying out of this function is marked by hierarchical domination and oppression rather than wise stewardship. In summary, the functional image view maintains that the image of God in human beings is seen in their rule and stewardship over creation, as part of humanity’s representation of God in the world. As a passing quip, the functional view of the *imago dei* seems to emphasize humanity being created *as* the image of God rather than *in* the image of God. There are two main criticisms of the functional view: 1) Like the structural-substantive view, one questions how the image features in human persons who for various reasons are unable or incapable of exercising dominion or rule; and 2) reliance on the narrow exegetical support (based on one verse) and historical-cultural background to ground the functional view seems to prematurely rule out wider considerations accumulated over the whole canon of Scripture as to what the *imago dei* is.

### *The Relational Image*

A more recent proposal sees the image of God as located in our “relations” or our relationality as human beings. That is to say, human beings are created in the image of God in the sense that we are fundamentally and essentially relational beings—related to God, to other humans, and to creation. That we are, at the core, relational beings is the way that we image and reflect God, who is himself a relational being. The relationality of God is in turn inherent to and expressed most clearly in the Trinity. Some propose further that the fundamental relational nature of human persons is seen most clearly in the male-female differentiation and coexistence of humanity.<sup>13</sup> At first glance, the relational reading of the *imago dei* might seem like an overflow from the ascendancy of philosophical or psychological studies emphasizing the dimension of relationality in human persons, so much so that relationality appears to be the new metaphysics!<sup>14</sup> However, as Cortez

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12 Because this view commands a strong exegetical and historical-cultural support for its understanding of “image,” one can understand why the functional view of the *imago dei* is a popular view among biblical scholars. The first biblical scholars to advocate this view would be Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Westminster Press, 1972), 58–60; and D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968). J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Brazos, 2005) is a more recent work advocating this view. See also Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say about Human Origins* (Brazos, 2012), xv.

13 Most famously, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/1*, trans. J. W. Edwards, O. Bussey and H. Knight (T&T Clark, 1958), 195–198.

14 Relationality is seen as the new ontology for both human beings and the divine being. John Zizioulas is one who has cast an undeniable shadow in advocating for the relational understanding of ontology and being.

has shown, proponents of the relational view appeal to at least three exegetical bases in promoting their view: 1) the divine plural “Let us” in Genesis 1:26, 2) the juxtaposition of the fact that humanity is created in the image of God with the fact that humanity is created male and female (Genesis 1:27), and 3) the larger context of the creation narratives spanning Genesis 2–3, in which relations with God, other humans and creation feature prominently.<sup>15</sup> As expected, the exegetical claims offered are accepted to varying degrees by biblical scholars.<sup>16</sup> A slight variation of the relational view can be found in Michael Horton: “The image of God ... is not something *in* us that is semidivine but something *between* us and God that constitutes a covenantal relationship.”<sup>17</sup> To be created in God’s image is to be persons called into existence to be in communion; therefore, for human beings to reflect God’s image lies not in “*what they are essentially* but in *how they reply ethically*.”<sup>18</sup> The *imago dei* that sets humanity apart from the rest of creation is, on Horton’s account, “ethical and covenantal—which is to say, relational.”<sup>19</sup> Among the three proposals offered so far, there is much that the relational view of the *imago dei* offers.

### *The Multifaceted Image*

As the name suggests, the fourth proposal sees the image of God as a multifaceted concept that cannot be reduced to any single category of structural capacity, dominion and rule, or relationality. Instead, the image must be robustly applied to the entire human person. The main risk of this proposal is that the image of God becomes all-encompassing—that it becomes pliant, losing its specificity and ceasing to be meaningful as a concept. More seriously, if the entire human person were to image God, we are faced with the problem of how a corporeal being can image an incorporeal divine being.<sup>20</sup> A variant to this fourth proposal is to integrate certain categories together. Cortez himself proposes a way of thinking about the image of God that integrates the functional and relational views.<sup>21</sup> To

15 Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 24–25.

16 James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991* (Clarendon, 1994), 160, famously derided Barth’s exegesis to support the relational view as “particularly ill-judged and irresponsible.”

17 Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Zondervan, 2011), 381.

18 Horton, *Christian Faith*, 389.

19 Horton, *Christian Faith*, 395.

20 Hence John Calvin’s vehement objection against Osiander, who extended the image of God to both the body and the soul of the human person. See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Westminster, 1960), 1.15.3. Aquinas’ move in ST 1.93.1 where he differentiates between a “perfect” and “imperfect” image, and where he allows for humanity to bear an imperfect rather than perfect likeness to God, might provide a way out of this difficulty.

21 Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 31–37. Cortez excludes the structural view that he finds untenable due

him, the image of God is a nexus that coordinates the three interrelated concepts of *representational* presence, *personal* presence, and *covenantal* presence. Cortez states: “The image of God can be understood as *God manifesting his personal presence in creation through his covenantal relationships with human persons, whom he has constituted as personal beings to serve as his representatives in creation and to whom he remains faithful despite their sinful rejection of him.*”<sup>22</sup> The image of God becomes, strictly speaking, something that God does (he manifests himself) in and through human persons, rather than something that *human persons do or are.*<sup>23</sup>

## II. THE CHRISTOLOGICAL *IMAGO DEI*

The above background sets the stage for a consideration of the central argument of this chapter: the “Christological doctrine” of the image of God, so named by the original proposer of the concept, Oliver Crisp.<sup>24</sup>

The fundamental idea maintained in this view is that the image of God is essentially borne by one individual, Christ. Jesus Christ, being the Son of God incarnate in his human nature and human flesh, is the *first* and *true* image of the invisible God. Other human beings are made in the image of God by *being made* and by *conforming to the image of Christ.*<sup>25</sup> This train of thought leads us to say that human beings—including Adam and Eve (however we might understand them)—are really ectypes of the *archetype* (arising from the “true”) and *prototype* (arising from the “first”) of the divine image found in Christ.<sup>26</sup> A further entailment is that it is not so much the case of Christ assuming and possessing a copy of some generic form of human nature in the Incarnation as it is the case of God ordaining from before the foundation of the world that the human nature Christ assumes in the Incarnation is the definition and archetype of true human nature.<sup>27</sup> Jesus Christ’s human nature—one that is in hypostatic union with God the Son—serves as the blueprint for all other human natures, including Adam and Eve’s. Crisp specifies

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to its lack of exegetical support.

22 Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 37 (emphasis original).

23 Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 35.

24 Crisp, “Christological Doctrine,” 51–70.

25 Crisp, “Christological Doctrine,” 60.

26 Crisp, “Christological Doctrine,” 52.

27 Crisp, “Christological Doctrine,” 62. The choice of words is important here. By using the word “ordaining” rather than “conceiving,” Crisp preempts the possibility of allowing for some form of heavenly (human) flesh in eternity. On p. 67, Crisp states: “Although in one sense the concrete particular that is [Christ’s] human nature begins to exist subsequent to the moment at which the human race begins to exist, it is possible for his human nature to be the archetype of all other human natures because its generation is eternally in view, as it were, in the mind of God, logically prior to his ordination of all subsequent human beings.”

further: “[Christ] being the image of God has to do with the fact that God makes human nature capable of bearing union with the divine and capable of bearing the divine imprint or image in order to do so.”<sup>28</sup> In this view, it is the whole and entire human nature, rather than some substance of the soul, some structural capacity like rationality or intellect, some functional aspect like rule and dominion, or even some dimension of relationality *alone* that images God. Human nature—“designed” by God and foreordained in the particular human nature that God the Son assumes in his Incarnation—images God by being made with “the capacities and powers necessary and sufficient to be in hypostatic union with a divine person,” as Crisp affirms.<sup>29</sup> It is in turn through this union that, borrowing the terminology of Cortez, the representational, the personal and the covenantal presence of God is reflected.

It is important at this juncture to highlight what Crisp intends with the Christological *imago dei* from another version of it. This other version takes its starting point from the New Testament witness to Jesus Christ being the true image of God. So for example, Jesus is referred in 2 Corinthians 4:4 as “the image of God” (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ), and in Colossians 1:15 as “the image of the invisible God” (εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου). This other version maintains the element of Christ being the archetype of the divine image by having archetypal human nature, however that human nature is defined to be. And “it is in Christ, Redeemer and Savior, that the divine image, disfigured in man by the first sin, has been restored to its original beauty and ennobled by the grace of God,” as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* puts it.<sup>30</sup> In other words, this other version of the Christological *imago dei* sees Jesus Christ as the true *imago dei* who by his work of redemption transforms and conforms fallen human beings to the image of God in Christ (cf. Romans 8:29).<sup>31</sup> The Christological *imago dei* presented by Crisp covers all this and more. Specifically, the Christological *imago dei* that Crisp aims at not only sees Jesus Christ as the archetypal divine image in virtue of him possessing an archetypal human nature but also sees that human nature as prototypical of the human nature that Adam and Eve, as the first of humanity, would be created after.

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28 Crisp, “Christological Doctrine,” 62.

29 Crisp, “Christological Doctrine,” 63.

30 See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church III.II*, art. 1, 1701, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P5G.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P5G.HTM).

31 Farris, “A Substantive (Soul) Model,” 165, states that this is Kathryn Tanner’s understanding of the Christological view of the *imago dei* in Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), where human beings become an image through participation in Christ, the archetypal image. Farris calls Tanner’s version of the Christological *imago dei* the “Christ-participatory view.”

Clearly, a promotion of the Christological *imago dei* (as Crisp has presented it) must encompass the advantages of adhering to this view. That will come in the final section of this essay. Before that, however, it would be beneficial to outline a possible path for this particular reading of the Christological *imago dei* by situating it within three periods of theological thought—the early patristic, late patristic and medieval, and Reformed periods.

### III. SITUATING THE CHRISTOLOGICAL *IMAGO DEI* WITHIN THE HISTORY OF THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT

#### *The Patristic Period*

Crisp cites the examples of Irenaeus and Athanasius as two patristic fathers who held on to a Christological reading of the *imago dei*.<sup>32</sup> A cursory glance at the major patristic fathers reveals this to be true not just for Irenaeus and Athanasius but arguably all the patristic theologians. They conceived of *Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word* to be not only the archetype but also the *prototype of the divine image in whom humanity was created after*. The following paragraphs survey the major patristic fathers on this point.

Irenaeus states in *Against Heresies* 5.16.2:

For in times long past, it was said that man was created after the image of God, but it was not [actually] *shown; for the Word was at yet invisible, after whose image man was created*, wherefore also he did easily lose the similitude. When, however, *the Word of God became flesh*, He confirmed both these: for *He both showed forth the image truly*, since He became Himself what was His image; and He re-established the similitude after a sure manner, by assimilating man to the invisible Father through means of the visible Word.<sup>33</sup>

Irenaeus shows from the above passage that to be created in the image of God is to be created in the image of the Word, and it was in the Incarnation that the Word truly showed forth what that image was meant to be all this while. He states even more explicitly in *On the Apostolic Preaching* that as man is made in the image

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<sup>32</sup> Crisp, “Christological Doctrine,” 53.

<sup>33</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.16.2 (added emphasis).

of God, “the ‘image’ is the Son of God, in whose image man was made.” And the incarnate Son’s manifestation “*in the last times*” was precisely to “show the image like unto Himself.”<sup>34</sup>

Origen similarly has an idea of humanity being created as an “image of the Image.” He states in *Homilies on Luke 8.2*: “I need to consider that the Lord and Saviour is ‘the image of the invisible God,’ and realize that my soul is made ‘in the Creator’s image’, so that it is an image of the Image. My soul is not directly an image of God; it was created as the image of an Image that already existed.”<sup>35</sup>

Athanasius, the Alexandrian bishop, continues with the idea of Jesus Christ being the archetype and prototype of the divine image. He states in *On the Incarnation*:

What then was God to do? Or what was to be done save the renewing of that which was in God’s image, so that by it men might once more be able to know Him? But how could this have come to pass save by the presence of *the very Image of God, our Lord Jesus Christ*? For by men’s means it was impossible, since *they are but made after an image*; nor by angels either, for not even they are (God’s) images. Whence the Word of God came in His own person, that, as He was the Image of the Father, He might be able to create afresh the man after the image.<sup>36</sup>

As for the Cappadocian Fathers, Gregory of Nazianzus resists viewing the *imago dei* through a single lens but sees the divine image (εἰκὼν θεῖα) as a dynamic existence in which human beings relate to it by being and becoming.<sup>37</sup> Within this dynamic understanding of the human *eikon*, Gregory gives pride of place to beginning with Christ, whom he calls the “identical Eikon.” As one commentator states, this is Gregory of Nazianzus speaking “of Christ as the Eikon in a way that denotes Christ’s ontological imaging of the Father.”<sup>38</sup> His good friend Gregory of Nyssa interprets Genesis 1:26 as concerning not the particular but rather the universal or the collective—that is, Adam is not the particular human

34 Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* (Catholic University of American Press, 1952), §22.

35 Origen, *Homilies on Luke*, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J. (Catholic University of American Press, 1996), 8.2.

36 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. IV, eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Christian Literature Company, 1892), §13 (added emphasis).

37 Thomas, *Image of God in Gregory of Nazianzus*, 2–3. On p. 5, Thomas highlights that rather than focusing on the question “What is the divine image?” Gregory of Nazianzus’ attention was turned toward the other question of “What does it mean to be a divine image?”

38 Thomas, *Image of God in Gregory of Nazianzus*, 7.

being on view in the injunction of Genesis 1:26, but it is the entire human race that bears the divine image. As Gregory states, it is “the human being manifested together with the first formation of the world, and he who shall come to be after the consummation of all” that forms the referent for the humanity spoken of in Genesis 1:26.<sup>39</sup> This leads John Behr to posit the idea that for Gregory of Nyssa, “the image of God in accordance with whom God makes the human being in Gen. 1.27 is, according to *De hom.* 16.7, Christ Jesus, the ‘Prototype.’”<sup>40</sup>

This survey of the few patristic figures reveals two key aspects of the patristic understanding of the *imago dei*. On the one hand, there is the aspect whereby the *imago dei* is located in the human soul, and especially in the quality or trait of rationality or the intellect. This aspect in many ways is unavoidable, granted first the Greek philosophical understanding of λόγος as the rational principle of order or divine intelligence that governs the world, and second, the fact that Christ is described in John’s gospel as ὁ λόγος, further consolidated by the apologist Justin Martyr’s employment of this ascription. As one commentator states of Justin Martyr’s thought, “The Logos is the personal reason of God in which all men partake” and that “this divine Logos assumed human form in Jesus Christ.”<sup>41</sup> Given this line of thinking, it is easy to see how the divine image came to be located in the human soul and in the particular trait of rationality, even as the archetypal divine image is located in the perfect divine reason that has become flesh in Jesus Christ.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, the patristic fathers did not hold onto the *imago dei* being the human soul with its intellect in isolation, but it could be argued that the concept is relegated under the more emphatic notion of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word being the archetype and the prototype of the divine image. And if the focus on Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word is on his human nature such that Jesus Christ is not just *homo futurus* but *homo humanus*, it positions the Christological *imago dei* to sit very comfortably with the theology of the patristic fathers. With the patristic fathers, we could say that rather than making Adam the basis of anthropology, Jesus Christ the incarnate one forms the basis.<sup>43</sup>

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39 Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, 16.17–18.

40 John Behr, “Nature Makes an Ascent from the Lower to the Higher: Gregory of Nyssa on Human Distinctiveness,” *Zygon* 58:2 (2023): 545.

41 Marian Hillar, *From Logos to Trinity: The Evolution of Religious Beliefs from Pythagoras to Tertullian* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 144.

42 This explains Origen’s interesting concept of “rational discipline” (On First Principles, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Ave Maria Press, 2013), 1.5.2). A falling away from Christ is a falling away from logos or reason, and part of our being conformed to the image of Christ is to undergo this rational discipline.

43 Matthew C. Steenberg, *Of God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (T&T Clark, 2009), 33, mentions the following of Irenaeus, which could hold true for the other patristic fathers: “Irenaeus takes his theology of the image from the starting point of the incarnate Christ. This Christ, as perfect

*The Late Patristic and Medieval Period*

When it comes to the late patristic and medieval period as sampled in the church fathers Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, the aspect of the *imago dei* residing in the human soul, and particularly its rationality or intellect, is amplified to form an indelible feature of what the *imago* is within the theological tradition. The other aspect of Jesus Christ being the prototype of the divine image, however, falls out of view. In the interest of space, only Augustine's views will be explored.

Two reasons are offered for the shift away from the patristic fathers' understanding of the *imago dei*. First, as Laela Zwollo has shown, there is in Augustine's doctrine of creation a very active dimension of Christ being the Creator by being the Word (*Verbum Dei*) that is eternally uttered by the Father; when God spoke, the Word spoke, and creation was brought into being. The "speaking" of the *Verbum Dei* in turn materialized the eternal "Ideas" and "Reasons" or "Forms" that existed in the mind of the Word, and these ideas or forms served as models or patterns for created things in the universe.<sup>44</sup> Augustine thus designated the *Verbum Dei* as the creation principle or the ontological foundation of the universe and at the same time setting Christ, the *Verbum Dei*, to be the most perfect image of the Father and completely equal to him. It is evident that Augustine's understanding of Christ as the perfect or archetypal divine image emphasizes the pre-incarnate Word or the *Verbum Dei*, whereas the patristic fathers had a major bearing to Christ as the Word incarnate in their conceptualizing of the archetypal divine image. Naturally, greater attention is given to the humanity of Jesus when Christ the incarnate

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image of the Father, ... is the living paradigm for an anthropology of the image. It is not Adam, as too many scriptural commentators assume." Michael Reeves, in "The Glory of God: The Christological Anthropology of Irenaeus of Lyons and Karl Barth" (PhD diss., University of London, King's College, 2005), 39–40, states that this move presents Jesus Christ as "the first and true man who would come after the second (Adam) and so make visible what he eternally was." I grant that such thinking throws up questions about time, freedom, and necessity, but these are not problems that the patristic fathers addressed. On this note, Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1: *The Triune God* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 140, has appropriated this idea of Jesus Christ being the prototypical divine image toward arguing for the pre-existence of Jesus Christ: "[The] *Logos*, whether pre-existing or walking among us, is always the person Jesus." However, Emmitt Cornelius, "St. Irenaeus and Robert W. Jenson on Jesus in the Trinity," *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society* 55:1 (2012): 117, highlights that Irenaeus was more keen to establish that the *Logos* is identical with the human person Jesus Christ than to identify the *Logos* with a pre-existent Jesus.

<sup>44</sup> Zwollo, *St. Augustine and Plotinus*, 145–46. Augustine's doctrine of creation by the *Verbum Dei* is actually more complicated. He allows for two "levels" where creation occurs, in the eternal and temporal realms. In the eternal realm, God's speaking by the *Verbum Dei* brought forth the realm of pure Light, intelligence, and knowledge, and associated with that, angels, the human soul, and the principles of causal reason (*or Rationes causales*). Creation in the temporal realm saw the unfolding of the principles of causal reason in the material world. Applied to the human creature, this is where the human soul came together with the body (Zwollo, *St. Augustine and Plotinus*, 148–49). Understanding Augustine's two-level creation act helps us understand why he locates the image of God in the human soul, and specifically in the highest part of the soul, the mind, above which nothing exists other than God himself (Zwollo, *St. Augustine and Plotinus*, 154).

Word serves as the primary referent for the archetypal divine image.

Second—and this remains purely a postulation open to correction—by the time we reach Augustine, the doctrine of divine simplicity had become more developed.<sup>45</sup> The consolidation of the doctrine meant that Augustine’s conceptualization of God the Son would tend to begin from the viewpoint of demonstrating the divinity and co-equality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; in other words, from the viewpoint of God the Son as the pre-existent *Logos* rather than as Christ the Word incarnate. This explains why, as Zwollo highlights, Augustine is keen to demonstrate in the first half of *De Trinitate* “how the Incarnation fits into his scheme of the Holy Trinity as immaterial and transcendent, as well as how or why the Son’s divine essence remained immutable throughout his human life.”<sup>46</sup> Once again, starting from the viewpoint of God the Son as the pre-existent Word diverts the focus from the humanity of Christ as the incarnate Word serving as the archetype, let alone prototype, of the human nature that Adam and Eve were created after as an image of the divine.<sup>47</sup>

### *The Reformed Period*

In approaching the Reformed period, there are two windows—one partial and the other fully opened—within Reformation and Reformed theology in which the Christological reading of the *imago dei* could fill the space previously vacated during the late patristic and medieval periods. The first (partial) window is the concept of Christ the eternal mediator and the second (fully opened) window is the covenant of redemption conceptualized within a supralapsarian framework.

The idea of Christ as the eternal mediator gained prominence through the writings of the Reformer John Calvin. It is a well-established fact that Calvin begins his treatment of Christology in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* II.12 with the idea of Christ having to be true God and true man in order to fulfill

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45 See Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Catholic University of American Press, 2002, 1963), 5.4.5; 5.16.17; 6.7.8–9.

46 Zwollo, *St. Augustine and Plotinus*, 202.

47 As Zwollo, *St. Augustine and Plotinus*, 207, highlights, Augustine, in showing how Christ or the Son is the “Perfect Image” of God, identified Christ with knowledge, understanding, and intelligence (*The Trinity* 6.10.11), which Zwollo asserts is no different from Augustine’s presentation of Christ as the creation principle in *De genesi ad litteram libri*. Augustine also correlates the eternal nature of the knowledge of God to the eternal love between the Father and the Image, which manifests in the Holy Spirit. By this move, Zwollo, (*St. Augustine and Plotinus*, 208) suggests that Augustine is preparing the ground for “his extensive treatment in books VIII–X of the relationship of love within the Holy Trinity as a paradigm for the human *imago Trinitatis* and its own love and knowledge.” That said, there is also this aspect where Augustine allows for the “Perfect Image” in his Incarnation to serve as a model for mankind, although this aspect takes second priority in comparison to the earlier notion of Christ-the-Word as the “Perfect Image.”

the office of the mediator.<sup>48</sup> But Calvin's discussion of why there is a need for a mediator occurs earlier in chapter 6. And it is in fact within this context of Christ as the mediator that Calvin discusses the purpose of the Old Testament Law and the continuity of the Old and New Testaments from chapters 7–11. Moreover, as Stephen Edmondson has shown through Calvin's involvement in the controversy with the Italian theologian Francesco Stancaro, Calvin's emphasis on Christ as mediator extends to the argument that Christ is the *eternal* mediator.<sup>49</sup> Stancaro had advanced the position that Christ mediated between God and humanity only in his human nature and not in his complete person as the God-man. To Stancaro, for the Son to mediate between God and man in his divinity would imply that he was subordinate to the Father in his divine nature, and that amounts to the Arian heresy. Rather, Christ mediated in his humanity alone, while his divinity served as the source and empowerment for Christ's mediatorial work.<sup>50</sup> Calvin's response came in the form of two letters that he wrote.<sup>51</sup> The core issue pertaining to our discussion is that Calvin emphasized in both responses that Christ did not just become mediator when he assumed human flesh in the Incarnation. Instead, Christ was always mediator, not only between the Israelites and God in the Old Testament prior to the Incarnation<sup>52</sup> but also as the Son of God mediating from the beginning of creation. This has to be so, since Christ remains head over the Church, has primacy over the angels, and is the firstborn of every creature.<sup>53</sup> Logic demands that "if ... the Son of God is the mediator, then it is outside of controversy that Christ is the Son of God in respect to both natures, and hence it follows that he is mediator no less by reason of his divinity than by his human nature," as Calvin states.<sup>54</sup> In Calvin's second response, he similarly affirms that "certainly, the eternal λόγος was already mediator from the beginning, before Adam's fall and the alienation and separation of the human race from God."<sup>55</sup>

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48 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.12 "Christ had to become man in order to fulfill the office of mediator." Stephen Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 5, argues that the form and teaching of Calvin's Christology is centred around the focus of Christ as Mediator. This central idea forms the bridge to relate the discussion of the metaphysics of Christ's person and Christ's office or work.

49 Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology*, 14–40.

50 Edmondson, *Calvin's Christology*, 14, 17.

51 Both letters have been translated and reproduced in Joseph Tylenda, "Christ the Mediator: Calvin versus Stancaro," *Calvin Theological Journal* 7 (1972): 5–16 and Joseph Tylenda, "The Controversy on Christ the Mediator: Calvin's Second Reply to Stancaro," *Calvin Theological Journal* 8 (1972): 131–157.

52 This is a point highlighted more in Inst. than in Calvin's response to Stancaro. Calvin states in Inst. II.6.1 that apart from the mediator, there is no knowledge of God, and in *Inst.* II.6.2–4 that the Old Testament covenant with Israel was premised upon a mediator.

53 Tylenda, "Christ the Mediator," 12–13; Tylenda, "Controversy on Christ," 147.

54 Tylenda, "Christ the Mediator," 14.

55 Tylenda, "Controversy on Christ," 147. It should be stated that Calvin had other key points in his responses to Stancaro, namely, 1) that in order for Christ to truly be the mediator in opening the way for

To be sure, Calvin identified Christ the eternal mediator as the Son or Word or λόγος rather than as the Word incarnate (or the Word-to-be-incarnated). This forms the reason why Calvin’s concept of the eternal mediator at best opens the window partially for the notion of the Christological *imago dei* to enter.<sup>56</sup> Yet, the very language of “mediator” opens paths of enquiry. After all, what is a “mediator” if not someone who represents God to humanity and humanity to God? Christ is the perfect mediator because he is the true God-man, *vere deus vere homo*, “of one substance with the Father,”<sup>57</sup> and “consubstantial with us according to the Manhood.”<sup>58</sup> The fact that Calvin allows for Christ to be this perfect mediator even *before the Fall of humanity* and *before the Incarnation* leaves him at the very least open to the idea that the human nature Christ assumes at the Incarnation serves as the archetype and even the prototype of the human nature that the first of humanity would be created with, even though that human nature is assumed only at a point chronologically later. What Calvin needed was an instrument of thought that could formalize this way of thinking.

That instrument lies in the teaching of supralapsarianism, which came into view during the period of Reformed Orthodoxy. Supralapsarianism and its counterpart infralapsarianism flowed from discussions centred around God’s divine decree. Although the doctrine of God’s simplicity, eternity, and omniscience implies the issuance of a single divine decree with no “before” or “after” in the divine decision, “we sometimes speak of his decrees (plural) and a sequential order simply to refer to a *logical* rather than *temporal* succession of decisions,” as Horton states in *The Christian Faith*.<sup>59</sup> In particular, supralapsarianism specifies that God’s decree to save and redeem in Christ is logically *prior* to his decree to create and permit the Fall, whereas infralapsarianism specifies that the decree to save *follows* the decision

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humanity to return to God by overcoming death, he needed to share in the same divinity as the Father; 2) Christ as the true God-man was mediator as a whole person; therefore, it was not possible for him to be mediator according to the human nature alone; and 3) Christ is mediator between God and men in relation to the economy of salvation and not his essence, therefore, the role of mediator neither puts into question the nature of Christ’s divinity nor posits it as an inferior divinity as Stancaro thought.

56 In *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.15.3, Calvin shows his non-deviation from the tradition in locating the seat of the image of God in the human soul. However, as Horton (*Christian Faith*, 392) argues, Calvin is innovative in attributing the image’s glory to the whole person, including the body itself. Calvin thus seems to allow for the entire rather than one aspect of human nature to image God. Calvin’s statement that the “full definition of ‘image’ ... can be nowhere better recognized than from the restoration of his corrupt nature” and that this restoration is only obtained through Christ “the Second Adam” further shows his maintenance of the view of Christ being the archetypal image.

57 Nicene-Constantinople Creed A.D. 381 (ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ).

58 Chalcedonian Definition, A.D. 451 (ὁμοούσιον τὸν αὐτὸν ἡμῖν κατὰ τὴν ἀνθρωπότητα).

59 Horton, *Christian Faith*, 315 (emphasis original). Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Baker Academic, 1985), “supra lapsum,” states that both the supralapsarian and infralapsarian views arose out of a “consideration of an eternal, logical ‘order of the things of the decree’, or *ordo rerum decretarum*, in the mind of God.”

to create and permit the Fall.<sup>60</sup> This has a bearing on the objects of the divine predestination. As Richard Muller highlights, supralapsarianism posits that “in the divine mind, the human subject of election and reprobation is conceived as ... creatable and fallible, i.e., as a possibility for creation and capable of falling,” while infralapsarianism posits that “in the divine mind the human subject of election is viewed in eternity as ... created and fallen.”<sup>61</sup> Supralapsarianism, as compared to infralapsarianism, presents greater room for Christ as mediator and redeemer to bear not only archetypal but prototypical human nature, since with supralapsarianism, the decree that Christ comes as redeemer takes logical precedence over the decree to create humanity.<sup>62</sup>

The case is further strengthened when another notion arising from the period of high Reformed orthodoxy, the Covenant of Redemption, is added to a supralapsarian framework. Stated plainly, the covenant of redemption is the pre-temporal intra-Trinitarian agreement between the persons of the Trinity to plan and execute the redemption of the elect. The 1657 Savoy Declaration (the Congregational version of the Westminster Standards) captures the gist of the covenant of redemption:

It pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus his only begotten Son, according to a covenant made between them both, to be the Mediator between God and man; the Prophet, Priest, and King, the Head and Saviour of his Church, the Heir of all things and Judge of the world; unto whom he did from all eternity give a people to be his seed, and to be by him in time redeemed, called, justified, sanctified, and glorified. (VIII.i)<sup>63</sup>

If, as Reformed scholar J. V. Fesko says, the covenant of redemption focuses on the “plan of redemption and the Son’s election,” any discussion on the Son’s election

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60 Horton, *Christian Faith*, 315–16.

61 Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, “supra lapsum.”

62 This is not to say that the Christological *imago dei* is totally ruled out with infralapsarianism. It is still possible for there to be a logical distinction and separation between humanity as created following the pattern of Christ’s human nature and humanity as the objects of the divine election in their “created and fallen” state. However, I concede that such a logical distinction is rather “forced.” Supralapsarianism provides a smoother logical connection in that God’s decree to save and redeem in Christ “leads” to his decree to create humanity patterned after the humanity of Christ, their saviour and redeemer.

63 *Savoy Declaration*, VIII.i, quoted in J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Christian Focus Publications, 2016), 45.

(to be covenant surety and mediator) will involve the doctrine of predestination.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, given that what defines supralapsarianism is the object of predestination—in particular, humanity as “creatable and liable to fall”<sup>65</sup>—the covenant of redemption set within a supralapsarian framework allows generous room for an interpretation that allows for Christ, in being elected “to be the Mediator between God and man” and to “give a people to be his seed,”<sup>66</sup> to bear in his own being as mediator the archetype and prototype of the very human nature that he has come to redeem and renew, even “before” the creation of humanity patterned after that nature. By ordering the (logical) relationship between the decree to elect (and save) and the decree to create, supralapsarianism provides a capacious space for the Christological *imago dei* to reside comfortably in.

#### IV. ADVANTAGES OF THE CHRISTOLOGICAL *IMAGO DEI*

A summary of the argument covered so far is in order. After surveying the options for how the *imago dei* is understood today, the Christological *imago dei* as envisaged by Oliver Crisp was presented. This is a view that locates the divine image in the human nature that Jesus Christ assumes in the Incarnation, and the first of humanity is created patterned after this prototypical human nature of Jesus. Following this, the Christological *imago dei* was investigated further in relation to its fit within the historical tradition of understanding the image of God. The conclusion is that although this view was acknowledged and even advanced by the patristic fathers, it was overshadowed by the intellectualistic and rationalistic understanding of the image in the late patristic and medieval period. This view, however, could possibly find a comeback via the two Reformed concepts of Christ as the eternal mediator and the covenant of redemption set within a supralapsarian understanding. To close the essay, it would only be fitting to highlight some advantages of holding on to the Christological *imago dei* over others. One key advantage comes to mind; the rest of can either be grouped under this key advantage or serve as elaborations of this advantage.

The key advantage is simply this: The Christological *imago dei* follows in a natural manner the overarching biblical story in its development of the image of God; and

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64 Fesko, *Trinity and Covenant*, 202. On p. 211, Fesko asserts that the covenant of redemption is precisely the coordination of Christology and predestination.

65 Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, “supra lapsum”; Fesko, *Trinity and Covenant*, 207 fn. 13.

66 *Savoy Declaration*, VIII.i

if the image of God is the defining feature for what it means to be human, then Jesus is shown to be the true human being. As Karl Barth famously remarked, “This man [referring to Jesus] is man. ... He alone is primarily and properly man.”<sup>67</sup> The Christological *imago dei* thus aids in a study of anthropology that is grounded in Christology. Stanley Grenz warns us of the dangers of an anthropological study conducted otherwise:

When the nature of the human person is assumed to emerge solely from creation—i.e. apart from Christ—and when Christ is cast as, above all, the divine antidote to human sin, not only is anthropology cut loose from any Christological grounding, but Christology is also made dependent on anthropology. We might say that the first Adam thereby becomes the measuring rod for the Second.<sup>68</sup>

In this sense, the assumption that a sufficient or even a full understanding of the *imago dei* can be derived purely from the creational account is to run aground the New Testament witness. As Grenz affirms, the early Christian writers sought to “set forth a Christocentric understanding of the image of God that drew from, but also transformed, the perspective found within the pages of the OT in accordance with their belief that Jesus was the fulfillment of what God had intended from the beginning.”<sup>69</sup> As such, Grenz emphasizes that Christology must inform the doctrine of creation, for only in Christ as the true *imago dei* can we see fully what it means to be human and to discern God’s divine purpose for humanity.<sup>70</sup> The Christological *imago dei* (as presented by Crisp) captures the emphases of Grenz’s argument, the key difference being that where Grenz locates the image in the vocation given to humanity to live as God’s representative within creation, Crisp locates the image in the human nature that Jesus assumes (or comes to assume) in the Incarnation, with that human nature being the prototype and archetype of the human nature *that* humanity is created in.<sup>71</sup>

The other advantages follow from the above-mentioned key advantage. First, there is no need to abstract from human nature one aspect—be it the human soul,

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67 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2, trans. H. Knight et. al. (T&T Clark, 1960), 43. It should be noted that the word translated “man” (*Mensch*) can be more appropriately translated “human” or “human being.”

68 Stanley Grenz, “Jesus as the *Imago Dei*: Image-of-God Christology and the Non-Linear Linearity of Theology,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47/4 (2004): 626.

69 Grenz, “Jesus as the *Imago Dei*,” 618.

70 Grenz, “Jesus as the *Imago Dei*,” 627.

71 Grenz, “Jesus as the *Imago Dei*,” 622; Crisp, “Christological Doctrine,” 52.

some structural quality like rationality, or some functional aspect like rule and dominion or relationality—and limit the *imago dei* to that particular aspect. The difficulty of limiting the *imago dei* to reside in a substantive view of the soul with the property of intellect, for example, is that it is hard to justify the particular property chosen. So, in this case, why the intellect? Also, limiting the *imago dei* to reside in relationality or rule and dominion neglects the element to do with the “substance” of the image that makes the relationships or rule possible in the first place. Rather, the entirety of Jesus’ human nature serves as the divine image. And when God said in Genesis, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Genesis 1:26), by “image,” he was referring to the human nature that Jesus would assume. Humanity would be created and patterned after *that* human nature. In other words, the Christological *imago dei* can validate and integrate the different understandings of the *imago dei* on offer today.

Second, thinking of the *imago dei* as the human nature of Jesus brings us as close as possible to the meaning that “image” is meant to convey. Whether it is the notion of “representation” (from the Hebrew word *selem*) or “reflection” (from the Greek term *eikōn*), it is in the human nature assumed by Jesus that the fullest meanings of “representation” and “reflection” are realized. As Crisp states:

God ordained that human nature have certain properties and powers that would mean that the particular human nature God the Son assumes at the first moment of his incarnation conforms to, and is capable of being in personal union with, a divine person. Human nature is created in order that it might reflect the divine image and be united to God.<sup>72</sup>

Arising from Crisp’s statement, what better “reflection” of the divine is there than to have human nature (in particular, the human nature of Jesus) possess the potential and the capability of being in personal union with God himself? And what better “representation” of the divine is there than to have human nature (in particular, the human nature of Jesus) represent God to humanity and thus to the world? In other words, there is no better “reflection” and “representation” found in any other than the perfect eternal mediator, Jesus Christ. His human nature serves as the archetype and prototype of the divine image.

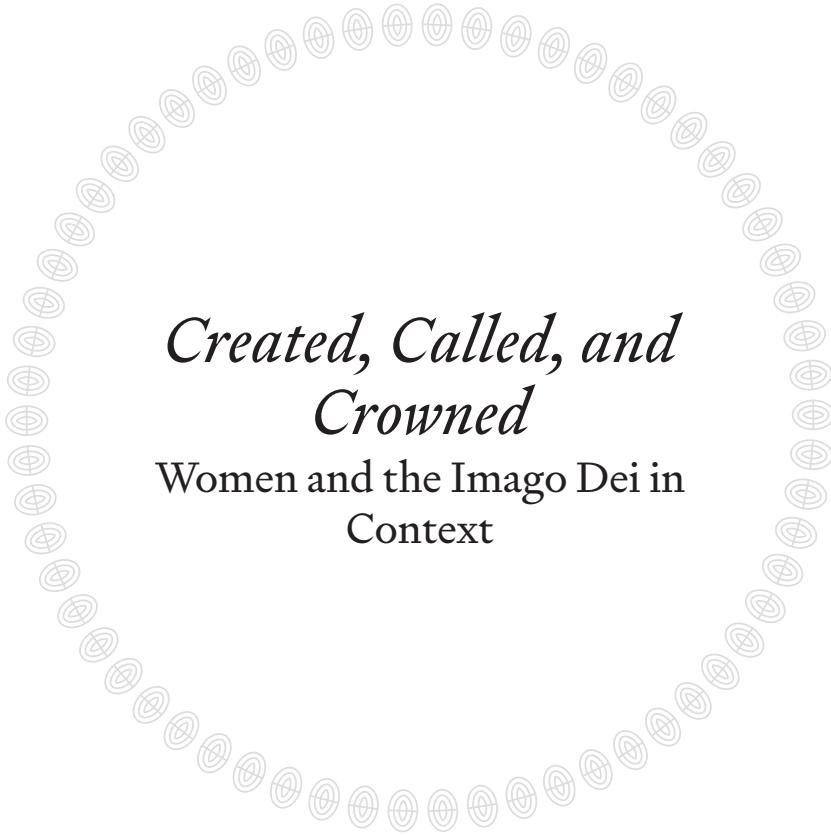
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72 Crisp, “Christological Doctrine,” 63.

## V. CONCLUSION

In a fascinating use of the Old Testament in the New Testament, the author of Hebrews takes the famous question and answer of Psalm 8:4–5 (“What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor”) and applies it to the Lord Jesus in Hebrews 2:5–9. And if Psalm 8 can be thought of as a commentary on the *imago dei* that makes humanity so unique among God’s vast and bountiful creation, it is all the more striking the writer’s answer: “But we do see Jesus” (Hebrews 2:9). What we find in the author’s answer is the culmination of a trajectory of the *imago dei* commenced in the Old Testament and fulfilled in the New Testament: To be created in the image of God is to be created in the entirety of our human natures in the image of the perfect God-man, the Lord Jesus Christ, *vere deus, vere homo*. To be created *imago dei* is to be created *imago christi*.





*Created, Called, and  
Crowned*

Women and the Imago Dei in  
Context

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In a quiet Syrian village, a Christian woman kneels beside her olive tree, tracing a cross into the soil, her weathered hands a testament to both sorrow and grace. Across the Middle East, from candlelit sanctuaries in Egypt to war-worn churches in Iraq, women gather. Beneath vaulted ceilings or cracked cement, they read Scripture aloud, whisper prayers for the suffering, and embody a faith shaped by endurance.

Often veiled, not in subjugation but in sacred reverence, they carry the burdens of tradition and patriarchal expectation. Yet in the pages of Scripture, they have discovered a deeper truth: women, like men, are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), co-heirs in Christ, redeemed and called.

Mariam, a young widowed seminary student, proclaims: “We are part of the new creation.” Her life of teaching, shaped by loss and displacement, is a living witness to resurrection hope. In her home, she opens the Gospel of Luke with other women, highlighting Jesus’s radical embrace of the overlooked and marginalized. “He calls us daughters. He calls us worthy.”

These women reflect not worldly power but divine perseverance: glory revealed through suffering, wisdom, and faithfulness. In the words of 1 Corinthians 11:7, woman is “the glory of man”—not as lesser, but as one who radiates God’s image into the world.

In cultures where their voices have been muted, a quiet renaissance is unfolding. These women are thinkers, learners, researchers, educators, intercessors, and leaders—some titled, many not, all marked by the *imago dei*. Though often unseen, they are the heartbeat of the church in the Middle East: constrained by culture yet spiritually crowned.

Their crowns are not jeweled but forged in love, joy, peace, and patient endurance. They are the hidden pillars of the church. Not hidden from God, he sees the women and honors them. And in Christ they stand, crowned by heaven.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the *imago dei*, the image of God, is a foundational tenet in Christian theology, affirming the intrinsic dignity, worth, and equality of all human beings. Genesis 1:26–27 declares, “Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness ... male and female he created them,” clearly indicating that both men and women equally bear the divine image. Nevertheless, despite this theological

affirmation, numerous Christian traditions have historically marginalized women, restricting their participation in God's redemptive work.

This marginalization stands in tension with the New Testament's vision of the church, where proclamation of the word is entrusted to the whole people of God. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, women often navigate intersecting cultural and theological frameworks that impose both visible and invisible constraints. Within Islamic contexts, where veiling reflects broader socioreligious norms regarding women's roles, such frameworks significantly shape women's identities, agency, and public presence. Yet, confronted with these limitations in the context where they are situated, many Christian women embody the *imago dei* in transformative ways, demonstrating spiritual wisdom and faithful presence. Grounded in Scripture and shaped by New Testament theology, this paper examines the theological foundation for women's inclusion in proclaiming the Word, urging the Church toward communal discernment. It contends that affirming women's participation is integral to the church's faithful witness in the world.

## II. GOD'S IMAGE?

Humanity was created to reflect God's glory, yet as Romans 3:23 states, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." This falling short implies not only moral failure but a distortion of what it means to bear the divine image. In Pauline theology, women may be understood as the "crown of glory," not through a diminished status but through a multifaceted, elevated identity grounded in creation and redemption. Indeed, Philip Payne contends that Paul, deeply shaped by the Hebrew Scriptures, operates with theological axioms that affirm the equal standing of men and women.<sup>1</sup> Passages such as Colossians 3:10 ("And have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator") and 2 Corinthians 3:18 reveal Paul's conviction that both sexes bear the image of God and are being renewed in Christ: "And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

Payne draws on Paul's language in Colossians 2:10–11 and Ephesians 5:22–27 to argue that women, like men, share fully in the redemptive identity and spiritual

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1 Philip Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters*, 69.

status granted through Christ. In Colossians 2:10, Paul declares, “You have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority,” and in verse 11 he continues with the metaphor of spiritual circumcision, indicating that all believers, regardless of gender, are incorporated into Christ’s body through faith, not through physical or cultural markers.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in Ephesians 5:22–27, while Paul addresses the roles of husbands and wives, he frames the relationship within the larger mystery of Christ and the church, affirming that both are sanctified and cleansed by the word and presented as a radiant church.<sup>3</sup> Payne uses these texts to suggest that gender distinctions do not hinder one’s participation in the *imago dei* or in the fullness of life in Christ, and therefore, women should not be excluded from active roles in proclaiming the word.

However, 1 Corinthians 11:7–10 introduces a complex theological rationale for gender distinction, particularly in the context of worship practices.

A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; 9 neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. 10 It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels.

The current discussion among New Testament scholars is both nuanced and significant and is therefore reviewed here in some detail. At first glance, this passage appears to disrupt Paul’s broader affirmation of male-female equality by employing terms such as “image” and “glory” in ways that seem to distinguish men from women. Yet Paul’s affirmation of equality is central to his theology, as seen especially in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14, where each believer is called to participate in the life of the community and contribute to the exercise of spiritual gifts.

Payne interprets Paul’s insistence on specific hair practices as a symbolic affirmation of sexual differentiation rooted in Genesis 1–2. Here, “image” and “glory” are not ontological hierarchies but moral and theological categories intended to affirm the divine intention behind male and female distinctions.<sup>4</sup> Paul’s concern, according to this reading, lies in upholding sexual differentiation as a boundary against effeminacy and perceived rejection of creation order, particularly in

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2 Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 69.

3 Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 69.

4 Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 175

Greco-Roman contexts that associated hairstyle with sexual identity.<sup>5</sup>

Lucy Peppiatt and others have observed an internal oscillation in Paul's argument, moving between cultural, theological, and anthropological logics. Peppiatt questions whether Paul unequivocally affirms male primacy in the divine image, noting the interpretive challenges and potential shifts in his reasoning from honor/shame paradigms to theological anthropology.<sup>6</sup>

Cynthia Long Westfall (2016) offers a revisionist and constructive reading, suggesting that if man is the glory of God, then woman, crafted from and for man, can be seen as the "glory of glory." Far from being subordinate, Westfall argues this identity is surplus: Woman shares fully in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27) and carries additional symbolic resonance as the culmination of creation. Her covering, then, is not a symbol of inferiority but of liturgical decorum tied to her exalted status.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, while some scholars interpret 1 Corinthians 11 as affirming a gendered hierarchy grounded in creation, others argue for a theological vision that elevates woman as both equal image bearer and uniquely glorious, indeed, as the crown of human creation. The debate reveals the richness and tension within Paul's theological anthropology and his negotiation between cultural convention and redemptive equality.

Resolution to these discussions lies in the foundational principles of the creation account. As the climactic act of God's creative work, woman is not fashioned as an afterthought, but as the culmination and completion of creation, formed from man's side to signify shared worth. Genesis 1:26–27 declares that humanity is created in God's image and likeness. While these terms have often been interpreted in terms of immaterial qualities such as moral capacity, intellect, or agency, when read in the wider Ancient West Asian context they also carry a royal and representative sense: Humanity as *imago dei* is appointed to exercise God's vice-regency on earth, to "act like him." This creation theology secures the ontological equality of men and women as those who alike bear God's image. Yet Paul's appeal to equality does not rest directly on the creation narrative. Instead, his language of "image" consistently unfolds within a Christological horizon. For Paul, the image is fully and definitively

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5 Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ*, 177

6 Lucy Peppiatt, *Women and Worship at Corinth: Paul's Rhetorical Arguments in 1 Corinthians* (Cascade, 2015), 45.

7 Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Baker Academic, 2016), 37.

revealed in Christ, and humanity is restored to that image only in union with him (2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10–11). Thus, his powerful insistence on equality—whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female (Gal 3:28)—is rooted not in creation alone but in the new creation inaugurated in Christ. In this way, the biblical witness presents creation as the foundation of equal worth, and Christ as the means by which that equality is renewed and enacted within the life of the church.

The particular creation of humanity (Genesis 1:27) is presented in poetic form, marked by a symmetrical and repetitive literary structure:

- A. So God created humanity
- B. in his image;
- C. in the image of God
- D. he created him;
- E. *male and female*
- F. *he created them*<sup>8</sup>

The mirrored elements (A–A', B–B') highlight the centrality of the divine image, while the final pair (B'–A' to B'–A'') emphasizes that both male and female equally bear that image.<sup>9</sup> Unlike other creatures distinguished by species (Gen. 1:11, 12, 21, 24, 25), humans are unified in kind. There is only one humanity bearing a singular divine image. Jewish exegetical tradition reads this as divine intention: No individual can claim superior ancestry as a basis for domination. Extending this logic, just as variation in species does not imply hierarchy among animals, the distinction between male and female does not justify hierarchical structures within humanity. The narrator presents male and female as equal image bearers, with gender holding no implication of precedence.

This equality is further reinforced in Genesis 1:28–29. Both male and female are recipients of the divine blessing and mandate to be fruitful, fill the earth, subdue it, and exercise dominion over living creatures. Provision of sustenance is given equally to both. Nowhere does the text introduce any gender-based differentiation in authority, capacity, or dignity. As bearers of the divine image, they stand on equal footing.

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8 Adapted from the structural analysis in Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Fortress Press, 1978), 16–17.

9 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 1 (Word Books, 1987), 31–33.

This reading is of great theological significance, especially when considering contrasting interpretations of the Fall. If one presupposes an ontological inferiority of the woman, whether in character or intellect, her transgression is then viewed as confirmation of such inferiority, and male authority as a necessary corrective. This has historically shaped interpretations by church fathers and even modern commentators, of whom many have asserted that female susceptibility or “gullibility” renders women unfit for leadership. These views, however, often reflect Aristotelian rather than biblical anthropology. As Prudence Allen has shown, Aristotle’s “sex polarity theory” cast the male as rational form and the female as irrational matter, with women perceived as “deformed” males. In such a paradigm, male virtue is expressed in leadership, female virtue in submission.<sup>10</sup> This is not a culturally appropriate reading of Genesis but an imposition of Hellenistic categories upon it.

Then, as already observed, in the New Testament, in 1 Corinthians 11:7, we encounter the assertion that “man is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man.” As Lucy Peppiatt notes, this verse has caused immense harm by being read as support for male primacy.<sup>11</sup> Yet Genesis never ascribes “glory” to man as such. Indeed, in 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul states that all believers, male and female, are being transformed into greater glory in Christ.<sup>12</sup> Peppiatt persuasively argues that 1 Corinthians 11:7–9 reflects a Corinthian theological error, which Paul corrects in verses 10–16 by affirming women’s authority in worship. Even interpreters who regard 11:6–7 as Pauline rarely apply the accompanying requirement that women wear head coverings, revealing selective application.<sup>13</sup>

To understand Paul faithfully, we must situate his remarks within the broader framework of the gospel as he presents it. Paul consistently proclaims that in Christ, God is renewing all creation, forming a new humanity without partiality. Cultural and social hierarchies are relativized in Christ, who reconstitutes human identity within a new community, the Body of Christ (Gal. 3:28). While distinctions remain, the relational center and defining characteristic of Christian identity is a participatory life in Jesus Christ, mediated by the Spirit of God. Believers are thus called to align their relationships and practices with the eschatological values of God’s kingdom.

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10 Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Early Humanist Reformation 1250–1500* (W. B. Eerdmans, 2006), 45–47.

11 Lucy Peppiatt, *Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God* (Cascade, 2022), 104.

12 Peppiatt, *Women and Worship at Corinth*, 50–53; 97–100.

13 Peppiatt, *Women and Worship at Corinth*, 78–85.

Paul's other references to Genesis further support this reading. In Galatians 3:28, he cites Genesis 1:27 using the precise phrasing "male and female" (not the standard Greek for "man and woman"), reinforcing the mutuality of image bearing. In Ephesians 5:31, ("For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh") he invokes Genesis 2 to underscore marital unity, not hierarchy. Notably, "glory" (*doxa*) does not appear in the Genesis creation narrative at all. When Paul uses this term, he speaks of God's glory and the eschatological transformation of all believers into that glory.

Taken together, these data points support the claim that Paul is engaging with and possibly correcting Corinthian misreadings and not proposing a divine gender hierarchy. Within Christian communities, healthy relationships, especially between men and women, are rooted in the shared process of transformation by the Spirit into God's image and glory (2 Cor. 3:17–18). This mutual transformation calls forth the participation and contribution of all members in the life and mission of the church.

To understand the broader context of the passage (2 Cor. 3:17–18), it is helpful to situate it within the framework of Paul's gospel message. At its core, Paul's gospel proclaims that, out of divine love, God, through Christ, initiates the renewal and restoration of all creation, including humanity. Central to this message is the affirmation that God shows no partiality; in Christ, all cultural distinctions are relativized. Believers are transformed into new persons, collectively forming a new community, the church, or the body of Christ. Consequently, Christian thought and conduct are to be aligned with the values inherent in God's promises and truth. This theological vision confronts and subverts prevailing social hierarchies, which ascribed value and status based on human constructs.

### **III. THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH'S MISSION**

From our analysis, then, we have established that the doctrine of the *imago dei* affirms that both men and women are created equally in God's image (Gen. 1:26–27; Gal. 3:28), sharing equal dignity and vocation.

Here, we turn to the *imago dei* with a deeper theological lens, through the Incarnation. As Thomas F. Torrance writes, what matters is not simply that God

became *man*, but that God became *human*.<sup>14</sup> This distinction is crucial. In Christ, God took on the fullness of human nature, not male characteristics alone, but the shared humanity of all people. And through this Incarnation, the possibility of participation in the divine life was opened to both women and men. This has significant anthropological implications: If the humanity assumed by Christ encompasses all humankind, then women, no less than men, are fully represented in the redemptive work of Christ and are thus affirmed as bearers of the *imago dei*.

To affirm the Incarnation is to affirm that God's redemptive presence extends across gendered lines. It affirms that women's voices are not a threat to the church's purity but a witness to its fullness. Paul grounds his powerful call for equality not in creation but in Christology: "In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female" (Gal. 3:28). Humans, for Paul, are restored to the image of God through Christ. His use of image language often appears in connection with Christological transformation, as in 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Colossians 3:10–11.

Despite this, historical church structures—shaped by interpretations from theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas—have often marginalized women's roles. I would argue that such interpretations contradict Scripture. A faithful theology of the *imago dei* calls for the full inclusion of women in the church's mission. The Spirit's outpouring promises that both sons and daughters will prophesy (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17), and Paul's vision of the church as the body of Christ underscores the essential contribution of every member (1 Cor. 12; Rom. 12). Scriptural examples of female leaders—Phoebe, Priscilla, and Junia—affirm the active ministry of women in the early church. Romans 16, in particular, offers a vivid illustration: The new community comprises Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, men and women, all ministering and serving one another through their diverse gifts. Passages such as 1 Corinthians 12:7—"To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good"—highlight this principle, as Paul repeatedly emphasizes "each" and "all" throughout 1 Corinthians 12 and 14.

Paul's writings reflect the tension between the new creation in Christ and existing cultural norms, negotiating equality within a patriarchal world. Women's faithful witness, empowered by Scripture and the Spirit, reveals God's glory and invites communal discernment rooted in Scripture and life in Christ.

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14 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, ed. Robert T. Walker. (InterVarsity Press, 2008.)

#### **IV. WOMEN AND THE IMAGE OF GOD IN THE MENA CONTEXT: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL-THEOLOGICAL INQUIRY**

The affirmation that both women and men are created in the image of God (*imago dei*) is foundational to Christian theological anthropology. However, within the (MENA) context, this theological truth is often obscured by entrenched structural and symbolic barriers that limit the roles of women both in ecclesial and societal spheres.

Anthropologically, the lived experiences of women reveal pervasive power imbalances sustained more by culturally constructed gender roles than by intrinsic theological mandates. These roles are reinforced by patriarchal traditions within many ecclesial contexts, which often marginalize women by limiting their access to theological education, leadership, and ministry. In many churches across the MENA, women are present, faithful, and spiritually mature. They teach, lead prayer gatherings, offer hospitality, and bear the cost of discipleship, often in communities where faith comes at great risk. In a small house church in North Africa, for example, a woman leads secret gatherings of believers each week while her name remains unknown to the wider church; she offers pastoral care, organizes worship, and mentors new believers, all while living under constant threat of exposure. And yet, these same women are frequently excluded from formal leadership, theological education, or visible roles in public worship.

This exclusion is rarely named outright. Instead, it is reinforced through theological language about “authority” or “headship.” These terms function as gatekeepers, signalling that women’s participation must remain limited, even when they are among the most active and spiritually mature members of the church. But what is the situation we are really looking at? It is one in which faithfulness is abundant but authorised participation in ministry is withheld. It is a contradiction of the very theology we claim to uphold. If we believe in a God who became human for the redemption of all humanity, then we must ask: Where is the space for women in this redemptive order? Why are their gifts underutilised? Neglecting this status diminishes the full expression of the divine image and restricts the transformative witness of the church within its cultural milieu.

Having examined the concept of the *imago dei* within Christian theology, we now turn to the Islamic context of the Middle East to explore the practice of veiling and consider how it reflects religious convictions and social values within that tradition.



veiling as a complex expression of pious agency. For many Muslim women, it confers religious credibility and authority within patriarchal frameworks. Louise Simon notes that Muslim women frequently derive honor through fulfilling socially prescribed familial roles—daughter, wife, mother—within patriarchal communities, highlighting honor’s relational and contingent nature. In contrast, Christian theological anthropology locates a woman’s glory in her intrinsic dignity as God’s image bearer, independent of social role or approval.

Both Muslim and Christian women may experience constraints when cultural or religious expectations limit their freedom to engage fully in society and faith communities. However, veiling practices can reinforce hierarchical gender orders wherein male authority dominates and women are relegated to supportive or silent roles. Even when voluntarily adopted, veiling normalized within patriarchal systems can obscure women’s personhood and contributions, raising critical theological concerns about dignity.

From a Christian perspective, veiling that curtails female agency conflicts with the theological imperative to recognize the sacredness and worth of every person. Such practices risk conveying that women’s bodies and voices are problematic (*awra*- physical defect) rather than sacred, contrasting with incarnational theology affirming God’s self-revelation in both male and female. Christian theology, particularly Pauline texts (1 Cor. 11), associates the uncovering of a woman’s head in worship with the restoration of dignity and visibility, reflecting the glory of God. Women, as bearers of God’s image (Gen. 1:27; 1 Cor. 11:7),<sup>17</sup> possess intrinsic worth independent of social roles or status.

In considering veiling practices, it is also essential to engage with the women’s mosque movement, which presents a compelling counternarrative by foregrounding women’s active participation in religious life and interpretive authority within Islamic contexts. Traditionally, Arab culture has located women’s roles primarily within the private sphere of the home, often regarded as the central site for female identity and influence. Consequently, within many Islamic societies, there has been persistent resistance to women’s participation in public life, including education and employment outside the home. However, shifting social attitudes and growing economic demands have increasingly challenged

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<sup>17</sup> “For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man.”

these boundaries,<sup>18</sup> opening new avenues for women's visibility and engagement.

As women enter public spheres more freely, their connection to the mosque community—both the female sorority and the wider *Umma*—plays a formative role in shaping their religious, social, and personal identities. This engagement develops a sense of missionary consciousness, directed not only toward extended family networks but also beyond the boundaries of the Muslim community.<sup>19</sup> The instruction women receive in mosque settings cultivates piety, self-discipline, and moral responsibility. Mosque programs often integrate educational and practical knowledge ('ilm) within a religious framework, equipping women with tools they carry into their workplaces and broader social contexts.<sup>20</sup>

When reflecting on the role of women within Arab culture, the Christian doctrine of the *imago dei* invites a more expansive perspective. It affirms that women, as bearers of God's image, possess intrinsic dignity and a divine vocation that transcends cultural and domestic constraints. Their God-given capacity for learning, leadership, and mission is not peripheral but central to their identity and calling within the church and society.

Consequently, the mosque programme prompts women to consider a “new mimetic ideal,” which, as I will discuss below, offers a valuable lens through which to reflect on the concept of the *imago dei*.

### *Mimetic Paradigm*

As a result of the women's mosque movement, significant transformations are emerging within contemporary Islamic practice. One notable development is the increasing visibility of female religious teachers in nonformal educational settings, offering Muslim women new mimetic models of piety, knowledge, and leadership. The nature of mimesis suggests that “to imitate is to seek to take on the character and attributes of the original template.”<sup>21</sup>

In examining the question of imitation, it becomes evident that Muslim women look to different models depending on their social and religious context. Within the family and kinship structure, the mother remains the central female ideal—

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18 Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, 55.

19 Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, 81.

20 Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite*, 209.

21 Moyra Dale, “(Re)forming Identities and Allegiances,” in *When Women Speak*, eds. Moyra Dale, Cathy Hine, and Carol Walker (Regnum Books International, 2018), 91.

valued for her nurturing role, moral influence, and dedication to the household. However, within the mosque community, new religious models have emerged. According to Anisah Huda, a prominent leader in the Syrian mosque movement, “*The dā’iya is God’s mediator to people and successor of the Messengers.*”<sup>22</sup> This attribution of spiritual authority is striking: The female religious teacher, or *dā’iya*, is not only recognized for her instructional role but is also described in prophetic and communal terms, functioning as a *khalīfa*, a successor or representative of Muhammad.<sup>23</sup>

This elevated perception of the *dā’iya* reflects a significant shift in how religious leadership is imagined and embodied by women in Islamic contexts. The emergence of the *dā’iya* as a mimetic ideal has contributed meaningfully to the expansion of religious education among women across the Middle East, opening new spaces for female religious agency, interpretation, and influence.

Hafez defines desire as the multifaceted needs and aspirations that shape subject formation—an ongoing process rather than a fixed goal. Drawing on Girard, two forms of mediation help clarify how ideals function: external mediation, where the model (e.g., Islam’s Prophet Muhammad) is distant and unreachable; and internal mediation, where the model and subject occupy overlapping social spheres. The *dā’iya*—a female religious teacher engaged in *dā’wa* (“invitation” to Islam), functions as an internal mediator. Unlike the prophetic model, she is both accessible and imitable, offering Muslim women a tangible mimetic ideal.

Contemporary *dā’iyas*, particularly in urban mosque settings, lead study groups, provide moral guidance, and serve as influential figures in religious revival movements. Their rise marks a shift in Islamic religious life, positioning women not only as recipients but as transmitters and interpreters of religious knowledge.

The concept of the ideal enables Muslim women to navigate identity and aspiration. While Muhammad remains the ultimate model, his role as an external mimetic ideal—distant, male, and ritually distinct—limits his practical influence on women’s daily lives. Gendered interpretations of purity and ritual further restrict women’s participation, making local female figures such as *dā’iyas* more imitable. Since the Qur’an centers male experience, women turn to accessible female teachers as internal mediators of religious life. As Dale notes, desire is

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22 Dale, “(Re)forming Identities and Allegiances,” 67–88, citing 79.

23 Dale, “(Re)forming Identities and Allegiances,” 67–88, citing 79.

shaped through culturally governed imitation; thus, the *dā'īya* becomes the mimetic ideal who embodies and transmits communal values. In the mosque movement, Anisah Huda urges female Qur'an students to pursue roles as scholars and guides, invoking historical examples and affirming, "*You are the khalīfāt of God on earth.*"<sup>24</sup> This reframes women's identity from subordination in kinship structures to divine agency.

The Christian understanding of vocation offers a distinct framework that affirms women's roles beyond the private and familial sphere, calling them to public ministry, teaching, and leadership. While the mosque movement empowers women as *khalīfāt*, God's representatives on earth, Christian theology recognizes women as co-regents with men in creation—entrusted with stewardship and service as part of their divine calling. Women's engagement with Scripture deepens the communal understanding of the *imago dei* and God's mission.

In our societies, women are rendered invisible, deprived of voice, image, and presence. This marginalization is often masked by political correctness in the West yet is more openly acknowledged in parts of the Middle East. In such contexts, a woman rooted in her identity as bearing God's image lives visibly, sometimes unintentionally so. In cultures where women are told, "*You are not meant to be seen,*" visibility becomes a form of testimony. For women in ministry, the act of leading often provokes societal resistance. Yet waiting for affirmation risks continued invisibility. It is the theological conviction *I am created in God's image and called by him* that sustains women in ministry and gives rise to faithful, visible witness. Visibility, then, is not self-promotion but a natural outworking of life lived in Christ's image.

This visibility, grounded in theological identity rather than social approval, prepares the way for deeper reflection on how God consistently engages women throughout the biblical narrative.

Throughout Scripture, women are portrayed not as peripheral figures but as vital participants in God's redemptive purposes. In the Gospels, Jesus's interactions with women consistently invite active engagement—they are called to speak truth, proclaim the good news, believe boldly, and exercise leadership. These encounters illustrate that faithful discipleship and reception of divine revelation are not limited by gender, reinforcing the theological claim that men and women

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24 Dale, "(Re)forming Identities and Allegiances," 67–88, citing 104.

are equally created in the image of God. Hagar's narrative in Genesis 16:7–13 exemplifies this principle: In her abandonment, she meets the God who sees and names him El Roi. Her recognition and articulation of God's identity demonstrates that image bearing involves relational awareness, speech, and participation in divine action, even for those marginalized by social or covenantal hierarchies.

The Incarnation further deepens this theological understanding. Mary of Nazareth, in Luke 1:26–38, becomes the human vessel through whom Christ—the ultimate Image of God—is formed. Her humble affirmation, “Let it be to me according to your word,” models how image bearing unfolds in relational responsiveness to God's initiative. Similarly, Mary of Bethany's posture at Jesus's feet (Luke 10:38–42; John 12:1–8) demonstrates that attentiveness, discernment, and initiative are integral aspects of faithfully reflecting God's image. Her anointing of Jesus anticipates prophetic ministry and highlights the active, participatory role of women in shaping God's mission.

Finally, the women at the resurrection (Matt. 28:1–10; John 20:11–18) embody the theological and missional dimensions of the *imago dei*. Commissioned as the first witnesses to the risen Christ, they challenge traditional cultural hierarchies and demonstrate that authority, vocation, and witness in God's kingdom are not gendered. Mary Magdalene's recognition of the risen Lord exemplifies the relational and active dimensions of image bearing, showing that the *imago dei* is dynamic, expressed through presence, transformation, and engagement in God's redemptive mission. Collectively, these examples remind us that Christ's restoration of God's image is transformative, equipping all members of the church—male and female—to participate fully in God's work in the world.

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper has explored how dominant theological and cultural assumptions have contributed to the marginalization of women in the Middle Eastern context. Traditional readings of the *imago dei* have often been shaped by culturally bound interpretations that reinforce gender hierarchies and restrict women's roles in church and society. In response, I have proposed an alternative approach, one that recognizes the contextual nature of interpretation and affirms that women are equally created in the image of God. Their voices and theological insights deserve full inclusion within the life of the church.

A personal image captures this theological vision: a photograph from my parents'

wedding in the Eastern Melkite Catholic Church, where they stand crowned side by side. In this liturgical act, the church declares their equal participation in a sacred covenant—both crowned with dignity and glory as image bearers of God. Thus, this paper offers not merely critique but invitation: to re-envision theology not as a defence of exclusion but as a witness to shared human dignity and vocation. It calls us to return to the foundational truth—that in creation and in Christ, women and men are called together into God’s redemptive story.

In conclusion, the theological questions raised in this essay invite a critical reexamination of how our inherited traditions, particularly our interpretations of the *imago dei* and Pauline texts, have shaped ecclesial structures in ways that often obscure or silence women’s contributions. If the Spirit has indeed been poured out on all flesh, as Acts 2 proclaims, then the church must move beyond mere permission toward active encouragement of women’s full participation in proclaiming the word and exercising leadership. For theologians in the Middle East, this involves engaging cultural norms such as veiling, silence, or invisibility, not simply as sociological givens but as theological challenges that call for a renewed Christian anthropology, one in which visibility and voice are integral to the church’s witness. The Incarnation of Christ, in its affirmation of full humanity, calls us to reimagine the structures of theological education, ecclesial leadership, and decision making through the lens of embodied inclusion. Within the Middle Eastern context, the Church has the opportunity to model a redemptive alternative to patriarchal norms, embodying a vision of authority marked not by hierarchy but by mutual submission and shared service (Eph. 5:21).





*Being Human*  
Imago Dei from the  
African Context

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## I. THE QUEST FOR AN AFRICAN IDENTITY

Africans have long been engaged in a quest for identity, an identity that affirms their inherent humanity and honors their historical and ongoing contributions to society. This pursuit has been significantly shaped by the devastating impact of colonialism, which did not merely involve the occupation of land or the extraction of resources but also entailed the systematic dehumanization of African peoples. Colonial powers worked to erase dignity, distort identity, and deny the sacredness of African lives, treating individuals as commodities to be used and discarded. This has long been acknowledged as a major issue that dehumanized the African people. Ali Mazrui, a respected Kenyan professor, identified various issues that shaped Africa identity: “Christianity, Western liberal democracy, urbanization, Western capitalism, the rules of Western science and the rules of Western art.”<sup>1</sup> Tite Tiénou identifies “Western domination and domestication” as two prominent factors shaping African identity.<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel Katongole aptly observes, the African body and life are still often not regarded as “unique, precious, [and] sacred” but rather as “mere bodies to be used, mere masses to be exploited.”<sup>3</sup>

The quest for an African identity is, at its core, a pursuit of Africanness, a search for meaning, belonging, and dignity in the lived experience of being African, both on the continent and in the diaspora. “Africanness,” as Kofi Appiah describes, is “the desire for authenticity and the struggle to redress the state of alienation that resulted from the historical experiences of cultural domination, slavery and colonialism in Africa. In this sense, Africanness directs our attention to the complex web of issues involved in the African struggle for the rehabilitation and integral liberation of Africans, as basic topics of African theology.”<sup>4</sup> And as Appiah rightly contends, this quest remains a theological quest. Mercy Oduyoye also calls us to “explore anew our human Be-ing and to affirm each one’s mode of being human.”<sup>5</sup>

In response to this dehumanizing legacy, various political, philosophical, and theological movements and ideologies have emerged seeking to reassert African

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1 Ali A. Mazrui, *The African Condition*, 68.

2 Tite Tiénou, “The Right to Difference,” 25.

3 Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa*, 17.

4 Simon Kofi Appiah, *Africanness*, 6.

5 Mercy A. Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa*, 135.

humanity and agency. These include Négritude, Pan-Africanism, the African Renaissance, and a range of contextual theologies, such as South African Black Theology, African Liberation Theology, and Bosadi (womanist/feminist) theologies mainly advanced by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, an organization founded by Professor Mercy Amba Oduyoye in 1989. These movements have reread Scripture and reimagined theology in ways that affirm the human worth and dignity of African peoples, offering creative and liberative responses to historical and contemporary oppression.

This paper contributes to that broader theological discourse by examining anthropological conceptions of humanity found within African cultures and contributing to theological anthropology. While traditional African worldviews may not affirm humanity in terms of the *imago dei*, they nonetheless affirm human worth, sacredness, and relational identity. This study explores how African understandings of what it means to be human can meaningfully interact with, and even enrich, Christian theological reflections on the image of God. But first, a brief overview of the biblical concept of the image of God and the three proposals advanced around it.

## II. THE BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF THE *IMAGO DEI*

The biblical affirmation that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26–27) lies at the heart of Christian theological anthropology. While the phrase appears explicitly only a few times in the Old Testament (Gen. 5:1; 9:6) and is alluded to in Psalm 8:4–6, the New Testament expands the theme in significant ways. It refers to humans as God’s image (1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9), identifies Jesus Christ as the perfect image (*eikōn*) of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3), and affirms the restoration of that image in believers (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 4:22–24; Col. 3:10, among others). The Apocrypha also testifies to the image motif, notably in Wisdom 2:23–24 and Ecclesiasticus 17:1–12.

Despite its theological centrality, the meaning of the “image” and “likeness” of God remains the subject of interpretive ambiguity and theological debate. The ambiguity in the usage of these terms has led to a wide spectrum of interpretations, particularly concerning the nature, location, and endurance of the divine image in human beings, especially post Genesis 3. Theologians have debated whether the image is substantial (based on something inherent in humanity), relational (based on relationship), functional (based on vocation and

dominion), or Christological (centered in Jesus as the image). The theological significance of the *imago dei* has shaped convictions about human dignity, the quest for justice, and more.

### III. THREE PERSPECTIVES OF THE *IMAGO DEI* IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

In *Basic Christian Ethics* (1950), Paul Ramsey identified two major perspectives that have shaped Western interpretation of the *imago dei*. These are the substantial and the relational views.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Substantialist View*

The substantial view, also termed “substantialist”<sup>7</sup> or “structuralist,”<sup>8</sup> locates the image of God in certain inherent features or faculties within human nature. According to Ramsey, this view “singles out something within the substantial form of human nature, some faculty or capacity man [sic] possesses, and identifies this as the thing which distinguishes man [sic] from physical nature and from other animals.”<sup>9</sup> Patristic and medieval theologians emphasized reason as the primary substance in which the divine image resides. However, other attributes were also highlighted across the centuries, including conscience, aesthetic sense, dominion, emotional capacities, spiritual awareness, original righteousness, immortality, freedom, personhood, and moral capacity. The identified “substance” or “faculty” are seen as a mark or a stamp of the *imago dei* in humanity.

This substantialist interpretation dominated much of Western Christian theology for centuries, and it was *reason* that became the locus of the *imago Dei* in Western scholarship. As David Cairns affirms, “In all the Christian writers up to Aquinas we find the image of God conceived of as man’s power to reason.”<sup>10</sup> Douglas Hall adds:

The notion that it is human reason that constitutes Homo Sapiens, God’s earthly imago, is so firmly entrenched in the convention of Christendom that it is hardly possible for anyone who is part of the intellectual stream of our culture to read Genesis

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6 Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 250, 254.

7 Douglas Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion As Stewardship*, 89.

8 Emil Brunner, *Christian Doctrine*, 59.

9 Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics*, 250.

10 David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*, 110.

1:26–27 without immediately and subconsciously assuming that the ancient Hebraic author’s phrase “image of God” specifically referred to the rational capacities of the human creature.<sup>11</sup>

The deep entrenchment of this interpretation can be traced to the Western Church’s long-standing engagement with Hellenistic philosophical traditions, Jewish anthropology, and theological categories shaped by classical understandings of personhood and metaphysics. But many theologians have identified several weaknesses of this view, including its possibility to dehumanize people living with profound mental disabilities.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Functional View*

A second major perspective on the *imago dei* emphasizes the God-given mandate of dominion and responsibility over creation. This “functional view” has theological roots in the Antiochene Fathers such as Diodore of Tarsus, John Chrysostom, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Nestorius, and Theodoret, who underscored *human vocation* and *agency* rather than innate capacities.

Richard Middleton, a key contemporary proponent of this view, defines the image of God as humanity’s calling to be “God’s representatives and agents in the world, granted authorized power to share in God’s rule or administration of the earth’s resources and creatures.”<sup>13</sup> To image God, in this perspective, is to faithfully carry out the divine commission of stewardship—nurturing, protecting, and cultivating the created world.

The functional view finds support in both biblical exegesis and Ancient Near Eastern context. Biblical scholars draw attention to the structure of Genesis 1:26, where the phrases “in our image” and “let them rule” are closely linked. The inference is that the divine image is expressed through the function of dominion, commonly referred to as creation mandate.<sup>14</sup> This mandate encompasses both ecological stewardship and culture making, where human beings are viewed as co-creators with God mandated to nurture God’s beautiful but fallen creation.

Reformed theologians particularly have been inspired by John Calvin’s assertion

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11 Hall, *Imaging*, 92.

12 See, Tarus, “Being Different.”

13 J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*, 27.

14 Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 25–29; Gregg A. Okesson, *Re-Imaging Modernity: A Contextualized Theological Study of Power and Humanity within Akamba Christianity in Kenya*, 182–184.

that creation is “a mirror, a painting, and a theater of the divine glory.”<sup>15</sup> Even in a fallen world, this cultural engagement reflects God’s ongoing presence in human creativity and activity and is a constant invitation to human beings to act responsibly and honorably, together, for the sake of the earth.<sup>16</sup>

The functional view draws its support also from Ancient Near Eastern texts, especially Sumerian, Babylonian, and Egyptian sources that describe kings as being made in the image of their gods.<sup>17</sup> In those cultures, kings functioned as divine representatives or viceroys. However, Genesis democratizes this royal imaging, extending image bearing to all humanity; all people, not just kings, are images of God and are God’s viceroys.<sup>18</sup> Thus, embodied humanity is authorized to exercise delegated power on earth on God’s behalf.

Despite the functional view’s biblical and historical strengths, it raises concerns in relation to people with disabilities. If rulership or cultural productivity becomes the central marker of the divine image, then individuals who cannot visibly exercise such capacities, particularly those with profound intellectual or physical disabilities, risk being marginalized or devalued.<sup>19</sup>

Scholars have responded to this critique by clarifying that ruling/dominion is not the image itself, but a result of being made in God’s image. In this nuanced understanding, the ability to steward creation flows from the *imago* rather than defining it. Additionally, the emphasis has shifted from individual agency to corporate responsibility: humanity as a collective shares in the stewardship of creation. Within this communal framework, all people—regardless of ability—are intrinsically valuable and participate, together, in the divine mandate. This opens the way to the next view, which further develops the communal and relational dimensions of the *imago dei*.

### *The Relational View*

A third and increasingly influential, though not necessarily new perspective, understands the *imago dei* as relational. Unlike the substantial view, which locates the image of God in individual, inherent qualities such as reason or will, the

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15 Susan E. Schreiner, *The Theater of His Glory: Nature and the Natural Order in the Thought of John Calvin*, 121; Calvin, *Institutes* (1536) I.5.10.

16 Deane-Drummond, *Questioning the Human*, 75.

17 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 152; Barth, *God with Us*, 152.

18 Middleton, “Image of God,” 516–523.

19 Tarus, “Being Different.”

relational view emphasizes that the divine image is realized through dynamic, active relationships: with God, with fellow human beings, and with the created order. This approach challenges the individualistic orientation of much of Western theology and instead affirms a communal and holistic anthropology. Human beings bear God's image not as isolated individuals but as persons-in-relationship. This view resonates deeply with African worldviews that value community, interdependence, and relational identity over isolated individualism.

Martin Luther (1483–1546), while rooted in some substantialist traditions, contributed significantly to the development of this relational understanding. He acknowledged that reason was an important aspect of human uniqueness, stating that it was the “chief part” of humanity and what elevates humans above animals.<sup>20</sup> However, Luther went beyond the notion of mere noetic capacities. In his *Disputatio de homine* (1536), he asserted that the *imago dei* was ultimately expressed in the original holiness and perfect relationship human beings had with God before the Fall. For Luther, the image was not just about intellectual faculties but about something “far more distinguished and excellent,” namely, faith, love of God, and zeal for holiness.<sup>21</sup> He believed that while humans retained their rational faculties after the Fall, they lost the relational dimension of the image. Thus, the gospel becomes essential, not merely to inform the intellect but to restore communion with God through grace.<sup>22</sup> This relational loss and its potential for restoration underscores the theological importance of community in Luther's thought: Humans are created for a vibrant, faithful relationship with God and one another.

John Calvin (1509–1564) also affirmed a relational view of the *imago dei*, especially as it pertains to the redemptive work of Christ. Calvin situated his theological anthropology around humanity's creation, fall, and redemption. His *Institutes of the Christian Religion*<sup>23</sup> are structured to reflect this: Book I.15 discusses the original creation of humanity; Books II.1–3 explore the fall; and Books III.3–10 focus on regeneration and restoration in Christ. Calvin's chief concern was not to speculate about the essence of the image but to show how it is renewed in Christ through the Holy Spirit. For Calvin, the image of God is fully restored only in Christ, the image of God (cf. Col 1:15), and renewed progressively in believers through

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20 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 34:137.

21 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 1:63.

22 Luther, *Luther's Works*, 1:64.

23 Calvin, *Institutes* (1536).

sanctification. Theological anthropology, then, is intrinsically Christological. As Wilhelm Niesel (1956) and B. A. Gerrish (1981) argue, Calvin bound his understanding of human nature tightly to Christ's redemptive work.<sup>24</sup>

Calvin's relational emphasis becomes even more apparent in his critical engagement with previous views of the *imago dei*. He rejected anthropomorphic ideas that located the image in the physical body<sup>25</sup> as well as mystical or speculative views, such as Andreas Osiander's "essential righteousness"<sup>26</sup> and other views, which he deemed erroneous.<sup>27</sup> Importantly, he dismissed the idea that dominion alone constituted the image, criticizing Chrysostom's reduction of the *imago dei* to functional stewardship.<sup>28</sup> For Calvin, dominion is not the image itself but rather a consequence of being made in God's image. He emphasized the necessity of communion with God for the realization of human vocation. Calvin saw the *imago dei* as inherently tied to humanity's covenantal relationship with God—an image marred by sin but restored in Christ, the second Adam.<sup>29</sup> Through this restoration, humanity regains its original righteousness, in which human beings reflect the glory of God through sound reason, rightly ordered affections, and the excellence of the divine gifts bestowed by the Creator.<sup>30</sup>

The relational understanding of the image of God is also grounded in the role of Christ as a restorer and an enabler of humanity as God intended. Humanity is thus defined in relation to Christ, the "true humanity,"<sup>31</sup> the "perfect realization of true humanity,"<sup>32</sup> and "what human nature is intended to be."<sup>33</sup> What this means is that the image of God is most fully revealed in Jesus Christ. Stanley Grenz wrote:

Consequently, the humankind created in the divine image is

24 Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 70; B. A. Gerrish, "Mirror of God's Goodness," 213.

25 Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), I.13.1 and IV.17.23, 25.

26 Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), II.12.7.

27 For example, Calvin rejected what he called "the Manichean error" of Michael Servetus (ca. 1511–1553), who understood the image of God as an emanation from God (Institutes I.15.5); the Irenaean distinction between "image" and "likeness" (Institutes I.15.3); Augustine's psychological model of the image as a trinitarian correspondence in human intellect, memory, and will (Institutes I.15.4, 7); and Chrysostom's reduction of the image of God to dominion alone (Institutes I.15.4).

28 Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), Institutes I.15.4.

29 Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 43, argues that Calvin "sometimes speaks of the image of God as having been destroyed by sin, obliterated by the Fall, wiped out or lost by sin, cancelled by sin, as it were, blotted out ... by Adam's sin, or utterly defaced by sin." But it is clear from Institutes, I.15.4 that Calvin believed the image was not completely gone. "There is no doubt that Adam, when he fell from his state, was by this defection alienated from God. Therefore, even though we grant that God's image was not totally annihilated and destroyed in him, yet it was so corrupted [by sin] that whatever remains is frightful deformity."

30 Calvin, *Institutes* (1536), I.15.3, 4.

31 Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, 18.

32 Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 20.

33 Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 532.

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 who have joined their head in resurrection life by the power of the Spirit.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, the *imago Dei* finds its fulfillment not in humanity as it is, but in what humanity is becoming in Christ.

Grenz's Christocentric framework does more than merely redefine the image of God through Christ; it also emphasizes the communal and ecclesial dimension of human identity. For Grenz, the purpose of humanity's creation in God's image was to live in communion with God through Jesus Christ. This relational identity leads to what he calls an "ecclesial self"—a self formed not in isolation but in relationship with others in the body of Christ, the church.<sup>35</sup> The church, then, becomes the visible expression of the new humanity conformed in and by Christ, embodying the *imago dei* in concrete and practical ways. The community of believers becomes the space where God's image is restored and lived out through worship, discipleship, justice, reconciliation, and mutual love. Now, away from Western thinkers. Let's see what Africa offers.

#### IV. THE AFRICAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE DOCTRINE OF THE IMAGE OF GOD

African traditional anthropology has no concept of the image of God. J. N. K. Mugambi offers insights that help explain why African anthropology traditionally lacks a developed concept of the *imago dei*, although his discussion primarily focuses on African traditional religious heritage rather than directly addressing the doctrine itself. He writes, "African religious and philosophical heritage is characteristically based on physical experimental perception rather than on mystical contemplation."<sup>36</sup> According to traditional African communities, a human being is simply a person in community surrounded by other beings. Community includes God (the Supreme Being), the living dead, humans, the yet-to-be-born, and natural creation.<sup>37</sup>

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34 Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*, 231–232.

35 Grenz, *The Social God*, 332.

36 J. N. Kanyua Mugambi, *God, Humanity, Nature*, 25.

37 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 75; Elina Hankela, *Ubuntu, Migration, and Ministry: Being Human in a Johannesburg Church*, 51.

Even though African religious heritage lacks a notion of the image of God, the concepts of “vital force” (life force), “*ubuntu*,” and “*utu*” among others, correlate with the notion of the image of God in some ways.

*Imago Dei in the Context of Vital Force*

Placide Tempels made a pioneering contribution to the study of Bantu cosmology in his 1945 work *La Philosophie Bantoue*, later translated into English as *Bantu Philosophy*. In it, he expounds on the Bantu existential concept of “vital force,” which he identifies as the central organizing principle of Bantu cosmology.<sup>38</sup> He asserts, “In the minds of Bantu, all beings in the universe possess vital force of their own: human, animal, vegetable, or inanimate. Each being has been endowed by God with a certain force, capable of strengthening the vital energy of the strongest being of all creation: man.”<sup>39</sup>

Vital force is permanent and irreversible; “Existence which comes from God cannot be taken from a creature by any created force.”<sup>40</sup> To Tempels, God is the source of this “vital force,” which animates and empowers human life. Without God’s supply of life’s vital force, human life is empty. God is the “power source” of human existence because God is “he who possesses Force in himself.”<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, he argues that vital force is the very essence of being. “Force is the nature of being, force is being, being is force.”<sup>42</sup> Life in this sense, is a dynamic increase or decrease of vital forces.

Every human being possesses vital force in different intensities but because of interdependence, people combine their vital forces for meaningful existence.<sup>43</sup> William Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen agree with Tempels that African people view reality from the lenses of power.

The goal of human life for Africans is the promotion of one’s vital powers, whether through the expansion of the family or by the fertility of crops and animals. The spirits are enlisted to promote this expansion of life and its endowments — prayers, sacrifices, oblations are offered in pursuit of this goal.<sup>44</sup>

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38 Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 30.

39 Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 31–32.

40 Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 57.

41 Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 31.

42 Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 35.

43 Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy*, 58–61; James Henry Owino Kombo, *Doctrine of God*, 150.

44 William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Global Dictionary of Theology*, 50.

Thus, from this outlook, human beings as they are, in their sinful and broken nature, need power to overcome their condition. From a Christian perspective, this empowerment is only through Christ by the Holy Spirit.

Thus, applying Tempels's view of vital force to the doctrine of the image of God yields a view of the image of God as communion with God for human empowerment. To be God's image bearer is to commune with God, which then empowers people to exercise their God-given mandate of being God's representatives and agents in the world. It is in communion with God that humans are shaped into beings that faithfully exercise their God-given mandate of being God's representatives on earth. Also, as Tempels shows, though vital force is unique to an individual, existence is about interdependence; the goal of communion with God is not the production of self-autonomous empowered individuals but an empowered community of faith. It is in community that humans fulfil their God-given mandate of glorifying God. Empowered individuals, together, become empowered communities. However, although the concept of vital force is embraced in African philosophy and religion, it is insufficient because of its Western Aristotelian (philosophical) import.<sup>45</sup> *Ubuntu* is more prominent because it is praxis oriented.

*Imago Dei in the Context of Ubuntu: I Am Human Because I Belong*

The term "*ubuntu*" is a Bantu ontological noun describing the essence of being human. It is the belief that to be human is to be in communion with God, fellow human beings, the nonhuman creation, and the spiritual world. To be human is to be with. It is not the Western "I think therefore I am" but "I am human because I belong."<sup>46</sup> I am known. I have a family. I am familiar with and for community. For the African people, each person's humanity is recognizable in community. Bishop Tutu asserts, "Our humanity is caught up in that of all others. We are human because we belong. We are made for community, for togetherness, for family, to exist in a delicate network of interdependence."<sup>47</sup> Thus, Tutu says, "In Africa when you ask someone 'How are you?' the reply you get is in the plural even when you are speaking to one person."<sup>48</sup> Likewise, John Mbiti observes that the African view of humanity can be summarized in the aphorism, "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."<sup>49</sup> As Mercy Oduyoye observes,

45 Mugambi, *God, Humanity, Nature*, 22; Okesson, *Re-Imaging Modernity*, 50–51.

46 Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, 4.

47 Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 196. See also Tutu, *In God's Hands*, 34. Tutu, *God is Not a Christian*, 21–3.

48 Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*, 25.

49 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 106.

“It is only in community that our humanity means anything.”<sup>50</sup>

Because of the high value placed on harmony between humanity and nature in African thought—and the way ubuntu is understood within this context—it is crucial to conceive of the image of God not as a mark that separates humanity from nature, but as a designation of interrelatedness. The *imago dei* points not to isolation from the created order, but to a relational vocation within it. John Calvin’s threefold understanding of nature—as the theater of God’s glory, the living image of God, and the beautiful garment of God—is helpful in articulating this interconnectedness, even though Calvin himself did not explore the image-bearing quality of nature in depth. Rather, he affirmed that God’s glory shines forth through creation.

The African worldview not only emphasizes the sacredness of human life but also affirms the sacredness of nature as God’s creation. Through the “doctrine” of ubuntu, African traditional heritage recognizes the holiness of the visible and invisible world. In Kalenjin culture, for instance, sacred spaces such as *kapkoros* were designated for the worship of God, yet the entire earth was often regarded as holy ground, and to distort it or to misuse it comes with great penalties and destruction. Moreover, Africans view humans as having a priestly role in their relationship with nature. John Mbiti articulates this well when he writes: “African Religion recognizes clearly that, if man abuses nature, in return nature will strike back at him. In this case man is not a master over nature to treat it as he wishes. Instead, man is the priest towards nature—soliciting its kindness and expressing respect towards it.”<sup>51</sup> This view aligns with a biblical theology of stewardship and calls for a renewed ecological ethic grounded in relational responsibility and reverence for creation.

It is important to note that ubuntu is not uniquely African. It is a human attribute. All human beings have ubuntu (are relational in nature). In *Imaging God*, Douglas Hall succinctly captures this reality: “Simply in our being there we are being-in-re-relationship; our sheer existing points beyond itself. We are creatures whose being implies relatedness. The solitary, isolated, self-sufficient human being—the ‘self-made man’ that still exists for us as a rhetorical ideal—is, in fact, a contradiction in terms. To be, to be-in-the-world, is to be with.”<sup>52</sup>

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50 Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, 141.

51 Mbiti, “Man in African Religion,” 65.

52 Hall, *Imaging God*, 119.

However, while the principles of ubuntu resonate with universal human values—as illustrated in the preceding reflections—their practical expression often contrasts sharply with prevailing Western frameworks of personhood. The Western world, shaped significantly by philosophical and theological traditions, tends to emphasize individualism over community. In his seminal work *Communion and Otherness*, Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas highlights this trajectory, observing: “Ever since Boethius in the fifth century identified the person with the individual ... and St. Augustine at about the same time emphasized the importance of ... self-consciousness in the understanding of personhood, Western thought has never ceased to build itself and its culture on this basis.”<sup>53</sup> Zizioulas’s assertion regarding individualism in the West is a major point of departure between Western cultures and African cultures. African cultures emphasize communion or community as a precondition for existence, while the West tends to emphasize individual existence.

While ubuntu offers a compelling communal vision of what it means to be human, it is not without its weaknesses. In practice, ubuntu is often interpreted through narrow, ethnocentric lenses, reducing its rich anthropological and theological depth. Rather than embracing the broader human family, some communities confine ubuntu to kinship ties, clans, or ethnic boundaries. This constriction distorts its foundational intent, turning a life-affirming ideal into an exclusive endowment for the in-group. The result is the marginalization of “outsiders” and the reinforcement of ethnocentrism, clannism, and even racism. These realities contradict the *imago dei* and the affirmation of community.

Furthermore, when ubuntu is overemphasized as a purely communal value, it may suppress individual autonomy and responsibility. Community becomes a source of conformity rather than flourishing. In some African contexts, communal solidarity is manipulated by ruling elites who exploit ethnic loyalties to secure political power, often to the detriment of national unity and justice. Such exploitation can fuel electoral violence, entrench systemic corruption, and mask wrongdoing as communal loyalty thus shielding even perpetrators of injustice.

Additionally, the virtue of hospitality, deeply embedded in the African spirit of ubuntu, can be problematic. In urban settings, for instance, families may feel compelled to host extended relatives from rural areas indefinitely, sometimes at

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<sup>53</sup> John D. Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, 1 as quoted in; Victor I. Ezigbo, *Re-imagining African Christologies*, 263.

great emotional and economic cost. This pressure, rooted in fear of offending communal expectations, reveals how communal obligations can undermine the dignity and well-being of the individual.

Further, for African evangelical Christians, it is important to discern communion of saints in the contexts of ancestor veneration and worship. The ninth article of the Apostles' Creed—*communio sanctorum* or the “communion of saints”—resonates deeply with many African cultural frameworks that uphold an active relationship between the living and the departed, often referred to as the “living dead” and ancestors. In African thought, the departed continue to be honored and respected, regardless of whether they fully lived up to communal ideals. This inclusive understanding of communion—one that graciously embraces both the “saints” and the “sinners” of the community—offers a compelling resource for developing a theology of the community of grace.

In the African worldview, identity and belonging are not severed by death. Similarly, Hebrews 12 affirms the presence of a “great cloud of witnesses” who surround the living faithful. This imagery suggests that the Christian community extends beyond the visible church to include those who have gone before us. The challenge—and opportunity—for African Christians is to discern how this communion can be affirmed theologically without falling into the practice of ancestor worship. How might Christians faithfully affirm spiritual solidarity with the departed saints without attributing to them divine status or worship? How can we acknowledge that the church is not limited to the living, but includes those in glory? These are pertinent questions as we seek to build a theological anthropology rooted in the image of God that affirms the humanity of the living and an honoring of those who have departed.

An *imago dei* theology from the African context calls us to affirm both community and individuality, both hospitality and justice, both belonging and accountability, both the living and the dead. Moreover, it compels us to critique any conceptualizations of the *imago dei* that limits it to one's kin and tribe. We must act human to all regardless of their ethnic or clan roots. This is where our reflection now turns.

*Imago Dei in the Context of Utu: I Am Human Because I Am Humane*

“*Utu*” is a Swahili term that captures the essence of humanness—the call to act in ways that reflect the dignity of being human. It is not simply about being biologically human but about living in a manner that affirms one's humanity and

the humanity of others. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu explains, a person with ubuntu is generous, hospitable, friendly, caring, and compassionate.<sup>54</sup> In this sense, to be human is to act humanely.

Though community plays a formative role in shaping an individual's identity through naming ceremonies, rites of passage, and the inculcation of discipline, it ultimately falls to the individual to choose whether to embody and practice the virtues that define true humanness. Ubuntu presents human life not as a static condition but as a dynamic journey toward becoming more fully human.<sup>55</sup> One grows in *utu* (humanness) as one treats others with dignity and respect. In this view, to act with compassion, justice, and kindness is not merely to perform good deeds; it is to participate in the unfolding of one's own humanity. Thus, ubuntu aligns with the *imago dei*, calling each person into a lifelong becoming humanity as God intended.<sup>56</sup>

For many African communities, a person regains and retains their noble status as a bearer of *ubuntu* only through the actualization of *utu* (agency). One becomes fully *umuntu* (a true human being) by treating others as abantu (fellow humans), not as infintu (objects or things).<sup>57</sup> Humanity, therefore, is a calling to live in ways that honor the dignity of others. This sacred view of human life aligns with the biblical affirmation that all people are created in the image of God and thus deserve honor and respect. Human beings are not to be used, exploited, or abused. Among the Kalenjin people of Kenya, this ethos of hospitality and generosity is deeply rooted. A well-known proverb captures it beautifully: *makiwong'u che eng sot*—"Never drink all the milk; spare some for the stranger." Such wisdom underscores that true humanness is demonstrated in care for others, especially the vulnerable and the outsider.

However, not all people act in ways that reflect true humanness. In African contexts, those who harm others or commit acts of cruelty are often considered inhuman—exhibiting brutality—or even unhuman, behaving in ways likened to animals. Among the Kalenjin people, such individuals are described as *sorin* (*sorik*), meaning "evil people," or *bik che matinye koroti*, "people without human blood." This moral judgment is captured in the proverb: *Ma chi chi nengero ko*

54 Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 31.

55 On this aspect of becoming more human, see, F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology*, 217; Victor I. Ezigbo, *Re-Imagining African Christologies*, 268–69; Elina Hankela, *Ubuntu, Migration, and Ministry*, 52; Andrea M. Ng'weshemi, *Rediscovering the Human*, 15.

56 Hankela, *Ubuntu, Migration, and Ministry*, 53.

57 Joe M. Kapolyo, *The Human Condition: Christian Perspectives Through African Eyes*, 19–27.

*chi ama chi*: “A person is not a person who does not act like a person.” In this worldview, being human is not a mere biological status but a moral and relational identity; one must act humanely to be considered fully human.

Yet, while such individuals may be perceived as having lost their humanness through their actions, their inhumanity does not obliterate their ubuntu. Like the *imago dei* and the concept of vital force, ubuntu is understood as a permanent and irreducible essence of human life. Though human actions may obscure or distort this divine image, they cannot fully erase it. The sacred imprint remains, dimmed perhaps, but not destroyed. This theological insight affirms that even those who commit evil retain the potential for restoration, for to be human is not only a state but a calling to return to the fullness of what one was created to be.<sup>58</sup>

*Imaging the Triune God: The African Contribution*

Christians affirm the doctrine of the Trinity: God exists as a communion of three Persons (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). This communal nature of God confirms that imaging God should be interpreted as imaging the triune God. Thomas Smail argues:

Being in the image of God is to be understood as a mirroring of the Father, a mirroring of the Son and a mirroring of the Holy Spirit, so that to be authentically human means to reflect in our relationships, firstly, the specific relationship that the Father has with the Son, secondly, the specific relationship that the Son has with the Father, and thirdly, the specific relationship that the Spirit has with the Father and the Son.<sup>59</sup>

The African indigenous worldview lends weight to this imaging the triune God. In fact, it can be argued that the African traditional cosmology readily accommodates a doctrine of the Trinity. Three aspects support this assertion.

First, indigenous African peoples believed that though God is alone in the sense of being the Supreme Being; God is never alone—God is surrounded by other divinities. These divinities are the personifications of the Supreme Being. Dr. Kipkoech Sambu, a Kalenjin scholar, confirmed to me through email that the Kalenjin worshiped Asiis, the god associated with the sun, “who manifested

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58 Hankela, *Ubuntu, Migration, and Ministry*, 53.

59 Thomas Smail, “In the Image of the Triune God,” 22. Smail offers a fuller treatment of a trinitarian view of the image in his book entitled, *Like Father, like Son*.

herself in three persons: Asiis, Ileet ne myee, and Ileet ne ya. Ileet ne myee was the bringer of rain and rumbled until rain came while Ileet ne ya flashed with his forked sword, killing all and sundry on its path. Occasionally Ileet ne ya restored justice by killing thieves and destroying or exposing the ill-gotten wealth. So the Kalenjiin Trinity was complete with two natures of the Creator: good and evil.”<sup>60</sup> God has his own community (divinities/gods, spirits, and ancestors), and God is generous to include humans into this community. A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya observes, “The centrality of community and the fundamentality of relatedness undergird the concept of the Divine as community in African contexts.”<sup>61</sup> This “communion of God” or communitheism<sup>62</sup> paradigm in African cosmology may lend some weight to the doctrine of the image of God as communion with God, God’s people, and God’s world.

Second, indigenous African peoples believed in a form of divine unity: “The gods are not separated from one another but are connected by virtue of their common Divinity or nature, which they derive from the all-pervasive force that is their common substance.”<sup>63</sup> Human beings are connected by virtue of being created in the image of God, although humans will not exist perfectly the way the divine Three exist.

Third, African understandings of relationship are fundamentally triadic rather than simply dyadic. While dyadic relationships focus on the interaction between two individuals—face-to-face and often limited in scope—triadic relationships assume the possibility of a third presence.<sup>64</sup> This triadic notion reflects a deeply rooted belief in interconnectedness: that every relationship is part of a broader web of communal existence. It expands the idea of community beyond the nuclear family to encompass the extended family, the clan, the society, and ultimately, the entire human race.

This triadic worldview is not merely social but also theological. Whereas Western thought often begins with the individual and moves outward toward community, African thought begins with communion/community as the starting point from which individual identity and value are derived. This perspective offers rich

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60 Dr. Kipkoech Sambu, email message to author.

61 A. Okechukwu Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity: An African Interpretation of the Trinity*, 14.

62 Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity*, 23: “Divine communalism is the position that the Divine is a community of gods who are fundamentally related to one another and ontologically equal while at the same time distinct from one another by their personhood and functions.”

63 Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity*, 26.

64 Ogbonnaya, *On Communitarian Divinity*, 8.

insight for Christian theology—particularly for understanding the Trinity. Just as African anthropology emphasizes community before the individual, Trinitarian theology begins not with isolated divine Persons but with the communion of the triune God. From this unity-in-relationship, the unique roles of Father, Son, and Spirit are revealed. Thus, the African triadic orientation offers more than cultural insight; it provides a theological lens through which to articulate a relational doctrine of God and of humanity.

## V. IMPLICATIONS OF THE *IMAGO DEI* FOR THE SANCTITY OF LIFE

Returning to where we began, the quest for African identity and dignity is deeply rooted in the affirmation of the African's *vital force*, *ubuntu*, and *utu*, all understood within the framework of the biblical truth that Africans, like all people, are created in the *imago dei*. This integrated vision offers a powerful framework for confronting the pervasive problem of dehumanization on the African continent and in the diaspora. It affirms that to be human is to possess inherent worth, relational responsibility, and sacred value, gifts that no system of oppression, marginalization, or exploitation can erase. This is an important affirmation given that the African person has historically existed and continues to live amid persistent forces of dehumanization: colonial subjugation, systemic poverty, ethnic violence, and political exploitation.

In *Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle*, Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux highlight a disturbing global reality: the reduction of human beings to “dead weight”—disposable lives treated as if they were commodities, no more valuable than waste.<sup>65</sup> Across the globe, people are often valued not for their inherent dignity but for their utility as laborers, consumers, voters, or mere tools in political campaigns. This utilitarian view erodes the sacredness of human life.

Writing specifically about African youth, Ali Mazrui lamented their objectification within global capitalist structures, noting that they are often “pawns in a bourgeois chess game; almost never real players in that game.”<sup>66</sup> His words capture the tragic reality of systemic dehumanization that treats young people not as full participants in shaping their destiny but as tools to serve the ambitions of others.

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<sup>65</sup> Brad Evans and Henry A. Giroux, *Disposable Futures: The Seduction of Violence in the Age of Spectacle*, 34.

<sup>66</sup> Ali A. Mazrui, *The Africans*, 223.

This commodification of human life is not a modern phenomenon. In the biblical narrative, the Israelites under Pharaoh's rule experienced a similar fate: Valued solely for their labor, their humanity was disregarded, and their lives rendered disposable. As Walter Brueggemann observed, "When their work was done, their lives were dispensable"; they were viewed as mere property, to be used and discarded at will.<sup>67</sup> Brueggemann is right to urge believers to disrupt "what has become 'normal' in the modern world" that is, that "cheap labor is expendable, subject to whatever abuse, oppression, or disregard that might be required by the ownership class in its commitment to surplus wealth through cheap labor."<sup>68</sup>

In light of this, the theological affirmation of the *imago dei* and the resources available in African cultures offers a counternarrative to systemic dehumanization. No human is disposable. Every human being without exception is created in the image of God and should be honored as such.

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67 Walter Brueggemann, *A Wilderness Zone*.

68 Brueggemann, *A Wilderness Zone*, 79.





*Gregory of Nyssa's  
Imago Dei*

Engaging Cultural  
Thought Forms

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Biblical anthropology rightly commences with an affirmation of the divine decree, “Let us make man in our image and likeness” (Gen. 1:26). This remark, as Paul Ricœur notes, will continue to be explored throughout history, both in relation to divine purpose and human identity. “Each century has the task of elaborating its thought ever anew on the basis of that indestructible symbol which henceforth belongs to the unchanging treasury of the Biblical canon.”<sup>1</sup> The dynamic nature of *imago dei* as a theological concept allows each generation to rediscover and rearticulate its meaning in light of new contexts and questions.

Consequently, works in systematic theology frequently explore the concept of *imago dei* in light of various nuances that have been upheld within church tradition since the earliest days of Christianity. These discussions often emphasize key aspects such as humanity’s dominion over creation, the capacity for reason and intellectual reflection, the exercise of volition or free will, the intrinsic nature of community and relationality, and the role of sexuality in human identity.

Contemporary theological, philosophical, and ethical discussions continue to engage with these themes in order to deepen our understanding on what it means to be created in the image of God, taking into account modern scientific discoveries, cultural shifts, and evolving ethical challenges. Because of this, *imago dei* continues to inform contemporary debates on human dignity, bioethics, artificial intelligence, and transhumanism, as well as issues related to justice, human rights, and social ethics. Furthermore, ongoing dialogue between theology and other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, and neuroscience, seeks to integrate new insights while remaining faithful to the core convictions of Christian tradition.

As these trends continue, there remains a persistent skepticism toward early approaches to biblical interpretation, particularly patristic exegesis. This stems in part from past attempts to present a distorted version of Christianity, such as Adolf von Harnack’s *Hellenization thesis*, along with the affirmative development in biblical theology brought by the emphasis on grammatical-historical reading of Scripture. As a result, there is a tendency to disregard traditional nuances in defining *imago dei*. The philosophical foundations of these concepts, including rationality and volition, may no longer seem relevant in a contemporary context.

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1 Paul Ricœur, “The Image of God and the Epic of Man,” in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Northwestern University Press, 1965), 110.

While this shift has paved the way for emphasizing robust theological alternatives where *imago dei* is understood through Trinitarian, Christological, and eschatological frameworks, I remain cautious about prematurely discarding traditional nuances. I believe they can still offer valuable insights: (1) demonstrating how *imago dei* engaged with the prevailing cultural thought forms of its time; (2) providing a way for the articulation of Christian theology to address conceptual complexities; and (3) as a result, theologians can address ethical issues that pertain to the human person in their own context.

Considering what has been said, I seek to retrieve a patristic view that presents a nuanced understanding of *imago dei*. I will briefly examine how certain patristic interpretations were not merely a theological exercise confined to scriptural exegesis but also engaged with the prevailing cultural thought forms of their time. This contextual sensitivity enabled early Christian thinkers to articulate theological insights in ways that resonated with their contemporary audiences while remaining rooted in the biblical tradition. Building on this, I seek to present how such an interpretive framework shaped Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of *imago dei*. His approach did not treat the doctrine as a static concept but as one informed by a broader theological vision. His commitment to the transformative nature of divine likeness is grounded in the hope that the fullness of humanity finds its culmination in its archetype—Jesus Christ.

A substantial portion of the discussion will demonstrate that Gregory's thoughtful engagement with culture rendered his view of *imago* ethically incisive. It enabled him to find resources in challenging one of history's most enduring and pervasive structures of oppression. Albeit focusing on specific concepts that are deemed traditional, the following discussion does not diminish the significance of recent studies in understanding *imago dei*. Rather, it shows how Gregory's work merits renewed attention as part of an ongoing conversation about human dignity, divine likeness, and social justice.

## **I. PATRISTIC INTERPRETATION: A CONTEXTUAL METHOD?**

Theological methodology in the early centuries of the Christian church was not as systematically branched out as it is today. It involved starkly different exegetical practices and presuppositions. Theologians did not specialize in specific academic disciplines or pastoral work. Instead, they embarked on interlacing multiple tasks such as interpreting the Scripture, developing catechetical materials, and

answering various contentions against the Christian faith. Since articulating the message and implications of Scripture in systematic form demanded a high level of persuasion, theologians drew upon philosophical categories and frameworks available in their time. Philosophy in this context should be understood as a branch of culture because it reflects, shapes, and interacts with the values, beliefs, and intellectual traditions of one's society.

Origen of Alexandria is among the most prominent early Church Fathers who attempted to use intellectual traditions outside the confessional and creedal norms of the church. For him, Greek philosophy is, to some degree, an emulation of biblical wisdom. It is therefore unsurprising that he recognized a number of Greek philosophical concepts aligning with Christian thought. In one of his works, for instance, he described his approach in an attempt to see if the word "bodiless" in Greek philosophy can be used to describe the nature of God:

We shall inquire ... whether the actual thing which Greek philosophers call ἀσώματος (that is, "bodiless") is *found in the holy Scriptures under another name*. For it is also to be investigated *how God himself is to be understood*, whether as bodily and formed according to some shape, or of a different nature than bodies, a point which is not clearly indicated in our preaching. The same is also to be investigated even regarding Christ and the Holy Spirit, and indeed it is to be investigated no less of every soul and every rational nature ... Everyone, therefore, who desires to construct a certain structure and body of all these things, in accordance with reason, must make use of elements and foundations of this sort, according to the precept which says, *Enlighten yourselves with the light of knowledge*, that by clear and cogent arguments the truth about each particular point may be discovered, and he may form, as we have said, one body, by means of illustrations and assertions, either those which he came upon in the holy Scriptures or those which he discovered followed from investigation and right reason.<sup>2</sup>

Several observations should be drawn out of Origen's approach in interacting with the philosophical sources. First, as a systematic body of knowledge, theology must

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<sup>2</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. John Behr, vol. 1, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford University Press, 2017), 21. Emphasis added.

be articulated with clarity and intellectual rigor. These standards of articulation should not be compromised or subordinated to faith, as if faith were inherently nonrational. Second, Origen acknowledged the value of engaging philosophical concepts that might assist in articulating theological claims—particularly, in this case, the doctrine of God’s incorporeality. Whatever insights derived from human reason apart from the biblical material are not necessarily incompatible or inoperative in theological reflection. Rather, such concepts could contribute meaningfully to the development of doctrine when analyzed and appropriately integrated. Third and most importantly, Origen presupposed the canonical voice of the Scripture. Whether a concept could be legitimately employed or dismissed rests on the degree to which the Scripture attests its theological plausibility.

Gregory of Nyssa expressed his theological method in the same format one can see in Origen. He did not perceive a dichotomy between faith and reason; instead, he sought a theological articulation in which analytical reflection serves to illuminate, rather than obscure, the witness of Scripture. At the beginning of *On the Making of Man*, he clarifies that his treatise will present a two-pronged approach, interlacing Scripture and analytical thought together:

For it is our business ... to leave nothing unexamined of all that concerns man,—of what we believe to have taken place previously, of what we now see, and of the results which are expected afterwards to appear; and, moreover, we must fit together, *according to the explanation of Scripture and to that derived from reasoning*, those statements concerning him which seem, by a kind of necessary sequence, to be opposed, so that our whole subject may be *consistent in train of thought and in order*, as the statements that seem to be contrary are brought (if the Divine power so discovers a hope for what is beyond hope, and a way for what is inextricable) to one and the same end.<sup>3</sup>

We can see here that Scripture and reason hold a symbiotic relationship in Gregory’s thought. The coherence of the Christian faith (“consistent in train of thought and in order”) is attained through Scripture’s interaction with cultural thought forms. Thus, the theological process is not without speculative

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, in Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, trans. Philip Schaff and Wace Henry, vol. 5, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2 (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995), 386. Hereafter, NPNF 2/5. Emphasis added.

rumination, logical analysis, and empirical observation. His use of “conjectures and inferences” or “theoretical speculation” is pivotal in demonstrating biblical claims about God and the nature of creation.<sup>4</sup> This allowed Gregory’s theological vision to attain both conceptual coherence and contextual relevance.

A similar method is evident in Gregory’s philosophical work, *On the Soul and Resurrection*. In this work, he affirms the sufficiency of Scripture for establishing Christian doctrine yet simultaneously acknowledges the constructive role of reason in theological inquiry. He observes that while Scripture is adequate, “the weakness of the human understanding is strengthened still farther by any arguments that are intelligible”; as such, the use of “philosophical examination” is not only permissible but beneficial.<sup>5</sup> Gregory’s method anticipates what might today be termed contextualization or the attempt to articulate theological claims in ways that are intelligible through the use of idioms and frameworks within one’s cultural milieu. It is from this standpoint that Gregory of Nyssa interpreted the biblical account of creation, and particularly the concept of *imago dei*.

## II. A COMPOSITE OF DIVINE IMAGE

Gregory of Nyssa’s interpretation of the *imago dei* is, above all, theological in character. Central to his understanding is the nature of the Son, who serves as the archetype according to which humanity is fashioned.<sup>6</sup> This archetypal pattern chiefly encompasses the notions of divine sovereignty, beauty and goodness, and rationality. However, given that many of the questions prompting Gregory’s treatise *On the Making of Man* were fundamentally philosophical, his response necessarily assumes a multifaceted form. While firmly rooted in theological conviction, Gregory’s exposition is shaped and enriched by philosophical categories.

*“Rule over all the creatures”*

Early in his treatise, Gregory points out that the basic definition of *imago dei* is for humanity to rule or exercise dominion over other created beings. Once again employing logical thought, he first derived this truth from the chronological order of creation. The world (“a royal treasure-house”) and all nonhuman creatures were

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4 NPNF 2/5:403, 405. Gregory’s epistemology includes the formative effect of empirical knowledge to theoretical insight. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (Yale University Press, 1993), 61–62.

5 Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and Resurrection*, NPNF 2/5:452.

6 NPNF 2/5:389.

created in preparation for the arrival of its rulers.<sup>7</sup> Here, the majestic entrance of image bearers occurred when the beholders of glory are already in place. This scenario yields few implications.

First, the arrival of the king portends the subjugation of the created realm. Yet rather than justifying the uncontrolled subversion of nature as a display of the force of human dominion, Gregory understands ruling to be tied up with the concept of stewardship, befitting to vassal rulers who are accountable to the Creator. Dominion is in part enabled by what might seem like a deficiency in human nature—namely, that we are not as strong or swift as many other creatures. This is by God’s design, Gregory explains, as it fosters a mutual interest between human and nonhuman creation, with humans harnessing the various powers of other creatures.<sup>8</sup>

Secondly, for Gregory, even the basic experience of gratification via creation conveys a theological purpose. According to Nyssen, God “manifests man in the world, to be the beholder of some of the wonders therein, and the lord of others; that by his enjoyment he might have knowledge of the Giver, and by the beauty and majesty of the things he saw might trace out that power of the Maker which is beyond speech and language.”<sup>9</sup>

Finally, in Chapter IV of *On the Making of Man*, we encounter the concept of self-governance or the exercise of free will to complete the picture of the royal position granted to all of humanity. “For the soul immediately shows its royal and exalted character, far removed as it is from the lowliness of private station, in that it owns no lord, and is self-governed, swayed autocratically by its own will; for to whom else does this belong than to a king?”<sup>10</sup> The idea of human freedom might simply be an implied aspect of possessing a divine imprint, but as we shall later see, it is a crucial element within the broader framework of Gregory’s *imago dei*.

*“Clothe in virtue”*

In certain philosophical and theological traditions, beauty is regarded as a virtue when it reflects harmony, order, and transcendence. For instance, Plato

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7 Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*, NPNF 2/5:389.

8 NPNF 2/5:391–2.

9 NPNF 2/5:389.

10 NPNF 2/5:389. Augustine explored this theme differently in his treatment of *imago dei*—memory, understanding, and will. See *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna, vol. 45, *The Fathers of the Church* (The Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 269–314, 451–528. See also John Edward Sullivan, *The Image of God: The Doctrine of St. Augustine and Its Influence* (Priory, 1963).

believed that beauty must be seen as a reflection of the divine and a pathway to understanding higher truths. In this sense, beauty is not merely physical but also moral and intellectual. Likewise, Aquinas taught that beauty is a property of God and creation. It is virtuous when it lifts the soul toward God and aligns with truth and goodness.

Aside from status (royalty) and function (dominion), Gregory believed that the image of God encompasses a moral essence. Before the Fall, humanity possessed an “exalted character” and was “clothed in virtue.”<sup>11</sup> Theologically, this beauty and goodness is an outgrowth of divine character (Ps. 145:9; see Luke 6:45). The statement in the creation narrative that says, “God saw that it was good,” pertains to God’s satisfaction in the result of his deeds (Ps. 104:31) because his handiwork has the potentiality to reveal his glory (Ps. 19:1). The archetypal beauty of the Creator subsumed into human form is further specified as “purity, freedom from passion, blessedness, alienation from all evil, and all those attributes of the like kind which help to form ... the likeness of God.”<sup>12</sup> Gregory puts forward that these characteristics are necessary to facilitate a divinely granted capacity for humanity to participate in the very life of God:

He creates man for no other reason than that He is good; and being such, and having this as His reason for entering upon the creation of our nature, He would not exhibit the power of His goodness in an imperfect form, giving our nature some one of the things at His disposal, and grudging it a share in another: but the perfect form of goodness is here to be seen by His both bringing man into being from nothing, and fully supplying him with all good gifts ... The language of Scripture therefore expresses it concisely by a comprehensive phrase, in saying that man was made “in the image of God”: for this is the same as to say that He made human nature participant in all good; for if the Deity is the fulness of good, and this is His image, then the image finds its resemblance to the Archetype in being filled with all good.<sup>13</sup>

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11 NPNF 2/5:389.

12 NPNF 2/5:390.

13 NPNF 2/5:404. See also *Gregory of Nyssa*, “An Address on Religious Instruction,” in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy (The Westminster Press, 1954), 276. *Immortality, for Nyssen*, is also an aspect of divine goodness comprised in the imago dei.

This forceful remark that the *goodness of God* is a necessary precondition for the *goodness of humanity* conforms to a larger philosophical discussion concerning the nature of substance. In Greek philosophical thought, a substance cannot produce or exhibit anything contrary to its nature.<sup>14</sup> Gregory presupposes this logic affirming that God “would not exhibit the power of His goodness in an imperfect form” and that human goodness emanates from the divine substance (i.e., “perfect form of goodness”).

It is noteworthy that Hans Urs von Balthasar recognized the presence of a philosophical dimension in Gregory of Nyssa’s identification of goodness as a constituent aspect of *imago dei*. However, he attributed the underlying influence in this regard to Plotinus, thereby suggesting that Gregory’s conception is shaped, at least in part, by Neoplatonic metaphysical thought.<sup>15</sup>

*“Rational animal”*

The human capacity for reason occupies a central place in Gregory of Nyssa’s understanding of *imago dei*. While he adopts a classical description of the human being as a “rational animal,” he emphasizes that rationality constitutes the distinctive feature that still sets humanity apart from the rest of creation. This, he argues, is because such capacity bears “an accurate resemblance to the superior nature”—a reflection of divine nature.<sup>16</sup> If human beings alone bear the image of God, then any attribute shared with nonhuman creatures must be excluded from the defining marks of that image. Within this framework, Gregory maintains that the order of creation is deliberate: God brings the world into being progressively, from the lesser to the greater, with humanity reserved for the final act of creation. In this climactic moment, human beings are endowed with what other creatures lack, thereby completing and crowning God’s creative work.<sup>17</sup>

14 Aristotle, *Categories* 3b24–32 *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, Bollingen Series LXXI 2 (Princeton University Press, 1984). See also *Physics*, Book VIII.5 (257a1); *Metaphysics*, Book VII.3 (1029a11–16), and Book XII.4 (1070a). This is reflected in Philo as well, see Philo of Alexandria, *On the Creation*, 51.

15 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Ignatius Press, 1995), 77. To cite the basis of correlation in Neoplatonism, Plotinus says, “We are saying that Intellect is an image of the One, first—for we should express ourselves more clearly—because that which is produced must somehow be the One and preserve many of its properties, that is, be the same as it, just like the light that comes from the sun.” (Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Lloyd P. Gerson [Cambridge University Press, 2018], 541.)

16 Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man,” NPNF 2/5:395–6.

17 NPNF 2/5:402. *Chapter VIII* (4) also reads, “Perfect bodily life is seen in the rational . . . which both is nourished and endowed with sense, and also partakes of reason and is ordered by mind” (392). Likewise, Gregory of Nazianzus asserts that the “greatest attribute in man’s nature” is “his divine image and intellectual faculty,” (*Oration 22* [13], Gregory of Nazianzus, *Select Orations*, trans. Vinson Martha, vol. 107, *The Fathers of the Church* [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003], 127).

It can be argued that Gregory's use of "rational animal" is a conceptual import. We can identify two possible sources: Aristotle and Porphyry. In *Politics*, Aristotle took an interest in the way people, unlike any animals, judge between good and evil, just and unjust in their ordering of society. By virtue of this ability to utilize language and participate in discourses, we dominate the animal kingdom and hence can rightly be called *political animals*.<sup>18</sup>

On the surface, such a communicative advantage might separate us from brute creatures, but ironically, it could also jeopardize our esteemed position. As Aristotle explains, "For man, when perfected, is the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, he is the worst of all; since armed injustice is the more dangerous, and he is equipped at birth with arms, meant to be used by intelligence and excellence, which he may use for the worst ends."<sup>19</sup>

Aristotle further purported that both humans and animals possess a vegetative mode of existence.<sup>20</sup> Yet, humans are still superior on account of their ability to determine a course of action based on autonomous use of reason: "For of all animals man alone stands erect, in accordance with his god-like nature and substance. For it is the function of the god-like to think and to be wise."<sup>21</sup> Neoplatonist thinkers like Porphyry rejected Aristotle's claim that humans are the only rational creatures. They maintained that human beings are animals but with a higher degree of mental capability.<sup>22</sup>

A comparable interpretive approach is reflected in Gregory's thought. First, because the *imago dei* results in humans having bodies primed for speech and reason,<sup>23</sup> we are able to exercise dominion and make moral judgments.<sup>24</sup> Second, together with nonhuman animals, we also possess a vegetative mode of existence, adequate for nutrition and growth.<sup>25</sup> This is a significant observation because on these grounds we can apprehend what it means for us to be "rational animals." Gregory imported Aristotle's tripartite analysis of the soul.

In his treatise *On the Soul*, Aristotle articulates a comprehensive framework for

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18 Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a1.

19 Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a30–35.

20 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1102a15–1102b1.

21 Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* 686a27–29.

22 Porphyry, *Isagoge*, trans. Edward W. Warren (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1975), 46. See also Porphyry, *On Abstinence from Killing Animals*, trans. Gillian Clark, *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* (Bloomsbury, 2000), 84–85.

23 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man," NPNF 2/5:393–94.

24 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Soul and Resurrection," NPNF 2/5:440.

25 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man," NPNF 2/5:392–93.

understanding the nature of living beings through the functions of the soul. He classifies living organisms according to three progressively complex modes of life: (1) the capacity for nutrition, growth, and reproduction; (2) the capacity for movement and sense perception; and (3) the capacity for intellectual activity, including both practical deliberation and theoretical contemplation.<sup>26</sup> On the basis of these functional distinctions, Aristotle proposes a tripartite division of the soul: the vegetative (or nutritive), the appetitive (or sensitive), and the intellective (or rational).

Hence we must ask in the case of each order of living things, What is its soul, i.e., What is the soul of plant, man, beast? Why the terms are related in this serial way must form the subject of examination. For the power of perception is never found apart from the power of self-nutrition, while—in plants—the latter is found isolated from the former. Again, no sense is found apart from that of touch, while touch is found by itself; many animals have neither sight, hearing, nor smell. Again, among living things that possess sense some have the power of locomotion, some not. Lastly, certain living beings—a small minority—possess calculation and thought, for (among mortal beings) those which possess calculation have all the other powers above mentioned, while the converse does not hold—indeed some live by imagination alone, while others have not even imagination.<sup>27</sup>

Each level of soul activity presupposes the existence of the lower: all living beings possess the vegetative soul, animals possess both vegetative and appetitive souls, and human beings, alone among creatures, possess the intellective soul. The soul, in this schema, is not a separate substance but the *form* of the body or the organizing principle that actualizes the potential of a living organism. Rationality, as the highest expression of the soul's capacities, distinguishes the human being and orients the person toward truth, moral deliberation, and ultimately the contemplation of the divine.

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26 Aristotle, *On the Soul* 413a20–414b30; 433b3. The discussion concerning the difference between practical and theoretical use of reason can be found in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1138b18–1139b35. On a recent attempt for theological interpretation of this framework, see Eli Diamond, *Mortal Imitations of Divine Life: The Nature of the Soul in Aristotle's De Anima* (Northwestern University Press, 2015).

27 Aristotle, *On the Soul* 414b33–415a10. This analysis of the soul is a departure from Plato's version of tripartite soul: sensual, rational, and spiritual. See Plato, *The Republic*, eds. G. R. F. Ferrari and Tom Griffith, *Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 137–138.

In the same manner, Gregory describes a threefold structure of human existence, comprising the vegetative, sensual, and rational modes. The vegetative mode governs the biological functions of growth and nutrition, the sensual mode pertains to sense perception and empirical experience, and the rational mode encompasses the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of human life. These modes enable humanity both dominion over creation and contemplative ascent toward God.

Gregory substantiates this anthropological framework through engagement with biblical text. He appropriates each mode with a corresponding aspect of human nature: the *body* with the vegetative, the soul with the sensual, and the *spirit* with the rational. In doing so, he presents a theological anthropology in which human nature is ordered hierarchically and teleologically, with rationality as the highest expression of the divine image within the human person.

*Gregory's Biblical Appropriation of Aristotle's Tripartite Analysis of the Soul*

<i>Biblical Texts</i>	<i>Vegetative</i>	<i>Sensual</i>	<i>Rational</i>
	Plants	Animals	Human
Eph. 5:23	Body	Soul	Spirit
Mark 12:30	Heart	Soul	Mind
1 Cor. 2:14–15; 3:3	Natural	Carnal	Spiritual

It is hardly a coincidence that Gregory's analysis of what constitutes a human person closely mirrors Aristotle's view.<sup>28</sup> There is a strong likelihood that Gregory appropriates a broadly accepted philosophical framework concerning the nature of animated beings in his attempt to establish the preeminence of human nature. This Aristotelian anthropology exerted a formative influence not only in Gregory's thought but also on later Christian theological reflection, particularly in the development of doctrines concerning the nature of the human person as a rational being. The tripartite division is reinterpreted within a theological framework, wherein the rational soul becomes the locus of divine image bearing, and the hierarchy of soul functions mirrors a teleological ascent toward union with God.

The following section will examine Gregory's rhetoric in addressing the universally accepted institution of slavery. As hinted above, the effectiveness of his method

<sup>28</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Making of Man," NPNF 2/5:392–93.

lies, in part, in the way philosophical insight shapes and informs his theology. This foundation sets the stage for a closer examination of early Christian discourses on slavery where theological reflection began to intersect more pointedly with immediate social realities. Such intersections are opportunities for demonstrating the relevance of *imago dei* in the cultural fabric of society.

### III. EARLY DISCOURSES ON SLAVERY

#### *“A Tool with a Soul”*

Gregory of Nyssa lived during a time when slavery was still ingrained in the cultural fabric of the known world. The institution of slavery has been tied to economic, sociopolitical, and cultural structures of a society. Slaves were necessary commodities for labor, household, and entertainment industries. This condition explains why opposition to the institution of slavery, even on moral grounds, was rare. Chris L. de Wet stresses that for Plato, the legitimacy of owning slaves is not much of an agenda for political discourse; instead, Plato’s focus was on determining “what type of slave management would be best in the interest of the household and society.”<sup>29</sup> The pretext for the proliferation of human bondage can be surveyed in the intellectual landscape prevalent in the ancient world.

Aristotle described the nature of a slave as: (1) one “marked out for subjection” “from the hour of their birth”;<sup>30</sup> (2) a “living tool” unsuited for a deeper level of friendship with the master;<sup>31</sup> and, (3) equal to animals, existing to attend to the necessities of the masters.<sup>32</sup> Aristotle even assumed that because the body structure of slaves is stronger than their masters, they are meant to serve. Because of this association with nonhuman creatures, it became easier to look at slaves merely as tools rather than persons.

A few centuries later, Seneca, a Stoic philosopher and a slave owner, offered a somewhat consolatory teaching for the slaves to cope with the adverse conditions they experienced. Contrary to Aristotle’s view that virtue is beyond the capacity of slaves, Seneca argued for their adequacy to obtain it.<sup>33</sup> In Seneca’s time, virtue was

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29 Chris L. de Wet, *The Unbound God: Slavery and the Formation of Early Christian Thought* (Routledge, 2018), 47.

30 Aristotle, *Politics* Book I (1254a23).

31 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VIII 1161b3.

32 Aristotle, *Politics* Book I 1254a16–1254b38.

33 Seneca, *On Benefits*, trans. Mirriam Griffin and Brad Inwood (University of Chicago Press, 2010), 70.

viewed as a central element of ethics and was considered necessary for attaining happiness or, at least, becoming worthy of any favorable circumstances. Seneca also pivoted to asserting that ownership of slaves is only limited to the possession of nothing but the body of a human person. As he puts it,

It is a mistake to think that slavery penetrates to the core of a human being. The best part of him is exempt. Bodies are vulnerable, assigned to masters; but the mind is autonomous, so free and independent that even the prison that contains it cannot prevent it from using its own powers to undertake great deeds and from departing for the infinite. ... And so it is only the body that ... is what he buys and sells. That inner part of a person cannot be owned. Whatever comes from this inner part is free.<sup>34</sup>

Because it is only the material nature that can be bound to subjection, separation from the body secures genuine emancipation: “A person who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave.”<sup>35</sup> Whereas Aristotle gives a metaphysical framework to justify slavery, Seneca promises an incorporeal emancipation by means of transcending the material realm.

In the Scripture, we can see an ordering of communal life that promoted the welfare of slaves. Deuteronomy 15:12–18 stipulates protection against lifelong enslavement of domestic slaves. Moses used the Israelites’ deliverance from slavery in Egypt as a ground for their compassion toward their neighbors who sold themselves to slavery out of poverty. Yet an even more generous provision is given to protect foreign slaves who escaped their masters (Deut. 23:15–16). Extradition treaties are part of Mesopotamian and Hittite law, a policy designed to address a growing number of runaway slaves.<sup>36</sup> Yet God requires the nation of Israel to provide shelter for these slaves should they appear in the gates of their cities to take refuge. Slaves are to gain their freedom and enjoy the blessings of the covenant.

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<sup>34</sup> Seneca, *On Benefits*, 71–72.

<sup>35</sup> Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic: Epistulae Morales Ad Lucilium*, trans. Robin Campbell, (Penguin Group, 1969), 72. This string of thought controversially introduces emancipation through suicide, see *Letter LXXVII* (128).

<sup>36</sup> For example, see the *Code of Hammurabi* in *James B. Pritchard*, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton University Press, 1974), 166–67.

*A Christian Slave?*

The New Testament, however, reveals that the institution of slavery continued to be integrated in the life of the people, including those who belong to the community of faith.<sup>37</sup> S. Scott Bartchy remarks that, even in the succeeding centuries after the apostolic age, “no ancient government ever sought to abolish slavery,” and the slaves who managed to carry out successful revolts did so not even for the sake of political reform but for hostile takeover of elite status and estates. Some even enslaved their masters.<sup>38</sup> Bartchy adds that thinkers and writers such as Epictetus and Aesop, who formerly experienced the horrors of slavery, never spoke against such institutions in their discourses. Some who managed to gain their freedom and become elite members of their community, such as Pasion, Diphilus, and Epicrates, even acquired slaves of their own.<sup>39</sup>

It makes sense, then, that in Paul’s epistle to the Corinthian believers, the admonishment is for the congregation to live out their “calling”<sup>40</sup> in whatever social status God has bestowed upon them: “Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk” (1 Cor. 7:17). Though this guiding principle was given to the question of preference between matrimony and celibacy, Paul connects the discussion of social status with circumcision, marital separation, and remarriage. However, it perturbs our modern sensitivities to read that such a principle is further applied to slavery (1 Cor. 7:21–24). The question this raises, of course, is whether Paul did indeed wish for slavery to continue.

Notwithstanding this and the clause where Paul encouraged the slaves to embrace freedom when available, the general principle of remaining with God seems to suggest that social status is not something that should bother God’s people. Is Paul supporting the *status quo* when it comes to slavery? The answer surely lies well beyond the scope of this project, but it is sufficient at least to say that the reading of the passage should not be detached from the overarching motif of eschatological expectation where the apostle contends that the “form of this world is passing

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37 Cf. Philo, “Every Good Man Is Free,” in Philo, trans. F. H. Colson, vol. IX, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 1985), 57.

38 S. Scott Bartchy, *Mallon Chrēsai: First-Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:21* (Scholars Press, 1973), 73.

39 Bartchy, *First-Century Slavery*, 74.

40 The social status of every individual is located within the sphere of God’s providence, wherein even adverse situations should be seen as part of divine allotment. Being slaves of human masters is never an obstacle to live out one’s calling to serve the divine master who purchased them with his blood (1 Cor. 7:23). As Gordon Fee puts it, “Paul wants them to live out their Christian life (i.e., their ‘calling’ to Christ) in the situation (‘calling’) where they were when God called them in Christ” (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987], 314).

away" (1 Cor. 7:29–35), including every social structure that pertains to human relationships or social status. As such, the principle does not overshadow social justice but sets the preoccupation of the people of God off the temporal sphere of existence toward the commitment to "sanctify the setting of their calling" in view of the coming of the Lord.<sup>41</sup> The lack of explicit biblical directive that could compel the church to confront slavery directly undoubtedly contributed to the continuance of the oppressive institution among Christian households. Thus, the New Testament epistles contain exemplary codes of conduct for both masters and slaves.<sup>42</sup>

This continued in the succeeding centuries of the church. Writing in the fourth century, Basil of Caesarea argued that even though "no one is a slave by nature," the level of disparity among human creatures with regards to intelligence may be a divine scheme for designating who is fit to rule those with lower intelligence.<sup>43</sup> Expressing a different perspective, John Chrysostom considered slavery not as a natural condition but a consequence of human depravity. "Whence is slavery," Chrysostom asked, "and why it has found entrance into human life?"<sup>44</sup> If one should answer from the Genesis account, it should be clear that this is not part of the original created order: "When God formed man, He did not make him a slave, but free."<sup>45</sup> Besides, the human body was designed in a functional manner where it does "not stand in need of servants."<sup>46</sup> Chrysostom's homily on Ephesians 6:5–8 provided a convictive answer to the question of slavery's origin. According to Chrysostom, slavery is a consequence of human sinfulness, and particularly the curse of Ham when he disrespected his father, Noah. It is "the fruit of covetousness, of degradation, of savagery. ... The thing was the fruit of sin, of rebellion against parents."<sup>47</sup>

41 Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 314.

42 See Col. 3–4; Eph. 6; 1 Pet. 2:18; 1 Tim. 6:1. All the same, we can read some accounts whereby Christian masters went beyond and freed their slaves. See Ben Witherington III, *The Indelible Image: The Theological and Ethical Thought World of the New Testament*, Volume 2: *The Collective Witness* (IVP Academic, 2010), 675. In the early third century, Constantine I has allowed churches to free their slaves—the manumission in ecclesia—with a special provision by which "a mere declaration of that intention without the customary requirement of witnesses or of written documents" will suffice (William L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* [The American Philosophical Society, 1955], 154).

43 In the same section, Basil admits that all of humankind are slaves considering that we are possessions of God. Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 80.

44 John Chrysostom, "Homily XXII," in *Homilies on Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Alexander Gross, vol. 13, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 1 (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 159.

45 John Chrysostom, "On Lazarus and the Rich Man," in *On Wealth and Poverty*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), 112.

46 John Chrysostom, "Homily XL," in *Homilies on the Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, ed. Philip Schaff (Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1994), 248.

47 In his homily on Ephesians 6:5–8, Chrysostom believes that the origin of slavery can be traced to Ham. It is the curse of when he disrespected his father (Gen. 9:22, 25–27), "the fruit of covetousness, of degrada-

Moreover, similar to Seneca and Stoic philosophers, Chrysostom subscribed to the idea that all human beings are slaves in some sense. On the one hand, real bondage is being able to sin. Servitude to evil passion forces masters to abandon reason and subject themselves to the whim of another. On the other hand, divine bondage precedes genuine freedom. Slaves, who are not intoxicated with sin but rather led by the vision of the holiness available in Christ, become capable of virtue and nobility. Chrysostom then ushers the congregation to think beyond social status toward a more salutary analysis of their identity:

Slave and free are simply names. What is a slave? It is a mere name. How many masters lie drunken on their beds, while slaves stand by sober? Whom shall I call a slave? The one who is sober, or the one who is drunk? The one who is the slave of a man, or the one who is the captive of passion? The former has his slavery on the outside; the latter wears his captivity on the inside.<sup>48</sup>

Chrysostom's unique perspective answers the social issue through a spiritual framework. The slaves can be free by attaining a virtuous life in Christ while the masters will remain in the slavery of their lust and passion. This comes alongside Chrysostom's reiteration of what the apostle Paul communicated: that slavery, as a social institution bred by human sinfulness, should not hinder God's people from living in godliness. He explains:

How then is the slave a free man? Because He has freed thee not only from sin, but also from outward slavery while continuing a slave. For he suffers not the slave to be a slave, not even though he be a man abiding in slavery: and this is the great wonder. But how is the slave a free man while continuing a slave? When he is freed from passions and the diseases of the mind: when he looks down upon riches and wrath and all other the like passions.<sup>49</sup>

Together with the continuation of slavery in the New Testament and in the succeeding centuries, we can see that even the early church generally accepted slavery as part of the social context where individuals, both masters of slaves, can live a flourishing Christian life. However, this was not acceptable for Gregory of Nyssa. What is really at stake for him is not whether slaves can be faithful Christians

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tion, of savagery. ... The thing was the fruit of sin, of rebellion against parents" (Homily XXII, 159).

48 Chrysostom, "On Lazarus," 115–16.

49 John Chrysostom, "Homily XIX," in *Homilies on the Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 108.

while they serve their masters or not. Instead, the spiritual peril rather lies in the masters' neglect of the divine image that should be reflected in their slaves.

#### IV. *IMAGO DEI*: A RHETORIC FOR EMANCIPATION

##### *Dominion*

During the Great Lent of 379, the same year Macrina died, Gregory gave his congregation a series of provocative homilies on the book of Ecclesiastes, which included his conviction that condemns slavery. At the outset, he emphasized the danger of being enchanted by the material possessions of this world. The danger of pursuing power and authority for the purpose of accumulation of material riches could lead to an inordinate desire to possess a fellow human being.<sup>50</sup> That is why in this series of sermons, Gregory attempts "to raise the mind above sensation, to persuade it to abandon all that seems to be great and splendid in the world of existence, to catch a glimpse through the eyes of the soul of those things which are unattainable by sense-perception, and to conceive a desire for those things to which sense does not attain."<sup>51</sup> Within this context and in relation to slavery, the focus of Nyssen's argument is for God's redeemed community to find the real value of a human person by reiterating what it means for humanity to be made in the image of God.

With Solomon in mind, Gregory's first argument exposes the moral corruption of slavery (Eccles. 2:7). It manifests of one's pride. It not only holds other human beings in contempt but also defies God's absolute dominion. In his words,

I got me slaves and slave-girls, he says, and homebred slaves were born for me. Do you notice the enormity of the boast? This kind of language is raised up as a challenge to God ... So, when someone turns the property of God into his own property and arrogates dominion to his own kind, so as to think himself the owner of men and women, what is he doing but overstepping his own nature through pride, regarding himself

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50 Nyssen validates Solomon's conclusion, saying that, "This is human life: ambition is sand, power is sand, wealth is sand, and sand each of the pleasures eagerly enjoyed in the flesh" (Gregory of Nyssa, "Homily 1," in *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, ed. Stuart G. Hall [Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1993], 41).

51 Gregory of Nyssa, "Homily 1," in *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, 34. A parallel motif can be found in Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. Richard A. Jr. Norris, *Writings from the Greco Roman World 13* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 73.

as something different from his subordinates?<sup>52</sup>

Gregory of Nyssa finds in slavery a usurpation of God’s authority because slave owners are imposing absolute rule over their slaves. No one can assert dominion over those who, like them, have been given the task to have dominion over the created world. Slavery is not only incompatible with the message of salvation but also marks one’s usurpation of divine rule. “God would not therefore reduce the human race to slavery,” says Gregory, “since he himself, when we had been enslaved to sin, spontaneously recalled us to freedom. But if God does not enslave what is free, who is he that sets his own power above God’s?”<sup>53</sup>

Gregory also challenges his audience to justify slavery by presenting a biological advantage of slave owners over their slaves. Here, we can see the appeal to familiar concepts in the study of the natural world, particularly on human anatomy. He demands to know “something extra” that could establish the slave owners’ superiority such as (1) different air to breathe, (2) a way of subsistence that does not require the consumption of food, (3) an excellent “arrangement of their guts”, or (4) a more splendid destination after death.<sup>54</sup> Without these extenuating conditions, slave owners have no physiological advantage to assert their superiority much less right to possess another human being.<sup>55</sup>

### *Free Will*

Gregory’s view that free will is a necessary component in pursuing virtue also holds a major key in his rhetoric against slavery.<sup>56</sup> Slavery is a serious obstacle in human participation of God’s goodness because the *imago dei* entails free will. In *On the Soul and Resurrection*, he avers that “as everything that is free will be united with its like and as virtue is a thing that has no master, that is, is free, everything that is free will be united with virtue. But, further, the Divine Being is the fountain of all virtue. Therefore, those who have parted with evil will be united with Him.”<sup>57</sup>

52 Gregory of Nyssa, “Homily 4,” *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, 73.

53 Gregory of Nyssa, “Homily 4,” 73.

54 Gregory of Nyssa, “Homily 4,” 75.

55 To some degree, this argument undermines Basil’s judgment that having a superior intelligence presupposes one’s right to rule over another person with lesser ability to comprehend the complexities of life.

56 Gregory of Nyssa, “Homily 4,” 73. See Jonathan Farrugia, “The Homilies on the Our Father and Gregory of Nyssa’s Interpretation of Human Free Will as the Divine Image in Man,” in *Homilies on the Our Father: An English Translation with Commentary and Supporting Studies* (Brill, 2018), 530–46. For a detailed discussion on the philosophical nuance of Nyssen’s free will, see Neil Bronwen, “Divine Providence and Free Will in Gregory of Nyssa and His Theological Milieu,” *Phronema* 27, no. 2 (2012): 35–51.

57 Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Soul and Resurrection,” NPNF 2/5:451. See also Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, ed. Drobner Hubertus R. and Albert Viciano, trans. Stuart G. Hall (Brill, 2000), 43–44.

Biblical commands and principles for moral behavior (e.g., the Decalogue, Shema, and the Beatitudes) are predicated on our choice to love or reject God. This does not undermine the theological truth that no matter how many times we choose to obey God, apart from his enabling grace, we remain in our rebellious condition.

The absence of a fully explicit account of free will in Scripture appears to have prompted Gregory to articulate the concept through the interpretive lenses and cultural thought forms available within his context. Ilaria Ramelli argues that the connections Gregory makes between free will, virtue, and *imago dei* are a result of his theological appropriation of Plato.<sup>58</sup> Rightly so, in the *Republic*, Plato writes that “Virtue knows no master ... The choice makes you responsible. God is not responsible.”<sup>59</sup> Given the striking similarity in vocabulary and the shared context (discourse on virtue), it is reasonable to conclude that Ramelli’s suggestion appears plausible. While the primacy of the theological context (human slavery to sin) in Gregory’s thought should not be dismissed, it is evident that he derived from this reality that all forms of slavery constitute a subversion of *imago dei*.

Furthermore, one can also draw a parallel nexus between Gregory and Aristotle concerning the discussion of moral responsibility.<sup>60</sup> In *Against Fate*, Gregory uses a more dialectical approach in defending the nature of free will against astrological fatalism. The notion that the movement of stars and the time of one’s birth direct human actions is incompatible with the principle of personal responsibility for one’s actions. He writes:

Do the heavenly powers, heat from the planet Mars, or any other celestial body frustrate and paralyze a person either through his own consent or against his will? If anyone who willingly does evil and inflicts injury admits to his behavior, he is indeed miserable. Instead of choosing the good, he has opted for ignominy brought on by pleasure. If he commits these deeds not through choice but by necessity, then some other higher fate has determined the attributes and capacities proper to human nature.<sup>61</sup>

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58 Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery: The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from Ancient Judaism to Late Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 180–181.

59 Plato, *The Republic* Book 10 (617e)

60 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book III.

61 Casimir McCambley, “Against Fate’ by Gregory of Nyssa,” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 37 (1992): 326.

If human actions are determined solely by the sway of external forces, whether it is an aftermath of cosmic flux or a directive from the slave-owners, then there is no sufficient condition for God to hold people accountable for their actions. Both philosophers and theologians agree that moral responsibility presupposes a freedom to choose between good and evil. But since slaves are not given a choice but compelled to decide and act in certain ways, their capacity to advance in virtue by freely aligning themselves with God's will is inhibited and, as such, they are prevented from attaining the fullness of God's image.

Rebekah Eklund also demonstrates that in Nyssen's *Homilies on the Beatitudes*, it is explicit that the restoration of God's image is not eschatological realization but a present endeavor.<sup>62</sup> Manumission therefore provides a context for the slaves to partake in the recovery of the divine image imprinted upon them.

### *Rationality*

Slavery creates an exclusive environment whereby only the masters are free to represent God's rule and to make moral choices. Yet more than this, as a pretext for a deeper form of oppression, slavery objectifies a human person to the extent that God's image is reduced or obscured to the nature of ordinary or lesser creatures. Gregory argues that slavery demotes humans to nonhuman animal status—"a level with four-footed things and even footless things."<sup>63</sup> Drawing from tripartite analysis of a human person where *imago dei* corresponds to one's rational mode of existence, slaves, by virtue of their lifelong bondage for the service of their masters, are essentially treated as irrational beasts, devoid of divine image. A similar emphasis appears in "Homily V" of *Our Father*, which highlights that God never willed for rational beings to suffer such degradation: "When your anger burns against a servant, it does not enter into your mind that it is not nature but love of power that has divided humankind into servants and masters. For the Administrator of the universe established a law that the *nature without reason* must serve humanity."<sup>64</sup> With the disregard of this divine order in treating slaves as animals, Gregory goes even further to ask what particular livestock produced a slave.<sup>65</sup>

62 Rebekah Eklund, "Blessed Are the Image-Bearers: Gregory of Nyssa and the Beatitudes," *Anglican Theological Review* 99, no. 4 (2017): 729–740.

63 Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, 74.

64 Homily V; Jonathan Farrugia, *Homilies on the Our Father*, 153. Emphasis added.

65 The rest of Gregory's arguments contain a series of thoughtful questions directed to his congregation and specifically to slave owners: (1) How do Christian masters justify the legitimacy of buying another person in view of Christ's claim that even the whole world will not suffice to gain one's soul (Mark 8:36)? (2) Considering that slaves can manifest a level of rationality as they perform household chores, how much could be the worth of such rational capacity? And (3) Could a fragile document bind a human being as a possession

At the end, slave owners must reflect on whether it is fitting for those liberated by God from the oppression of sin to continually subject their fellow human to bondage. The freedom we have in Christ should be an ethical paradigm for recovering the image of God once marred by the fall.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study has examined Gregory's appropriation of philosophical concepts to articulate a theological anthropology grounded in the concept of *imago dei*. Part of the reason in emphasizing the interaction between philosophy and theology is a conviction that although the technical term "contextual theology" emerged as part of the development of Christian theology in the recent century, its various expressions have long been embedded in patristic interpretive praxis. As such, approaches and concepts in the early patristic tradition should not be overlooked in contemporary theological discourse. They continue to hold enduring relevance even for addressing ecclesial and social challenges facing the church today.

For instance, crucial to Gregory's account of slavery is his engagement with the cultural thought forms in his context, especially appropriating and criticizing a few prevailing philosophical constructs. This gives relevance and weight to his view that *imago dei* is to be realized in a person's exercise of dominion, free will, and rationality. Despite the integrated teachings of the church whereby slaves are generally directed to conform to the Christian virtues through submission and obedience to their masters, Gregory still insists that slavery is incompatible with the Christian life. The consequences of slavery stand in direct opposition to the redeeming work that God is accomplishing through Jesus Christ. It is no longer an issue of becoming charitable and compassionate Christians while remaining slave owners. Gregory's rhetoric draws out the social implications of the Christian message: *imago dei* is realized in the lives of God's people when they cease to be part of or to suffer from oppressive institutions of their society.

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of another? (Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on Ecclesiastes*, 74–75)



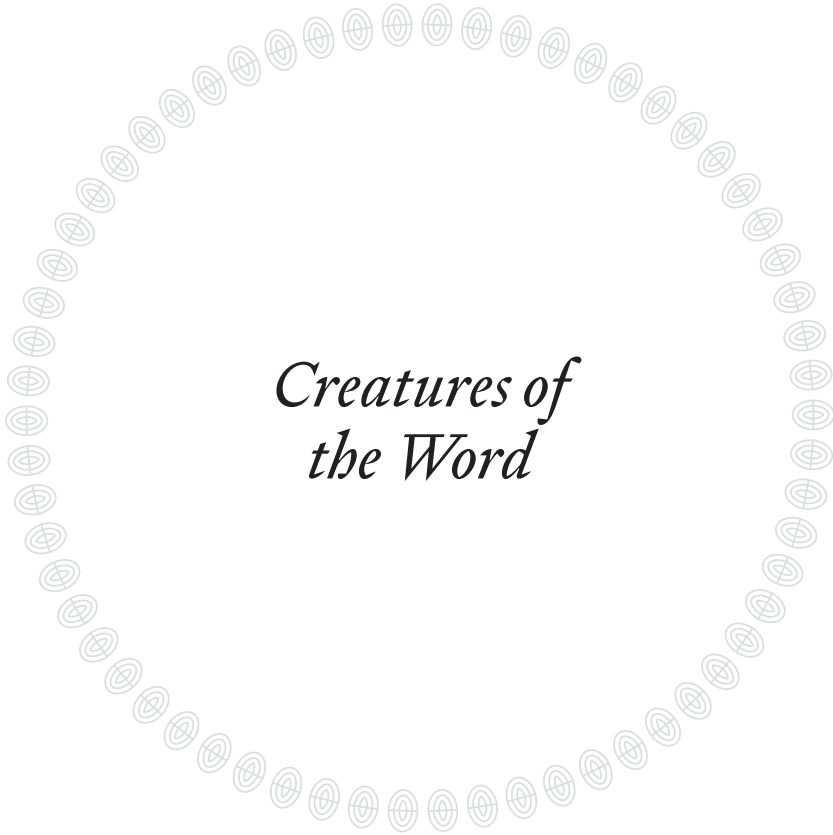




HUMANITY







*Creatures of  
the Word*

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**I**n the darkness something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing ... the most beautiful noise he had ever heard. It was so beautiful he could hardly bear it. ... Then two wonders happened at the same moment. One was that the voice was suddenly joined by other voices; more voices than you could possibly count. They were in harmony with it, but far higher up the scale: cold, tingling, silvery voices. The second wonder was that the blackness overhead, all at once, was blazing with stars. They didn't come out gently one by one, as they do on a summer evening. One moment there had been nothing but darkness; next moment a thousand, thousand points of light leaped out ... If you had seen and heard it ... you would have felt quite certain that it was the stars themselves which were singing, and that it was the First Voice, the deep one, which had made them appear and made them sing ...

The Voice on the earth was now louder and more triumphant; but the voices in the sky, after singing loudly with it for a time, began to get fainter. ... All the time the Voice went on singing. ... The eastern sky changed from white to pink and from pink to gold. The Voice rose and rose, till all the air was shaking with it. And just as it swelled to the mightiest and most glorious sound it had yet produced, the sun arose. ... The earth was of many colours: they were fresh, hot and vivid. They made you feel excited; until you saw the Singer himself, and then you forgot everything else.

It was a Lion. Huge, shaggy, and bright it stood facing the risen sun. Its mouth was wide open in song and it was about three hundred yards away. ... And as he walked and sang the valley grew green with grass. It spread out from the Lion like a pool. It ran up the sides of the little hills like a wave. ... Soon there were other things besides grass. The slopes grew dark with heather. ... And when he burst into a rapid series of lighter notes she was not surprised to see primroses suddenly appearing in every direction. ... But now the song had once more changed. It was more like what we should call a tune, but it was also far wilder. It made you want to run and jump and climb. ... Showers of birds came out of the trees. Butterflies fluttered. Bees got to

work on the flowers as if they hadn't a second to lose. ... And now you could hardly hear the song of the Lion; there was so much cawing, cooing, crowing, braying, neighing, baying, barking, lowing, bleating, and trumpeting. ... Then there came a swift flash like a fire (but it burnt nobody) either from the sky or from the Lion itself, and every drop of blood tingled in the children's bodies, and the deepest, wildest voice they had ever heard was saying: "Narnia, Narnia, Narnia, awake. Love. Think. Speak. Be walking trees. Be talking beasts. Be divine waters."

-C. S. Lewis, *The Magician's Nephew*

*Creatura Verbi: The Sacramental Word*

With the towering peaks of Christ's ascension and Pentecost as our landmarks, we turn first to the origin of the church: not only its beginning but the perpetual source of its identity. Nuclear to Lutheran and Reformed ecclesiologies, the notion of the church as *creation of the word* has received renewed attention in ecumenical discussions, as in the Reformed-Roman Catholic dialogue that nicely summarizes the theme:

The church existing as a community in history has been understood and described in the Reformed tradition as a *creatura verbi*, as "the creation of the word." God is eternally Word as well as Spirit; by God's Word and Spirit all things were created; reconciliation and renewal are the work of the same God, by the same word and Spirit. ... This is why the Reformed tradition has insisted so emphatically that the preaching, teaching and witness of the church through the centuries—the church's dogma and tradition—are always to be subordinated to the testimony of the Bible, that scripture rather than Tradition is "the word of God written" and "the only infallible rule of faith and practice" ... The church, like faith itself, is brought into being by the hearing of God's word in the power of the Spirit; it lives *ex auditu*, by hearing. This emphasis upon hearing the word of God has been of central importance in Reformed theology since the sixteenth century. This is why the Reformed have stressed "the true preaching of the word" together with "the right dispensing of the sacraments according to the institution

of Jesus Christ” as a decisive “mark of the true church.”<sup>1</sup>

The dialogue adds, again from the Reformed side,

Against the appeal to continuity, custom and institution, the Reformed appealed to the living voice of the living God as the essential and decisive factor by which the church must live, if it will live at all: the church, as *creatura verbi* ... The church is the creation of the word because the word itself is God’s creative word of grace by which we are justified and renewed ... The community of faith is thus not merely the community in which the gospel is preached; by its hearing and responding to the word of grace, the community itself becomes a medium of confession, its faith a “sign” or “token” to the world; it is itself part of the world transformed by being addressed and renewed by the word of God.<sup>2</sup>

As inherently social in both its act and effects, proclamation of the gospel cannot be set over against the church, as other defining practices often are in more individualistic and experiential approaches to spirituality. As living speech, it cannot be reduced to a timeless body of doctrine or ethics, yet as the speech of God who is other than us, individually or collectively, it always arrives as an external word (*verbum externum*) with the sovereign authority to define and redefine the church’s existence. Conceived in the event of hearing, the church always remains on the receiving end of its redemption and identity. Articulating this motif, especially with respect to the significance of hearing, is my goal in this paper.

## I. LIVING AND ACTIVE: THE SACRAMENTAL WORD

First and foremost, the Word is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity: the eternal Son, by whom all things were created and in whom they hold together, including the church (John 1:1–16; Col. 1:15–23; Heb. 1:1–4; Rev. 19:13). Yet Scripture also refers to specific instances of the Father’s speaking in the Son by the power of the Spirit, who brings about its intended effect. In this sense, God’s word is God’s *working*. As our own words spread out our intentions and influence without

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1 “Lutheran-R.C. Dialogue,” *Growth in Agreement II: Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical Conversations on a World Level, 1982–1998*, eds. Jeffrey Gros, FSC, Harding Meyer, William G. Rusch (World Council of Churches; W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 802. For the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue on this point, see 495–498.

2 “Lutheran-R.C. Dialogue,” 803.

spreading out our persons, God's Word in this sense is not an extension of the divine essence but the effect of personal presence and lively activity. The human words do not simply coincide at certain points with God's Word but are in fact God's "breath" (2 Tim. 3:16). Borrowing on J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, we may say that *God does things with words*.<sup>3</sup> Although the divine essence does not emanate, God's words do in fact "go forth" and are "sent" on their missions. The Word is that living and active energy that creates and recreates. It may harden hearts or melt them, but it is never inert, since it is the Word of the Father, spoken in the Son, made effectual by the Spirit.

Not by silent thoughts or ideas in the divine mind but "by the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth" (Ps. 33:6). "We are used to thinking that it was light that broke the primordial darkness," writes Stephen H. Webb, "but it was really God's voice that shattered the silence. This is the significance of God's appearance to Moses in the fire. Moses hears the words but sees no form: 'there was only a voice' (Exod. 4:12). The words illumine, not the flame."<sup>4</sup> Although the phrase, *word of God*, has various meanings in Scripture, notes Bavinck, "It is always a word of God which means: never simply a sound, but a power, no mere information but also an accomplishment of His will, Isa. 55:11, Rom. 4:17, 2 Cor. 4:6; Heb. 1:3, 11:3. By this word Jesus quiets the sea, Mk. 4:38 [sic], heals the sick, Mt. 8:16 [sic], casts out demons, 9:6 [sic], raised the dead, Luke 7:14, 8:54, John 5:25, 28; 11:43, etc."<sup>5</sup> As in the former creation and exodus, so in the new, God's performative utterance brings a world into being (Isa. 55:10–11). Wherever God speaks the Son in the Spirit, a mass of individuals become the covenant people, and anonymous space becomes "a broad place" of lavish abundance and freedom where the Lord dwells in the midst of Zion (Ps. 18:19).

The alternative to a theocentric and Trinitarian conception of the word is not autonomy but captivity to other lords who cannot liberate. When this conception is given priority, there is a proper place for experience and doctrine. Although

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3 In fact, it is striking how many contemporary theologians observe the similarities between the Reformers' theology of the word and speech-act theory, especially J. L. Austin's *How To Do Things With Words*, 2nd ed. (Clarendon, 1975). See, for example, Oswald Bayer, *Theologie. Handbuch Systematischer Theologie 1* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus G. Mohn, 1994), 441ff.; Reinhard Hütter, *Suffering Divine Things: Theology as Church Practice* (W. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 82–94.

4 Stephen H. Webb, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Brazos, 2004), 47.

5 Herman Bavinck, chapter 10 (section 56), in *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 3rd unaltered ed., vol. 4 (J. H. Kok, 1918). This excerpt was translated by Nelson D. Kloosterman as "Law-Gospel Distinction and Preaching," <http://auxesis.net/bavinck/law-gospel-distinction-and-preaching.php>, page 2.

this canon is also a written norm and constitution, it is also “the implanted word” (James 1:21) that “abides in you” (1 John 2:14) and is to “dwell in you richly” (Col. 3:16). Because it comes to us from outside of ourselves, either as pious individuals or a magisterium, this word creates, renews, judges, and justifies the church; yet because it comes to us in the power of the Spirit, this word wins our consent and makes out of many one body.

The notion that the church is the creation of the word arises from the repeated assumption in Scripture itself that God’s *speaking* is *acting*, and this acting is not only descriptive and propositional but also creative and performative. God’s word is authoritative not only because it communicates doctrinal and ethical truth—these are not to be denied—but chiefly because it is God’s truthful praxis: God at work in bringing about the new creation. It not only tells us what God has done; it also does what God tells. Any theory of language that allows only a referential function for signs will miss some of the most interesting descriptions of the word’s activity in the biblical drama.<sup>6</sup> Preaching involves teaching, but it is much more than that. In fact, even this important didactic aspect becomes more valuable when it is comprehended under the category of the sacramental word: “The dogma is the drama,” as Dorothy Sayers put it.<sup>7</sup>

In a covenantal context of a living relationship, doctrine and life, theory and practice, creed and deed are inextricably connected. It is the drama of redemption itself—God’s activity in the world—that keeps the dogma from degenerating into mere propositionalism and the praxis from degenerating into mere moralism. As life-giving as well as informative news, the gospel *creates* knowledge, assent, and trust.

Given the way in which the “sacramental” is often marginalized by a purely pedagogical and regulative understanding of the concept, it is no wonder that the

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6 No less an evangelical theologian Carl F. H. Henry asserted that doctrines are “the theorems derived from the axioms of revelation” (*God, Revelation, and Authority* [Word, 1979], 1:234; see also 4:105–109, 113, 120). Scripture’s two primary functions are, says Henry, to give us “propositional truths about God and his purposes” as well as “the meaning of divine redemptive acts” (Carl Henry, “Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,” *Trinity Journal* 8 [1987]: 3). Henry reflects an enormous debt to his mentor, Gordon Clark, who argued that biblical language is “inadequate” until distilled in propositional language (Gordon Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* [The Craig Press, 1978], 143). Elsewhere, Clark wrote, “Truth is a characteristic of propositions only. Nothing can be called true in the literal sense of the term except the attribution of a predicate to a subject” (Gordon Clark, “The Bible as Truth,” in *Bibliotheca Sacra* [April 1957], 158). After centuries of a Kantian moratorium on claims to constitutive knowledge of God (i.e., theology) and anti-intellectual dismissals of propositions, Henry’s reaction was understandable. However, it is often just such views as those defended by Henry and Clark that keep the epistemological pendulum swinging.

7 Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos* (Harcourt, Brace, 1949), 3.

word written and preached is often treated as a dead letter that must somehow be supplemented by something else: either a living community or Spirit-filled individuals. When doctrine is conceived as merely timeless propositions, faith and practice and preaching and experience drift apart, and there is pressure on ministers to find a way to make the Bible relevant, practical, applicable and effectual.

On the other hand, B. A. Gerrish observes, “Calvin felt no antagonism between what we may call the ‘pedagogical’ [teaching] and the ‘sacramental’ functions of the word.”<sup>8</sup> Life is found only in God, located in Christ, mediated by his word.<sup>9</sup> “God’s word, for Calvin, is not simply a dogmatic norm; it has in it a vital efficacy, and it is the appointed instrument by which the Spirit imparts illumination, faith, awakening, regeneration, purification, and so on. ... Calvin himself describes the word as *verbum sacramentale*, the ‘sacramental word,’” that gives even to the sacraments themselves their efficacy.<sup>10</sup> “It is crucial to Calvin’s interpretation that the gospel is not a mere invitation to fellowship with Christ, but the effective means by which the communion with Christ comes about ... It therefore makes good sense to us when we discover that in Theodore Beza’s (1519–1605) edition of the Geneva Catechism, the fourth part, on the sacraments, actually begins with the heading ‘On the *Word of God.*’”<sup>11</sup> As with baptism and the Supper, the Spirit creates a bond between the sign (proclamation of the gospel) and the reality signified (Christ and all his benefits). The word is a ladder, to be sure, but, like the Incarnation, one that *God* always *descends* to us (Rom. 10:6–17).

Specifically, the *gospel* is that part of God’s word that gives life. While everything that God says is true and full of impact, not everything that God says is *saving*. Sometimes God’s speech brings judgment, disaster, fear, warning, and dread, Calvin reminds us.<sup>12</sup> “For although faith believes every word of God, it rests solely on the word of grace or mercy, the promise of God’s fatherly goodwill,” which is only realized in and through Christ.<sup>13</sup> “For in God faith seeks life,” says Calvin, “which is not to be found in commandments or the pronouncement of penalties, but in the promise of mercy—and only a free promise.”<sup>14</sup> The only safe

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8 B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Augsburg Fortress, 1993), 84.

9 Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 85; cf. Calvin, *Petit tracté de la sancta Cene* (1541), OS 1:504–505.

10 Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 85, referring to Calvin, *Institutes* 4.14.4

11 Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 84, referring to Calvin, *Institutes* 3.5.5.

12 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols.. The Library of Christian Classics (The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.2.7; 3.2.29. All references to the 1559 *Institutes* in this volume are from this edition.

13 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.28–30

14 Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.29

route, therefore, is to receive the Father through the incarnate Son. Christ is the saving content of Scripture, the substance of its canonical unity.<sup>15</sup> “This is the true knowledge of Christ: if we take him as he is offered by the Father, namely, clothed with his gospel. For as he himself has been designated the goal of our faith, so we shall not run straight to him unless the gospel leads the way.”<sup>16</sup>

Just as creation begins with a command, “Let there be ... And there was ...” so too does the new creation originate in the womb of the word. The Spirit does not eliminate the need for earthly means but consecrates them in the service of uniting us to the ascended Christ so that our life is “now hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3).

This word, then, is not only the source or norm that we appeal to in order to encourage *bearers* to do something or become something but is also the means through which God communicates here and now the benefits of a redemption achieved then and there. We and all other creatures exist because God *told* us to exist. As in our redemption, regeneration, and justification, so too in our creation we are passive recipients of God’s living and active word. If Greek philosophers saw human personhood as a pure essence that exists eternally and necessarily, the dominant assumption in our culture is that personal identity is a fiction of socialization and individual self-creation. But according to the Bible’s anthropology, we are the result of God’s free speech. Our identity is neither a silent idea nor an autonomous choice but is determined by God’s eternal love, wisdom, and power.

While God’s word certainly “tells it like it is,” it is also the act by which God makes things what they are and the way that they are in the first place.<sup>17</sup> God’s word not only warns and promises but brings about in history that which is threatened and assured: “The Lord sent a word against Jacob, and it fell on Israel” (Isa. 9:8). Far from being a dead letter, the word of God “gets around.” Like the God who utters it, this word is restless until it accomplishes the reality it describes. To put it simply, the word not only *sets* forth; it *brings* forth. The word not only explains, describes, asserts, and proposes, but *arrives*. J. A. Moyter asks, “How did the

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<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.7

<sup>16</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.6

<sup>17</sup> The demand that theological statements have meaning only if they refer to an extralinguistic reality therefore seems to reflect a more Platonist than Hebraic worldview. Instead of transcending the finite creation, of which words are like the bodily carapace that is shrugged off on the way up the ladder of contemplation, from Genesis 1 on, all that there is to know is “worded” by God in creation, providence, redemption, and consummation. This linguisticity has its deepest ontological source in the Trinity itself, with the Son as the archetypal Word eternally begotten of the Father. Thus, to get behind or above language one would have to get behind or above God.

prophet receive the message which he was commissioned to convey to his fellows? The answer in the vast majority of the cases is perfectly clear and yet tantalizingly vague: “The Lord came ...”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, “the word of the Lord came to me, *saying* ...” is also a common expression in the prophets. The Lord came in the energy of his word, delivered through the prophets and now consummately in the One who is the Word of God, not only in energy but in essence (Heb. 1:1–3).

Unlike the hypostatic Word, the sacramental word is not an eternal event that is necessary to God’s very being. Rather, it is freely spoken in time—always new and yet connected to the words that have preceded it; in one sense, contingent (God could have spoken otherwise), yet never arbitrary because it always reveals God’s self-consistent character. It is a word that is never lost to the ebb and flow of history—not because it does not really enter into it but because it actively shapes its course and brings it to its appointed end. “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isa. 40:8; cf. Matt. 24:35). And that appointed end is a covenantal relationship with the only suzerain worthy of our trust and worship: “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear” (Isa. 45:22–23).

Yahweh’s word in human words is compared to the rain that descends and brings forth fruit: “So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa. 55:10–11). The same word goes forth from God’s mouth and the prophet’s mouth. Although it brings him nothing but reproach, this word is like a burning fire in Jeremiah’s bones, compelling him to bring it to the covenant people day and night (Jer. 20:9). “Is not my word like fire, says the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” (Jer. 23:29).

God’s words are event-generating discourse; they are not only enlightening or informative but are *fulfilled* (Ezek. 12:28). In fact, the scene of the prophet preaching to the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37 vividly portrays this living and active word that creates the reality of which it speaks. This is only because the words of the prophets and apostles share in the energetic light of the hypostatic Word, but precisely because they do, they are the very word of God. Christ is the Word who upholds all of creation for the good of his church (Col. 1:15–20) and

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18 J. A. Moyter, sv. “Prophecy,” *The New Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (W. B. Eerdmans, 1962), 1039.

gives us his word to dwell in us richly (Col. 3:16).

So the word of God written and proclaimed is not an impersonal body of timeless doctrine or ethics but is grounded ultimately in the Son as the climax of the Father's revealing and redeeming speech in a gradually unfolding history (Heb. 1:1–3) with the Spirit as its perfecting power: the source of its perlocutionary effect. "Indeed, the word of God is living and active," exposing and judging our hearts (Heb. 4:12–13). According to James 1:21, the word is an implanted seed "that has the power to save your souls." 1 Peter 1:23–24 adds, "You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God." Furthermore, it is not the word in general but the gospel in particular that is credited with this vivifying effect: "That word is the good news that was announced to you" (1:25).

Similarly, Paul says that "faith comes by hearing the word of God," and more specifically, "the gospel of peace," "the word of faith that we proclaim" (Rom. 10:15, 17). Salvation is not something that one has to actively pursue, attain, and ascend to grasp, as if it were far away, but it is as near as "the word of faith that we proclaim" (10:8). We do not have to bring Christ up from the dead or ascend into heaven to bring him down, since he addresses us directly in his word (10:6–9). The word of God is the source not only of creation but of the events of judgment and redemption of history leading to the last day (2 Pet. 3:1–7). From creation to consummation, we are "worded" all the way down.

Throughout the prophetic writings, scrolls are eaten and burn in bellies; they fly around like a giant parchment with razor-sharp edges bringing judgment to the ends of the earth. All of this imagery is meant to underscore the point that God's word as covenant canon not only speaks of but actually brings blessings and curses. Its sanctions are always effectively realized. Therefore, not only as word events but also as an enduring constitution, God's word is living and active. By this canon, the Suzerain constructs a temple-house.<sup>19</sup>

Properly speaking, we are creatures of the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit, through the Word.

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<sup>19</sup> As I have referred to elsewhere, M. G. Kline's treatment of this theme is richly suggestive, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (W. B. Eerdmans, 1989), chapter 3.

## II. CREATOR-SPIRIT

The Spirit is not the architect, nor is the framework of the cosmos or of the new creation “in him” as the Word in whom all things hold together (Col. 1:17). But he is the builder, carrying with him the plans of the Father and the materials purchased by the Son as he builds the sanctuary according to all that he has received. We will now begin to explore in more detail the missions of the Spirit in God’s undivided works.

When we begin with the Spirit’s work in *creation*, the canvas of his operations widens. Jürgen Moltmann expresses a legitimate critique of tendencies to reduce the Spirit’s work to the inner life of the individual believer—basically, to the application of redemption. “In both Protestant and Catholic theology and devotion,” he asserts, “there is a tendency to view the Holy Spirit solely as the Spirit of redemption. Its [sic] place is the church and it gives men and women the assurance of the eternal blessedness of their souls.” He continues:

The redemptive Spirit is cut off both from bodily life and from the life of nature. It makes people turn away from this world and hope for a better world beyond. They then seek and experience in the Spirit of Christ a power that is different from the divine energy of life which according to Old Testament ideas interpenetrates all the living. The theological textbooks talk about the Holy Spirit in connection with God, faith, the Christian life, the church and prayer, but seldom with the body and nature.<sup>20</sup>

Introducing the Holy Spirit too late in the story—namely, the application of redemption, we miss much of the action. But more than this, we end up with a narrow and even distorted vision of the Spirit’s work even in this important aspect of his ministry. The new creation narrows to the Spirit’s operations in the individual soul, often seen in contrast rather than continuity with the old creation as such. Such “crude superficialities,” Abraham Kuyper complains, “confine the Spirit’s operations entirely to the elect, beginning only at their regeneration.”<sup>21</sup>

### *The Spirit’s Agency in Creation*

The doctrine of *ex nihilo* creation—God’s creation of everything out of nothing—

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20 Jürgen Moltmann, *Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Fortress Press, 1992), 8.

21 Abraham Kuyper, *The Holy Spirit*, 44–45.

fixes forever the ontological distinction between Creator and creation. Neither divine nor demonic, this world is the theater of God's glory. Bound by no inner necessity or thirst for self-completion, the Triune God created the wondrous speck of dust and water that we inhabit along with billions of galaxies for the sheer love of it—and of us. He created it all for his glory, to be sure, but he did not need to display his glory in this way. Love and glory become virtually indistinguishable as the motivation and final end of God's creative act. God's glory is his love, and his love is his glory. Though far from arbitrary, the act of creation is grounded in God's free *and therefore* loving speech: from the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit.

The “darkness and void” (*tō-hū wā-bō-hū*) that follow the announcement of God's creation of matter is not a hypostasized deity, as in Babylonian, Mesopotamian and Egyptian creation myths.<sup>22</sup> Generally regarded as the earliest surviving work of literature, the *Gilgamesh Epic* (2100 BC) bears close resemblance to the Bible's stories of Adam and Eve in the garden and Noah's flood.<sup>23</sup> According to the most influential creation story *Enúma Eliš*, the founding deity—ocean-goddess Tiamat—is the font of creation. A massive serpent, she is the personification of the feminine stereotype: voluptuous yet chaotic. The process of creation from chaos is a series of violent skirmishes among the gods, in which the original dragon lady Tiamat herself is murdered.<sup>24</sup> Egyptian creation myths vary considerably from time and place. Yet, with the possible exception of the version centered in Thebes, the lifeless chaos waters were personified in Egyptian theology as the deity Nu.<sup>25</sup>

In the context of this pagan milieu, the Bible's opening chapters take on the appearance of an obvious polemic. It has been pointed out frequently that there are parallels between Genesis 1–2 and *Enúma Eliš* (not to mention, *Gilgamesh*). After all, a good polemic requires some parallels. Wholly incommensurable stories do not even clash, but that is precisely what happens here. However, the contrasts could not be greater.<sup>26</sup>

The chaos in Genesis 1 is simply inert matter, called into being but not yet fully formed or productive. The ocean is simply water, the skies and lights in the

22 Stephanie Dalley, trans., *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh and Others* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

23 Andrew George, trans., *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Penguin, 1959).

24 W. C. Lambert and S. B. Parker, *Enúma Eliš: The Babylonian Epic of Creation* (Oxford University Press, 1966).

25 See for example Douglas J. Brewer and Emily Teeter, *Egypt and the Egyptians* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. ch. 6; George Hart, *Egyptian Myths* (University of Texas Press, 2004).

26 Which only serves to remind us of the tragedy of New Atheists and “creation science” advocates alike, that this amazing and divine literature is not about the “days of creation.”

heavens merely natural phenomena visible to the naked eye of a farmer. Anyone who took seriously these two chapters of Genesis would no longer stare at the sky and call it by the divine name Nut or call the expanses Shu or the earth Geb or the sun Ra. Notice Job's hymn of Yahweh's act of creation:

He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters  
At the boundary between light and darkness.  
The pillars of heaven tremble  
and are astounded at his rebuke.  
By his power he stilled the sea;  
by his understanding he shattered Rahab.  
By his wind the heavens were made fair;  
his hand pierced the fleeing serpent.  
Behold, these are but the outskirts of his ways,  
and how small a whisper do we hear of him!  
But the thunder of his power who can understand? (Job 26:12–14)

The first line echoes the Spirit brooding over the waters in a judicial role of separating and marking out in mathematical artistry. “Rahab” is code for Egypt—the “fleeing serpent” whose cosmology is as flawed as its oppressive politics. Yahweh alone is sovereign. The “wind” (*ba-rū-ḥōw*) here is another instance of a translation decision, and while wind may be the best rendering, “power,” “understanding,” and “wind” are frequently associated with the Spirit's activity in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet all of these operations are but “the outskirts of his ways.” We hear but “a small whisper” and cannot even interpret “the thunder of his power.”

Job continues the Genesis polemic, as does Isaiah in the context of Yahweh's final judgment. “Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead.” Then the Lord will “punish the inhabitants of the earth for their iniquity, and the earth will disclose the blood shed on it, and will no more cover its slain. In that day the LORD with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea” (Isa 26:19–27:1). Leviathan, the echo of the pagan serpent-god, is not a god at all, nothing more than a creature, and is entirely under the sovereign power of Yahweh (see also Pss. 74:12–14; 104:26). The serpent's head will be crushed finally and forever (Rev. 12:7–9), just as God promised in Genesis 3:15.

And the biblical creation story lacks the intriguing, if vulgar, violence of its rivals. Evil, personified in Satan, is not *something*; it is not a part of God's creation, always lurking beneath reality and vying for dominance. As noted above, not even the chaos in Genesis 1:2 is an evil force. There is no moral significance to "formless and void." Creation at this point was simply a good house waiting to be turned into a beautiful and well-ordered home.

Evil is not ontological but moral; not necessary but the result of willful rebellion. It is the corruption of that which is essentially good—the depravity of personal agents who abuse their freedom to turn their back on the good Creator. Even the demons are (like Lucifer himself) good angels turned bad. Just as the Triune God was plotting our redemption in view of the Fall, the demons were in assembly with their "Stalin" to plot the downfall of God's kingdom. This world arises not out of an ontological rift between good and evil divinities or forces but out of the freedom that is proper to a self-complete God who needs nothing and no one because he is who he always will be: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is not yet any discordant note of tragedy, only comedy—the beautiful sound of laughter between co-conspirers in a venture of creative love.

Genesis 1 exhibits the following subplot:

v. 1: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," a comprehensive summation of *ex nihilo* creation. The Father created the world through the Son who "upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:2–3). In fact, "By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible" (11:3).

v. 2: Chaos. Again, not a divine something—divine or demonic, or both—but just the sort of thing that one expects from an artist's studio. The chaos is merely the material creation called into being and as yet unformed into an ordered cosmos. The Spirit was hovering over the waters, both to organize and fertilize it and also to cherish it.

vv. 3–10: "Let there be ... ' And there was ... " This set of events fits the *ex nihilo* variety: the creation of light (cf. vv. 14–19), land, and expanse. Each has its separation that makes the two into something without setting them in dualistic opposition: the light separated into day/night, the land separated into oceans/continents, the expanse separated into heavens/earth.

Yet from this point the narrative reports a different type of speech-act. Alongside

God's fiat word "Let there be light!" there is the continuing speech that keeps creation reverberating with God's life-creating word in verses 11–25: "Let the earth bring forth ... ' And the earth brought forth ... " This too comes from God, but it is different. Under this heading of "Let the earth bring forth ... " are the vegetation bearing its own seeds, waters swarming with swarms of swarming things (literally in the Hebrew), and birds flying across the heavenly expanse. There is no hint here of creation out of nothing; that initial act has occurred already. On the contrary, now in these speech-acts, creation is conceived of as growing and propagating on its own steam, as it were. Yet it is not quite on its own steam. Every putting forth of a leaf now appears to be a new miracle of God. Yet it is not a miracle, at least in the fiat ("Let there be ... ") sense; rather, it is the result of a wondrous working of the Spirit within nature. Both are the result of God's speech, but one brings a world *into being* while the other brings it *to maturity*. We will meet this distinction again throughout this study: the fiat type of word (an immediate act of creation) and the "Let the earth bring forth ... " type of directive (the Spirit's work within creation to bring about the intended effect of the Father's command, in the Son).

In the biblical conception, nothing in creation—including angels or the human soul—is divine. There is the Triune God and then there is everything else: Creator and creation, with nothing in between. Yves Congar observes,

Rûah-breath is not in any sense opposed to "body" or "corporeal." Even in profane Greek and the language of philosophy, pneuma expresses the living and generating substance that is diffused in animals, plants and all things. It is a subtle corporeality rather than an incorporeal substance. The rûah-breath of the Old Testament is not disincarnate. It is rather what animates the body. It is opposed to "flesh," but then "flesh" is not the same as "body." "Flesh" is the purely earthly reality of man and is characterized by the fact that it is weak and corruptible ... The Greeks thought in categories of substance, but the Jews were concerned with force, energy and the principle of action.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, when the New Testament draws its contrast between the flesh and the Spirit, it is not the difference between material bodies and spiritual or intellectual

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<sup>27</sup> Yves Congar, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, Milestones in Catholic Theology, trans. David Smith (Crossroad, 1999), 3.

essence but an eschatological contrast between this present age, under the dominion of sin and death, and the age to come that Christ has inaugurated by his resurrection from the dead. The age to come is the new creation, and it is the age of the Spirit because the Holy Spirit is bringing creaturely reality into the sphere of Christ's eschatological life.

The qualitative distinction between God and the world, emphasized by the doctrine of *ex nihilo* creation, ensures that the cosmos is grounded in divine love and freedom rather than necessity and ontological violence. Creation is not a necessary emanation or overflowing of being from a divine fountain down the ladder from angels to ants. Multiplicity is not the result of an ontological fall from the unity of being: first, because the source of all being is the Triune God, with the plurality of persons being as ontologically real as the unity of essence; second, because the diversity of creatures belongs to the divine benediction ("It is good") in creation. Whatever oppositional dualisms that emerge later in the story are the result of the willful pride of human beings and their refusal to be grounded in this free act of divine love and its peace. In other words, the oppression of spirit over body, male over female, rich over poor, and so forth, is ethical rather than ontological. It is blasphemous to consider them somehow grounded in "the way things are," by the action of the Holy Trinity in creation. Rather, they are the result of human pride in opposition to God's order.

To say that the Holy Spirit is the *giver of life* is to affirm that while he does not depend on creation, creation depends on him. The Father spoke creation into existence; the Son is the archetypal image of God, according to whose likeness we were created, but Adam became a "living being" (*ne-ḫēš ḥay-yāh*) when God breathed into his nostrils "the breath of life" (literally, "the breath of lives"). The same idea is conveyed in both 2 Timothy 3:16, where it is said that the Scriptures are "God-breathed" (*theopneustos*), and when Jesus breathed on the disciples and they received the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). The soul is not therefore the eternal, immortal, and divine part of human beings but is as much a part of creation as fingernails and livers. Adam's existence as a physical body preceded his being endowed with a soul—that is, before he became a "living being." Already we recognize the Spirit as the one who brings order out of chaos and clothes the human representative with royal dignity and beauty. (Later, the priests will be similarly adorned, representative of the role that had been given to Adam in the beginning.)

The Spirit gives the kiss of life to mortals in creation, preserves them in natural

life, raises us from spiritual death in regeneration, indwells us, and renews us in supernatural life. The Spirit will raise our bodies from the dead and glorify us by his perfecting energies. Life, both natural and supernatural, comes from the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit. As European nations were debauching humanity in 1918, Gerard Manley Hopkins expressed Christian confidence in the indefatigable persistence of the Creator-Spirit in his poem “The Grandeur of God”:

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

### III. LOOSENED TONGUES

Whenever humanity has assembled together in a synaxis of autonomy and pride that parodies the public gathering of the nations in the Spirit through word and sacrament, it is to take heaven by storm. Yet the same Spirit who descended in judgment on Babel, scattering its workers and dividing their languages, descended in grace at Pentecost to unite receivers around the word of Christ.

Although the word comes first of all to de-center the self-deluded in its claims to autonomy, it is with the goal not of drowning out the voice of the servant but of training the voice to sing the “Amen.” It is striking that Scripture records not only the direct “Thus says the Lord” but also the histories, laments, praises, proverbs, and interpretations of God’s people as they wrestle with how they will answer back in the historical circumstances of this relationship.

Thus, God has not only given us his word of judgment and grace but also our own

appropriate lines in the script of faith and gratitude. This re-creative word arrives not to subvert human poesis but to overthrow the presumption that this is an original (archetypal) poesis rather than a responsive (ectypal) one. Our speaking and making are always analogically related to God's, never identical to the *ex nihilo* speech that is the heartbeat of reality. Therefore, God's word does not render us silent; it gives us back our voice—or, rather, gives us back the appropriate lines in the script intended for us. As Stephen H. Webb describes the Reformation view of the word in preaching and liturgy, "Words could spring forth as praise because God had already said the Word that releases us from our sin."<sup>28</sup> Once more we see that the forensic word generates an effective economy that is as extensive as it is intensive.

The word that rules is the word that first of all liberates. Unlike the other words of other sovereigns to which we give our allegiance, this word brings about a liberating captivity and a captivating liberation. Yet it is always something strange, something to which we must be converted by the Spirit. And this is true as much for the community as for the self, neither of which can be exempt from this sovereign grace that refuses to let us define ourselves, which would be our death. Like Isaiah, we are "undone," yet only to be forgiven, clothed, and sent out with good news on our lips and in our hearts.

While the church is not the master of the text, it is the amphitheater in which the word creates the reality of which it speaks, the place where a valley of dry bones becomes a resurrected community (Ezek. 37). "The Church is the place of fruitful and hopeful repentance; and it is nothing else," Karl Barth wrote in connection with Romans 10:

When the Church crashes up against this point, it is overwhelmed with disgust at its convulsive attempts, at one moment to—ascend into heaven, at another to—descend into the abyss; it is appalled that it should have tried to be both "height" and "depth," to occupy them, speak of them, point them out, and apportion them. There is a certain horror at all attempts to bring about the work of God, to effect the incarnation of divinity or the resurrection of humanity, by employing the dynamic, demonic power of the Church's own word. The Church may refine its liturgy; popularize its technical language; broaden the basis of the education of its clergy; see that its administration

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28 Stephen H. Webb, *The Divine Voice*, 107

is made more efficient; yield hurriedly to the demands of the laity, however doubtful they may be; encourage theological journalism; approximate more closely to the uncertainties of the “spirit of the age,” to romanticism, liberalism, nationalism, and socialism; may, in fact, —“bring Christ into the picture”! But when He is brought into the picture, it is discovered that we cannot introduce Him thus, either by bringing Him down or by bringing Him up. For Christ is not the exalted and transformed ideal man. He is the new man.<sup>29</sup>

Only when we are silenced can “all moralizings and sentimentalities” give way to the word of the cross. Yet even this word must not be transformed into a descent into the abyss: “a gospel of demolition,” which would just be another way of moralizing.<sup>30</sup> Barth wonders, “Shall we never permit our hands to be empty, that we may grasp what only empty hands can grasp?”<sup>31</sup> Yet even this emptying of our hands is the judging and liberating work of a God who is too gracious to let us have the last word.

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29 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated from the sixth edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford University Press, 1933), 378

30 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 379

31 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 380–381





*“What Is Man That You  
Are Mindful of Him?”*

Interrogating African Traditional  
Religions’ Conception  
of Humanity in Light of  
Hebrews 2:6–8

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**T**okunboh Adeyemo aptly states: “African ontology is basically anthropocentric. Man is at the very centre of existence and everything is seen in its relation to the central position of man.”<sup>1</sup> This conception of human beings in the African Traditional Religions’ (ATR) thought nudges Africans to primarily show care for one another, to locate their identity in a community, and succeed in life as a community rather than seeking the care of a divine being.

Christian theology, on the other hand, is theocentric, making relationship with the Triune God the center and goal of human beings. In partial agreement with ATRs, sound Christian theology should advocate or promote the positive aspects of human community but without decentering God as the primary relationship essential for human flourishing.

Hebrews 2:6–8 declares the centrality of God in the existence of creation. The author of Hebrews asserts the significance of humanity in God’s creation. God cares for and is mindful of humanity without making them the center of existence. In this paper, I will explain what the author of Hebrews conveys about the relationship between God and humanity. This will be followed by a nuanced critique of ATRs’ conception of humanity in order to provide a better conception of humanity in the African context.

## I. WHAT IS MAN?

“What is man?” or “What is humankind?” This is a penetrating and perennial question posed by philosophers, theologians, scientists, and the ordinary men and women who strive to find out their identity, role, and purpose in the cosmos. The preoccupation with this question will be more acute in the face of the proliferation of AI, the mechanization of the modern society that is becoming more technocratic and utopia-oriented,<sup>2</sup> the sexual and identity confusion and illusion of cultures, particularly Western culture, and the violent and senseless wars that have wreaked havoc in nations around the world. In other words, technology, sexuality, and violence will force modern society to grapple with the origin, identity, role, and purpose of humanity.

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1 Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing, 1997), 54.

2 A. Th. van Leeuwen quoted in Swailem Sidhom, “The Theological Estimate of Man,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, eds. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (Orbis Books, 1969), 83–115, here 99.

In their striving to answer this important question, Western theologians and philosophers have provided various answers to “What is man?” or “What is humankind?” For instance, the French philosopher and novelist Albert Camus contends that humanity is absurd. The absurd man toils to uncover meaning that does not exist in this irrational and meaningless world. In Camus’s estimation, a human is a being without a future.<sup>3</sup> The hopeless and meaningless life of man is aptly embodied in Camus’s main French-Algerian protagonist in his novel *The Stranger*.<sup>4</sup>

According to Marxist ideology, man is a material being, or to be precise a *Gattungswesen* (species-being), which Karl Marx appropriated from Ludwig Feuerbach, who propagated that “God is not the Creator of man; man is the creator of God.”<sup>5</sup>

Sigmund Freud, on the other hand, answers the question “What is man?” using psychoanalysis, stating that man is a sexual being that needs to fulfill its neurotic and eroticized desires without any sort of inhibition. Our dissatisfaction and frustration is not because of the Fall or sinful nature; rather the source is the unmet sexual desire propelled by the libido.<sup>6</sup>

Charles Darwin almost blurs the difference between humans and animals. For Darwin, humans are animals at a higher level. In his own words, “Nevertheless the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind.”<sup>7</sup> Despite this minor difference, Darwin insists, both humans and apes have a common origin or ancestor. His theory has mutated in every direction and has since been applied in dehumanizing scientific research like eugenics and the social Darwinism that classifies some people as inferior beings. Here it suffices to mention the Orwellian maxim: “All men are created equal, but some are more equal than others.”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, René Descartes proposes that man is composed of mind and body. For him, the human body is a machine that cannot function without the mind. The mind

3 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O’Brien (Vintage International, 1983), see esp. 66.

4 Albert Camus, *The Stranger*, trans. Matthew Ward (Vintage International, 1989).

5 Quoted in Gudina Tumsa, “Unbelief from Historical Perspective (‘Kairos’),” in *Witness and Discipleship: Leadership of the Church in Multi-Ethnic Ethiopia in a Time of Revolution: The Essential Writings of Gudina Tumsa*, ed. The Gudina Tumsa Foundation (Hamburg: WDL Publishers, 2007), 25–33, here 30.

6 Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, pp. 115–16; Joe M. Kapolyo, *The Human Condition: Christian Perspectives through African Eyes* (Langham Global Library, 2013), 11–12.

7 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1871), 105.

8 George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (Constable, 2021), 93.

which is tasked with thinking takes the highest place in Descartes’s understanding of human beings. His well-known expression “I think, therefore I am” (*cogito ergo sum*; “*Je pense, donc je suis*”) underlines that one’s (an individual’s) existence can be proved by one’s thinking. Note that man is the sum of his thoughts. This is a relativistic and individualistic expression. In other words, one’s existence does not require the approval of others, and the person who is experiencing illusions, doubt, questions, or confusion can prove his or her own existence based on their thinking and experiencing that same illusion.<sup>9</sup>

## II. MAN ACCORDING TO AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

Africans have also provided answers to the question “What is man?” The wider African cultures, African Traditional Religions in particular, assert that humans are created by God. Swailem Sidhom rightly observes that the diverse cultures of Africa have one thing in common, “Man was created by God and that he has his origin in Him.”<sup>10</sup> As such, humanity originated and is sustained by God or a certain Supreme Being.<sup>11</sup>

Again Sidhom notes, “God is; hence man is.”<sup>12</sup> However, ATRs lack the idea that humans are created in the image of God. Joe M. Kapolyo, a Zambian theologian, indicates the absence of the concept of *imago dei* when he writes, “This language [the image of God] is never applied to the relationships between people and God, except of course in the appropriate translations of the Word of God into the many African languages.”<sup>13</sup> Despite the absence of the concept of the image of God in ATRs, God or a Supreme Being is identified as the source and origin of humanity. So the first answer ATRs provide to the question “What is man?” is that humanity is God’s creation, whoever this God or Supreme Being might be.

Nevertheless, as stated at the outset of this paper, African Traditional Religions are human-centered. The Creator God or Supreme Being is decentered to make room for the *anthropos*; “God ... is ... not the centre of creation.”<sup>14</sup> John S. Mbiti, the late Kenyan NT scholar and theologian, is often quoted for his remarkable insight

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9 See René Descartes, *A Discourse on the Method* (Oxford University Press, 2008); idem., *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 3rd ed. (Hackett Publishing Company, 1993).

10 Sidhom, “The Theological Estimate of Man,” 100.

11 Kapolyo, *The Human Condition*, 19, 21.

12 Sidhom, *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, 100.

13 Kapolyo, *The Human Condition*, 85.

14 Kapolyo, *The Human Condition*, 17.

on this issue:

African philosophy is basically anthropocentric; man is at the very centre of existence, and African peoples see everything else in its relation to this central position of man. God is the explanation of man's origin and sustenance; it is as if God exists for the sake of man. The spirits are ontologically in the mode between God and man; they describe or explain the destiny of man after physical life ... Animals, plants, land, rain and other natural objects and phenomena, describe man's environment, and African peoples incorporate their environment into this deeply religious perception of the universe.<sup>15</sup>

The late Congolese ethicist and theologian Bénézet Bujo has a similar description of the place of man in ATRs:

The traditional religions of Africa have their origins in the mystery of life and death. When Africans live this mystery intensively, they discover themselves, and their position in the total scheme of things. In particular, they discover their relationship with the transcendent God who, by the mediation of the ancestors, bestows meaning upon their lives. In such a religion, focussed on the mystery of life and death, humankind itself is naturally the centre of concern, although God is always present, at least implicitly. This perspective affects above all Africa's moral philosophy, which may be called anthropocentric.<sup>16</sup>

These two extensive quotes underline the fact that African anthropology is anthropocentric theism. This means God is acknowledged as the creator of humanity but at the same time is denied the limelight, the central position above and among his own creation.

ATRs also address the question "What is man?" by answering that humans are both physical and spiritual beings by nature. The body is essential to connect with the physical world, whereas the spiritual nature is vital to connect with the spirit realm.

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15 John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Johannesburg: Heinemann, 1969), 82.

16 Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in Its Social Context* (Orbis Books; Nairobi: St. Paul Publications-Africa/Daughter of Paul, 1992), 32.

The African conception of man or humanity, particularly the view of African Traditional Religions, is that man has both body and spirit, but the body is insignificant without its unity with the soul or heart or spirit.<sup>17</sup> Please note that this is not similar to the Platonic idea of man that emphasizes the spiritual and denigrates the physical. It simply means that the body is useless without its unification with the non-physical essence or element. Janheinz Jahn underscores this fact when he writes:

The origin of human being ... is represented as a double process. On the one hand it is the purely biological union of shadow and body. ... But at the same time something spiritual ... if we may say so, unites with the body, for the production of a human being is a process of body and spirit.<sup>18</sup>

He further states, “Biological life ... and spiritual life meet in the human being. In a concrete human life neither the one nor the other can be present alone. It is not the pure biological life that is embodied in man, nor is the living human person ever without a ‘shadow.’”<sup>19</sup>

The body allows the African to have an integral part in the natural world. However, this physical interaction occurs in tandem with his or her interaction with the spirit world. The spiritual composite of his nature enables him to interact with the ancestors or spirit beings. It is this spiritual essence that distinguishes man from animals.<sup>20</sup> Animals lack the spiritual component man embodies. This is the reason why Africans prize being indwelt or possessed by a spirit, as it gives them an edge to be part of the ancestors when they transition to the other side of the spirit realm.<sup>21</sup>

To answer the question “What is man?” ATRs offer a robust answer by stating that humans are beings that are composed of body and spirit with an accent on the spirit. ATRs vehemently contend that humans are not animals. The fact that animals and humans are different is not only true for proponents/members of ATRs, but it is also a point stressed among Christians in Africa. In a very popular Ethiopian novel *Love unto Crypt*, Haddis Alemayehu stresses this theological fact:

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17 Sidhom, *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, 100.

18 Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of Neo-African Culture*, trans. Marjorie Greene (Faber and Faber Limited, 1961), 107.

19 Jahn, *Muntu*, 107.

20 Jahn, *Muntu*, 107.

21 Kapolyo, *The Human Condition*, 21.

The difference between humans and animals is not that humans walk on two feet. Even a chick walks on its two feet. Well, then, is it the language that makes humans different than animals? No. Animals have their own languages as well. The main difference between humans and animals is man's ability to control himself. Humans differ because they can control their hunger, greed, adultery, and other similar feelings that they share with animals. If a man were pushed by hunger to eat whatever he wishes, to possess whatever he has seen, or to have sex with any woman he wishes, he could become an animal and not a human. Since man is created with the union of flesh and spirit, he is the battlefield where secular and spiritual feelings come alternately and incessantly.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to this, an Ethiopian evangelical singer Dereje Kebede once responded to the Marxist-Leninist regime of Ethiopia that propagated that man is a social animal who is not created by God by singing: "I am not a monkey, I am an image of God / I have been given dominion over creation." The point here is that Africans insist—contra the Aristotelean contention that man is a human animal<sup>23</sup>—that humans are not animals because they possess spiritual elements along with their body.

The third answer to the question "What is man?" that ATRs give is that the ideal humanity/man is a being in community. The idea that man is a people in community is in direct conflict with Rene Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* ("I think therefore I am!"). Such expressions of individualism and selfishness are frowned upon and indicate social abnormality for Africans. Rather, Africans in general promote the philosophical worldview known as *ubuntu*. The idea of ubuntu can be summed up in Mbiti's famous axiom: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."<sup>24</sup>

The corresponding meaning of ubuntu is humaneness that is characterized by compassion, generosity, love, care, and treating others as family members.<sup>25</sup>

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22 Haddis Alemayehu, *Love unto Crypt*, trans. Sisay Ayenew (Author House, 2005), 10.

23 See Joshua R. Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology: Humans, Both Creaturely and Divine* (Baker Academic, 2020), 311, also 31 n. 19.

24 John S. Mbiti, *An Introduction to African Religions* (Heinemann, 1973), 141.

25 Jerry M. Ireland, *The Missionary Spirit: Evangelism and Social Action in Pentecostal Missiology*, ASMS 61 (Orbis Books, 2021), 143; Kapolyo, *The Human Condition*, 19–23; Michael Mnyandu, "Ubuntu as the Basis of Authentic Humanity: An African Christian Perspective," *Journal of Constructive Theology* 3/1 (1997): 77–86, here 79–80.

Ubuntu is considered to be a gift from G/god and a virtue that can be inculcated and nurtured by doing good works. Hence, the ideal man, the authentic person is the one who practices ubuntu. In other words, “*Human beings are what they do.*”<sup>26</sup> Lack of ubuntu, the practice of individualism, is a sign of animalism and bruteness.

In ATRs man is a “society-based existence.”<sup>27</sup> John V. Taylor, in his *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence and African Religion* observes that “the sense of the personal totality of all being, and of a humanity which embraces the living, the dead and the divinities, fills the background of the primal worldview. But the foreground in which this solidarity becomes sharply defined and directly experienced is the life of the extended family, the clan, and the tribe. This is the context in which an African learns to say I am because I participate. To him, the individual is an abstraction; Man is a family.”<sup>28</sup>

When men and women do not practice ubuntu it brings disharmony and conflict. Any offence committed or good works omitted within the community disrupts the unity and the good life and may bring about disaster upon the community—these all affect the well-being of the community. A person who does not carry out his or her responsibility of ubuntu breaks the code of the community and becomes an evil, selfish person that should be excluded from the community. In other words, sin, if we can call the offenses done sin, is committed against the community, the family, and not God. ATRs are cognizant of the distance between God or the Supreme Being and humanity. However, ATRs do not provide any kind of solution to address the problem of sin committed against God. Again, John Mbiti’s observation is valuable here when he laments: “This remains the most serious cul-de-sac in the otherwise rich thought and sensitive and religious feelings of our peoples. It is perhaps here then, that we find the greatest weakness and poverty of our traditional religions compared to world religions like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism.”<sup>29</sup>

Also, another vital weakness in Africans’ conception of ubuntu is that it could be limited to close family or tribal members that exclude other people from benefitting from ubuntu.<sup>30</sup> Jerry Ireland goes further and argues that “*ubuntu* has proven an ineffective instrument in quelling Africa’s xenophobic conflicts.”<sup>31</sup>

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26 Mnyandu, “Ubuntu as the Basis of Authentic Humanity,” 80, emphasis in original.

27 Kapolyo, *The Human Condition*, 85.

28 John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence and African Religion* (SCM, 1963), 93.

29 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 99.

30 Ireland, *The Missionary Spirit*, 144; Kapolyo, *The Human Condition*, 23.

31 Ireland, *The Missionary Spirit*, 144.

Ireland offers a solution to address the weakness of ubuntu by providing *koinonia* as the New Testament concept that could redeem the philosophy and practice of ubuntu. Doing so will enable Christian Africans to offer the principles of ubuntu across the familial, tribal and ethnic lines.<sup>32</sup>

The goal and purpose of ubuntu is maintaining relational harmony and experiencing the good life as a result. God is not the goal of ubuntu. The horizontal aspect of ubuntu takes precedence over the vertical relationship with the divine. Therefore, ubuntu, as good as it is with so many positive qualities, has a significant theological deficiency: God is not the goal or the center of ubuntu, but humanity is.

In conclusion, ATRs' conception of humanity is that they are created by God; they are composed of body and spirit and they are people in community who are expected to practice ubuntu to maintain social harmony and have a good life. While these answers to the question "What is man?" are commendable from a biblical-theological perspective, the absence of the centrality of God or God as the telos of humanity in ATRs make the answers somewhat inadequate. Then, how does the author of Hebrews depict the origin, identity and purpose of man in Hebrews 2:6–8? Let us now turn to Hebrews.

### III. SETTING HEBREWS 2:6–8

Hebrews 2:6–8 is preceded by Hebrews 1:1–14, whereby the author argues that Jesus is better than the foregoing revelation, the prophets, and God's angels because he is the divine Son of God and the second person of the Trinity, who made eternity and the heavens and the earth. The exposition on the divinity of the Son is then followed by an argumentation on the true humanity of the Son in Hebrews 2. Hebrews 2:1–4 continues the author's argumentation of the superiority of the Son to the angels, which began at Hebrews 1:5–14. The Son has provided "such a great salvation" and neglecting this salvation will result in God's just punishment.

Hebrews 2:6–8 is located in 2:5–18 where the author contends that the divine Son is fully human. In his pericope, the Son's degrading humiliation, substitution and death, the Incarnation of the Son and its significance and purpose is described. It is in this passage where we see the Son's solidarity with humanity.

At Hebrews 2:5, the author offers the reason why the congregation must "pay

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<sup>32</sup> Ireland, *The Missionary Spirit*, 145–146.

more careful attention” to the “great salvation” they heard: It is “because it is not to the angels he [God] has subjected the world to come.” In other words, angels who are already identified as God’s “ministering spirits” (λειτουργικὰ πνεύματα) will not rule the world, but the divine Son will. Hence, the divine Son is better than the angels.<sup>33</sup> The author then proceeds to offer proof for this claim by citing LXX Psalm 8:5–7 (ET 8:4–6).

#### IV. EXEGESIS OF HEBREWS 2:6B–8C<sup>34</sup>

At 2:6a the citation is introduced by indefinite markers: “somewhere, someone testified saying.” It appears that the author does not want to mention both the location and the speaker of the Psalmic passage.<sup>35</sup> The reason for his reticence in citing the exact location and speaker of the quotation is to highlight the fact that the Psalmic quotation is the divine testimony. In other words, the author desires to shift the attention from the human speaker to God to indicate that the testimony belongs to God.<sup>36</sup>

The Psalmic quotation reads: “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet” (2:6b–8).

2:6b *“What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man, that you care for him?”*  
(τί ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος ὅτι μνησθήσκη αὐτοῦ, υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου ὅτι ἐπισκέπη αὐτόν)

The Old Testament quotation poses a rhetorical question to highlight God’s care for humanity. The original context of Psalm 8 betrays David’s amazement of God’s handiwork in creation, particularly the creation of man in God’s image (cf. Gen. 1:26–28). Psalm 8 centers on God, his creating ability, and his greatness. The Psalm opens at 8:1, “O, LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens.” The centrality of God is depicted by setting God as the sole recipient of respect, glory, majesty, praise, and honor because he is the Creator, the Lord and the setter.<sup>37</sup>

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33 John W. Kleinig, *Hebrews, Concordia Commentary* (Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 129.

34 Parts of this section appears in Abeneazer G. Urga, *Hebrews*, HECB (Langham Publishing, forthcoming).

35 Daniel M. I. Cole, “Somewhere Someone Testified: The Hermeneutical Function of Indefinite Citation Formulae in the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *NTS* 70 (2024): 99–100.

36 Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NIGTC (W. B. Eerdmans, 1993), 148; Sigurd Grindheim, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, PNTC (W. B. Eerdmans, 2023), 158.

37 Bruce K. Waltke and Fred G. Zaspel, *How to Read and Understand the Psalms* (Crossway, 2023), 214–15.

God's greatness and splendor is reflected in his act of creation, particularly the creation of humankind as his pinnacle handiwork. God made humanity in his own image (Gen. 1:26–28) so that humanity can rule “over the works of [God’s] hands” (Ps. 8:6). Grindheim rightly states: “As God’s image (Gen. 1:27), humans are called to rule the earth on God’s behalf. Their glory and honor are not innate but connected with the assignment they have been given by God: to extend his rule throughout the world.”<sup>38</sup>

The Psalm also notes that God cares for humanity despite man’s insignificance. The Psalmic quotation is an explicit gateway to the Incarnation of the Son of God in the subsequent section (Heb. 2:10–18; esp. 14–18). Scholars read the citation in two ways: anthropologically or Christologically. Those who advocate for the anthropological reading of the quotation point out that the passage is a reference to humanity collectively.

As such, they render *τί ἐστὶν ἄνθρωπος ὅτι μνησθήσεται αὐτοῦ, υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου ὅτι ἐπισκέπτεται αὐτόν*; as “What is mankind that you are mindful of them, a son of man that you care for him?” (NIV). The theological ground for the anthropological reading is Genesis 1:26–28, where God created Adam and Eve in his own image to rule over his creation. Others read the quotation Christologically. The Christological reading agrees with those who advocate for the anthropological reading that God intended humanity to rule over creation (cf. Gen. 1:26–28). However, the author of Hebrews appropriates the Psalmic passage to the Son of God, the new Adam.<sup>39</sup>

It is logical to take the citation first Christologically and then anthropologically. After all, the author has clearly given us the precedent for such an understanding. The Son, who is appointed to inherit everything has enabled those who are/will be associated with him to inherit salvation (Heb. 1:2, 4, 14). In other words, the restoration of humanity to rule over creation can only happen in the Son’s mediatorial function as God’s Prophet, Priest, and King. Consequently, the Christological reading of Psalm 8 has primacy.

The similar verbiage between Psalm 110:1 and Psalm 8 and the two passages’ appearance alongside each other in places in the New Testament (1 Cor. 15:25–27; Eph. 1:20–22) also lends support in reading Psalm 8 Christologically. It is possible

<sup>38</sup> Grindheim, *Hebrews*, 159.

<sup>39</sup> F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (W. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 35.

that the expression “Son of man” alludes to Daniel’s “one like a Son of man” (Dan. 7:13) who rules over “all peoples, nations and languages” (Dan. 7:14).

“What is Man?” The Hebrew term *‘enosb* (ἄνθρωπος) or *ben Adam* (υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου) in Psalm 8:4 is employed here to indicate the mortality, weakness and frailty of humanity.<sup>40</sup> God’s greatness and otherness is incomparable to humanity’s weakness and mortality.<sup>41</sup> The Psalmist himself answers the question “What is man?” later in Psalm 144:3–4: “LORD, what is man that you regard him or the son of man that you think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow.” In other words, humanity or the Son of Adam is ephemeral and finite. Although he nowhere cites Psalm 8 or 144 or Hebrews 2:6–8, Kelly M. Kapic’s recent book’s title captures the idea of ephemerality and finitude perfectly: *You’re Only Human*,<sup>42</sup> or, in the words of Carmen Joy Imes, “On our own, we are not enough.”<sup>43</sup>

However, humanity is not insignificant in the eyes of God. In reality, God is “mindful” (ἐπισκέπτη) of humanity because he sent his Son to be the incarnate God so that he can execute the task of the purification of sins in order to restore everything lost through the first Adam. This fact is ascertained in the author’s utilization of the Christological title “Son of man” (υἱὸς ἀνθρώπου).<sup>44</sup> The purification and the restoration of humanity’s dignity, dominion over creation and relationship with the divine could only be a reality through the Incarnation. Sin necessitated the Incarnation, the divine Son becoming the Son of Man. The offense is not merely committed against humanity, the *umuntu*; here and in the rest of the epistle we see that sin is an offense against God that requires divine intervention. The intervention necessitates suffering, death, the offering of blood, intercession, mediation, and sanctification (Heb. 1:3; 2:9–11, 14–18, 7:25, etc.).

The divine Son becoming man with blood and flesh is the only definitive solution to the problem of sin. The vertical reconciliation with the divine through the

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40 George H. Guthrie, “Hebrews,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Baker Academic, 2007), 919–95, here 944; John Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 1: Psalms 1–41* (Baker Academic, 2006), 158.

41 Waltke and Zaspel, *How to Read and Understand the Psalms*, 217.

42 Kelly M. Kapic, *You’re Only Human: How Your Limits Reflect God’s Design and Why That’s Good News* (Brazos Press, 2022).

43 Carmen Joy Imes, *Being God’s Image: Why Creation Still Matters* (IVP Academic, 2023), 87.

44 There are some scholars who contend that “Son of man” here does not have messianic sense as it is anarthrous. See William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8*, WBC 47A (Zondervan, 1991), 46–47; Thomas R. Schreiner, *A Commentary on Hebrews*, BTCP (B&H, 2015), 88; Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on Hebrews* (W. B. Eerdmans, 1977), 84; Gareth L. Cockerill, *Hebrews*, NICNT (W. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 128; Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 36 (Doubleday, 2001), 215–16.

sacrificial-victorious works of Jesus enables a horizontal reconciliation by bringing many to become siblings in Christ. This work of Christ brings unity, peace, harmony, and filial relationships under the roof of God's household. In other words, the Second Adam is able to redeem the lost dignity, status, innocence, unity, peace, and harmony because of the first Adam.<sup>45</sup> God's remembrance and care for humanity is expressed in sending the perfect Son to be the mediator par excellence. The Son identifies with humans by becoming one.

The terms *μυνησκομαι* ("to be concerned about") and *ἐπισκέπτομαι* ("to look after") underline the significance of humanity before God. God cares for and actively looks after his creatures in his own image. This is particularly evident in the Son's act of offering the purification for sins on the cross. Hughes rightly states: "The incarnation of the Son of God is the great and ultimate proof of the importance of man. It is not, however, in egocentric self-approval that the worth of man finds his expression, but in his status as God's creature and his constitution in the divine image."<sup>46</sup> The Amharic translation of the term *ἐπισκέπτομαι* rightly captures the term's intended meaning: *ትጎበኘው* (*tigobegnew*, "to visit"). BDAG also renders the term as to "make an appearance to help."<sup>47</sup> God appeared in the flesh to help humanity so that he could deliver his creation from its slavery.

Prominent Ethiopian singer Tesfaye Gabiso links the descent of God from heaven and proffering help to those who are in bondage of transgression:

When God assists, descending from the heavens,  
When He wipes out all offences by His Justice,  
Haven't you seen the trap broken,  
The captive freed and telling about His redemption?<sup>48</sup>

2:7a *"You made him for a little while lower than the angels"* (ἠλάττωσας αὐτὸν βραχύ τι παρ' ἀγγέλους)

The Son of Man was made lower (ἠλάττωσας) for a brief moment. The expression *βραχύ τι* in the Hebrew text of Psalm 8:6 (כָּצִוּ) denotes the degree of the humiliation of man. Hence it is rendered as "a little" rather than "for a brief moment." Some

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45 Dana M. Harris, *Hebrews*, EGGNT (B&H, 2019), 47.

46 Hughes, *A Commentary on Hebrews*, 84–85.

47 BDAG, 378.

48 Lila W. Balisky, *Songs of Ethiopia's Tesfaye Gabbiso: Singing with Understanding in Babylon, the Meantime, and Zion*, ASM 37 (Pickwick, 2018), 218.

scholars argue that the MT meaning—that is degree, not time—should be maintained in Hebrews.<sup>49</sup> Nonetheless, the humiliation of the Son of Man for a brief moment makes more sense. Man was made lower than the angels for a short time.<sup>50</sup> As Kistemaker rightly notes, this does not mean that the administration of God’s creation is given to the angels because they are superior to humanity.<sup>51</sup> At Hebrews 2:5, the author has already made a point that the angels will not govern “the world to come.”

The temporary humiliation is a reference to nothing other than Christ’s Incarnation, his sufferings on earth, and ultimate humiliation and sacrifice on the cross. Christ’s humiliation began when he took the form of a slave and the nature of man. But the pinnacle of him being lowered is evident in his obedient death on the humiliating cross (cf. Phil. 2:6–8). The *Andemta* tradition comments that Jesus became lower than the angels because God gave him suffering and death so that we can benefit from his passion.

2:7b–8a “*You have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet*” (δόξη καὶ τιμῇ ἐστεφάνωσας αὐτόν, πάντα ὑπέταξας ὑποκάτω τῶν ποδῶν αὐτοῦ)

The humiliation was momentary. The Son of Man’s utter suffering, humiliation, and sacrifice was followed by honor, exaltation, and crown. God crowned the Son of Man, Jesus, “with glory and honor.” According to BDAG, στεφανόω means “to recognize distinguished service or performance with an award, *honor, reward, crown*.”<sup>52</sup> The Son’s humiliation from birth to crucifixion did not go unnoticed. The Father recognized the Son’s accomplishment, obedient suffering, and lowliness. Consequently, he exalted him. The Son’s exaltation is already stated in the exordium (Heb. 1:3–4). His sacrificial activity culminated in the Son’s enthronement at the Father’s right hand. Philippians 2:9–11 conveys a similar notion. Christ obediently, vicariously suffered and was humiliated utterly. As a result, God rewarded him by exalting him. The crown followed the degrading cross. According to *Andemta*, God honored Jesus for his humiliation by giving him resurrection and ascension and by “appointing him over all the works of your [God’s] hands.” The expression πάντα ὑπέταξας ὑποκάτω τῶν ποδῶν αὐτοῦ alludes

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49 Brooke F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (W. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 44; The NIV translation prefers the degree to the time.

50 Lane, *Hebrews, 1:48*; Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 88.

51 Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Baker, 1984), 65.

52 BDAG, 944.

to Psalm LXX 109:1 (Ps 110:1), particularly the verbiage ὑποπόδιον τῶν ποδῶν σου. (109:1) and τῶν ποδῶν αὐτοῦ (Heb 2:8a). A similar combination of Psalm 8 and Psalm 110:1 is reflected in 1 Corinthians 15:25–27 and 1 Peter 3:22.

Here a realized eschatology is in purview. The finished works of Christ on earth have culminated in Christ’s present enthronement, rule, and kingship. Everything is under his sovereign rule and dominion. The Son of Man has recaptured the lost dominion of humanity’s rule over creation, and he sustains and bears it to the end. By implication, those who associate and identify with the Son will rule creation as co-heirs with the Son (cf. Heb. 1:14; 2:5).

The motif of subjection is presented in the already-but-not-yet framework. The term ὑποτάσσω appears four times between 2:5 and 2:8. In one sense, Christ, the Son of Man, has achieved the subjection of everything under his rule. In another sense, however, the subjection is to be realized in the eschaton.

2:8b *“Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control”* (ἐν τῷ γὰρ ὑποτάξαι [αὐτῷ] τὰ πάντα οὐδὲν ἀφήγεν αὐτῷ ἀνυπότακτον)

The author formulated his rhetorical question using a question from LXX Psalm 8:5–7 in Hebrews 2:5–8a. But in Hebrews 2:8b–9, he provides the answer to the question posed.<sup>53</sup> God has subjected everything (Heb. 1:3) under the feet of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ. In so doing, the new Adam recapitulated what the first Adam failed to do: to rule and have dominion over God’s creation (cf. Gen. 1:26–28). This commentary on the quotation is introduced by the coordinate conjunction γὰρ (“for”). The explanation particularly highlights the fact that God has subjected everything in the universe under the rulership of the Son of Man. The conjunction also reiterates the fact that “the world to come” is not subjected to the angels but to the Son of God and those who identify with the Son (Heb. 2:5). The subjection is comprehensive and all-inclusive. The adjective τὰ πάντα along with οὐδὲν ... ἀνυπότακτον punctuate that everything is under the dominion of the Son of Man.

## V. A NUANCED CRITIQUE OF ATRS’ CONCEPTION OF HUMANITY

African cultures, African Traditional Religions in particular, are correct to denote

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<sup>53</sup> Kleinig, *Hebrews*, 130.

that humanity is created by God, composed of body and spirit who should be in community and seek unity, harmony, and a good life. However, as I pointed out earlier, there is some theological deficiency in ATRs’ understanding of the nature of humanity.

First, in the practice of ubuntu, the goal and purpose of humanity is ultimately human centered. In the words of Mbiti, “It is as if God exists for the sake of man.”<sup>54</sup> Nonetheless, we have seen in Hebrews and Psalms that God cares for humanity, but God does not exist for humanity. Richard Gehman is on point when he describes the tendency of ATRs: “The focus of ATR is indeed on man himself. African Traditional Religions centers on man. The whole emphasis is upon man gaining the power needed to live a good life. Life revolves around man and his interests and needs.”<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, Hebrews 2:6–8 echoes the ancient tradition that creation is God’s handiwork and exists for God’s splendor and praise. As such, Hebrews 2:6–8 provides a correction to the anthropocentric thought of African Traditional Religions by offering God the center position. God is and should be the goal and focus of Africans. The author of Hebrews is explicit when it comes to who it is who exists for who: “For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering” (Heb. 2:10).

In order to have the centrality of God in the African context, it is important to bridge the chasm between God and humanity, a problem for which ATRs are unable to provide a solution. When relationships between humanity take precedence, God takes the back seat, and the vertical relationship becomes relatively unimportant. In other words, ATRs are weak when it comes to the doctrine of sin or total depravity and the solution to the problem of sin.

As stated above, in African Traditional Religions, sin is committed against the community, not necessarily against God. Although there is a grain of truth that sin affects our relationships with others, Christian theology and the biblical evidence stress the fact that sin first and foremost affects our relationship with the divine. Hebrews 2:6–8 and the literary context of this pericope indicate that God became man, the divine became incarnate in order to provide purification, sanctification, and the forgiveness of sins so that the broken divine-human relationships could

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54 Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 82.

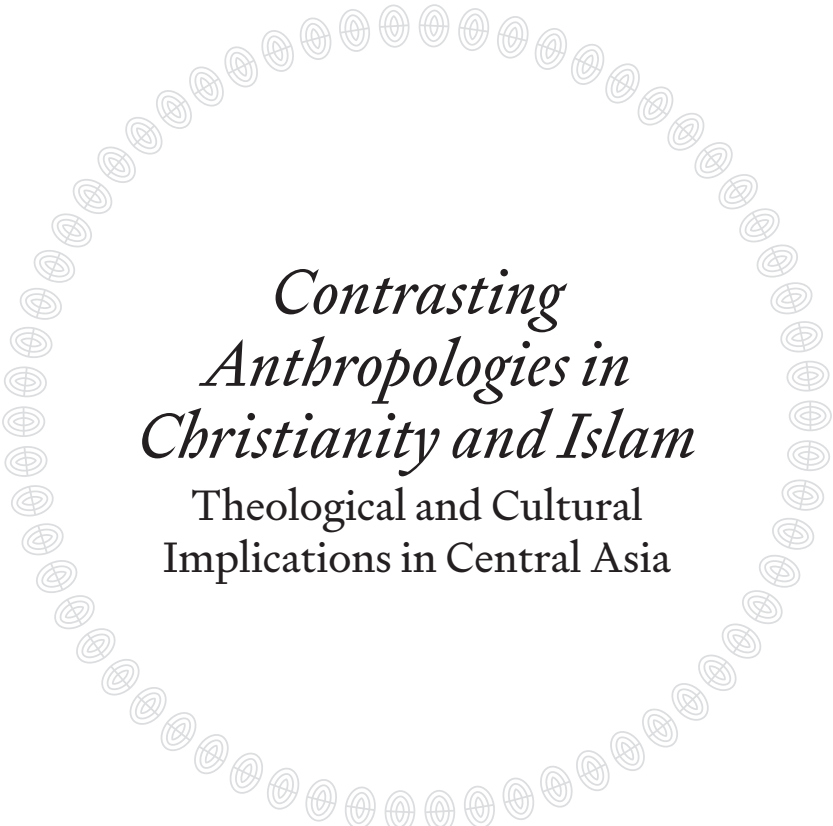
55 Richard J. Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective* (Kijabe, Kenya: Kesho Publications, 1989), 50.

be fixed. The lack of the doctrine of total depravity and the corruption of the *imago dei* is a key weakness of ATRs' anthropology. Here again Hebrews chapter 2 provides a vital corrective to ATRs' conception of humanity's sin by highlighting that the offense is primarily committed against God. But there is a God-ordained solution to the problem of sin: the God Incarnate, the New Adam.

Hebrews 2:6–8 and its wider context also offer a slight correction to the idea of people in community. Indeed all are created in God's image, and the desire for unity and having a good life in community is commendable. However, the reality of sin affects the desired peace, harmony, and unity. In contrast, because of the Son of Man, the New Adam's sacrificial-victorious mediatorial work on behalf of humanity helps to create a new community, the new people of God. Hebrews 2:10 exclaims that God brings many sons and daughters to himself through his divine Son. Indeed, ATRs consider humanity as a family. Hebrews 2 nuances that by stating men and women in Christ are the new family, the new community that are sanctified by the sanctifier, Jesus. The point here is that genuine humanity, *umuntu*, true people in community with a lasting harmony is only possible if people are associated with the Son of Man, the divine Son, and are sanctified, purified, and brought closer to God. This ideal *umuntu*, this ideal humanity, ATRs are unable to offer to Africans.

In conclusion, ATRs' anthropocentric theism fails to provide a correct conception of humanity because they decenter God and focus on the centrality of humanity. This anthropocentric thought of ATRs in turn soft-pedals the problem of sin and considers the human-to-human relationship as more significant than the divine-to-human relationship. Hebrews 2, verses 6–8 in particular, offers a corrective to ATRs' conception of humanity by centering God as the origin, goal, purpose, and focus of humanity.





*Contrasting  
Anthropologies in  
Christianity and Islam*

Theological and Cultural  
Implications in Central Asia

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This paper offers a comparative study of Christian and Islamic theological anthropologies with particular attention to their implications in Central Asia. Christian traditions, from patristic to contemporary, interpret human dignity through the lens of the *imago dei* and the adoptive sonship of believers, emphasizing restoration, communion, and filial identity before God. Islamic sources—*Qur'ān*, *ḥadīth*, *tafsīr*, *kalām*, *falsafa*, and *taṣawwuf*—frame humanity through categories such as *'ubūdiyya* (servanthood), *kḥilāfa* (vicegerency), *fiṭra* (primordial disposition), and *karāma* (dignity), underscoring moral responsibility, reason, and stewardship under divine sovereignty. While both traditions affirm creation by God and a baseline human worth, they diverge in their dominant metaphors of adoption versus servanthood. Bringing these frameworks into conversation within the post-Soviet religious landscape of Central Asia, where Islamic legacies, Soviet secularism, and emerging Christian communities converge, highlights how theological anthropology shapes discipleship, interreligious perception, and public witness. By situating doctrinal claims alongside pastoral application and lived examples, this study contributes to comparative theology, contextual theology, and the study of religion in Central Asia.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Christian and Islamic theological anthropologies both speak robustly about human worth and vocation, yet they do so with different organizing centers and metaphors. In Central Asia, where Islamic traditions, Soviet secular legacies, and emerging Christian communities intersect, these differences shape how dignity is taught, how moral formation proceeds, and how neighbors understand one another. Christian discourse often leans on *imago dei* and adoptive sonship; Muslim discourse foregrounds *'ubūdiyya* (servanthood), *kḥilāfa* (vicegerency), and a universal human honor (*karāma*) that coexists with moral differentiation by *taqwā* (piety). Admittedly, the temptation is to collapse these frameworks into an easy equivalence or, conversely, to caricature Islam as merely “slave language” and Christianity as merely “beloved language.” Both moves obscure the real convergences (shared belief in God as Creator and a baseline human worth) and the real divergences (filial adoption vs. servanthood/vicegerency as the dominant frame). An unconscious approach could result in pastoral confusion, where catechesis borrows terms without clarifying their theological grammar, public witness sounds needlessly polemical, and Central Asian believers struggle to articulate identity in ways faithful to Christian confession and intelligible in their context.

This study proceeds as a comparative theological inquiry aimed at pastoral clarity. First, it offers a concise, diachronic sketch of Christian anthropology (patristic, medieval, Reformation, and contemporary), highlighting how *imago dei* is construed and how adoption/sonship governs the believer's service to God.<sup>1</sup> Second, it surveys Islamic anthropology across genres, including Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*; classical *tafsīr* and *kalām*, *falsafa*, and *taṣawwuf*; as well as select modern thinkers, to show how *fiṭra*, *rūh*, *'ubūdiyya*, *ḵbilāfa*, *ḵarāma*, and *taqwā* cohere. The comparison is analytic rather than adversarial: it seeks to name each tradition's internal logic in its best light, acknowledge pluralities within both, and avoid false equivalences. A synthesis section then sets the two accounts side by side in a matrix (source of dignity, primary vocation, hierarchy, pedagogical risks), followed by brief Central Asia-facing snapshots that illustrate how language choices and teaching frames concretely affect identity formation and neighbor love. The goal is neither syncretism nor provocation but a fair, disciplined contrast that serves church pedagogy and public engagement.

Thus, Christianity and Islam both affirm God as Creator and locate human worth in divine creation. Christianity grounds universal dignity in the *imago dei* and interprets human vocation within a filial frame, adoption in Christ, that governs and redefines service. Islamic discourse centrally emphasizes *'ubūdiyya* (servanthood) and *ḵbilāfa* (vicegerency), articulating a universal baseline honor (*ḵarāma*) alongside a moral hierarchy ordered by *taqwā*. These differing emphases, filial adoption versus servanthood/vicegerency, yield distinct pedagogies and moral imaginaries that materially shape catechesis, identity, and Christian–Muslim engagement in Central Asia.

This thesis does not deny overlaps (e.g., Christian servanthood language, Islamic stress on divine mercy and human elevation) but argues that the organizing centers differ in ways that matter pastorally. Clarifying those centers allows Christian communities in Central Asia to teach dignity without triumphalism, to speak of service without erasing adoption, and to engage Muslim neighbors with both theological honesty and respect.

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1 In this paper, I use the terms *Allah* and *God* interchangeably for readability, while recognizing the significant theological differences between the Christian and Muslim conceptions of the divine. Christians confess God as Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit—whereas Muslims affirm Allah in strictly unitarian, monolithic terms. This linguistic choice should not be taken as a claim that both faiths worship the same God.

## II. CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

From its beginnings, Christian theology has maintained that *imago dei* is the answer to the question “What is a human?” At the core of this answer resides the belief that humanity is created to reflect God and to share communion with him. Throughout the generations of theologians and centuries, the emphasis has shifted slightly, but the discussions remain around human beings’ dignity, vocation, and restoration in Christ.

Origen (d. 254) distinguished body and soul and speculated about the soul’s preexistence (rejected by the church later). The point of his system was moral-spiritual ascent: through purification, the soul is restored to likeness with God.<sup>2</sup> Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395), extended this trajectory in a more eschatological and ontological register. His idea of *epektasis* (ἐπέκτασις “stretching forward”) describes human destiny as endless progress into God. Because God is infinite, human participation in him can never be exhausted.<sup>3</sup>

Augustine (d. 430) rejected preexistence and insisted on body-soul unity. The image is located in the rational, relational soul ordered to God; sin disorders this harmony, damaging but not erasing the image. Grace heals and reorients humans to God.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) articulated a hylomorphic unity: the soul is the form of the body. The image is chiefly in rational capacities, intellect and will, ordered to knowing and loving God. It is both given and teleological: perfected by participation in God.<sup>5</sup>

Martin Luther (d. 1546) identified the image of God with *original righteousness*—the right relation between humanity and God, in which reason, will, and affections were properly ordered. In The Fall, this righteousness was entirely lost so that humanity became deeply corrupted. While Luther occasionally allowed that vestiges such as reason or memory remain, he insisted that the image in its true sense was destroyed. Restoration comes only through the gift of righteousness in Christ, received by faith, whereby believers are justified and sanctified.<sup>6</sup> In

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2 Origen, *On First Principles I.74*, trans. John Behr (Oxford University Press, 2017), 67.

3 Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses II.225–229*, trans. Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (Paulist Press, 1978), 115–117.

4 Augustine, *De Trinitate* 14.12.15, in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (New City Press, 1991), 394–395.

5 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae I*, q. 93, a. 4, in *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger, 1947).

6 Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* WA 42:85–87, cited in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Fortress, 1966), 159–161.

contrast, John Calvin (d. 1564) understood the image of God as deeply damaged but not annihilated by sin. Human faculties still bear traces of the image, preserving human dignity, though distorted and insufficient for true knowledge of God. Full restoration comes only through union with Christ, who by the Spirit renews believers into conformity with God. This restoration is dynamic and progressive, as the faithful are continually transformed into God's likeness, reflecting his glory.<sup>7</sup>

Modern accounts tend to be relational and Christological. Karl Barth located the image finally in Christ, the true human, and reads human relationality (e.g., male-female, covenant) as analogical to God's self-giving.<sup>8</sup> Ian A. McFarland emphasizes that image is not a list of faculties but a grace-shaped relation grounded in God's freedom.<sup>9</sup> Jürgen Moltmann added an eschatological horizon: humanity's destiny as the community of God's children, anticipating participation in the coming kingdom. The common thread: image as dynamic calling, fulfilled in conformity to Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Two key tensions must be clarified before proceeding further. Regarding trichotomy versus dichotomy: some early voices used body-soul-spirit language, but the mainstream trajectory (Augustine, Aquinas, the Reformers) treats "spirit" as an aspect or function of the soul. The standard view is body-soul unity, not three separable parts. Second, servanthood and adoption. Scripture affirms both: believers are "servants of Christ" yet also "sons and daughters" by adoption (Rom. 8; Gal. 4). The governing metaphor in Christian theology is filial: service is real, but it is service as children who belong to the Father through the Son and in the Spirit.

Thus, Christian theological anthropology presents humans as images of God: dignified by creation, disordered by sin, and restored in Christ. Patristic writers stress ascent and participation, Augustine and Aquinas secure body-soul unity and rational vocation, the Reformers underscore the depth of sin and the necessity of grace, and contemporary theologians recast image in explicitly Christological and relational terms. Taken together, the tradition places adoption/sonship at the center of human vocation. Servanthood is not erased but redefined within a filial

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7 John Calvin, *Institutes* I.15.4, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster, 1960), 190–191.

8 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/1*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (T&T Clark, 1958), 183–191.

9 Ian A. McFarland, *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (Fortress, 2005), 42–44.

10 Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God* (Harper & Row, 1985), 216–220.

frame: redeemed people serve God as beloved children conformed to the image of his Son.

### III. ISLAMIC THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Unlike Christian discourse that often centers on the *imago dei*, Islamic anthropology is organized around a constellation of concepts: *fiṭra*, *rūḥ*, *‘ubūdiyya*, *khilāfa*, *karāma*, *amāna*, *taqwā*, and *taskhīr*. These terms frame humanity as simultaneously dependent upon God, entrusted with responsibility, honored with dignity, and called to moral excellence. At the same time, Islam’s strong emphasis on *tanzīh* (God’s transcendence) sets boundaries on how far human beings can be analogized to the divine.

#### *Qur’ān and Hadīth Foundations*

Several Qur’ānic passages shape the Islamic understanding of human nature:

- **Fiṭra (30:30):** The Qur’ān speaks of the “fiṭrat Allāh” upon which God created humankind. This innate disposition points to a primordial orientation toward monotheism and moral order. Humans are born with an inbuilt capacity to recognize God, even if later obscured by social or cultural conditioning.
- **Rūḥ (15:29):** God is said to have breathed his *rūḥ* into Adam. While interpreted cautiously, lest it imply divine substance entering creation, this verse establishes that human life and dignity are derived directly from God’s creative act. The *rūḥ* is a sign of God’s special bestowal of vitality, consciousness, and moral responsibility.
- **‘Ubūdiyya:** Humanity’s basic identity in the Qur’ān is that of *‘ibād Allāh*, servants of God. Servitude (*‘ubūdiyya*) expresses absolute dependence on the Creator, a reminder that all human endeavors are bounded by submission to divine will.
- **Khilāfa (2:30):** In the story of Adam, God declares his intention to place a *khilāfa* (vicegerent, steward) upon the earth. Humans thus bear responsibility to administer creation responsibly, representing divine will in the terrestrial order.
- **Karāma / Takrīm (17:70):** “We have honored the Children of Adam.” This verse is central to discussions of dignity: all humans are bestowed with a baseline honor, irrespective of piety or status.

- **Amāna (33:72):** The Qur’ān speaks of the “trust” (*amāna*) offered to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, which they refused, but which humanity accepted. This symbolizes the weight of moral responsibility, to live faithfully under God’s command.
- **Taqwā (49:13):** While dignity is universal, superiority is measured by *taqwā*, or reverent God-consciousness. Human hierarchy is not determined by race, class, or tribe, but by moral excellence before God.
- **Taskhīr (45:13):** Creation is “subjugated” (*taskhīr*) for human use, a sign of God’s favor but also a mandate to exercise stewardship responsibly.

A particularly debated hadith states that “God created Adam in his image.” Interpretations vary: some take it literally, others allegorically, and still others see it as an affirmation of human rational and moral faculties without implying divine anthropomorphism. This diversity of reading illustrates Islam’s caution in affirming dignity without collapsing the Creator-creature distinction.

#### IV. CLASSICAL DISCOURSES

**Tafsīr (Qur’ānic Exegesis).** Commentators like al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210), and al-Qurṭubī (d. 1273) elaborated on the above Qur’ānic motifs. Al-Ṭabarī stressed humanity’s privileged status in creation but also its frailty and accountability. Rāzī explored the philosophical implications of *rūḥ* and *fiṭra*, treating human rationality as evidence of God’s honor. Qurṭubī linked *kbilāfa* to legal and political stewardship, grounding Islamic governance in humanity’s divine mandate.<sup>11</sup>

**Kalām (Theological Schools).** The Ash‘arīs and Māturīdīs both affirmed humanity’s servanthood, though they differed on reason and free will. Ash‘arīs stressed divine omnipotence: human acts are “acquired” but created by God. Māturīdīs allowed for greater human agency, seeing moral responsibility as real and compatible with divine sovereignty. Both traditions agreed that humanity’s dignity derives from God’s creative will, not innate autonomy.<sup>12</sup>

11 *The History of al-Ṭabarī, vol. 1: General Introduction and From the Creation to the Flood*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (SUNY Press, 1989), 261–265 (discussion of Adam as khalifa and angels’ objection). Tariq Jaffer, *Razi: Master of Qur’anic Interpretation and Theological Reasoning* (Oxford University Press, 2015). Aisha Bewley, *Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī* vol. 1 (Dar al-Taḳwa, 2003), 223–228.

12 Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, trans. Rodrigo Adem (Brill, 2014). 279–293.

Falsafa (Islamic Philosophy). Thinkers such as Avicenna Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037) and Averroes Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) engaged Aristotelian categories. Avicenna described the human soul as immaterial and immortal, with knowledge of universals orienting it toward the divine. Averroes emphasized rational capacity as humanity’s highest function, aligning human fulfillment with the exercise of reason. Both philosophers contributed a naturalized account of human excellence, which, while controversial among theologians, enriched Islamic understandings of human vocation.<sup>13</sup>

**Sufism (Mysticism).** Mystical thinkers like al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) placed greater emphasis on the experiential journey of the soul. For al-Ghazālī, the human heart is a mirror that must be polished to reflect divine light. Ibn ‘Arabī’s doctrine of the *insān kāmil* (Perfect Human) identified the perfected saint as a mirror of divine attributes and a microcosm of the cosmos. This mystical anthropology emphasizes transformation: humans are not merely servants but potential loci of divine manifestation—though always within the bounds of God’s transcendence.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Modern and Contemporary Voices*

In the modern era, Islamic anthropology has been reinterpreted in light of colonialism, modernity, and global pluralism.

For instance, Muhammad Iqbal portrayed human beings as dynamic and creative, endowed with agency to participate in shaping history. In *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, he wrote that “God becomes a co-worker with [man], provided man takes the initiative.” His poetic philosophy of *khudī* (*The Secrets of the Self*) emphasized self-realization under God, presenting a heroic anthropology of vitality and responsibility.<sup>15</sup> In a similar manner, Fazlur Rahman interpreted the Qur’ān ethically, stressing humanity’s innate moral responsibility before God. In *Major Themes of the Qur’ān*, he developed this through the *amāna* (trust), the primordial covenant, and *taqwā* as a comprehensive orientation toward justice and moral accountability.<sup>16</sup>

13 Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (Brill, 2014), 214–229. Averroes, *The Incoherence of the Incoherence vol. 1*, trans. Simon van den Bergh (Luzac, 1954), 292–305.

14 al-Ghazālī, *The Marvels of the Heart: Book XXI of the Revival of the Religious Sciences*, trans. Walter James Skellie (Fons Vitae, 2010), 43–55.

15 Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Oxford University Press, 1934), 20.

16 Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’ān*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 12–23.

Islamic studies scholars often pose ethics and human dignity as the core issues of anthropology. Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd approached the Qur'ān as a dynamic discourse, shaped by and responsive to context. His hermeneutics emphasized the evolving dimensions of meaning and their implications for affirming human dignity.<sup>17</sup> Talal Asad analyzed Islam anthropologically as a discursive tradition. In *Genealogies of Religion and his essay* "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," he examined how ritual and discipline shape particular kinds of embodied and ethical subjects.<sup>18</sup>

Seyyed Hossein Nasr instead emphasized a sacred cosmology in which humans are custodians and guardians of the natural order. In *Man and Nature*, he criticized the modern secular worldview for reducing humanity's metaphysical dignity and for usurping the sacred responsibility of stewardship.<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, Mohammed Arkoun sought to reopen Islamic thought through critical reason. In works such as *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, he argued against dogmatic closure and treated anthropology as a key site for renewing Islamic intellectual life.<sup>20</sup>

Anthropological inquiries in Islamic studies do not avoid the issue of women's dignity. And Saba Mahmood showed in *Politics of Piety* how practices of female piety within the Islamic revival movement cultivate embodied forms of selfhood. Her analysis challenged liberal assumptions that equate agency with autonomy or resistance.<sup>21</sup>

Charles Hirschkind studied the role of listening practices in shaping moral dispositions. In *The Ethical Soundscape* and related essays, he demonstrated how the circulation of cassette sermons in Egypt created embodied modes of ethical attention and pious sensibility.<sup>22</sup> Shahab Ahmed broadened the scope of Islamic anthropology in *What Is Islam?* by tracing how law, philosophy, poetry, art, and even practices like wine drinking together constitute Islam. He argued that "what it means to be human" in Islamic thought is mediated by multiple, sometimes

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17 Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, *Critique of Religious Discourse*, trans. Jonathan Wright (Yale University Press, 2018), 8–13.

18 Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," *Occasional Papers Series* (Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 14.

19 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (George Allen & Unwin, 1968), 25.

20 Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (Saqi Books, 2002), 1–15.

21 Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 1–2.

22 Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (Columbia University Press, 2006), 2.

contradictory, but authoritative discourses.<sup>23</sup>

In sum, Islamic theological anthropology portrays humanity as both exalted and limited. Humans are *'ibād Allāb* (servants of God) who acknowledge dependence on the Creator, and *khulafā'* (viceregents) entrusted with moral and ecological stewardship. Every person shares a baseline dignity (*karāma*) by virtue of creation, yet the Qur'ān insists that true excellence is measured by taqwā. The acceptance of the amāna symbolizes humanity's heavy responsibility, while taskhīr reminds them that creation is a trust, not a possession.

Across *tafsīr*, *kalām*, *falsafa*, and Sufism, diverse emphases emerge. Exegetes highlight divine mandate. Theologians stress servanthood and accountability. Philosophers prize reason and immortality. Mystics envision transformation into the *insān kāmil*. Modern voices continue this plurality, reframing anthropology in light of ethics, politics, and global modernity.

A unifying thread is the emphasis on *tanzīb*, God's absolute transcendence. Even when affirming human honor or perfection, Islamic thought resists collapsing the gap between Creator and creature. Humanity's dignity is real but derivative, always pointing back to God. Thus, Islamic anthropology combines universal honor, hierarchical morality, and radical divine otherness, forming a complex yet coherent account of what it means to be human.

### *Comparative Synthesis*

The preceding sections have traced the major lines of Christian and Islamic theological anthropology. Each tradition affirms the special place of humanity in creation, yet they organize the meaning of human dignity and vocation around different metaphors and theological priorities. Christianity pivots on the *imago dei* and adoption in Christ, while Islam emphasizes *'ubūdiyya* (servanthood), *khilāfa* (vicegerency), and the universal honor (*karāma*) of the children of Adam. The following synthesis highlights key points of convergence and divergence, clarifies potential misunderstandings, and draws out implications for pedagogy in Central Asia.

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23 Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 3–7, 405.

**Comparative Matrix**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Christianity</b>	<b>Islam</b>	<b>Observations</b>
<b>Source of Dignity</b>	<i>Imago dei</i> humanity created to reflect God, intensified in adoption through Christ.	<i>Karāma</i> (17:70): baseline honor for all humans, linked to creation, <i>fiṭra</i> , and <i>rūh</i> .	Both affirm universal dignity; Christianity grounds it in imaging and adoption, Islam in divine honor and disposition.
<b>Primary Vocation</b>	Adoption and sonship: humans called to live as God’s children; servanthood real but governed by filial frame.	Servanthood ( <i>‘ubūdiyya</i> ) and vicegerency ( <i>ḵbilāfa</i> ): humans are God’s servants and stewards of creation.	Different metaphors frame similar themes: relationship to God (children vs. servants) and responsibility toward creation.
<b>Hierarchy</b>	No intrinsic hierarchy in dignity; all share equally in image. Distinction arises only by grace and sanctification, not by nature.	Hierarchy by <i>taqwā</i> (49:13). Baseline dignity is equal, but moral rank depends on reverence and obedience.	Both reject hierarchy of race, class, or tribe. Islam articulates moral gradation more explicitly.
<b>Anthropological Risks</b>	Legalism: overemphasizing works and forgetting grace; also presumption of worth without sanctification.	Fatalism or over-submission: reducing humanity to servility without recognizing honor; or pride in <i>taqwā</i> as merit.	Each tradition risks distortion when the organizing metaphor is isolated from its balancing truths.
<b>Pedagogical implications</b>	Identity in Christ: teaching focuses on new creation, adoption, participation in Christ. Emphasis on belonging.	Obedience and submission: teaching stresses responsibility, accountability, discipline, and stewardship.	Pedagogy differs in tone and aim: assurance of belonging vs. summons to submission. Both necessary for holistic formation.

### *Convergences and Divergences*

Despite differences of imagery, both traditions affirm several common points. First, human dignity is universal and not tied to ethnicity, class, or gender. Christianity insists that all bear the *imago dei*; Islam emphasizes God's honoring of all the children of Adam. Second, both stress vocation as relational: humans exist not autonomously but in orientation to God, whether as adopted children or as devoted servants. Third, each envisions responsibility toward creation: Christian theology frames this as stewardship within sonship, while Islam highlights *khalāfa* and *taskbīr*. These convergences provide a basis for respectful dialogue and shared concern for justice and ecological care.

The divergences lie primarily in the organizing metaphors. Christianity elevates adoption and sonship as the governing identity of believers. Servanthood remains, but it is reinterpreted within a filial frame: believers serve God not as outsiders but as beloved children incorporated into Christ. Islam, by contrast, insists that servanthood is humanity's essential identity. While stewardship and honor enrich this picture, the language of *'ubūdiyya* is central and unqualified. Sonship metaphors are excluded due to strict *tawhīd* and the Qur'ān's rejection of divine filiation.

Hierarchy also plays out differently. Christianity resists gradations in dignity: all bear the image equally, and sanctification is by grace rather than measurable rank. Islam, while affirming equal baseline honor, explicitly states that the noblest are those with greatest *taqwā*. This moral hierarchy shapes Muslim ethics, where piety marks real distinction.

## **V. ANTHROPOLOGICAL RISKS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Every anthropology carries risks if its central metaphor is overstressed. Christianity risks legalism when sanctification is reduced to moral performance rather than filial grace. Equally, it risks presumption if adoption is taught without the call to holy living. Islam risks servile reduction when *'ubūdiyya* is preached apart from the Qur'ān's insistence on honor and stewardship, leading to fatalism or passivity. Conversely, it risks moral pride if *taqwā* becomes a badge of superiority rather than humble reverence. These risks show why internal balances, grace alongside obedience, and honor alongside submission are essential.

For Christian pedagogy in Central Asia, the difference of organizing centers matters. Many Muslim neighbors grow up hearing that human worth is conditional, measured by obedience, and framed in servanthood language. When Christians present the gospel, emphasis on adoption can either resonate deeply (as an unheard note of intimacy with God) or offend (as language seemingly violating divine transcendence). Effective teaching therefore requires clarity: adoption does not mean physical sonship but relational participation through Christ, in continuity with God's holiness.

At the same time, Christians should not neglect the reality of service. Scripture calls believers *douloi* (slaves/servants) of Christ; however, that service is governed by adoption. Teaching in Central Asia can therefore acknowledge the shared value of obedience while offering the distinctive Christian note: obedience flows from belonging, not as a condition to earn dignity.

## VI. BALANCE AND ORGANIZING CENTERS

The balance between convergence and divergence is crucial. Christianity also speaks of servanthood, but it is framed by filial identity. Islam also affirms mercy and honor, but servanthood remains the core metaphor. The real difference lies not in whether humans are dignified, responsible, or accountable (both affirm this) but in how these truths are organized. Christianity organizes them under the metaphor of sonship; Islam organizes them under the metaphor of servanthood.

Recognizing these organizing centers avoids caricature. It prevents Christians from dismissing Islam as merely a "religion of slaves," while also protecting Muslims from assuming that Christianity teaches unconditioned license under divine fatherhood. Instead, each can be understood on its own terms, with its strengths and its internal tensions.

Thus, Christianity and Islam articulate strikingly different yet partially overlapping visions of humanity. Both affirm universal dignity, both call for moral responsibility, and both guard against hierarchy of race or tribe. Christianity, however, locates dignity in imaging God and vocation in adoption, with service interpreted through filial belonging. Islam locates dignity in God's bestowal of honor and vocation in servanthood and stewardship, with moral hierarchy structured by *taqwā*.

These distinctions are not mere semantics; they shape how identity, morality, and

pedagogy unfold in lived communities. For Central Asian Christians, awareness of these differences helps in presenting the gospel faithfully and sensitively. The comparative framework clarifies both common ground and genuine divergence, equipping Christian communities to teach dignity without triumphalism, obedience without servility, and adoption without presumption.

## VII. CENTRAL ASIAN IMPLICATIONS

The comparative synthesis of Christian and Islamic anthropologies takes on particular significance in Central Asia, a region where Islam has deep historical roots, Soviet secularism left enduring marks, and Christian communities now navigate a plural religious landscape. Scholars such as Adeb Khalid (*Islam after Communism*), Devin DeWeese (*Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde*), Bruce Privratsky (*Muslim Turkistan*), and Heathershaw & Montgomery (*The Politics of Muslim Identities in Central Asia*) remind us that Central Asian religious life is neither monolithic nor static.<sup>24</sup> It is marked by contestation, negotiation, and adaptation across centuries. Within this shifting context, how theological anthropology is taught and embodied shapes not only Christian discipleship but also interreligious relations and public perceptions.

### *Vignettes of Practice*

First, language of “slave” versus “children.” In Kazakh and Russian discipleship settings, translation choices are deeply consequential. The Qur’ānic language of *‘abd* (“slave/servant”) has long permeated Central Asian Muslim vocabulary, reinforced by cultural categories such as *gul* (“slave”) in Kazakh. Yet this term carries strong overtones of subordination and social humiliation in everyday speech. When Christians translate biblical servanthood passages using *gul*, it often jars or offends hearers. By contrast, the biblical emphasis on believers as “children” (*balalar*) of God resonates more positively, aligning with cultural values that prize kinship and belonging. Pedagogically, emphasizing adoption as sons and daughters provides a constructive counternarrative to servile metaphors, while still acknowledging service as part of filial obedience.

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24 Adeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (University of California Press, 2007). Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994). Bruce G. Privratsky, *Muslim Turkistan: Kazak Religion and Collective Memory* (Curzon Press, 2001). John Heathershaw and David W. Montgomery, *The Politics of Muslim Identities in Central Asia: Islam, Ethnicity, and the State* (Routledge, 2014).

Second, converts negotiate dignity. First-generation believers often describe their journey in terms of dignity and identity. Raised with the Islamic affirmation that all humans share *ḥarāma* and *fiṭra*, they nevertheless experience social marginalization as converts, sometimes accused of betraying heritage or kin. In small group Bible studies, teaching on the *imago dei* offers them a framework to affirm their worth apart from communal rejection. They interpret being “image bearers” and “adopted children” as both theological truths and coping mechanisms in the face of stigma. This shows the power of anthropology not merely as doctrine but as a living resource for negotiating contested identities.

Third, resistance to sonship language. At the same time, the metaphor of divine sonship can provoke resistance. Muslim neighbors, aware of the *Qurʾān*’s polemics against attributing offspring to God, sometimes hear Christian talk of adoption as blasphemous or confused with biological procreation. In catechesis, this tension surfaces: new believers wrestle with explaining sonship in ways that avoid suggesting God has literal children. Teachers who fail to clarify adoption’s metaphorical and forensic sense risk reinforcing misunderstanding. Those who carefully contrast adoption with physical sonship, however, often find the metaphor becomes a bridge, offering intimacy with God without compromising divine transcendence.

#### *Risks and Benefits*

The risks are real. Careless use of “slave” language risks alienating Muslim neighbors by reinforcing servility rather than emphasizing shared dignity. Overemphasis on sonship without clarification risks theological misunderstanding and public backlash. Central Asian Christians are aware that language shapes not only doctrinal precision but also communal trust.

Yet the benefits are equally striking. Offering adoption and sonship as the governing metaphor provides a distinctive Christian anthropology that speaks into Central Asian contexts of fractured identity, post-Soviet dislocation, and enduring questions of belonging. It affirms worth beyond performance, invites intimacy with God, and reframes service not as humiliation but as filial obedience.

#### *Implications for Formation*

Theological anthropology is not an abstract doctrine alone; it shapes the lived experience of believers and communities. In Central Asia, where Muslims and Christians often share family ties, neighborhoods, and cultural practices, the

metaphors through which faith is taught carry extraordinary weight. For this reason, clarifying the distinctives of Christian anthropology, while showing respect for Islamic categories, is essential for healthy formation. Three areas of application stand out: teaching, worship, and pedagogy.

One of the most practical areas of formation is how teachers present biblical identity. In Muslim-majority contexts, the Qur'anic category of *'abd Allāh* ("servant of God") is familiar and often taken as the primary way to describe human beings. Christians can affirm the truth in this, that humanity exists to serve God, while also introducing the biblical theme of adoption. Teaching modules can contrast "slave" and "son" not as mutually exclusive identities but as different kinds of relationship. Christians do serve God, but they do so as sons and daughters, not outsiders. Eden imagery reinforces this: in Christ, the fellowship broken by sin is restored, so humanity returns not as mere servants at the edge of the garden but as children welcomed into communion with the Father.

*Worship and Liturgy: Metaphors that Shape Prayer*

Worship practices inevitably reinforce anthropology. If prayers continually stress only human servitude, believers may come to see themselves solely in terms of duty and submission. By including language of sonship, adoption, and friendship with God, liturgy shapes a different posture—confidence, intimacy, and gratitude. Central Asian worship can integrate both aspects. Hymns, prayers, and testimonies may highlight obedience as an expression of filial love rather than fearful slavery. For example, prayers that begin with "Heavenly Father, we thank you that you call us your children" provide a counterbalance to culturally dominant metaphors of subordination. Over time, these practices embed a sense of dignity that transforms how believers approach both God and neighbor.

*Pedagogy: Local Articulations of Faith*

Finally, formation requires attention to pedagogy: how the faith is explained in ways that resonate with Central Asian categories without simply importing foreign terms. Western theological vocabulary may not communicate well, and unexamined translations can distort meaning. Teachers must attend carefully to language, choosing, for example, *balalar* ("children") rather than *qul* ("slave") when speaking of believers' identity, or clarifying the metaphorical sense of adoption to avoid charges of blasphemy. Pedagogy should encourage local believers to articulate faith in their own idioms, drawing on proverbs, poetry, and kinship imagery familiar in Central Asian cultures. In this way, Christian

anthropology becomes not an imported abstraction but a lived, contextualized confession.

Implications for formation are clear: (1) in teaching, highlight adoption as the governing frame, with servanthood reinterpreted within it; (2) in worship, employ metaphors that cultivate intimacy and dignity rather than servility alone; and (3) in pedagogy, equip Central Asian Christians to articulate identity in Christ using their own cultural resources. By doing so, the church not only preserves doctrinal clarity but also offers a compelling witness to neighbors—presenting Christianity not as a rejection of cultural identity but as its fulfillment in restored fellowship with God.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

Christianity and Islam both affirm God as Creator and grant humanity a special place in the order of things. Christianity grounds dignity in the *imago dei* and frames vocation through adoption and sonship in Christ, while Islam emphasizes *'ubūdiyya* (servanthood) and *khilāfa* (vicegerency), affirming universal *karāma* yet ordering human distinction by *taqwā*. The difference lies less in whether humans are dignified or responsible, and more in the organizing metaphor that governs identity.

This study contributes by setting Christian and Islamic anthropologies side by side, clarifying both commonalities and divergences, and then pressing these insights into the lived realities of Central Asia. By drawing on regional scholarship and practical vignettes, it shows how translation choices, teaching frames, and worship language concretely affect discipleship and interreligious engagement.

Future work should test these claims more fully: through fieldwork that captures the voices of Central Asian believers, dialogue with Muslim scholars who can articulate their own tradition's anthropology, and practical experimentation with pedagogical models that present adoption without presumption and servanthood without servility. Such work would deepen understanding and strengthen the witness of Christian communities in contexts where anthropology is not an abstract question but a lived identity.





*Wisdom and  
Concurrentism*

The Problem of Divine and Human  
Agency in the Book of Proverbs

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In the history of OT wisdom scholarship, a typical view on the relationship between divine and human agency in the book of Proverbs can be summed up by the following dictum: Whenever humans act, God does not act; otherwise, it would not be considered genuine human actions.<sup>1</sup> In other words, human and divine agency are perceived as inimical or competitive.

On the one hand, scholars attribute to proverbial wisdom a fundamental belief in the human ability to exercise mastery over creation independent of divine influence. For example, Walther Zimmerli, whom Stuart Weeks called the “fairy godparent” who ushered wisdom literature into the ball of OT scholarship in the mid-to-late twentieth century,<sup>2</sup> contends that wisdom is essentially an anthropocentric and eudemonistic enterprise in which humanity’s dependence on God “plays no role at all at the point of origin ... of self-understanding.”<sup>3</sup> In the same vein, Walter Brueggemann asserts that the worldview of the wisdom literature advocates a trust in human potential to master the world, since wisdom accentuates the authority of human experience over and against any appeal to divine authority and exalts the importance of human responsibility within a creation order bereft of divine intervention.<sup>4</sup> OT wisdom fills the lacuna of biblical faith with an optimistic and exalted view of human nature, since wisdom portrays humanity as both the “trusted creature” and the “enthroned creature.”<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, if human beings are indeed the crown of creation, then the crowning of human agency necessarily leads to a frowning upon divine agency.

On the other hand, other scholars construe OT wisdom as shifting from an anthropocentric to a theocentric focus. According to J. Coert Rylaarsdam, the early form of Israelite wisdom is secular, focused on human affairs, and optimistic about the human ability to grasp and navigate reality.<sup>6</sup> Late Israelite wisdom, however, is marked by a theocentric focus on divine initiative and grace, with an attendant skepticism and despair toward humanistic wisdom. Thus, late

1 Christopher J. Insole, *The Intolerable God: Kant’s Theological Journey* (W. B. Eerdmans, 2016), 126.

2 Stuart Weeks, “The Place and Limits of Wisdom Revisited,” in *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Jarick, LHBOTS (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 3.

3 Walther Zimmerli, “Concerning the Structure of Old Testament Wisdom,” in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. James L. Crenshaw, Library of Biblical Studies (Ktav, 1976), 178. Zimmerli restates his point of contention like this: “Does the ‘central question’ of wisdom grow up out of knowledge and recognition of a fixed, binding obligation—above the question arose concerning the broadest tie of creature to Creator—whose realization in practical conduct is now in question? Or, is the contention right that it is a question which originates with the individual person, ultimately being oriented around him alone?”

4 Walter Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust: The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* (John Knox, 1972), 18–23.

5 Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust*, 24.

6 John Coert Rylaarsdam, *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 1946), 67.

wisdom aims to foster one's trust in God, not human ability.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, form-critical approaches hypothesized that the proverbial materials evolved from an older collection of pithy, secular sayings to include longer theological wisdom in the later stage. There appears to be some form of Yahwistic reinterpretation of early secular sayings within Proverbs, which was intended as a theological corrective against the humanistic strand of Israelite wisdom.<sup>8</sup> The net result of such a developmental view is to relegate human agency to a lower rung of Israel's wisdom. God's agency can only come to the fore when human agency recedes to the background.

Whether one prioritizes human or divine agency in proverbial wisdom, it is clear that both agencies are perceived as incompatible. Even the mediating position of Gerhard von Rad's dialectical approach to the divine-human relationship could not wrest one from viewing both agencies as essentially incompatible.<sup>9</sup> In this paper, I will argue for a concurrentist account of divine and human agency based on Proverbs' theology of creation.

Concurrentism differs from both deism and occasionalism. For the deist, human agency is genuine only when the divine recedes to non-interventionism. For the occasionalist, divine agency is genuine only when human agency is reduced to a mere proxy for divine agency. Concurrentism, however, affirms divine and human agencies cooperatively produce effects, with both wholly, not partially, contributing according to their distinct natures.<sup>10</sup> Concurrentism, then, hinges on a particular understanding of creation theology in which God, the creator, plays a central role in the creation of human agents.

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7 Rylaarsdam, *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature*, 76–93.

8 William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach*, OTL (Westminster, 1985), 10–22; R. N. Whybray, "Yahweh-Sayings and Their Contexts in Prov. 10, 1–22,16," in *Wisdom: The Collected Articles of Norman Whybray*, ed. Katharine J. Dell and Margaret Barker, *Society for Old Testament Study Monograph Series* (Routledge, 2016), 45–57. See also, R. B. Y. Scott, "Wise and Foolish, Righteous and Wicked," in *Studies in the Religion of Ancient Israel*, ed. G. W. Anderson et al., VTSup 23 (Brill, 1972), 146–165.

9 Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, translated by James D. Martin (Abingdon Press, 1972), 63. According to Gerhard von Rad there are two means of knowledge in Proverbs: (1) that which is gained from direct divine intervention (late wisdom) and (2) that which is gained from the sages' appropriation of the created order through a presupposed theological lens of YHWH's sovereignty over all human experience in creation. Von Rad, however, sets up the two ways of knowledge in a dialectical fashion in which the sages vacillate between the two ways without ever coming to a fixed point of resolution. Cf. A. Josef Greig, "Some Formative Aspects in the Development of Gerhard von Rad's Idea of History," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 16 (1978): 323.

10 The concept of concurrentism has precedence in Jewish compatibilists' account of fate and human freedom. According to Josephus, the Pharisees "ascribe all to fate [or providence], and to God, and yet allow that to act what is right, or the contrary, is principally in the power of men, although fate does cooperate in every action." Josephus, *War* 2.162–163 (Whiston). For further discussion on Josephus and Ancient Judaism's view of compatibilism, see Jonathan Klawans, *Josephus and the Theologies of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 44–91.

## I. CREATION THEOLOGY OR CREATOR'S THEOLOGY?

Walther Zimmerli coined his famous adage: “Wisdom thinks resolutely within the framework of a theology of creation.”<sup>11</sup> However, Zimmerli’s theology of creation functions primarily as a warrant for anthropocentric-eudemonistic wisdom bereft of divine influence in support of human autonomy.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Klaus Koch promoted a mechanistic act-consequence nexus within the creation order of Proverbs in which divine agency is limited to the initial act of creation.<sup>13</sup> This concept of creation order paves the way for the scholarly tendency to introduce what Roland Murphy calls a “buffer zone of order [that] comes between the sage and the Lord.”<sup>14</sup> Hence, even if the divine agency is acknowledged as having a place in proverbial wisdom, that agency is perceived as limited to the initial stage of creation. Specifically, the notion of divine intervention is denied. Creation theology, thus construed, renders creation (and its order) as the subject and relegates the creator to the periphery.<sup>15</sup>

In reassessing the nature of creation theology in Proverbs, Stuart Weeks saliently states that “it is problematic to speak of a ‘creation theology’ in wisdom literature; it is much less difficult to speak of a ‘creator theology...which is intrinsic to its character.”<sup>16</sup> Several scholars have strongly criticized the Kochian notion of a mechanistic creation order for marginalizing YHWH’s agency.<sup>17</sup> Notably, Lennart

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11 Walther Zimmerli, “The Place and Limit of Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament Theology,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 17, no. 2 (1964): 148.

12 Accordingly, a theology of creation represents wisdom as a sapiential mastery of the world, a mastery that entails the innate human ability to give order to the world through knowledge. This construal of human agency allows Zimmerli to account for what he deemed the anthropocentric focus on human interest (eudemonism) in the book of Proverbs. For Zimmerli, any God-talk in the book of Proverbs is merely “God... seen from man’s viewpoint.”

13 Klaus Koch, “Gibt Es Ein Vergeltungsdogma Im Alten Testament?” *ZTK* 52, no. 1 (1955): 1–42. English translation: Klaus Koch, “Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament?” in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, ed. James L. Crenshaw, Issues in Religion and Theology (Fortress Press, 1983).

14 Roland E. Murphy, “Religious Dimensions of Israelite Wisdom,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, ed. Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride (Fortress Press, 1987), 138.

15 According to Murphy, Koch’s conception of order places God “outside of this ‘order’ making him unnecessary.” Roland E. Murphy, “Wisdom and Yahwism,” in *No Famine in the Land: Studies in Honor of John L. McKenzie*, ed. James W. Flanagan and Anita W. Robinson (Scholars Press, 1975), 121–122.

16 Stuart Weeks, *An Introduction to the Study of Wisdom Literature*, T&T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies (T&T Clark, 2010), 119.

17 For example, Fox argues against any appeal to Egyptian Ma’at as a support for an impersonal notion of order in Proverbs. Michael V. Fox, “World Order and Maat: A Crooked Parallel,” *JANESCU* 23 (1995): 37–48. Lennart Boström’s critique of the Kochian notion of creation order includes challenging Koch’s idea that there is no concept of divine retribution in Proverbs and contending that Proverbs does not connect actions with consequences but a character with consequences. See Lennart Boström, *The God of the Sages: The Portrayal of God in the Book of Proverbs*, Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series (Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1990). Boström aims to contend against a deistic tendency in the Kochian order-thinking. He considers problematic the kind of order-thinking that “countenances a kind of deism in which justice and order are inherent in the structure of the world, rendering God’s continued involvement redundant.”

Boström rightly contends that agency (both human and divine) and responsibility rather than a mechanistic function of impersonal forces is the basis of Proverb's view of causality. Furthermore, Zoltán Schwáb argues that Proverbs is not so much creation-centric or anthropocentric as it is theocentric. From Proverbs 2:1–5, he points out that Proverbs surprisingly projects the fear and knowledge of God as the result of pursuing wisdom.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, when Proverbs asserts that the fear and knowledge of God is the *telos* of the pursuit of wisdom, God is made “the highest end in Proverbs.”<sup>19</sup> Schwáb's exegesis comports with the explicit claims of Proverbs 1:7 and 9:10 that wisdom is founded on the fear of the YHWH. Thus, YHWH stands at both the beginning and end of wisdom. In short, it is warranted that we begin our investigation of the theology of creation in Proverbs in terms of a creator-creation relationship.

### II. YHWH'S TRANSCENDENCE AND UNLIMITED AGENCY AS CREATOR IN PROVERBS

The concept of God (*Gottesbild*) in Proverbs as the transcendent and sovereign Creator undergirds its view of an unlimited divine agency. Johannes Fichtner and Boström underscore YHWH as both the world's creator and sovereign regent.<sup>20</sup> Fichtner speaks of divine transcendence as “self-evidently presumed” (*selbstverständlich vorausgesetzt*), since it serves as the basis for divine retribution and justice in Proverbs.<sup>21</sup>

It is noteworthy that references to YHWH as the Creator are ensconced within two passages that exalt wisdom (Prov. 3:13–20; 8:1–36). The abrupt shift of focus from wisdom's self-predication to YHWH in 3:19 and 8:22 (both verses transit “fronting” YHWH at the initial position of the sentence) suggests the primacy of the Creator over wisdom. Wisdom's exalted status in creation has resulted in hypotheses that Lady Wisdom is also a deity of some sort.<sup>22</sup> However, while

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Boström, 137.

18 Fox acknowledges that “the combination of fear and knowledge is the apex of *hokmah*, ‘the highest degree of wisdom and Torah,’ in Ibn Yahyah's words.” Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB, vol. 18A (Doubleday, 2000), 112.

19 As Schwáb has argued against those who perceive wisdom as eudaemonistic. See Zoltán S. Schwáb, *Toward an Interpretation of the Book of Proverbs: Selfishness and Secularity Reconsidered*, JTISup (Eisenbrauns, 2013), 128–159.

20 Johannes Fichtner, *Die altorientalische Weisheit in ihrer israelitisch-jüdischen Ausprägung: Eine Studie zur Nationalisierung der Weisheit in Israel*, BZAW 62 (1933; repr., Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 105–117.

21 Fichtner, *Die altorientalische Weisheit*, 105.

22 See Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs, Bible and Literature* (Almond, 1985), 23–68; Alice M. Sinnott, *The Personification of Wisdom* (2005; repr., Routledge, 2017), 10–52.

personified wisdom was co-present with YHWH during creation (Prov. 8:27–30), the text is clear that YHWH alone is the creator of all things. As Creator, YHWH stands outside of creation. Claus Westermann explains, “All being, like all that exists, is created; was God an *ens (being)*, even the highest, then he would be created, not Creator. Where being and existence are no longer identical with being created, God is no longer the Creator as the Bible understands this word.”<sup>23</sup>

That Proverbs appears to eschew anthropomorphic depictions of God, especially in the creation accounts (Prov. 3 and 8), further underscores the transcendence of God.<sup>24</sup> As Creator, YHWH transcends all creaturely categories. Though the characteristics of divine sovereignty, transcendence, omnipotence, and omniscience are not unique to Israelite wisdom but are also present in Egyptian wisdom,<sup>25</sup> the monotheism of Yahwistic faith provides the basis for the radical transcendence of YHWH.<sup>26</sup> Regardless of whether the term “monotheism” is appropriate to describe Yahwism,<sup>27</sup> YHWH alone is perceived as the “wholly other” in the worldview of Proverbs. As Yehezkel Kaufmann has argued, the uniqueness of Israel’s monotheism is not so much “the concept of God as Creator, eternal, benign, or even all-powerful,” since these are common notions found in other ancient religions, but that YHWH is “the source of all being, not subject to a cosmic order, and not emergent from a pre-existent realm; a god free of the limitations of magic and mythology.”<sup>28,29</sup> YHWH is the “wholly other,” the one distinct from his creation.<sup>29</sup>

23 Claus Westermann, “Creation and History in the Old Testament,” in *The Gospel and Human Destiny*, ed. Vilmos Vajta, *Gospel Encounters History Series* (Augsburg Press, 1971), 22.

24 Fichtner, *Die altorientalische Weisheit*, 105. Cf. Boström, *God of the Sages*, 145 and 154. While Proverbs appears to eschew anthropomorphisms, especially when one compares the creation accounts of Gen. 1 and Prov. 8:22–31, the book is not without anthropomorphism (e.g., Prov. 2:6; 22:12).

25 Boström, *God of the Sages*, 190–191; Fichtner, *Die altorientalische Weisheit*, 115–116.

26 Hans Heinrich Schmid’s contention that monotheism is not unique to Israel has been challenged by a number of scholars. Notably, Schmid’s equivocation of polytheism with the introduction of wisdom’s hypostasis in a time when God appears distant from Israel stems from the ambiguity of the term “hypostasis” and his blurring of the lines between polytheism and monotheism. See Hans Heinrich Schmid, *Wesen und Geschichte der Weisheit: eine Untersuchung zur altorientalischen und israelitischen Weisheitsliteratur* (Töpelmann, 1966), 148, 154–155; See Franz-Josef Steiert’s critique of Schmid’s understanding of the “monotheistic elements” of Egyptian wisdom. Franz-Josef Steiert, *Die Weisheit Israels—ein Fremdkörper im Alten Testament? eine Untersuchung zum Buch der Sprüche auf dem Hintergrund der ägyptischen Weisheitslehren*, Freiburger theologische Studien 143 (Herder, 1990), 64–66.

27 For a discussion on the problem of “monotheism” in Israel’s religion, see Richard Bauckham, “Biblical Theology and the Problems of Monotheism,” in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Craig Bartholomew, Mary Healy, Karl Möller, and Robin Parry (Zondervan, 2004), 187–232.

28 Yehezkel Kaufmann, *Religion of Israel: From Its Beginnings to Babylonian Exile*, trans. Moshe Greenberg (University of Chicago, 1960), 29.

29 As Westermann notes, the differentiation between the one Creator and creation is fundamental to Israel’s creation theology as well as her neighbor’s: “Die Besonderheit besteht nicht darin, daß eine bestimmte Darstellungsweise der Schöpfung die allein biblische wäre, sondern einzig darin, daß der Schöpfer einer, alles andere aber Geschöpf ist.” Westermann, “Schöpfer und Schöpfung,” 242.

*Divine Omniscience and Agency*

While Proverbs 3 and 8 emphasize YHWH as the Creator of the world, in the sentence literature of Proverbs 10–29, the accent falls on YHWH as the Creator of humanity (Prov. 14:31; 17:5; 22:2).<sup>30</sup> In these passages, divine transcendence is manifest in YHWH's total awareness of human affairs. Divine omniscience transcends space and time. "For before the eyes of YHWH are the ways of a man, and all his paths he is evaluating [*mefalles*]" (5:21). "In every place are the eyes of YHWH, keeping watch of the evil and the good" (15:3). The human heart is laid bare before YHWH's scrutinizing omniscience (15:11), and his assessment is more accurate than the self-evaluation of humans (16:2; 21:2). Divine omniscience, then, is the basis for divine retribution—God's righteous intervention into the affairs of the human world. That YHWH can perceive and evaluate the human heart ensures that he can and will recompense (*beshiv*) each one according to his work (24:12).<sup>31</sup> Divine omniscience also safeguards knowledge (*da'ath*) by subverting (*waysallef*) the words of the treacherous (22:12).<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, although divine transcendence is stated without any contrast to or comparison with human beings in individual passages, we can observe the differences between the limits of human agency and the boundlessness of divine agency.<sup>33</sup> Humans can mistakenly evaluate their own paths (Prov. 14:12) and their own hearts (16:2; 20:9; 21:2), but YHWH's knowledge of everything human is in-depth and precise (5:21; 15:3, 11). Human planning, while valid and necessary, is nevertheless subject to God's rule and determination (16:1, 9; 19:21; 20:24; 21:30, 31). Boström states it well: "The contrast between God and man is so profound that one may say that they belong to different worlds. Man exists within the limits of this world while the LORD does not appear to be bound by its limitations. God belongs to a reality separate from and unknown to man at the same time as he is

30 Notably, Westermann suggests that the creation of the world and the creation of humankind are two different traditions behind the biblical creation account. The latter is the older tradition. Claus Westermann, "Das Reden von Schöpfer und Schöpfung im Alten Testament," in *Das Ferne und nahe Wort: Festschrift Leonhard Rost zur Vollendung seines 70. Lebensjahres am 30. November 1966 gewidmet*, ed. Leonhard Rost and Fritz Maass, BZAW 105 (Verlag Alfred Töpelmann, 1967), 242–243. Regardless of his tentative proposal, the final form of Proverbs unifies YHWH as the creator of the world and of all creatures, with particular focus on human beings.

31 Fichtner perceives a strong connection between divine omniscience and divine retribution in Prov. 24:12. See Fichtner, *Die altorientalische Weisheit*, 116–117.

32 See Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, Chapters 15–31, NICOT (W. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 213. Contrary to Boström, Prov. 22:12 speaks of more than divine involvement in ensuring justice; YHWH is active in preserving knowledge. Cf. Boström, *God of the Sages*, 146–147.

33 A point emphasized by Gese. See Hartmut Gese, *Lehre und Wirklichkeit in der alten Weisheit: Studien zu den Sprüchen Salomos und zu dem Buche Hiob (Mobr, 1958)*, 37–39.

actively involved in the world of men.”<sup>34</sup>

In addition, Proverbs does not distinguish between transcendence and immanence but perceives both as integral to YHWH as the Creator. Divine transcendence and the Creator’s agency in human affairs are inextricably tied. As the transcendent Creator, YHWH has the freedom and power to affect human beings. In this sense, his creative and interventive agency moves unhindered within human agents. In Proverbs, YHWH’s creation of human faculties undergirds the freedom and responsibility of human agents. It is the basis for the unhindered flow of divine agency within human agents.<sup>35</sup>

*Divine Transcendence and Human Faculties*

As the transcendent creator, YHWH is the maker of the faculties of knowledge and learning: “The hearing ear [*’ozen sboma’atb*] and the seeing eye [*we’ayin ro’ab*], YHWH is the maker of them both” (Prov. 20:12). In Proverbs, both sight and hearing are faculties of knowing and learning as seen from their frequent juxtaposition with words of knowing and learning (Prov. 1:5; 4:1; 6:6; 7:7; 15:32; 24:32).<sup>36</sup> According to Proverbs’ theology, the human senses pertaining to knowledge acquisition are owed to the Creator’s agency.<sup>37</sup>

In the Old Testament, the divine ability to create human senses underscores the marked contrast between the limitless divine agency and the limitations of human agency. As Yael Avrahami points out, this contrast is exemplified by the inability of human beings to vivify human senses in religious iconography.<sup>38</sup> The characterization of idols as the “work of human hands” (*ma’aseh yede ’adam*) often accompanies disparaging remarks on the nonfunctional sensory organs of pagan idols (Deut. 4:28; Ps. 115:4–7; and Ps. 135:15–17).

They have mouths but do not speak; they have eyes, but do not see; they have ears, but do not hear” (Psalm 115:5–6).

<sup>34</sup> Boström, *God of the Sages*, 142.

<sup>35</sup> As we will see below, YHWH’s all-pervasive agency is not opposed to the causal efficacy of human agents.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible*, LHBOTS (Bloomsbury, 2012), 158–159.

<sup>37</sup> This point is acknowledged by Zimmerli and others, but the accent is placed on human autonomy. The point here is different from Rylaarsdam’s emphasis that wisdom is a universal gift rather than a “special gift of grace.” John Coert Rylaarsdam, *Revelation in Jewish Wisdom Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 1946), 72. Rather, YHWH’s universal endowment is the gift of human faculties designed for the purpose and potential of acquiring wisdom. See Stewart, *Poetic Ethics in Proverbs*, 98.

<sup>38</sup> Avrahami, *Senses of Scripture*, 190.

Psalm 115:2–8 then highlights the contrast between YHWH’s freedom to do whatever he pleases and the inanimate idols—the works of human hands. The idols have merely the appearance of sense organs but are devoid of life and vitality. From another perspective, Isaiah 44:9–20 sneers at the folly of idol makers. The idol makers are senseless—they neither see nor know (44:9)—to think that they can fashion a god who truly sees and knows (cf. Isa. 40:27). In short, human beings cannot create functional senses. Creating human senses, particularly the sense of knowing, is solely a divine ability. From this perspective, the freedom of human agents to exercise their faculties is caused by the Creator’s agency.

Moreover, YHWH’s agency over human faculties is not restricted to the initial stage of creation but goes beyond to sustain human function. In Proverbs 29:13, YHWH gives light (*me’ir-’ene*) to the eyes of both the poor and his oppressor. The metaphor of brightened eyes connotes the continual sustenance and not just the idea of initial creation. When Jonathan ate the honey in the honeycomb, his eyes were brightened (*wattaro’ènaḅ ‘enayw*); he was in a revitalized state in contrast with the prior condition of being faint (*wayya’a’af*; 1 Sam. 14:27–29). The honey revitalized Jonathan’s life. This reading comports with the Psalm 13:3 use of *ba’irab ‘enay*, which refers more to the sustenance or revitalization of life than to the creation of life. Similarly, the concept of revitalization is clear from Psalm 19:8 [MT 19:9]: “The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes [*me’irathb ‘enayim*].”<sup>39</sup> In this way, Proverbs 29:13 speaks of the poor and oppressor as equal dependents on YHWH’s life-sustaining activity. In addition, the connection between the metaphor of brightened eyes with the rejoicing of the heart in Proverbs 15:30 and Psalm 19:9 suggests that the metaphor is not merely about living but also a normal means of flourishing—experiencing and enjoying life.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, Proverbs 29:13 considers YHWH as the source of the normal function of human sight, through which one can live and experience life.

Secondly, in addition to the senses of perception, Proverbs affirms that YHWH has control over human speech and cognition:

To man belongs the plans of the heart, but from the LORD is the answer of the tongue. (Prov. 16:1)

39 See also Dave Bland’s interpretation of Prov. 29:13. Dave Bland, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs*, College Press NIV Commentary: Old Testament Series (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002), 263.

40 Contrary to Fox, who argues that Prov 29:13 has essentially the same meaning with the concept of creation (as in “YHWH as the maker of both”) in Prov 22:2. The phrase (יניע־ריאם) is chosen instead to avoid the suggestion that YHWH “creates certain persons to be oppressive.” Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10–31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB, vol. 18B (Yale University Press, 2009), 839.

Bible commentaries usually acknowledge the sovereignty and control of God over human speech in Proverbs 16:1. Furthermore, Proverbs affirms the possibility of divine influence within human hearts:

The heart of the king is a channel of water in the hands of  
YHWH; he [YHWH] turns it every way he [YHWH] desires.  
(Prov. 21:1)

Proverbs 21:1 states that YHWH is able to direct the hearts of kings since the king's heart—where the human heart is the seedbed of cognition—<sup>41</sup> resides in the hand of YHWH.<sup>42</sup>

*Divine and Human Actions in Concurrency*

Despite the acknowledgment of YHWH's sovereignty and control of human faculties, the oppositional view of divine and human actions persists among scholars. It is alleged that each stanza within the bicola Proverbs 16:1 portrays an oppositional tension between divine and human agency.<sup>43</sup> The Yahwistic sayings of Proverbs 16:9, 16:33, and 21:31 also join the list of passages regarded as positing such a tension.

**Prov. 16:9** The heart of man plans his way, but Yahweh establishes his steps.

**Prov. 16:33** The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole decision of it is from Yahweh.

**Prov. 21:31** The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but to Yahweh belongs the victory.

However, upon closer examination, the alleged tensions between the human and divine rest on two assumptions: (1) that antithetical parallelism connotes a

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41 Michael Carasik, *Theologies of the Mind in Biblical Israel* (Peter, 2006), 8–9.

42 It is important to note that of the more than 200 references to the “hand of YHWH” in the OT, the phrase most frequently connotes divine power in creation and activity. See Eduard Lohse, “*Χειρ*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (1974; repr., W. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 9:427.

43 Boström, *God of the Sages*, 173–177. By tension, I refer to the alleged contradiction between the sayings that attribute the attainment of desired results to human potential and sayings that attribute the same desired results to God. Consequently, the agency for cognition and speech is thought to belong to the exclusive realm of either humans or God. For example, Michael Fox perceives Prov 16:1 as containing a “mysterious disjunction between thought and utterance.” Fox, *Proverbs 10–31*, 608. Similarly, Waltke maintains that the first stanza pertains to “human initiative in thought” and the second stanza pertains to “divine initiative in human speech.” Waltke, *Proverbs 15–31*, 9.

contradiction or opposition between the bicolon sayings and (2) the priority of human potential in non-Yahwistic sayings. Firstly, the grammatical and syntactical structure of antithetical poetic lines does not necessarily connote an oppositional idea between the two lines. Jože Krašovec notes that though the fundamental character of an antithesis refers to “two opposing elements” that exclude “each other in relation to a common idea,” the term can also refer to a merism—the contraposition of opposite concepts to denote the same idea. Antithetical parallelism can also connote the complementarity of contrasting ideas.<sup>44</sup> Just as Marvin Pope notes, “The antithesis is not in terms of contradiction, thesis and antithesis, but in opposite aspects aspect of the *same idea*.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, as Krašovec points out, antithetical contrasts between YHWH and human beings are fundamental to the Hebrew Bible. Such an antithesis is primarily in the form of “the verticality and radicality of YHWH” over the “horizontality” of human actions.<sup>46</sup> Hence, the marked ontological contrast between YHWH and humanity does not necessarily lead to an oppositional contrast between divine and human actions.

Secondly, there is said to be a tension between divine and human actions in a Proverbial aphorism when it is evaluated against other passages that speak of unbridled human potential. The implicit assumption here is that human agency is the starting point by which we should examine the relationship between divine and human agency. However, as we have seen above, such an assumption runs counter to Proverbs’ priority of the creator over creation.

In contrast to the assertion that Yahwistic sayings like Proverbs 16:1, 16:9, 16:33, and 21:31 connote an oppositional tension between divine and human agency, it is more plausible to read these passages as the actualization of limited human agency by divine agency.<sup>47</sup> On the one hand, these passages affirm human agency’s legitimacy and limitations. On the other hand, they affirm that divine power is needed to overcome the limits of human agency. The passages are compatible with the notions of divine supplementation of human agency—that God is “remedying the deficiencies of created causes” or “taking their place” when the created agency is inoperative.<sup>48</sup> In Proverbs 16:1, YHWH actualizes human speech which began

44 Jože Krašovec, *Antithetic Structure in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, VTSup 35 (Brill, 1984), 5–7.

45 Marvin H. Pope, *Job: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AYB, vol. 15 (Yale University Press, 2008), li.

46 Krašovec, *Antithetic Structure in Hebrew Poetry*, 138.

47 Klaus Koch touches on this idea when he suggests that YHWH acts like a midwife to bring about the completion of what human actions started. Koch, “Is There a Doctrine of Retribution in the Old Testament,” 61. However, Koch means this in a way that YHWH’s agency is limited to bringing human actions into completion, whereas my point here is that there is continuity between human and divine actions.

48 Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment* (Blackwell, 1988),

in human heart.<sup>49</sup> Proverbs 16:9 depicts YHWH as the one who actualizes human planning by establishing one's steps. Similarly, the casting of the lot in Proverbs 16:33 is actualized in its purpose by YHWH's decision. This is in line with the casting of the lot as a divinely sanctioned means for discerning divine decision (Lev. 16:8, 9; Num. 33:54). In the same vein, the emphasis of Proverbs 21:31 is that YHWH alone grants victory by actualizing the intent of battle preparations. In short, divine and human actions can be taken as in *concursum* with one another—where God's action is in some sense “running together with”<sup>50</sup> or “accompanying”<sup>51</sup> human actions. When there is a comparison of human and divine action, the emphasis is on God's unlimited agency and humanity's limited agency.

The notion of divine *concursum* finds further support when we consider instances when divine actions oppose human activities. While Proverbs generally does not set human and divine action in opposition to each other, divine action is commonly said to oppose wicked activities. Hence Proverbs 22:12 states, “The eyes of YHWH guard knowledge, but he subverts<sup>52</sup> the words of the treacherous.” Here, YHWH's action does not actualize that of the wicked but acts in opposition to it. YHWH does not fulfill but thwarts the cravings of the wicked (10:3). YHWH does not maintain but tears down the house of the proud (15:25). In these cases, there is no correspondence between divine action and the actions of the wicked. Therefore, there is a tacit assumption in Proverbs that whenever divine action concurs with human actions and actualizes that which human agency is insufficient to accomplish (e.g., 10:22; 16:1, 9; 16:33), these human actions must occur in line with and not in opposition to the divine will and purposes.

#### *Concurrentism in the Book of Proverbs*

In contrast to deism and occasionalism which pit human against divine agency and vice versa, concurrentism holds that *both* divine *and* human agency are genuine and efficacious and that both cooperate together for the same effect (Cf. Ps. 127:1; Isa. 26:12; Phil. 2:12–13). Concurrentism maintains that the dual agencies of God and human creatures are necessary to produce an effect in creation. The same effect, however, is contributed to wholly, not partially, by both divine and created

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100–101.

<sup>49</sup> There are successive connections between the heart (*lev*) and the organ of speech (*lashown*) on the one hand (cf. 16:21, 23; 17:20) and the activity of the heart (*ma'arkhe-lev*) and speech (*ma'aneh*) on the other (cf. 15:28).

<sup>50</sup> Christopher J. Insole, *The Intolerable God: Kant's Theological Journey* (W. B. Eerdmans, 2016), 113.

<sup>51</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pt. 3 (T&T Clark International, 2004), 102.

<sup>52</sup> See Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, Chapters 15–31, NICOT (W. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 213.

agency, each according to its different ways.<sup>53</sup> Since created agency is determined by divine power to exist and to possess a specific nature of a being (i.e., fire produces heat, not cold; human beings are God's image bearers), as a secondary cause, created agency actualizes an effect by virtue of divine power and exercises its agency according to its nature.<sup>54</sup>

The core argument here hinges on reconciling divine and human agency through what Kathryn Tanner termed a "non-contrastive" understanding of divine transcendence.<sup>55</sup> This perspective does not place divine agency in contrast with human agency, recognizing both as acting on different ontological planes. A non-contrastive view sees God as "wholly other," vastly different and beyond the limitations of created entities, thereby granting God's agency unlimited scope over all. As we have seen above, Proverbs affirms both a non-contrastive divine and the unlimited scope of divine agency that extends beyond God's act of creation. In a non-contrastive approach, human agents possess causal efficacy and can effect changes within the created order without diminishing divine agency. This offers an alternative to occasionalism by rejecting any necessity for divine magnitude to undermine human capability. Instead, divine greatness can coexist with empowered human agency, allowing humanity to act freely yet entirely dependent on God's creative power. This interrelation enables a harmonious view where divine and human actions are neither inversely proportional nor in opposition. The non-Yahwistic Proverbial sayings that focus on human actions are not anomalies in a God-centered worldview properly anchored in a non-contrastive view of divine transcendence. Sentences that apparently affirm the efficacy of human actions in the world and in gaining wisdom are coherent with a worldview that affirms the efficacies of both creative (divine) and created (human) agency.

Secondly, unlike deism, which might suggest autonomous human agency, a non-contrastive viewpoint permits human freedom to remain dependent yet efficacious, considering divine and human agency function independently yet

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53 Petr Dvořák, "The Concurrentism of Thomas Aquinas: Divine Causation and Human Freedom," *Philosophia* 41, no. 3 (2013), 623.

54 Dvořák, "Concurrentism of Aquinas," 622.

55 It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to examine philosophical-theological debates about concurrentism. For objections raised against Tanner's work, see Thomas F. Tracy, "Divine Action, Created Causes, and Human Freedom," in *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations*, ed. Thomas F. Tracy (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 77–102. See also David B. Burrell's rejoinder. David B. Burrell, "Divine Action and Human Freedom in the Context of Creation," in Tracy, *The God Who Acts*, 103–109.

interrelate cohesively.<sup>56</sup> This model counters Immanuel Kant's rejection of concurrentism<sup>57</sup> by proposing that divine influence does not compromise human freedom, as divine action isn't external but internal, originating from the Creator itself.<sup>58</sup> Thus, divine influence can occur without undermining human autonomy. In Proverbs, the assertion that the human senses of perception are created and endowed by YHWH intimates that human ability is contingent on divine agency. As we have seen, the divine endowment of sensory abilities is what gives human creatures the vitality of life. Divine agency is needed for the proper functioning of human existence. Hence, the exhortation to trust in YHWH (e.g., 3:5–6) accords with divine creation and the nature of human beings as creatures with limited created efficacies.

Thirdly, the relationship between divine and human actions is presented not as inversely related but positively proportional: As humans move towards the divine will, the efficacy of divine agency in them is accentuated. Human achievements aligning with divine intentions reflect effective divine action, situating all progress towards human perfection within the framework of divine collaboration. This reframes the tension often assumed between divine and human actions, allowing for a shared path to fulfillment based on mutual functional potency. We have seen above that passages such as Proverbs 16:1, 9, 33 and 21:31 do not depict an opposition between divine and human actions. Rather, these passages depict human actions as actualized by divine action. A non-contrastive view of divine transcendence helps us see how both unlimited divine agency and limited human agency can function together to effect the same result. Inasmuch as human actions correspond with the divine will, human agency is directly proportionate to divine agency. In other words, the more human actions conform to the divine will, the more we can attribute to God his power to affect human agents. The effects that YHWH actualizes are consonant with and not counter to his will, since not even the actions of the wicked are outside of his purposes (Prov. 16:4).<sup>59</sup> Moreover, Proverbs makes numerous assertions about the close relationship between divine favor or displeasure and ethical behaviors, making the divine will the backdrop of what wisdom values or anathematizes.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Tanner, *God and Creation*, 91.

<sup>57</sup> Immanuel Kant and Paul Guyer, *Notes and Fragments, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant in Translation* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 340. See Insole's discussion of Kant's rejection of concurrentism at Insole, *The Intolerable God*, 123–128.

<sup>58</sup> Tanner, *God and Creation*, 95; Insole, *The Intolerable God*, 124.

<sup>59</sup> Concurrentism does not support the consideration of God as the cause of evil.

<sup>60</sup> Prov. 3:32; 6:16; 11:1; 12:2, 22; 15:26, 29; 16:5, 7; 17:15; 20:10, 23.

The point that human agency is directly proportional to divine agency is further evidenced by the observation that the efficacy of human actions (i.e., success) is positively related to piety toward YHWH: “Commit your work to YHWH, and your plans will be established” (Prov. 16:3); “In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight” (Prov. 3:6); “Honor YHWH with your wealth and from the first of all your produce, then your storehouses will be filled with sufficiently, and your vats will burst forth with wine” (Prov. 3:9). In these passages, the efficacy of human actions (i.e., the straightness of one’s path, the establishment of one’s plans, and the filling of one’s storehouses) is attributed to one’s piety. Such piety not only places the accent on the need for human dependence on God but also indicates that human efficacies can be directly attributed to God.

In summary, this non-contrastive view of transcendence advocates for understanding divine and human agencies as compatible, even if an enigma remains on the exact workings of the divine-human relationships. It posits a theological framework where both agencies exist on separate ontological planes without negating one another. Each cause retains sufficiency for its effect, enabling human actions to be discussed autonomously while acknowledging a penetrating divine agency. While Proverbs does not delineate a systematic rationale for concurrentism, it is no coincidence that we find the notions of divine transcendence and unlimited divine agency in colocation with an emphasis on human agency. From the theology and worldview of Proverbs, a non-contrastive divine transcendence is the *raison d’être* of the compatibility of the Yahwistic and anthropocentric sayings. The coherency of this God-centered worldview stands in contrast to previous scholars’ attempts to integrate the divine and human from an anthropocentric starting point (i.e., wisdom as a human enterprise distinct from revelation)—attempts that tended toward a discordant relationship between divine and human agency.

### III. CONCLUSION

[Wisdom] is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her; those who hold her fast are called blessed. (Prov. 3:18)

With desire-infused language, Proverbs 3:13–18 evokes the memory of Eden.<sup>61</sup>

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61 Christine Roy Yoder, “Wisdom is the Tree of Life: A Study of Proverbs 3:13–20 and Genesis 2–3,” in

Whereas the way (*derekb*) to the tree of life was barred from human reach in Genesis 3:24, the pursuit of wisdom, in which “her ways (*derakbeyba*) are ways of pleasantness (*darkhe-no'am*,” and “all her paths are peace” (Prov. 3:17), leads one back to it. Whereas Eve wrongly “desired the tree to make one wise” (Gen. 3:6), the desire for the wisdom of Proverbs leads one to a blessed life. In this way, wisdom re-visions for humanity that the way back to the splendor of Eden is one in which humanity, the crown of creation in all the majesty of our divinely endowed agency, lives in perfect synchrony with every move of the God of creation. Instead of the folly of wearing the crown of a usurper of a world ruled by the True Sovereign, wisdom bestows a “beautiful crown” (Prov. 4:9) on those who prize her. Let us heed wisdom’s call because “wisdom shall be vindicated by her deeds (Matt. 11:19).”







*What Are We Made For?*  
Eschatology Before Anthropology

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“Dead are all the gods: Now do we desire the overman to live.”

-Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>1</sup>

“If traditionally death was the specialty of priests and theologians, now the engineers are taking over.”

-Yuval Noah Harari.<sup>2</sup>

**M**uch like C. S. Lewis’s “scientist-magician,” many leading figures in technology—scientists, engineers, and venture capitalists—are drawn to what I have been calling natural supernaturalism. While disinclined toward a personal God who created and acts within nature and history, many find animism to be a way of preserving spirituality after religion. Everything in nature is bristling with divinity. It is a mystical materialism that dominates conversations at the intersection of philosophy, religion, and science. As I extrapolate below, the core of this outlook is the doctrine of panpsychism: the age-old belief in a World Soul or Mind that unites all reality. Consciousness is a feature of everything that exists, from humans to trees and quarks. Panpsychism is the favored view of the transhumanist movement. In answer to our two big questions—“Where do I find fullness?” and “Where is history going?” transhumanists offer a radical alternative to the Christian account. And yet in some ways it is a parody of the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, consummation.

Obviously, there are many differences between magic and modern science. Yet both assume that they are engaged in *natural* operations, manipulating nature to transform it into something higher.

But what if we could go so far as to transcend our humanity and become divine? It will not be a sudden apocalypse, says Yuval Noah Harari in *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, but a gradual upgrading. “Every day millions of people decide to grant their smartphone a bit more control over their lives or try a new and more effective antidepressant drug. In pursuit of health, happiness and power, humans will gradually change first one of their features and then another, and another, until they will no longer be human.”<sup>3</sup>

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1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part I, Section XXII, 3, trans. Thomas Common.

2 Noah Yuval Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, 23.

3 Harari, *Homo Deus*, 49.

The related technologies and their possible implications are beyond my scope and expertise, but the evangelistic claims made by transhumanism are theological, even eschatological, dogmas. In fact, transhumanism exhibits characteristics of a religion—drawing explicitly on ancient animism, panpsychism, and Indian religious philosophies for perhaps the boldest expression thus far of natural supernaturalism.

C. S. Lewis observed, “There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the wisdom of earlier ages ... For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men.”<sup>4</sup> This is evident in the “Word-Faith” movement behind the so-called prosperity gospel, especially in its doctrine that the new birth makes us “little gods” who can decree anything into existence as if God didn’t even exist.<sup>5</sup>

Atheists, too, have hijacked Christian eschatology to develop a parody of the hope of glory.

## I. TRANSHUMANISM: “YOU SHALL BE AS GODS”

“In seeking bliss and immortality,” says Harari, “humans are in fact trying to upgrade themselves into gods. The upgrading of humans into gods may follow any of three paths: biological engineering, cyborg engineering and the engineering of non-organic beings.”<sup>6</sup> As *The Economist* summarized recently, this widely influential movement “sees the human body as just another piece of hardware to be hacked, optimised and upgraded.”<sup>7</sup> For example, the editors report, “It was after tripping on hallucinogenic mushrooms that Christian Angermayer realised he had a personal mission to help the human race improve itself. Having passed through the ‘gateway to God’ opened by psychedelic drugs, the German tech billionaire wanted to usher the rest of humanity in the same direction.” Elon Musk’s Neuralink focuses on brain implants, and Musk “talks about giving people ‘superpowers.’” The three major forms for such upgrading are anti-aging hormones, gene editing, and brain-computer interfaces (BCIs). “An implant developed by Mr. Musk’s firm, Neuralink, has allowed a paraplegic to operate a computer with his thoughts.” The magazine quotes Aron D’Souza, who heads

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4 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (HarperCollins, 2001), 77

5 See Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (Oxford University Press, 2013), especially 16.

6 Harari, *Homo Deus*, 43.

7 Editorial, *The Economist* (March 22, 2025): 9.

Enhancement Games: “We have the ability to overcome the weakness of our feeble biological forms and become something more ... I believe in superhumanity.”<sup>8</sup>

There is a paradox in transhumanism that bears comparison with Nietzsche. On the one hand, it is anthropocentric—there is little attention given to nonhuman creatures. Human mastery of nature, including one’s own body, remains the fundamental assumption. On the other hand, it advocates that human beings ought not be thought highly of *as they are now*. Biological humans are weak, danger prone, and intellectually feeble. Transhumanism anticipates the day when precisely through such technological mastery our descendants will transcend our biological limitations and become gods. Jacob Shatzer suggests, “If we had to boil transhumanism down into two features, they would be an *optimism* regarding the possibility of radically altering human nature via technology and belief in a *fundamental right* of an individual to use technologies for that purpose.”<sup>9</sup>

Transhumanists are confident that their utopian vision will circumvent any potentially dystopian threats. In fact, human vices will be cured through technological innovation. Here the Third Era, the Age of the Spirit, reaches its consummate expression. American inventor, futurist, and expert on artificial intelligence, Ray Kurzweil, calls this eschaton the Singularity. Echoing centuries of millennial anticipation, Kurzweil’s 2005 title announced *The Singularity is Near*, and in 2024 he wrote *The Singularity is Nearer*. He explains:

Our version 1.0 biological bodies are likewise frail and subject to a myriad of failure modes, not to mention the cumbersome maintenance rituals they require. While human intelligence is sometimes capable of soaring in its creativity and expressiveness, much of human thought is derivative, petty, and circumscribed. The Singularity will allow us to transcend these limitations of our biological bodies and brains. We will gain power over our fates ... We will be able to live as long as we want ... We will fully understand human thinking and will vastly extend and expand its reach ... Our intelligence will be trillions of trillions of times more powerful than unaided human intelligence.<sup>10</sup>

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8 Briefing: Human Enhancement, *The Economist* (March 22, 2025): 15–17.

9 Jacob Shatzer, *Transhumanism and the Image of God: Today’s Technology and the Future of Christian Discipleship* (InterVarsity Press, 2019), 53.

10 Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (Duckworth, 2005), 23.

Across the literature I have read on the subject, there seems to be a consensus that humans will try to perfect themselves by means of machines (which is already happening on a wide scale) to extend the length and quality of life. Then they will upload their consciousness, creating a copy of the mind. Freed of its biological limitations, this mind's vastly greater powers can assume any bodily form it chooses. Even the title of Hans Moravec's pioneering 1988 work, *Mind Children*, highlights this point. Finally, they will merge what remains of their humanity with their artificial offspring. In *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind*, Moravec argues:

Our artificial progeny will grow away from and beyond us, both in physical distance and structure, and in similarity of thought and motive. In time their activities may become incompatible with old earth's continued existence. Even so, it is likely that we, the historical root of their transcendence, will be preserved in some form—though, to us, the form may seem extremely strange. Just possibly, human personalities could participate in some way in the mainstream of this future activity, either under the wings of superintelligent hosts, or by being transformed into a compatible form—surely becoming very unhuman in the process.<sup>11</sup>

Like other transhumanists, Moravec sees this process as analogous to our own evolution from chemistry to biotic life. However, this assumes that organic life is not different ontologically from digital code.

Descartes said, "I suppose the body to be nothing but a statue or machine made of earth."<sup>12</sup> Whether a distinct entity or simply the highest part of the rational soul, spirit or mind is divine. Thus, humanity represents the convergence of unrelated nature: atoms in motion forming extended things and divine, purely self-conscious, thought. Far from encouraging infidelity, Descartes believed he had rescued God and souls from the inexorable fate of the physical laws and mechanics governing the realm of extension (i.e., matter). As Paul Ricœur observed, Descartes's influence remains influential: "We construe the world in terms of the Cartesian dichotomy between the self as sovereign consciousness on the one hand, and an objectivized, manipulable nature on the other. We conceive

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11 Hans Moravec, *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 11–12.

12 René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1; trans. John Cottingham and Robert Stoothoff and Dugald Murdoch (Princeton University Press, 1985), 99.

ourselves as authors of our own meaning and being, set in the midst of a world there for us to interrogate, manipulate, and control.”<sup>13</sup>

Ironically, while claiming to be materialists, transhumanists embrace Descartes’s theory of mind over matter, calling it panpsychism. This is the old animist idea that the world is a living organism with a cosmic mind or spirit. From this theosophical speculation Kurzweil thinks that initially humans will make modified copies of themselves. “One type of AI avatar that we can create, called a ‘replicant’ (to borrow a term from *Blade Runner*), will have the appearance, behavior, memories, and skills of a person who has passed away, living on in a phenomenon I call After Life.”<sup>14</sup> Reincarnation, we could say, will no longer be determined by one’s merits or demerits but will be entirely in the hands of the consumer—until they take on a life of their own.

In the early 2040s, nanobots will be able to go into a living person’s brain and make a copy of all the data that forms the memories and personality of the original person: You 2. Such an entity would be able to pass a person-specific Turing test and convince someone who knew the individual that it really is that person. According to all detectable evidence, they will be as real as the original person, so if you believe that identity is fundamentally about information like memories and personality, this would indeed be the same person.<sup>15</sup>

This key presupposition—“if you believe that identity is fundamentally about information”—points to the underlying anthropology, which is not actually a physicalist monism but a radical Cartesian dualism. To be human is to be “a thing that thinks.” Consciousness can be enhanced while our biological bodies will be left behind, and we can choose vastly superior containers.

Kurzweil believes that this “Singularity”—the eschatological advent of spiritual machines—is on the near horizon. We already can make an exact copy of small segments of the brain. Eventually, this will extend to the whole brain. In Kurzweil’s view, I would not even notice the gradual adaptations and augmentations that replace my current self.<sup>16</sup> At first, there would be two “Mike Hortons,” but “Mike

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13 Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Fortress Press, 1980), 6.

14 Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Nearer*, 100.

15 Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Nearer*, 103.

16 Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Nearer*, 93.

2” would go his own way, outpacing the mortal “Mike 1.”<sup>17</sup>

Yuval Noah Harari writes, “If traditionally death was the specialty of priests and theologians, now the engineers are taking over.”<sup>18</sup> This view is summarized well in the Transhumanist Manifesto. Yet there is a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, it expresses utopian autonomy: “I am the architect of my existence. My life reflects my vision and represents my values. It conveys the very essence of my being—coalescing imagination and reason, challenging all limits.” On the other hand, humanity, nature, and the planet are prisons of the divine self. “Aging is a disease” that must be overcome, along with “our confinement to planet earth.”<sup>19</sup> For Christians, aging and death are not just part of the Fall but are necessary for our ultimate salvation. The goal is not cryogenically preserved bodies or uploaded minds but the whole person completely dead in its present condition so it can be raised in a totally new condition. According to biblical eschatology, heaven is a condition—the everlasting Sabbath—and it encompasses the earth. We will still be earthly and timely creatures, limited by our natures, but unlimited in our enjoyment of God’s love.

It was only a matter of time until the utopian escape of the soul from all limitations of the physical world was consummated in liberation from the planet earth. Confinement to the earth is concomitant with imprisonment in the body. Zoltan Istvan declared, “All biology is to be overcome and replaced by the synthetic.”<sup>20</sup> He expressly states that his outlook is “Mind *versus* Matter,” adding:

As a transhumanist, I plan to live forever ... Ultimately, I’d like to reach what I call omnipotism: a post-singularity epoch where our identity, value, and intelligence control the very quarks and quantum mechanics that make up the universe. We’ll barely resemble our human selves at all, but our conscious energy and thoughts will span the cosmos ... With universities and tech companies building technology that could one day connect your mind directly to the internet, the debate is no longer theoretical.<sup>21</sup>

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17 Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Nearer*, 104, emphasis added.

18 Noah Yuval Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow*, 23.

19 <https://www.humanityplus.org/the-transhumanist-manifesto>; Shatzer, *Transhumanism and the Image of God*, 49.

20 Quoted in Paul Kingsnorth, “Bring That Hammer Down,” speech at Samford University, October 18, 2024, <https://paulkingsnorth.substack.com/p/bring-that-hammer-down>.

21 Zoltan Istvan, “If Our Thoughts Live Forever, Do We Too,” Quartz (May 16, 2019), retrieved on May

Second-century Platonist philosopher Celsus objected strongly to Christian teaching at every point, judging that it was “bound to flesh-and-blood concerns.”<sup>22</sup> Plato said that the goal of philosophy is “freeing the soul from association with the body as much as possible.”<sup>23</sup> He added:

In this way we shall escape the contamination of the body’s folly ... and by our own efforts we shall know all that is pure ... And does purification not turn out to be what we mentioned in our argument some time ago, namely, to separate the soul as far as possible from the body and accustom it to gather itself as far as it can both now and in the future, freed, as it were, from the bonds of the body? ... It is only those who practice philosophy in the right way, we say, who always most want to free the soul; and this release and separation of the soul from the body is the preoccupation of the philosophers ... altogether estranged from the body.<sup>24</sup>

Going beyond Plato, ancient Gnostics taught that the imprisonment of the divine self in matter was accomplished by the cunning of the evil creator: the jealous Yahweh, the God of Israel. It is not moral transgression of God’s command but ignorance of our true origin that constitutes evil, and redemption is attained through an enlightenment that liberates our spirit from the body and the lower parts of the soul. Gnosticism taught that the highest part of the soul (often distinguished as spirit or mind) is a spark of divinity that has fallen into a deep sleep of ignorance by its incarnation. Escaping the finite and bounded limitations of bodiliness, the Gnostic intellect sought to ascend to its divine birthright. Moreover, Gnosticism, secular humanism, and transhumanism are anthropocentric: Human beings are distinguished from animals by something divine within them. This goes by various euphemisms (e.g., soul, idea, mind, and consciousness), but it is basically a nonphysical substance.

The gulf between these two views of transcendence is evident again in our day. In Christianity, human beings will finally transcend their condition of guilt and corruption when their bodies are raised incorruptible and immortal; for Gnostics,

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24, 2025, from <https://qz.com/1616187/transhumanist-science-will-reshape-what-it-means-to-be-human>.  
22 This is a repeated refrain in Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*, trans. Joseph Hoffmann (Oxford University Press, 1987), 57–105.  
23 Plato, *Phaedo* 67a–e. (trans. Grube, 102).  
24 Plato, *Phaedo* 67a–3; (trans. Grube, 102).

they will finally transcend their humanity when they escape their bodies and all natural limitations. The relationship between Gnosticism and transhumanism is not a direct historical correlation, but there are rather striking similarities in doctrine.<sup>25</sup> Catherine Albanese writes that “metaphysics” no longer means what it did before the nineteenth century. “For our time, metaphysics more easily and clearly signals what its etymology suggests—those preoccupied in some sense with what lies beyond the physical plane. Meanwhile, esotericism, occultism, and gnosticism—all three—bring connotations that are narrower or more negative or both.”<sup>26</sup> At several points, comparisons can be made between transhumanism and ancient Gnosticism.

First, survival of death is seen as a *technical* problem—the result of ignorance, requiring more information, rather than of sin, requiring redemption.<sup>27</sup> Davis points out that Hermetic gnosis is essentially a form of spiritual technology.<sup>28</sup> He observes, “Like the Freemasons and other later secret societies, some Gnostics were apparently fond of doling out mysterious words, strange sigils, and mysterious hand gestures—information that the soul would need in its journey through the afterlife, which the Gnostics imagined as a kind of multileveled computer game inhabited by demonic gatekeepers and treacherous landscapes. This more magical and alchemical approach to gnosis particularly informs the pagan *Corpus Hermeticum*, a portion of which made it into the Nag Hammadi library.”<sup>29</sup>

Second, and consequently, there is a marked antipathy toward the creator identified as the God of Israel. Transhumanist and anti-humanist figures alike express feelings toward biblical theism that range from disbelief to hostility and turn instead to pre-Christian spiritual philosophies.<sup>30</sup>

Third, while transhumanists and anti-humanists agree that humans are flawed, the latter attribute this to a moral flaw while the former see it as a biological

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25 Davis expresses my own view: “I admit that by teasing out the gnostic threads from the webwork of technoculture, I am perhaps only making a further mess of things, and it seems best to remind the reader that we are dealing with psychological patterns and archetypal echoes, not some secret lore handed down through the ages” (TechGnosis, 93).

26 Catherine Albanese, *A Republic of Mind & Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (Yale University Press, 2007), 12.

27 Christina Bieber Lake, *Prophets of the Posthuman: American Fiction, Biotechnology, and the Ethics of Personhood* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), xii.

28 Davis, *TechGnosis*, 80.

29 Davis, *TechGnosis*, 95.

30 John Gray, *Straw Dogs*, xii–xiii. While Gray accuses transhumanists of being modern Gnostics, his cosmic pessimism (at least toward humans) resembles the ancient heresy. The title of *Straw Dogs* is taken from Lao Tzu: “Heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs.”

weakness. Kurzweil shares Hans Moravec's belief that "no matter how much we fine-tune our DNA-based biology, *our flesh-and-blood systems will be at a disadvantage relative to our purpose-engineered creations*. As writer Peter Weibel put it, Moravec understood that in this regard humans can only be 'second-class robots.'<sup>31</sup> Human beings as they exist now are not worth saving. But roads diverge sharply from here. Transhumanists are optimistic that once our high-tech progeny transcend human bodies, they will improve morally.<sup>32</sup> However, anti-humanist John Gray insists that humans are truly responsible for who they are, which is akin to a violent parasite. Human *behaviors* are perfectly in line with their *values*. And it is not because of "the failings of our biology" but because of an inveterate depravity: a sickness "peculiar to humans," in which the "good life" leads to the end of all life.<sup>33</sup> Gray sees the contradiction inherent in the idea that the further mastery of reality by frail and vicious humans will lead to bliss.<sup>34</sup>

Fourth, transhumanism envisions salvation from the body rather than of it. In fact, Gray claims, "Today's cybernauts are unknowing Gnostics."

The flight from the prison of the flesh is the essence of the Gnostic heresy that, despite incessant persecution, persisted in Christendom for centuries, and which survives to this day in the Mandaean community in Syria. For Gnostics, the Earth is a prison of souls, ruled—perhaps created—not by God but by a demiurge, an evil spirit which enticed humans into the captivity of the flesh by showing them the beauty of the world. A twentieth-century Gnostic, C. G. Jung, stated the central Gnostic myth in precisely these terms ... Jesus promised the resurrection of the body, not an afterlife as a disembodied consciousness ... The cult of cyberspace continues the Gnostic flight from the body.<sup>35</sup>

Aldous Huxley, who wrote *The Perennial Philosophy* in 1945, anticipated a similar natural supernaturalism. Bostrom refers to Huxley's last novel:

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31 Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Nearer*, 245, emphasis added. See Hans Moravec, *Mind Children: The Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (HUP, 1988); Peter Weibel, "Virtual Worlds: The Emperor's New Bodies," in *Ars Electronica: Facing the Future*, ed. Timothy Druckery (MIT Press, 1999), 215.

32 Kurzweil, *The Singularity is Nearer*, 109, emphasis added.

33 Gray, *Straw Dogs*, 116.

34 Hans Moravec, *Robot: Mere Machine to Transcendent Mind*, 75.

35 Gray, *Straw Dogs*, 142–43.

The approach he takes in *Island* is to seek a fusion of the best of Western science and of Eastern Mahāyāna Buddhism. The inhabitants of his utopian community have opted for a selective form of modernization. They cultivate an enlightened, pacifistic, humanistic way of life that is aimed at facilitating the pursuit of humanity's final end, which Huxley (elsewhere) describes as "the unitive knowledge of immanent Tao or Logos, the transcendent Godhead or Brahman." The islanders' pursuit of spiritual awakening is strongly aided by the consumption of "moksha-medicine": a psychedelic entheogen prepared from yellow mushrooms.<sup>36</sup>

From Huxley's other works, it is not hard to conjecture that his "moksha-medicine" is a justification for hallucinogenic drugs. This new shamanism leads to "Luminous bliss. ... Understanding of everything, but without knowledge of anything ... There was only this experienced fact of being blissfully one with Oneness."<sup>37</sup> The shamanic experience leads still to the virtual reality of salvation articulated by the sage. This religion is viewed not as a religion but as universal spirituality or philosophy, but it is essentially natural supernaturalism. Thus, near the end of our story we come back full circle to shamanism—and to that most radical Orphic expression called Gnosticism.

The transhumanist trajectory represents a divided mind. On the one hand, humans will become gods, transcending their bodies to join the immortals of Mount Olympus without an initiation. On the other hand, humans are just machines. Other machines will catch up to them, and eventually the only way of surviving this obsolescence is to merge our consciousness. In either case, *homo sapiens* has little to do with its body. Our finite, visible, natured presence is just a manifestation, an avatar of our real self that can transcend such limits. The body becomes little more than a tool of the inner will to power, to self-creation and self-possession, and self-expression through various chosen identities.

## II. WHAT ARE WE MADE FOR?

What, in fact, are we made for? Telos. What's a watch? What is its design, its

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36 Nick Bostrom, *Deep Utopia: Life and Meaning in a Solved World*, 288, from Huxley, Foreword to *Brave New World* (Harper & Row, 1946), x.

37 Bostrom, *Deep Utopia*, 288, quoting from Huxley, *Island* (Harper & Row, 1962), 308–09.

purpose? How do you distinguish a good watch from a bad one? Telling time. The problem today is that people don't believe that there's such thing as "creation" with certain "natures" that have been made with a particular purpose, design, or telos in mind. I *could* call it a watch. Or maybe it wants to be a waterfall or a steak knife. Human beings do not want to be defined in relation to God but to be independent sovereigns, each determining his or her own identity. Such individualism is foreign to non-Western outlooks, which are actually closer to the solidarity-oriented worldviews of South Global societies.

Human beings were created to reflect the glory of the ineffable God.

### *Last Things First*

Why do we go to work? Why do we plan for the future and ask as we're dying, "What comes next?" Many Christians identify eschatology with "end times"; in fact, the term *means* "last things" (ta eschata).

But eschatology doesn't just enter the picture after the Fall and the promise of salvation. Already at their creation, Adam and Eve were given an inner drive and an external Word to reign as prophets, priests, and kings—multiplying, ruling, serving, and subduing until God's glory filled the earth. As the prize of their faithful service, they would be *confirmed* in righteousness, glorified in soul and body, without even the possibility of falling into sin.

There was a task to perform, a goal to be realized. As Geerhardus Vos reminds us, "The universe, as created, was only a beginning, the meaning of which was *not perpetuation, but attainment*" (emphasis added). Creation began with a greater destiny lying before it.<sup>38</sup>

Adam never fulfilled the trial as our covenantal representative and therefore never entered God's Sabbath. So although we are created in the image of God, we are not yet *glorified* images of God. Yet even now, believers are being gradually transformed by beholding God's glory in the face of Christ. As Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." That's why Calvin instructed,

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<sup>38</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *The Eschatology of the Old Testament*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (P&R Publishing, 2001), 73–74: "The universe, as created, was only a beginning, the meaning of which was not perpetuation, but attainment ... Eschatology aims at consummation rather than restoration ... It does not aim at the original state, but at a transcendental state of man."

the true nature of this image “can be nowhere better recognized than from the *restoration* of his corrupted nature.”<sup>39</sup> Like a good novel, we only really know the character and the meaning of the plot by the last page. It’s as the drama unfolds that we learn who we were created to be.

Eschatology does not come later, after the Fall, rather it is already the goal at creation. From the *redemption* of humanity, Calvin adds, we discern that “God’s image was not totally annihilated” but was grossly disfigured. “Consequently, the beginning of our recovery of salvation is in that restoration that we obtain through Christ, who also is called the Second Adam for the reason that he restores us to true and complete integrity.”<sup>40</sup> Thus redemption is at least in part understood in terms of “putting on” Christ: “Put on the new man, who has been created according to God” (Eph. 4:24).<sup>41</sup>

The understanding of “image” is therefore not to be sought through speculation concerning a distinctive faculty within us—some eternal and unchanging inner, spiritual chip, but by learning from eschatology the identity of the Second Adam in whom the image is fully expressed: “Now we see how Christ is the most perfect image of God,” Calvin observes. “If we are conformed to it, we are so restored that with true piety, righteousness, purity and intelligence we bear God’s image.”<sup>42</sup>

### *Plato vs. Paul*

Alfred North Whitehead famously said that all philosophy is a footnote to Plato. That may be an exaggeration, but Plato (who lived four centuries before Christ) left a huge mark on Western thought, including Christianity. At the center of Platonism is the Orphic myth of the soul as the eternal spark of divinity inside us. The soul lost its wings and fell to the earth, entombed in a prison house of flesh, and must regrow its wings by virtue and spiritual contemplation. Salvation is the release of the soul from the body.

For Philo of Alexandria, the great Jewish-Platonist thinker of Jesus’s day, and a host of Christian theologians after him, the *imago dei* is the highest (rational) part of the soul. It’s reason that separates humans from the rest of the animals with

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39 Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.4.

40 Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.4.

41 Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.4.

42 Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.4.

whom they share their bodily nature; in fact, the rational soul itself is a spark of the divine Soul.

The contrast with the biblical plotline couldn't be greater. For Plato, the soul's incarceration in the body is a punishment; for the Bible, humans are created in time, in both body and soul, and it is "very good" (Gen. 1:31). Plato drew a line between the upper world of unchanging, invisible, eternal reality and the lower world of ever-changing, visible, and time-bound shadows. But the only line the Bible draws is between God and everything else, Creator and creation. Your soul is no more divine than your fingernails. We're *creatures* inside and out.

Just as Plato attributed our divinity to our soul, he attributed sin to the body. But the Bible teaches that the whole person is good intrinsically by nature in creation and the whole person is fallen. Sin is due not to the fall of the soul into the body but to the willful disobedience of the first human. Plato taught that death is salvation—the release of the soul. The Bible teaches that death is a curse—literally, a death sentence for covenant breaking. And deliverance comes not by our escaping the body and this world, but by God himself assuming our humanity and raising our bodies in glory. In fact, the whole creation will share in this redemption (Rom. 8:18–25).

Plato drew a circle. Platonism thinks of time as an eternal cycle. The plot is pretty simple: The divine and immortal is united to the supreme divinity, then falls into a body, and returns at last to its homeland like Odysseus returning to Ithaca. One of its maxims is "The end is always like the beginning." Unfortunately, some Christian Platonists like Origen of Alexandria taught this idea, even repeating the maxim, "The end is always like the beginning."<sup>43</sup>

But Scripture breaks the pagan circle out into linear time, not with the end returning to the beginning but from promise to fulfillment. It's not Paradise Regained. It's something in the future, in history. What we're promised is something "no eye has seen nor ear heard" because it's a reality far greater than the Garden of Eden. It's the prize that Adam forfeited. It's the City of God itself, where the serpent has been crushed and one of us has been crowned King of Kings and Lord of Lords on behalf the rest of us. It's heaven on earth, a condition of this world and of human beings that has never been experienced because of the first Adam's treason.

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43 See Michael Horton, "Atonement and Ascension" in Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders, eds., *Locating Atonement: Explorations in Contemporary Dogmatics* (Zondervan Academic, 2015), 226–50.

Nietzsche was right when he said that Platonism deprives this world of significance. But he was wrong, fatally wrong, in imagining that this world could have any significance on its own, detached from God and his purposes in creation. As our culture exhibits at every turn now, if God doesn't exist and this world is our creation, not his, then nothing we are or do really matters. We're just left in a sterile room by ourselves with our playlists, condemned to meaningless choices about which song to play next.

But Nietzsche was also wrong when he said that Christianity is "Platonism for the masses." The Reformed tradition has been especially sensitive to the differences. The soul is not the "real self" apart from the body. That's why we believe in resurrection, not release; in the restoration of this world, not in "the late, great planet Earth." As the second-century church father Irenaeus put it, "The glory of God is the human fully alive."

Tacking more closely to Irenaeus than Origen (which is to say, to Paul over Plato), Calvin said that "it would be foolish to seek a definition of 'soul' from the philosophers."<sup>44</sup> He even takes a rare shot at Augustine: "For that speculation of Augustine, that the soul is the reflection of the Trinity because in it reside the understanding, will, and memory, is by no means sound. Nor is there any probability in the opinion of those who locate God's likeness in the dominion given to man, as if in this mark alone he resembled God."<sup>45</sup> Nor is the image of God an "emanation," he says, "as if some portion of immeasurable divinity had flowed into man."<sup>46</sup> Augustine asserted, "For not in the body but in the mind was man made in the image of God."<sup>47</sup> But Calvin argues that the image extends even to the "goodly beauty" of the body.<sup>48</sup> In fact, he adds, "There was no part of man, not even the body itself, in which some sparks did not glow."<sup>49</sup>

Peter Martyr Vermigli observed the close identification in the Old Testament of the soul (*nepheš*, life) with the blood, highlighting the soul-body integration.<sup>50</sup> "As flesh and spirit (taken physically) are *distinctions, not contraries,*" explains

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44 John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.6.

45 Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.4.

46 Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.5.

47 Augustine, *Commentary on John's Gospel*, XXIII, 19.

48 Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.5; cf. 1.15.3.

49 John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.3.

50 Based on Gen. 9:4, he argues that "the blood is the soul." This represents a metonymy: "Since the blood is a sign of the soul's presence, it may be called the soul itself... I do not offer this as if I accept it as the reason why God gave that commandment [against eating the blood of animals], but to indicate the communion of man's soul with the body." *The Peter Martyr Library, Volume 4: Philosophical Works*, translated and edited by Joseph C. McLelland (Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, 1996), 42.

Francis Turretin, “so also are the appetites, inclinations and habits of both in themselves. The repugnancy now found in them arises accidentally from sin” (emphasis added).<sup>51</sup> In other words, body and soul are distinct aspects of the whole person; bodily appetites are intrinsically good, but we’ve been corrupted in body and soul by sin.

We don’t believe that salvation is “going to heaven when you die.” Of course, we do believe that the soul is separated from the body at death and enjoys the unspeakable peace of being in God’s presence. But the soul wasn’t *meant* to be separated from the body; this is a curse, not a blessing. Wonderfully, the moment the soul is absent from the body, it is present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). But we call this the *intermediate* state for a reason: It’s not our *ultimate* salvation. We are only saved, finally and forever, when we are raised bodily, as limbs of the already-risen Christ, and glorified. As Paul says in Romans 8:23, “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

Even in their relative blessedness, the souls of the martyrs cry out from the altar, “How long, O Lord?” (Rev. 6:10) as they long for the final judgment and restoration of all things, including the resurrection and glorification of their complete humanity, body and soul in perfect union. Take away this resurrection, and the only decent alternative, at least for Paul, isn’t Plato’s ascent of the soul but the Epicurean maxim that Nietzsche embraced: “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”

Assuming that the image of God is reason, many over the centuries have confused the soul with the mind. This is why many Christians fail to take mental illness seriously as a medical and not just spiritual problem. But the Bible never identifies the soul with the mind. More often, in fact, it is identified metaphorically with the heart or even the bowels. Our mind is not our soul; it’s part of our body—specifically, our brain. *Thinking* is no less an embodied act than throwing a javelin. In fact, as Herman Bavinck points out:

Adam’s body was formed from the dust of the earth and then the breath of life is breathed into him. He is called “Adam” after the ground from which he was formed; he is “from the earth, a man of dust” (1 Cor. 15:47). The body is not a prison, but a

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51 Cited in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Ernst Bizer; revised ed. (Wipf & Stock, 2008), 468.

marvelous piece of art from the hand of God Almighty, and just as constitutive for the essence of humanity as the soul (Job 10:8–12; Pss. 8; 139:13–17; Eccles. 12:2–7; Isa. 64:8) ... Now, this body, which is so intimately bound up with the soul, also belongs to the image of God ... The incarnation of God is proof that the human body is an essential component of that image.<sup>52</sup>

Immortality is not an essential attribute of the soul any more than the body; it is God's gift of resurrection-glorification in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:53; 2 Tim. 1:10). John Murray summarizes this consensus well: "Man is bodily, and, therefore, the scriptural way of expressing this truth is not that man has a body but that man *is* body ... Scripture does not represent the soul or spirit of man as created first and then put into a body ... The bodily is not an appendage."<sup>53</sup>

In brief, Christian theology offers a richer and more complex anthropology, and it is determined not by speculation about essences but by an unfolding drama that leads from creation to consummation.<sup>54</sup> Creation is presently filled with strife and sin, not because of an ontological fall from being in eternity but because of a historical fall from covenantal obedience. He's still a watch, with all the parts, but he's a broken watch that no longer tells time accurately.

Only with the Last Adam do we see the firstfruits of the consummation. This consummation is not yet fully realized for us. "But we do see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (Heb. 2:8–9). We only come to a proper understanding of the nature of creation when we recognize its end as well as its origin, and Jesus Christ as the one person who brings them together.

### III. COVENANTAL CONTEXT

Eschatology provides the *direction* of the plot, while the covenant provides the

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52 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged in One Volume*, ed. John Bolt (Baker Academic, 2011), 327.

53 John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Vol. 2 (Banner of Truth, 1977), 14.

54 John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (W. B. Eerdmans, 1989). I agree with John Cooper that "anthropological dualism" expresses the Christian conviction insofar as it affirms the distinction between body and soul. At the same time, I prefer a term like psychosomatic holism, since dichotomy suggests that the distinction between soul and body is more basic than its unity.

concrete *context* for discerning the image of God. So we turn to the covenantal coordinate now. The stock of metaphors in biblical revelation for Israel's relationship to God is taken not from religion but from politics. The gods were witnesses to political compacts among Israel's neighbors, but only in Israel was their God also the head of state. Significantly, the holiest part of the Holy of Holies in the temple wasn't a statue or cultic relics but the ark of the covenant: a box containing the treaty of the Great King. Entering this holiest precinct would be more like going to the National Archives in Washington to see the U.S. Constitution than entering the National Cathedral. The prophets were God's lawyers—not life coaches, monks, or sages—and history (not just the inner self) was the courtroom.

Our interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis will be wide of the mark if we miss their context and scope. The purpose is not to provide either a *scientific* account of origins or a *mythological* account of origins. Rather, the purpose is to provide a political-ethical, which is to say, *covenantal*, account of God's lordship over all of reality. As Meredith Kline explained, Genesis 1 unfolds as a parade of creature-kings, as each ruler leads its realm behind the human viceroy as they pass before the review of their Great King enthroned in Sabbath glory.

Significantly, this workweek is crowned by the Sabbath: the eschatological sign par excellence. Our days are not a cycle of one vain thing after another, but there is a goal: something that “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined” (1 Cor. 2:9). Contrary to the teaching of Platonists (including the early Christian theologian Origen), the future hope still awaiting us is not like the beginning but a “new thing,” the consummation that was forfeited by Adam and won by the Last Adam. So the concept of human beings as the image of God isn't drawn from the usual stock of pagan religion (*viz.*, the idol as the replica of the deity). Rather, it's a *political* image, as we find in Egypt with the son of the Pharaoh identified as the image of Pharaoh even as Pharaoh is the image of the Sun-God.

It's not just a few doctrines here or there where biblical faith differs from its rivals, rather this faith offers radically different paradigms. As covenantal creatures, our identity is inherently relational and social. Plato wants us to find our identity by looking within, by ourselves. Plotinus called it “the flight of the alone to the Alone.” But according to the Bible, we find our deepest identity by looking outside of ourselves, up to God in faith and out to our neighbors in love. The image of God not something in us but something *between* us—a covenantal relationship.

To exist as human beings is not to be a “thinking thing,” a disembodied and unrelated ego, but is to be enmeshed in a web of relationships: a society. From the beginning, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). A. N. Whitehead’s famous quip “Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness” is far removed from any view of the self as oriented covenantally.<sup>55</sup> In “spirituality,” both Eastern and Western, we find the individual alone in meditative exercises. In the Bible, we see people gathered together into a community to hear the binding and liberating address of their Covenant Lord. The relations between the persons of the Trinity finds its creaturely analogy in this covenantal relationship of humans.

Pagan thinking searches for the image of God as *something*; biblical thinking finds the image to be *someone*: a person standing before the face of God in solidarity with others and responsible together before God to be stewards of his creation as prophets, priests, and kings. Bavinck explains concerning this original calling, “As prophet, man explains God and proclaims his excellence; as priest, he consecrates all that is created to God as a holy offering; as king, he guides and governs all things in justice and rectitude. In all this he points to One who in a still higher and richer sense, is the revelation and image of God, to him who is the only begotten of the Father, and the firstborn of all creatures. Adam, the son of God, was a type of Christ.”<sup>56</sup>

A powerful way of communicating this covenantal identity is the response to God that we often meet in Scripture: “Here I am.” Notice how this emphasizes the ethical and extrospective character of our identity. To find ourselves, we don’t *look within*, but *listen without*. It’s not an inner vision but an external word, and this word makes us accountable. How will we respond? The Hebrew idiom, “Here I am” (*binah*, behold, plus *ni*, me), and its New Testament Greek equivalent (*idou*, behold, plus *ego*, me), is the typical marker of covenantal response on the part of God’s servants. In fact, the flight of Adam and Eve from the divine call, “Adam, where are you” (Gen. 3:9) is contrasted with the “Here I am” of Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Mary and Jesus. The focus in Genesis 1–3 is not on *what* Adam is in his inner essence but on *who* he is and *where* he is in relation (ethically) to his Maker. By replying, “Here I am,” the covenant servant acknowledges the suzerain’s authority. The servant nails himself down, so to speak, vis-à-vis the covenant Lord.

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55 A. N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (Meridian, 1960), 16.

56 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged in One Volume*, 328.

That is why the silence of Adam and Eve is so sinister when God called. By contrast, after the angel's auspicious announcement, Mary declares, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). It is noteworthy that Jesus announces his triumphant arrival in heaven with the words, "Here I am [*idou ego*], and the children God has given me" (Heb. 2:13b). We don't find our identity in ourselves but by being "worded" by God. We are the creatures of his speech, created to reply "Here I am. Let it be with me according to your word," singing his praises in thanksgiving with our lips and our lives.

"Here I am" is not a founding word. It's not an autonomous self-definition. "Here I am" is inherently *responsive* to the word of another, first God and then our fellow images of God. It is diametrically opposed to the autonomous self that is the product of one's own introspective reflection. My identity depends on my relationship to others. I'm a child of God belonging to Christ's body; I'm a husband and father, a teacher and a friend of specific people. This is how we image the Triune God. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct persons, but their very names express relatedness: The first person wouldn't be the Father without the Son and vice versa, and they share the Spirit in common.

The covenantal relationality that is integral to human nature not only opens us up to say "Here I am" to our Creator but also to our creaturely neighbors. "In the image of God he created *them, male and female*" (Gen. 1:27). "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). As God rejoiced at the creation of Adam, Adam rejoiced in the creation of Eve from his side: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen. 2:23). Adam's cry of elation ("my bone and my flesh") is a kinship phrase that we often find in Scripture. Walter Brueggemann points out that it is "actually a covenant formula that speaks of a common, reciprocal loyalty."<sup>57</sup>

So according to the biblical account, the image of God is not something that human beings possess somewhere within but is rather the office that they hold together with the attributes appropriate to that office—namely, "true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:24; cf. Luke 1:75).<sup>58</sup> It is a gift but also a task. Confirmation in

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57 Stanley Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (WJK, 2001), 276.

58 See also the Westminster Confession, Chapter 4: In Adam human beings were "endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image; having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfil it: and yet under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject unto change. Beside this law written in their hearts, they received a command, not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; which while they kept, they were happy in their communion with God, and had dominion over the creatures."

this status was held out as the future glorification of the victorious servant.

#### **IV. PUTTING ESCHATOLOGY AND COVENANT TOGETHER: THE COVENANT OF CREATION**

The notions of covenant and eschatology are closely intertwined in biblical theology. Covenant provides the *context* for the unfolding story, while eschatology indicates the *direction* of the plot. Adam was created in righteousness and true holiness, but he was not yet confirmed in everlasting justice and blessing. It was his vocation, as the representative head of humanity, to fulfill his covenantal trial and win the right to eat from the Tree of Life. (This is especially clear from Revelation 2:7: “To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”)

##### *The Covenant of Creation*

The *covenantal* aspect of our eschatological identity isn't just a vague generality. It's a specific, concrete treaty that the Great King, Yahweh, delivered to Adam and Eve. God didn't create them as autonomous individuals and then negotiate a contract. Rather, he created them as covenant servants. That's intrinsic to our identity; it's our *nature* to be God's servants, ruling in his name over all that he has made. That's what it means to be God's images.

The original covenant was a legal command to love God and neighbor and to subdue any ethical threat to this reign of God, completing their mission and entering God's rest. It isn't that this religious and moral sense is lost in the Fall, but it has been gravely distorted and depraved, as Paul argues in Romans 1–3. The Fall did not mean that we were no longer related covenantally to God or eschatologically driven. Rather, it resulted in our being covenantally condemned and corrupt as traitors to our office and in twisting our eschatological impulse into Promethean attempts to build our Towers of Babel. The Fall didn't mean we were no longer worshipers but that we were now idolaters.

So what now? All human beings remain images of God. That's the basis for human rights and dignity. But all human beings are corrupt officeholders. That's the basis for distrusting human power. We're born into this world as “law creatures,” born into the covenant of creation that we have broken in solidarity with Adam, under a death sentence. This covenant of law is natural, a *verbum internum* (internal word) that rings in the conscience, summoning us to court. The ancient Babylonian Code

of Hammurabi bears striking resemblance to the Ten Commandments delivered to Moses centuries later. The historical prologue to the Code even grounds its justice in the gods.<sup>59</sup>

According to the Westminster Confession:

After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after his own image; having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it; and yet under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject unto change. Beside this law written in their hearts, they received a command, not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; which while they kept, they were happy in their communion with God, and had dominion over the creatures.<sup>60</sup>

From Genesis 1 and 2 we learn that human beings are created in the image of God, but we must turn to other passages in both Old and New Testaments to gain greater insight into the nature of this representation.

Contemporary paradigms for interpreting the *imago dei* include the following:

1. *Substantive*. Human beings are distinguished from other animals by resembling God in with respect to reason, will, and moral attributes. Since God does not have a body, it is the soul that mirrors the divine nature.
2. *Functional*. The image is a royal office, especially dominion, in order to guard, protect, and keep God's creation.
3. *Relational*. God is three persons in one essence. Analogously, human beings are persons-in-relation: male and female and humanity in a covenantal relationship with God.

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<sup>59</sup> Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1963), 14 fn. 9, from R. F. Harper, *The Code of Hammurabi*, King of Babylon (Chicago and London, 1904); Bruno Meissner, *Babylonien und Assyrien*, II (Heidelberg, 1925), 46; and O. E. Ravn in *Acta orientalia*, VII (1929), 81–90.

<sup>60</sup> Westminster Confession, 4.2.

4. *Christological*. Human nature is found perfectly in Christ as the incarnate image of God. Thus, human beings are images of *the* Image.

The substantive view, which has dominated Christian reflection throughout the centuries, acknowledges the truth that we are designed uniquely for participation in communion with God. Human beings are not limited to animal instinct and impulse but can freely make rational and moral decisions that may not be conducive to their immediate survival. Certainly, the Bible supports the view that our likeness to God includes our being created in true righteousness and holiness. However, by itself this view is too reductive. First, it tends to exclude the body.<sup>61</sup> According to Scripture, the whole person is created as God's image and likeness. Second, as knowledge of the animal world increases, it becomes clear that nonhuman animals possess emotions and some deliberative powers. Third, human beings have not lost the ability to reason, to will, and even to reflect God's moral will, but rather to use these endowments for God's glory.

The functional view also has biblical support. As J. A. Clines observes, Scripture teaches that we are created *as* God's image and likeness: that is, as God's representative rather than representation.<sup>62</sup> Genesis 1:26 correlates the image and likeness with a royal and priestly office: "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.'" Adam and Eve were God's rulers, prophets, and priests. Eden was God's holy mountain, "the garden of God" (Isa. 51:3; Ezek. 28:13). All that defiles (particularly the serpent) was to be cast out: the import of the call to "rule and subdue" (Gen. 1:28). Adam and Eve were to bring to the Great King a tribute-tithe—the firstfruits of their produce—as a sign of their allegiance. But after the Fall, a bloody sacrifice for sin was added in Genesis 3.<sup>63</sup> The commission to "guard and keep" the sanctuary in Genesis 2:15 is repeated by Moses for the Levitical priests in Numbers 3:5–10 (cf. Num. 8:25–26 and 18:5–7; 1 Chron. 9:17–27; Neh. 11:19). In fact, they are given the power of the sword to defend the sanctuary against defilement (Ex. 32:29; Deut. 33:8–11). Pharaoh was called the "son of Ra," ruling in the name of Egypt's solar deity.<sup>64</sup> Unique

61 Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine identified the image particularly with the soul's highest power of intellect. For a crisp defense of this view see Nyssa, in *NPNF2*, 5:390–442.

62 D. J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1967): 101.

63 G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (InterVarsity Press, 2004), 81–121.

64 Phyllis Bird, "Male and Female He Created Them': Gen 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," *Harvard Theological Review* 74/2 (April 1981).

to the Hebrew Scriptures, though, all of humanity—male and female—share in this royal and priestly function. However, humanity lost this priestly dominion through the fall (Gen. 3:16–19; Rom. 8:20). Consequently, if the image-likeness continues to define all people, it cannot be limited to function.

The relational view overlaps significantly with the functional view, while allowing space for the substantive position. Platonist and Aristotelians held that the human soul included an animal aspect, tied closely to the body, but that in the highest part of the self—rational intellect—human beings transcended the animal world and coalesced with the divine. Many patristic writers, including Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, shared this view. However, Calvin argued that the image of God, while seated in the soul, “extends to the whole excellence” of humanity: clear reasoning, acute senses, and even bodily beauty. In this wholeness, human beings are “the most illustrious ornament and glory of the earth.” The soul is not inherently immortal. “Were God to withdraw his grace, the soul would be nothing more than a puff or blast, even as the body is dust.”<sup>65</sup>

It may be an overstatement to suggest that Calvin’s approach represents “the birth of the relational *imago*.”<sup>66</sup> Difference is not a decline from an ontologically pure unity. God himself is one in essence but three in persons. It is a reasonable conclusion from a theological reading of the whole canon that the relationality of man and woman, parents and offspring, individual and society, reflects in a finite manner the interpersonal life of the Trinity. This is evident especially if we follow the patristic consensus in taking “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image” (Gen. 1:26) as presupposing the Trinity. The fact that “it is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18) is not a surprising verdict from the God who is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the Christological interpretation of the *imago* rests on solid exegetical ground. Christ is the Word by whom all things were made, “the only begotten God” (John 1:1–14). Jesus said, “If you had known me, you would have known my Father also ... Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:7, 9). “Christ is the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). The Son “is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3). He is God’s image by nature, whereas human beings are created image bearers: images of the image.

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65 Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.3 and Calvin on Ps. 24:1, in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, vol. 4, trans. James Anderson (Baker, 1996), 402.

66 Following Paul Ramsey, David Cairns, and Douglas Hall, among others, Stanley Grenz argues this position in *The Social God and the Relational Self* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 162.

Furthermore, the New Testament represents the re-creation of the elect through regeneration, sanctification, and glorification as being conformed to the image and likeness of Christ (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; 2 Cor. 3:18). As Calvin observed, the true definition of the *imago* “can be nowhere better recognized than from the restoration of his corrupted nature” in Christ “who also is called the second Adam for the reason that he restores us to true and complete integrity.”<sup>67</sup> To be sure, the eternal Son only became incarnate “in the fullness of time,” but in God’s eternal decree (*viz.*, the covenant of redemption), the Father had already given a bride to his Son. “He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you” (1 Pet. 1:20). In the eternal Word resided the archetype of that perfect human nature that he would assume, according to which he created Adam and Eve (Col. 1:16). He is preeminent as the mediator of creation as well as redemption:

And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.  
 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.  
 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (Col. 1:17–20)

By their creation all human beings share in the human nature that the Son assumed in his incarnation. Yet it is only in union with Christ, who is “the head of the body, the church,” that this conformity to the perfect image is being restored.

Taken together, all these theories capture an important aspect of the image and likeness. Each, in fact, corrects the imbalance of the others taken by themselves. A covenantal interpretation incorporates them all. There is wide agreement among scholars that the Hebrew Scriptures represent humanity as God’s covenant partners. According to this position, the image is not something *within* human beings—an intrinsically immortal and eternal soul—but something *between* human beings and God as well as each other. In contrast with their neighbors, Israelites did not believe that they were formed out of the substance of a deity. Rather, they were creatures in body and soul. Their relation to God, like that of Adam and Eve, was based on a covenant in which God took them for his people on

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<sup>67</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.4.

the condition that they remained faithful to this relationship.

There is indeed a substantive aspect. Most fundamentally, the image and likeness refer to God's moral characteristics—that is, the communicable attributes: holiness, righteousness, goodness, and love. Since, by definition, simplicity, eternity, immutability, impassibility, etc., are incommunicable, they cannot be predicated even analogically of creatures. But the moral attributes are communicable. It is these ethical similarities that make covenantal representation and communion (the functional and relational views) possible. Although God does not have a body, humans image God ethically not only in their reasoning and choosing but in their physical comportment: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1); “for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:20). God wanted to make a creature who resembles him in goodness.

Functional and relational aspects are highlighted by the covenantal context. A. N. Whitehead's assertion, “Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness” may describe contemporary spirituality.<sup>68</sup> However, biblical anthropology affirms a thoroughly interpersonal, social, embedded, and embodied network of relationships to God and each other as well as to the rest of creation. This righteousness and holiness exhibited itself in covenant fidelity to what God had “worded” Adam to be in the beginning. Modern individualism leads to what Charles Taylor calls “the disengaged self.”<sup>69</sup> While modern anthropologies call us deeper into ourselves to find meaning, God's voice calls us outside ourselves to embrace him in faith and our neighbor in love. We do not construct our own identity by looking within but by hearing God tell us what he has “worded” us to be. We receive our nature as created for God's glory. Yet “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Like any public official today, the human being is a magnificent ruler who is a traitor to the office.

At the same time, the passages cited above signal a Christological reading of the *imago*. The eternal covenant of redemption is the basis for God's creative and redemptive program in history. Before the creation of the world, the Son possessed within himself the archetype of a human nature that reflected God's

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68 A. N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Meridian, 1960), 16.

69 Charles Taylor invokes this concept throughout *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. (Cambridge University Press, 1989) and *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), especially pp. 146–58.

communicable attributes, that was relational and representative, glorifying and enjoying God and leading the rest of creation into the victory of the Sabbath rest. Sin is not essential but accidental to human nature. That is, the humanity that Christ assumed was mortal but unfallen: in the same condition as Adam and Eve before they sinned. In our nature, the eternal Son was tested by suffering and temptation, “yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). Christ fulfilled the trial that Adam forfeited, so while all people are substantively created in God’s moral image and likeness, only believers are united to Christ’s humanity, which has endured the probation and entered triumphantly as glorified at the Father’s right hand.

From Genesis to Revelation, we come to recognize the integration of covenantal office and its eschatological fulfillment in the concept of the *imago*. Christ is the true prophet, priest, and king that Adam and Israel failed to be, and in his anointing as Messiah, believers are restored to the proper, albeit partial, functioning of image and likeness. In this way, Christ has preeminence not only as the eternal Word in whom our humanity resided as an archetype but as the incarnate God who always did the will of his Father.

As we have seen above, in Genesis 1:26 there is a close link between the *imago* and dominion under Yahweh, the Great King. Like Adam, the despoiled Israelites could lament, “The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned!” (Lam. 5:16). Psalm 8 declares of humankind, “You made him for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned him with glory and honor, putting everything in subjection under his feet.” After quoting this passage, the writer to the Hebrews observes, “Now in putting everything in subjection to him, he left nothing outside his control. At present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone” (Heb. 2:8–9).

Therefore, it is in the person of Christ that this royal, prophetic, and priestly role of humanity is restored. He has fulfilled the covenant of works so that we may receive adoption, justification, sanctification, and glorification according to a covenant of grace. And one day we will share completely in his glorified humanity. Adam lost his crown, but Christ has won it back. Identical with the Father as the covenant Lord, he is identical with us as the covenant servant.<sup>70</sup> Adam followed

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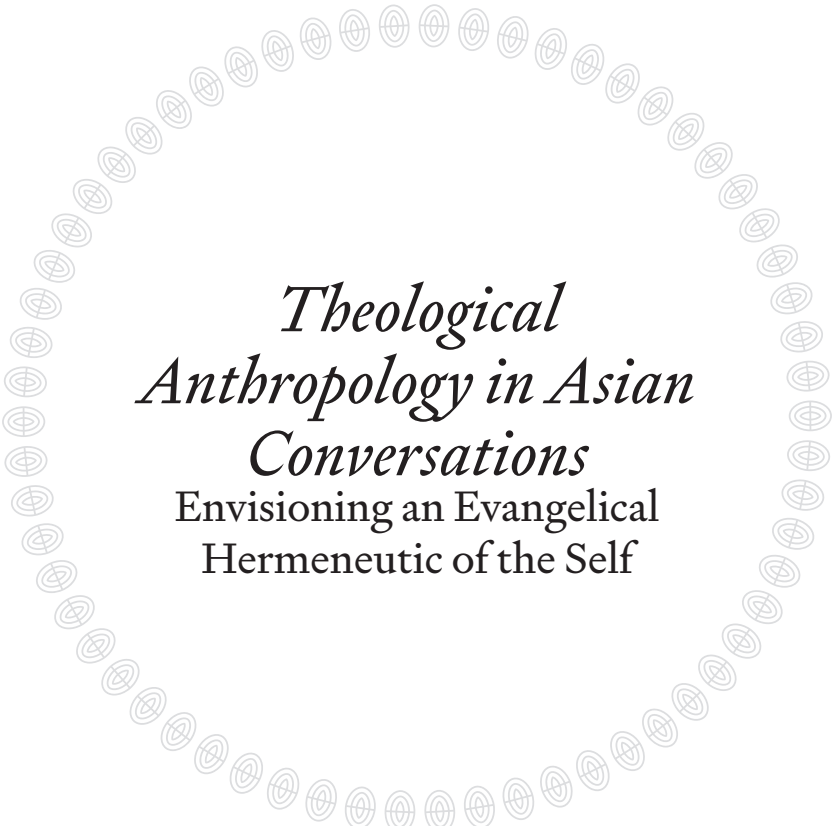
70 This is my overarching theme in *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Westminster John Knox, 2005).

his own autonomous inner light, while the Second Adam rebuffed the serpent's lies by appealing to "every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt. 4:4).

Thus, the *imago* is substantive (moral attributes), functional (prophet-priest-king), relational (covenantal), and Christological, and thus ultimately eschatological. As discussed later in this volume, glorification—deification—is the conformity of humans to God as much as is possible for a creature. Sharing fully in Christ's glorified humanity, believers will be perfectly righteous, glorious in body and soul, ruling and reigning with him, where nothing enters that can defile. All human beings participate in the image and likeness, because Christ's humanity is the archetype. But only those united to Christ, the Head of the Church, are restored to the not only perfect but glorified image of the Mediator and thus of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). And *that* is what we're made for.







*Theological  
Anthropology in Asian  
Conversations*  
Envisioning an Evangelical  
Hermeneutic of the Self

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John Calvin begins his monumental work *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with the assertion that “the knowledge of God and that of ourselves are connected.”<sup>1</sup> He argues that without the knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God and vice versa. However, he underlines that the order of teaching requires that we discuss theology first and then proceed to discuss anthropology. Asian theologians would contest this epistemological assertion. In Asian conversations, the epistemological starting point for discussing theological themes—in this case theological anthropology—is the current context of the lived experiences of people. Contextual demands strongly influence the approach and content of theological imaginations in the Asian context. This paper begins by discussing the starting point of theological anthropology in the Asian context, discussing the aspects of humanization, anti-empire rhetoric, othering, and agency in particular. Following this by recourse to Paul Ricœur’s *homo capax* (capable human), it proceeds to envision an evangelical hermeneutic of the self and elaborates on this idea by re-reading the story in Luke 10:25–37 as the story of the “neighbouring” Samaritan. Finally, the paper highlights two contemporary areas where there is scope for exploring the evangelical hermeneutic of the self—in relation to the contemporary relevance of Nicaea for theological anthropology and the challenges of the emerging digital culture.

## I. THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY: WHERE DO WE BEGIN?

Asia offers fertile ground or sites for the imagination, construction, and articulation of theological anthropology in the contemporary context. However, in contradistinction to their counterparts in other parts of the globe—particularly North American and Continental contexts—there is a strong critical consciousness of theological systems. In contrast to the systematization of theology (systematic theology), there is an overt privileging of a contextual approach to theology (contextual theology). In the words of Felix Wilfred, “There is a fragmentary sense to all kinds of South Asian theologies as they try to come to terms with ever new and challenging situations calling forth fresh faith responses.”<sup>2</sup> There is an evident tension between the “givenness” and/or the need for the “reconstruction” of theological anthropology. Wilfred observes

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1 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: Vol I&II*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. and indexed. Ford Lewis Battles (Westminster John Knox Press [1960], 2011), 35.

2 Felix Wilfred, “South Asia,” in *Ford’s The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918, 4th edition*, ed. Rachel Muers, Ashley Cocksworth, and David Ford (Wiley Blackwell, 2024), 189.

the “irruption of historical consciousness in the West”<sup>3</sup> primarily by way of prioritizing historical-critical method in biblical interpretation, which eventually gives way to “temporality” as the normative ecosystem for the articulation of theological themes. In his assessment, South Asian theologians, rather than going by historical consciousness or temporality, proceed by way of addressing questions that emerge from the immediate context, which “do not have any precedents or models in Christian history to go by.”<sup>4</sup> He makes the contentious yet insightful observation that South Asian theologians are “less attracted by issues of orthodoxy and heterodoxy than by a sense of fidelity to the gospel and the truth as revealed through the realities of their context.”<sup>5</sup>

Simon Chan shares a similar line of thought. He problematizes the starting point of theological imagination, especially in relation to what he terms as “elitist theologians.”<sup>6</sup> He faults Western scholars for their “highly selective approach”<sup>7</sup> to understanding Asian theology, which is partly informed by Asian ecumenical theologians. Chan’s primary concern is that theology in the Asian context, rather than being a product of elitist theological imagination(s), must emerge from the grassroots. However, he insists that instead of deriving theology solely from Asian cultural resources, Asian theological understanding must be outlined in the light of the larger Christian tradition.<sup>8</sup> Chan is careful to dodge the trap of the distinction between the Eastern and Western ways of thinking. He categorically dismisses such binaries as “neither helpful nor accurate.”<sup>9</sup> He observes:

A more pertinent question we need to ask in order to develop a contextual or local theology in an Asian context is: what spiritual and intellectual resources of the Christian faith can we bring to bear on the Asian context such that an authentic Christian faith can be effectively communicated and received?

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3 Wilfred, “South Asia,” 189.

4 Wilfred, “South Asia,” 202.

5 Wilfred, “South Asia,” 202.

6 Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (IVP Academic), 7, 28. Among the so-called elitist theologians, he directs us to the works of Hans Schwarz, *Theology in a Global Context: The Last Two Hundred Years* (W. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 510–539, and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction* (Baker, 2004).

7 Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 23.

8 Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 8. By “Christian Tradition” he refers to Catholic and Orthodox sources. Chan finds these two traditions to be broader in scope offering a more solid basis for grassroots theological imagination in contrast to mainline Protestantism and evangelicalism. By recourse to *ressourcement* (creative engagement with earlier source) and *aggiornamento* (adaptation and updating of these resources in the light of the new situations in which the church finds itself), he attempts to demonstrate the “distinctive contributions of Asian grassroots Christianity to the wider church’s theological endeavour.”

9 Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 10.

Implied in this question is a fundamental theological presupposition: an Asian theology is about the Christian faith in Asia. This presupposition may be phrased in different ways, but it runs through diverse Christian traditions, including Catholicism, Orthodoxy, evangelicalism and Pentecostalism.<sup>10</sup>

Both Wilfred (a Catholic) and Chan (an evangelical) share the common concern of constructing theology from the contextual realities/grassroots of the Asian people yet in faithfulness to the gospel and the global Christian tradition. Reverting back to Wilfred, against “temporality,” he argues for “spatiality” as the epistemological starting point for constructing theological anthropology. By spatiality he means the interplay of culture, sociopolitics, tradition, language, etc.<sup>11</sup> There is an evident and inevitable tension in determining the epistemological starting point for the reimagining of theological anthropology, raising the question of an appropriate methodological framework. This tension provides the scope for envisioning theological anthropology afresh in the Asian context. Before addressing this further, it is imperative to discuss the concerns that are inherent to the Asian discourse on what it means to be human (theological anthropology).

## II. THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE ASIAN CONCERN FOR HUMANIZATION

While speaking of “Asian theologies,” it is customary to refer to liberationist strands of theology like Dalit theology, Minjung theology, Pyithu-Dukkha theology, Filipino People’s Theology, or Adivasi/Tribal theology, among others. Apart from these strands, Asian theology is associated with the contributions of prominent theologians like Kazoh Kitamori, Kosuke Koyama, C. S. Song, M. M. Thomas, Stanley J. Samartha, Felix Wilfred, and Kwok Pui-Lan. In relation to theological anthropology, a common denominator to all forms of Asian discussions is the context of dehumanization against which diverse forms of humanization theologies emerged.<sup>12</sup> In simple terms “dehumanization” refers to forces that deny humanity their human rights, dignity, identity, and social justice.<sup>13</sup>

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10 Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 10.

11 Wilfred, “South Asia,” 189.

12 All forms of Asian theologies from Contextual, Dalit, Tribal, Minjung, Pyithu-Dukka, People’s Theology to Postcolonial, etc., share the challenges of addressing the context of dehumanization. For an insightful discussion see Archie Chu Chung Lee, “Contextual Theology in East Asia,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, 3rd edition, ed. David Ford and Rachel Muers (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 518–534.

13 For a detailed discussion, see M. M. Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation: Some Crucial Issues of the Theol-*

Here I limit the discussion to two theologians in particular, Paulos Mar Gregorios (1922–1996) and M. M. Thomas (1916–1996). In the context of dehumanization, Gregorios proposed “Sacramental Humanism” from the perspective of Orthodox tradition. M. M. Thomas, who initiated a contextual approach to theology as a whole, called for a “Secular Humanism.”

Paulos Mar Gregorios rendered a philosophical understanding of theological anthropology in engagement with Gregory of Nyssa.<sup>14</sup> In the context of the scientific-technological developments of his times, he was critical of human autonomy at the expense of the eclipse/death of God. Western Enlightenment ushered in abstract, rationalistic, and dualistic ways of thinking that created the God-human and human-nature binaries. He observed that science and technology alienated us from reality by presenting us two options: either to know it objectively or to manipulate it technologically. This attitude eventually leads to the “mastery” of nature or reality as a whole. As an alternate to this attitude of “mastery,” Gregorios vouched for the attitude of “mystery.”<sup>15</sup> By mystery he means the initiation, participation, “mutual perichoresis in which God and the universe embrace and penetrate each other.”<sup>16</sup> This is best expressed in the eucharistic sacrament. In the practice of mastery over nature, humanity uses technology to objectify and alienate nature to the point of losing its capacity for self-giving mutual love in its relationship with God and nature. This ultimately leads to the corruption of humanity’s own nature. Science and technology, instead of enhancing the life of humanity—especially for the less privileged—leads to the dehumanization of humanity.<sup>17</sup> Humanity forgets that its primary responsibility is to offer to God in the act of eucharistic sacrament the whole of nature—which is our extended body. Through his death on the cross, Jesus Christ gave not just himself but also humanity and nature (creation) in the act of self-denying love to God. In the same manner, redeemed humanity, which is initiated into and called to participate in this eternal act of self-giving love, must use technology as a way

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*ogy of Mission in Contemporary India* (The Christian Literature Society, 1971). By “forces of dehumanization” Thomas was referring to the call of the Uppsala Assembly of the WCC to the Churches to identify with and participate in the struggle “for human rights, social justice and world community.” From the economic point of view Thomas opposed poverty, and from a social point of view he opposed the caste system. Also refer Norman Goodall, ed. *The Uppsala Report 1968: Official Report of the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches Uppsala July 4–20, 1968* (World Council of Churches, 1968), 27–29.

14 See Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Cosmic Man The Divine Presence: The Theology of St. Gregory of Nyssa* (ca 330–395 A.D.) (Paragon House Publishers [1980], 1988).

15 For detailed discussion see Paulos Gregorios, *The Human Presence: An Orthodox View of Nature* (World Council of Churches, 1978), 82–89.

16 Gregorios, *The Human Presence*, 88.

17 For a detailed discussion see Paulos Mar Gregorios, *Science, Technology and the Future of Humanity* (ISP-CK & MGF, 2007).

of humanizing nature and offer it to God as an act of worship. This attitude of mystery begins by humanity's offering of itself and nature via the responsible use of technology to God in love. This, in other words, is sacramental humanism. Sacramental humanism reminds humanity of its mediatorial role between God and nature, where it holds in tension the mastery of nature within the mystery of worship.

Thomas understands the dynamics between God (theology) and humanity (anthropology) in relational terms by categorically rejecting abstract, metaphysical, and scientifically isolated conceptions. He says:

I think the ultimate framework of reference for Christian thought is neither God nor man in the abstract, neither the metaphysics of God nor the science of man taken in isolation, but Jesus Christ who is God-Man or rather God-for-Man, or, to use Karl Barth's expression, the Humanity of God.<sup>18</sup>

For Thomas the crucial issues were the call of the World Council of Churches (WCCC) at Uppsala in 1968 against dehumanizing forces and the criticism of Peter Beyerhaus,<sup>19</sup> who held strong reservations against the Uppsala Assembly's apparent epistemological shift from theology to anthropology. The underlying concern was the ecumenical emphasis on universalism, the interpretation of world history as history of salvation, and the orientation toward social activity in opposition to an orientation to soteriology, which was foundational to biblical evangelicalism.<sup>20</sup> Thomas responded to the criticisms of Beyerhaus in his Carey Memorial Lectures<sup>21</sup> which were later published as *Salvation and Humanisation*. Thomas's theology was driven by the conviction that the Christian community had to be fully engaged with and thoroughly involved in their contexts.<sup>22</sup> Thomas's immediate criteria of relevance were the Asian Revolution, secularization, and

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18 Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, 7.

19 Peter Beyerhaus was the Director of the Institute for Missiology and Ecumenical Theology in Tübingen. His fear was that Uppsala substituted anthropology for theology, holding this to be a conscious step, thereby forfeiting God as the absolute point of reference for all Christian thought and action. He held this to be an "anti-Christian symptom" and daring rebellion against God. Refer his article "Mission and Humanization," *International Review of Missions*, Vol. 60 (1971): 11–24.

20 Thomas, *Salvation and Humanisation*, 6.

21 This was delivered at Bangalore at the Charles Ranson Hall on the occasion of the meetings of the Senate Convocation of the University of Serampore during the month of January in 1970.

22 M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (Madras: CLS [1970], 1991), 309–315. Out of the four criteria for a living theology that was outlined by Thomas, the first criterion is that it must be 'situational,' or 'contextual.'

humanization.<sup>23</sup> Inasmuch as the Asian context was characterized by the transition in political, economic, and social structures and the major shift from village and rural structures to modernization and industrialization, the overarching concern was that of secular humanism. Secular humanism reflects a “secularistic” attitude that is not only closed to but also opposed to the idea of the Christian gospel and also devoid of a “comprehensive understanding” of the reality of humanity, which eventually becomes dehumanizing.<sup>24</sup> Thomas’s engagement with emerging ideologies—by which he meant the study of humanity or social anthropology—led him to a deeper, mature, well-informed, and sustained engagement with secular ideologies in India with the aim of making sense of the “secular” meaning of Christ.

In this regard, the cross plays a crucial role in his theological anthropology. Through the mediation of the cross of Christ, Thomas understands God’s identification with the sufferings of humanity and develops an understanding of “cruciform humanity in Christ as the ultimate destiny of mankind.”<sup>25</sup> His concern for the human condition led him to be vocal about the inefficiency and insufficiency of human achievements and moral standards to lift itself out of its human predicament. In the course of the influence of modernization and development, the cross serves as a critique of science and technology. Though science makes positive contributions toward human development, under the spell of optimism of its own nature and historical progress, it fails to recognize “the fact of evil in the higher self of man” and the “powerlessness of moral idealism.”<sup>26</sup> In the face of this reality, the cross stands as a reminder of “the spiritual evil” that is resident within the best of human institutions—religion, society, and state—constantly bearing witness to the human need for redemption by God. The cross, by demonstrating the self-emptying redemptive love of God, frees us to live in our history as people who are essentially models or patterns of a new humanity that is destined for an “eschatological humanization”<sup>27</sup> where all contrary forces to the fuller life of humanity will be removed. The ground of this universal influence of

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23 See M. M. Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution* (SCM Press/Lucknow Publishing House [1966], 1967), 6–7. By “revolution” Thomas meant a response or even a reaction to certain hegemonic and totalitarian tendencies by power-mongers.

24 M. M. Thomas, *The Secular Ideologies of India and The Secular Meaning of Christ* (The Christian Literature Society, 1976), 194–195. By dehumanizing he means denying and denuding the poor and the underprivileged/marginalized people—the Dalits, women, and tribals of their true humanity. In response, Thomas advocated a positive secular humanism which affirms the humanization of nature, creativity within human history, liberation from social bondage, and realization of love in human relations.

25 M. M. Thomas, *Man and the Universe of Faiths*, 38.

26 Thomas, *The Secular Ideologies of India*, 33.

27 M. M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ’s Sake*, 113.

the cross is the historical cross, which is open to all by way of faith response.

In the context of our sociopolitical realities, the cross calls for discerning the “continuing work of the living Jesus Christ to awaken man to his true humanity, promised in Christ, and needing the discipline of the Gospel for its fulfillment.”<sup>28</sup> The crux of Thomas’s theological anthropology is a “positive secular humanism” that affirms the humanization of nature and the creativity of humanity in purposive history, seeking emancipation from oppressive structures and the realization of the importance of love and justice as mediated by the cross to direct human relations in every historical situation. In the process of engaging human concerns from a sociopolitical point of view (anthropology), priority is given to positive secular humanism characterized as “humanization” (soteriology). The basis for this engagement is the Christ event (Christology), which he reimagines as “new humanity.”

### III. THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF EMPIRE/AGENCY/OTHERING

Under the influence of postmodern/colonial theoretical developments in the Continental/Western context, the Asian context continues to witness radical forms of theological-anthropological discourses. Empire, agency, and othering are major issues within theological anthropology that are especially informed and funded by postcolonial and anti-imperial theories and theologies. Anti-empire rhetoric seeks to counter empire tendencies within the domain of theology. Joerg Rieger understands “empire” as the “massive concentrations of power that permeate all aspects of life and that cannot be controlled by any one actor alone.”<sup>29</sup> He states further:

Empire seeks to extend its control as far as possible; not geographically, politically, and economically ... but also intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, culturally, and religiously. The problem with empire is not primarily a moral one—it is not that all empires are necessarily equally evil and wrong. Some empires and certain modes of colonialism claim to promote benevolent causes ... The problem with empire has to do with forms of top-down control that are established on

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28 Albert H. Van Den Heuvel, *Unity of Mankind*, 92.

29 Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Fortress Press, 2007), 2.

the back of the empire's subjects and that do not allow those within its reach to pursue alternative purposes. The problem with this approach can be seen in Christology: in a situation of empire Christ becomes part of the system to such a degree that little or no room exists for the pursuit of alternative realities of Christ. Empire displays strong tendencies to domesticate Christ and anything else that poses a challenge to its powers.<sup>30</sup>

This same approach is applied to theological anthropology in the postcolonial Asian context. In Asian theological anthropological conversations, we are witnessing counterimaginings to the de-imperializing theology that was bequeathed to us by our Western counterparts. All forms of such theologies are written off as products of colonialism.<sup>31</sup> In the eagerness to reshape theological anthropology in a postcolonial sensibility,<sup>32</sup> the primary quest is to rediscover identity. Inherent to the identity discourse are the issues of “othering,” “worlding,” and “agency/subjectivities.”<sup>33</sup> Asian theological anthropologies question tendencies towards the imposition and fixation of essential(ist) identities and vouch for the promotion of subjectivities instead. In such a context, the proposal is for a “planetary anthropology” where the emphasis is on intersubjectivity and embodiment.<sup>34</sup> By problematizing transcendent categories—which fosters othering—metaphysical discussions in relation to theological anthropology are rendered useless. The emphasis is on “radical relationality” that “relocates ethics in a materialistic plane of human relationship.”<sup>35</sup> Within this framework, there is no place for human sinfulness. Planetary ontology rejects all forms/theologies of human depravity to create space for diverse ways of becoming more human, or perhaps even posthuman to the point where the human element is eventually eclipsed, and the emphasis is more on “becoming.”<sup>36</sup> The common denominator

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30 Rieger, *Christ and Empire*, 2–3.

31 For e.g., see Y. T. Vinayaraj, *Faith in the Age of Empire: Christian Doctrine in a Postcolonial Sensibility* (ISP-CK and CWM, 2020), xxvi.

32 Postcolonial sensibility is understood as “a discursive strategy to unsettle notions of theological normativity of both West and East as it legitimates the logic of colonialism and the desires of domination.” See Vinayaraj, *Faith in the Age of Empire*, xxvii.

33 In simple terms, othering means a process of the colonizer to distinguish the native from colonial governments. Worlding is related to the way the Western imperialists describe the “Third World.”

34 For different approaches to the overarching theme see Stephen D. Moore and Mayra Rivera, eds., *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology* (Fordham University Press, 2011).

35 Vinayaraj, *Faith in the Age of Empire*, 50.

36 Other Asian voices that reiterate these views are those of Kwok Pui-Lan and Wonhee Anne Joh. See Kwok Pui-Lan, “What Has Love To Do With It? Planerarity, Feminism, and Theology, in *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and Mayra Rivera (Fordham University Press, 2011), 31–45. Wonhee Ann Joh, *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

to all these imaginations of postcolonial/planetary anthropology is the emphasis on intersubjectivity, interbeing, radical relationality, and planetarity.

#### IV. ENVISIONING AN EVANGELICAL HERMENEUTIC OF THE SELF

One thing that emerges from the above discussion is the urgency and need to make sense of theological anthropology in context. Though Wilfred is dismissive of orthodoxy, he underlines the need to articulate how *the gospel* addresses our immediate contexts. This is also the concern of Chan, Gregorios, Thomas, and the host of other Asian theologians. In the light of this shared concern, there is scope for articulating an “evangelical” theological anthropology that draws from the riches of Christian tradition and engages with contextual realities. At this stage it is important to note the distinction between “evangelical” and “evangelicalism(s).” Evangelicalism(s) is understood as the diverse interpretations or expressions of the evangelical faith.<sup>37</sup> “Evangelical,” on the other hand, means that which is “informed by the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>38</sup> This is independent of the diverse interpretations or perspectives of the gospel account across history. The evangel (the gospel/good news) precedes evangelicalism(s). Hence evangelical may be further clarified to mean “gospel affirming.”

In vouching for an evangelical theological anthropology, I am vouching for a “theology of gospel affirmation,” or a “gospel-affirming” theological anthropology. At the heart of the gospel is an event—the Christ event. Were it not for the Christ event, there would be no evangel and hence no evangelical message/perspective or theology. It is the Christ event that funds and mediates to us the sum and substance of our theology. If evangelical theology is the product of the reflection by evangelicals on the gospel, then it is the Christ event alone that mediates to us the content or the “stuff” of our theology.<sup>39</sup> As far as theology is concerned,

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37 Gabriel Fackre highlights that evangelicalism expresses itself in the form of subcommunities like the Fundamentalist Evangelicals, the Old Evangelicals, the New Evangelicals, Justice and Peace Evangelicals, and Charismatic evangelicals. See Gabriel Fackre, “Evangelical, Evangelicalism,” in *New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, eds., A Richardson and J. Bowden (SCM, 1983), 191–192. Further there are those who would identify themselves as “Ecumenical Evangelicals,” or even “Radical Evangelicals.” Today one may even speak of evangelicalism based on regional or geopolitical sensitivities like North American Evangelicalism, British Evangelicalism, Latin American Evangelicalism, African Evangelicalism, and Indian/Asian Evangelicalism.

38 Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 11. Barth clarifies that this “being informed by the gospel of Jesus Christ” is in line with the way it was heard afresh in the sixteenth-century Reformation by direct return to the Holy Scripture. This is not to discount the definitions rendered by David Bebbington, Timothy Larsen, Daniel J. Trier, Michael Bird, Tom Greggs etc.

39 The word “stuff” is more than a mere colloquial expression. M. M. Thomas in discussing the criteria of a living theology, held that the “stuff” of living theology is the life and witness of the laity in the lay world and

the Christ event is *the* decisive event. Every imagination of the gospel is based on this decisive event as given to us in the Gospel accounts and affirmed by apostolic tradition. This renders the meaning of the Christ event to be transcontextual. If a particular context is taken as “the” final horizon of understanding the gospel, it will inevitably lead to a particular typification of the gospel and theology. To avoid falling into the trap of theological typification or parochialism, Asian theology must derive its content from the actual Christ event so as to resonate with the local context. To develop a distinct or an authentic Asian theological anthropology, it is imperative to make sense of the actual Christ event afresh vis-à-vis the issues and questions emerging from the local context. In other words, what we need today is a gospel-affirming reimagination—an *evangelical reimagination*—of Asian theological anthropology.

It is on this basis that we need to revisit theological anthropology in the Asian context, especially by transcending the binary tension between the systematic-contextual approach. It is here that we need to explore the prospects of a hermeneutical approach to theological anthropology in the Asian context.<sup>40</sup> Hermeneutics, inasmuch as it is about engaging texts produced in another time and contexts from ours, is about how we understand and make sense of them in our respective contexts. It has the potential to bring the systematic and contextual approach into meaningful conversation to bring about new and fresh meaning. In the present context, we need a mechanism to theologize without falling into the trap of binary opposition between systematic and contextual theology. Contrary to a static, finished, or closed understanding of systematic theology, we must understand it as being dynamic, living, growing, and progressive in nature. All theologies arise out of particular contexts. It is the method or approach the theologian or the theologizing community takes that determines the nature of the theological expression. Diverse contexts provide the space to think through theology in a systematic manner. Systematic theology is a form of theological engagement in particular contexts, while contexts provide the space or the arena for the reimagination of dogmatic themes, hence the importance of contextual engagement. It is contextual realities that keep systematics alive, infusing it with life and energy. Systematic theology plays the role of a handmaid or servant to

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the fellowship of the church's congregation responding in Christ to save the secular neighbourhood. Though the life and witness of the laity is crucial in society at large, the core/cruc of the gospel message remains the Christ event alone.

<sup>40</sup> For a good introduction to hermeneutics and the discipline of theology see Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (W. B. Eerdmans, 2009).

contextual realities.<sup>41</sup> Systematic theology must not misunderstand the genuine intentions of contextual theology, and at the same time it must be critical of parochial tendencies inherent in certain forms of contextual theologies. There is a tendency to accentuate praxis at the expense of doctrinal content on one hand, while on the other hand, the tendency is to immerse oneself so much into doctrine without deliberation on its practical relevance.

This is especially evident in forms of Asian theological anthropology. In the eagerness to address the Asian quandary of dehumanization and counter apparent forms of colonial theologies, there is both a subtle and an overt tendency to overlook fundamental/biblical faith affirmations of what it means to be human. This is evident in relation to the image of God (*imago dei*) and the reality of the Fall. In the contemporary postcolonial Asian context, the emphasis is on multidisciplinary, which privileges a deconstructive reading of theological anthropology. In this context, God is de-transcendentalized, by virtue of which the *imago dei* is reduced to the plane of mere becoming and intersubjectivity. Sin is located in the systems (sociopolitical, economic, etc.) that exploit the bodies and human rights of the colonial subjects. *Imago dei* is just an “agentic assemblage”<sup>42</sup> in the sense that it is constituted and comprised of “an assemblage of microbes, animals, plants, metals, chemicals, word-sounds, and the like.”<sup>43</sup> The emphasis is more on a “materialistic political ontology of humanity.”<sup>44</sup> Rather than engaging in an apologetic or polemic response, an evangelical theological anthropology seeks to affirm what it means to be human in line with the larger Christ event. In contrast to the pessimistic view of humanity, which emphasizes the Fall and the sinfulness of humanity, and the optimistic view, which plays up the rational and potential self, evangelical theological anthropology emphasizes the “hermeneutical self.”

In his regard, Paul Ricoeur becomes a key conversation partner. In contrast to the apparent pessimism of classical theology and obvious optimism of postmodern/colonial theology, Ricoeur affirms the situated, fragile, and capable self (*homo capax*). The capable self is constituted in the idea of the embodiment (embodied self), the quest for meaning (hermeneutical self), sociality or entanglement

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41 See Stanley Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Westminster John Knox, 2001), 17–18.

42 See Jane Bennet, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham University Press, 2010), 20–38.

43 Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, 120–121.

44 Vinayaraj, *Faith in the Age of Empire*, 50.

(social self), and the capacity to encounter God (theological self).<sup>45</sup> Inherent in Ricœur’s idea of the capable self are concerns that resonate with Asian theological anthropology. Ricœur comes across as a fine example of how to hold in tension contextual situatedness and sustained systematic, philosophical, and intellectual engagement. By locating the human self in concrete contexts, he takes the materiality of humanity seriously and does not reduce it to mere spirituality. Recognizing the embodiment of the human calls for admitting the entanglement with other contingent factors like language, culture, and tradition, which shape our identity. This idea of being “inextricably entangled”<sup>46</sup> is in contrast to the Enlightenment idea of the “autonomous self.”

Yet, through embodiment and entanglement, the capable self uncompromisingly reiterates the fallenness of humanity.<sup>47</sup> Ricœur uses two words to address the Fall of humanity—fragile/fragility and disproportion. To echo the words of Dan Stiver, Ricœur holds the human self to be “a fragile equilibrium that easily falls apart.”<sup>48</sup> Ricœur is careful to affirm the factuality of the Fall, not in terms of the literal interpretation of Adam and Eve as the unique story of the first man and woman but in terms of reflecting the condition of every man and woman right from the beginning. He creatively interprets the fall (fault) as being preceded by fallibility. It is human fallibility that renders it conscious of its faults. There is an ontological priority to fallibility in relation to the existential reality of the Fall. Every human being is inherently fallible. For him the Genesis story provides a new lease on life to the universal reality of the Fall affirmed in and through the prevailing myths in other ancient cultures. Evil is present across cultures. In the Genesis story, this is symbolized by the serpent. Inasmuch as evil is present, the Fall is a choice we have made. The presence of evil must at least lead us to the awareness of our fall, though we may not have a full understanding of it.

Considering the fragility/fallenness of embodied and entangled humans, our identities are “story-shaped.” However, like all stories, there is the scope for

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45 For a detailed discussion see Dan R Stiver, *Ricœur and Theology* (Bloomsbury, 2012), 91–117.

46 This is an idea that he adopts in engagement with Maurice Merleau-Ponty. See Stiver, *Ricœur and Theology*, 104.

47 See especially two works of Paul Ricœur in this regard, viz., *Fallible Man* (Fordham University Press, 1986); and *Oneself as Another* (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

48 Stiver, *Ricœur and Theology*, 100. Here it is also important to clarify that Ricœur distinguishes human and humanity. Human is the individual self, while humanity is the “others.” There is a kind of Kantian transcendent and practical synthesis at work in his thinking in the sense that he realizes how the universal idea of human/ity combines with the concrete human/individual self in complex and concrete situations. Stiver also observes that Ricœur’s analysis of the fragility of the human self corresponds to Reinhold Niebuhr’s and Paul Tillich’s theological analyses of interpretation of “original sin” and the “Fall.”

construction and deconstruction. Identity is formed and impacted by various contingencies. If identity is story shaped, then humans write their stories, and their stories are also written by other contingent factors. The self in a sense is a mystery to itself. It is dispossessed and fragile. This reality leads the self to constantly be on a path of self-discovery, trying to make sense of itself. It is always in an interpretative process. The human self is an interpreting self. In other words, it is hermeneutical in nature. Inherent to this hermeneutical self is the “capacity to encounter God or at least to be open to a religious and theological experience.”<sup>49</sup> This is what Ricœur means by the image of God—a “point of contact” of humanity with grace.<sup>50</sup>

It is safe to infer that in line with the early church fathers, and Athanasius in particular, Ricœur affirms the *imago dei* as the very person of Jesus Christ himself.<sup>51</sup> Ricœur provides a model for imagining the *imago dei* in concrete terms rather than in a metaphysical or philosophical sense. Intrinsic to the embodied and entangled human self is the idea of ethical responsibility. This eventually develops and concerns itself with the idea of justice in society at large. Ethics, by nature, are a social matter and not merely an individual or private matter. In the human encounter with God, humanity cannot escape its ethical responsibility. At its core, humanity’s ethical responsibility is to encounter Jesus Christ and to emulate Christ in the web of entanglement. Humanity is called to demonstrate Jesus Christ to a fragile and disproportionate world. In doing so, it demonstrates its true theological self. Failing to live up to our ethical responsibility is evidence of the inherent disproportionality and fragility of ourselves. Taking these cues from Ricœur, the following section attempts to explore an evangelical hermeneutic of the self by reading the story in Luke 10:25–37 as the story of the “Neighbouring” Samaritan.

## V. THE “NEIGHBOURING” SAMARITAN AND EVANGELICAL HERMENEUTIC OF THE SELF

In the Asian context, othering is a genuine concern. The situated and capable self is, in a sense, a given and accepted reality. The problem is with the fragility of the self. Though evangelical theological anthropology takes contextual engagement seriously, it builds/funds its content by recourse to the original evangel—the gospel/the Christ event. If Christ is the epistemological starting point of Christian

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49 Stiver, *Ricœur and Theology*, 114.

50 Stiver, *Ricœur and Theology*, 114.

51 See Athanasius CG, §2, §46.

ethics, then the object of the church's ethical praxis must be the world, because the revelation of God's reality is not only *in* the world but also *for* the world. From the Christ event itself, this truth stands out very clearly in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The context of the parable is the question of what needs to be done to inherit eternal life, which ultimately leads to the question of "Who is my neighbour?" In response, Jesus tells the questioner—in this case a lawyer—the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Though traditionally this story is known as the story of the "Good Samaritan," from an evangelical hermeneutic point of view, I believe a more appropriate title would be the "Neighbouring Samaritan."

In Luke 10:25–37, the question of the lawyer moves from a religious/theological one (about eternal life) to a social or relational one (who is my neighbour). At its core, this parable radically challenges and decentres the religious, social, and political order of the day. One wonders whether Jesus, by invoking Jerusalem and Jericho, was in a sense hinting at two centres of exclusivity—an exclusively religious centre (Jerusalem) and an exclusively social centre (Jericho).<sup>52</sup> In describing the action of the priest and the Levite upon seeing the wounded man, Christ mentions that they "passed by on the other side." They were guilty of "othering." This conscious othering exposes their fragile nature to the point that they forget their ethical responsibility. They were so self-centred that they did not recognize themselves in the plight of the wounded traveller, whereas the Samaritan "came near ... and went to him." The action of the Samaritan moved from that of "othering" to "neighbouring." The Samaritan reflected the image of God by his ethical actions. Through the story of the "neighbouring" Samaritan, Christ seems to be subverting the parochial and exclusive understanding of "Who is my neighbour?" Christ turns the lawyer's understanding of neighbour on its head. The lawyer was more concerned about who his neighbour was in relation to himself as the point of reference (who is *my* neighbour?). Jesus subverts this approach by reminding him that *we need to understand who we* are in relation to others. The Samaritan, fragile as he was, demonstrates the true *imago dei* by his ethical capacity in the situation of violence. Many times, binary identity constructions blind us from discerning and addressing that which is common to all of us—our humanity.

An evangelical hermeneutic of the self calls for revisioning what it means to be human by considering the life of Jesus Christ, who freely gave himself for others

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52 I. Howard Marshall notes that "Jericho was one of the principal country residences for priests." See I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (W. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 447. Scholars hold Jericho to be the place where priests settled down after retirement.

without in any way compromising his divine-human identity. In the Asian context, for meaningful engagement we would do well to focus primarily on the commonalities rather than on the differences—in this case our humanity and not theological leanings. This is not to suggest that we suspend or discard our theological convictions. In terms of praxis, the driving question must be How are we committed to the good news of the Christ event in the way we treat our neighbours of diverse faith and ideological/theological persuasions? Evangelical theological anthropology gains traction when it is anchored in the recognition and celebration of our humanity, reflecting our creation in the divine image by discharging our ethical responsibilities. But then how do we do this in the Asian context of diversity and plurality of theological views? Perhaps the larger context of the parable of the “neighbouring” Samaritan gives us some clues.

The story of the Samaritan is part of the “travelogue” of Luke. It is interesting to note that this episode is recorded after Jesus Christ’s rejection by the Samaritans in Luke 9:51–56. Luke gives a hint that Jesus’s rejection was linked to a religious-political reason—“because his face was set toward Jerusalem.” Even in his earthly life, Jesus Christ remained committed to and gave himself to and for the “other” despite rejection. In the contemporary Asian context, we need to concede that identity discourse is about transcending our narrow socioreligious/theological perspectives to embrace the other, in the process of which the other is seen not merely as “other” but as one’s self, thereby loving the neighbour as the self. In the context of embodiment and entanglement, identities or our understanding of our selves are negotiated outside of exclusive confines. This is not to deny the credibility and particularity of an evangelical identity. Rather, it is about upholding the integrity of an evangelical hermeneutic of the self that follows the pattern of the Christ event and not rigid interpretations of it—be it evangelicalism or ecumenicalism—in the context of diversity and plurality.

## **VI. EVANGELICAL HERMENEUTIC OF THE SELF AND CONTEMPORARY ENGAGEMENTS**

In the contemporary context, this has relevance in at least two important areas—the contemporary relevance of Nicaea for theological anthropology and the challenges of the emerging digital culture. The intention is to highlight some concerns and suggest how an evangelical hermeneutic of the self can be resourceful in addressing these concerns. World over, ecumenical bodies are commemorating the 1,700th year of Nicaea in 2025. Though the theme of

theological anthropology is not explicitly stated, it is implicit within the Nicene Creed. A major criticism against Nicaea is its propagation of an “elitist theology, which ... could no longer be easily communicated to ordinary Christians.”<sup>53</sup> Another criticism is in regard to the language used in the Creed: C. H. Turner notes that older creeds were formulated primarily for catechumens and were local in character, while the new creed—Nicaea—was “a creed for bishops.”<sup>54</sup> Apart from the language, postmodern/colonial critics criticize the overtly metaphysical nature of the discussions in Nicaea. They especially problematize the apparent “hierarchical ontology” inherent to the creed. Herein lies the clue to Wilfred’s comment that Asian theologians are less interested in matters of orthodoxy.

However, evangelical theological anthropology helps us to realize that early church thinkers were more relational in their thinking than metaphysical. Nicaea affirms that the one Lord, Jesus Christ, “for us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became *truly human*.” It recognizes the true humanity of Jesus Christ to address the quandary of humanity.<sup>55</sup> At a time when the unity and identity of the Son with the Father came under threat, Athanasius not only safeguarded it in line with tradition but also emphasized an incarnational and relational ontology between God and humanity. The very idea of incarnation assumes and presupposes embodiment and entanglement. The Christ event is a situated event in the fragile and disproportionate atmosphere of human weakness and corruption. An evangelical hermeneutic of the self provides a model to revisit Nicene theology in relational and concrete terms, with the potential to address the reality of human fall. It’s necessary to explore the meaning of the Incarnation in relation to theological anthropology in the Asian context, not just by regurgitating any particular traditional bias of the Incarnation but by doing it in such a way that it addresses the ground-level realities of the Asian situation. The basic concerns of the Asian people are those of political turmoil and power rhetoric, economic disparity, ethnic conflicts, globalization, gender-based violence, and religious plurality, among others. If Nicaea is to have relevance in the contemporary context, evangelicals must revisit it in the light of local challenges and questions to reinforce an evangelical hermeneutic of what it means to be human.

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53 Wolfram Kinzig, *A History of Early Christian Creeds* (Walter de Gruyter, 2024), 624–625.

54 C. H. Turner, *The History and Use of Creeds and Anathemas in the Early Centuries of the Church*, 2nd ed. (SPCK, 1910), 24.

55 This was precisely the argument of Athanasius—that “Christ became what we are that we might become what he is.” See Athanasius, DI, §9, §16.

Another challenge facing the Asian context is the emerging digital culture. Recently, the Department of Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts, at the University of Ljubljana deliberated on the theme of “Humanism, Posthumanism and Transhumanism in the East Asian Past and Present.”<sup>56</sup> The range of topics discussed are so intriguing that they interrupt our anthropological slumber. William Brown, in his discussion of “subaltern” imaginings of artificial intelligence, observes how a (South) Indian movie like *Entbiran* (*The Robot* 2010) challenges Eurocentrism in science fiction and vouches for human and nonhuman codependency and connectedness, ultimately leading to an egalitarian world.<sup>57</sup> At the economic and development front, India is striving to enhance the quality of life by engaging cutting-edge technologies like AI, quantum computing, and semiconductors.<sup>58</sup> With Asian cultures being integrative and inclusive by nature, the idea of “interconnectedness” seems to have strong resonance. With the theology of intersubjectivity (de-transcendentalizing God) gaining traction, we are witnessing the loss of the integrity of the divine and human identity in the God-human relationship. Theologically speaking, it not only negates God’s aseity<sup>59</sup> but also discards the *imago dei* and constructs an entity that is other than human (trans/posthuman) based on aporetic constructions.<sup>60</sup> A theology of intersubjectivity shifts the focus from an ontology of being to an ontology of becoming, where the human is redundant.

Inasmuch as the emerging digital culture makes us aware of the tension in the human-machine relationship, it remains silent with regard to the reality of the Fall. An evangelical theological anthropology recognizes our entanglement

56 For brief details see Maja Maria Kosek, *Humanism, Posthumanism and Transhumanism in the East Asian Past and Present* (University of Ljubljana Press, 2023). This was held from May 19–21, 2023.

57 See William Brown, “‘Subaltern’ Imaginings of Artificial Intelligence,” in *From Deleuze and Guattari to Posthumanism: Philosophies of Immanence*, eds. Christine Daigle and Terrance H. McDonald (Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 183.

58 The latest news tells us that tech giants like Google and Nvidia are all geared up to enhance AI focus and invest in India. See PTI, “Tech giants Google, Nvidia to enhance AI focus, investments in India,” *The Hindu*, 24 Sept 2024, <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/technology/tech-giants-google-nvidia-to-enhance-ai-focus-investments-in-india/article68676353.ece>. Accessed 24 Sept 2024.

59 Aseity refers to the state or quality of being independent and autonomous. According to Paul Tillich, “There is no ground prior to him [sic] which could condition his [sic] freedom ... A conditioned God is no God.” See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1 (University of Chicago Press, 1951), 248. For a detailed discussion on the aseity of God see Part II of Tillich’s ST, Vol 1.

60 In the words of Pramod K. Nayar, Critical Posthumanism is “the radical decentering of the traditional sovereign, coherent and autonomous human in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines.” Pramod K. Nayar, *Posthumanism* (Polity Press, 2014), Chapter 1, Perlego. Nayar differentiates between transhumanism, which is understood more in terms of prosthesis to human identity, and [critical] *posthumanism*, where technology is integral to human identity. Posthumanism is generally understood as the merger of humans with technology “creating a new and superior posthuman species.” See Brent Waters, *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World* (Routledge, 2016), x.

within this digital web and seeks to provide a framework for reinforcing a relational hermeneutic of existence—in the sense that without negating or overprivileging the otherness/transcendence of God, it grounds the reality of God in a way that human experiences can relate to. Jesus Christ is not just the medium of correspondence to the redemptive activity of God, he is also the one who enables humanity to be co-respondents to God's redemptive and restorative purposes. This co-response is intrinsic to the *imago dei*. This brings to light the teleological dimension of humanity—that humanity is God's covenant partner and recipient of God's grace. The paradox of humanity is that though it is radically corrupt (hamartiological dimension), it is also constituted by God's covenant promises (teleological dimension). Through the reality of sin, it is grace that facilitates and preserves the continuity between God and humanity in Jesus Christ. Inasmuch as it is imperative to recognize the fallen state of humanity, without either trivializing and condoning sin or absolutizing it, we must see it to be relativized in the light of God's telos for humanity.<sup>61</sup> An evangelical hermeneutic of the self provides the model in this direction.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In the Asian conversations, the theme of theological anthropology has much currency and demands constant engagement. In the light of the binary tension between the systematic and contextual approach, a hermeneutical approach provides the scope to bring the concerns of these approaches into meaningful and constructive conversations. An evangelical theological anthropology that is informed by the gospel of Jesus Christ leads to the imagination of an evangelical hermeneutic of the self. Within the contextual realities of embodiment and entanglement, an evangelical hermeneutic of the self prioritizes the evangel in its pristine form to reinforce the reality of the Fall and the distinction of humanity as the *imago dei*. A reading of Luke 10:25–37 through the lens of an evangelical theological anthropology demonstrates how contextual realities help to envision what it means to be neighbouring humans, especially by privileging the life of Jesus Christ as the epistemological starting point. The urgency for this approach

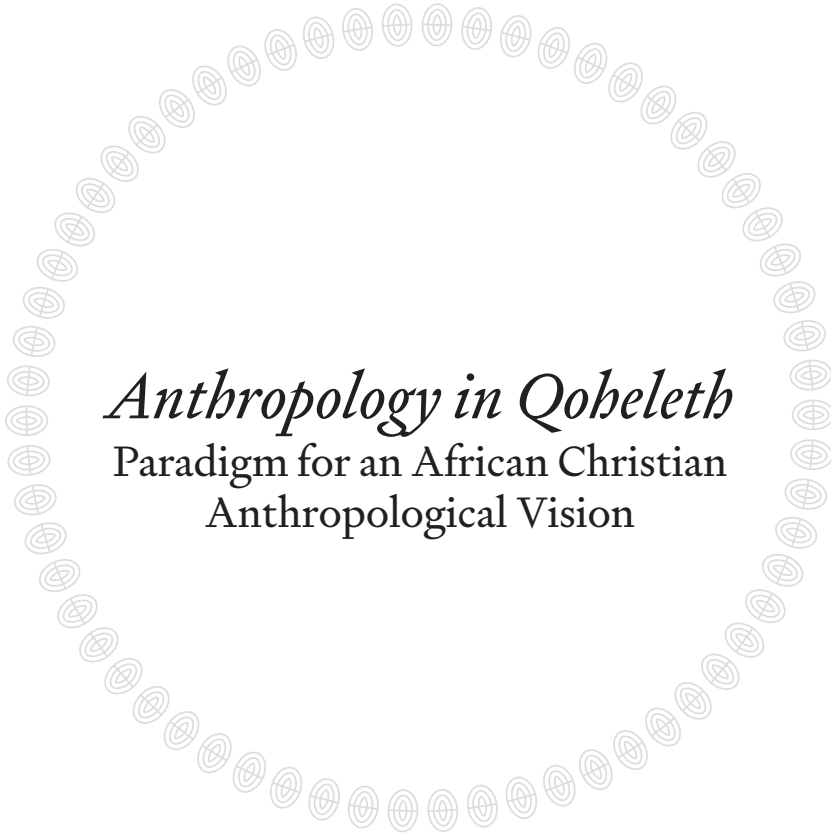
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61 Here I build on the Barthian idea that in Jesus Christ, grace sustains humanity's continuum with God. Barth, *CD III/2*, 37, 43–44. According to Barth, "if we do not want to exclude ourselves from the knowledge of grace, we must not absolutise sin, but that, even though we cannot relativise it of ourselves, we must regard it as relativised and secondary from the standpoint of divine grace ... What is the creaturely nature of man to the extent that, looking to the revealed grace of God and concretely to the man Jesus, we can see in it a continuum unbroken by sin, an essence which even sin does not and cannot change?"

is especially relevant in relation to making sense of the ancient Nicene Creed in the twenty-first-century context and the emerging digital culture. An evangelical hermeneutic of the self, by upholding biblical and apostolic affirmations of the self, provides a coherent framework for furthering the conversations on both theological anthropology in the Asian context and systematic engagement with the concerns of dehumanization and misconstrued forms of global theologies.







*Anthropology in Qobeleth*  
Paradigm for an African Christian  
Anthropological Vision

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Qoheleth has been variously interpreted as enigmatic, skeptical, ascetic, hedonistic, agnostic, rationalistic, pessimistic, fatalistic, unorthodox, and riddled with contradictory perspectives. How might a cogent theological anthropology be drawn from such a book? This paper first evaluates the basic assumptions behind these negative evaluations of Qoheleth and proceeds to propose an alternative interpretation based on the fear of God (*yirat Adonai*) and the Hebrew concept of *hebel*. The fear of God and the Hebrew concept of *hebel* together constitute an adequate interpretive framework for Qoheleth, leading us to the depth of the theology of the book. From that angle, an anthropology that is true to the text of Qoheleth, internally coherent and externally consistent with the rest of the Old Testament, would be drawn. Such an anthropology could grasp the meaning and coherence of life and possibly critique the *carpe diem* conception.

The paper envisions humanity that is molded by the fear of God and that construes *hebel* as it actually is, *hebel*. Challenges like wars and corruption exist when people regard *hebel* as ultimate. In the course of the discussion, the paper assesses Joel Biwul's political and economic reading of Ecclesiastes, whereby *hebel* is understood as a literary rhetorical device—as an evaluative grid to critique and indict the negative behaviour of the politically powerful and the wealthy. Though some sectors of scholarship associate Qoheleth with nineteenth- and twentieth-century existentialism, the present author seeks to distinguish the “meaningless” of Ecclesiastes from that of the existentialist thought.

The argument extends that the anthropology established from Qoheleth could be paradigmatic for an African Christian anthropological vision. The moral crises facing Africa like civil wars, corruption, unjust economic governance, and consumerism arise from deficient and untenable anthropological visions which are *hebel*-oriented. They are essentially anthropological crises. The crises are anchored by the fallen humanity, and they necessitate humanity's recreation by the fear of God. The prevailing moral problems on the continent cannot be overcome by anthropocentric, existentialist, or other autonomous anthropologies which actually exist in the sphere of fallenness. The predicaments could be addressed by the theocentric anthropology grounded in the fear of God. That version of anthropology would constitute a humanity that is recreated, restored, and reconciled to the Creator and holds promise for the construction of a viable African Christian anthropology.

## I. INTERPRETIVE MATTERS

The word Qoheleth comes from the Hebrew root *qbl* meaning assemble or summon. The noun *qabal* means a religious assembly. Qoheleth then means someone who convenes a religious assembly either to preach or teach. The traditional Hebrew and Christian positions ascribe authorship of the book to King Solomon in the tenth-century BC. The tradition goes that Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes in his old age, possibly in the 930s BC. As he grew old, he came to an honest evaluation of the essence of life that human striving after wealth, toil, accomplishments, and pleasure do not yield ultimate gain. However, some historical-critical scholars think that the book was written in the intertestamental period under the influence of Hellenistic philosophy. The article adopts the traditional Hebrew and Christian position regarding authorship and date of Qoheleth.

Some sectors of scholarship have charged Qoheleth with skepticism and pessimism based on passages such as 1:3 which asks, “What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?” Accusations of fatalism have been made based on passages such as 1:15 which says, “What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered”; 3:1–8 which indicate that seasons and times for humans are determined beyond human control; and 7:13 which asks, “Consider the work of God; who can make straight what he has made crooked?” Qoheleth’s seemingly negative evaluation of pleasure, laughter, wealth, and toil in 2:1–11 has drawn charges of asceticism against him. A charge of anti-intellectualism is made by some scholars based on their interpretation of 1:18 which says, “For in much wisdom is much vexation, and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.” Qoheleth’s seeming ambivalence toward wisdom in passages such as 2:12–17 has led some to see the book’s theology as enigmatic. Some have charged Qoheleth with agnosticism when he confesses that he does not know whether the one who will inherit his wealth will be wise or foolish (2:18–21) and that no one knows the destination of the spirit of men and the spirit of a beast (3:19–21). Considering the entire approach of the book, some have laid charges of rationalism against Qoheleth. They hold that Qoheleth deals with abstractions rather than pragmatic matters. Life is not predictable and does not always go according to human expectations. For instance, the race is not to the swift (9:11), and folly and slaves are honored whereas the wise and princes are assigned low places (10:6–7). Some have noted contradictions, like where the Teacher denounces wealth and then acknowledges in 10:19 that money answers everything. Peter Enns observes that the book of Ecclesiastes poses hermeneutical challenges because, firstly, its message seems to be at odds with theological trajectories evident elsewhere in the

Hebrew Scriptures, and second, it has noticeable internal inconsistencies.<sup>1</sup>

All human activity is ultimately *hebel* because no human activity produces ideal *yitron* (advantage, gain or profit). The Hebrew word *hebel* literally translates vapor, breadth, or wind. Metaphorically, it renders ephemeral, vain, worthless, inconsequential, transient, transitory, and absurd. In the book, *hebel* refers to such things as pleasure, wealth, labor, justice, and wisdom. Though positive, these values do not provide *yitron* in the ultimate sense. Mark R. Sneed avows that the word *hebel* occurs 38 times in the book and is considered the leitmotif of the book by most scholars.<sup>2</sup> Sneed argues that the word *hebel* usually has the meaning of futility as directed at human activity. Though in agreement with Sneed up to this point, one could disagree with his evaluation of Qoheleth as an unorthodox sage who challenges traditional norms.

For Stephen M. Coleman, “The significance of *hebel* for Qoheleth is signaled in part by its frequency of use and in part by its appearance at strategic locations as a summary assessment of and verdict on his observations of life under the sun.”<sup>3</sup> Coleman stands in agreement with Michael Fox who prefers to translate *hebel* as absurdity. Fox writes that “the absurd is irrational, an affront to reason ... the quality of absurdity is not inherent in a phenomenon but is a relational concept, residing in the tension between a certain reality and a framework of expectations.”<sup>4</sup> Absurdity, explains Coleman, means that what is so evaluated is not as it appears to be or should be. Coleman continues that permanence, certainty, control, and progress are an illusion in a life lived under the specter of death and that “the chief reason there can be no ultimate gain in this life is that death relativizes the value of every human action. Nothing that mankind can do is of permanent, ultimate, or lasting value.”<sup>5</sup> There cannot be ultimate *yitron* in human activities done under the sun. Ultimacy originates from the extrahuman sphere. Qoheleth’s outlook demonstrates optimism with respect to the ultimate gain of fearing God. Ideally, the fact that all is vanity and that death is inevitable drives humanity to fear God.

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1 Peter Enns, “Ecclesiastes 1: Book of,” in *Dictionary of Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (IVP Academic, 2008), 121.

2 Mark R. Sneed, “Ecclesiastes,” in *The Social World of the Sages: An Introduction to Israelite and Jewish Wisdom Literature* (Fortress Press, 2015), 350.

3 Stephen M. Coleman, “The Folly, Mystery and Absurdity of Sin in the Wisdom Literature,” in *Ruined Sinners to Reclaim: Sin and Depravity in Historical, Biblical, Theological and Pastoral Perspectives*, eds. David Gibson and Jonathan Gidson (Crossway, 2024), 315.

4 Michael Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up: A Rereading of Ecclesiastes* (W. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 31.

5 Coleman, *Ruined Sinners to Reclaim*, 317.

There are apparent internal tensions in the book. Qoheleth on numerous occasions concludes that life is “meaningless,” but then at crucial points he advocates a lifestyle of joy (Eccles. 2:24–26; 3:12–14, 22; 5:18–20; 8:15; 9:7–10). Obedben Mmesomachukwu Lumanze argues that “thus, the Qoheleth may not have been pessimistic about life but only disturbed about life’s essence in the light of its ephemeral or transient nature.”<sup>6</sup> For Lumanze, Qoheleth does not mean that life is meaningless or pointless but rather that life is fleeting and temporal. Nothing lasts on earth. God’s provisions should be enjoyed not as absolute but for practical purposes in human existence. Here and in the rest of the book, Qoheleth is not engaging with abstractions nor rationalistic epistemology but with divine revelation.

The fear of God provides the macrostructure for unlocking the message of Ecclesiastes. It is argued that “the theme of Ecclesiastes is the necessity of fearing God in this fallen, confusing world.”<sup>7</sup> The term “fear of God” as used in this research encompasses a profound sense of reverence, awe, and submission to God on account of divine aseity, glory, righteousness, and majesty. The fear of God is a covenant theme. On the micro level, the theme of the fear of God brings together the three books of Old Testament Wisdom Literature (Prov. 1:7; Job 28; Eccles. 12:13–14). On the macro level, the theme appears in the Pentateuch and the Prophets and thus takes the Old Testament Wisdom corpus on the same theological plane as the rest of the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> Following this trajectory, Qoheleth’s anthropology will be internally coherent and externally consistent with that drawn from Proverbs and Job. Then the Old Testament Wisdom anthropology as a package will be internally coherent and externally consistent with that drawn from the rest of the Tanakh. Qoheleth, then, contributes significantly to the development of the Old Testament anthropology.

The argument of the coherence of Wisdom Literature with the rest of the Old Testament gets support from Coleman, who writes from the perspective of the theology of sin. Coleman’s aim is to “demonstrate the coherence of the theology

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6 Obedben Mmesomachukwu Lumanze, “Is Life Vanity? Reinterpreting the Qoheleth’s Elusive Use of Hevel in Ecclesiastes,” *Unizik Journal of Religion and Human Relations*, Volume 14 No. 1 (2022): 37, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jrhr.v14i1.3>

7 *The ESV Systematic Theology Study Bible: Theology Rooted in the Word of God* (Crossway, 2024), 761.

8 For instance, Deuteronomy 10:12–21 calls upon the Israelites to fear God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, and serve him with all their heart and with all their soul. In the Prophets, passages such as Isaiah 8:13; Jeremiah 5:22–24; Jeremiah 32:38–40; Hosea 3:5; Jonah 1, Micah 6:9 and Malachi 3:16–17 express the fear of God as covenant faithfulness. The fear of God has Messianic overtones and is associated with humble repentance as well as moral judgment and serves as the unique identifying factor of God’s faithful remnant.

of sin developed in the wisdom literature with the theology of sin found in the rest of Scripture.”<sup>9</sup>

Another area gaining currency in interpretations of Ecclesiastes is the place of the epilogue. Is the purpose of the epilogue to correct the errant theology of Qoheleth or to confirm Qoheleth’s observations? Katharine J. Dell attests that “the Epilogue reinforces Qoheleth’s approach to the wisdom task.”<sup>10</sup> In Katherine’s estimation, the Epilogist does not contradict Qoheleth. She refutes the position that “Ecclesiastes is often seen, with Job, as directed against proverbial wisdom, as ‘wisdom in revolt,’ or protest literature. So, they are both seen as different developments away from an earlier aphoristic model contrasting wise and foolish behavior.”<sup>11</sup> Dell sees no revolt in the wisdom of Job and Ecclesiastes. Ecclesiastes 12:13, *kol-hā ‘ādām* (lit. “all the man”), is translated in the New International Version as “the whole duty of man.” The whole duty of humanity is to fear God and keep his commandments. The redactor’s conclusion does justice to the heart of Qoheleth.

Biwul proposes a political and economic reading of Ecclesiastes. He writes, “As such, it argues that the Qoheleth uses *hebel* as a literary rhetorical device as an evaluative grid to critique and indict the negative behavior of the politically powerful and the wealthy, to caution against the reckless abuse of political and economic power to their benefit by those who live in privilege in society.”<sup>12</sup> He avers that Qoheleth proposes the theological ideology of *hebel* as the totality of human existence in this book. Biwul submits that “*hebel* plays a ligamentary role in Ecclesiastes. It serves as the pervasive hub that holds together both the spokes and the wheel of the book’s theological centre.”<sup>13</sup> According to Biwul’s historical reconstruction, Qoheleth was responding to the oppressive sociology of human experience of the Hellenistic era whereby the Hellenistic rulers and Jewish aristocrats were exploiting the underprivileged. Biwul concludes that “Qoheleth’s use of *הֶבֶל* (*hebel*) has direct consequence on the political and economic life of those who live in privilege in society.”<sup>14</sup> Though Biwul’s interpretation of Ecclesiastes

9 Coleman, *Ruined Sinners to Reclaim*, 295.

10 Katharine J. Dell, “A Wise Man Reflecting on Wisdom: Qoheleth / Ecclesiastes,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 71.1 (2020): 137, <https://doi.org/10.53751/001c.27739>. Dell disproves Martin A. Shields who sees the Epilogist as critical of Qoheleth and as discrediting the wisdom movement, but she agrees with Mark J. Boda and C. G. Bartholomew who see the Epilogist as summarizing the gist of Qoheleth’s argument.

11 Dell, *Tyndale Bulletin*, 143.

12 Joel K. T. Biwul, “The Use of Hebel in Ecclesiastes: A Political and Economic Reading,” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 73(3) (2017): a4571. 1, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i3.4571>

13 Biwul, *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 5.

14 Biwul, *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 9.

would help us to counter present-day consumerism and oppressive sociology, he attempts to takes us away from the traditional position of the Solomonic authorship and the tenth-century BC dating.

Tremper Longman III contends that “the Targum interprets the book as a repository of orthodox teaching in perfect harmony with the rest of the canon, particularly the Torah.”<sup>15</sup> T. F. Leong proclaims that “the overall argument—because ‘All is vanity,’ therefore ‘Fear God’—should guide our reading of the speech.”<sup>16</sup> Leong continues that we need to identify clues as to how Qoheleth develops his argument from the theme “All is vanity” to the conclusion “Fear God and keep his commandments.” The reader of Qoheleth should have in the background the Fall of humanity in Genesis 3. In view of the Fall of humanity, frustrations and vexation crept in under the sun. For example, work that was meant to be enjoyed and fruitful can bring vexation.

## II. CARPE DIEM THOUGHT IN ECCLESIASTES?

In *Odes Book 1* published in 23 BC, the Roman poet Horace’s work, the phrase *carpe diem* is part of a longer *carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero* (pluck/seize the day, put very little trust in the future). The phrase is often understood against Horace’s Epicurean background. One is urged to take advantage of the present experiences and opportunities without concern for and reference to the future, nor defer action and enjoyment to the future. Some scholars have identified the *carpe diem* thought in Qoheleth. However, the frame of the fear of God and *bebel* demonstrate the theocentric approach of Ecclesiastes. Additionally, the Teacher has the future in mind, as when he invites the youths to remember their Creator in their youthful phase (11:9–12:8). In the invitation, Qoheleth mentions future judgment, eternal home, and the spirit returning to God who gave it. Qoheleth advances a lifestyle lived in consideration of the future.

Sneed holds that Qoheleth’s primary ethical system appears to be the *carpe diem* ethic.<sup>17</sup> To paraphrase Sneed, this ethic is framed by pessimism and resignation in the context of *bebel* and the forthcoming divine judgment. Enns observes that in Ecclesiastes 3:13 and 5:19, the so-called *carpe diem* passages, “Qohelet affirms that

15 T. Longman III, “Ecclesiastes 3: History of Interpretation.” *Dictionary of Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (IVP Academic, 2008), 143.

16 T. F. Leong, “Ecclesiastes in Context: Reclaiming Qoheleth’s Canonical Authority,” *Themelios* Vol 48, Issue 2 (August 2023): 304.

17 Sneed, *The Social World of the Sages*, 352.

*kol-hā'ādām* ('everyone') is to enjoy pleasure in daily existence. In Ecclesiastes 7:2 Qohelet observes that death is the end (*sōp*) of *kol-hā'ādām*.<sup>18</sup> Sneed proceeds that pleasure and death are two important, indeed, dialectical and pivotal theological themes in Qohelet's discourse. It will be discussed later whether Qoheleth advances a *carpe diem* ethic.

Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd contend that the *carpe diem* (seize the day) sayings are found in Ecclesiastes 2:24–26, 3:10–15, 3:16–22, 8:10–15, 9:7–10 and 11:7–12:7. Bartholomew and O'Dowd contend that rather than promoting a nihilistic hedonism, these passages celebrate the gift of life.<sup>19</sup> The passages speak of eating and drinking, enjoying one's work, enjoying marriage, and taking pleasure in life as God's gift. Arthur Keefer maintains that "the *carpe diem* passages themselves reflect a sort of purpose statement that sets a goal for the present life. In view of incoherence and an unhopeful future, the commendation of joy offers purpose for the present."<sup>20</sup> Keefer maintains that life may be meaningful in the sense of purpose not that of coherence. Contrary to the stance of Keefer, the theme of the fear of God would help us to see both purpose and coherence in Qoheleth.

Three factors suggest the nonexistence of *carpe diem* belief in Qoheleth—theocentricity, eschatology, and ultimacy. In terms of theocentricity, the present research recognizes that the gifts in these so-called *carpe diem* passages are theocentric in origin. And the toil, pleasure, and the whole array of human pursuits are theocentric in motive. In Qoheleth's evaluations, God is foundational. Contrarily, the *carpe diem* conception is anthropocentric in perspective.

The eschatological dimension is present in that Qoheleth has the future in perspective in his assessment and commendations. Knowledge about eschatology is not reached autonomously by human observation, reasoning, and experience but by divine revelation. Bartholomew and O'Dowd remark that "each succeeding area that Qohelet explores with his epistemology of experience, observation, and reason gets him nowhere."<sup>21</sup> Autonomous epistemology cannot lead us to knowledge of eschatology, for example. Ecclesiastes 12:5 teaches that "man goes to his eternal home and the mourners go about the streets." Chapter 12:14 teaches that God will bring every deed into judgment. In view of the ultimate judgment and justice,

18 Enns, *Dictionary of Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, 125.

19 Craig G. Bartholomew and Ryan P. O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature: A Theological Introduction* (IVP Academic, 2011), 202.

20 Arthur Keefer, "The Meaning of Life in Ecclesiastes: Coherence, Purpose, and Significance from a Psychological Perspective," *HTR* 112:4 (2019): 447–466.

21 Bartholomew and O'Dowd, *Old Testament Wisdom Literature*, 201.

argues Coleman, “Qoheleth’s sober warnings and exhortations toward piety suggest that what is done under the sun is of consequence in eternity.”<sup>22</sup> One should live with future judgment in mind for the ultimate destination of humanity is the eternal home. Chapter 3:11–14 states that God put eternity in the human heart, but people cannot comprehend what God has done from the beginning. This confirms that knowledge of the existence of eternity has divine origin, is unattainable to the autonomous understanding, and affirms the category of mystery. And our interpretation of the text is that mystery serves to inspire humanity to fear God. Mystery, once construed positively, draws one to a sense of awe and submission before God. Qoheleth views that enjoyment/pleasure should be exercised with the eschatological lens. Enjoy the gifts from God with the future in perspective.<sup>23</sup> Here again, a contrast with *carpe diem* is noted. In *carpe diem* thought, there is no consideration about the future but rather an overaffirmation of the present.

Regarding ultimacy, we draw from Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s 1940 manuscript “Ultimate and Penultimate Things” in his *Ethics*.<sup>24</sup> Applying Bonhoeffer’s categorization to our discussion, one would consider that issues of pleasure, toil, wisdom, and wealth operate in the penultimate sphere, whereas the fear of God and eternity exist in the ultimate sphere. Thus, the *yitron* of pleasure, accomplishments, and intellectual pursuits is transient and penultimate, whereas that of the fear of God and the eternal home is ultimate. Truly, Qoheleth does not label toil and pleasure as useless, but he assigns them their rightful place in God’s economy. They are of the penultimate and not the ultimate *yitron*. Human striving after them leads to pain and frustration. We can conclude that the penultimate should be enjoyed from the perspective of the ultimate. In this categorization, the *carpe diem* philosophy becomes limited to the penultimate and thus differentiates itself from the theology of Qoheleth. The challenge comes when humanity ascribes ultimacy to the penultimate matters. At the fundamental level of Qoheleth’s interpretation, one discovers the nonexistence of *carpe diem* thought in the book. The presence of eternity, eschatology, and ultimacy rules out *carpe diem* in Qoheleth. Qoheleth’s interpreters are consequently moved to drop both the conception and terminology of *carpe diem*.

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22 Coleman, *Ruined Sinners to Reclaim*, 320.

23 Qoheleth should not be construed as advancing a reductionist otherworldliness marked by a withdrawal from the present realities of existence. He affirms life in this world but brings in the notion of eschatology from which to consider as one lives in the here and now.

24 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE vol. 6 (Fortress Press, 2005). Bonhoeffer writes that the ultimate (*Letztes*) is the justification of the sinner by grace through faith and that the penultimate comprises the orders of existence. The ultimate determines the penultimate, and the latter loses its self-sufficiency. The ultimate maintains and makes viable the penultimate.

### III. QOHELETH: HARBINGER OF EXISTENTIALISM?

Existentialism is a collection of philosophical views that focus on the individual's struggle to find meaning and authenticity in a seemingly indifferent or absurd universe. Friedrich Nietzsche is regarded as one of the founders of the movement that developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche writes that "the *Übermensch* (Overman) is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the overman shall be the meaning of the earth!"<sup>25</sup> In *Gay Science*, Nietzsche announces that "God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!"<sup>26</sup> Nietzsche denies the existence of external sources of meaning, arguing that the onus is on humans to create and give meaning to life. The "meaningless" of Nietzsche should be understood in that sense.

Longman III writes that "indeed, Ecclesiastes was a favorite of existentialist theologians such as P. Tillich because the ancient book itself often sounded skeptical."<sup>27</sup> Existentialism objected to objective meaning out there—maintaining that existence is not inherently meaningful. Existentialists argue that meaning is created and redefined by human beings. Our assessment is that existentialism is characterized by anthropocentrism and produces an anthropocentric anthropology. The existentialists may have regarded Ecclesiastes as a harbinger of their ideologies. Tillich says, "The spirit of the Preacher is strong today in our minds. His mood fills our philosophy and poetry. The vanity of human existence is described powerfully by those who call themselves philosophers or poets of existence. They are all children of the Preacher, this great existentialist of his period."<sup>28</sup> Here, one observes Tillich identifying existentialists as children of Qoheleth. Tillich should be interpreted here in the broader context of his theological method of correlation, which seeks to achieve a synthesis between Christianity and the modern mind. Tillich writes that his theological system "correlates questions and answers, situation and message, human existence and

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25 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, eds. Adrian Caro and Robert Pippin (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 6.

26 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 120. Nietzsche further wrote, "The greatest recent event—that 'God is dead'; that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable—is already starting to cast its first shadow over Europe. To those few at least whose eyes—or the suspicion in whose eyes is strong and subtle enough for this spectacle, some kind of sun seems to have set; some old deep trust turned into doubt" (343). Nietzsche became concerned with the consequences of this recent development of the decline of belief in the Christian God and traditional religious values in late nineteenth-century Europe. The beginning of the First World War in 1914 may have confounded Nietzsche's concerns.

27 Longman III, *Dictionary of Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, 146.

28 Longman III, *Dictionary of Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, 146.

divine manifestation.”<sup>29</sup> In our particular case, Tillich seeks a synthesis between Qoheleth and existentialism. One could notice a distinction between the spirit of Qoheleth, who is thoroughly God centered, and that of existentialism, which is human centered. Tillich could then be critiqued for identifying existentialist traits in the Preacher and for his method of correlation.

#### IV. QOHELETH AND POSTMODERNISM

Existentialism anticipated the skeptical approach of postmodernity. Longman III continues that both Tillich’s existentialism and Jacques Derrida’s deconstructionism<sup>30</sup> doubt finding meaning in life or in literature. Postmodernity follows the footsteps of existentialism to denounce the belief in objective meaning external to human beings. John S. Feinberg quotes David Griffin, who describes that philosophical postmodernism “deconstructs or eliminates the ingredients necessary for a worldview, such as God, self, purpose, meaning, a real world, and truth as correspondence ... this type of postmodern thought issues in relativism, even nihilism.”<sup>31</sup> The postmodernists instead subscribe to the coherence theory of truth, whereby no claims are assumed as true and so, exempt from objection and critique. And consequently according to the postmodernists, no claims have an assumed privileged status of being foundational to other claims. Feinberg laments that in the postmodern era, “each human consciousness must still structure its understanding of the world, but prospects of justifying one’s beliefs by properly basic beliefs that are self-evident, evident to the sense, or incorrigible are gone.”<sup>32</sup> The postmodern epistemology questions epistemological foundationalism and instead adopts nonfoundationalism.

J. A. Smith states: “The wisdom of Qohelet is very postmodern, especially as the cynical wisdom of Ecclesiastes challenges the neat and the tidy world of that presented in the book of Proverbs and in conventional wisdom.”<sup>33</sup> Leon Roper

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29 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology I* (The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 8.

30 Deconstructionism is a philosophical and literary theory developed by Jacques Derrida in the 1960s to challenge the idea that texts have fixed or unified meaning, arguing instead that meaning is always unstable, deferred and dependent on context. Derrida described deconstructionism as a turn away from Platonism’s ideas of true forms and essences. An evaluation of deconstructionism specifically as it relates to biblical studies lies beyond the scope of the present research.

31 John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Crossway, 2001), 95–96.

32 Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 96.

33 J. A. Smith, 2009. “‘The earth remains forever’: Ecclesiastes 1:1–18 as a basis for a Christian, theological environmental ethics as an antidote to the modern emphasis of control and as a new perspective within postmodernism,” unpublished MTh thesis submitted to the Department of Theological Ethics, University of South Africa, 127.

and Alphonso Groenewald identify similarities in thought development between the ancient societies of Job and Ecclesiastes on one hand and the present-day postmodernism on the other. The two scholars claim, nevertheless, that the similarities do not necessarily justify a postmodern tag for the books of Job and Ecclesiastes.<sup>34</sup>

Roper and Groenewald address three underlying questions. First, can the books of Job and Ecclesiastes be viewed as wisdom books? To this question, they argue that Job and Ecclesiastes are wisdom books, for they are characterized by wisdom thought. The authors follow Schmid, who criticizes a too-exclusive view of wisdom and adopts a broader description of wisdom. Second, if Job and Ecclesiastes are considered wisdom books, is their wisdom revolutionary in nature? Influenced by Scott, Schmid, and Von Rad, the two authors (Roper and Groenewald) hold that Job and Ecclesiastes are wisdom in revolt against the systematization of wisdom, especially the traditional doctrine of retribution. And third, are there any similarities between the thoughts of Job and Ecclesiastes on the one hand and that of postmodern thinkers on the other? Roper and Groenewald identify a reactionary character, whereby Job and Ecclesiastes are “wisdom in revolt” and postmodernism is “modernism in revolt.” In both cases, insist Roper and Groenewald, the reaction seems to develop from a systematization or rigidity of a specific worldview.<sup>35</sup>

On the first question, the present research agrees with Roper and Groenewald that Job and Ecclesiastes are wisdom books. On the second question, we proffer an alternative view regarding Job and Ecclesiastes, that they present other facets of the Israelite wisdom tradition. Rather than being revolutionary, the two books would be integral to the multidimensional Israelite wisdom tradition. The “in revolt” conception crumbles when applied to Job and Ecclesiastes, for they are not revolting against Proverbs. That established, we approach the third question from an angle different from that of Roper and Groenewald. The similarities between Ecclesiastes and postmodernism in terms of being reactionary would exist only on the superficial but not fundamental level. At the fundamental level, Qoheleth accepts the absolute—that is, the fear of God. In contrast, postmodernity

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34 L. A. Roper & A. Groenewald, “Job and Ecclesiastes as (Postmodern?) Wisdom in Revolt,” *HTS Theological Studies/Theological Studies* 69(1) (2013): Art. #2002, 1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v69i1.2002>

35 Roper and Groenewald have noted additional similarities between Job and Ecclesiastes on one hand and postmodernism on the other. They include movement from optimism to disillusionment, from causality to relativity and from generalization to emphasis on difference.

advocates relativism, secularism, and consumerism.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, whereas postmodernism mistrusts grand stories or metanarratives, one could hold the fear of God as a grand narrative underlying the message of Qoheleth as well as of the entire Old Testament Wisdom Literature. From other grounds, Tsedey Gebrehiwot contends that “while Job and Ecclesiastes deal specifically with how to live when life appears to have turned upside down, Proverbs presents the ABCs of wisdom when life is generally going right.”<sup>37</sup> Gebrehiwot’s view is aligned against the “in revolt” stance.

## V. AFRICAN CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGICAL VISION

One of Africa’s anthropological challenges is consumerism. The twentieth century witnessed “the overconsumption of natural resources, endangering the sustainability of society, the economy, and the environment. Consumption-oriented, market-driven marketing practices encourage unsustainable production and consumption.”<sup>38</sup> The authors propose consumer citizenship as a tool for addressing both consumer protection and sustainable consumer issues.<sup>39</sup> Smirti Kutaula et al. write that while perspectives on ethical consumerism vary in terms of focus on the consumers or companies, “the common thread in these definitions is the agreement on the relationship between consumption and its wider impact on society and environment.”<sup>40</sup> In the context of emerging markets in Africa, irresponsible consumption negatively affects global sustainable development. And overconsumption is categorized in the present research as an anthropological problem.

According to Fredrik Portin, consumerism is imagined by some theologians and social scientists as, functionally speaking, a form of ersatz religion—*weltanschauung*

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36 Stephen O. Maitnmi (Editorial), “Reflections on Christian Education.” *Journal of Research on Christian Education* Vol. 28, No. 2 (2019): 91–93, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10656219.2019.1649401>

37 Tsedey A. Gebrehiwot, “A Biblical Theology of the Wisdom Literature,” *Theo Global* Vol. 1, *The Living God: Attributes and Persons* (November 2024): 210.

38 Anuradha Binnuri and Rajanikanth M., “Consumerism, Sustainable Consumption, and Consumer Citizenship in the Indian context,” *Cogent Business and Management* Vol. 11, no. 1 (2024): 2428777, 1, DOI: 10.1080/23311975.2024.2428777

39 A consumer citizen is a consumer who is conscious of society and the environment and purchases products with no adverse consequences. Though the study was limited to India, the concept of consumer citizenship could replicate in Africa and provide favourable conditions for sustainable development. Sustainable consumption is defined as “the use of services and related products that respond to basic needs and bring a better quality of life while minimizing the use of natural resources and toxic materials, as well as the emission of waste and pollutants over the life cycle so as not to jeopardize the needs of future generations” (Binnuri and R.M., *Cogent Business and Management*, 5).

40 Smirti Kutaula et al., “Ethical Consumerism in Emerging Markets: Opportunities and Challenges,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 191 (2024):651, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-024-05657-4>

in a post-Christian context. He narrates that “consumerism becomes something more than the satisfaction of individual materialistic needs. Rather, it entails a formative practice that shapes the individual’s orientation in life and his or her fundamental outlook in life.”<sup>41</sup> Consumerism is construed as nihilistic in essence, having no telos, not offering the soul any fulfillment and not leading to anything ultimate. Actually, consumerism negatively affects the socioeconomic and ecological lanes in Africa. The rampant corruption, exploitation of the underprivileged, and some elements of environmental degradation arise from unbridled consumerism.

The present research employs Qoheleth’s paradigm of *hebel* and the fear of God to evaluate the ideology of consumerism. The material and natural resources would not provide *yitron* in the ultimate sense. Hence, human striving after opulence, status, and prestige becomes *hebel*. What should we say then? Should humanity embrace a posture of passivity and resignation? Not that. The fear of God will drive humanity to pursue wealth and personal development in godly ways and to avert overconsumption, which tends to glorify humans. And the fear of God would lead humans to the sustainable use of the God-given resources for the benefit of the future generations and the entire cosmos.

Africa is plagued by other moral challenges that arise from anthropological deficiencies. Dilemmas such as corruption, money laundering, wars, ecological crises, poverty, human rights abuses, broken healthcare systems, xenophobia, land grabbing, inefficient public service, nepotism, biased journalism, gender-based violence, and sexual immorality are founded upon anthropological crisis. Moreover, people are neglecting *Ubuntu*, whose ideals include generosity, hospitality, considering others, justice, and kindness. These ideals have been replaced by egoism and individualism. *Ubuntu* should not be romanticized, and, owing to the human condition, there are still moral failures even though *Ubuntu* is cherished. The dilemmas call for transformed anthropology—an anthropology that recognizes *hebel* for what it actually is, *hebel*. But what would be the basis of such an anthropological vision? This is where the fear of God should come in to reconfigure humanity.

Under the influence of and in critical engagement with Gerrit Brand, I have proposed that African Christian anthropology should meet the cultural,

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41 Fredrik Portin “Consumerism as a Moral Attitude,” *Studia Theologica Nordic Journal of Theology*, 74:1 (2020): 5, DOI: 10.1080/0039338X.2020.1751278

contextual, and Christian criteria.<sup>42</sup> The criteria can be adapted to the present discussion. For the cultural criteria, African Christian anthropology should be expressed in African terms, consider African worldview, and address the existential problems in Africa. In terms of the contextual criteria, African Christian anthropology should be liberating, contextual, and in solidarity with the victims of moral lapses. For the Christian criteria, a promising anthropology in Africa would involve remaining in critical conversation with the Christian tradition, remaining faithful to the revelation in Christ, and submitting to the authority of the Scripture. The message of anthropology in Qoheleth should be transmitted in a manner consistent with the cultural, contextual, and Christian criteria outlined above.

The message of Qoheleth points us to the New Testament. Any human striving is *hebel* and so cannot redeem mankind. Surpassing *yitron* resides in faith in Jesus Christ, the Saviour of humanity, the perfect image of God and in whom the fullness of the deity dwells bodily. Christ is the center. The Scriptures question: “For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” (Mark 8:36). The essence of life is in Christ. In other words, what do people gain by accumulating *hebel* at the expense of eternal life in Jesus Christ? The theme of the fear of God extends to the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians 7:1 it says, “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, and make holiness perfect in the fear of God.” The fear of God leads to spiritual and moral purification that will help Christians in Africa to overcome the dilemmas. And in Hebrews 12:28–29 we read, “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire.” Here, Christians are commanded to worship in the fear of God for giving us his kingdom that is firmly established. Christians fear God through Jesus Christ who reconciles us with God the Father.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The research discovered that drawing anthropology from Qoheleth depends upon one’s interpretation of the book. I submit an interpretation of Qoheleth that is faithful to God’s revelation. The Hebrew concept of *hebel* and the theme of

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42 Michael Phiri, “Re-Conceptualizing the Gender and Development Discourse in Malawi Within the African Christian Anthropological Framework,” *Facets of African Christian Theology in the 21st Century*, eds. H. Mvula and K. Ross (Zomba: Kachere, 2024), 138–146.

the fear of God constitute the interpretive framework for Qoheleth. This frame of interpretation exonerates Qoheleth from the charges of asceticism, skepticism, pessimism, hedonism, fatalism, rationalism, and anti-intellectualism leveled against him. The frame presents the book as unified without any contradictions. Rather than succumbing to the negative evaluation of Qoheleth, one is led into mystery, which in turn directs us to the fear of God. Once the charges have been disproved and the category of mystery accepted, a cogent theological anthropology, built upon the fear of God, will be developed from Qoheleth. This article attempts to become programmatic for future research dealing with anthropology in Qoheleth.

The so-called *carpe diem* passages would not fit that designation on account of their theocentricity, eschatology, and ultimacy. The *carpe diem* thought is purely anthropocentric, autonomous, and this-moment focused. On the other hand, Qoheleth's epistemology derives from divine revelation.

Qoheleth cannot be a harbinger of existentialism, for the two proceed from clearly distinct and irreconcilable foundations. The "meaninglessness" of Qoheleth is distinguished from the existentialists' one. We are called upon to explore further manifestations of twenty-first century existentialist thought and employ Qoheleth's anthropology in addressing them.


Furthermore, though some have seen similarities between Qoheleth's theology and postmodern thought, closer examination shows fundamental differences between them. Instead, the fear of God in Qoheleth is foundational and constitutes an absolute which should frame existence. Qoheleth could actually be a resource for examining the nonfoundationalism of the postmodern epistemology. Contrarily, postmodernism questions the existence of absolute truths and metanarratives.

The research recognizes that the moral lapses plaguing Africa such as corruption, violence, and consumerism are attributable to the anthropological lapses; hence the call for humanity in Africa that is recreated and reconfigured by the fear of God—a humanity that discerns *hebel*, accepts that *hebel* is devoid of ultimate *yitron*, recognizes that ultimate *yitron* essentially resides in the fear of God, and incorporates the ideals of *Ubuntu*.

Finally, who transcends? The *Übermensch*? The postmodern humanity? The *carpe diem*-framed mankind? Any other autonomous person? None of these, for they are all characterized by *hebel* inclinations. Who then transcends? The one who fears God and keeps his commandments. This one transcends beyond the *hebel*-

oriented penultimate life to embrace the ultimate yitron found in the fear of God. This is the vision of the transcendent theological anthropology in Africa within the fold of Qoheleth's anthropology.





*Reframing Theological  
Anthropology for  
the Lowland  
Philippine Setting*

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**M**indful of the vibrant local-global theological interchange encouraged by Theo Global, this essay proposes a “reframing” of theological anthropology specifically in and for the lowland Philippine context.<sup>1</sup> This is rooted in the conviction that contextualizing—or vernacularizing—the Christian faith is essential for meaningful discipleship and theological maturity among Filipino believers. The goal is not to create an isolated theology but to participate meaningfully in the one catholic faith of Jesus Christ, expressed in Filipino thought and life.<sup>2</sup>

This work is exploratory and invites input and interaction from the readers.<sup>3</sup> This is intended to be a major section of a projected primer of Christian doctrine for Filipino Christians. It proceeds in three parts: (1) introducing the rationale for contextualizing theological anthropology, particularly through vernacular theology; (2) drawing insights from the historical development of theological anthropology, particularly from early Christian and patristic sources; (3) articulating a theological anthropology using key Filipino cultural categories while also highlighting implications of this reframed anthropology for Filipino Christian life and discipleship.

## I. VERNACULAR OR CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY IN A POLY-CENTRIC WORLD CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT

The emergence of a truly polycentric world Christianity shows that Majority World theologians are embracing self-theologizing, with vernacularization at

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1 By using the term “lowland Philippines,” I am differentiating it from uplanders (indigenous communities from mountainous regions) in the Philippines. I use the word “reframe” in the way *Cambridge Dictionary* defines it: “to change the way something is expressed or considered.” In this case, changing the way theological anthropology is often expressed and considered for the Philippine setting. (Cambridge Dictionary, “reframe,” accessed 25 July 2025, [dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/food-bank](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/food-bank).)

2 As part of doing Asian evangelical theology, this study seeks to be “biblically rooted, historically aware, contextually engaged, and broadly evangelical” [Timoteo D. Gener and Stephen T. Pardue, *Asian Christian Theology: Evangelical Perspectives* (Langham, 2019), 2]. It is also worth noting Michael Horton’s call for an ecclesiology and theology that are grounded in the ecumenical consensus of orthodox Christianity, away from reactionary biblicism (and liberalism). See Michael Horton, “Why Historical Theology Matters: The Trinity and the Dangers of Biblicism,” *Theo Global Journal 1, The Living God* (2024): 223–238.

3 Christian Filipino reflections on theological anthropology are lacking. Catholic theologian Leonardo Mercado’s works on this theme are seminal. See his *Elements of Filipino Theology* (Divine Word Univ. Publications, 1975), 25–76; also his *Elements of Filipino Philosophy* (Divine Word Univ. Publications, 1974, 1976), 53–104; see also related pioneering sections on anthropology in José M. de Mesa, *Isang Maikling Katesismo Para Sa Mga Bata: Na Dapat Munang Pag-Aralan Ng Mga Matatanda* (Manila: Aklat Ginhawa, 2011). Another seminal work on anthropology with a focus on bioethics comes from another Catholic scholar Dionisio Miranda, *Pagkama-kabubay: On the Side of Life: Prolegomena for Bioethics from a Filipino-Christian Perspective* (Manila: Logos Publications, 1994).

its heart.<sup>4</sup> Rooted in the gospel's inherent translatability, this theological task reflects the reality of Pentecost (Acts 2) and the cosmic scope of Christ's reign (Acts 3:17–21; Eph. 1:7–10; Col. 1:19–20; Rom. 8:19–23; Rev. 7:9–10).<sup>5</sup> It affirms the multiethnic body of Christ (Eph. 2) and the local languages through which the gospel takes root. This approach to theology does not entail abandoning the essential theological core—or, in biblical terms, the “deposit of faith” (1 Tim. 1:4; 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14). Rather, it anticipates and participates in the fullness of God's new creation as Asians, moving beyond rigid Western modes of knowing and the overvaluation of theological systems.<sup>6</sup>

Self-theologizing from the Philippine churches aligns with a call to develop contextual or missional systematic theology,<sup>7</sup> where the contextual expresses itself in vernacular or local theologizing as part of the world Christian movement.<sup>8</sup>

Theological reflection in the mode of vernacular theology “includes the practices of Christian communities as well as their verbal or written statements ... [It redraws] the function of theology as generalizing *within*, rather than across cases—as working on the whole symbolic complex of a community's Christian life so as to distill a vocabulary in which its meaning can be described, shared, and then valued.”<sup>9</sup> For our purposes, the “within” pertains to my setting as part of the church community in the Philippines, where the use of the vernacularization is

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4 On this, see Timoteo D. Gener, “Re-imagining Conversion in the Lowland Philippine Setting: The Perspective of Gospel Re-rooting,” *Journal of Asian Mission* 3 (2001): 43–77; and “‘I Heard a Voice Speaking in the Hebrew Tongue’ (Acts 26:14): Paul's Missional Approach to Culture,” in *The Gospel in Culture: Contextualization Through Asian Eyes*, ed. Melba Maggay (Mandaluyong City: OMF Literature, 2013), 57–75. Also José M. de Mesa, *In Solidarity with the Culture: Studies in Theological Re-Rooting* (Quezon City, Philippines: Maryhill, 1987); Lammin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Orbis Books 1992); Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Books, 1996); Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of Non-Western Religion* (Orbis Books, 1996); Jim Harries, *Vulnerable Mission: Insights into Christian Mission to Africa from a Position of Vulnerability* (William Carey Library, 2011). On the need for self-theologizing that probes the “fourth self” in the missionary movement, see Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. (Baker Book House, 1985) 193–224.

5 See Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*; also, Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa*, 109–125.

6 See Maggay, *The Gospel in Culture: Contextualization Through Asian Eyes*; also, Timoteo D. Gener and Jason Richard Tan, eds, *Ama Namin: The Lord's Prayer in Philippine Life and Spirituality* (Langham Global Library, 2023). When referring to Eastern and Western modes of knowing, I am aware of the charges of essentialism and reductionism associated with the categorization. I use them not in an absolute, reifying sense but in terms of forms of imagination formed through enculturation which can be undone. For this understanding of “imagination,” see David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*. (Crossroad, 1981).

7 See Timoteo D. Gener, “Doing Contextual Systematic Theology in Asia: Challenges and Prospects,” *Journal of Asian Evangelical Theology* 22, no. 1–2 (2018): 49–68; also Stephen B. Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective* (Orbis, 2009), 1–5.

8 Gener, “‘I Heard a Voice Speaking in the Hebrew Tongue,’” 57–75.

9 William Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology: Case Studies in Vernacular Theologies* (Zondervan, 1991), 33.

critical to effect church and societal transformation. Utilizing the vernacular could help bridge the cultural divide, a situation where “the culture of the elite reigns thinly on top; [those] who can only write in English and for each other and cannot find the tongue to speak to the (Filipino) speaking common *tao* (person).”<sup>10</sup> If lasting change is to occur within Philippine culture, the church, as an agent of transformation, must draw from and connect with the language and experiences of the local culture. Thus, change has to be initiated, mediated, and nurtured from within culture (*internal*) through human, even *ecclesial*, mediation.<sup>11</sup>

Christian Filipinos should critically reflect on their use of English as a medium, recognizing the ongoing influence of Euro-American theologizing on discourse.<sup>12</sup> Local theological resources are scarce, and there continues a lack of critical, constructive work in developing vernacular theologies that communicate the Christian faith using local terms and idioms toward authentic mission and discipleship. Instead of uncritically accepting theologies from overseas, Philippine (and by extension, Majority World) theologians should contribute to their contextual systematics in conversation with the universal church.<sup>13</sup>

Put another way, vernacular theology is a missional stance that honors the local culture’s ability to express the gospel, assuming God’s acceptance of local languages as vehicles for his incarnational message of renewal. This underpins the broader project of contextual systematic theologies in Asia, where the process of theological reflection (activity) is as crucial as the product (content).<sup>14</sup> This paper intends to develop this contextual systematic direction, focusing on biblical teachings on humanity and the image of God within the Southeast Asian setting, particularly the Philippines. By “systematic” I mean an “ordered” approach to biblical teaching, whose coherence is based on the biblical story and

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10 Melba Maggay, *Pagbabalik-loob: Moral Recovery and Cultural Reaffirmation* (Quezon City: Akademya ng Kultura at Sikolohiyang Pilipino & Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture, 1993), 20. On this divide, see also Mesrob Vartavarian, “Limited Democracy: Elites and Subalterns in Contemporary Philippine Politics,” FORSEA, February 15, 2020, <https://forsea.co/limited-democracy-contemporary-philippine-politics/>.

11 Timoteo D. Gener, “The Family as Catalyst for Social Change: A Task for Inculturation,” *Phronesis: A Journal of the Asian Theological Seminary and Alliance Biblical Seminary*, 10 no. 1 (2003): 35.

12 Timoteo D. Gener et al., *Doing Theology in the Philippines* (Mandaluyong City: OMF Lit., 2005), 17. That is why vernacular theologizing should be encouraged to get out from under or away from the methodological assumptions of predominant Euro-American scholarship.

13 Lorenzo Bautista once noted that Filipino “evangelicals remain most hospitable to foreign missions and spiritual experimentation. An American evangelical leader who receives a global vision in Dallas can start fulfilling it in Manila any time.” Quoted in Timoteo D. Gener, “Every Filipino Christian a Theologian: A Way of Advancing Local Theology for the 21st Century,” *Doing Theology in the Philippines*, ed. J. Suk (Mandaluyong City: OMF Lit.; Quezon City: Asian Theological Seminary, 2005), 3–23.

14 Gener, “Doing Contextual Systematic Theology in Asia: Challenges and Prospects,” *JAET* 22:1–2 (2018), 49–68

is gospel-centered<sup>15</sup> rather than adhering to “alien philosophical ideas imposed on the concepts of Scripture; alternatively, theology confined within a confessional straitjacket.”<sup>16</sup> I have nuanced it as the gospel-centered ordering of theological themes based on the biblical canon.<sup>17</sup>

More precisely, contextual systematic theology, or Filipino evangelical theology, is a quest for true knowledge of God undertaken by Christian Filipinos in response to God’s self-revelation in Christ, illumined by Christian history and tradition in the region. It seeks rational coherence, issues in ethical conduct, resonates with and responds to Philippine cultural forms and realities, and is concerned with God’s greater glory within and beyond Philippine shores.<sup>18</sup> It is attentive to the local contexts and themes (root metaphors) in its organizing principles and responsive to the liturgical and missional needs of the churches and communities in the region, drawing from renewed biblical and cultural exegesis while remaining true to Christian faith and aligning with the broader Christian tradition.<sup>19</sup> This reframes the classical notion of theology from “faith-seeking understanding” to the faith *of a people* seeking to understand and live out the biblical message.<sup>20</sup> This missional systematic direction is what I intend to develop in this paper, focusing on biblical teachings about humanity and the image of God in the Philippine setting.

## II. INPUTS FROM THE HISTORY OF THEOLOGY

This particular study is about theological anthropology—a field that investigates “the resources, the limitations, and the destiny of the human person.”<sup>21</sup> This includes common themes such as humanity in creation, the disparity between God’s original intention in creation and humanity’s present condition, and the reversal of the consequences of the Fall in Christ. Theologians generally differ on “explaining the initial state and vocation of humanity, in estimating the damage done in the Fall, and in the resources for recovery provided in Christ.”<sup>22</sup>

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15 Gener, “Doing Contextual Systematic Theology in Asia,” 52.

16 Gener, “Doing Contextual Systematic Theology in Asia,” 52.

17 Gener and Pardue, *Asian Christian Theology*, 26.

18 Cf. Timoteo D. Gener, “Asian Evangelical Theology: Theological Commitments and Interdisciplinarity,” *J AET* 23:2 (2019), 117.

19 Gener, “Asian Evangelical Theology,” 117–118.

20 Bevans, *An Introduction to Theology in Global Perspective*, 3–4; 61–63; also Jose de Mesa et al., *Ang Maganda sa Teolohiya* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian, 2017).

21 J. Patout Burns, *Theological Anthropology* (Fortress Press, 1981), 1.

22 Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, 1.

Nonetheless, the role of the *imago dei* as biblical concept was a consistent thread in Christian thought and history in articulating Christian anthropology.<sup>23</sup>

In his historical introduction to the field, J. Patout Burns emphasizes that there was no single, monolithic view of theological anthropology but rather a tapestry of perspectives shaped by different philosophical and theological influences. Indeed, early Christian writers illustrate various approaches to theological anthropology, including those influenced by Platonism, Gnosticism, and developing Christian traditions. These engendered ascetic and Christian Platonist movements in early Christian theology. The different conceptions of humanity among early Christian writers engendered diverse understandings of key theological themes like sin, grace, salvation, and the relationship between God and humanity.<sup>24</sup> Still, a key theologian of anthropology, such as Irenaeus (c. AD 130–c. AD 200), may be viewed as a “biblical theologian” who was not beholden to the philosophies of the day, shown in his emphasis on Scripture and redemptive history in constructing Christian anthropology. He was an apologist and theologian of the developing Catholic tradition during this early period. Indeed, he “connected the sub-apostolic church to the old Catholic church.”<sup>25</sup>

From another angle, in his exploration of the various anthropologies in history, Ray Sherman Anderson distinguishes between theological and non-theological anthropologies. A theologically grounded anthropology deals with the essence of being human (ontology) in light of God’s revelation in the Scriptures. It posits that the “knowledge of ourselves as human beings must be determined and correlated with our knowledge of God as the one who reveals himself finally and completely in Jesus Christ.”<sup>26</sup> Non-theological anthropologies tend toward a phenomenology of human existence that begins its analysis with human existence and situation.<sup>27</sup> The focus on the human situation “can be placed in a continuum from Myth to Science, with Philosophy located in the middle.”<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the mythical, scientific, and philosophical non-theological anthropologies can be said to be “Cartesian, because, like Descartes, they seek to explain the mystery

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23 Cf. John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology. 1st ed.* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994) 178.

24 Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, 1–22.

25 *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B, D. F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (IVP Academic, 1988), under “Irenaeus.”

26 Ray Sherman Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (W. B. Eerdmans, 1982), 18–19.

27 Anderson, *On Being Human*, 4–19.

28 Anderson, *On Being Human*, 8.

of the human in terms of the human subject.”<sup>29</sup> In this, the “human person seeks to have the final word, the decisive judgment, as to the nature of humanity.”<sup>30</sup> Theological anthropology undertaken in this manner is neither biblicist nor obscurantist. Anderson, in particular, seeks a holistic theological anthropology that is open to the insights of the behavioral and social sciences. He grounds his stance in the story of creation, where humans are to be viewed as “related to the *physical* world—created from the dust of the ground; related to each other [*social*—bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh; and related to a transcendent *spiritual* reality—created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1–2).”<sup>31</sup>

This summary of the history of Christian thought, with a focus on theological anthropology, reveals the uneasy relationship between Christianity and Christian faith and philosophy. Regardless of intent, the different perspectives on theological anthropology were shaped, to varying degrees, by the dominant philosophical frameworks of the time.<sup>32</sup> As the stance taken in this paper suggests, this influence should not be judged entirely negatively. The Christian world-and-life-view, grounded in the biblical story, is not averse to the insights of philosophy and the sciences. Such a Christian view “appropriates, critically reinterprets, and integrates” insights from the human sciences *within* such a (Christian) view.<sup>33</sup> This transformational stance presupposes a certain realism in acknowledging context relatedness as well as the commitment to make sense of non-Christian insights in terms of a biblical Christian perspective centered on God as creator, redeemer, and reconciler of all things.<sup>34</sup> Having said this, and resonating with Anderson’s evangelical convictions, the primacy of biblical revelation in theological anthropology will be an established position in this research. However, the biblical revelation being the primary norm does not eliminate valuable perspectives from philosophy and the sciences that do not conflict with the biblical testimony and

29 Anderson, *On Being Human*, 8.

30 Anderson, *On Being Human*, 16.

31 Ray S. Anderson, *Christians Who Counsel: The Vocation of Wholistic Therapy* (Zondervan Academic, 1990), 16. For him, to be competent counselors one must first “understand competence in being human, in living humanly, openly, and lovingly with others and with God.” [Ray S. Anderson, “Spiritual Formation as Family Therapy: A Social Ecology of the Family Revisited” in *Journal of Family Ministry* 11 no. 4 (1997): 18]. See also his *Christians Who Counsel*, where he says of the first humans: “In their differences each experienced a wholeness and unity of being. God was present, and they experienced him in the joy of their own unity of being. In this way the human self was integrated as a personal, social and spiritual being” (17).

32 On the different approaches to philosophy and types of theology discernible in early Christian history, see also Justo Gonzales, *Christian Thought Revisited: Three Types of Theology* (Orbis, 1999).

33 Timoteo D. Gener, “Transformational Correlation: A Reformational Perspective on Cultural Theological Method in Dialogue with David Tracy’s and Paul Tillich’s Correlational Approaches,” in *That The World May Believe: Essays on Mission and Unity in Honour of George Vandervelde*, eds. M. Goheen, M. O’Hara (University Press of America, 2006), 36.

34 Gener, “Transformational Correlation,” 36.

the historical faith consensus of the church.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, one's social and historical location influences or colors one's theological understanding, even if not conditioned or bound by them.<sup>36</sup> In the end, while we do not have a God's-eye view on objectivity relating to theological interpretation, what is intended is relative adequacy;<sup>37</sup> real knowledge through interpretation in the community of God's people,<sup>38</sup> knowing that as we probe God's word together, even we ourselves as particular members of Christ's body do not have the fullness of truth. In other words, we theologize about anthropology as parts of Christ's body; the fullness of truth ultimately lies in Jesus Christ expressed through the unity and fullness of his body, the church (Eph. 1–4).<sup>39</sup>

### III. BIBLICAL AND CONTEXTUAL APPROPRIATION

The biblical survey on the theme by New Testament scholar Joel Green and the related work of Old Testament scholar Carmen Imes, *Being God's Image*, provide summary perspectives that inform this study.<sup>40</sup> I will not delve into the details

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35 Other than Irenaeus, another church father who did “constructive theology” on anthropology is worth noting and emulating in regard to theological methodology. Robert Louis Wilken, in his essay “Biblical Humanism: The Patristic Convictions,” presents the contours of Gregory of Nyssa's methodology that is quite instructive as it parallels key aspects of the ongoing movement of contextual or vernacular theologizing. Gregory of Nyssa's approach drew on culture and philosophy from the early Christian period. His interpretation of the Holy Scriptures is not closed off; instead, it engages in dialogue with other sources of knowledge, such as philosophy and the science of his day. Theological clarity exists in the relationship between these primary and secondary sources, particularly in terms of their use and relevance. See Richard Lints, Michael Scott Horton, and Mark R. Talbot (eds.), *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective* (W. B. Eerdmans, 2006), 13–28.

36 Interestingly, in an example coming from the Asian context, Indonesian theologian Robbyanto Noto-mihardjo notes the Asian flavor of the theological anthropology of Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama (1929–2009), especially highlighting the propensity of human beings to tell stories, an aspect of being human that often escapes Western interpreters of the image of God. This follows Merrill Morse's summary of Koyama's understanding of the image of God, “Calvin's Anthropological View and the Development of the Third World Theology of Mission with Special Reference to Kosuke Koyama's Doctrine of Human Beings,” *Jurnal Amanat Agung* 3 no. 1 (2007): 69–94, <https://ojs.sttaa.ac.id/index.php/JAA/article/download/239/219/>, accessed February 2025.

37 Cf. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, “for an adequate conceptual, reflective language, all the criteria of relative adequacy and all the tasks proper to a relatively adequate systematic theology as reflective upon the original language emerge as the final theological task” (408). The sense of “keeping alive” the memory of Jesus Christ involves the dynamic nature of Scriptural revelation, which proffers a communal sense of relative adequacy aided by discernment through the Holy Spirit, in giving fidelity to the apostolic witnesses (329).

38 Among Catholic and evangelical theologians, this stance comes from a critical realist approach to epistemology. Bevans sums up critical realism in this way: “Critical realism is a philosophical position that takes seriously all of reality, the human and the divine, the material *and* the spiritual. And it is convinced that our partial and always inadequate knowledge is still real knowledge. Critical realism knows that our knowledge does not provide a photograph of reality, but it does provide a real insight into that reality” (*Introduction to Theology from a Global Perspective*, 195).

39 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (W. B. Eerdmans; WCC Publications, 1989) 123–126.

40 See Joel B. Green, “Humanity – Created, Restored, Transformed, Embodied,” in *Rebinking Human Nature: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Malcom Jeeves (W. B. Eerdmans, 2011), 271–294; Carmen Joy Imes,

of the various views on the nature of the image of God in human beings, usually categorized as substantive, relational, and functional views.<sup>41</sup> Instead, the contextual cues and vernacular discernible through thematic cultural exegesis will lead the way in cultural theological reframing. Other helpful books provide interdisciplinary and multi-confessional reflections in their presentations and coverage of the topic.<sup>42</sup> Note also that the cultural-theological approach in this study does not preclude the incorporation of contributions from the sciences for renewed theological anthropology. The vernacular reframing assumes this interdisciplinary openness while being normed and guided by the biblical message.

While there are pioneering works on local theology, conscience, moral theology, and ethics, there is none that deals explicitly with theological anthropology, particularly with the theology of the image of God in lowland Philippines.<sup>43</sup> As the succeeding section will show, it appears that the understanding of humans as God's image would be best subsumed within the theme of "life" or "*bubay*," with God as the Creator and giver of life.

There is also an underlying supernaturalistic worldview in indigenous thinking that assumes the existence of a supreme being (*Bathala*). Historically, through more than 350 years of colonization by Spain, this supreme being was referred to by the missionaries as the Christian God or *Dios*. This was when Roman Catholicism was introduced to the islands. This understanding of God inevitably blended with a certain dualism, where the invisible or spiritual realm is considered to be of a higher plane than the material. This parallels certain facets of popular (local) Christology, which tend to view Christ more as an angel detached from

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*Being God's Image: Why Creation Still Matters* (IVP Academic, 2023).

41 On this, see the helpful discussion and constructive proposals of John Frederic Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (W. B. Eerdmans, 2015); also Tony Lane who identifies six ways that mark out human beings as being in the image of God: reason, will, spirituality, authority, creativity, and community. "We must not make the mistake of reducing the image of God to any one of these on its own... We image God in all six of these ways, but we must also remember that each and every one of them has been spoiled by sin... Christ came to restore this image" [Lane, *Exploring Christian Doctrine: What Christians Believe* (IVP Academic, 2014), 61–63].

42 See especially Malcolm A. Jeeves, *Rethinking Human Nature: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. (W. B. Eerdmans, 2011); also, Beth Felker-Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau, eds., *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology* (InterVarsity Press, 2016). See also Colin Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Paternoster Press; W. B. Eerdmans, 1993).

43 Aside from the pioneering work of Mercado (fn 3), the works of Jose de Mesa on local theology are insightful, particularly his, *Isang Maikling Katesismo Para Sa Mga Bata*, 1–54. On indigenizing ethics and moral theology, Dionisio Miranda's publications are ground-breaking except that he bypasses the theme of the image of God in regard to inculturating ethics or moral theology. See Dionisio M. Miranda, *Buting Pinoy: Probe Essays on Value as Filipino* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1992), also his *Kaloob ni Kristo: A Filipino Christian Account of Conscience* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 2003), and his *Dapat Lamang: Reconstructing Natural Law from a Filipino-Christian Perspective* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 2021).

creation rather than a full-blooded human being or God in the flesh.<sup>44</sup> Hence de Mesa and Wostyn probingly asked, “Does not Jesus’ divinity obscure his power to do so on the grounds that he did not fully share our human condition? It is already a struggle to follow the example of a saint. At most, we can only dream of imitating an angel. Is it not simply preposterous for us to dare to follow a God-man?”<sup>45</sup> No doubt this facet also has implications in contextualizing biblical anthropology, particularly with respect to divine and human agency.<sup>46</sup> We now propose a biblical-theological appropriation of the theme with the Philippine context in mind.

*Life (Buhay) as the Overarching Theme*

As was intimated above, it appears that the overarching cultural theme that directly connects with biblical anthropology is the root metaphor *bubay* (life, existence).<sup>47</sup> As Mina Ramirez concluded, “BUHAY (life) is a great motivating force for Filipinos.”<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, one’s self or personhood is viewed as the totality of one’s life with an intrinsic connection to God as Creator, the giver of life. Consequently, to be created by God is the beginning point of life. “*Kinikilala nating mga Pilipino na ang bubay na ating nararanasan at tinatamasa ay kaloob ng Diyos ... Para sa atin, hindi nagkataan lamang na tayo ay nabubay sa daigdig. Nilooob ito ng Diyos!*”<sup>49</sup> (We recognize as Filipinos that the life we experience and enjoy is a gift from God ... For us, it was not by chance that we are living on this earth. God willed it!)

The theme of life correlates well with key aspects of the creation stories of Genesis 1 and 2. The garden was teeming with life/living things, with humans at the apex of God’s creation (1:3–31; 1:26–28). The LORD breathed life into the human being, and s/he became a living creature (Gen. 2:7). Aligned with this, biblical scholar Joel Green clarifies that “within the Old Testament, ‘soul’ (*nephesh*) refers to life and vitality—not life in general, but instantiated in human persons and animals; not a thing to have but a way to be.”<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, *nephesh* (usually translated

44 On this see my “Christologies in Asia: Trends and Reflections,” *Journal of Asian Evangelical Theology* 17, no. 2 (September 2013): 29.

45 Gener, “Christologies in Asia: Trends and Reflections,” 30.

46 Gener, “Christologies in Asia: Trends and Reflections,” 36–39.

47 Romulo L. Chua and Rodolfo L. Nazareno, *Ang Mahalaga sa Buhay: A Handbook of Filipino Values* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1992), 125.

48 Mina Ramirez, *Reflections on Culture* (Manila: Asian Social Institute 1991), 21.

49 de Mesa, *Isang Maikasing Katesismo*, 15.

50 Joel B. Green, “Humanity – Created, Restored, Transformed, Embodied,” in *Rethinking Human Nature: A Multidisciplinary Approach*, ed. Malcom Jeeves (W. B. Eerdmans, 2011), 277.

“soul”) in 2:7 “is used only a few verses earlier with reference to ‘every beast of the earth,’ ‘every beast of the air,’ and ‘everything that creeps on the earth’—that is, to everything ‘in which there is life (*nephesh*)’ (1:30). This demonstrates that ‘soul’ is not for the Genesis story a unique characteristic of the human person. Accordingly, one might better translate Genesis 2:7 with reference to the divine gift of life: ‘the human being became fully alive.’”<sup>51</sup>

It is striking that the theme of life runs through the entirety of Scripture as part of the story of God and his people, flowing from the Old Testament to the New, from creation to the new creation. Scriptures reveal that life is a gift from God, the God who is love (1 John 4:8, 16). Hence, John’s Gospel reveals, “Life is characteristic of God and that God is the only one who can bestow life. ... God is the ‘living life-giver.’”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, one could say that the “in the beginning” of the Genesis 1 creation story is tied to the outgoing movement of God’s eternal love revealed by the Word who was “in the beginning” (John 1) together with the Spirit (Gen. 1, Eph. 1). Another way to put it is through the portrayal of Jesus in John’s Gospel: “It is in his relational unity with the Father that Jesus is able to impart life. And Jesus not only offers life; he is life in himself, because the Messiah is life.”<sup>53</sup> The biblical witness is clear that God created human beings not out of selfish intent but out of love. It was also out of God’s great love for the world that he gave his only Son (John 3:16), and such sovereign love sustains the whole of creation (Rom. 8:18–39) until the time when “creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God” (Rom. 8:21).<sup>54</sup>

*Human Life Is Fundamentally Relational* (May Loob sa Kapwa), *Consisting of Katawan (Body) and Kalooban (Inner Self)*

Having clarified what soul and life means in the context of creation, one notes also that “Genesis 1–2 does not locate the singularity of humanity in the human possession of a ‘soul,’ but rather in the human capacity to relate to Yahweh as a covenant partner, and to join in companionship within the human family and in relation to the whole cosmos in ways that reflect the covenant love of God.”<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, vernacular idioms highlight this relational character of human identity.

51 Joel B. Green, “Humanity – Created, Restored, Transformed, Embodied,” 278.

52 Christopher Blumhofer, Diane G. Chen, and Joel B. Green, eds. *Early High Christology: John Among the New Testament Writers* (Fortress Press, 2024), 88.

53 Blumhofer, Chen, and Green, eds. *Early High Christology*, 94, authors’ emphases.

54 de Mesa, *Isang Maikling Katesismo*, 16–17.

55 Joel B. Green, “Humanity – Created, Restored, Transformed, Embodied,” 275.

Along with the gift of life, God gave the human being a body (*katawan*) and an inner self (*kalooban*, lit. “inside”). *Katawan* is not only the physical body but also encompasses personhood (*katau-ban*), which connects a person to his or her *kapwa* (kindred, fellow human) and the rest of creation (*kalikasan*). Interestingly, the concept of the image of God, along with the soul, is related to the whole of creation (Pss. 19:1; 104; Heb. 11:3, Rom. 1:20). The rest of creation is therefore *kapwa-nilikba* (fellow creature). Since the biblical truth of creation and creature is linked with *kapwa* (shared identity), this has profound implications for creation care in our region. John Calvin previously pointed to this broader sense of the image of God, and he supported it with specific Bible passages.<sup>56</sup>

*Loob* or *kalooban*, like *katawan* (body), also encompasses selfhood, but the view comes from what is inside, particularly the realm of one’s *damdamin* (feeling), *kaisipan* (mind), and *kilos* (action). As such, one’s true and innermost self lies in one’s *loob* (lit., one’s inside, the equivalent of one’s authentic self).<sup>57</sup> As with *katawan* (body), *loob* (inner self) is also relational. Both indigenous terms point to shared humanity or kindred selves. To be a human being is inseparable from being a *kapwa* (kindred selves, neighbor). The literal meaning of the word *kapwa* is “alike” (*magkakabalintulad*), and thus, Filipinos view all human beings as *kapwa*, since they all share a common humanity. In the words of Felipe de Leon, the meaning of *kapwa* is this: “The other person is also yourself.”<sup>58</sup> In contrast, the English term for other people is “the other,” which means “different from me.” Thus, the focus of *kapwa* is on commonality, while the notion of the Euro-American “other” is on difference(s).<sup>59</sup>

God is totally Other (holy), yet in Filipino terms, God also has *kalooban* (inner self), which the LORD shares with human beings (Matt. 6:10). God has *kapwa-loob* (shared inner self) with humans (*tao*), which is to say God and humans are *kapwa* (kindred, with a shared *loob*—Gen. 5). The sharing of *loob* presupposes an ongoing connection with God established in creation when God breathed into Adam the breath of life (*ruach*, also the term for spirit) and became a living being (Gen. 2:7). Self-centeredness and disobedience to God (*pagsuway sa Diyos*) ruptures such connection. “The rupture of relationship with God is reflected in

56 See Notomihardjo, “Calvin’s Anthropological View and the Development of the Third World Theology of Mission,” 70–83.

57 de Mesa, *Isang Maikling Katesismo*, 19–20.

58 Felipe de Leon, “Towards a Filipino Development Paradigm,” *Plenary Lecture at the Philippine National Council for NGO Certification*, Pasig City, Philippines, June 5, 2025.

59 de Mesa, *Isang Maikling Katesismo*, 20.

the poisoning of human relationships. The first human act outside the Garden is Cain's murder of Abel. The image of God in which humans were created is obscured and distorted by sin [*kasalanan*]."<sup>60</sup>

In the New Testament, the renewed relationship with God in Christ through repentance and faith (*pagbabalik-loob sa Diyos*) is confirmed by the Holy Spirit bearing witness with the human spirit (*espiritu, diwa*) of such relationship (Rom. 8:16). Note that part of one's *loob*, the human spirit (*espiritu, diwa*), is the more tangible spiritual dimension of human beings (connectedness with God, *pagkakaugnay sa Diyos*) that is inseparable from breath and life (Gen. 2:7; 6:3; Job 33:4; Luke 8:45; 23:46).<sup>61</sup>

#### *A Beautiful/Good Life* (Ang Magandang Buhay)

It seems fitting in the local context to draw from the larger theme of *bubay* (life) for reframing theological anthropology for lowland Filipinos. Particularly, we are after what is *ang magandang bubay* (a beautiful or good life) rather than merely the nature and constitution of human beings. *Bubay*, as a local idiom, has the potential to render theological anthropology with cultural theological impact. *Bubay*, from a biblical-theological perspective, encompasses human life in an integral relationship to creation, being God's image, creatureliness, new life in Christ, and the new creation—all grounded in creation and salvation.

The qualifier *maganda* refers to something beautiful and good. The theological anthropology of *magandang bubay* uses the vernacular concept of *ganda* (beauty, good, goodness), which has been suggested as a primary cultural-theological lens through which to view theology in Filipino so that key elements of the Christian faith can be "seen, felt, and shared" with Filipinos in a meaningful way.<sup>62</sup>

*Ganda* signifies what is beautiful. It has two aspects: the ethical and the aesthetic. When we refer to the ethical, it means good. For example, *Maganda ang ginagawa mong pagtulong sa kapwa* (You're doing good in helping your neighbor). But when we say *maganda* instead of *mabuti* ("good"), we are in fact saying that "you're doing something beautifully good in helping your

60 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 150.

61 *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Xavier Léon-Dufour, trans. from the French under the Direction of P. Joseph Cahill. Translated by P. Joseph Cahill (Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), under "Spirit."

62 Jose de Mesa, "Kapag 'Ganda' ang Pag-uusapan: Mungkahi para sa Dulog at Paraan ng Mabathalang Pag-aaral," in *Ang Maganda sa Teolohiya*, 1–22.

neighbor.” We are referring to the winsome and captivating manner we are doing something. Thus, when we say, “Good morning,” “good afternoon,” “good evening,” in the vernacular, what we are expressing is “May you have a charmingly good morning, afternoon, or evening.”<sup>63</sup>

*Maganda* connotes beauty or good, impactful (*may dating*), felt (*ramdam*), and efficacious (*may talab*). *Magandang bubay* (beautiful/good life) is not just *maginbawang bubay* (abundant life for individuals), but also *kaginbawan ng kapwa* (abundant life for co-humans as kindred selves, John 10:10).

From a sociocultural angle, Filipino sociologist Mina Ramirez envisions cultural transformation (part of *magandang bubay*) through movements that spell “liberating action from unbalanced social structures, from Western impositions, and from narrow perspectives of small group orientations.”<sup>64</sup> It respects the dignity of *kapwa* (lit. “like others,” co-human, neighbor) and advocates for authentic relationships—“profound respect for the person and authentic relationships inspired by Christian or profoundly human values.”<sup>65</sup> This is the vision of *magandang bubay*, which has its theological anchor in the good news and mission of Jesus, leading to the new creation: to proclaim and embody the world-transforming reign of God in Christ (Isa. 60, John 20:21; Luke 4:16–21; Rev. 21–22).

This reign—*bubay na namamayani ang kagandabang-loob at ng Diyos*—calls the church to embody *pagbabalik-loob* (return to one’s authentic self) and *bagong buhay kay Cristo* (new life in Christ), a foretaste of the new creation (*bagong paglikha*) (2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 8). New life (*bagong bubay* or *magandang bubay*), which is also God’s reign in Christ, ushers the new creation and could thus become a catalyst for discernment of the common good (*shalom*, kingdom of God), leading to social transformation. Theological anthropology in this light is not merely academic. It becomes a lived vision: To be human is to live under God’s rule (*pagbabari, kalooban*), to walk in the way (*daan*) and truth (*katotohanan*) of Christ, and to participate in God’s mission, which also involves the transformation of culture and society through the renewing power of the Holy Spirit. The reign of God could redirect cultural understandings of renewal and transformation toward the biblical ideal for society and culture. In Filipino terms, *ang magandang*

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63 Jose de Mesa, *Jose de Mesa: A Theological Reader* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 2016), 23–24.

64 Mina Ramirez, *Understanding Philippine Social Realities through the Filipino Family: A Phenomenological Approach* (Manila: Asian Social Institute, 1984) 60.

65 Ramirez, *Understanding Philippine Social Realities through the Filipino Family*, 60.

*bubay ay ang pagbabagong-bubay* under God’s reign.

*Human Life as Image of God: Ang Tao bilang Kalarawan ng Diyos*

Admittedly, the concept of the *image of God* being part of Genesis—the book of beginnings—is foundational to theological anthropology. Note that even if the exact mention of the phrase in the Bible is not that many, we should not be confined to the precise phrase in our theological reflection since one could pinpoint related phrases that echo the theme, even in Genesis.<sup>66</sup> Aside from this, as was intimated earlier, the image of God in the Bible is not limited to humans, as it correlates with the larger theme of life (*bubay*).

In creation, God gives himself to humankind and calls them into a relationship of being God’s image, to share in the richness of God’s being and glory in his kingdom. It is in and through the biblical story of God’s creation and redemption that humankind finds its identity and vocation. In Filipino Christian terms, the “drama of what one must do as well as become is played out between *ang kalooban ng tao at ang kalooban ng Diyos*” (the most authentic inner self of humans and that of God)<sup>67</sup> revealed in God’s Word.

The root word of *kalooban* (inner self) is *loob*, which is unique in Filipino in the sense that it is used in a variety of figures of speech. *Loob* is literally “‘inside’ ‘within,’ ‘interior,’ ‘inner space,’ but its meaning in Filipino covers much more than inner physical space. It reaches deep into the core of one’s being, embracing a whole range of human sentiments.”<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, a fundamental value among Filipinos is *pakikipagkapwa* (shared inner self and shared identity), which can be deepened by a theology that views humankind as God’s image.

Scripture speaks of human beings as the image of God (Gen. 1:26–28). *Nilikha ang tao bilang kanyang larawan or kawangis*. (Humans were created as God’s image or likeness.) Exegetically, it is fundamentally a status, not a function.<sup>69</sup> This has a universal bearing and contextual significance. *May dangal tayong mga tao dahil kalarawan tayo ng Diyos*. (As humans, we have inherent dignity because we are God’s image in the world.)

66 Carol Kaminski in dialogue with Carmen Imes, “Image of God and Mission,” YouTube video, 1:04:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xMXzFXmRwM&t=3880s>, accessed January 14, 2025.

67 Dionisio Miranda, *Kaloob ni Kristo*, 15.

68 Chua and Nazareno, *Ang Mahalaga sa Bubay*, 84.

69 See Carmen Imes, *Being God’s Image: Why Creation Still Matters* (IVP Academic, 2023) 13–15, 29; and early on Claus Westermann, *Creation*, trans. John J. Scullion (S.P.C.K, 1974), 58–60.

Note that the word *karalangan* or *dangal* is connected with *pangalan* (name). Hence one could say that humans have inherent dignity (*dangal*) not just because of birth names given by our parents but because God calls us by name, and the very name of God (Yahweh, Elohim) is what we bear as God's people. Thus, human beings have intrinsic dignity and value because they *are* God's image. This also involves relatedness to God and, thus, the image of God assumes a divine-human relationship.<sup>70</sup>

The status of being God's image calls for aligning one's life, living out its implications (*pangangatawan*, embodiment), and *pananagutan* (being responsible to God and people) based on God's intention of being God's representatives on earth. From this, *maganda na sana* is an attractive way of restating the Fall in Filipino idiom. In English, *maganda na sana* could be translated as "It would have been perfect had it not been ..." In other words, the world would have been perfect had it not been for humans who fell short or keep falling short of living up to their God-given status as his image bearers. *Nabumaling sa mapanlinglang na kagandaban ang tao*. (Humans became obsessed with deceitful beauty.)<sup>71</sup> There is a consequent loss of glory and honor (not the image of God itself) when one does not live up to the name. *Dinungisan nating mga tao ang larawan o wangis ng Diyos pag bindi natin sinusuklian ng utang na loob ang kaloob niyang karangalan*. (The image of God is sullied when we do not reciprocate with a debt of gratitude for God's gift of human dignity, being the crown of God's creation.)

#### *Divine and Human Agency (Pagkilos) in Creation*

One should also recognize the function of *magpadami* or *managana* (multiply, abound) in human life, which is to populate the world with God's representatives (Gen. 1:26–27, 12:1ff.). This is directly connected with human flourishing. *Pagiging-katiwala* (being stewards) and *pamamabala* (dominion, governance, stewarding creation) are other implications of being God's image. This emphasizes the importance of human agency in the theology and practice of Christians in regions like the Philippines where the supernatural tends to eclipse human participation for transformation.

Within this frame, the universal theme of grace (or more precisely, common grace)

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70 "Adam is neither a fallen God, nor a particle of spirit which has fallen from heaven into a body. He is a free creature with a constant and essential relation to God. This is what is shown by his origin." *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Xavier Léon-Dufour, under "Man."

71 Levy Lanaria, "O Kay Ganda, Sana," in *Ang Maganda sa Teolohiya* (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian, 2017), 53.

is present in the creation accounts pre- and post-Fall. In many ways, the theme of blessing encapsulates this well (Gen. 1:24, 28).<sup>72</sup> Along this vein, dialogue and participation with one's *kapwa* (kindred selves, neighbors) toward the common good are therefore part of God's will and reign ("cultural mandate"), as part of the ministry of the whole people of God.<sup>73</sup> Interestingly, there seems to be a tendency in theology to separate the motif of blessing from the theme of human life and the image of God. Alternatively, one could place this theme of common grace or blessing alongside election and relate the theme of "being light to the nations," which can be further deepened in relation to cultural engagement. Moreover, the theme of Adam (humankind) being *anak ng Diyos* (offspring of God—Gen. 1:27; 5:1–3; Luke 3:38; Eph. 4:6) seems to be necessary for schooling Christians in human (not just spiritual) formation.<sup>74</sup> The connection between humanness and the priesthood of Jesus Christ is also a thread that has the potential to link the humanity of Christ with creation (Heb. 2:14–18; 4:15; 5:7). For "he [Jesus] as man is the eternal bridge between heaven and earth."<sup>75</sup>

*Jesus Christ as Bukal ng Buhay at Ginhawa, Tunay na Larawan, at Mukha ng Diyos (Fountain of Life and Well-Being, the True Image of God, and Human Face of God)—the Way (ang Daan) to being Fully Human (Pagpapakatao)*

What is the role of the person and work of Christ within this local rendering of theological anthropology? God is triune—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—based on the biblical message. As the Son of God, Jesus Christ is fully human and fully God according to the Bible and the faith of the early church. The story of Jesus Christ, as told in the Bible, encompasses the Incarnation, his teachings and ministry, the

72 Cf. Westermann who concludes, "Despite man's disobedience and punishment, the blessing given with the act of creation remains intact....Man who is now far from God is always man blessed by God, and man's life remains open to the future just because of the power of God's blessing" (Creation, 104). See also his *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (Fortress Press, 1978).

73 Christ's good news of the kingdom of God (*paghabari ng Diyos o pamamayani ng kalooban ng Diyos*, Matt 4:23; 6:10; 9:35; 24:14) continues this thrust. The kingdom was/is meant to transform both individuals and societies. It involves a commitment to the common good (*kaginhawaban, kapakanan ng nakararami*, biblical shalom), which is also the basis for Christian public theology. On this latter point, see Jim Wallis, *The (Un)common Good: How the Gospel Brings Hope to a World Divided* (Brazos Press a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2014).

74 On this see Old Testament scholar Spencer Boersma's essay, "All People are God's Children," May 28, 2015, <https://spencerboersma.com/2015/05/28/all-people-are-gods-children/>. Also Imes who says: "Genesis 5 begins with a recap of God's creation of humans in his 'likeness.' Then the narrator applies the same language to the birth of other humans: 'Now Adam lived 130 years, he fathered in his likeness, according to his image; and he called his name Seth' (Genesis 5:3, author's translation). The narrator is offering us an analogy: Seth is Adam's image the way we are God's image. To be God's image implies kinship. We are God's family. Being God's image involves both kinship and kingship. We are part of the royal family. Being God's image is our human identity." *Being God's Image*, 29.

75 Gunton, *Christ and Creation*, 32.

crucifixion, and the resurrection. Drawing from these truths “for Christian faith and theology, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus will constitute the decisive norm of both true divinity *and* true humanity.”<sup>76</sup> For Jesus Christ is the “fullest expression of what God intends humanity to be [*tunay na larawan at mukha ng Diyos*]. This human being is the ‘image of God’ (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15) and our human destiny in him is to be conformed to the image of God. Hence the form of human life that we meet in Jesus Christ will surely be the decisive factor in any Christian statement of what it means to be genuinely human.”<sup>77</sup> More precisely, in Pauline terms (cf. Rom. 7:7–8:4), Christ is the criterion (*pamantayan*) for authentic humanity as God intended it to be. “Christ was in fact what Adam was destined to be. The ‘life’ that Adam lost is once again represented in the world, and in it the divine intention for humanity becomes manifest” through the power of the Spirit of Christ.<sup>78</sup>

While affirming the fullness of the person of Christ as attested by the Scriptures and the Christian faith, a meaningful local rendering of the reality of Jesus Christ in relation to creational renewal, *shalom*, and wholeness would be Jesus as *bukal ng bubay at ginbawa* (source or fountain of life, wholeness or well-being—John 1:3–4; 5:26; 10:10).<sup>79</sup> Jesus is able to do this because he is the only mediator (*tagapamagitan*, 1 Tim. 2:15) between God and humankind, reconciling the world back to God (2 Cor. 5). We can see this in the way John frames his Gospel with literary allusions to the creation accounts of Genesis 1–2 (e.g., word of God, life, breath of life, garden, the gardener, finished work), particularly in its beginning (John 1) and concluding sections (John 19–20). By way of an example:

The verb *tetelestai* (“it is finished”: from the *teleo*, also in 19:28) corresponds to language from Genesis 2 that highlights God’s completion of the work of creation and the divine blessing of the seventh day as sabbath because the work was finished. ... John could be intimating that God’s creative, life-giving work, begun in Genesis, finds its ultimate completion at the death of Jesus the Messiah. ... “Jesus alone is life; but he is life for the world because, and only because he dies.”<sup>80</sup>

76 Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. Second Edition (W. B. Eerdmans, 1991, 2004), 142.

77 Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 142.

78 Jerome Murphy O’Connor, *Becoming Human Together: The Pastoral Anthropology of St. Paul* (Liturgical Press, 1982), 43.

79 Cf. Jose de Mesa, *Mga Aral sa Daan: Dulog at Paraan sa Kristolohiya* (Manila: Dela Salle University Press, 2004), 118.

80 Blumhofer, Chen, and Green, eds. *Early High Christology*, 92.

Moreover, as the true image of God (*tunay na larawan ng Diyos*, 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), Jesus is the way (*daan*, John 14:6) to full humanity (*pagpapakatao*) since he is the way to fullness of life (*bubay na ganap at masagana*, John 10:10) or the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45) bringing the new creation. He is also *ang taong tunay na may magandang kalooban* (the human being with a genuine, good, and beautiful inner self). Finally, we come to know who God truly is through Christ who is the human face of God (*mukha ng Diyos*) being the “exact representation of the God’s being” (Heb. 1:3).<sup>81</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This paper has proposed a reframing of theological anthropology for the lowland Philippine setting. It highlights the task of vernacularizing theology, particularly the doctrine of humanity and the concept of the image of God, in the local context. Informed by the witness of Scriptures on the theme and the historical faith consensus of Christians, as well as drawing from the Philippine sociocultural realities, Filipino cultural theological categories were brought to the fore to reframe Christian anthropology. This opened up the theme *ang tunay na magandang bubay* (authentic beautiful/good life) with its integral connection to creation, being God’s image, creatureliness, new life in Christ, and the new creation as crucial to the retelling.

It is through the vernacular lens of a good and beautiful life (*magandang bubay*) that theological anthropology may be most fruitfully expressed—rooted in Scripture, resonant with Filipino life, and radiant with the good news of Christ (*magandang balita*). May this exploration lead to deeper discipleship and theological maturity among Filipino believers and bring in “new treasures into the life of the Church,” that Christianity would grow and change “until it becomes more credible as a foretaste” of the kingdom of God and a sign of the unity of all humankind in Christ.<sup>82</sup>

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81 Gener, “Christologies in Asia: Trends and Reflections,” 29–31, 38–39; also de Mesa, *Mga Aral sa Daan*, 96–115; Worthy of note here is Jose de Mesa’s theologizing related to God’s self-disclosure and our faith response. He ponders first the question: how do you know the loob (most authentic self) of someone in Philippine context? This is all about *pagpapalagayang loob* (getting to know someone) *tungo sa pagkakahulihan ng loob* (toward being at ease and friends with someone). He then uses this relational route and metaphor to speak of the “roles” within the Triune God and relates this to worship and mission. Consequently, these phases are *pakiramdaman* (feeling each other out mutually), *namukhaan* (recognition of the human face seen symbolically), and *arukin ang loob* (probing into the depths of the relationally authentic self). He uses these three phases of knowing a person as ways speaking about the roles of the Spirit (*ang Paramdam ng Diyos*), of the Son (*Mukha ng Diyos*), and of the Father (*Loob ng Diyos*) [Adequate but Not Enough: A Filipino Reflection on the Triune God (Quezon City, Philippines: Claretian Communications Foundation Inc., 2018) 81–92.]

82 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 123–124.





*Religious Consciousness—  
Divine Revelation and  
Human Reception*

J. H. Bavinck's Reformed  
Anthropological Reading of  
Romans 1

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Three years ago, I travelled to Edinburgh to start my study program. Scotland, for an Egyptian Presbyterian like me, has deep significance in our theological heritage. One of the earliest Reformed missionaries in Egypt in the nineteenth century, John Hogg, was Scottish. Studying in this historic center of Reformed Christianity is a privilege; however, living in Scotland has brought many unexpected experiences. In Edinburgh, as in several Western communities, many people identify as nonreligious, with some viewing religion as harmful.

On the other side, the MENA region still has a strong religious character, which is partly positive, as many people still believe in God and seek a connection with the divine. However, this also creates a challenge for the church, since religion is often distorted by sin. But also, after the Arab Spring, a major phenomenon in the region has been the growing number of young people turning to atheism, largely in response to the distorted forms of religion and the violence they have witnessed.

The post-Fall reality shows that sin has affected both human nature and the way humans receive God's revelation. This raises important questions, such as How do non-Christians respond to divine revelation? How should we understand the *imago dei* and the *semen religionis* in non-believers, as taught by Augustine and Calvin? How can the church engage with those who reject religion entirely? In the MENA context, how should the church view other faiths and proclaim the gospel with clarity? And how can we enter dialogue with the religious other in love and respect for the good of the world?

In this regard, during my study of the Neo-Calvinist theology, I have found Johan Herman Bavinck's theology of religious consciousness a valuable resource for the church, especially for Middle Eastern Reformed Christians, to engage with and learn from. Johan Bavinck (1895–1964), a Dutch theologian and nephew of well-known theologian Herman Bavinck, studied at the Free University of Amsterdam and later earned a doctorate in Germany with a thesis on mysticism. He served as a pastor and a missionary in Indonesia and a missiologist in the Netherlands.

Johan explains that after the Napoleonic wars, Egypt and the Near East became a focus of scholarly interest. Scholars began decoding ancient Egyptian texts and exploring their religious beliefs, including views on God, humanity, and salvation. This led to the rise of religious studies as a discipline seeking to understand religion

more deeply.<sup>1</sup> Johan's theological view is important because it highlights the strong links between theology and anthropology, divine revelation and human reception, and between religion and culture. Like many Calvinists, he saw culture as shaped by religious experience, with religious consciousness at its core. For him, this consciousness is a universal human awareness, rooted in inner assumptions that drive people to seek answers to life's big questions.<sup>2</sup> He explains, "It appears that humanity always and everywhere has fallen back on definite ideas and presumptions, and that these ideas and presumptions always resurface in surprising ways whenever they may have been temporarily repressed for various reasons."<sup>3</sup>

Johan develops his view of religious consciousness through two key perspectives, starting broadly and then focusing in. Although he admits that religious consciousness is "vague and ambiguous,"<sup>4</sup> he outlines five core questions, which he calls the "Five Magnetic Points."<sup>5</sup> These reflect the spiritual longings shared by all people and help explain the universal nature of religious consciousness. Johan grounds this framework in Scripture, especially Paul's theology in Romans 1.

## I. THE FIVE MAGNETIC POINTS

Johan identifies the "Five Magnetic Points" as fundamental expressions of the inherent tensions and existential longings within human experience. These points form an essential set of interconnected ideas that drive the lives of all individuals.<sup>6</sup> Each element is deeply interconnected with the others, collectively influencing and shaping human religious reality.

The first question is What is my relationship to the cosmos?<sup>7</sup> or what Johan describes as "experience of totality."<sup>8</sup> People often sense that they belong to a

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1 Johan H. Bavinck, "Het probleem der Anknüpfung bij de Evangelieverkondiging," 107–108.

2 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 29. He links this thought with Augustine's theology of the inextricable tie between God and humans that makes all humans have a sort of consciousness about God. See *Christus en de Mystiek van het Oosten* (Kampen: H. Kok, 1934), 120ff.; J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 317ff. This is very similar to Herman Bavinck's affirmation on the subjective aspect of divine revelation that God gifted humans with inner conscience to receive the general divine revelation. See H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1: 286–290.

3 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 150.

4 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 151.

5 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 145, 151.

6 Strange describes these points as "a kind of 'religious anatomy' of fallen human beings who both know God and don't know him at the same time." Daniel Strange, *Making Faith Magnetic*, 27.

7 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 32, 37.

8 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 151–163.

9 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 37, 38. This refers to the deep human feeling of being both small and connected to something much greater.

larger whole, even as they feel fragile before the eternal.<sup>10</sup> Yet, at the same time, they also experience greatness, as if the entire cosmos meets within them.<sup>11</sup> This tension between humility and significance shapes human life and reflects a key part of religious consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

The second question is What is my relationship to my own desires?<sup>13</sup> which Johan calls “the relationship with the Norm.”<sup>14</sup> He explains that people have an inner sense of a moral and religious standard that they did not create, yet it shapes their thoughts and actions. This inner dialogue points to a spiritual reality and a connection to the divine that gives life meaning and direction.<sup>15 16 17 18</sup>

The third question is What is my relationship with the Supreme Power?<sup>19</sup> or what Johan calls “The Great Unknown.”<sup>20</sup> Here, he explores the deep struggle people face in understanding the source of their existence.<sup>21</sup> Throughout history, humans have sensed a connection to a higher power, whether seen as a distant god, many gods, or a force behind the universe. This power is often linked to moral awareness, shaping how people view life and right and wrong.<sup>22 23</sup>

Johan’s fourth question is How do I find salvation?<sup>24</sup>—the human “need for deliverance”<sup>25</sup> or “thirst for redemption.”<sup>26</sup> He explains that in every age, people sense that something is wrong inside them and in the world.<sup>27</sup> This inner trouble keeps them from becoming what they could be and creates a strong longing to

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10 Paul J. Visser “Introduction: The Life and Thought of Johan Herman Bavinck (1895–1964),” in Johan Herman Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 57.

11 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 162.

12 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 162.

13 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 32.

14 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 163–173.

15 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 172–173.

16 Johan refers to Kant, who saw this moral sense as a way to approach religion. J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 172, 223–224.

17 Though Kant’s view remained limited to natural religion and did not explain Christianity. J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 224.

18 For Johan, the Norm is not just an idea—it is deeply tied to human life and spirituality. It shows the divine source of morality and helps people become aware of their own will and responsibility. J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 45–55.

19 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 30.

20 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 173–183.

21 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 33.

22 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 174–182.

23 Johan shows that human life is a constant dialogue between the limited self and the infinite divine, a relationship that gives meaning and direction in a world full of uncertainty. J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 183.

24 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 33.

25 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 183–192.

26 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 81.

27 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 33.

be set free. They picture freedom as social change or personal release, yet they disagree on what really chains them—death, ignorance, constant change, or selfishness.<sup>28</sup> The endless search for how to be saved—by our own effort, by changing society, or by God’s action—shows humanity’s urgent, timeless quest for redemption.<sup>29</sup>

The fifth question is How do I understand my relationship to my mysterious existence?<sup>30</sup> It is a question that concerns destiny,<sup>31</sup> or what Johan calls “the tension between action and fate.”<sup>32</sup> This tension reflects the human struggle to balance taking control (activity) of life and accepting what is beyond control (passivity).<sup>33</sup> It raises the question of whether people shape their own fate or must trust in God or the gods. Johan explains that this struggle—between acting and submitting—runs deep in human experience and has shaped religious and philosophical thought throughout history.<sup>34</sup> At the heart of this struggle, humans sense a connection to a Supreme Power that rules their destiny.<sup>35</sup>

Together, the Five Elements form the core of religious consciousness and confront people in every culture.<sup>36</sup> Johan writes, “We cannot deny that these five dimensions influence one another and are tied to each other.”<sup>37</sup> The sense of cosmic totality points to a higher power and to the pull between action and fate.<sup>38</sup> Norm and the need for deliverance show that a person is not just a speck in the universe but a free, responsible being who feels moral law and seeks redemption.<sup>39</sup> These themes colour every faith and touch even those who identify as nonreligious.<sup>40</sup>

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28 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 89. J. H. Bavinck, *The Impact of Christianity on the Non-Christian World*, 116–117. Bavinck argues that Islam in its teachings emphasizes collective redemption. However, Islamic mysticism tends to emphasize the individual experience of redemption.

29 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 192.

30 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 33. Bavinck here also explains how Islam is different from both primitive religions and Greek religious philosophy in identifying the relationship between me and my riddled existence. While this relation described works on handling the activity and passivity of humans in relation to this existence, it maintains mysterious tragedy in the primitive religions, and it’s a product of absolute irrationality. In Islam, it is Allah’s sovereignty that is responsible for human destiny. It is God’s command, God’s plan that is determined by him for human beings that acts as the active element in human existence, and it is held unquestionable. See, J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 69–76.

31 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 33.

32 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 192.

33 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 67.

34 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 95–96.

35 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 32–33, 76–80.

36 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 107–113.

37 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 201.

38 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 201–202.

39 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 202.

40 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 34.

## II. RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE PARADOX OF ROMANS 1

Theologically, Johan grounds the five key life questions in a biblical framework that explains how religious consciousness works. His approach shows a deep integration of theology and anthropology, or a theological anthropology, offering a Reformed understanding of human religious experience.

Like other Neo-Calvinists such as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, he bases much of his thinking on Romans 1:18–32, using it to explore the different aspects of religious consciousness in a way that fits both his time and context. Johan's interpretation of Romans 1 addresses the paradox of humanity's innate knowledge of God, acquired through general revelation, and their simultaneous suppression of this knowledge, which ultimately results in idolatry.<sup>41</sup> Johan resolves this tension by explaining the dual process of suppression and substitution that characterizes humanity's response to divine revelation. He explains:

It seems to me that Paul touches upon these things; Man has repressed the truth of the everlasting power and the divinity of God. It has been exiled to his unconscious, to the crypts of his existence. That does not mean, however, that it has vanished forever. Still active, it reveals itself again and again. But it cannot become openly conscious; it appears in *disguise*, and it is exchanged for something different. Thus, all kinds of ideas of God are formed; the human mind makes its own ideas of God and its own myths. This is not intentional *deceit*, it happens without man's knowing it. He cannot get rid of them. So he has religion; he is busy with a god; he serves his god, but he does not see that the god he serves is not God himself. An exchange has taken place, a perilous exchange. An essential quality of God has been blurred because it did not fit in with the human pattern of life, and the image man has of God is no longer true. Divine revelation indeed lies at the root of it, but man's thoughts and aspirations cannot receive it and adapt themselves to it. In the image man has of God we can recognize the image of man himself.<sup>42</sup>

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41 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 277; J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 118–122; See, also, J. H. Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring*, 7–8.

42 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 122

Therefore, although humans exert considerable effort to resist divine revelation within their inner consciousness, they cannot push away this revelation.<sup>43 44</sup> The universal act of divine self-disclosure is not eradicated by human suppression but instead becomes unconscious repression, leading to existential unrest and misdirected worship.<sup>45</sup> Johan explains:

All this can be interpreted as meaning that the faculty (*'pistis'*) by which man could see through the works of God has fallen into the magnetic field of sinful forces and inclinations, so that it has become completely counterproductive. It still captures the image of the works of God, it still penetrates the invisible backgrounds, but it can only see these unseen backgrounds in caricature form. There is a continuous process of 'suppressing' and 'exchanging' of God's revelation taking place in the depths of the human heart.<sup>46</sup>

He argues, "We do well to regard this revelation as very alive and powerful. It is so strong that, while a person may be capable of suppressing the truth or exchanging it for a lie, they are never fully able to escape the power of that truth."<sup>47</sup> Thus, despite the human suppression of divine inner revelation, God's truth remains an ever-present force within the human soul, demanding recognition and response.

Despite the clarity of this revelation, Johan emphasizes the persistent paradox of human response. He discusses that although people inherently know God, they suppress this knowledge and engage in what Johan describes as a "perilous exchange," replacing divine truth with idolatrous alternatives.<sup>48</sup> This suppression occurs, at the same time, with the perception of God's revelation, reflecting

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43 Johan asserts that general revelation is not a product of philosophical reasoning derived from nature but rather an existential encounter initiated by God, who makes his presence evident to all individuals. See also Johan H. Bavinck, *Religies en Wereldbeschouwingen in Onze Tijd* (Groningen: Wolters, 1958), 138.

44 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 123.

45 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 277–290. For more discussion on the process of suppression and substitution of divine revelation, see Daniel Strange, "Johan Herman Bavinck," in TNT, 268–270; Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, *A Sense of the Divine: An Affective Model of General Revelation from the Reformed Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

46 J. H. Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring*, 8. [Dit alles bat zich aldus duiden: dat het kenvermogen („de pistis”), waardoor de mensch de werken Gods kon doorzien, in het magnetisch veld van zondige krachten en neigingen geraakt is, waardoor het volkomen averechts is gaan werken. Het vangt het beeld van de werken Gods nog wel op, dringt ook nog wel door tot de onzienlijke achtergronden, maar het vermag dié onzienlijke achtergronden alleen in caricatuur-vorm te zien. Er vindt een continu proces van „ten-onder-houden” en „uitwisselen” plaats in de diepten van het menschelijk hart.]

47 J. H. Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring*, 13.

48 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 118, 124–125; J. H. Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring*, 8.

a deep-seated moral opposition to God. As a result, humanity is left without excuse,<sup>49</sup> since they are now accountable before God as knowers<sup>50</sup> and recipients of general revelation.

Johan concludes his discussion on Romans 1 by affirming the significance of this teaching for the church's mission. He affirms that Christians are engaging with individuals who have already received the general divine revelation in their inner lives. Therefore, every human being experiences what Johan describes as the "two fatal reactions" of suppression and substitution.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, the task of Christians is not to prove the existence of God to non-Christians but to clarify the truths that God has already revealed about himself. So, when a Christian, for instance, preaches the gospel, it marks a new and intensified phase in the individual's encounter with God. In other words, Christ is already present in the spiritual seeking of the gospel's hearers, even before they recognize him.<sup>52</sup> Through proclaiming the gospel, Christ becomes more tangible and audible.<sup>53</sup>

### III. *SENSUS DIVINITATIS TO SENSUS NUMINIS*

The analysis of Johan's perception of religious consciousness underscores the reconciliation he achieves between theology and anthropology in his theology of religions. In other words, religious consciousness, on one hand, stems from a vague, precognitive dimension, an internal impact of general divine revelation on the human inner being that gives rise to the *sensus divinitatis*.<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, it also encompasses the five fundamental elements of life questions, articulated within a worldview framework with psychological implications.<sup>55</sup> However, based on Romans 1, there is a cognitive aspect within the effect of divine revelation.<sup>56</sup> Johan identifies this aspect, developing a theological articulation of what he describes as *sensus numinis*, which is derived from the repression of the *sensus divinitatis*.<sup>57</sup> By *sensus numinis*, Johan refers to a suppressed product of the *sensus*

49 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 243–244.

50 J. H. Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring*, 13–14.

51 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 126.

52 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 127.

53 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 127.

54 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 233–264.

55 J. H. Bavinck, *The J. H. Bavinck Reader*, 151–198, 228–232.

56 J. H. Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring*, 15.

57 See J. H. Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring*, 15; J. H. Bavinck, "Het probleem der anknüpfung bij de Evangelieverkondiging," in *Vox Theologica: Interacademiaal theologisch Tijdschrift*, Jaar no.4 (Maart 1940): 105–111, 110. Johan Bavinck introduces theological concepts that appear to be absent from Kuyper's theology of religion, notably *sensus numinis*.

*divinitatis*, formed as a consequence of human sinfulness, which resists the divine sense imprinted in human inner life through general revelation.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, although humans still possess a *sensus divinitatis*, an innate sense or awareness of God, a continuous process of suppression and substitution takes place within their inner being. As a result, this sense of the divine has become distorted by sin. While glimpses of God's eternal power may still be perceived, they are often misinterpreted as magical forces residing in visible objects.<sup>59</sup> Johan further rearticulates this meaning, stating,

There is truly a *sensus numinis* in man, which makes him not stand before the mighty *phanerosis* (manifestations) of God in his creatures as one who can no longer pick up a single sound. There is also a continuous effect of God on human life, an effect that is so strong and striking that it still exerts influence on fallen humanity.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, despite humans' tendency to repress or distort the divine revelation, God continues to reveal himself within the inner being of every person. As a result, all people possess knowledge of God, albeit a non-saving knowledge, characterized by an undeniable awareness of his presence, akin to how demons acknowledge God with fear.<sup>61</sup> For Johan, this explains how pseudo-religions, even in their most noble forms, reveal both God's persistent, merciful influence and humanity's continual, inherent drive to suppress divine truth.<sup>62</sup> This understanding underscores the idea that people seek God due to God's inner revelation.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, paradoxically, people both know God and do not know him at the same time. Johan argues:

Even then, however, the dualistic nature of pseudo-religion remains; it is both knowing and at the same time unknowing,

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58 J. H. Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring*, 15.

59 J. H. Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring*, 16.

60 Johan H. Bavinck, "Het probleem der Anknüpfung bij de Evangelieverkondiging," 110. [Er is metterdaad in den mensch een *sensus numinis*, waardoor hij tegenover de machtige *phanerosis* Gods in Zijn schepselen niet staat als één die geen enkel geluid meer opvangt. Er is ook een voortdurende werking van God, uitgaande op het menschelijk leven, een werking, die zóó sterk en zóó frappant is, dat er metterdaad nog kracht van uitgaat op den gevallen mensch.]

61 J. H. Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring*, 17. Bavinck here uses the analogy of seeing a lamp, where the lamp itself forces acknowledgment regardless of one's mental state. God's revelation can impose itself so powerfully that repression fails, albeit temporarily.

62 J. H. Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring*, 18.

63 J. H. Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring*, 18. Johan states, "If anywhere there is talk of 'seeking' that occurs, it is not a psychological phenomenon but rather stems from the dynamic horismos, the divine destiny that does not let go of the deeply sunken human." [Indien er ergens sprake is van „zoeken”, dan is dat geen psychologisch verschijnsel, dan is dat een zoeken krachtens den dynamischen horismos de bestemming van Godswege, die den diepgezonken mensch niet loslaat.]

being addressed by God while at the same time repressing, distorting, and exchanging truth for lies. Man resists the Creator's eternal power and divinity. It is obvious that even the pagan person cannot entirely escape the fact that he is "playing a game" with divine matters.<sup>64</sup>

Now, what is the significance of reading J. H. Bavinck today? How has he, as a Reformed theologian, missiologist, and missionary, contributed to theological anthropology?

Johan Bavinck offers a modern Reformed reading of the Christian doctrine of general revelation. He explains religious consciousness and other religions using key Augustinian-Calvinist ideas like *imago dei*, *sensus divinitatis*, and *semen religionis*, showing how these shape human awareness of God from a Neo-Calvinist perspective.

Second, unlike some Neo-Calvinists, such as Abraham Kuyper, who placed religions into a hierarchy and viewed Calvinism as the highest theological system, Johan opposes ranking Christianity above other religions.<sup>65</sup> Instead, he argues that all religious traditions offer answers to the five basic life questions. These answers are shaped by patterns of suppression and substitution, both personally and collectively.

Third, Johan's interconnected concepts of *sensus divinitatis* and *sensus numinis*, worldview and world-vision, his psychological approach to religion, and the missiological implications form a framework for identifying points of contact between various faith traditions. It also fosters meaningful engagement with these religious traditions.

His idea of *sensus numinis* shows how his theology brings together insights from theology, anthropology, and culture. This allows Christians to dialogue with non-Christians not only across cultures but also in small groups and personal conversations. Such dialogue goes beyond discussing beliefs ("what") to also consider the person involved ("who"), including psychological and human

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64 J. H. Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring*, 18. [Ook dan echter blijft het dualistisch karakter der pseudoreligie. Zij is kennen en tegelijk niet-kennen, aangesproken worden door God en tegelijk verdringen, verwisselen, zij is in aanraking komen met de waarheid en tegelijk een vlucht in den leugen. Aan de eeuwige kracht en goddelijkheid van den Schepper wil de mensch niet aan. Het ligt voor de hand dat het ook den heiden niet geheel ontgaan kan, dat hij een spel speelt met de goddelijke dingen.]

65 See, for instance, his chapter "Calvinism as A Life System" in Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*.

aspects—not just doctrines.

Additionally, in addressing the points of contact between Christianity and non-Christian religions, Johan affirms the presence of elements of truth within other faiths, grounding his perspective in the doctrines of general revelation and common grace.<sup>66</sup> However, he cautions against viewing these truth elements in isolation from each other and from the whole religious system. Instead, he emphasizes that they must be understood within the framework of their totalizing religious systems, as their meaning and function are inseparable from the broader theological and cultural contexts in which they exist.<sup>67</sup>

In other words, it is wrong to assume that shared words or ideas mean the same thing in Christianity and other religions. These elements must be understood within their own religious systems, as their meaning depends on the beliefs that surround them. Johan Bavinck uses a kind of word-association theory, showing that terms gain meaning from the network of ideas they belong to. So, even if two religions use the same word, it may carry very different meanings. This helps create better interreligious dialogue by showing how each faith understands key ideas.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, Johan offers a Reformed theological perspective on the use of psychology within the religious realm, linking this approach to the doctrine of general revelation. Although Johan may be criticized for affirming the psychological interpretation of religion, he himself rejects the notion that psychology can replace theology in understanding religious experience.<sup>69</sup> In other words, Johan asserts that anthropology and psychology must be employed from a theological foundation, forming a distinct Reformed anthropology and psychology.

Finally, Johan illustrates not only the uniqueness of the gospel message in non-Christian contexts,<sup>70</sup> but also its transformative impact on individuals and societies.<sup>71</sup> He acknowledges the work of the Holy Spirit in proclaiming the gospel

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66 Abraham Kuyper, “The Natural Knowledge of God,” trans. Harry van Dyke, *The Bavinck Review* 6 (2015), 104.

67 J. H. Bavinck, “Het probleem der anknüpfung bij de Evangelieverkondiging,” 106.

68 J. H. Bavinck, *The Church Between Temple and Mosque*, 13–14.

69 J. H. Bavinck, *Het Probleem van de Pseudo-Religie en de Algemene Openbaring*, 14–15.

70 J. H. Bavinck, *De Absoluutheid van het Christendom* (Javasche Boekhandel & Drukkerij, 1936), 11–15. For Johan, absolute truth is found solely in God’s revelation through the gospel of Christ within Christian faith.

71 See Stefan Paas, *Religious Consciousness in a Post-Christian Culture: J.H. Bavinck’s Religious Consciousness and Christian Faith*, 51–52.

to non-Christians. In his discussion on the content of preaching in the mission field, he explains,

This is the truth in the expression that our point of contact exists in an antithesis. In other words, if those whom we would convert have already been busy with God, in the sense that God has done something with them, and they have done something with God, then the missionary can only call such people to abandon the old and accept what has been made new in Christ Jesus.<sup>72</sup>

This process of presenting the gospel to non-Christians, as Daniel Strange observes in Johan Bavinck's theology, does not stem from feelings of imperialism or self-righteous supremacy but from grateful individuals who are themselves sinners renewed by the grace of God.<sup>73</sup> Johan describes this process as "meeting in love."<sup>74</sup> Thus, with love and humility, Christians must bear witness to the gospel, acknowledging that God's grace has already been at work in the lives of all people.

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72 J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 137

73 Daniel Strange, *Their Rock Is Not like Our Rock: A Theology of Religions* (Zondervan, 2014), 40.

74 Here Daniel Strange is quoting from J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, 126.



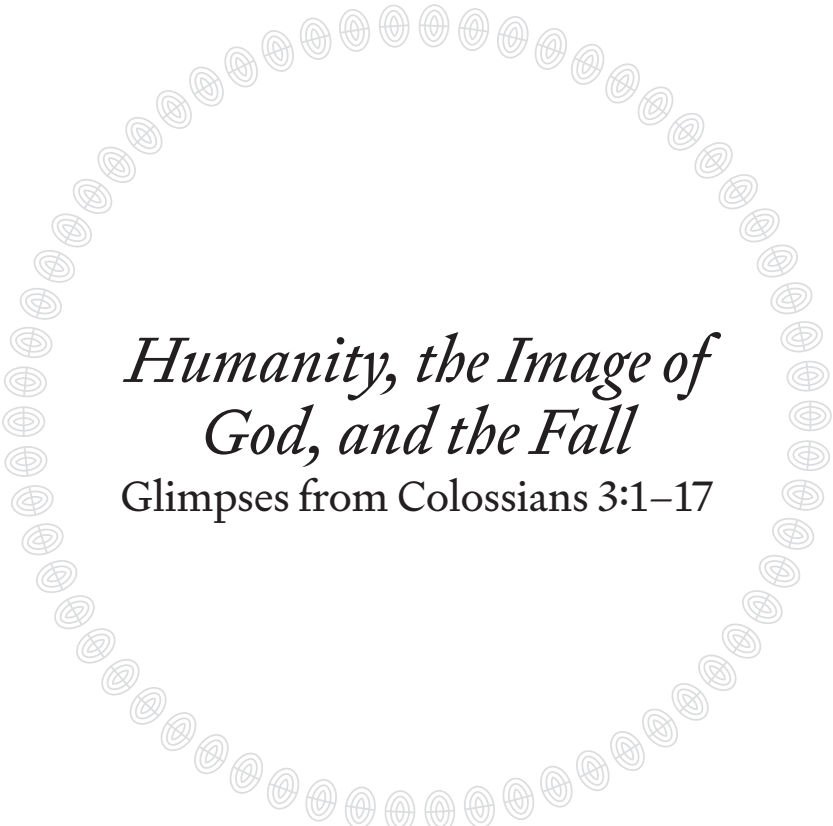




FALL (AND SALVATION)







*Humanity, the Image of  
God, and the Fall*  
Glimpses from Colossians 3:1–17

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The impact of the Fall on humanity as God's image bearers has been a contentious issue in scholarship. On the one hand, there are scholars like John F. Kilner who argue that the *imago dei* was not damaged by sin.<sup>1</sup> However, many interpreters are rightly concerned that this does not account for the pervasive effect of sin that the New Testament outlines (cf. Rom. 5–8). Towards this end, it has been convincingly argued that though humanity still bears the image of God, the Fall has corrupted and distorted it. This distortion is an aspect of the theological anthropology of the New Testament, which depicts Christ as the restorer of that which has been marred by sin. While all of humanity can reflect the character of God and is thus an image bearer, it does so in an incomplete and imperfect way.

On the other hand, there are those, like Grant R. Osborne, for whom the Fall entails the complete destruction of the image of God in humanity.<sup>2</sup> This is, however, a difficult position to maintain given that Scripture implies that even after the Fall, humanity still bears the image of God. In prohibiting the shedding of blood, Genesis 9:6 states that “whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed; for in the image of God he made man.” Again, in James 3:9, we find that the *imago dei* still remains even after the fall (“With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God”). As Louis Berkhof states, “It is unwarranted to say that man has completely lost the image of God.”<sup>3</sup> Although humanity is still an image bearer, the question of how Scripture delineates the effect of the Fall and what it means to be human in light of Christ’s redemptive work is an issue that requires further thought.

Drawing from Paul’s anthropological views in Colossians 3, I’ll argue that for Paul, the redeemed human is the bearer of the image of God who receives restoration in and through Christ. We find him reflecting on Christ’s ongoing work of transforming believers towards Christlikeness (cf. Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:4; Col. 3:10). The teleological goal of salvation is thus depicted as conformation to the image of God’s Son. Furthermore, for Paul, God’s restoration of believers to the *imago Dei* is tangible and embodied. In Christ, Paul tells us, the transformation of the human self is to be manifested in ethical living in the here and now (Col. 3:1–17). This depicts a Pauline understanding of personhood as a self in relation

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1 See, for example, John F. Kilner, “Humanity in God’s Image: Is the Image Really Damaged?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53 (2010): 601–117.

2 See, for example, Grant R. Osborne, *Romans* (IVP, 2004), 223.

3 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 204.

to an indwelling other—whether that indwelling external entity is sin and death or Christ for the redeemed. I will also briefly highlight models of the moral self in two Second Temple Jewish texts to help us understand Paul’s conception of human moral agency in the renewal of believers to the image of God.

## I. PERSONHOOD AND THE *IMAGO DEI*: COLOSSIANS 3:1–17

Colossians 3:1–17 constitutes a distinct unit that addresses people redeemed in Christ and the various imperatives created by believers’ union with Christ. In this passage, Paul addresses both the individual believer and the new covenant community. In the preceding section of 2:8–23, he has argued for the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, urging the Colossian believers to stand firm against the philosophies of this world or the restrictive regulations associated with the Torah. He does this through a “theology of the incarnation and a redemptive historical scheme of promise and fulfilment” through Christ’s resurrection and triumph.<sup>4</sup>

The imagery of 3:1 thus picks up on the theme of the resurrection and Christ’s enthronement in 2:10, 12, 15 and Christ’s lordship, which Paul has discussed in 1:15–20. In 3:1–17 Paul also advocates a moral vision to compete with the restrictive system of heavenly intermediaries, asceticism, and coercive Torah observance of the teachers he opposes.

Just like he does in his letter to the Romans (6:1–23; 7:1–6; 8:1–16; 12:1–2) and the Galatians (5:13–6:10), Paul discusses the behavioural implications of his theological exposition of the gospel of Christ. Because people redeemed in Christ are united with Christ, they are no longer to offer their bodies to the service of sin. Thus, 3:1–17 functions “as an exhortation focusing on the transformative nature of the gospel” as believers live between the triumph of Christ’s death and the manifestation of his glory at the Parousia—an in-between period in the “already-not-yet” where believers struggle against evil desires of the flesh and the powers.

In Christ, in the here and now, believers have already been transported from darkness to light (Col. 1:13–14) and from death to life (Col. 3:3–4). They have been given a new and transforming identity in Christ (Col. 2:6–7, 11; 3:11). As Charles Moule puts it:

“The new life is a *fait accompli* because of Christ: it is a free gift

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<sup>4</sup> Michael F. Bird, *Colossians and Philemon, a New Covenant Commentary* (Cascade Books, 2009), 88.

from God; but it carries a challenge. If we accept that challenge, we begin to belong to the final event, to God's ultimate purpose: we have entered into the new covenant...But the process of fully becoming detached from the old and fully belonging to the new remains to be painfully and laboriously completed."<sup>5</sup>

Thus Paul begins by urging the Colossians to identify themselves with a source of identity that is bound up with Jesus Christ (3:1–4). This new relation with Christ would mediate all their perceptions and actions. What Paul advocates would lend itself to seeking and setting their minds on things above, which entails the hope of the gospel (1:5), the invisible God (1:15), and the reign of Jesus over the cosmos (2:8).

Signifying key aspects of his theology of the person, Paul identifies believers as people "raised with Christ" in verse 1. He also says in verse 3, "For you have died, and your life has been hidden with Christ in God." Furthermore, he states in verse 10 that Christians are now clothed with a "new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator." The inference Paul draws from the believers' in-Christ identity is that they must enact Christ's death and put to death immorality and idolatry (v. 5). The command to put to death (v. 5) and put off (v. 8) can be taken as a description of the stark contrast between the new life in Christ and the human depravity that marked their life before Christ (cf. Col. 1:21; 1 Cor. 1:26–31; 6:9–11; 12:2; Gal. 4: 8–9; Eph. 2:1–3).

Since for Paul the self is always a self in relationship with an external and indwelling other, insofar as the self still lives "in the flesh" as an "earthly being," it must continually confront the old existence that was crucified in Christ—this is the crux of Paul's language of putting to death and what putting off/stripping off entails. Implicit in Paul's overall argument is the idea that there are two spheres of existence that are mutually opposed. The self in union with Christ is a newly constituted self that has agency in faith. Susan Eastman puts it well:

Christ indwelling and thereby re-creating the self is the source of faith in Christ; Christ crucified in human history is the basis and goal of such trust, because the self-giving of the Son of God generates and sustains trust in himself.

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5 C. Moule, "The New Life' in Colossians 3:1–17," *RevExp* 70 (1973): 481–93, 483.

When Paul urges the Colossian believers to put to death that which belongs to their earthly nature (v. 3), he describes an important aspect of life in the faith which mediates all human relationships—that is, all of life. Thus, he urges believers to put to death sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires, greed, anger, rage, malice, slander, perverse talk, and falsehood (vv. 5, 8, 9).

Instead, they are to put on compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiveness, love, and a heart that is ruled by the peace of Christ and saturated with the word of Christ and gratitude to God (vv. 12–16). In these imperatives, Paul identifies his readers (believers) as moral agents. For Paul, the life believers live is summed up with the statement “Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:19–20; cf. Rom. 7:15–18). The person is shaped in relationship to a separate entity (Christ) that is both external and indwelling. In Christ, the person’s whole self has been crucified with Christ, and Christ’s indwelling presence enables and actualises a putting to death of evil fleshly desires.

It is important to read Paul’s imperatives of putting to death sinful behaviour and putting on attitudes and actions in line with the life of Christ in terms that do not slide into a competitive account of divine and human agency. As J. Louis Martyn says:

We can reiterate that Paul is serious when he allows human beings to be the subject of the verb “to place one’s trust.” Those who believe in Christ are not puppets, moved about and made to speak by others. ... But just as these persons are not puppet believers, so they are not believers as a result of an act of their own autonomous wills, as though the gospel were an event in which two alternatives were placed before an autonomous decider, and faith were one of two decisions the human being could make autonomously. ... Thus, when Paul speaks about placing one’s trust in Christ, he is pointing to a deed that reflects not the freedom of the will but rather God’s freeing of the will.

In contrast to an anthropology that is premised on the notion that human beings are autonomous and self-directing individuals, for Paul it is the death and resurrection of Jesus (not the strength of the human will) that accomplishes redemption and transforms the lives of believers.

For Paul it is “those who belong to Christ Jesus [that] have crucified the flesh with

its passions and desires” (Gal 5:24), and again he says of himself, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which [or whom] the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14). He also describes the Colossians as being constituted anew through Christ’s death, saying, “Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:11b–12). He again says to them, “When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins” (Col. 2:13). For Paul, it is by belonging to Christ that believers can crucify the flesh with its passions and desires. It is believers’ crucifixion with Christ that actualises their crucifixion to the cosmos and the world’s crucifixion to them (Gal. 6:14).

Earlier Old Testament texts view human beings as having free will—that is, the ability to freely choose between good and evil without any inherent impairment to their moral capabilities. Texts such as Deuteronomy 4:1–9; 30:6–10 and Proverbs 6:20–24; 7:1–5; etc. do not reflect a focus on the issue of inner moral conflict or the inability to freely choose between good and evil.

In later prophetic literature, we find the view that human agency is impaired, and the self cannot choose what is right and pleasing to God. The impairment is so pervasive that it cannot be overcome by human effort—instead, according to texts such as Ezekiel 36:26, God is the one who will enable genuine moral agency through a transformation that is initiated and actualised by him.

In contrast, in some Second Temple Jewish literature such as 4 Ezra, humanity’s sinfulness and moral failure is attributed to “the evil heart” with which humans were created. In this view, human beings have the capacity to make moral decisions, but because of some sort of inherent condition, such as a guilty inclination or propensity to lust, human beings can have disordered desires. The impairment can also be the result of an external influence by demonic beings, as is the case in Jubilees, 1 Enoch, the Aramaic Levi Document—these external influences cause error and lead humans astray.<sup>6</sup> In this view, internal moral impairment can be overcome through correct teaching that will equip the person to resist wrongful desire. There is a direct link drawn between accepting Enochic wisdom

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<sup>6</sup> In the Aramaic Levi Document, Levi prays: “Let not any satan rule over me to lead me astray from your way” (AID supp. 10) 28; and, similarly, in the Plea for Deliverance from the 11QPsalms scroll, the speaker prays: “Let neither a satan nor an impure spirit rule over me; let neither pain nor an evil inclination take possession of my bones” (11Q5 XIX, 15–16).

or the teachings of the Yahad and having moral agency and the ability to resist sin through the will.

Another model we find in Second Temple Jewish thought is the possibility that the majority of humanity does not possess moral agency at all. In the pre-sectarian wisdom text called 4QInstruction, there are two kinds of people in the world. Genesis 1 recounts the creation of a “spiritual people,” who are made in the likeness of the holy ones (Gen 1:27). To these fortunate persons has been given the capacity to become moral agents, though they must work hard to obtain the necessary insight to actualize this capacity. Then there is another type of human created, the “spirit of flesh” that is not able to discern between good and evil. This is the being created in Genesis 2 from the dust of the earth. To this second group belong the majority of humanity, both Jews and Gentiles.

A sectarian text from Qumran, the *Hodayot* or Thanksgiving Hymns depict all humanity as incapable of moral action. The writer argues that all humanity are animated beings characterised by a spirit of error and perversion. “Thus, as created, no one possesses moral agency, since the moral faculty is so defective as to produce only guilty actions.”<sup>7</sup> Resolution is found when the author draws on Ezekiel’s 36:26–27 promise of “I will put my spirit into you.” In contrast to Ezekiel, however, where the defective piece of moral equipment is definitively removed, the speaker of the *Hodayot* is not freed entirely from his “spirit of flesh,” since he still expresses distress and anxiety about its power (1QH<sup>a</sup> IV, 37; cf. V, 30–32). This defective spirit remains as an alienated and rejected part of the self.<sup>8</sup>

This is in stark contrast to the Pauline model of moral selfhood. When Paul says, “I no longer live but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:19–20) and again, “It is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me” (Rom. 7:17), he describes personhood as a self in relation to another, “suggesting that it is not only ‘in Christ’ but also in the realm of sin and death that the person is shaped in relationship to a separate entity that is both external and indwelling.”<sup>9</sup> All humanity is thus indwelt by the realm of sin and death. Those who are redeemed in Christ are redeemed from sin and death and united with Christ. For Paul, Christians are no longer to offer their bodies to the service of sin since they are no longer in the realm of sin. Their personhood and therefore their moral agency is reconstituted through union with Christ.

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7 11Q5 XIX, 23.

8 11Q5 XIX, 24.

9 Susan Grove Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul’s Anthropology*, 7.

Thus Paul says in Colossians 3:10–11: “Having clothed yourselves with the new man, which is being renewed according to the image of the one creating him. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, Barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is for all, and is in all.” For Paul, every aspect of the personhood and its social location have been nullified by the cross of Christ. For Paul, who was living in a culture that was pervasively shaped and dominated by systems of honour, union with Christ through the cross puts to death such values and systems. For this reason, Paul now considers his infant circumcision, his belonging in the tribe of Benjamin, and membership as a zealous Pharisee as loss, as garbage (Phil. 3:5, 8). Because the gospel of Christ produces a single new humanity, socially constructed selves are obliterated, for sources of human identity are taken up by and into the gospel. Similarly to Galatians 3:28, in Colossians 3:11 Paul advocates a negation of ethnic and economic realities as modes of honour, separation, othering, and superiority.

In delineating this new human identity and what the Colossians are to do in order to further their transition into the new life in Christ, Paul identifies what makes it possible for a believer to put off sins of aggression (anger, wrath, malice) and sins of the tongue (slander, perverse talk, lying to one another). It is not the strength of the believer’s moral will but rather “the power and glory of the new creation spilling over” into the believer’s life. He articulates this in v. 10: “Having stripped off the old man with its deeds and having clothed yourselves with the new man which is being renewed according to the image of the one creating him.” Renewal to the image of God is here presented as the outworking of faith in Christ, which the Colossians have been initiated into through Christ.

We find here an echo of Genesis 1:26–27 and Colossians 1:15 where Paul has stated that Jesus is the “image of the invisible God.” As Jesus Christ is the image of God, so too “human beings—when indwelt by Christ, become renewed after the image of God.”<sup>10</sup> For Paul, the new humanity in Christ is a self that is indwelt by Christ—the self in Christ is also continually shaped after a pattern. It is a renewal to the pre-Fall state of humankind. Paul identifies the pattern after which God’s renews the believer as Jesus Christ who resembles God’s absolute likeness. He is “at once the new Adam, that is, the archetypal pattern of human existence, and simultaneously the triumphant Messiah who reigns as the sovereign Lord over the dominion of God.”<sup>11</sup>

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10 Bird, *Colossians and Philemon*, 102.

11 Bird, *Colossians and Philemon*, 102.

Thus, believers in Christ

1. Have died and risen with Jesus (Col. 3:1)
2. Have their present life hidden with Christ (v. 3)
3. Are called to continually enact Christ's death in this life (vv. 5, 8)
4. Have a new self which is being renewed to the image of God (v. 10)

Raised with Christ, the new self is a re-creation in God's image and an embodiment of the *imago dei*—which is to be disclosed in adhering to God's moral standards. In Ephesians 4:22–24, instead of language of re-creation in God's image (εικόν), Paul uses the phrase “created according to the likeness of God (κατὰ θεὸν) in true righteousness and holiness,” where likeness is synonymous to image.

Paul follows this indicative with the imperative in the following verse: “So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours” (Eph. 4:25). He interprets believers' re-creation to be like God or according to the image of God through a moral interpretation of the *imago dei*. Empowered by the Spirit, believers are called to exemplify God's standards of morality.

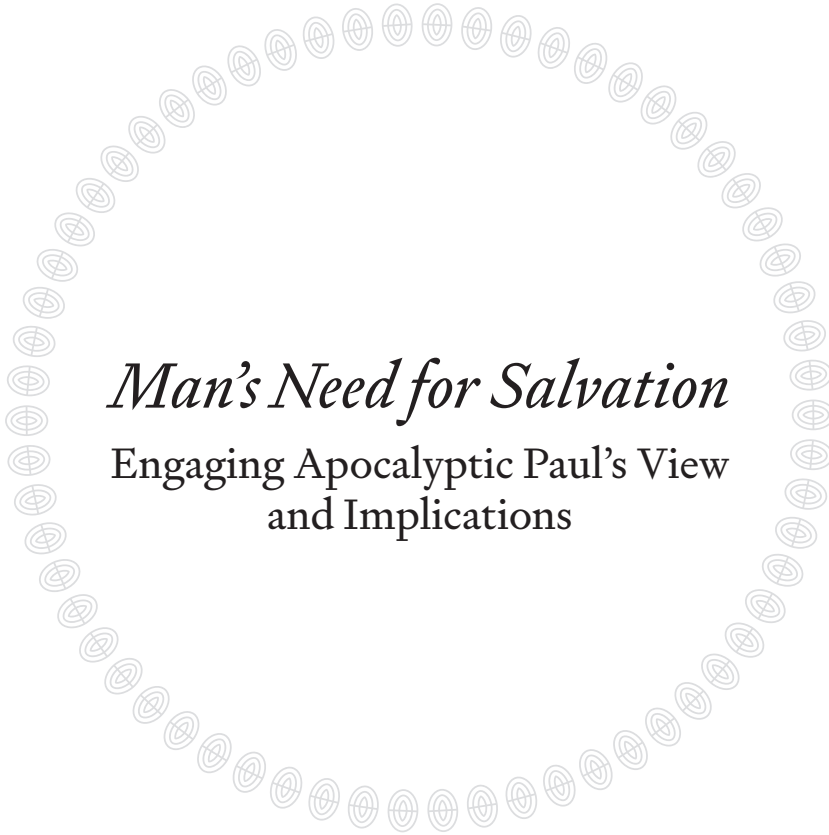
## II. CONCLUSION

Paul's theological anthropology in Colossians 3:1–17 presents a distinctive understanding of humanity as image bearers who are restored and renewed through union with Christ. Against the backdrop of scholarly debate regarding whether the Fall completely destroyed, marred, or left intact the *imago dei*, I contend that Paul depicts redeemed humanity as bearers of God's image who receive tangible restoration in and through Christ's indwelling presence, thus implying that for Paul, the Fall had damaged the *imago dei* and the moral and relational aspects he associates with the notion of image bearing. Paul's anthropology fundamentally challenges autonomous individualism by presenting personhood as relational—a self in relationship that is either shaped by the realm of sin and death or reconstituted through union with Christ. The transformation of believers toward Christlikeness is not accomplished through human moral effort on the basis of resolve or strength of the will but through divine agency, as “the power and glory of the new creation spills over” into the believer's life. Paul also demonstrates that this renewal according to God's image nullifies ethnic, economic, and social distinctions, creating a single new humanity where “Christ is for all, and is in all.”

For the Ethiopian evangelical church, this theological framework provides a biblical foundation for pursuing unity across ethnic lines while emphasizing that moral transformation flows not from human effort but from Christ's transformative and indwelling presence.







# *Man's Need for Salvation*

Engaging Apocalyptic Paul's View  
and Implications

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Two influential figures in twentieth-century New Testament scholarship are Rudolf Bultmann and his student Ernst Käsemann. While Bultmann emphasized an existential and individualistic understanding of salvation, Käsemann advocated for a more apocalyptic and cosmic perspective. The contrast between these two prominent scholars can be summarized under this question: Is God's salvation primarily concerned with saving human beings from guilt, or from enslavement to powers lying beyond their control? Proponents of the apocalyptic reading of Paul's theology would argue for the latter. J. Christiaan Beker, a key apocalyptic figure in New Testament studies, summarizes the apocalyptic view of the gospel in contrast to a more individualistic interpretation:

The gospel is not primarily an intrapsychic phenomenon that limits itself to the conversion of individual souls climbing out of a lost world into safety of the church, like drowning people aboard a safe vessel. Rather, the gospel proclaims the new state of affairs that God has initiated in Christ, one that concerns the nations and the creation.<sup>1</sup>

This discussion about the nature of salvation is closely tied to the question about human nature. Soteriology must be connected to anthropology. The way we understand the human condition and the impact of sin will shape our view the kind salvation that is needed.

This paper explores the apocalyptic perspective of Paul's anthropology and its implications for understanding Christ's saving work. The paper concludes with a critical assessment and theological response to this apocalyptic view of human condition.

## I. DEFINITION AND MAIN FEATURES

Apocalyptic theology has been significantly shaped by key German New Testament scholars from the first half of the twentieth century, such as William Wrede, Albert Schweitzer, and Ernst Käsemann.<sup>2</sup> While in the English-speaking world, "Christiaan Beker seems to have been the first to grasp the significance

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1 Johan Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Fortress Press, 1980), 8.

2 More Pauline scholars who endorsed the apocalyptic reading of Paul would include, J. Christiaan Beker, J. Louis Martyn, Katherine Grieb, Susan Eastman, Beverly Gaventa, and Douglas Campbell.

of the revolution which Käsemann had effected in German scholarship, and to attempt a systematic presentation of this ‘apocalyptic’ perspective on Paul.”<sup>3</sup>

The so-called Apocalyptic Paul school maintains that Paul’s theology closely aligns with the key features of Jewish apocalypticism. With reference to Jewish apocalypticism, “It is a worldview that was widespread in early Judaism from c. 200 BC to AD 200, and which centered on the expectation of God’s imminent intervention into human history in a decisive manner to save his people and punish their enemies by destroying the existing fallen cosmic order and by restoring or recreating the cosmos to its original pristine perfection.”<sup>4</sup> Constantine Campbell rightly observes that “apocalypticism sought to explain God’s apparent silence in the face of centuries of oppression and abhorrent treatment of Jews by various nations and empires. It held that God’s silence was in anticipation of dramatic action to achieve his purposes.”<sup>5</sup> Among the distinctive features of this apocalyptic framework are the following:<sup>6</sup>

- The temporal dualism of the two ages.
- The radical discontinuity between this age and the next, coupled with pessimism regarding the existing order and otherworldly hope directed toward the future order.
- The expectation of the imminent arrival of the reign of God as an act of God, spelling the doom of existing earthly conditions.
- A cosmic perspective in which the primary location of an individual is no longer within a collective entity such as Israel or the people of God, and the impending crisis is not local but cosmic in scope.
- The cataclysmic intervention of God will result in salvation for the righteous, conceived as the regaining of Edenic conditions.”<sup>7</sup>

The Apocalyptic Paul school interprets Paul’s theology—including his anthropology—through this framework. In this view, Paul’s anthropology is not understood primarily in individualistic terms but in relation to the realm or kingdom to which one belongs. Käsemann expresses this view by saying,

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3 N. T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Fortress Press, 2015), 136.

4 David E. Aune, “Apocalypticism,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (InterVarsity Press, 1993), 25.

5 Constantine R. Campbell, *Reading Paul as Christian Scripture: A Literary, Canonical, and Theological Introduction* (Baker Academic, 2024), 6.

6 Aune, “Apocalypticism,” 27.

7 Aune, “Apocalypticism,” 27.

The terms used in Pauline anthropology all undoubtedly refer to the whole man in the varying bearings and capacities of his existence; but they do not apply to what we call the individual at all. Here existence is always fundamentally conceived from the angle of the world to which one belongs...even the believer has neither being, existence nor power in himself. His continuity and identity also rest outside himself.”<sup>8</sup>

This raises the question: How does this school deal with Paul's use of seemingly individualistic language in his epistles? As she interacts with Romans 7:7–25, Susan Eastman provides an explanation for Paul's transition from the plural to the singular in Romans as she says,

Paul dramatizes the situation of the self (and not only of humanity in general) in the grip of sin's lethal and deceptive power, in order to bring home to his Roman auditors, empirically and personally, both that power and the even-greater power of God's deliverance through Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

Another important feature of the apocalyptic reading of Paul is the emphasis on the two ages or two spheres of existence—the old aeon and the new aeon. These two ages represent opposing spheres of existence. Through his death and resurrection, Christ inaugurates the new age, and the living Christians are those who now live now in the tension of these overlapping realities—what is often termed the “already but not yet.” Günther Bornkamm uses the language of the old aeon and new aeon as he describes “where Christ took upon himself all the encompassing might and power of the old aeon (the law, sin, flesh, powers of the world) and dying for sinners he opens access for them into the grace of God.”<sup>10</sup>

The decisive event that brought in the new age and the victory over the evil powers is the death and resurrection of Christ. In his resurrection, the eschaton that the Old Testament looked for was inaugurated. Christians are drawn into this new reality and the newness of life through participation in Christ. As the personal experience is analyzed according to the apocalyptic reading, the individualistic

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8 Ernst Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (Fortress Press, 1971), 26.

9 Susan Eastman, “Double Participation and the Responsible Self in Romans 5–8,” in *Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Baylor University Press, 2013), 100.

10 Günther Bornkamm, “Baptism and New Life in Paul (Romans 6),” in *Early Christian Experience*, trans. by Paul L. Hammer (Harper & Row, 1969), 75. See also Robert C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Topelmann, 1967), 16.

aspect is marginalized. Barclay describes the new mode of existence for the believer by saying, “It is not in the first place an *anthropological* phenomenon: it is experienced by human beings only inasmuch as they share in, and draw from, a life whose source lies outside of themselves.”<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, apocalyptic theology emphasizes the inbreaking of the coming age into this age through the Christ event and the triumph of God over the powers of evil, such as sin and death. This theology depends primarily on God’s revelation in Christ.<sup>12</sup> Attached to this theology, sin and death are not primarily human failings but cosmic apocalyptic powers that reigned in the old aeon and have now been conquered in Christ’s death and resurrection.

In light of these features of the apocalyptic reading of Paul, pressing questions arise: How should one understand the doctrine of sin? How should the Christ event—particularly Christ’s atonement—be perceived?

## II. APOCALYPTIC VIEW OF SIN

According to the apocalyptic view, Paul speaks of sin not primarily as guilt nor as internal corruption but as a cosmic power that enslaves human beings. In his commentary on the book of Galatians, Louis Martyn expresses this understanding as he writes, “The human dilemma consists at its base, not of guilt, but of enslavement to powers lying beyond the human being’s control.”<sup>13</sup> Beverly Gaventa, a contemporary proponent of this apocalyptic reading of Paul, further develops this understanding. In an article on the cosmic power of sin in Romans,<sup>14</sup> Gaventa depicts Paul’s soteriology in Romans as a cosmic conflict in which God conquered his enemies, including sin.<sup>15</sup> She turns the focus from the individualistic view of salvation to a cosmological one. Instead of considering sin as primarily a feature of human activity, experience, or even a human disposition

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11 John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (W. B. Eerdmans, 2015), 501. See also, John M. G. Barclay, “Under Grace: The Christ-Gift and the Construction of a Christian Habitus,” in *Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8*, ed. Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Baylor University Press, 2013), 65.

12 Douglas A. Campbell, “Romans and the Apocalyptic Reading of Paul,” in *Preaching Romans: Four Perspectives*, ed. Scot McKnight and Joseph B. Modica (W. B. Eerdmans, 2019), 40–58.

13 J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, The Anchor Bible AB 33A* (Doubleday, 1997), 308.

14 Beverly R. Gaventa, “The Cosmic Power of Sin in Paul’s Letter to the Romans: Toward a Widescreen Edition,” *Interpretation* 58, no. 3 (July 2004): 229–240.

15 According to Christiaan Beker, “The major apocalyptic forces are, for Paul, those ontological powers that determine the human situation within the context of God’s created order and that comprise the ‘field’ of death, sin, the law, and the flesh.” Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 189.

or flaw inherent in human nature, Gaventa sees sin as a cosmic power that enslaves humankind and stands against God.<sup>16</sup>

Her views reach their climax as she explains Romans 6 with a strong emphasis on the description of sin as a tyrant. For her, the central concern in Paul's theology is not individual guilt but the broader apocalyptic conflict, in which God wages war against anti-God powers, including "Sin" and "Death." As Gaventa describes Paul's view of sin, she argues,

To take seriously the résumé of Sin will require an enlargement of our view of Romans. Recent decades of Pauline scholarship have rightly called into question those interpretations that treat Romans as having to do largely with the relationship between God and the individual. The scholarly pendulum has swung in the opposite direction, emphasizing the concern in Romans for God's dealings with Israel and the Gentiles. Yet even that important correction does not suffice, since the "widescreen" version of Romans is not only about the relationship among ethnic groups, between God and humanity, or God and the individual. It concerns the much larger apocalyptic battle in which God wages war against anti-God powers, including the powers of Sin and Death.<sup>17</sup>

Sin is personified as a cosmic power from which believers have been freed through the death of Christ and thus transferred under the lordship of Christ. Consequently, sin is hardly viewed as individual transgression; rather, it is viewed as a power, an evil force that Christ conquered in his death, thereby liberating human beings from its grip.<sup>18</sup> Some theologians take the idea of the personification of sin in Romans even further, interpreting it as a representation of Satan himself.

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16 Gaventa, "Cosmic Power," 233. Gaventa does not deny that "the beginning point of this grand depiction of Sin is certainly humanity's willful choice to deny God, even to create its own gods. Paul's depiction of humankind opens with an action taken by humanity itself rather than by another power." However, she goes on to say, "With the claim that God delivered up humanity to impurity, passion, and debased mind, however, there may be at least a hint of some larger conflict. An as-yet-unnamed someone or something challenges God for humanity. That is not to overlook the initial action: Humanity's refusal of God's lordship meant that God conceded humanity for a time to the lordship of another."

17 Gaventa, "Cosmic Power," 236. See also Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Neither Height nor Depth: Cosmos and Soteriology in Paul's Letter to the Romans," in *Apocalyptic and the Future of Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn*, ed. Joshua B. Davis and Douglas Harink (Cascade Books, 2012), 189–190.

18 In his commentary on Romans, John Ziesler defends the personification of sin, denying that "it is just something people do that is wrong." For him, "it is a power that can act, and once let loose, cannot easily be stopped." John A. Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, TPI New Testament Commentaries (SMC Press, 1989), 145.

For instance, Tom Holland views sin in Romans 5 and 6 as a reference to Satan.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Robert Tannehill pictures sin “not merely as a series of separate acts nor an abstract principle, but as a demonic power, a world ruler who claims the obedience of men just as God does.”<sup>20</sup>

### III. APOCALYPTIC VIEW OF ATONEMENT AND SALVATION

The perception of sin as primarily and sometimes exclusively a cosmic power impacts the way these theologians interpret the Christ event. J. Christiaan Beker, for example, considers Christ’s death an apocalyptic event that marked the defeat of apocalyptic powers such as death, sin, the law, and the flesh.<sup>21</sup> According to Beker, Christ’s death is seen primarily in Paul’s theology as the judgment of the powers of this age, not as a sacrifice that is offered to God.<sup>22</sup>

#### *Atonement: Not Retributive*

Although an apocalyptic reading of Paul’s theology does not necessarily exclude the retributive dimension of Christ’s atonement, some scholars understand Paul’s teaching on Christ’s death as exclusively apocalyptic. For instance, J. Christiaan Beker contends that Paul does not speak of the death of Christ as the means for forgiveness of former transgressions as much as liberation from humanity’s condition of enslavement under sin. He ridicules the Reformed view of the Pauline explanation of the death of Christ. He describes it as an Anselmian view in which “Christ is viewed as ‘the Lamb of God’ who satisfies on behalf of humankind the wrath of God and in this way merits God’s mercy as priest, representative, and sacrifice.” He goes on to say, “This Anselmian view of the atonement threatens to undo the redemptive initiative of God’s act in Christ by splitting apart the wrath of God and the mercy of Christ.”<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, Douglas Campbell, a contemporary advocate of the apocalyptic reading of Paul, rejects the notion that God punishes retributively; consequently, he denies that the sacrifice of Christ was offered to satisfy God’s justice.<sup>24</sup> He contends that

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19 Tom Holland, *Romans: The Divine Marriage: A Biblical Theological Commentary* (Pickwick Publications, 2011), 160.

20 Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ*, 16.

21 Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 189.

22 Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 191.

23 Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 208.

24 Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (W.B. Eerdmans, 2009), 75.

the atonement is transformational not punitive.<sup>25</sup> Campbell comments on a text such as Romans 8:3 by saying that it presents a Trinitarian dynamic in which God liberated humanity by executing the evils of sin and the flesh through the death of Christ.<sup>26</sup>

This raises a pressing question: What about all the notions of forgiveness of sins in the New Testament? From the apocalyptic perspective, the meaning of forgiveness is primarily cosmological rather than individualistic. Beker does not deny that the death of Christ was for the forgiveness of sin. However, he understands the forgiveness of sin as God's restoration of the just order, an act achieved through the obedience of Christ unto death.<sup>27</sup> According to this reading, the whole concept that the death of Christ is for salvation from the guilt of sin or for paying the debt owed due to sin is largely downplayed, if not entirely set aside.<sup>28</sup>

#### IV. JUSTIFICATION AS LIBERATION

The Apocalyptic Paul school not only undermines the retributive aspect of Christ's atonement but also denies the traditional forensic understanding of justification. Douglas A. Campbell discusses the meaning of justification extensively in his writings, and he explicitly rejects what he calls the *Justification Theory* of salvation, which matches the view of most Protestants.<sup>29</sup> Campbell contends that Paul uses the term "justification" as a performative act of God's liberating intervention and not as forensic-retributive. As Campbell explains the verb δικαιώω (cf. Rom. 3:24) or the expression δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ, he interprets these terms to refer to God's liberation of his people rather than a legal declaration.<sup>30</sup> Hence, he entitled his magnum opus *The Deliverance of God*, in which he redefines justification as a forensic-nonretributive liberative act.<sup>31</sup> As he comments on texts such as Romans

25 "Jesus's death does not function as a punishment for sin so much as a termination of a sinful condition—a termination that then, by the work of the Spirit, can be universalized." Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 76.

26 Douglas A. Campbell, "Christ and the Church in Paul: A 'Post-New Perspective' Account," in *Four Views on the Apostle Paul*, ed. by Michael F. Bird, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (Zondervan, 2012), 136–137.

27 Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 209–210.

28 Douglas A. Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God's Love* (W. B. Eerdmans, 2020), 258n12.

29 He presents what he calls intrinsic difficulties of this theory in the second chapter of part one of his *Magnus Opus: The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul*, 36–61.

30 "When Paul is informed by his Christology he uses the verb δικαιώω in an overtly liberative and even resurrecting sense and it would not be unfair to call this an 'apocalyptic' usage." Douglas A. Campbell, "Rereading Paul's ΔΙΚΑΙΟ-Language," in *Beyond Old and New Perspectives on Paul: Reflections on the Work of Douglas Campbell*, ed. Chris Tilling (Cascade Books, 2014), 208.

31 Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 658–665.

1:17 and 3:21–26, Campbell argues that Paul is alluding to Psalm 98:2 in which the Lord is portrayed as the king who reveals his righteousness to the nations, and that righteousness is a liberative action that is rooted in God’s kindness and love.<sup>32</sup> Thus, for Campbell, God’s righteousness is an act that is considered as “an event, singular, saving, liberating, life giving, eschatological (hence apocalyptic).”<sup>33</sup>

In a similar fashion, Beverly Gaventa argues that sin is the universal refusal of humanity to acknowledge God as God. She contends that the antidote for sin must go beyond the language of forgiveness to the language of new life and of liberation. This liberation, according to Gaventa, was inaugurated through Christ’s death and resurrection.<sup>34</sup>

## V. ASSESSMENT AND RESPONSE

First, the Apocalyptic Paul school has offered valuable insights into the influence of apocalyptic Judaism on Paul’s thought and theology, which in turn enriches our interpretation of his writings. It also—rightly—broadens our understanding of Christ’s work of salvation beyond individualistic terms, drawing attention to its cosmological dimensions. Sin is not merely a transgression, but it is also personified as a power that dominates this present evil age. Christ did not only save sinners from guilt and bondage; he also broke into this present age of sin and death, achieving victory over evil powers, inaugurating a new age of righteousness that will be consummated at his second coming. In Christ, the new creation has already begun, and all who believe have become participants in this new reality. That said, holding only to the apocalyptic view can distort key theological doctrines, such as the nature of sin, the character of God, the meaning of the atonement, and the essence of salvation.

The apocalyptic view considers sin a power to be liberated from, not a guilt that deserves punishment. Consequently, the death of Christ is interpreted mainly as a solution to the problem of sin as a cosmic power. It can hardly be denied that Paul himself spoke of sin as a person, especially in the book of Romans, speaking of it as a dominating power. However, such personification should not overshadow the fact that sin is also an act against God and his laws. Overemphasizing sin as an external

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32 Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 688–693. See also, “Rereading Paul’s ΔΙΚΑΙΟ-*Language*,” 200.

33 Cf. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 683–688. See also, Campbell, “Rereading Paul’s ΔΙΚΑΙΟ-*Language*,” 199–200.

34 Beverly R. Gaventa, “Dead to Sin,” *Christian Century* 110, no. 18 (June 2, 1993): 595.

power—one that is beyond human control and enslaves individuals against their will—can be deeply problematic, especially when it obscures the more fundamental reality that sin is a manifestation of human rebellion against God. According to this view, human beings are seen primarily as victims rather than transgressors or moral agents. They are portrayed as deceived captives in need of rescue from an alien enemy. While it is not entirely incorrect to acknowledge humanity's victimhood—given the effects of the Fall and the deceptive power of Satan—this perspective is incomplete. Scripture also portrays human beings as willing participants in sin—criminals who are enslaved because they love sin in their innermost being. Such a narrow view of sin tends to downplay personal responsibility and, in doing so, undermines the urgency and necessity of repentance.

Downplaying sin as a transgression also underestimates the biblical portrayal of God as the judge and the king against whom all sin is ultimately committed. Consequently, the forensic dimension of salvation becomes less central. While scholars, such as Beker, tried to find a place for forgiveness of sins in his system, his explanation of forgiveness remains vague. Beker, for example, speaks of the restoration of God's "just order" through the death of Christ but avoids interpreting this act in terms of satisfying God's wrath. He describes the cross as the expression of God's love that costs the death of Christ,<sup>35</sup> a love that bears the burden of its moral character. However, he does not elaborate on what it means to bear the burden of the moral character of God.<sup>36</sup> Without a deep understanding of God's righteous wrath against sin, the cross of Christ can be considered only a sentimental act rather than a profound expression of justice and mercy. Only as we grasp the seriousness of God's wrath can we truly appreciate the depth and cost of his love.

When discussing the atonement of Christ, the way the apostles described the death of Christ makes its judicial and retributive nature unmistakable. For example, in the book of Acts, Christ is repeatedly said to have been "hanged on a tree" (Acts 5:30; 10:39; 13:29)—an expression that highlights the shameful and cursed character of his death in fulfillment of Deuteronomy 21:22–23 (cf. Gal. 3:13–14; 1 Pet. 2:24). This language clearly carries penal significance. Similarly, when Philip encountered the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26–40, he proclaimed the gospel through the lens of Isaiah 53, which offers a robust account of penal substitution. Paul also affirmed this sacrificial and penal understanding of Christ's death,

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 199.

<sup>36</sup> Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, 210.

describing Christ as our Passover lamb (1 Cor. 5:7), asserting that Christ died “for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3), and explicitly teaching that God put Christ forward as a propitiation by his blood (Rom. 3:25). Such apostolic witnesses shows that the penal dimension of the atonement is unmistakable in the New Testament message in general and in the Pauline corpus in particular.

Interestingly, while Campbell defines justification only in terms of liberation, emphasizing God’s benevolence and denying God’s retribution, he nonetheless argues that God will eventually be the final judge. He argues that “the God of justice will be perceived at the eschaton, when all peoples of the earth will be judged for their wrongdoing.”<sup>37</sup> This raises an important question: If God will judge at the end, why is it not also appropriate to think of the cross within a forensic framework? In fact, in Romans 3:26, Paul comments on the offering of Christ as a propitiation (3:25) and gives the twofold goal behind that atonement, that is, for God to be the just and the justifier of those who believe in Jesus. In the same chapter, Paul speaks in Romans 3:5–6 of God’s righteousness, which is directly connected to his actions as a just judge who makes things right. These verses show that God’s justice is not suspended in salvation but rather upheld through the death of Christ. In conclusion, the apocalyptic view denies the forensic meaning in the death of Christ without giving a satisfactory explanation for the cursed punitive death of Christ, as articulated in both Paul’s writings and the broader New Testament witness.

Finally, the school of Apocalyptic Paul will leave us with a distorted gospel and incomplete salvation. Because sin is primarily a power, so salvation is primarily about saving from that power. The gospel becomes about liberation, dying to an old life, and beginning a new life without solving the problem of guilt and enmity with God. It must be affirmed that an essential part of Christ’s salvation has to do with liberating from the power of sin and the beginning of a new life. However, the gospel that Paul preached was also concerned with sins and not only Sin. As Paul explains the gospel in a nutshell in 1 Corinthians 15:3, he says, “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures.” Death in this statement is not about freedom from the power of sin as much as it is about of the sins that humans commit. Christ died on account of these sins. It is a judicial fact. This is the same gospel that Paul is explaining in the book of Romans as the power of God unto salvation (cf. Rom. 1:16). Also, Paul’s gospel underscored the reconciliation motif

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<sup>37</sup> Campbell, *The Deliverance of God*, 76.

and the restoration of peace with God after the natural state of enmity against him (cf. Rom. 5:10, Eph. 2:12–16).

Holding to salvation from the power of sin should never be at the expense of salvation from the guilt of sin. Both are evident in the gospel that Paul preached. In fact, Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 15:3, Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν is close to his language in Galatians 1:4, τοῦ δόντος ἑαυτὸν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν. The result of Christ giving himself for the sins of his people in Galatians 1:4 is to deliver them from the present evil age. This inseparable relationship between “new creation” and “reconciliation with God” is evident in 2 Corinthians 5:17–21. For Paul, salvation from sin as a power and as a guilt should not be separated.

## VI. CONCLUSION

While the apocalyptic reading of Paul rightly emphasizes God's cosmic victory over sin and evil powers, Scripture grounds salvation first and foremost in the forensic reality of Christ's substitutionary atonement. Christ's death on the cross is primarily God's just judgment against sin (Rom. 3:25–26; Gal. 3:13); without this foundation, liberation from evil powers would be unwarranted. We are only be saved from the tyranny of sin, Satan, and death because the guilt of our sin has been dealt with (Col. 2:13–15). Only because Christ bore the penalty of sin as “the Lamb of God” (John 1:29) can the powers be dethroned and sinners freed from their tyranny. Paul's gospel never separates cosmic liberation from its forensic foundation: the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:14) precedes and enables participation in the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17–21).

Therefore, while the apocalyptic vision rightly broadens our hope to include all of creation as Paul argues in Romans 8:19–23, it is the forensic act of justification, in which God declares sinners righteous in Christ, that secures both personal reconciliation, cosmic renewal, and participation in the new creation. To prioritize liberation over justification is to invert Paul's theological logic: The righteousness of God (Romans 1:17) is revealed not merely in victory over enemies but in the vindication of divine justice at Calvary. The gospel, therefore, is cosmic in scope—but anchored in the courtroom of divine wrath satisfied, where mercy and justice meet.







*Grace for the Blamed  
and Burdened*

Augustine's Response to  
Pelagius on Sin, Freedom,  
and Human Nature

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The debate between Pelagius and Augustine—and the affirmations of Augustine’s theology at the Councils of Carthage (418) and Orange (529)—centered on the relationship between sin, grace, and human freedom, a debate that remains deeply relevant for understanding salvation, responsibility, and suffering.

In the early centuries of the church, after addressing central questions about God’s nature in the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology, the focus shifted to theological anthropology: what it means to be human before God. At the heart of this debate was the question of whether human beings, wounded by sin, are able to seek and obey God on their own, or whether divine grace is absolutely necessary to free the will and restore fallen humanity. Pelagius emphasized human freedom, moral responsibility, and the possibility of moral perfection by personal effort, while Augustine insisted on the depth of original sin and the absolute necessity of God’s sovereign grace. The Councils of Carthage and Orange addressed these tensions, articulating a biblical vision of sin’s devastation and God’s rescuing grace—clarifying issues that still shape how we understand salvation and offer hope to those who suffer and are burdened by sin and its effects.

## **I. COUNCILS OF CARTHAGE (419) AND ORANGE (529)**

In the first four centuries of its existence, the church hammered out a firm theology of the Trinity, the person of Christ, and the person of the Holy Spirit; and its attention turned from the nature of God to the relationship between God and humanity. The main questions that confronted it in the fifth through seventh centuries revolved around grace, free will, and the sinfulness of humankind. Although it was now the nature of humanity rather than the nature of God that was the center of church councils, the decisions reached at Carthage and Orange were no less important to the development of Christianity than those at Nicaea and Chalcedon.

While the knowledge of a good and loving God throws a light on how far short humankind can fall, Christian doctrine is complicated by the teaching on Adam’s fall from grace. Orthodox Christian doctrine has always been that each human bears responsibility for his or her own sinfulness. The question is How much responsibility? If sin came into the world through Adam and infected everyone else without their consent, can individuals really be held accountable for sins they commit?

Secular views of humankind sometimes blame the evil in the world on oppressive institutions, bad genetics or upbringing, or psychological disorders. Although these explanations are certainly valid, they can be abused to avoid taking real responsibility for one's actions. The challenge for orthodox Christianity is to agree with these secular views that there is an evil influence beyond our control that has skewed our ability to do good, but to maintain that we bear some responsibility even given this influence, and that there is a great deal that we do that cannot be blamed on anyone but ourselves. Worse, there is a great deal that we do with good intentions that ends up only causing harm.

In the debates at Carthage and Orange, theologians attempted to strike a balance between human responsibility for sin (and human ability to do good) and the doctrine that we live in a fallen world. The debate began with a British monk named Pelagius, who thought he had found a real answer to those who blame evil on our environment rather than ourselves. He advocated a worldview in which humans had full freedom and full responsibility for their actions. If God is just, Pelagius believed, he will punish or reward humans only for the choices that they can freely make, and so he created a world that lets each person choose good and bad however they please. On the other side, a North African bishop named Augustine promoted a view in which humans are born into the bondage of Adam's sin. People are destined to sin more and more unless God intervenes, in which case they are gradually freed to do good by the power of God's Spirit. At Carthage, the council ruled that Augustine's idea was truer to both Scripture and to the human experience than that of Pelagius, even though it was much less palatable. Later, Orange reaffirmed Augustine's teaching against the Semi-Pelagians, those who didn't go as far as Pelagius but still held a more optimistic view of human nature.

## II. PELAGIUS

Early in the fifth century, a controversy boiled over in the Western church about the origin of sin, the freedom of the will, and the nature of God's grace. Christians in the first four centuries held two beliefs concerning human nature:

1. Humanity is fallen and requires divine help for salvation.
2. Humans have a will and are responsible for their sin.

Just like the apparent paradox of the doctrine of the Trinity—God is one but exists in three persons—the two ideas were difficult to reconcile. The conflict came to a

head with the clash of two popular teachers: Pelagius and Augustine.

Pelagius was a heretic of a different sort. He was Trinitarian and held to the divinity and humanity of Christ. This gave him the benefit of the doubt with many Christians at the time, but what landed him in trouble was his understanding of the Fall of humanity. Understanding Pelagius's historical context is helpful here.

Pelagius was a British monk who was deeply devoted to living a moral life. He was born around AD 350 in Britain. The details of his life are shrouded in mystery, but historians know he became a monk and eventually moved to Rome to teach the Bible. He had a mild personality, and there was no controversy surrounding his early life. However, upon seeing the lax moral discipline in Rome, he developed a reputation for being a spiritual director who urged people to reform their behavior and live lives as upstanding, moral citizens. It must be understood that Constantine had not only Christianized the Roman Empire in the fourth century but also brought about the "secularization" of the Christian church.<sup>1</sup>

When he came to Italy to be a teacher, he was shocked to see how lax the Italian Christians often were. One of their more infamous offenses was a tendency among Italian noblemen to take multiple mistresses in addition to their wives or to buy slave girls to keep as mistresses, and this was apparently true of both pagans and Christians.<sup>2</sup> Several lived comfortable lives in the midst of great wealth, while the society around them was often desperately poor. The clergy was taking little action to confront these Christians, either allowing them to continue in open sin after baptism without any rebuke or permitting them to remain in a sort of halfway state as "catechumens" (unbaptized Christians—they could participate in church but not the Eucharist).<sup>3</sup> To Pelagius, the situation clearly violated Christ's teachings. In one of his letters, he wrote, "Do you consider him a Christian who oppresses the wretched, who burdens the poor, who covets others' property, who makes several poor so that he may make himself rich, who rejoices in unjust gains ... and a man of this kind has the audacity to go to church!"<sup>4</sup> Unless a person denied himself and imitated Christ, Pelagius warned, he had no business calling himself a Christian.

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1 Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Christian Church* (Hendrickson, 1988), 201.

2 Henry Chadwick, "Pelagius, Caelestius, and the Roman See in Gaul and North Africa," in *The Church in Ancient Society: From Galilee to Gregory the Great* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 3.

3 Henry Chadwick, "Pelagius, Caelestius, and the Roman See," 3.

4 B. R. Rees, *Pelagius: Life and Letters* (Boydell Press, 1991), 119.

Before Christendom, as it came to be known, Christians were being persecuted or ignored. It was a serious choice to become one. After Christians gained considerable power in the Roman Empire, it became politically expedient to be a Christian. Nominal Christians increased in number as a result.<sup>5</sup>

To counter the dangerous moral laxity that he observed, Pelagius developed an ascetic form of Christianity with an optimistic theology of human nature. He pleaded for a sense of urgency about moral reformation and a pursuit of “real” Christianity. As historian Peter Brown notes, Pelagius lived in a world where Christians occupied more positions of power than they ever had before.<sup>6</sup> Out of his discussions with these sophisticated men, Pelagius formed the basis of his theology in his *Expositions of the Letters of St. Paul*.

Before 410, Pelagius had to flee Rome to avoid the invasion of the Arian Gothic leader Alaric.<sup>7</sup> He then moved to North Africa where he met intense opposition before migrating to Palestine. In 418 he was banished from Jerusalem, after which he vanished from the historical record. His teaching was condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431.

### III. PELAGIUS’S TEACHING

Partly from his observations in Italy as well as from his own strictly disciplined life, Pelagius developed a doctrine of sin and salvation that hinged on good works. According to him, sin cannot stem from a preexisting condition, because it would mean that God had created sin as part of human nature: “To say that man cannot be without sin is like saying that a man cannot live without food or drink or sleep or other such things without which our human state cannot exist.”<sup>8</sup> Instead, Pelagius taught, sin comes from bad habits that people willingly form. As humans continue to sin, their wills become weaker and bad deeds more frequent, but if they will commit themselves to do good, they can reverse these trends.

The starting point of Pelagius’s moralistic theology was his insistence that God would never command anything that is impossible for humans to carry out.

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5 See Rodney Stark, *Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Harper Collins, 1997).

6 Peter Brown, *Augustus of Hippo: A Biography*, rev. ed. (University of California Press, 2000), 341. “Pelagius reached his peak, in Rome, in a world where cultivated Christian laymen exercised more influence than any time previously.”

7 This invasion prompted Augustine to write *City of God*.

8 Rees, *Pelagius*, 168–69.

Pelagius emphasized humans' unconditional free will and moral responsibility. Specifically, Pelagius took issue with Augustine's prayer in his *Confessions*: "I have no hope at all but in your great mercy. Command what you will: give what you command."<sup>9</sup> He felt that this kind of talk encouraged laziness rather than piety and that laziness is not a safe state of mind when it comes to sin.

Pelagius saw Augustine's prayer as turning humans into puppets determined by God's action. Indeed, he thought that God's commanding a person to do something that he lacked the ability to do would be useless: "To call a person to something he considers impossible does him no good."<sup>10</sup> If God called humans to live moral lives, Pelagius thought, it should be within their own power to carry out God's commands.

In his *Letter to Demetrias*, Pelagius laments that Christians do not consider it an honor to be ruled by God's precepts in his word. He writes, "In fact, we act like lazy and insolent servants, talking back to our Lord in a contemptuous and slovenly way: 'That is too hard, too difficult! We cannot do that! We are only human; our flesh is weak!' What insane stupidity! What impious arrogance! We accuse the Lord of all knowledge of being doubly ignorant. We assert that he does not understand what he made and does not realize what he commands ... The just one did not choose to command the impossible; nor did the loving one plan to condemn a person for what he could not avoid."<sup>11</sup>

Notice Pelagius believed that God commands only according to our abilities. In Matthew 5:48, Jesus commands, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Pelagius interpreted this to mean that perfection must be within our reach. Since perfection is achievable, it should therefore be obligatory.

It is important to understand that Pelagius's motivation was good. He saw one form of God's divine sovereignty as eliminating human responsibility. To modern ears, Pelagius's ideas might seem self-righteous, a way of setting yourself up to be holier than those around you. Pelagius himself, however, wrote from pastoral concern. He thought that the idea of original sin inherited from Adam—that humans are guilty and corrupted by an evil influence—led Christians to be apathetic about their own sins. "Anyone who hears that it is not possible for him

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<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *Confessions* 10.40.

<sup>10</sup> Pelagius, *Letter to Demetrias I*.

<sup>11</sup> Pelagius, "Letter to Demetrias," in *Theological Anthropology, Sources of Early Christian Thought*, ed. and trans. J. Patout Burns (Fortress, 1981), 53.

to be without sin ... will never do penance appropriate to his misdeeds but will believe that God will lightly remit what rightly he ought not even to impute.”<sup>12</sup> (In plain English—if Christians are always going to be sinful and God is just going to forgive sins, what’s the motivation to even try to change? Pelagius is suggesting that original sin removes the sense of evil from sin.) Pelagius worried that if the church embraced the idea of original sin, it would inadvertently give Christians an excuse for tolerating their own sins and that God would judge them harshly on the day of judgment.

Moreover, Pelagius intended to avoid the error of the Manichaeans, who posited a dualism between immaterial good and material evil (and since Augustine had been a Manichaean before his conversion to Christianity, Pelagius was doubly suspicious of his emphasis on the evil of human nature). In the Manichaean view of humanity, to be human (even before Adam’s fall from grace) is to be inherently evil, and the highest good is achieved in the soul’s separation from the evil body. Pelagius, however, saw human nature as something good created by God.

It is the result of the Fall upon humanity (original sin), however, that Pelagius ignores, causing his theology to fall into error. First, Pelagius argued that there is no such thing as original sin. In no way were humans after Adam guilty of or implicated in his first sin. Adam’s sin in no way makes humans guilty or corrupt. Instead, “over the years [our own sin] gradually corrupts us, building an addiction and then holding us bound with what seems like the force of nature itself.”<sup>13</sup> Humans by nature have a clean slate—a state of neutrality—according to Pelagius, and it is only through voluntary sin through the exercise of an unhampered human free will that humans are made wicked. Potentially, then, one could live a sinless life and merit heaven, for there is nothing intrinsically sinful about humans even after Adam and Eve’s sin. Pelagius didn’t consider humans to be intrinsically damnable after the fall.

In short, Pelagius rejected the doctrines of original sin, substitutionary atonement (the idea that Christ’s death in our place is a supernatural intervention to save us), and justification by faith (the idea that believing and trusting in Christ is the way to salvation). This had major implications for Pelagius’s theology of the freedom of the will, the origin of sin, and the nature of grace.

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12 Rees, *Pelagius*, 168. “Impute” is an older legal phrase for “charge” (for example, with a crime). Pelagius is saying that God should not even have to charge us with sin if we are living as we should.

13 Pelagius, *Letter to Demetrias* VIII.

### 1. *Pelagius on the Freedom of the Will*

Early-church scholar J. N. D. Kelly observes that “the keystone of [Pelagius’s] whole system is the idea of unconditional free will and responsibility.”<sup>14</sup> Humans are given the unique privilege of carrying out God’s will by their own choice. Pelagius identifies three elements in conduct: ability, will, and act. The first one comes from God while the latter two are strictly humanity’s. This means that God has given us all the tools we need to do good, but it is up to us to want to do good and to carry it out. Hence, people are responsible for their own sins and cannot blame any outside influences (addiction, abuse, duress, or most especially original sin). As seen in Pelagius’s quote above, if we say we are incapable, we impugn God’s creative ability. God made humans to be good.

### 2. *Pelagius on the Origin of Sin*

Most Christian theologians would reply, “Yes, but what about the fall?” Pelagius would reply that it had nothing to do with our sins. Yes, Adam was a bad example for his descendants, but his sins affected only himself. Pelagius rejected as absurd and unjust the doctrine Augustine termed “original sin.” Why should a person be punished for another person’s sins? The human duty to self-improvement could not be abandoned. People are born sinless, just like Adam. We sin not because we are born sinners but because we make a deliberate choice to do so. Sin exists only in the act. Pelagius taught that many Old Testament heroes were able to remain sinless, and since it had been done before, we are therefore without excuse.

### 3. *Pelagius on the Nature of Grace*

So what about grace? Pelagius did not discard grace entirely, but he did not understand it to mean dependance on God for salvation. When Pelagius spoke of grace, he meant the natural ability that God had given humanity to control their affairs rather than a supernatural intervention. God has given us the grace to obey him. Pelagius also spoke in terms of instruction. It is by grace that we have the word of God. The role of God in this scheme is threefold: God gives each person free will, the ability to see for themselves what is right and wrong, and revelation through Scripture to guide them.<sup>15</sup> Christ is the ultimate form of grace, the perfect

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14 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (Harper Collins, 1978), 357.

15 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (Prince Press, 2004), 359.

divine guide that God has given humanity to demonstrate the right way. So the grace of God through Jesus Christ is his perfect example of obedience. In the end, however, the only thing that matters is whether one has fully eradicated evil from oneself.

According to Augustine, Pelagius's disciple Caelestius summarized Pelagianism succinctly with this list:

- Adam was created mortal, and he would have died whether he sinned or not.
- Adam's sin injured himself alone, not the human race.
- The law, as well as the gospel, leads to the kingdom.
- There were men without sin before Christ's coming.
- Newborn infants are in the same condition as Adam before the fall.
- It is not through the death or the fall of Adam that the human race dies, nor through the resurrection of Christ that the whole human race rises again.<sup>16</sup>

#### IV. AUGUSTINE'S RESPONSE

On the other side of the debate was Augustine, a prominent North African bishop who had already weathered many controversies. Only a few years before the Council of Carthage, Augustine had dealt with a splinter group known as the Donatists, who preached that the church should consist only of those who live perfectly holy lives. In many ways, the Donatists prepared Augustine for the new challenge of Pelagius. Against the Donatists, Augustine had argued that the church does not consist of perfect people (not that he believed there is such a thing) but consists simply of those who have been baptized into the church. He compared the church to the parable of the tares and the wheat in the gospel: "What swelling of arrogance it is, what forgetfulness of humility and gentleness, that any one should dare or believe that he can do what the Lord did not grant even to the apostles—to think that he can distinguish the tares from the wheat."<sup>17</sup> Having dealt with the Donatist disappointment of how the institution of the

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<sup>16</sup> This is what Augustine alleged Caelestius summarized in *On the Proceedings of Pelagius 23*.

<sup>17</sup> See especially Augustine, *Against the Donatists*, Book IV, in which Augustine deals with several questions about the imperfections of the church. Augustine, *Against the Donatists*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1408.htm>.

church looks in real life, Augustine now turned to Pelagius's disappointment with how sinners look in real life.

Pelagius's teachings prompted a storm of anti-Pelagian literature, especially from the North African bishop Augustine, who opposed Pelagianism in many of his major works, such as *On the Spirit and the Letter* (412), *On Nature and Grace* (415), *On the Grace of Christ and on Original Sin* (418), *On Grace and Free Will* (427), and *On the Predestination of the Saints* (429).<sup>18</sup> Toward the end of his life, Augustine kept the sovereignty of God, human depravity, and humanity's need of grace at the center of his theology.

Augustine worked out his theology of humanity long before the Pelagian controversy. The amount of writings against Pelagius's view on the freedom of the will, origin of sin, and nature of grace showed how seriously Augustine considered Pelagius's errors to be.

### 1. *Augustine on the Freedom of the Will*

Augustine affirmed that humans were created with free will, teaching that only Adam and Eve had real freedom. This freedom was not in the fact that they had an inability to sin but rather because they had the ability not to sin. Pelagius said that humans started out in a neutral state but easily fell prey to bad habits. As the person commits more and more wrongs, he is less and less able to reform his life. Augustine said that after the Fall, humans were preconditioned to commit wrong because Adam and Eve had sinned and that all humans were guilty of that sin. The direction toward evil and away from God was already set. They are "not able not to sin." Hence, God must intervene and turn humans back toward him.

If Pelagius had solved the problem of sin and human responsibility by arguing that humans are perfectly capable of doing whatever they want, Augustine solved it by saying that humans deliberately act against the good ideals that they don't know and are selfish, greedy, lustful, stubborn, and proud. In his words, people are non posse non peccare, "not able not to sin," because even the good things that we do are not out of love for God but for some lesser purpose. In Augustine's scheme, grace is not a divine nudge but a power that frees people to love God for who he really is. It is this God-empowered love that destroys the rule of sin and bestows

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<sup>18</sup> Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (InterVarsity Press, 1999), 270.

the ability to choose to sin or to choose not to sin (*posse non peccare*—“able not to sin”). However, until this grace is given, people cannot choose goodness. Though we might be in the grip of an evil power that we do not understand, we are still responsible for spending our time and energy on the things that we do wrong. Furthermore, he held that all of humankind had committed sin when Adam had—the act of disobedience had been committed together, in a mystical way.<sup>19</sup> As such, there were no innocent victims who had been wronged by a third party—everyone had crippled themselves.

Unlike Pelagius, who thought that hardened sinners are least likely to be able to return to God, Augustine believed that God sometimes chooses hardened sinners over the good, pious people in order to better show his grace.

Augustine firmly believed in original sin. In his view, humans begin life in the grip of a power that they cannot shake, which will draw them deeper and deeper into destruction unless God himself rescues them. Just as Pelagius’s dogmas reflected his own life of self-discipline and hard work, Augustine was influenced by a youth that was wasted in increasingly selfish pursuits. From his point of view, his desires had propelled him into sin, but he had not reformed his life by increasing his desire to do good. In his spiritual autobiography, *Confessions*, he took the words of Paul in Romans 7 as his watchword: “Even though a person may be delighted with God’s law as far as his inmost self is concerned, how is he to deal with that other law in his bodily members [which delivers] him as prisoner to the law of sin dominant in his body. Who will free him from this death-laden body, if not your grace, given through Jesus Christ our Lord?”<sup>20</sup> By these words, Augustine demonstrated how helpless he had been in his former life, and how much he owed to the mercy of God.

Humans are restored after the mediation of divine grace in Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit—and only by the mediation of divine grace, for the will is bent in on itself and unable to choose to do good—and receive once again, by God’s grace, the ability not to sin. Augustine writes, “This freedom of will is not therefore removed because it is assisted; it is assisted just because it is not removed. For he that says to God ‘be thou my helper’ confesses that he wills to

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19 Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (University of Chicago Press, 1971), 299. There was a debate at the time as to whether the effects of Adam’s sin were passed down materially (traducianism) or spiritually (creationism).

20 Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding (New City Press, 2001), 135.

fulfill what He has commanded, but that he asks the aid of Him who commanded that he may have power to fulfill it.”<sup>21</sup> The range of freedom one enjoys is narrowed the deeper one is in sin and broadened the deeper one is in Christ.

## 2. *Augustine on the Origin of Sin*

The problem is original sin. If Adam had not sinned, he would not have died.<sup>22</sup> But he did, so the consequences were severe. Augustine taught that the Fall affected all of Adam’s descendants with sin. Now every part of humankind is corrupted by sin, darkening the human mind and hardening the human heart. Furthermore, all human beings are born guilty of Adam’s sin. In other words, people are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are born sinners. Sin is like a hereditary disease passed down from one generation to the next. Augustine called humans a “lump of sin” incapable of saving themselves.<sup>23</sup> He “was happy to regard the church as a hospital where fallen humanity could recover and grow gradually in holiness through grace.”<sup>24</sup>

Augustine believed in both the corruption and guilt inherited from Adam—what later theology would describe as original sin’s double effect: corruption and guilt.

Augustine taught that human nature was radically corrupted by Adam’s sin. This means that all humans are born with a disordered will and an inclination toward sin—they are *non posse non peccare* (not able not to sin). This is the damage passed on to all humanity.

But Augustine went further: He also insisted that all people are guilty before God because of Adam’s sin. In his reading of Romans 5:12, he understood that humanity was not only wounded by Adam’s fall but also implicated in it legally—we are born not only sick but condemned: “In Adam, all die; and all are made liable to condemnation, not only because of imitation, but because of participation in his guilt.”<sup>25</sup>

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21 “Augustine Ep. clvii (to Hilarius),” in *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4th ed., ed. Henry Battenson and Chris Maunder (Oxford University Press, 2011), 61.

22 Augustine, *On the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on Baptism of Infants 1.2*.

23 Augustine, *To Simplician*, 18.

24 Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Blackwell, 1998), 83.

25 Augustine, *Contra Julianum* 6.5.13. Augustine defends the doctrine of original sin against the Pelagian bishop Julian of Eclanum. In that section, Augustine insists that human beings are implicated in Adam’s guilt—not merely through imitation (as Pelagius and Julian argued).

He explicitly argued against the Pelagian claim that infants are born innocent and sin only by imitation. For Augustine, even infants need baptism to be cleansed from the guilt of original sin—not just its effects: “The whole mass of humanity was condemned in its root; and if the deserved punishment were rendered to all, it would justly drag all to eternal death.”<sup>26</sup>

Augustine believed that we inherit both the corruption of nature (moral/spiritual brokenness) and guilt (legal condemnation) from Adam. This view was affirmed at the Council of Carthage (418) and later shaped Western Christian doctrine, especially in the theology of the Reformers.

### 3. *Augustine on the Nature of Grace*

In *On the Grace of Christ*, Augustine charges Pelagius with ignoring Philippians 2:12–13, which urges Christians to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling even though God is actually at work in them.<sup>27</sup> Augustine says, “Thus [Paul] did not say, ‘God works in you to be able,’ as though they had willing and working of themselves and had no need of God’s help for these two. Instead he said, ‘It is God who works in you both to will and to accomplish.’”<sup>28</sup> Put differently, “It is clear that [Pelagius] located this capacity [to will and to work] in nature itself” rather than in divine grace.<sup>29</sup> Or further, “The grace Pelagius acknowledges is God’s showing and revealing what we ought to do, not giving and helping us to do it.”<sup>30</sup>

To Augustine, grace is the only way to salvation. In *On Nature and Grace*, Augustine argued that if it were possible for a person to live a perfectly righteous life and be saved without faith in Christ, as Pelagius alleged, then Christ “died in vain” (Gal. 2:21).<sup>31</sup>

Albert Outler beautifully summarizes Augustine’s view of grace: “Grace, for Augustine, is God’s freedom to act without any external necessity whatsoever—to

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26 Augustine, *City of God* 13.14

27 “We must realize that [Pelagius] believes that neither our will nor our action is helped by divine aid. He believes that such help is given only to the capacity to will and work, the only member of this trio which he says comes from God. Hence he believes that this capacity which God himself has placed in human nature is weak while the other two which he claims for us are so stable, strong, and self-sufficient that they do not need God’s aid. Thus he believes that God does not help us to will, that he does not help us to act, that he helps us only to be able to will and to act.” Augustine, *On the Grace of Christ* V.6.

28 Augustine, *On the Grace of Christ* V.6.

29 Augustine, *On the Grace of Christ* VI.7.

30 Augustine, *On the Grace of Christ* VIII.9.

31 Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, 2.

act in love beyond human understanding or control; to act in creation, judgment, and redemption; to give his Son freely as Mediator and Redeemer; to endure the Church with the indwelling power and guidance of the Holy Spirit; to shape the destinies of all creation and the ends of the two human societies, the ‘city of earth’ and the ‘city of God.’ Grace is God’s unmerited love and favor.”<sup>32</sup> Augustine is famous for his play on the Latin words *gratis* (free) and *gratiae* (grace): “This grace, however, of Christ, without which neither infants nor adults can be saved, is not rendered for any merits, but is given gratis, on account of which it is also called grace.”<sup>33</sup>

## V. THE COUNCIL OF CARTHAGE (418)

Pelagius and Augustine might never have clashed if the Roman Empire had remained intact. As it was, however, the empire was crumbling, and in 410 Rome itself was sacked by Alaric, king of the Visigoths. The Gothic incursions sent Roman nobles fleeing to fortress towns on the coast and forced Pelagius and his followers across the sea into North Africa. There, a disciple of Pelagius named Caelestius began spreading Pelagian ideas, and it was not long before a synod of African bishops was assembled to deal with the two conflicting visions of God’s grace and human free will. The Council of Carthage was assembled early in May 418 and came down heavily on the side of Augustine.

Among the eight canons that the council passed, there are three ideas that pose significant challenges to Pelagius. Two of these are about original sin and free will. First, the council stated that infants require baptism because baptism is not only a symbol but actually washes away sin.<sup>34</sup> This was a practical way of recognizing Augustine’s position that humankind is born into sin rather than working itself into sin.

Second, the council decreed that a sinless life was impossible. Over and against

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32 Albert C. Outler, “Introduction,” in *Confessions and Enchiridion*, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/confessions.html>.

33 Augustine, *On Nature and Grace* 6. Augustine’s theology was not perfect, of course. There were some dark corners to his soteriology, such as the requirement of baptism to wash away original sin. The unavoidable conclusion that he did not shy away from then was that anyone who died without baptism must go to hell, even babies, albeit with the lightest punishment. B. B. Warfield observed that the Protestant Reformation was basically the revolt of Augustine’s doctrine of grace against his doctrine of the church. See David F. Wells, *Turning to God* (Baker, 1989), 84.

34 David F. Wells, *Turning to God*, 300. The council taught that baptism washes away the guilt and power of original sin. The Catholic Church maintained, however, that concupiscence, or the inclination to sin, remained after baptism.

the idea that Pelagius and Caelestius had proposed, that the biblical writers called themselves sinners out of humility rather than any real sin, the council reaffirmed the statement in 1 John 1:8: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” It was an important recognition that our sins go deeper than we ourselves ever realize. By taking this position, the council was refuting the idea that we are in complete control of what is good or bad in us and, consequently, the idea that we can perfect ourselves.

Finally, the council took a stand on the power of God’s grace. Pelagius had said that the phrase “God’s grace” means that God has given people a natural ability to overcome their sins. The council took a much stronger view of the power of grace and of its role in the relationship between God and humankind: In short, the council stated that grace is primarily related to bringing God and man closer together, “so that we may know what to seek, what we ought to avoid, and also that we should love to do so.”<sup>35</sup> Grace is not simply a tool that people can use to conform to certain behaviors but also a description of how God changes people from the inside as well as the outside by helping them love him rather than sin. The council argued that God’s grace is something he gives, not something that we choose at our convenience, and that it overpowers the stranglehold sin has on our lives: “Without the grace of God, we can do no good thing.”<sup>36</sup> Since the council had also said that God remains distant from the world because of our sins, the presence of grace shows the believer in a very tangible way that God has forgiven us and voluntarily united himself with us again.

The council proceeded without much political excitement compared with the councils at Ephesus or Nicaea. The only exception is the actions of Pope Zosimus, who was impressed by the piety of Pelagius and Caelestius and who strongly urged the African synod to recognize the orthodoxy of the Pelagian party.<sup>37</sup> The Africans politely but firmly refused—they had had several unpleasant dealings with Roman officials and considered themselves competent to decide such a matter in their own province.<sup>38</sup> After a few months, Zosimus conceded the point.

Partly because it was not ecumenical, however, the council remained open to

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35 “Council of Carthage (AD 419),” <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3816.htm>. Numbered here as Canon 112, but at the time the fourth of the eight canons passed.

36 “Council of Carthage (AD 419),” numbered here as Canon 113.

37 Chadwick, “Pelagius, Caelestius, and the Roman See,” 12. At this point, the Pelagians were “fools, not heretics” in the mind of the church, and only at Ephesus in 431 would they be counted as heretical. Pelikan, *Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 316.

38 Chadwick, “Pelagius, Caelestius, and the Roman See,” 12.

question. Its decision was not accepted as authoritative in the East, and several Christian theologians felt free to question its rulings. In particular, the council's deep pessimism about human freedom alarmed thinkers who thought that the Africans had gone to extremes in rejecting Pelagianism and that a more moderate position would serve the same purpose without devolving into fatalism. Thus, a second council was called more than a century later at Orange to resolve some of the more controversial issues at Carthage in a way that would be more binding.

The decision at Carthage left much of the Western Christian world torn. On the one hand, most theologians opposed Pelagius, and they were glad that the council thoroughly defeated his ideas. On the other, there was a growing fear that the council had been influenced by Manichaeism, a sizeable religion that proposed that humankind is trapped in an utterly evil material world and that the only escape is through the spiritual realm. In comparison with this trapped, fatalistic view, the church had traditionally been optimistic about the ability of humans to choose their own fate. The fact that Augustine had once been a Manichaean and that his ideas were central to the council made the suspicion of Manichaean influence a plausible one. Consequently, theologians such as John Cassian argued that while the intent of the Council of Carthage was good, it left no room for human decision-making, or at least decision-making that had any real meaning. The church in their eyes had become just as fatalistic as the Manichaeans.

Those who questioned Carthage thought (1) that the idea that fallen humans are unable to freely choose good in their unredeemed state is self-evidently false, and (2) that the fatalism implied by the council's ideas about predestination is repugnant and contrary to the teaching of Scripture. Perhaps the most famous of the theologians who called Carthage into question was John Cassian, who argued that human freedom is not in conflict with God's grace and that God's predestination is based on his foreseeing who will freely (by grace) come to faith in Christ. For instance, Cassian cited the story of Zacchaeus from the Gospels.<sup>39</sup> In the story, Zacchaeus is a universally despised tax collector who was desperate to catch a glimpse of Jesus. Since he was a short man, he was forced to climb a tree and wait until Jesus passed by. John Cassian argued that God did not cause Zacchaeus to climb the tree—he decided of his own accord to do so, and Jesus rewarded his initial step of faith. Zacchaeus made a decision of his own free will, and God responded to that decision—two separate beings treating each other

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<sup>39</sup> Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 371.

with dignity, rather than one using the other as a puppet.

Unfortunately, in the seventeenth century these “dissenters” from the decision at Carthage were labeled Semi-Pelagians, which links them much closer to the Pelagian heresy than they actually were. Indeed, calling these theologians Semi-Pelagians is much akin to calling those who lived in post–World War II Germany Semi-Nazis, strictly on the basis of their historical location. Regarding the fate of this “Semi-Pelagianism,” church historian J. N. D. Kelly notes, “It suffered, inevitably, but unjustly, from a suspected bias to Pelagianism, but what chiefly sealed its fate was the powerful and increasing influence of Augustine in the West.”<sup>40</sup>

## VI. THE COUNCIL OF ORANGE (529)

A second council was called in 529 at Orange in southern Gaul (modern-day France) to deal with these questions. It decided once more in favor of Augustine (who was now deceased). In fact, Augustine’s influence was so prevalent that many of Orange’s rulings used his language word for word.

Twenty-five canons were passed that ruled out the arguments of those who questioned Carthage. They frequently accused the opponents of the council of having been unknowingly influenced by Pelagius, perhaps as a counterpoint to the accusations that the Council of Carthage had been unknowingly influenced by the Manichaeans. However, while it might be thought that the council was simply called to reaffirm Augustine’s teaching, some of the canons acknowledge that free will is a mystery, and in fact Augustine’s doctrine of predestination to hell was ruled as heretical.<sup>41</sup> For instance, the council affirmed that free will is restored by baptism (Conclusion) and that Christians have a duty to pray and to persevere in good works (Canon 10). But it was adamant that the will has to be freed by God first before someone can choose to love him: “The love with which we love God ... is wholly a gift of God to love God. He who loves, even though he is not loved, allowed himself to be loved. We are loved, even when we displease him, so that we might have means to please him” (Canon 25).<sup>42</sup>

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40 Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 371.

41 The quotation is, “We not only do not believe that any are foreordained to evil by the power of God, but even state with utter abhorrence that if there are those who want to believe so evil a thing, they are anathema.”

42 In this respect, the council was not going as far as modern Calvinists. God may call someone to love him, but once the will is freed through baptism, that person can go in any direction he or she chooses. Moreover, since infants were the ones who were usually being baptized, much of the debate was academic, though important to reaffirm the decision at Carthage. For the full text of the council, see the website of Fordham

## VII. RELEVANCE

The theology of Augustine won against Pelagianism only formally at the Council of Carthage (418). Pelagianism refused to die and has continued to live on in various forms throughout church history. As theologian Robert Reymond opines, human beings are born “with Pelagian hearts,”<sup>43</sup> meaning all people are prone to attempt salvation through natural means from within ourselves rather than through the supernatural means of relying on God’s grace. Ask most people, “Why would you go to heaven?” and if the person believes in heaven, a safe bet is that the answer will be, “Because I’ve tried my best to be a good person.” One arrives at this common answer because of a combination of three basic Pelagian concepts:

- Freedom is defined as independence from God’s sovereignty.
- Original sin is rejected; we are all born good. Sin is only in the act of the will.
- Grace as unmerited favor from God is rejected, ignored, or unknown.

The combination of these three results in personal morality as the basis for salvation. But this must be rejected, as it is clear from Scripture that “there is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God” (Rom. 3:10–11). This is because of original sin, as Paul writes, for “just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12).

Christ came to set us free from the bondage of sin, from which we are unable to break free on our own (John 8:34–36). Paul said that we are free from righteousness, but that leads to death (Rom. 6:20–23). We are called to freedom (Gal. 5:1, 13), and true freedom is not being left to do what we please but acting in the way that God has always intended for us (Rom. 6:18). We either serve sin or we serve God.

The good news is that we are not left to our own devices to choose righteousness, but we are changed and empowered by God’s grace to love and obey God more and more. That is one of the roles of our Helper the Holy Spirit (John 14:16–17). One day those redeemed in Christ will enjoy ultimate freedom, when sin will no longer be an option.

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University: “The Council of Orange,” <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/orange.txt>.

43 Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Thomas Nelson, 1998), 469.

Understanding Pelagius's error and Augustine's contribution to the doctrine of sin is monumentally important today. Ignoring, as Pelagius did, the consequences the fall of Adam has on every human can lead to diminishing the multifaceted work of Christ. Jesus not only bore our sins on the cross but lived a perfect life in obedience to the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit—the life that Adam failed to live—in order to restore fallen humans through union with him. But God not only saves humans by grace; he also sustains them by grace. As Augustine put it, “God set the strong one free and permitted him to do what he chose; he guards the weak so that by his gift the saints unfailingly choose the good and unfailingly refuse to abandon it.”<sup>44</sup> Without understanding the magnitude of sin and the plight of humanity, the gracious work of Jesus for us and our salvation seems superfluous, at best. 1 Peter 1:18–19 says, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” It is for this reason that the work of Augustine in upholding the truth of Scripture in the fifth century is relevant for the church today.

Despite the fact that Pelagianism was never widespread, the ideas of Pelagius are compelling and deserve a carefully thought-out response. You might say that Pelagianism is wrong in its denials but challenging in its assertions; in many ways, it seems to answer certain questions about Christianity much more satisfactorily than the rulings at Carthage. For instance, there is no problem about whether God is fair, or of salvation outside of the church, or of the way that leads to heaven. Good people do good things and are rewarded; bad people do bad things and are punished. Any bad person can become a good person if they will only pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

Like most heresies, however, Pelagianism provides easy and attractive answers at great cost. Though Pelagius's God may seem more fair, he is certainly much less intimate. The wonder of salvation for Augustine was that God loved him when he was deeply in sin. Rather than waiting until Augustine had gotten his act together and freed himself from sin, God broke into Augustine's life on his own timing and with a scandalous disregard for whether Augustine was a good person.

In Augustine's arguments against Pelagius, the God-humanward movement is emphasized as opposed to the cruelty of emphasizing the human-Godward

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44 Augustine, *On Rebuke and Grace*, 38.

movement. This is especially relevant when it comes to suffering or recovery from abuse.

Examples of this God-humanward movement are found in the opening lines of morning and evening prayer.

Morning Prayer: "O Lord, open thou our lips. And our mouth shall show forth thy praise."<sup>45</sup>

Evening Prayer: "O God, make speed to save us. O Lord, make haste to help us."<sup>46</sup>

Compare this to how some theologians who engage trauma studies seem to emphasize the human-Godward movement as they celebrate process theology, open theism, panentheism, or Schleiermacher's theology and then criticize classical theology.

Clearly, distorted God-centered theologies have been used to justify rather than encounter suffering: "Classical theology and reform liturgy justifies rather than encounters suffering. Before suffering can speak or cry out, it has been steamrolled by an aggressive theology of sin and guilt."<sup>47</sup>

This is cruel. But equally as cruel is the anthropocentric and Pelagian theologies that leave survivors blamed and burdened.

The message survivors hear often is self-heal, self-love, and self-help. Survivors of trauma are frequently told some version of the following, which are all from trauma theologians: "One can will one's well-being"<sup>48</sup> or "If you are willing to work hard and find good support, you can not only heal but thrive."<sup>49</sup> Regarding healing, two survivor advocates write: "There's nothing as wonderful as starting to heal, waking up in the morning and knowing that nobody can hurt you *if you don't let them*."<sup>50</sup> The message is that healing begins with and is maintained primarily by the survivor. One trauma theologian writes: "When a moral loss is involved, it

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45 *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 42.

46 *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 63.

47 Wendy Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire*, 8

48 Augustine, *On the Predestination of the Saints*, chap. 9, in NPNF1, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Peter Holmes and Robert Ernest Wallis (Hendrickson, 1994), 496. Also see Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (Continuum, 1994), 149.

49 Ellen Bass and Laura Davis, *Beginning to Heal: A First Book for Men and Women Who Were Sexually Abused as Children* (HarperCollins, 2003), 5.

50 Bass and Davis, *Beginning to Heal*, 2.

must be that violator and violated are co-responsible for the resulting harms.”<sup>51</sup>  
This is theological victim blaming at its worst.

This sentiment is reflected in the famous quote, “No one can disgrace us but ourselves.”<sup>52</sup>

This is all the opposite of what John Barclay writes about the concept of gift in Paul’s theology. Paul is famous for speaking of Christ with the language of gift (2 Cor. 9:15, Gal. 1:14): “The conditions for the gift are anything but positive. This is not the giving of covenants to the worthy ... No fitting features can be traced in the recipient of God’s love, not even in their hidden potential.”

Pelagianism offers those who suffer horrible news. The experience of many survivors is that people offer them platitudes, suspicious questions, surface empathy, and shallow theology. But those who experience trauma simply may not have the wherewithal to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.”

Hurting people need something from the outside to stop the downward spiral, to give them a place to rest, to support and carry them, and to give them strength for recovery.

Fortunately, God’s mercy, grace, power, and love flood in at the point when hope to heal oneself is lost. Survivors need to be told that however deeply despair and violence can go, God’s great love goes deeper.

What is needed is not simply a list of exhortations or self-help platitudes and advice. J. Gresham Machen: “What I need first of all is not exhortation, but a gospel, not directions for saving myself but knowledge of how God has saved me. Have you any good news? That is the question that I ask of you. I know your exhortations will not help me. But if anything has been done to save me, will you not tell me the facts?”

God does not command “Heal thyself!” but declares “You will be healed!” Jeremiah 17:14 promises: “Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved, for you are my praise.”

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51 Jennifer Erin Beste, *God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusion on Grace and Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.

52 This quote is attributed to Josh Billings, *Henry Wheeler Shaw*, and J. G. Holland.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

The question of original sin, which seems far removed from everyday life, becomes much more real when applied to those who are trapped in sin. Their fate hung in the balance at the Council of Carthage—whether they would be told to simply get their act together or told that they were loved first in spite of themselves, and that because of God’s love they would be given the ability to conquer sin. At the same time, Pelagius’s critiques about leading a holy life and not using grace as an excuse to sin should ring strongly in a consumer culture that often takes it for granted that God should be conforming to its preferences. David Wells, a Protestant cultural critic, once wrote, “Pagans were deathly afraid of the gods and goddesses ... By contrast, we feel that the sacred will be pleased to have us, will spread out the welcome mat, so to speak, and will be grateful for our attention.”<sup>53</sup> For all the faults in his theory, Pelagius reminds us that we should not take advantage of God’s mercy.

As for the case of those who questioned Carthage, the ruling at Orange is more ambiguous. Some today question how firmly we should hold the rulings at Orange and Carthage at all. They were not ecumenical councils of the church; that is, they were not universally affirmed by the Eastern and Western branches of the church. In addition, some argue that the councils were so concerned with Pelagianism that they ruled out legitimate understandings of the grace of God and human salvation. Today, we can broadly consider both sides at Orange as orthodox, since there are several threads that unite both those who sided with Augustine and those who wanted to avoid the heresy of Pelagius without sacrificing legitimate expressions of human freedom. Most important, both sides absolutely affirmed “that humanity’s present condition does not correspond to God’s ultimate purpose and original intention in its creation.”<sup>54</sup> Moreover, they agreed that humans are responsible for their condition and that God is ultimately responsible for reversing the curse and restoring that which has been broken. Put differently, both sides affirm the crucial doctrine that salvation is by grace alone; nothing that humans can do could warrant their acceptance before a holy God.

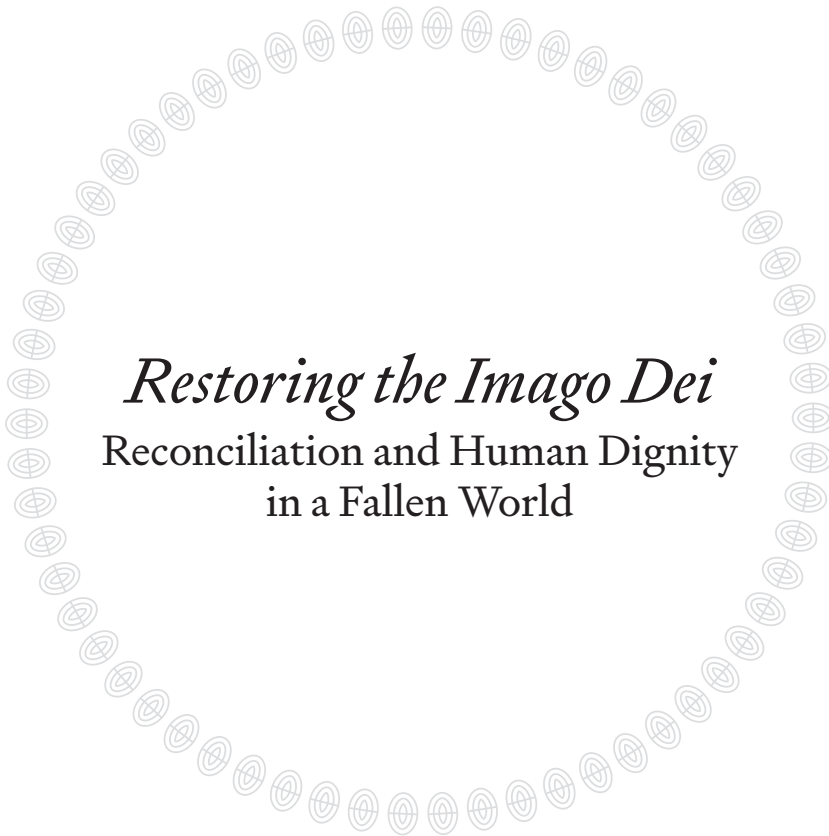
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53 David F. Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant* (W. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 188.

54 J. Patout Burns, *Theological Anthropology*, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Fortress, 1981), 1.







*Restoring the Imago Dei*  
Reconciliation and Human Dignity  
in a Fallen World

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The biblical doctrine of *imago dei*—that humanity is created in the image of God—has been central to Christian theology and anthropology throughout history. It speaks to the inherent dignity, purpose, and relational nature of human beings. Yet, the Fall introduced a distortion of the divine image, resulting in broken relationships with God, oneself, others, and creation. Despite this, Scripture offers hope of restoration through Jesus Christ, who is the perfect image of God and the reconciler of all things (Col. 1:15–20). This paper seeks to explore the restoration of the *imago dei* through the redemptive work of Christ and its implications for human dignity, purpose, and the church’s mission in a broken world. Through a theological examination of key biblical texts, insights from church history, and contemporary challenges, the paper will argue that reconciliation through Christ offers the restoration of the divine image, which the church is called to embody and proclaim. Furthermore, this restoration has ethical implications for the church’s engagement with issues of social justice, human rights, and ecological stewardship.

## I. THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE *IMAGO DEI*

The concept of the *imago dei* is a central theological assertion that undergirds Christian anthropology, ethics, and soteriology. It is introduced in Genesis 1:26–27, where humanity is uniquely created in the image and likeness of God. This foundational truth affirms the inherent dignity and worth of all people, regardless of race, gender, or social status. The statement, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (Gen 1:26), signifies a deliberate act of divine creativity and relationality. As J. Richard Middleton emphasizes, the *imago dei* is not a mere attribute but a royal vocation—humans are meant to represent God’s sovereignty within creation.<sup>1</sup>

Psalm 8 further highlights humanity’s privileged role as caretakers of creation, reflecting God’s sovereignty and creativity. The psalmist marvels at the exalted status bestowed upon human beings, describing them as “a little lower than God” and “crowned with glory and honor” (Ps. 8:5). Colin Gunton argues that this dominion is not to be understood as exploitation but as stewardship grounded in the nature of God’s own creative and sustaining love.<sup>2</sup> The creation mandate thus establishes both a relational and functional understanding of the *imago dei*.

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1 J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*, 27.

2 Colin E. Gunton, *The One, the Three and the Many*, 52.

From a doctrinal perspective, Karl Barth contends that the *imago dei* is most clearly understood through humanity's relational capacity, which reflects the relational nature of the Triune God. Barth asserts that "the image of God in man is his capacity for free fellowship with God and with man."<sup>3</sup> This emphasis on relationality as central to the *imago dei* resonates with Jürgen Moltmann's understanding that humanity's communal nature reflects the relationality inherent within the Trinity.<sup>4</sup>

However, the Fall described in Genesis 3 brought about a profound distortion of the *imago dei*. Sin resulted in alienation from God, broken relationships, and a marred identity. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes, the Fall represents the refusal of humankind to accept its creaturely status, resulting in a fractured relationship between God and humanity.<sup>5</sup> This brokenness is evident throughout the Old Testament, where the image remains but is deeply corrupted by sin.

Despite the pervasive effects of the Fall, there are prophetic hints of restoration throughout the Old Testament. Isaiah's vision of a suffering servant (Isa. 53) and Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34) suggest that God's redemptive plan includes the renewal of the *imago dei*. The eschatological hope expressed by the prophets is that humanity will be restored to its intended purpose and dignity.<sup>6</sup>

Historical theology has offered various interpretations of the *imago dei*. The early church fathers, such as Irenaeus and Augustine, distinguished between the image and likeness of God, viewing the former as essential and the latter as a state of holiness lost through the Fall. Irenaeus argued that the image (*eikōn*) refers to humanity's rationality and capacity for relationship, which remains intact after the Fall, while likeness (*homoiosis*) is the state of moral perfection disrupted by sin.<sup>7</sup>

Augustine, similarly, affirmed the persistence of the image but emphasized its corruption due to sin. He explained that while the *imago dei* remains as part of human rationality and relationality, it has been marred by human rebellion and disobedience.<sup>8</sup> This distinction became foundational for subsequent theological discourse, particularly in Reformation thought.

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3 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/2*, 183.

4 Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 99.

5 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 45.

6 Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation*, 67.

7 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.6.1.

8 Augustine, *On the Trinity* 14.16.

The Reformation, particularly through the writings of John Calvin, emphasized that the image was not destroyed but profoundly corrupted, requiring restoration through Christ. Calvin stated, “Although we grant that God’s image was not totally annihilated and destroyed in him, yet it was so corrupted that whatever remains is frightful deformity.”<sup>9</sup> This Reformation emphasis on the need for regeneration and renewal through Christ remains a vital aspect of Protestant anthropology.

N. T. Wright’s soteriological perspective places the renewal of the *imago dei* within the framework of God’s redemptive mission. According to Wright, the restoration of the image is part of God’s larger purpose of reclaiming creation through Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup> This eschatological vision emphasizes that the *imago dei* will be fully restored in the new creation.

Furthermore, contemporary theological anthropology has broadened the understanding of the *imago dei* by considering its ethical and social implications. Miroslav Volf contends that reconciliation and embrace are essential components of the restoration of the *imago dei*, especially in contexts of cultural and racial division.<sup>11</sup> This insight links the doctrine of the *imago dei* to ethical concerns such as justice, peace, and social transformation. Additionally, the *imago dei* serves as a foundational principle for the affirmation of human dignity and rights. Richard Hays underscores that the recognition of all people as bearers of God’s image necessitates a commitment to justice and compassionate engagement with the world.<sup>12</sup> This perspective challenges the church to advocate for the oppressed and marginalized.

Ethically, the call to reflect God’s image entails responsibilities toward creation itself. David Horrell argues that environmental stewardship is inherent in the *imago dei* and must be recovered within a holistic understanding of Christian ethics.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, the *imago dei* is both an ontological reality and a missional calling. It speaks to humanity’s identity, purpose, and destiny in relation to God, others, and the world. Theologically, it provides a robust framework for understanding the interrelationship between creation, fall, redemption, and new creation.

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9 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.15.4.

10 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 52.

11 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (1996) 29.

12 Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics*, 207.

13 David G. Horrell, *The Bible and the Environment: Towards a Critical Ecological Biblical Theology*, 31.

In summary, the *imago dei* serves as a foundational doctrine that addresses the nature of humanity, the devastating effects of sin, and the comprehensive scope of God's redemptive mission aimed at restoring His image in humanity. Though distorted by sin, Scripture and theological tradition consistently affirm that restoration is made possible through the reconciling work of Christ. This restoration is not merely individual but encompasses ethical, social, and ecclesial dimensions that reflect God's image in the world. As such, reconciliation emerges as the essential means by which the *imago dei* is restored, calling humanity to renewed relationship with God, one another, and all of creation. This understanding sets the stage for exploring the Christological implications of the *imago dei*, where Christ himself is the true image of God and the model through whom reconciliation and restoration are realized.

## II. RECONCILIATION AS RESTORATION OF THE *IMAGO DEI*

The New Testament presents Jesus Christ as the perfect image of God, the one through whom the fractured *imago dei* in humanity is ultimately restored. Paul affirms that Christ “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15), while the author of Hebrews identifies him as “the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3). Theologically, Christ's embodiment of the *imago dei* is not merely a doctrinal assertion but a transformative reality that reshapes the identity and vocation of all who are united with him. As Anthony Hoekema asserts, “Jesus Christ, as the perfect image of God, is both the pattern and the power for the restoration of the image of God in man.”<sup>14</sup>

Paul's teaching in 2 Corinthians 5:17–21 underscores reconciliation as the cornerstone of the believer's new identity and vocation. According to Paul, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). The language of “new creation” signifies a profound transformation that goes beyond moral improvement to encompass a total renewal of the person's nature and calling. Wright explains, “To be in Christ is to be part of the new creation, to have the image of God restored and renewed.”<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, reconciliation entails not only a restored relationship with God but also the reconstitution of the *imago dei* within humanity. Christ's atoning work

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14 Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 85.

15 N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology*, 147.

addresses the alienation and corruption introduced by the Fall, making possible a genuine restoration of the divine image. As I. Howard Marshall notes, “The concept of reconciliation implies the recovery of a relationship that has been marred or broken, including the renewal of the image of God within the believer.”<sup>16</sup> This renewal is inaugurated through faith in Christ but continues progressively through sanctification, as believers are “transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18).

The church, as the body of Christ, is called to proclaim and embody this message of reconciliation. According to Paul, believers are entrusted with “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18), a vocation that encompasses both evangelistic proclamation and communal embodiment of restored relationships. The church’s mission, therefore, is integrally connected to the restoration of the *imago dei*. As Stanley Grenz asserts, “The community of Christ’s followers, united by the Spirit, becomes the context in which the restoration of the image of God is worked out and displayed to the world.”<sup>17</sup> This corporate dimension underscores that reconciliation is not merely an individual experience but a communal reality that bears witness to God’s redemptive purposes.

The eschatological fulfillment of the restoration of the *imago dei* further underscores the completeness of reconciliation in Christ. Revelation 21–22 depicts the ultimate realization of God’s redemptive plan, where humanity’s restored image finds its fullest expression in perfect communion with God. As Richard Bauckham observes, “The final vision of the redeemed humanity in the New Jerusalem is the consummation of the restoration of the image of God, now fully realized in union with Christ.”<sup>18</sup> This ultimate restoration is the culmination of the transformative process that begins in the present age through the work of Christ and the indwelling Spirit.

In conclusion, reconciliation as the restoration of the *imago dei* is a central theme of the New Testament, particularly in the writings of Paul. Through Christ, the fractured image of God is being restored, enabling believers to fulfill their divine vocation as representatives of God’s kingdom. This transformation is not only a matter of individual renewal but also encompasses the corporate mission of the church to embody and proclaim God’s reconciling work. The full realization of

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16 I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, 580.

17 Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei*, 307.

18 Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 135.

this restoration will only be accomplished in the eschatological future, but the process is already inaugurated through Christ's redemptive work.

### III. IMPLICATIONS AND MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT

The theological foundation established in the preceding section underscores the intimate connection between reconciliation and the restoration of the *imago dei*. As believers are reconciled to God through Christ, they are transformed into his likeness, empowered to reflect his character in the world. This transformative process has significant implications for how the church engages missionally with society. Just as reconciliation with God involves the restoration of human identity and purpose, it also calls for the church to act as agents of reconciliation in every sphere of life. Therefore, the restoration of the *imago dei* through Christ serves as the basis for ethical, social, and ecological engagement.

#### *Ethical Implications and the Call for Justice*

The restoration of the *imago dei* through Christ presents profound ethical implications for the church's engagement with social justice. As those redeemed and renewed in the image of God, Christians are called to reflect his justice, love, and mercy in their interactions with the world. This calling finds particular relevance in contexts where oppression, exploitation, and inequality are prevalent. The affirmation of the *imago dei* demands that the church actively oppose systems of injustice that deny the inherent dignity and worth of individuals. As Miroslav Volf argues, the church must embody a reconciliation that is not only vertical—between God and humanity—but also horizontal, encompassing all human relationships.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, this ethical calling is rooted in the understanding that all people are created in God's image, a truth that necessitates a consistent response against racism, sexism, economic exploitation, and violence. The doctrine of the *imago dei* insists that the church's mission includes a prophetic confrontation of injustices wherever it exists. James Cone, in his seminal work *A Black Theology of Liberation*, emphasizes that "theology is not theology unless it is liberation theology; it must engage with the suffering and oppression of the marginalized."<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the church, as the reconciled community, must courageously advocate for justice and

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<sup>19</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996), 29.

<sup>20</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1986), 1.

embody God's compassion for the vulnerable.

Additionally, the restored *imago dei* demands that Christians pursue justice not merely as an abstract ideal but as a practical outworking of their faith. In line with John Calvin's insistence that faith must manifest in ethical living, the church's advocacy for justice becomes a tangible expression of the restored image. Calvin asserts that believers are "conformed to the likeness of Christ" and are thereby called to imitate his compassion and righteousness.<sup>21</sup> This ethical calling is holistic, addressing both spiritual and social dimensions of human existence.

Furthermore, the biblical vision of justice is deeply intertwined with reconciliation. As Christopher J. H. Wright contends, "Justice is not just about punishing wrongdoers or making reparations; it is about restoring right relationships."<sup>22</sup> The church's pursuit of justice must, therefore, be guided by a desire to restore broken relationships and heal societal wounds. This necessitates confronting systems of oppression and advocating for policies and structures that promote equity and human flourishing.

The ethical implications of the *imago dei* are further emphasized by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who argues that the image of God in humanity reflects communal existence. According to Bonhoeffer, "Being made in the image of God involves a call to responsible action toward others."<sup>23</sup> This communal aspect underscores the church's ethical responsibility to address societal injustices, recognizing that individual and communal well-being are deeply interconnected.

Moreover, N. T. Wright underscores the necessity of justice as central to the Christian mission, arguing that "the work of justice, in the biblical sense, is about implementing the victory of God in Jesus Christ over all forms of evil and injustice."<sup>24</sup> Thus, the ethical implications of the restored *imago dei* cannot be divorced from the church's commitment to justice, advocacy, and compassionate action in the world.

Finally, the call for justice grounded in the restoration of the *imago dei* demands that the church remain actively engaged in confronting social evils. This engagement must be both prophetic and pastoral, challenging injustice while also

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21 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.6.1.

22 N. T. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (2006), 285.

23 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3* (1997), 66.

24 N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (2008), 214.

providing hope and healing to those who suffer. As Gustavo Gutiérrez asserts, “To know God is to do justice.”<sup>25</sup> The church’s ethical responsibility, therefore, extends beyond mere proclamation to concrete actions that reflect God’s justice and mercy in the world.

### *Human Rights and the Sanctity of Life*

The doctrine of the *imago dei* provides a robust theological foundation for the defense of human rights and the affirmation of the sanctity of life. Since all individuals bear the image of God, their inherent dignity and worth transcend social status, ethnicity, gender, or physical ability. This universality of the *imago dei* calls the church to advocate for the protection and flourishing of all people. Nicholas Wolterstorff emphasizes that the intrinsic worth of every person is rooted in their identity as God’s image bearers, a status that undergirds the concept of human rights.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, the biblical understanding of the *imago dei* insists on equal worth and dignity for all people, regardless of their circumstances. As John Stott asserts, “The fact that human beings are created in God’s image gives each person a unique worth and value.”<sup>27</sup> This theological affirmation challenges the church to confront social structures and ideologies that undermine human dignity, including racism, sexism, and economic exploitation.

Additionally, the restored *imago dei* in Christ reinforces the church’s commitment to protecting the most vulnerable in society. Whether addressing issues of poverty, disability, or systemic oppression, the church’s mission must involve active engagement in promoting the well-being of all individuals. This commitment aligns with Karl Barth’s assertion that the dignity of the human person is grounded in their relationship to God, who grants them value and purpose.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, the church’s advocacy for human rights must be grounded in a holistic understanding of salvation that encompasses both spiritual and physical realities. As Christopher J. H. Wright argues, the mission of God includes “every dimension of human existence, personal and social, spiritual and material, historical and eschatological.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the church must engage in efforts that promote

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25 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (1988), 194.

26 Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (2008), 311.

27 John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (2006), 93.

28 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2 (1960), 204.

29 Wright, *The Mission of God* (2006), 267.

justice, peace, and human flourishing as an extension of its witness to Christ.

The theological emphasis on the *imago dei* also challenges the church to protect life at all stages, from conception to natural death. Dietrich Bonhoeffer contends that “the right to life comes from God’s creative will; it is not a human right that can be granted or revoked.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, advocacy for the sanctity of life is an essential aspect of the church’s ethical responsibility.

Moreover, the doctrine of the *imago dei* compels the church to engage in advocacy that addresses structural injustice. As Gustavo Gutiérrez asserts, “True liberation will be the work of oppressed persons themselves, who in reflecting on their situation, commit themselves to the struggle for justice.”<sup>31</sup> The church’s role, therefore, involves empowering marginalized communities and working alongside them to challenge systems of oppression.

Finally, the church’s commitment to human rights and the sanctity of life must be grounded in the love and justice of God. As Miroslav Volf argues, “To claim that all human beings are created in the image of God is to affirm their infinite worth and to reject all practices of exclusion and dehumanization.”<sup>32</sup> The church’s mission, therefore, is not only to proclaim the gospel but also to embody its ethical implications in concrete acts of justice and compassion.

#### *Ecological Stewardship and Creation Care*

The restored *imago dei* also has significant implications for ecological stewardship. Humanity’s original role as caretakers of creation (Gen. 1:28; Ps. 8) is reaffirmed through Christ’s work of reconciliation. The redeemed community is called to participate in God’s mission of restoring all things, which includes the created order. N. T. Wright emphasizes that the scope of reconciliation in Christ is cosmic, involving the renewal of both humanity and creation. He notes, “The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the new creation; as such, it brings the entire cosmos into the scope of God’s redemptive work.”<sup>33</sup>

Moreover, the church’s engagement with ecological issues must reflect its commitment to the Creator’s intent for the flourishing of all creation. This responsibility involves addressing contemporary challenges such as climate

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30 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (2005), 206.

31 Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (1988), 54.

32 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (1996), 25.

33 Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (2008), 97.

change, pollution, and the exploitation of natural resources. As Steven Bouma-Prediger asserts, “To be made in the image of God is to be entrusted with the care of creation.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, ecological stewardship is not merely a peripheral concern but a central aspect of the church’s ethical calling.

Theological reflection on the *imago dei* also affirms the interconnectedness of all creation. Jürgen Moltmann argues that the image of God must be understood in relational terms, not only between God and humanity but also in relation to the wider creation. Moltmann writes, “Creation is not just the stage on which the drama of human salvation takes place; it is itself an object of redemption.”<sup>35</sup> Such an understanding necessitates that the church view ecological stewardship as integral to its mission of reconciliation.

Furthermore, the biblical narrative reveals that creation itself is eagerly awaiting redemption (Rom. 8:19–23). This anticipation underscores the broader scope of God’s redemptive work, which includes the renewal of the natural world. Bauckham highlights that “human beings are given a role within creation which is intended to enhance the flourishing of all life.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the church’s ecological engagement must align with God’s ultimate purpose of restoring all things.

The restored *imago dei* compels believers to reflect God’s character in their relationship with creation, promoting practices that honor the Creator and contribute to the common good. As Christopher Southgate notes, ecological concern is “integral to Christian ethics precisely because it is a matter of justice.”<sup>37</sup> Consequently, ecological justice is not only about preserving the environment but also about ensuring that all creation can thrive according to God’s original intent.

Additionally, ecological stewardship must be rooted in a theology of gratitude and worship. Ellen Davis argues that “faithful response to God’s gift of creation requires a posture of gratitude, restraint, and humility.”<sup>38</sup> Such a perspective calls the church to adopt sustainable practices that reflect God’s generosity and care for the world.

Finally, the church’s engagement in creation care must be both prophetic and pastoral. Prophetic in denouncing practices that harm creation and pastoral in

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34 Steven Bouma-Prediger, *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (2010), 45.

35 Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation* (1985), 11.

36 Richard Bauckham, *The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation* (2010), 75.

37 Christopher Southgate, *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil* (2008), 4.

38 Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (2009), 37.

guiding communities toward sustainable living. As Pope Francis observes, “Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, the restored *imago dei* serves as both a theological and ethical foundation for the church’s commitment to ecological stewardship.

### *Holistic Proclamation of Reconciliation*

The church’s mission of reconciliation must be holistic, addressing spiritual, relational, social, and ecological dimensions. This comprehensive vision calls the church to embody the kingdom of God in tangible ways, reflecting the character of the Creator in acts of mercy, justice, and restoration. The reconciliation accomplished through Christ provides the foundation for the church’s engagement with a broken world, restoring the *imago dei* within individuals and empowering them to participate in God’s redemptive work. As Paul asserts in 2 Corinthians 5:18–19, “God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” This mandate extends beyond personal salvation and speaks to the holistic nature of reconciliation in every aspect of human life.

In this light, the church is called not only to announce the good news of salvation but also to live out this salvation in ways that address the felt needs of society. The church’s mission is not merely to convert individuals but to seek the transformation of society itself, engaging with issues of justice, human rights, ecological responsibility, and communal well-being. This holistic approach to mission reflects the comprehensive scope of God’s redemptive work, which includes the reconciliation of all things in Christ (Col. 1:20).

Furthermore, the church is called to be a signpost of the kingdom of God, where reconciliation, justice, and peace are embodied in relationships and structures. The restoration of the *imago dei* through Christ calls the church to live out these values in every sphere of life, whether in the home, the workplace, the political arena, or in the natural world. In doing so, the church becomes a foretaste of the ultimate restoration that will occur when Christ returns and fully establishes his kingdom.

The implications of reconciliation as the restoration of the *imago dei* are vast and far-reaching. It calls for the church to engage missionally in a broken world, addressing the social, ethical, and ecological dimensions of life. The church’s

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<sup>39</sup> Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015), 217.

mission is not only to preach the gospel but to embody the values of the kingdom in every aspect of life. The restored *imago dei* is the foundation for ethical living, the pursuit of justice, the defense of human rights, and the stewardship of creation. As believers are transformed into the likeness of Christ, they are empowered to participate in God's redemptive mission in the world. This holistic vision of reconciliation invites the church to be a transformative presence in society, bearing witness to the love, justice, and peace of God in a fractured world.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The restoration of the *imago dei* through Christ's reconciling work stands as a radiant beacon of hope and transformation for a fractured and unjust world. In Christ, the marred image of God in humanity is not only redeemed but empowered to flourish. This restoration is not abstract theology; it is a dynamic call to action. As redeemed image bearers, Christians are summoned to reflect God's character through lives marked by justice, compassion, stewardship, and relentless pursuit of reconciliation.

Moreover, this restored *imago dei* challenges the church to embody reconciliation across all spheres of life. It demands a response that transcends theological affirmation and becomes lived practice. As N.T. Wright articulates, the scope of reconciliation is cosmic, involving the renewal of all creation. The church must engage this mission with intentionality, passion, and faithfulness.

The pursuit of reconciliation is not optional; it is central to the church's identity and mission. Christians are called to confront injustice, advocate for the oppressed, and nurture creation, all as expressions of the restored image of God within them. Theological reflection must translate into ethical engagement, driven by the transforming power of the gospel.

Furthermore, the restored *imago dei* provides a framework for holistic mission. It calls the church to integrate social, relational, and ecological justice into its proclamation of the gospel. To reflect God's image faithfully is to pursue justice relentlessly, to love sacrificially, and to steward creation responsibly. This comprehensive vision affirms that God's redemptive work touches every aspect of life.

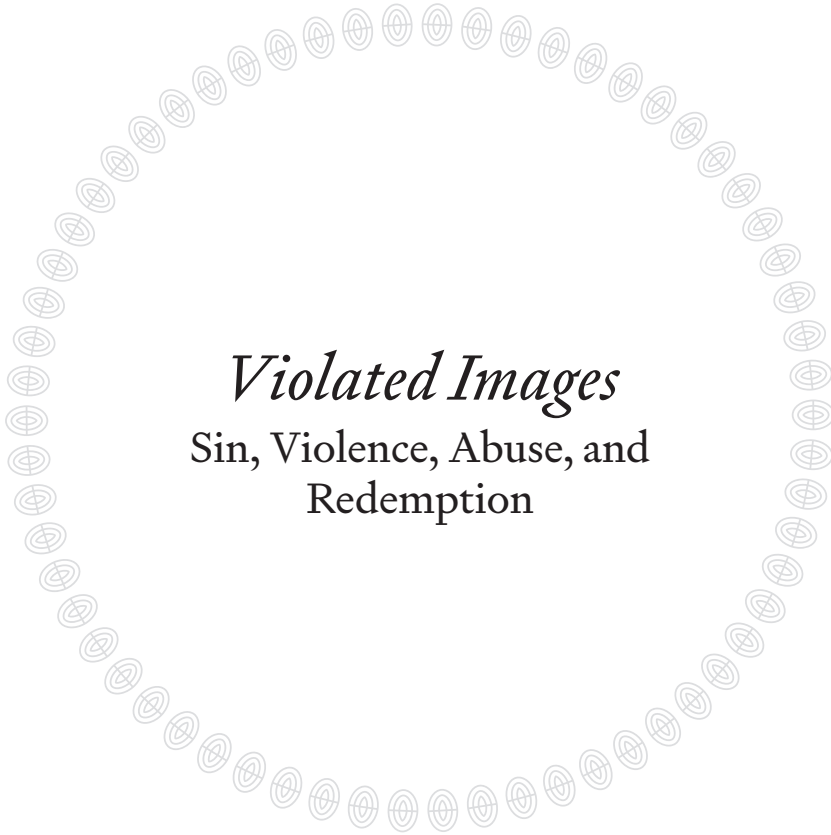
Ultimately, the church's mission must be rooted in the reality of the restored *imago dei*. This is the fullness of the gospel: that through Christ, the image of God is restored, human dignity is affirmed, and all creation is drawn toward wholeness.

As the body of Christ, the church must actively advocate for justice, defend the marginalized, and steward creation with integrity and faithfulness.

A fragmented world cries out for healing, justice, and renewal. The church's response cannot be timid or selective; it must be holistic, driven by the radical love of Christ. As ambassadors of reconciliation, believers are called to restore what sin has corrupted, to reclaim what has been lost, and to proclaim the transformative power of Christ's redemption. Through such a bold and comprehensive mission, the church bears authentic witness to the fullness of the gospel and the restored *imago dei*.







*Violated Images*  
Sin, Violence, Abuse, and  
Redemption

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Sexual assault, domestic abuse, and other forms of abuse are not merely social or psychological problems but theological distortions of creation, *shalom*, and the image of God, rooted in sin and violence and addressed by God’s redeeming work in Christ. Before examining what Scripture teaches about abuse and its effects, we will first consider the theological backdrop of sin, evil, and violence, because abuse flows from the corruption of God’s good design for humanity. Evil and sin work to vandalize *shalom*, deface the image of God, and violate peace. Sexual assault and domestic abuse, as some of the most profound expressions of such destructive forces, tragically distort what it means to be human.

## I. IN THE BEGINNING

The Bible begins with God, the sovereign, good Creator of all things: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”<sup>1</sup> God’s creative handiwork, everything from light to land to living creatures, is called “good.”<sup>2</sup> But humanity, being the very image of God, is the crown of God’s good creation (“Behold it was very good”).<sup>3</sup> As the pinnacle of God’s creation, human beings reveal God more wonderfully than any other creature as they were created like God,<sup>4</sup> by God,<sup>5</sup> for God,<sup>6</sup> and to be with God.<sup>7</sup> In Genesis 1:26, God says “Let us make man in our image.”<sup>8</sup> In the very beginning, our Creator gave us a remarkable title: He called us the image of God. This reveals the inherent dignity of all human beings.

To fully understand what “image of God” means, we need to look at the context of Old Testament history. Moses, the author of Genesis, and his Israelite readers understood these words because they lived in a world full of images. The most dominant images in the cultures of the ancient Near East were those of kings, who made images of themselves and placed them in various locations in their kingdoms. Pharaohs of Egypt, the emperors of Babylon, and the kings of other empires used images of themselves as a way to display their authority and power.

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1 Gen. 1:1

2 See the sevenfold use of “good”: Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.

3 Gen. 1:31

4 Gen. 1:26

5 Gen. 1:2.

6 Gen. 2:15

7 Gen. 2:15

8 In the original language of Genesis, this expression meant that God made humans “into” his image, much like one would say a potter makes a lump of clay “into” a vase. That is to say, humanity is not *in* the image of God; we actually *are* the image of God.

This custom of Moses's day helped him understand what was happening when God called Adam and Eve his image. Just as human kings had their images, the divine King ordained that the human race would be his royal image. Put simply, the expression "image of God" designated human beings as representatives of the supreme King of the universe.<sup>9</sup>

Immediately after making the man and woman, God granted them a special commission: "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'"<sup>10</sup> This verse contains five commands: "Be fruitful," "multiply," "fill," "subdue," and "have dominion." These decrees reveal our most basic human responsibilities.

It was God's design that humanity should extend the reign of God throughout the world. This involves two basic responsibilities: multiplication and dominion. First, God gave Adam and Eve a commission to multiply: "Be fruitful ... multiply ... fill." Their job was to produce so many images of God that they would cover the earth. Second, God ordered them to have dominion over the earth: "Fill ... subdue ... have dominion." Adam and Eve were to exercise authority over creation, managing its vast resources on God's behalf. Having dominion means being good stewards of creation and creators of culture, not dominating.<sup>11</sup>

Richard Pratt argues that multiplication and dominion are deeply connected to our being the image of God. To explain this, he describes the ancient Near Eastern context:

Many kingdoms in the ancient Near East stretched for hundreds of square miles. The kings of these empires were

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9 Richard Pratt explains that the title "image of God" is both a title of humility and dignity. Humans are only finite, physical representations of their Creator. We are images of God, but that is all that we are—images: "The Bible insists that we are not gods; we are merely images of God. We are not equal with our Maker; we don't have a spark of divinity within us. We are nothing more than creatures that reflect our Creator." See Richard L. Pratt Jr., *Designed for Dignity: What God Has Made It Possible For You To Be* (P&R Publishing, 1993), 4. While this points to humility, "image of God" also reflects our dignity: "We are images, but we are images of God (Gen. 1:27). God did not make Adam and Eve to resemble rocks, trees, or animals. Nothing so common was in his design for us. Instead, God carefully shaped the first man and woman so that they were in his likeness. He determined to make us creatures of incomparable dignity" (Pratt, *Designed for Dignity*, 8–9).  
10 Gen. 1:28

11 Francis Schaeffer writes: "So fallen has dominion over nature, but he uses it wrongly. The Christian is called upon to exhibit this dominion, but exhibit it rightly: treating the thing as having value itself, exercising dominion without being destructive. The church should always have taught and done this, but she has generally failed to do so, and we need to confess our failure ... By and large we must say that for a long, long time Christian teachers, including the best orthodox theologians, have shown a real poverty here." See Francis Schaeffer and Udo Middelman, *Pollution and the Death of Man* (Tyndale House, 1987), 72.

powerful leaders, but the sizes of their domains presented serious political problems ... Ancient kings simply could not have personal contact with all regions of their nations. They needed other ways to establish their authority. Many rulers solved this problem by erecting images of themselves at key sites throughout their kingdoms. They produced numerous statues of themselves and endowed their images with representative authority ... When citizens saw the images of their emperor, they understood to whom they owed their allegiance. They knew for certain who ruled the land.<sup>12</sup>

Moses described the twofold job of humanity against this historical background. To be sure, God had no problem filling the earth with his presence, but he chose to establish his authority on earth in ways that humans could understand. Similar to how ancient emperors filled their empires with images of themselves, God commanded his images to populate the landscape of his creation. In the command to “multiply,” God wanted his images spread to the ends of the earth. Just as an emperor conferred authority on their images, God commanded his likeness to reign over the world. His command to “have dominion” is God giving humans authority to represent him in his world.<sup>13</sup>

## II. *SHALOM* AND VIOLENCE

In Genesis 1 and 2, we see that God’s plan for humanity was for the earth to be filled with His image bearers, who were to glorify him through worship and obedience. This beautiful state of being, enjoying the cosmic bliss of God’s intended blessing and his wise rule, is called *shalom*. One scholar writes, “In the Bible, *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight*—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be.”<sup>14</sup> *Shalom* means fullness of peace. It is the vision of a society without violence or fear: “I will give you peace (*shalom*) in the land, and none shall make you afraid.”<sup>15</sup> *Shalom* is a profound and comprehensive sort of

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12 Pratt, *Designed for Dignity*, 22.

13 Pratt, *Designed for Dignity*, 23.

14 Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (W. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 10.

15 Lev. 26:6

well-being—abundant welfare—with its connotations of peace, justice, and the common good. While it is “intertwined with justice,” says Nicholas Wolterstorff, it is more than justice. In *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*, Wolterstorff argues that *shalom* means harmonious and responsible relationship with God, other human beings, and nature. In short, biblical writers use the word *shalom* to describe the world of universal peace, safety, justice, order, and wholeness God intended.<sup>16</sup>

Genesis 3 records the terrible day when humanity fell into sin and *shalom* was violated. Adam and Eve violated their relationship with God by rebelling against his command. This was a moment of cosmic treason. Instead of trusting in God’s wise and good word,<sup>17</sup> they trusted in the crafty and deceitful words of the serpent.<sup>18</sup> The royal image of God sinned and fell into the severe ignobility we all experience.<sup>19</sup> In response, the Creator placed a curse on our parents that cast the whole human race into futility and death as we are now guilty and corrupted. This tragic fall plunged humankind into a relational abyss. First, the harmony between God and people was broken. We are at enmity with God and have sided with God’s enemy. Adam and Eve committed cosmic treason, and all humans after have continued that rebellion. Second, the harmony between humans has been distorted. Paul Tripp writes:

What seemed once unthinkable wrong and out of character for the world that God had made now became a daily experience. Words like falsehood, enemy, danger, sin, destruction, war, murder, sickness, fear, and hatred became regular parts of the fallen-world vocabulary. For the first time, the harmony between people was broken. Shame, fear, guilt, blame, greed, envy, conflict, and hurt made relationships a minefield they were never intended to be. People looked at other people as

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16 Isa. 32:14–20; Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, 10; Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, electronic ed. (Logos Research Systems, 2000), 1022.

17 Gen. 2:16–17

18 Gen. 3:1–5

19 Richard Pratt describes the effects of sin: “The rest of Scripture teaches that sin has affected every dimension of human character. We are totally depraved. To be sure, none of us are as bad as we could be. God restrains sin and enables us to avoid absolute ruin. When left to our own devices, however, we are utterly corrupted in all our faculties. Our thinking processes are so darkened that we twist and pervert the truth (1 Cor. 2:14; John 1:5; Rom. 8:7; Eph. 4:18; Titus 1:15). Our wills have been rendered unable to choose for spiritual good (John 8:34; 2 Tim. 3:2–4). Our affections have been marred and misdirected so that we love the world and its evil pleasures (John 5:42; Heb. 3:12; 1 John 2:15–17). For these reasons, we are under the judgment of God (John 3:18–19) and unable to do anything to redeem ourselves (John 6:44; 3:5; Rom. 7:18, 23). The sin of Adam and Eve has had devastating effects on human character.” See Pratt, *Designed for Dignity*, 51.

obstacles to getting what they wanted or as dangers to be avoided. Even families were unable to coexist in any kind of lasting and peaceful union. Violence became a common response to problems that had never before existed. Conflict existed in the human community as an experience more regular than peace. Marriage became a battle for control, and children's rebellion became a more natural response than willing submission. Things became more valuable than people, and they willingly competed with others in order to acquire more. The human community was more divided by love for self than united by love of neighbor. The words of people, meant to express truth and love, became weapons of anger and instruments of deceit. In an instant, the sweet music of human harmony had become the mournful dirge of human war.<sup>20</sup>

God's good creation is now cursed because of the entrance of sin.<sup>21</sup> The world is simply not the way it's supposed to be. The entrance of sin into God's good world leads to the shattering of shalom. Sin, in other words, is "culpable shalom-breaking."<sup>22</sup> Evil is an intrusion upon shalom. The first intrusion was Satan's intrusion into God's garden, which led to Adam and Eve's tragic disobedience—the second. When sin is understood as an intrusion upon God's original plan for peace, it helps us see the biblical description of redemption as an intrusion of grace into disgrace, light into the darkness of sin, or peace into disorder and violence. Just as sin and evil are intrusions on original peace, so redemption is an intrusion of reclaiming what was originally intended for humans: peace.

Sin wrecks the order and goodness of God's world. Sin is the "vandalism of shalom."<sup>23</sup> Cornelius Plantinga writes: "God hates sin not just because it violates his law but, more substantively, because it violates shalom, because it breaks the peace, because it interferes with the way things are supposed to be. God is for

20 Paul David Tripp, *A Quest for More: Living for Something Bigger Than You* (New Growth Press, 2008), 40.

21 Gen. 3:14–24. See Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, 5: "The Bible presents sin by way of major concepts, principally lawlessness and faithlessness, expressed in an array of images: sin is the missing of a target, a wandering from the path, a straying from the fold. Sin is a hard heart and a stiff neck. Sin is blindness and deafness. It is both the overstepping of a line and the failure to reach it—both transgression and shortcoming. Sin is a beast crouching at the door. In sin, people attack or evade or neglect their divine calling. These and other images suggest deviance: even when it is familiar, sin is never normal. Sin is disruption of created harmony and then resistance to divine restoration of that harmony. Above all, sin disrupts and resists the vital human relation to God."

22 Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, 14.

23 Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, 30.

shalom and *therefore* against sin. In fact, we may safely describe evil as any spoiling of shalom, whether physically, morally, spiritually, or otherwise.”<sup>24</sup> Regarding this dimension of sin, Plantinga writes: “All sin has first and finally a Godward force. Let us say that a sin is any act—any thought, desire, emotion, word, or deed—or its particular absence, that displeases God and deserves blame. Let us add that the disposition to commit sins also displeases God and deserves blame, and let us therefore use the word sin to refer to such instances of both act and disposition. Sin is a culpable and personal affront to a personal God.”<sup>25</sup> God’s image bearers were created to worship and obey him and to reflect his glory to his good creation. According to G. K. Beale, “God has made humans to reflect him, but if they do not commit themselves to him, they will not reflect him but something else in creation. At the core of our being we are imaging creatures. It is not possible to be neutral on this issue: we either reflect the Creator or something in creation.”<sup>26</sup> After the Fall, humankind was enslaved to idolatry (hatred for God) and violence (hatred for each other). Sin inverts love for God, which in turn becomes idolatry and inverts love for neighbor, which becomes exploitation of others. Instead of worshipping God, our inclination is to worship anything else but God. Idolatry is not the ceasing of worship. Rather, it is misdirected worship, and at the core of idolatry is self-worship. Instead of loving one another as God originally intended, fallen humanity expresses hatred toward their neighbors. Sin perverts mutual love and harmony, resulting in domination and violence against others.<sup>27</sup> Both the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with God’s image bearers are fractured by the Fall. Evil is anti-creation, anti-life, and the force that seeks to oppose, deface, and destroy God, his good world, and his image bearers. Simply put, when someone defaces a human being—God’s image bearer—ultimately an attack is being waged against God himself.

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24 Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, 14.

25 Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, 13.

26 G. K. Beale, *We Become What We Worship: A Biblical Theology of Idolatry* (InterVarsity Press, 2008), 16.

27 Sigmund Freud serves unexpectedly as a theologian of original sin. In *A Short Account of Psychoanalysis*, he writes that the “impulses ... subjected to repression are those of selfishness and cruelty, which can be summed up in general as evil, but above all sexual wishful impulses, often of the crudest and most forbidden kind.” See Sigmund Freud, *A Short Account of Psychoanalysis*, Standard Edition, 19, ed. and trans. James Strachey (Hogarth, 1953–74), 197. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud writes: “Men are not gentle, friendly creatures wishing for love, who simply defend themselves if they are attacked, but that a powerful measure of desire for aggression has to be reckoned as part of their instinctual endowment. The result is that their neighbor is to them not only a possible helper or sexual object, but also a temptation to them to gratify their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without recompense, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. *Homo homini lupus*; who has the courage to dispute it in the face of all the evidence in his own life and in history?” Freud refers to Thomas Hobbes’s famous “*Homo Homini Lupus Est*,” which is Latin for “man is a wolf to [his fellow] man.” See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. Joan Riviere (Hogarth, 1963), p. 58.

The foundational premise of the Bible after Genesis 3, therefore, is that this fallen world, particularly fallen humanity, is violent.<sup>28</sup> The cosmic war begun by the serpent in Eden, described in Genesis 3, produces collateral damage in the very next chapter. Immediately after the Fall, there is a radical shift from *shalom* to violence, as the first murder takes place in Genesis 4. After God shows regard to Abel's worshipful offering, Cain responds by raging against God and murdering his brother.<sup>29</sup> The downward spiral of humankind and the constant spread of sin continued as God's blessing is replaced by God's curse.<sup>30</sup> Violence is both sin against God and his image bearers. In our hatred for God, we horde worship for self and strike against those who reflect God's glory. Plantinga explains: "Godlessness is anti-*shalom*. Godlessness spoils the proper relation between human beings and their maker and savior. Sin offends God not only because it bereaves or assaults God directly, as in impiety or blasphemy, but also because it bereaves and assaults what God has made."<sup>31</sup> A portion of the Old Testament is a catalogue of cruelty. Widespread violence and the appalling evil of fallen humanity is recorded in detail on nearly every page of the Hebrew Bible:

Acts of reprobate violence explode from the pages of the Old Testament as evil people perform unspeakable acts: Children are cannibalized (2 Kings 6:28–29; Ezek. 5:10; Lam. 2:20), boiled (Lam. 4:10) and dashed against a rock (Ps. 137:9). During the Babylonian invasion, Zedekiah is forced to watch his sons slaughtered, after which his own eyes are gouged out (Jer. 52:10–11). Pregnant women are ripped open (2 Kings 15:16; Amos 1:13). Other women are raped (Gen. 34:1–5; 2 Sam. 13:1–15; Ezek. 22:11); one of them is gang raped to the point of death (Judg. 19:22–30). Military atrocities are equally shocking. We read about stabbings (Judg. 3:12–20; 2 Sam. 2:23; 20:10) and beheadings (1 Sam. 17:54; 2 Sam. 4:7–9). These are normal military atrocities. More extraordinary cases involve torture and mutilation: limbs are cut off (Judg. 1:6–7), bodies hewed in pieces (1 Sam. 15:33), eyes gouged out (Judg. 16:21; 2 Kings 25:7), skulls punctured (Judg. 4:12–23; 5:26–

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28 D.G. Reid, "Violence," in T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, electronic ed. (InterVarsity Press, 2001).

29 Gen. 4:5b, 8

30 The word "curse" occurs five times in Genesis 4–11: 3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25.

31 Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 16.

27) or crushed by a millstone pushed from a city wall (Judg. 9:53). Two hundred foreskins are collected (1 Sam. 18:27), seventy heads gathered (2 Kings 10:7–8), thirty men killed for their clothing (Judg. 14:19). Bodies are hanged (Josh. 8:29), mutilated and displayed as trophies (1 Sam. 31:9–10), trampled beyond recognition (2 Kings 9:30–37), destroyed by wild beasts (Josh. 13:8 [sic]; 2 Kings 2:23–24) or flailed with briers (Judg. 8:16). Entire groups are massacred (1 Sam. 22:18–19; 1 Kings 16:8–14) or led into captivity strung together with hooks through their lips (Amos 4:2).<sup>32</sup>

### III. SIN AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

We have seen how violence is a bitter fruit of the Fall and is, without question, a “vandalism of *shalom*.” In biblical thinking, we can understand neither *shalom* nor sin apart from reference to God. David confesses to God, “Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You may be justified in Your words and blameless in Your judgment.”<sup>33</sup> Despite committing adultery with Bathsheba and orchestrating the murder of her husband, Uriah, David can write that he has sinned against God “only.”<sup>34</sup> David’s sins against other human beings were also, in the ultimate sense, transgressions committed against God himself. According to Plantinga, “Shalom is God’s design for creation and redemption; sin is blamable human vandalism of these great realities and therefore an affront to their architect and builder.”<sup>35</sup>

Sexual assault is a vandalization of *shalom*. It can influence how victims feel about themselves, how they understand connections and boundaries with others, and ultimately, how they relate to God. Throughout the Bible, there is a conception of sexual assault, with an understanding of its devastating emotional and psychological consequences for the victim.<sup>36</sup>

Sexual violence uses sex as a weapon of power and control against others. Sex is

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32 Leland Ryken, Jim Wilhoit, Tremper Longman et al., eds., “Stories of Violence” in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, (InterVarsity Press, 2000, c1998), 916.

33 Ps. 51:4

34 See 2 Sam. 11

35 Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, 16.

36 Deut. 22:25–29; Judg. 19:22–25; 20:5; and 2 Sam. 13:12, 12, 22, and 32 are a few places where sexual coercion is depicted in the Bible.

the means by which we fulfill our calling of multiplying and taking dominion. It is noteworthy that the very means of fulfilling God's plan for humanity is now a tool for violence toward other images of God. In *shalom*, sex was also a reflection of unity and peace between man and woman. It is a picture of two becoming one. God meant for sexual feelings, thoughts, and activity to be pleasurable and intimacy building in marriage. Satan understands the importance of what God has designed, and sexual assault is one of his chief means of destroying it. Sexual abuse creates in the victim's mind a tragic and perverse linkage between sex, intimacy, and shame. When someone is sexually violated, one of the most creative and intimate of human experiences—sexuality—is transgressed by violence and subjugation. Sex, the very expression of human union, intimacy, and peace, becomes a tool for violence after the Fall. Plantinga writes: "The story of the fall tells us that sin corrupts: it puts asunder what God had joined together and joins together what God had put asunder. Like some devastating twister, corruption both explodes and implodes creation, pushing it back toward the 'formless void' from which it came."<sup>37</sup> Violence is also the outworking and fruit of idolatry as humans have inherent dignity as the image of God:

The Old Testament records some horrific incidents of sexual violence: when people are alienated from God, depravity and violence are inevitable. Biblical stories of rape are infrequent but vivid, including the story of Dinah's rape and the resulting sexual retaliation by her brothers (Gen. 34), the abuse to death of the Levite's concubine (Judg. 19) and Amnon's rape of his sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13:1–21). In a similar vein are pictures in the prophetic books of the ravishing of wives and virgins as the aftermath of a nation's being conquered (Isa. 13:16; Lam. 5:11; Zech. 14:2).<sup>38</sup>

Sexual violence distorts this beautiful act of union, pleasure, calling, and worship. God intended humankind to "be fruitful and multiply,"<sup>39</sup> spreading divine image bearers throughout his good world. This multiplying of offspring and exercising of dominion was to happen through the God-ordained sexual union between man and woman, husband and wife, in the context of marriage: "Therefore a man shall

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<sup>37</sup> Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 30.

<sup>38</sup> Leland Ryken, Jim Wilhoit, Tremper Longman et al., eds., "Rape, Sexual Violence," in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, (InterVarsity Press, 2000, c1998), 916.

<sup>39</sup> Gen. 1:28.

leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.<sup>40</sup>

This peaceful, loving relationship was shattered by the entrance of sin into the world. Instead of unashamed intimacy and trust, there is shame and mistrust. Instead of grace, there is disgrace. Hatred toward other divine image bearers, not love, characterizes human life after the Fall:

As soon as human rebellion and self-assertiveness reared their ugly heads, shame, guilt and self-consciousness took over. Pathetic attempts at self-concealment (Gen. 3:7) are replaced by God's own provision of covering (Gen. 3:21). Henceforth nakedness was unnatural. Clothing is God's covering, his divine gracious response to human rebellion. Being unclothed thus becomes a metaphor for being exposed to the judgment of God.<sup>41</sup>

A foundational element of paradise—sexual innocence in community—has been spoiled by the treachery of sexual assault. Sexual assault is uniquely devastating precisely because it distorts the foundational realities of what it means to be human: embodied personhood is plundered, sexual expression is perverted and used for violence, intrapersonal trust is shattered, and disgrace and shame are heaped on the victim. Sexual assault is one of the most frequent and disturbing symbols of sin in the Bible. It is a complete distortion of relationship, a mockery and devastation of the original intent of being made for relationships with God and others. References to sexual violence is a way that God, through the biblical authors, communicates that sin has progressed so far that sex, an expression of union, peace, and love, is now used as a tool for violence.

The betrayal of creation and the refusal of any sense of covenantal relationship, sexual assault physically, emotionally, culturally, and structurally wounds the victim. Sexual assault is not just a criminal, physical, and psychological act; it is also a spiritual act in which the connectedness of humans with one another and with God is violated and broken, and the reality of defilement, guilt, terror, shame, alienation, and separation can take years to be made whole again. Sin names the reality of sexual assault, and in turn, assault symbolizes sin and its

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40 Gen. 2:24–25

41 Leland Ryken, Jim Wilhoit, Tremper Longman et al., eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, (InterVarsity Press, 2000, c1998), 581.

destructive effects. The Bible speaks about the reality and effects of sin in various ways: disease, burden, debt, and defilement. Sexual assault is another way to speak of sin, in both its reality and effects. Sexual assault both names and symbolizes that sin is not only something that is done to us but it also carries the effects of defilement, woundedness, and terror.

Sin is broken relationship with God, self, and others, and sexual assault signifies, even as it causes, brokenness and disruption. Sexual assault reminds us of the double-sidedness of so much sin: It is both personal and in the structures of culture. Sexual assault is an individual act of violence, one person against another. But it's also cultural: It is used as a weapon in warfare against the enemy,<sup>42</sup> and it's an epidemic in nearly all cultures.<sup>43</sup> There appears to be a societal impulse to blame traumatized individuals for their suffering. Alexander McFarlane and Bessel van der Kolk suggest that doing otherwise would threaten our cherished conceptions that the world is essentially just and that persons are free, self-determining, and basically good individuals responsible for their destinies:

Society becomes resentful about having its illusions of safety and predictability ruffled by people who remind them of how fragile security can be. Society's reactions [to traumatized people] seems to be ... in the service of maintaining the beliefs that the world is fundamentally just, that people can be in charge of their lives, and that bad things only happen to people who deserve them.<sup>44</sup>

In short, we sacrifice those who suffer so we can maintain our illusions of autonomy and safety.

The distress caused by sexual assault can be described well by Simone Weil's term "affliction." An event constitutes "affliction" if it has uprooted and attacked someone in all dimensions: physically, psychologically, and socially. Since affliction involves "social degradation or the fear of it in some form," it can be argued that one of the factors involved in affliction includes some form of interpersonal

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42 See Susan Brownmiller "War" in *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (Random House, 1975), 31–113.

43 Peggy Reeves Sanday, "The Socio-Cultural Context of Rape: A Cross-Cultural Study," *Journal of Social Issues* 37 (1981): 5–27.

44 Alexander McFarlane and Bessel van der Kolk, "Trauma and Its Challenge to Society," in Bessel van der Kolk, Alexander McFarlane, and Lars Weisaeth, eds., *Traumatic Stress* (Guilford Press, 1996), 27 and 35.

neglect or harm.<sup>45</sup> If victims were offered sufficient social support, they could be spared from the kind of suffering that constitutes affliction.

Marie Fortune describes sexual assault four different ways. First, it is a bodily sin. Sexual assault is a violation of bodily boundaries of personal space and distorts one's sense of body image. Second, sexual assault is a sin against relationship, violating the command to love one's neighbor as oneself. Third, it is a sin betraying trust and destroying relationships between victims and those who should have cared for them but instead caused them harm. The consequence of this sin is that it creates barriers of trust for victims in their future relationships. Fourth, it is a sin not only against the victims but also the community surrounding that victim.<sup>46</sup>

It is obvious that sexual assault is a sin against another human involving physical, psychological, and emotional violation through the commission of a nonconsensual sexual act imposed through coercion, intimidation, force, domination, and violence. Such an act entails not only a violation of the physical boundaries of the body but also a denial of the victim's will or agency—one dimension of being the image of God. Through sexual assault, the assailant aims to reduce the victim to a nonperson. Because the assault is bodily, it is sexed, and the scope of its harm includes the very personhood of the victim. The dominance inherent in an act of sexual assault, by which the assailant forces his incarnate will on the victim, is a hierarchic structure in which the victim's difference from the assailant is stamped out, erased, annihilated.<sup>47</sup>

This aspect of sexual assault involves the violation of the victim both bodily and mentally. By constraining the victim and disregarding, disbelieving, or deliberately acting contrary to her or his desires, the transgressor undermines the victim's sense of personhood.<sup>48</sup> Such acts of violence often result in emotional trauma for the victim, which is manifest in a sense of helplessness, loss, vulnerability, shame, humiliation, and degradation.<sup>49</sup> A particularly evil effect of sexual assault is that

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45 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (Putnam, 1951), 119.

46 Marie Fortune, *Sexual Violence: The Unmentionable Sin* (Pilgrim Press, 1984), 86–87.

47 Ann J. Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Cornell University Press, 2001), 192–193.

48 For the effects on the sense of self, see Ann J. Cahill, *Rethinking Rape*, 193–194; Ann Wolbert Burgess, "Rape Trauma Syndrome," in *Rape and Society: Readings on the Problem of Sexual Assault*, eds. Patricia Searles and Ronald J. Berger, (Westview Press, 1995), 239–245; Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 39; and Jocelyn Catty, *Writing Rape, Writing Women in Early Modern England: Unbridled Speech* (St. Martin's Press, 1999), 4.

49 Ann Wolbert Burgess, "Rape Trauma Syndrome," 240–243; Liz Kelly, *Surviving Sexual Violence*, 187–214; Jocelyn Catty, *Writing Rape, Writing Women in Early Modern England: Unbridled Speech*, 4; Susan Brownmiller, *Against our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, 18, 376; Ann J. Cahill, *Rethinking Rape*, 169–175, 192–194; Ann Wolbert Burgess and Lynda Lytle Holmstrom, "Rape Trauma Syndrome," in *Forcible Rape: The Crime*,

some victims not only feel a sense of radical disgrace but also participate in their own self-destruction.<sup>50</sup> The self-hatred, defilement, and guilt they experience cause them to act out self-destructively. Violence ensnares the psyche of the victim and propels its action in the form of defensive reaction. This is one of the most insidious aspects of violence. In addition to inflicting harm, the practice of evil keeps re-creating a world of violence, either against others or oneself. Evil generates new evil as evildoers fashion victims in their own ugly image.

In addition to being a sin against others, sexual assault is also a sin against God because the blessing of sexuality is used to destroy instead of build intimacy and because it is an attack against his image in his imager bearers. The ability of sexual assault to obscure internal and external relationships makes it a cosmic affront to the Creator and the order of his creation.<sup>51</sup> Sexual assault is a sin against God because it violates his most sacred creation, human beings made in his image.

There are explicit passages calling sexual assault sin—a violation of God’s law. Deuteronomy 22:25–29 addresses nonconsensual sexual acts and shows concern for the welfare of the violated woman. In Deuteronomy 22:25–27, the perpetrator is put to death by stoning, and it is stressed in the text that the woman is innocent of any wrongdoing and that no harm should come to her.<sup>52</sup> In addition to these and other biblical texts calling sexual assault sin, there are also depictions of sexual acts that the Bible characterizes as sexual assault resulting in emotional trauma. These passages are 2 Samuel 13, Hosea 2:1–13, Jeremiah 13:20–27, and Ezekiel 16 and 23. They demonstrate an understanding that such acts of sexual assault result not only in emotional trauma for the victim but also in a debilitating loss of sense of self and humiliation. These passages depict sexual assault as deeply traumatizing and resulting in devastating emotional and psychological consequences for the victim.

The Bible says that sexual assault is wrong, should not be done, and is not something the victims should experience. It also claims that God sees, knows, and cares about this sin and its effects and has acted to redeem people from the effects of sin.

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*the Victim, and the Offender* (Columbia University Press, 1977), 315–328; David Archard, *Sexual Consent* (Westview Press, 1998), 20–41, 44–53; and Patricia A. Harney and Charlene L. Muehlenhard, “Rape,” in *Sexual Coercion: A Sourcebook on Its Nature, Causes and Prevention*, eds. Elizabeth Grauerholz and Mary A. Koralewski (Lexington Books, 1991), 3–6, 12–15.

50 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, 122–123.

51 Gen. 6:1–3. See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966) 5.

52 Hilary Lipka, *Sexual Transgressions in the Hebrew Bible*, 90–92.

#### IV. TRANSGRESSION AGAINST GOD AND VICTIM

Far from being a peripheral issue in the Bible, sexual assault is clearly depicted as sin against God and neighbor, is mentioned frequently throughout the Bible, and is referred to as a symbol of how badly sin has corrupted God's good creation. The Bible confirms the effects of sexual assault we described in section three. As to what the Bible says about sexual assault, Hilary Lipka writes: "A comprehensive study that includes all biblical texts reveals that there is evidence not only of a core conception of rape, but also an understanding that sexual violence is devastating for the victim, resulting in emotional trauma and a debilitating loss of sense of self."<sup>53</sup>

We have seen in this chapter that sexual assault is a sin against the victim and a sin against God. However, it is very difficult in the Bible to distinguish the difference between the transgression against the victim and the transgression against God. It is so difficult that some scholars assert that there is no distinction between these two aspects of transgression. Sexual assault is always a sin against the victim and God because all crimes are depicted as sins, that is, violations of God's will and the reflection of his glory in others.<sup>54</sup>

The victim's experience of assault is not ignored by God, minimized by the Bible, or outside of the scope of healing and hope found in redemption. God's responses to evil and violence are redemption, renewal, and recreation. Evil and violence are not the final word. They are not capable of creating or defining reality. That is only God's prerogative. However, evil and violence can pervert, distort, and destroy. They are parasitic on the original good of God's creation. In this way, evil serves as the backdrop on the stage where God's redemption shines with even greater brilliance and pronounced drama. What evil uses to destroy, God uses to expose, excise, and then heal.<sup>55</sup> God's redemption imparts grace and brings peace.

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53 Lipka, *Sexual Transgressions in the Hebrew Bible*, 242. Commenting on these laws, Reid writes: "The law given at Sinai and expounded in Deuteronomy restrains the violence of murder or rape, but it also sanctions the violence of punishment for sins, the violence of Yahweh's wars and the substitutionary violence of animal sacrifice. The law, however, cannot put an end to Israel's complicity in human violence. Murder and sexual violence, for example, do not cease in Israel but multiply. At times the text of the OT surges with violence, even including unspeakable violence within Israel (2 Kings 6:28–29; Ezek. 5:10; Lam. 2:20; Judg. 19:22–30)." See D.G. Reid, "Violence," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, (InterVarsity Press, 2001), electronic ed. 832.

54 Moshe Greenberg, "Some Postulates of Biblical Criminal Law," in *Yehezkel Kaufmann Jubilee Volume: Studies in Bible and Jewish Religion Dedicated to Yehezkel Kaufmann on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Menahem Haran (Magnes Press, 1960), 36–41.

55 Dan B. Allender, "The Mark of Evil," in *God and the Victim*, ed. Lisa Barnes Lampman, 52.

## V. CONCLUSION: ADAM, NEW ADAMS, AND THE LAST ADAM

While the Fall brought a curse upon creation, God did not leave his image bearers to rot under its effects forever without hope of rescue. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve were “both naked and unashamed.” Post-Fall, however, nudity is sheer vulnerability. More than polite embarrassment, shame implied the danger of physical exploitation and humiliation. We see this as Adam’s shame soon festers into Noah’s exploitation. Nakedness and exploitation mark the earliest characters in Genesis and are traced throughout as a symbol of the depth of the effects of sin. Originally, Adam and Eve were naked without shame, enjoying open harmony with each other and God. Post-Fall, however, they recognized that they were naked and ashamed—no longer holy and righteous. They were morally defiled because of sin.

From the very beginning, God made provisions by establishing sacrifices to deal with guilt from sin. After Adam and Eve disobeyed, they realized they were guilty and tried to cover themselves with fig leaves. God replaced their leaves with garments made from animal skins. Bible scholars refer to this as the first sacrifice in the Bible. A life had to be sacrificed before Adam and Eve were clothed. E. J. Young, an Old Testament scholar, writes, “It would also appear that this act of God in the taking of animal life laid the foundation for animal sacrifice.”<sup>56</sup> In this passage, we see the pattern for all salvation history. God took a sacrificial animal, slew it before the eyes of Adam and Eve, and wrapped the skins about their naked bodies.

Often in the Bible, “nakedness” represents unrighteousness. It symbolizes the ideas of judgment and humiliation in the biblical world. The Bible pictures the sinner as clothed in “filthy rags” or “naked and ashamed.” The prophets described the sinful state of the nation of Israel as “nakedness” before God and the world (Isa. 47:3; Lam. 1:8; Ezek. 16:36). “‘Remove the filthy garments from him.’ And to him he said, ‘Behold, I have taken your iniquity away from you, and I will clothe you with pure vestments’” (Zech. 3:4). “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Isa. 61:10).

God did not desert them to the futility of sin’s harsh dominion. Even before covering them, God declared a plan to redeem them from sin and death: “And I

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<sup>56</sup> E. J. Young, *Genesis 3* (Banner of Truth, 1966), 149.

will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen. 3:15). This declaration is about the hope for redemption, but notice the violence it involves—enmity, crushing, and striking.

Martin Luther called Genesis 3:15 the “proto-evangelion”—the first gospel announcement and promise concerning Jesus Christ. At first glance, a curse against God’s enemy—the Serpent—may not seem like amazing grace. But this verse reveals God’s plans to redeem humanity by his victory over Satan. The Serpent will continue to trouble Eve’s descendants, constantly nipping at their heels, but one day the offspring of Eve will crush Satan’s head in glorious victory.

The Old Testament depicts a host of potential saviors who end up failing, often spectacularly, to show that even our prospective redeemers need a savior. It is not until we get to Jesus that we find a savior who can bear the crushing weight of our sin, because he himself is sinless. Before we get to the hope fulfilled in Jesus, we will look back at the hope deferred by the would-be saviors of humanity, starting with Adam.

### 1. *Adam*

*Adam* is the Hebrew word for “man” or “humanity,” which is apt because he represents all of humanity with Eve. They were placed in the garden and given the mandate to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen 1:28). It is a hopeful beginning, but Adam left no legacy as the “progenitor of the righteous people of God, as he would have been if sin had not entered the world.”<sup>57</sup> His representative bequest was not hope but intrinsic sin and imputed guilt. Adam’s sin polluted all born after him. Humans are now corrupted and guilty.

That may seem unfair or strange, but this idea of original sin handed down to us in Adam’s “representative headship” is actually not a foreign idea to our modern world:

The concept of representative headship exists in all sorts of legal and cultural settings. In the biblical world, the patriarch

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57 John L. Ronning, *The Jewish Targums and John’s Logos Theology* (Hendrickson, 2010), 99.

represents the clan; the father; the family; and the king, the nation. In the United States, parents legally act for their children, and people in Congress represent the citizens. Assuming the corporate solidarity of the race with its progenitors, Adam and Eve represented all people.<sup>58</sup>

After the tragic sin and expulsion of Adam and Eve, this creation mandate is given again throughout Scripture. But to those other individuals, it is a *blessing* rather than a command.<sup>59</sup> This is because, as a result of the sin of Adam, all humanity is no longer capable of ruling the earth in God's image as they were created to do. What was commanded to Adam is promised to men like Noah, Abraham, and David. This means that, after Eden, "being fruitful and multiplying" will be a gift: "Something has happened which means that Adam's descendants cannot simply be told to do this; the creator God will do it himself, and will (according to Genesis 17) do it 'exceedingly.'"<sup>60</sup> This makes it clear why these "Second Adams" in the OT must continue to receive rather than be expected to give. Scripture gives a portrayal of them that "highlights their sin in such a way that we can see similarities to the first Adam's sin."<sup>61</sup> The Scriptures include a number of Second Adam figures, but each fails miserably. This is ultimately remedied by the coming of Messiah, the antitype of Adam upon whom Adam is indeed modeled before creation. The failures of men like Noah, Abraham, and David to do what Adam could not when given the chance exposes humankind's need for a true savior.

Daniel Block is helpful here in tracing these Second Adams through the OT to their culmination in Christ:

Although complex, the OT picture of the messiah gains in clarity and focus with time. But the messianic hope is a single line that begins in broadest terms with God's promise of victory over the serpent through "the **seed** of the woman" (Gen. 3:15), then is narrowed successively to the seed of **Abraham** (Gen. 22:18), the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10), the stem of Jesse (Isa. 11:1), the house/dynasty of **David** (2 Sam. 7), and finally the

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58 Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 2011), 279.

59 "In the book of Genesis, a number of individuals seem to be presented to the reader as 'new Adams' in the sense that the two aspects of the original creation mandate of fruitfulness and dominion are given again to them as a blessing, in wording that is reminiscent of the mandate given to Adam and Eve," Ronning, *The Jewish Targums*, 99.

60 N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (SPCK, 2013), 786.

61 Ronning, *The Jewish Targums*, 100.

suffering and slain servant of Yahweh (Isa. 53).<sup>62</sup>

Further, through the idea of total depravity, Protestant theology describes how humanity can never save itself. Bruce Waltke is helpful here: “The end result of total depravity is that without God’s gracious intervention, unregenerate people struggle to live between the demands of their conscience and their drives and appetites,”—that is, “everything they do is with mixed motives and produces mixed results.”<sup>63</sup> He continues this line of thought:

Because of original sin and total depravity, humanity builds a culture not to glorify God but self. Because of the Fall, their accomplishments at best are tarnished. The splitting of atoms unleashed unthinkable power to light up our cities and to obliterate them. A computer, which is the result of many collective minds, outthinks and outperforms any individual, enabling people to do the unimaginable, such as landing on the moon or spreading child pornography around the world with just a click. Fuel gives humankind mobility, but its overconsumption threatens the planet’s ecology. In short, because of the Fall, civilization is a mixed blessing.<sup>64</sup>

Notice the behavior of Adam that is reflected in Noah, Abraham, and David. In the garden, Adam blames his wife before God, and the effect of his sin is shameful behavior and violence among his children. We will see reflections of these three in the second Adams before Christ, who is the Second Adam.

## 2. *Noah*

### *Parallels with Other “Adams”*

Even though the canvas is dark in this violent world, God continually paints the bright colors of his grace on his people. In the destruction of the earth, only Noah found favor in God’s eyes (Gen. 6:8), and we will not have to look hard to find language reminiscent of Eden used about Noah. Yet, instead of only the mandate to “be fruitful and multiply,” God adds to it a blessing:

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62 Daniel I. Block, “My Servant David: Ancient Israel’s Vision of the Messiah,” in *Israel’s Messiah in the Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, eds. Richard S. Hess & M. Daniel Carroll R. (Baker Academic, 2003), [17–56], 56.

63 Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 280.

64 Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 280.

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered.” (Gen. 9:1–2)

In Noah’s story, the flood is a “de-creation” in which God again makes the earth void of life except for this “Second Adam” and his family. It is a story of a “re-creation”—a restoration of the divine order and God’s visible kingship that had been established at creation.<sup>65</sup> Just as in the first creation:

The earth is made inhabitable by the separation of the land from the water (Gen. 8:1–3; cf. Gen. 1:9–10). Living creatures are brought out to repopulate the earth (Gen. 8:17–19; cf. Gen. 1:20–22, 24–25). Days and seasons are reestablished (Gen. 8:22; cf. Gen. 1:14–18). Humans are blessed by God (Gen. 9:1; cf. Gen. 1:28a), commanded to ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’ (Gen. 9:1b, 7; cf. Gen. 1:28b), and given dominion over the animal kingdom (Gen. 9:2; cf. Gen. 1:28c). God provides humanity—made in his image (Gen. 9:6; cf. Gen. 1:26–27)—with food (Gen. 9:3; cf. Gen. 1:29–30).<sup>66</sup>

Another major parallel is apparent between God’s planting of a garden for the man to enjoy (Gen. 2:8) and Noah’s vineyard (Gen. 9:20). The partaking of the fruit of this “garden” also reveals Noah’s failure as a second Adam.

### *Noah’s Sins*

With echoes of Eden, our hopes are apt to rise at this character so similar to Adam. The old was washed away and behold, the new has come. Noah, alas, was no savior, only another broken man inviting sin into God’s “re-creation.” Hope that the receding waters swept sin away with them is dashed when we see yet another off-putting parallel to Eden.

Having drunk too much of his vineyard’s produce, Noah is found naked in his tent by his son Ham. Instead of covering his father, he “told his two brothers outside,”

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65 Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Purpose*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 23 (InterVarsity, 2007), 60.

66 Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 60–61.

but they “walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father” so they would not shame him (Gen. 9:22–23). Noah fails as a Second Adam and Ham shames him. Notice the conflict between the sons of Noah and their lineage.

John Ronning sees a parallel between Noah waking up (his eyes are opened) and knowing “what his youngest son had done to him” (9:24) and Genesis 3:7—“the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked.” He also posits there could be “a reminder of the eating of the forbidden fruit in the overconsumption of the fruit of the vine.”<sup>67</sup> Man had no more than set foot on a world destroyed for sin than he began anew its path toward devastation. But God’s hope was not in Noah.

Despite his failure, Noah—like Abraham after him—represents “a new beginning for humanity through God’s gift of the covenant.”<sup>68</sup> Paul Williamson says this: “The glue that binds all the biblical covenants together is God’s creative purpose of universal blessing. Each of the subsequent covenants simply takes us one step closer towards the realization of that divine goal.”<sup>69</sup> God is faithful in the face of these failures, resolute to make his purposes known.

### 3. *Abraham*

#### *Parallels with Other “Adams”*

Once again, echoing the creation mandate to Adam, God gives a promise to Abraham—a covenant blessing:

“And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous. ... As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.” (Gen. 17:2, 4–6)

Abraham is another Second Adam with numerous parallels: God gives Adam his

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67 Ronning, *The Jewish Targums*, 100.

68 Justin S. Holcomb, *On the Grace of God*, 42.

69 Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath*, 76.

Garden of Eden while giving Abraham the land of Canaan; “God told Adam to be fruitful and multiply; Abraham is assured that God will make his descendants as numerous as the dust of the earth (Gen. 13:16) and the stars of heaven (Gen. 15:5).”<sup>70</sup> Additionally, God walked with Adam and Eve in Eden, and “Abraham is told to walk before God and be perfect (Gen. 3:8; 17:1; cf. 6:9). Through his obedient and faithful response to these promises, the promise is turned into a divine oath guaranteeing its ultimate fulfillment (Gen. 22:16–18; cf. 50:24).”<sup>71</sup>

Abraham also plays a role as a representative head of the people of Israel in that God’s blessing is always a gift.<sup>72</sup> N. T. Wright comments:

Israel’s covenantal vocation caused her to think of herself as the creator’s true humanity. If Abraham and his family are understood as the creator’s means of dealing with the sin of Adam, and hence with the evil in the world, Israel herself becomes the true Adamic humanity.<sup>73</sup>

This shows clearly in the correlation between “the placing of Adam and Eve in the Garden and the promise to Abraham and his family about the land of Canaan.”<sup>74</sup> The parallel is also vivid in terms of the exile and return: “Adam, given the garden to look after, disobeyed and was expelled. Israel, given the land to look after, disobeyed and was exiled.”<sup>75</sup> Therefore, “the return from exile ought thus to be like a return to Eden, a reclaiming of the original promises to Abraham and, behind that, the commands to the human race.”<sup>76</sup>

### *Abraham’s Sins*

In Genesis 3:6, Eve takes that tragic bite and is, at first, delighted by the results, sharing with Adam. Later, we hear God telling Adam that “because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life” (Gen. 3:17). We see a similar situation

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70 Gordon J. Wenham, “Genesis, Book of,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, eds. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, & Daniel J. Treier (Baker Academic, 2005), [246–52], 250.

71 Wenham, “Genesis,” 250.

72 “Abraham’s fruitfulness, the multiplication of his family, the recapitulation of the Adamic blessing, remains a strange gift, not something that can be presumed upon, always under threat from every angle, yet winning through,” Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 787.

73 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (SPCK, 1992), 262.

74 Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 787.

75 Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 787.

76 Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 787.

occur between our Second Adam, Abraham, and his wife in Genesis 16:2–3.

Sarai is barren in both womb and faith. To “help” fulfill God’s promise of a child, she tells Abraham to sleep with her slave girl (Gen. 16:2–3). Abram’s sin in taking Hagar as a second wife is not the only parallel to Adam’s failure, but it represents an overarching theme present first in Genesis 3 and throughout the book: Sin is “motivated by dissatisfaction with God’s providence—the attitude that God is withholding something good from people, so they must take action on their own.”<sup>77</sup>

Notice also the conflict between the sons of Abraham—Ishmael and Isaac—and the legacies of each.

In Genesis 12:10–20 and 20:1–19, Abraham tries to pass his wife off as his sister. When we look closely, we see that “the rebuke of the king in each of these incidents (12:18: “What this you have done to me?”; 20:9: ‘What have you done to us?’) is reminiscent of the LORD’s words to Eve: “What is this you have done?” (3:13).<sup>78</sup> Another direct parallel in Genesis 20 is what God says to the king:

“Now then, return the man’s wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all that are yours.”  
(Genesis 20:7)

This is identical to what he tells Adam about eating from the forbidden tree: “*mot tamut*, you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:17).<sup>79</sup> This parallel addresses the way Abraham fails his wife. The text suggests that treating Sarah as “a mere object of desire is objectionable in the extreme and is likely to yield consequences as dire as those threatened in the Garden of Eden.”<sup>80</sup> Additionally, the Pharaoh “sends away” (*salakb*) Abraham and his family like God “sends away” Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:23).<sup>81</sup> Abraham experienced shame and dread before the emperor, and “just as Sarai had no response to Abraham in vv. 11–13, so Abraham has not response to Pharaoh ... Abraham is reduced to silence too.”<sup>82</sup> Humans cannot remedy this problem themselves.

77 Ronning, *The Jewish Targums*, 101.

78 Ronning, *The Jewish Targums*, 101.

79 This construction of the verb *mot* with the infinitive absolute *tamut* is common in the Bible, but in Genesis, it only appears in the context of the garden and the sister-wife narratives; cf. Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other* (Maggid, 2011), 151.

80 Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels*, 151.

81 Terence E. Fretheim, *Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith* (University of South Carolina, 2007), 51.

82 Fretheim, *Abraham*, 51.

#### 4. *David*

##### *Parallels with Other “Adams”*

Ronning says the parallels between this Second Adam and the Genesis 1:28 mandate are not as apparent as they are with Noah and Abraham, but “the two aspects of the creation mandate (fruitfulness and dominion) are discernible in Nathan’s oracle given to David (2 Sam. 7; 1 Chron. 17). The LORD promises David that he will build him a house, a perpetual dynasty.”<sup>83</sup> The promises to the patriarchs involved kings, and since David’s dynasty was perpetual, “it seems apparent that he has now become heir of the promise of the new Adam given to the patriarchs.”<sup>84</sup>

Ronning is more expansive on these parallels in his dissertation:

David is the righteous **head** of a (nominally) righteous nation, administering “justice and righteousness for all his people” (2 Sam. 8:15). Abraham was to be a **father of many nations**; under David instead of seeing Israelites going over to the Philistine side (1 Sam. 14:21), Philistines and other Gentiles were **joining Israel**, professing allegiance to the Lord. Examples would include Ittai and the 600 men who had come with him from Gath (2 Sam. 15:18–21).<sup>85</sup>

##### *David’s Sins*

David’s sin with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11–12) has been called “an aggravated version of Abraham’s sin in Genesis 20.”<sup>86</sup> In that passage, “Abraham feared for his life because of a foreign king (Abimelech) who (so he thought) might take his wife from him and kill him.”<sup>87</sup> The parallel is that what Abraham, the elect patriarch, “fears of foreigners because of his wife is just what David, the elect, the Israelite king, does to Uriah the Hittite because of his wife.”<sup>88</sup> That is,

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83 Ronning, *The Jewish Targums*, 102. “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever,” 2 Sam. 7:16.

84 Ronning, *The Jewish Targums*, 102.

85 John L. Ronning, “The Curse on the Serpent (Genesis 3:15) in Biblical Theology and Hermeneutics” (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1997), 312.

86 Ronning, *The Jewish Targums*, 104.

87 Ronning, “Curse on the Serpent,” 312.

88 P. Miscall, “Literary Unity in Old Testament Narrative,” *Semeia* 15 [1979]: 27–44, quoted in Ronning, “Curse on the Serpent,” 312.

in 2 Samuel 11 the king is not a foreigner but David, who knowingly takes the wife of the foreigner Uriah the Hittite, then kills him to cover up the adultery. Perhaps Uriah was one of those foreigners brought to the worship of the true God by David, yet David in 2 Samuel 11 is like the king feared by Abraham in Genesis 20, who rules in a place where there is no fear of God.<sup>89</sup>

What is more, Gage suggests, “David’s palace would have been ‘terraced with gardens,’ and sees an analogy between the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and the forbidden ‘knowledge’ of another man’s wife.”<sup>90</sup> Notice also the division, conflict, and even murder of David’s sons and that Amnon (David’s son) rapes Tamar (David’s daughter). Like father like son.

The parallels continue between David’s flight to the east in judgment (2 Sam. 15), God’s proclamation that the sword would not depart from his house, and Genesis 3. Ronning concludes: “David is unworthy to be considered the new Adam, even though he was given the promises of the new Adam, and did more than anyone else to bring those promises to reality.”<sup>91</sup>

##### 5. *Christ as the Second Adam*

Tracing the sins of the “new Adams” provides stark contrast to the obedience and holiness of Jesus: “He was tempted in every way as they were and we are, yet he is without sin” (Heb. 4:15). Jesus was faithful in the garden to lay down his life for his bride and to make us the adopted children of God who are declared righteous and love one another.

Paul highlights the humility and attitude of Jesus toward God by comparing him to Eve. Her mind was set on being like God (Gen. 3:5), whereas Christ “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself” (Phil. 2:5–8). Paul’s wording in his description of the self-humiliation of Christ is meant to make this contrast with Eve clear.<sup>92</sup> That is, “the tempter urged Eve to seize this equality with God for herself, thereby expressing discontent with the high status in which the first pair

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89 Ronning, “Curse on the Serpent,” 313.

90 Gage, *The Gospel of Genesis*, 68; cf. Ronning, “Curse on the Serpent,” 313.

91 Ronning, “Curse on the Serpent,” 316.

92 Ronning, *The Jewish Targums*, 105.

was created ('a little lower than the angels')."<sup>93</sup> In a complete contrast, "Jesus gave up equality with God in order to become not just a man like Adam, put in charge of creation, but a servant, for the purpose of enabling his followers to truly gain the godlikeness lost in Adam."<sup>94</sup>

In response to God's questions of him, Adam blamed his wife, Eve, for his sin (Gen. 3:12). Both Abraham (Gen. 12:10–20, 20:1–18) and Isaac (Gen. 26:9–11) tried to pass off their wives as their sisters in order to save their own lives. David exploited another man's wife for his own selfish pleasure (2 Sam. 11). The ways the "new Adams" sinned against their own and other's wives form "an apt contrast to the work of Jesus, once we recognize that the church is his bride."<sup>95</sup> This is clearest in the case of Isaac, who "lied about his wife, subjecting her to potential defilement," because he was worried about his own life (Gen 26:9). Jesus, in sharp contrast, gave up his life for his bride to make her holy (Eph. 5:25–26) and to cover her nakedness with "the garment of salvation" or "the robe of righteousness" (Isa. 61:10)—the white robes (Rev. 7:9, 13–14).

With Romans 5–6, Wright suggests Paul is describing someone who is "under the law" as bound by God's law to Adam as our representative, "just as a married woman is bound by the law to her husband."<sup>96</sup> Using this analogy, the "old husband"/"old human being" dies with the Messiah in Romans 6:6. This means "you," the widowed woman, are free to marry again. The Messiah is the new bridegroom, and "belonging to him enables 'you,' like Abraham and Sarah despite their old age, to 'bear fruit.' The resurrection of Jesus as the new bridegroom has opened new possibilities not previously available."<sup>97</sup>

A clear argument for Jesus as the last Adam is in 1 Corinthians 15:21–49, in which he says Christ must reign until he has put all his enemies and things in subjection under his feet (vv. 25 and 27). This is fulfillment of the mandate to "have dominion" given to Adam. Here is Christ in Matthew 28: "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"

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93 Ronning, *The Jewish Targums*, 105.

94 Ronning, *The Jewish Targums*, 105.

95 Ronning, *The Jewish Targums*, 105.

96 N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (SPCK, 2003), 254.

97 Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, 254.

Additionally, Christ also fulfills the call to multiply by his creating “children of the kingdom” (Matt. 13:37–38). Ronning celebrates this reality: “Unlike the new Adams of the OT, all his children are righteous because he is the true progenitor of the righteous seed.”<sup>98</sup> Also, Christ represents Israel in that he fulfills the purpose God gave to Abraham—to make his revelation known to the nations. Waltke explains how this happened:

Since humanity’s first representative, Adam, failed, the elect by God’s merciful and intervening gift of faith identify themselves with the second representative, Jesus Christ, who by his sacrificial death, resurrection, ascension, and giving of his Spirit, cleanses the human conscience, pays the debt incurred by every and all sin forever, and reverses the tragic effects of the Fall (Rom. 5:12–19; 1 Cor. 15:22).<sup>99</sup>

The result is seen in what Peter calls believers: “You are a chosen race” (1 Pet. 2:9), which is a direct allusion to Israel being the Lord’s chosen people (Deut. 7:6–9).

Finally, in Romans 5:12–21, Paul argues that Adam brought sin and death into the world, but Christ has reversed the consequences of Adam’s sin and has given his own life and righteousness to secure their eternal glory. Because of Adam’s sin, through which “sin came into the world” (5:12), “many died” (5:15), “death reigned” (5:17), and “many were made sinners” (5:19). But Christ’s life, death, and resurrection secure for us “the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness” (5:17) as well as “justification and life” (5:18). Where Adam, Noah, Abraham, and David failed, Jesus, our new representative, reigns.

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98 Ronning, *The Jewish Targums*, 105

99 Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 279.





*Prophetic Lament on the  
Fall of the Crown*  
A Tribal Reading

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Lament is one of the deepest forms of emotion. Lament is an attitude of regret, mourning, or despair that an individual or community longed for in life. Lament, in other words, is also a cry of hope to restore what has been broken or torn apart in society. Prophets in the Hebrew Bible (HB)<sup>1</sup> have seen the injustices in society and use lament as a plea for renewal and restoration of humanity to God. So, what are the deeper meanings of laments? These laments show that humans have utterly failed to live in harmony. This paper delves into understanding the fall of the crown through communal laments expressed in Lamentations 5 and seeks to read Lamentations 5 from the tribal perspectives of Northeast India (NEI).<sup>2</sup> Do these laments narrate that humans have failed to look at other beings as created in the image of God? Does the failure to understand *imago dei* relate to the fall of the crown? What are the relations between lament and the fall of the crown?

## I. METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION: TRIBAL READING

Tribal reading in biblical studies has received recent interest in scholarship as it employs tribal hermeneutics to restore tribal culture and identity. Razouselie Lasetso defines the tribals as the indigenous<sup>3</sup> people who claim a common ancestry living in a community under one or more chiefs united by language and customs.<sup>4</sup> Tribals of NEI are an indigenous group of people who believe that Christianity brought education and development to the region of the tribals. However, they were made to think that they were inferior, needing to be replaced with Christian practises and foreign ideology.<sup>5</sup> Renthly Keitzar is the first among tribals who developed tribal hermeneutics. His article “Tribal Perspectives in Biblical Hermeneutics” asserts the approach for how tribal hermeneutics should be developed in the perspectives of the tribals and in their language.<sup>6</sup> The worldviews of the tribals are unique—the concept of God,<sup>7</sup> forms of worship, and arts and

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1 Hereafter Hebrew Bible will be referred as HB. Renthly Keitzar, “Tribal Perspectives in Biblical Hermeneutics,” *IJT* 31.3–4 (1982): 313.

2 Hereafter Northeast India will be referred as NEI. The paper seeks to focus on Northeast Tribal of India.

3 Wati Longchar defined indigenous people as cultural groups and their descendants who have a historical continuity or association with a given region either independently or largely isolated from the influence of the claimed governance by a nation-state. Wati Longchar, “The Continuity of Indigenous People in Today’s World,” in *Garnering Tribal Resources For Doing Tribal Christian Theology*, ed. Razouselie Lasetso (Jorhat: ETC Programme Coordination, 2008), 27.

4 Razouselie Lasetso, “Pauline Perception of Religion and Culture as Revealed in I Corinthians 9:19–23 and Its Significance for Constructing a Viable Tribal Christian Theology,” in *Garnering Tribal Resources For Doing Tribal Christian Theology*, ed. Razouselie Lasetso (Jorhat: ETC Programme Coordination, 2008), 3.

5 Lasetso, *Garnering Tribal Resources For Doing Tribal Christian Theology*, 4.

6 Keitzar, “Tribal Perspectives in Biblical Hermeneutics,” 293–313.

7 Tribals believe in God as one among the people and not a superior being in the form of hierarchy.

culture, which must be considered in interpreting the Bible. As hermeneutics are conditioned by traditions, tribal hermeneutics attempt to ascertain the tradition when reading the HB.<sup>8</sup> Biblical interpretation through the lens of tribal makes the Bible relevant for the tribals because contextual reading of the Bible enables the readers to relate to the text in its theological and social context. Zhodi Angami emphasizes that tribals should read “the Bible that brings tribal spirituality, tribal culture, and tribal history into conversation with the world of the biblical text.”<sup>9</sup> Oral tradition or literature such as ballads, legends, fables, songs, tales, and proverbs serve as an important category of ideas and primary sources that deserve serious consideration in tribal readings of the text.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, this paper seeks to understand the fall of the crown from tribal perspectives, as the strength of tribal hermeneutics lays in the tribal experience. Because tribals have experienced discrimination and oppression, the tribals recognize them in the text, and the lived experiences of the tribals become relevant in the text.

## II. UNDERSTANDING *IMAGO DEI* AND FALL OF THE CROWN

Understanding the fall of the crown begins with understanding the *imago dei*. Genesis 1:26 begins with the statement, “Let us make human in our image according to our likeness.” Gordon Wenham states that human are not created as an imitation of the divine image but to be the divine image.<sup>11</sup> Though the etymology of the word *selem*, “image” is uncertain, in ten instances the word refers to a physical representation of something (1 Sam. 6:5, 11; 2 Kings 11:18; 2 Chron. 23:17; Num. 33:52; Ezek. 7:20, 16:17, 23:14; Amos 5:26; Pss. 39:7; 73:20).<sup>12</sup> Claus Westermann states that the meaning of *selem* is “representation”<sup>13</sup>. While the second word *demut* “likeness” can be translated “to be like,” it refers to physical likeness.<sup>14</sup> Thus, *demut* can be a synonym for *selem*. According to Edward M. Curtis, “Man and woman were created not ‘according to’ the image of God but

8 Keitzar, “Tribal Perspectives in Biblical Hermeneutics,” 293–313.

9 Zhodi Angami, *Tribals, Empire and God: A Tribal Reading of the Birth of Jesus in Mathew’s Gospel* (Bloomsbury, 2017), 6; Zhodi Angami, “Tribal Biblical Interpretation,” *JTS XVIII*. 1(2013): 39.

10 Supongmayang Longkumer suggests that NEI tribals should employ tribal reorienting hermeneutics and tribal remythology hermeneutics, not just theoretical frameworks for interpreting biblical texts but to revive ailing tribal worldviews. Supongmayang Longkumer, “Tribal Hermeneutics: Exploring Theories and Principles,” in *Tribal Hermeneutics*, ed. B. Lalnuzira and A. Abeni Patton (Christian World Imprints, 2023), 19; Walotemjen, “Recovery and Significance of Oral History: A North East India Tribal Reading,” *JTS XVIII*. I (2013): 56.

11 Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Word Books, 1987), 29.

12 Edward M. Curtis, “Image of God,” *ABD* 3: 389.

13 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* (Fortress Press, 1994), 146.

14 In 2 Kings 16:10, Ahaz sent a likeness and a model of an altar from Damascus to Jerusalem so that he could have a similar altar constructed for the temple.

rather ‘as’ the image of God.”<sup>15</sup> Victor P. Hamilton suggests that “likeness” actually strengthens “image.”<sup>16</sup> The image of God stands on analogy with the Ancient West Asia (AWA)<sup>17</sup> kings setting up images of themselves throughout their realm.<sup>18</sup> This concept can be summarised through the statement of Brueggemann: “The image of God reflected in human persons is after the manner of a king who establishes himself to assert his sovereign rule where the king himself cannot be present.”<sup>19</sup> According to Phyllis Trible, Genesis refers to *imago dei* only with humans, which are defined by their sexuality as male and female, emphasising that humankind exists in a unity as sexually differentiated beings that she characterizes as distinction within harmony.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, Brueggemann states that “humankind is a community, male and female. And none is the full image of God alone. Only in community of humankind is God reflected.”<sup>21</sup> He further states that “every person is the ‘new creature’ (2 Cor. 5:17), crowned queen/king, entrusted with self-giving rule for the sake of others. The rule of the queen/king is to practice gracious freedom toward others which lets them be, even as the creator does toward us.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, male and female are given the crown of creation by the creator of heaven and earth.

Early church fathers much debated the concept of *imago dei* to understand the image and likeness of human in the image of God and what separates humans from the rest of the creation. Thomas Aquinas focuses on the element of *imago dei* that distinguishes human from animals (i.e., the rational soul, including the intellect and will<sup>23</sup>). Thus, the concept of *imago dei* sets apart men and women from the

15 Curtis, “Image of God,” 389.

16 Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17* (Eerdmans, 1990), 136.

17 Hereafter, Ancient West Asia will be referred as AWA.

18 One of the striking references is found in the ninth-century BC Aramaic-Akkadian inscription on a statue from Tell Fakhariyeh in the Upper Habur of Syria, which refers to the statues as a “likeness” and “image” of King Hadadyis. W. R. Garr, “Image’ and ‘Likeness’ in the Inscription from Tell Fakhariyeh,” *IEJ* 50 (2000): 228. See also Tremper Longman III, *Genesis: The Story of God Bible Commentary*, eds. Tremper Longman III and Scot McKnight (Zondervan, 2016), 36.

19 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 32.

20 Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1978), 16–18. Chung Hyun Kyung states that “Asian women’s suffering is the epistemological starting point of their theological anthropology.” Human as male and female shows an egalitarian relationship between the sexes. Chung Hyun Kyung, “To be Human is to be Created in God’s Image,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Orbis Books, 1996), 252.

21 Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 34.

22 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 35.

23 Montague Brown “*Imago dei* in Thomas Aquinas,” *SAJ* 10.1.(Fall 2014): 3. Aquinas is influenced by Augustine, particularly with the Trinitarian elements found in human beings such as existence, life, reason, memory, intellect, and will. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.93.8. As stated by Claus Westermann, “Irenaeus distinguishes between the natural and supernatural image and likeness of God. Philo under the influence of Greek philosophy views image and likeness in humans’ spiritual capabilities or his superiority. While for Augustine the image and likeness consists in the powers of the soul, in memory, intellect, and love.” Claus Westermann, *Creation*, trans. John J. Scullio (SPCK: London, 1976), 57.

rest of the creation. Anne Clifford stresses the interconnectedness of all creation and believes that such mutuality reflects the glory of God in all its diversity.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, *imago dei* should not separate us from being compassionate towards the rest of the creation nor should we dehumanize anyone created in the image of God, which results in the fall of the crown. This is made clear in the statement of Michelle A. Gonzalez: “Christian anthropology cannot claim that male and female are equal while simultaneously associating women with those attributes of humanity that are devalued by that tradition.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, both man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God to be the crown of creation.

The understanding of *imago dei* is further elaborated in the statement produced by WCC<sup>26</sup> that “Christian theological anthropology is not concerned only with Christians but is committed to all humanity, with its diversity of culture, colour, gender, sexuality and beliefs.”<sup>27</sup> Further, WCC states, “All human beings, though created in the image of God, are inevitably affected by individual and corporate sin.”<sup>28</sup> The fall of humanity begins with disobedience and sin, which is evident in the creation story. The well-being of humans should be considered not in isolation but in relation to God. Dehumanizing anyone created in the image and likeness of God or any creation disturbs the created order and results in the fall of the crown. It is in balanced harmony of men and women and with nature that gives the full realization of the crown of creation.

### III. LAMENT ON THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

Prophet Jeremiah is considered the author of the book of Lamentations. The book is known to have been written by an eyewitness who felt the tragedy of the fall of Jerusalem most deeply. The book of Lamentations narrates the communal lament<sup>29</sup> as the grief-stricken community offers its petition to God in the form of a prayer. The fall of Jerusalem constitutes a major loss in the history of the

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24 Anne M. Clifford, “When Being Human Becomes Truly Earthly: An Ecofeminist Proposal for Solidarity,” in *The Embrace of God: Feminist Approaches to Theological Anthropology*, ed. Ann O’Hara Graff (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1995), 173–89.

25 Michelle A. Gonzalez, *Created in God’s Image: An Introduction to Feminist Theological Anthropology* (Orbis Books, 2007), 127.

26 Hereafter World Council of Churches will be referred as WCC.

27 “Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology,” *A Faith and Order Paper Study Document* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), 2.

28 “Christian Perspectives on Theological Anthropology,” *A Faith and Order Paper Study Document* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2005), 4.

29 R. B. Salters, *Lamentations: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary* (Bloomsbury, 2023), 12. Communal laments appear to have been composed and recited on occasions of national disaster, military or natural, and also to commemorate such events.

people of Judah. The loss of statehood, the loss of Davidic line, and deportation of many important sections of the surviving population brought a major setback in society. The destruction of the temple meant the cessation of the normal practices in the worship of Yahweh.<sup>30</sup> Communal laments contain a description of misery and an appeal to Yahweh for help. The communal lament always has two sides: it laments the suffering and the disgrace of suffering.<sup>31</sup> Westermann states that laments are structured around three subjects (i.e., God, the lamenter, and the enemy).<sup>32</sup> The cry of lament, while ostensibly wrought from the human heart in certain situations, is filled with enigmatic energies, unbearable urges, moments both profane and sacred. Lament is more than railing against suffering, breast-beating, or a confession of guilt. It is a coil of suffering and hope, of awareness and memory, anger and relief, desires for vengeance, forgiveness and healing. It is the way of bearing the unbearable, both individually and communally. It is a wailing of the human soul, a barrage of tears, reproaches, petitions, praise, and hopes which beat against the heart of God.<sup>33</sup> Lament at the fall of Jerusalem is also lament for the fall of worship, fall of humanity, and fall in the hands of enemies. Lament at the fall of humanity shows that the crown has fallen because humans have failed to do justice, failed to treat other humans equally, mothers are raped and children are left orphan, young women are raped. Lament is an expression of suffering, injustice, pain, and agony, yet there is hidden hope for restoration in the midst of lamentation.

#### *Literary Structure of Lamentation 5*

Lamentations 5 contains the key elements of the communal lament: an address to Yahweh (v. 1); a description of misery/complaint (vv. 2–18); praise of Yahweh (v. 19); complaint (v. 20); an appeal to Yahweh for help (vv. 21–22).<sup>34</sup> In its prayerful lament, the community turns to Yahweh, concluding with an appeal and yet, in contrast to expectation, Yahweh remains silent. The final voice is that of a community still in the midst of their pain and suffering. The literary structure of Lamentations 5 can be classified as 1) the affliction and suffering of the people (5:1–13), 2) the loss of joy and hope (5:14–18), and 3) an appeal for the Lord's restored favor (5:19–22). Therefore, Lamentations 5 can be divided into three

30 Salters, *Lamentations: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 27.

31 Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (John Knox, 1981), 179.

32 Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, 169.

33 It is supremely and truly human: "Jesus wept" (John 11:35) as he beheld the reality of suffering and death.

34 Claus Westermann, *Lamentations* (Fortress Press, 1994), 212–213.

thematic units: an extended description of misery, opening with an address to Yahweh (vv. 1–18), a brief praise of Yahweh (v.19), and the future restoration of Jerusalem (vv. 20–22).<sup>35</sup>

#### IV. PROPHETIC LAMENT ON THE FALL OF THE CROWN

The social and historical context of Lamentations 5 stands along the period of suffering under the hands of the Babylonians as a sign of punishment for their disobedience. The social setting of Lamentations 5 is in Jerusalem and Judah after the city fell to Babylon. It describes the situation in which Jerusalem suffers greatly. Judah has no political or economic freedom, and Jerusalem has no status among the nations. The temple lies in ruins and worship is hampered. Hunger, death, oppression, deprivation, and disgrace are at its core.<sup>36</sup> The fall of Jerusalem and Judah in the hands of Babylon signifies the fall of the crown. Prophet Jeremiah laments the fall of Jerusalem and Judah where temple lies in ruins. It is also suggested that Lamentations 5 may have been sung during one of the festivals at the ruins of Jerusalem.<sup>37</sup> It is considered that Lamentations 5 is an expansion of a psalm of communal lament carried over from pre-exilic patterns of worship and dates after Jerusalem was destroyed.<sup>38</sup> Such circumstances have left the city desolate not just at the hands of Babylonians but at the loss of humanity as well. As the community was alienated from their normal lifestyle, the destruction of the temple and distortion of community made the Israelites lament to God. However, Lamentation is also an act of mourning, and mourning can lead to hope for a future.

Lamentation 5:1–22<sup>39</sup>

1 Remember, O Lord, what has befallen us; behold, and see our disgrace! 2 Our inheritance has been turned over to strangers, our homes to aliens. 3 We have become orphans, fatherless; our mothers are like widows. 4 We must pay for the water we drink, the wood we get must be bought. 5 With a yoke on our necks we are hard driven; we are weary, we are given no rest.

35 Elizabeth Boase, *The Fulfilment of Doom? The Dialogic Interaction Between the Book of Lamentations and the Pre-Exilic/Early Exilic Prophetic Literature* (T & T Clark, 2006), 236.

36 Paul R. House, *Lamentations* WBC 23B (Zondervan, 2004), 457.

37 House, *Lamentations*, 455.

38 House, *Lamentations*, 457.

39 New Revised Standard Version translation of Lamentations 5.

6 We have given the hand to Egypt, and to Assyria, to get bread enough. 7 Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities. 8 Slaves rule over us; there is none to deliver us from their hand. 9 We get our bread at the peril of our lives, because of the sword in the wilderness. 10 Our skin is hot as an oven with the burning heat of famine. 11 Women are ravished in Zion, virgins in the towns of Judah. 12 Princes are hung up by their hands; no respect is shown to the elders. 13 Young men are compelled to grind at the mill; and boys stagger under loads of wood. 14 The old men have quit the city gate, the young men their music. 15 The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning. 16 The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned! 17 For this our heart has become sick, for these things our eyes have grown dim, 18 for Mount Zion which lies desolate; jackals prowl over it. 19 But thou, O Lord, dost reign for ever; thy throne endures to all generations. 20 Why dost thou forget us for ever, why dost thou so long forsake us? 21 Restore us to thyself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old! 22 Or hast thou utterly rejected us? Art thou exceedingly angry with us?

1. *Devastation of Widows and Orphans (5:1–3)*

The community pleads with God to “remember what has happened” (5:1). “Remember” is a calling on Yahweh to “consider” what has happened. The element of the past is based on the former and traditional relationship of the people with Yahweh.<sup>40</sup> The author draws Yahweh’s attention to “what has happened to us,” which can be read in light of the fall of Jerusalem and the aftermath and refers to the actual conquest of Judah and to the ensuing hardships. The people felt they were all alone, as defenceless as orphans and widows. The cry that “we have become orphans, fatherless” (5:3) show loss of their fathers in the battle and to exile. The beginning verse described Jerusalem’s loss of inheritance, exposure to threatening foreigners, and people’s lack of family. In this verse, “orphan” indicates “one whose father has died.”<sup>41</sup> Such a person can be sold into slavery and

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40 Salters, *Lamentations: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 342.

41 House, *Lamentations*, 460. However, there are also instances where “orphan” can mean one who has lost both parents.

is certainly at risk. Mother becomes widow, as the father may be killed, captured, or missing, or women may have been abandoned in hard times. The designation of widowhood parallels what 1:1 says about Jerusalem herself. Like Jerusalem, the nation's cities have suffered losses of men, women, and children.<sup>42</sup> It appeals to God to see the humiliation and suffering that had come upon the covenant people. Their inheritance had been taken over by the aliens and strangers, which has left them defenceless as orphans and widows.<sup>43</sup> These terms allow the poem to evoke multiple ideas and emotions of pain and suffering to the reader.

The poetry depicts life at its most devastated. According to Kathleen O'Connor, "Every realm of the people's space is invaded and intruded upon, and the difficulties of survival dominate their speech."<sup>44</sup> Not only is their physical space intruded but their family life as well.<sup>45</sup> The siege of Jerusalem meant the death or exile of many of its menfolk, turning children and wives literally or effectively into orphans and widows. And for a wife and mother, the loss of husband and children means the loss of security as well as heartbreak. Having no land or hopes puts the entire community into a position of an orphan and widow.

## 2. *Basic Necessity at the Peril of Human Life (5:4–10)*

Lamentations 5:5 reads, "With a yoke on our necks we are hard driven." A yoke is a traditional image of slavery, and in conditions of foreign invasion, economic enslavement is likely. It is understandable that people live in far-reaching and unrelenting threat. Israelites suffer without home, inheritance, or parental support. They are compared with orphans who have lost their parents to provide basic resources like water and food, which they have to purchase now, indicating these were once available in abundance. Their inheritance has been taken over by strangers and foreigners. The word "price" in 4b indicates oppressive rates which intensifies the "silver" in 4a. According to F. B. Huey, Israelite laments saying "We must pay for the water we drink, the wood we get must be bought" (5:4) shows that the basic life necessities such as water and wood are bought at a price though they were once found in abundance.<sup>46</sup> It is heightened with the description that "at peril of our lives we get our bread." Such a statement show that people suffer

42 House, *Lamentations*, 460.

43 F. B. Huey, Jeremiah, Lamentations NAC 16 (Broadman Press, 1993), 486.

44 Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Orbis Books, 2003), 74.

45 This is made clear through their first complaint in Lamentation 5:2 "Our inheritance is turned over to strangers, our houses to foreigners."

46 Huey, Jeremiah, *Lamentations*, 486.

hunger and physical deterioration.<sup>47</sup> Verse 6 indicates they had made alliances with Egypt and Assyria to survive in the midst of political and military schemes. Verse 7 questions the link between sin and punishment, subverting the prophetic traditions. Additionally, verse 16 stands in tension with verse 7, presenting the destruction on the community as a result of sin.<sup>48</sup> The vulnerability of Israelites at the hands of Babylonians is a serious concern as the basic necessities are received at the expense of their life.

### 3. *Rape and Violence Heightens the Fall of Humanity (5:11–13)*

It is reported in verse 11 that “women are raped in Zion, virgins in the cities of Judah.” The word raped has a general sense of violence, humiliation, oppression. However, in this context it refers to a man forcing a woman to have sex; such situations are hinted in 1:4 and 1:8. The situation is widespread as it intensifies both in Zion and in the cities of Judah. It is also known that the image of princes hung in verse 12 signifies execution by hanging, being impaled on a stake, or exposure of the corpses (after execution) as a means of degradation and for instilling fear in the survivors.<sup>49</sup> Women were ravaged; princes were tortured and executed publicly; elders were shown no respect by the Babylonians.<sup>50</sup> The devastating state of women, young men, and elders in society suggests utter shame at the hands of enemies. The rape of women had little importance as an offence against women themselves, rather it was a tactic of humiliation and subjugation of the men who should protect them.<sup>51</sup> The devastation of the society is known from the life of women who are raped and victimized in society. These laments show injustices and atrocities have taken their toll in society, resulting in the fall of the crown.

### 4. *Fading of Music as a Sign of Grief and Fall (5:14–15)*

The author mentions the presence of “elders” and “choice young men” in verses 12–13 and in verse 14. The narrator emphasizes that elders have “ceased from the gate” and the music of young men has faded.<sup>52</sup> The narrator emphasizes that the elders who customarily sit in the city gates administering justice are no longer

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47 House, *Lamentations*, 465.

48 Boase, *The Fulfilment of Doom? The Dialogic Interaction Between the Book of Lamentations and the Pre-Exilic/Early Exilic Prophetic Literature*, 236.

49 House, *Lamentations*, 465.

50 Huey, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, 487.

51 O'Connor, *Lamentations and The Tears of the World*, 76.

52 House, *Lamentations*, 466.

seen at the gates, and the legal and social interchange has ended. The joy of the community ceased with the cessation of music and dancing among the people.<sup>53</sup> The narrator laments what has happened to the young women, young men, the elders, and the officials in Zion and the cities of Judah. Such devastation compels the community to bring the plea to God to restore their relationship hope for renewal. There is no safety, no place left for communal or domestic life, and no room for normal roles and behaviour.<sup>54</sup> Verse 15 declares that “the joy of our hearts has ceased” which connects with verse 14b. The usage of the verb *shebat* (joy has ceased) indicates that music, joy, and rejoicing ceased in verse 14b. According to Renkema, the loss of rejoicing is like the loss of rejoicing at festival and worship that is threatened in Hosea 2:13.<sup>55</sup> The fading of music symbolizes the terrible situation of the Israelites where the enemies have devastated the daily system of society. It has left the city a desolate place without joy and worship, symbolizing grief and fall of the crown.

##### 5. *Prophet Lament to Restore the Fall of the Crown (5:16–22)*

The author refers to the impact that the community’s constant weeping has impaired their vision. The combination of the two organs such as heart and eyes is worth noting. The author appears to allude to further physical effects of the hardships, meaning such can be poetic expression for sadness/grief, and the darkened eyes may be a poetic allusion to loss of vitality/lack of vigour.<sup>56</sup> The phrase “Woe to us, for we have sinned” shows how people confess that they have sinned. The word “crown” occurs 24 times in the OT. It denotes the crown of a monarch (1 Chron. 20:2; Ezek. 21:31) or high priest (Sir. 45:12) but is often used metaphorically, as in Proverbs 12:4 or Job 19:9 where it refers to honour status.<sup>57</sup> The narrator prophesied that joy and dancing have disappeared from the land, and sorrow prevails for “the crown has fallen from our heads” (5:16). The crown that has fallen from the head is because of sin, as verse 16 reads, “The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned.” The crown is a symbol of glory and honour (Isa. 28:1, 3; Job 19:9). The image of the crown falling from their head symbolizes the loss of their royal dignity and the collapse of their authority and power. The metaphor of fallen crown symbolizes the fall of humanity. In

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53 Huey, Jeremiah, *Lamentations*, 487. Verse 15 states that “our hearts have ceased from joy” and “our dancing has been overturned by mourning.”

54 O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 76.

55 J. Renkema, “Does Hebrew *ytwm* Really Mean ‘Fatherless?’” *VT* 45(1995): 119–122.

56 Salters, *Lamentations: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 366.

57 Salters, *Lamentations: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 363.

ancient biblical times, the crown was a symbol of kingship and sovereignty, and its loss represented the downfall of a nation and its leaders. According to Huey, the fall of the crown “could refer to the end of the Davidic dynasty with King Zedekiah’s capture.”<sup>58</sup> While R. B. Salters states that “the reference to the ‘crown’ falling ‘from our head’ is not simply symbolic language for honour and glory and festivity (Job 19:9; Song of Sol. 3:11) but a metaphor for the broken and collapsed walls of Jerusalem.”<sup>59</sup> The narrator laments the loss of status and statehood and interprets events in terms of cause and effect, as verse 7 reflects on the sins of their ancestors and connects it with the suffering they had to undergo.

Verse 21 states, “Restore us to thyself, O Lord, that we may be restored! Renew our days as of old.” The people asked for double-edged movement in their relationship, that God return to them and they return to God (5:21). With the verb of turning, the speaker demands restoration of covenant relationship and renewal of life. They ask for a future, a new life, and restored relations with God, relations that had been so disrupted that they could not even get God to look toward them. They ask for more than bodily survival. They want to live, flourish, and be made new.<sup>60</sup> The lament closes with an acknowledgment of God’s sovereignty, permanence, and stability. The book closes with the truth of human experience and suffering. Therefore, the fall of the crown is presumed through the devastation of women and orphans, lack of basic necessities in life, rape and violence in society.

## V. LAMENTING DISTORTED INTRINSIC RELATION

There are close similarities between lament and *lesbe*<sup>61</sup> of Sumi Naga tribals of NEI. Sumi Naga tribals use *lesbe* as a way of expressing communal laments over departed souls. *Lesbe* is a lament, a ballad about the loss of loved ones or grieving over unfulfilled love and a failed marriage. As stated by Jeviholi Swu, “*Lesbe* originated out of sadness, grave happenings like sudden unnatural death,

58 Huey, Jeremiah, *Lamentations*, 487.

59 Salters, *Lamentations: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 365.

60 O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 78.

61 *Lesbe* is a Sumi Naga term for poetry or ballad, which has its distinct linguistic style. The ancient Sumi Naga used *lesbe* to convey not a direct message (the messages were not conveyed through dialogue) but rather the usage of tunes with words that have deep-rooted meanings. See Jeviholi Swu, “Rhetorical Readings of Psalm 13:1–6 and *Lesbe*” in *Deciphering Diverse Liberative Readings in Indian Biblical Studies: A Festschrift in Honour of Prof. Rev. Dr. Kondasingu Jesurathnam*, eds. Varaprasad Gosala and Jeeva Kumar Ravela (Christian World Imprints, 2024), 368–369.

beheading by enemies, loss of loved ones, and unfulfilled love.”<sup>62</sup> *Lesbe* is a rich literature of expressing one’s innermost thoughts and emotions. It expresses the despair, pain, shame, remorse, love, and the being of the composer.<sup>63</sup> The following is an extract of one *lesbe* known as *Mighimi no Anipu Lumulakeu Mlo Ghime*.<sup>64</sup>

*Ni mighimi no kiu,  
Kiniuno kilo,  
Ilolumoe wo!  
Niye apu kubake, Mishi kuba wo:  
Niye aza kubake, Woli kuba wo.*

Sumi Naga *lesbe* of *Mighimi no Anipu Lumulakeu Mlo Ghime* states the deep emotional pain of an orphan who does not have father, mother, sisters, brother, or friends to initiate his marriage proposal. In this *lesbe*, an orphan laments that he does not have a father so he does not have a cow; he does not have a mother so he does not have a swine. The hopeless situation of an orphan in society drives the lamenter to mourn the situation. Therefore, *lesbe* of Sumi Naga tribals resembles the laments of the Israelites. It encompasses deep-seated emotional pain and grief over the context. Communal laments expressed in Lamentations 5 resonate with tribal experiences and sufferings in present scenarios of distortion and devastation in a land once plentiful and abundant. Sumi Naga *lesbe* expresses such lament on the basis of the context. According to Akani Kinimi, “For the tribals, land is the basis that gives a very strong sense of organic relationship among creatures....if there is no land, there is no personhood and identity. The misuse of land implies chaos among creatures.”<sup>65</sup> Tribals are agrarian communities and they share an intrinsic relationship with land and nature. The folk songs, folk tales, folk dance, fables, and poems of the tribals are an expression of the interrelated relationship humans share with nature. One of the folktales of Sumi Naga tribals of NEI, *Kasbo Papu Ghau* meaning Kasho’s father bird, narrates the interrelated relationship tribals share with nature at a time when Sumis had not determined the right time of season to grow crops. It was believed that the sound of a bird chirping *Kasbo Papu*<sup>66</sup>

62 Swu, “Rhetorical Readings of Psalm 13:1–6 and *Lesbe*,” 369.

63 Swu, “Rhetorical Readings of Psalm 13:1–6 and *Lesbe*,” 371.

64 Lito Zhimomi, *A Critical Study on the Folk Narratives of the Sumi Nagas* (Nagaland University, 2021), 84.

65 Akani Kinimi, “The Prophetic Ideology of Land in Jeremiah 12:7–13,” in *Tribal Hermeneutics: Biblical Reflections from North East India*, ed. B. Labunzira and A. Abeni Patton (Christian World Imprints, 2023), 57.

66 Zhimomi, *A Critical Study on the Folk Narratives of the Sumi Nagas*, 93–94. In this narrative, a man known as Kivigho had a son Kasho. When Kivigho died, he came in the form of a bird (bird is literally translated as *ghau*) in the village. *Kasbo Papu* literally means Kasho’s Father (father is translated as *Papu*). Thus he became known as Kasho Papu Ghau and sang *Kasbo Papu* in the dream of *Kasbo*, indicating that it is time to plant the paddy in the field.

gave signs to the villagers to plant the paddy, and that was how they harvested bountifully.<sup>67</sup> This folktale is a reminder of the interrelationship tribals share with the nature that provided in abundance. The sustenance of life depends on land, yet the intrinsic relationship tribals share with nature seems to be distorted. Lamentations 5 resonates with tribal understanding of anthropology and the fall in the name of greed and sin. The distortion of the intrinsic relation with nature symbolizes the fall of humanity at the expense of the marginalized. In the modern world, lament in the form of *leshe* expresses deep-rooted pain and emotions at the distorted relationship. Today, tribals lament because humans have failed to live in harmony with other beings. The news of rape, violence, destruction, and disunity has left the tribals to lament the grave situations of society resulting from the fall of the crown.

## VI. TRIBAL WORLDVIEW TO THE FALL OF THE CROWN

Prophetic cry in Lamentations 5 shows close proximity to the understanding of the tribals and the fall of the crown. The central message of Lamentations 5 states that “the crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned,” signifying the fallen nature of humans. The fall of the crown not only indicates the fall of kingdom but also the fall of humanity. The utter disappointment and violence in tribal society resonates with communal laments expressed in Lamentations 5. The violence in Manipur (one of the seven sisters of NEI) has been the hot spot of pain and grief for decades. However, the ongoing violence in the Kuki-Zo community since the outburst in May 2023 has left a remarkable impact in the lives of many people. The grieving situation is highlighted through an extract of the poem “Violence is not the Answer” written by Ganbam about the violence in Manipur. It reflects the traumatized and lamenting situation.<sup>68</sup>

May Day has turned the soil of jewels;  
Into the ground of battles.  
The hills cry and moved,  
Since the valley burnt and killed.  
Thus the Switzerland of Indus, fall and break.

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67 Zhimomi, *A Critical Study on the Folk Narratives of the Sumi Nagas*, 93–94.

68 Ganbam, “Violence is not the Answer,” E-Pao.net accessed on 15 August 2023, [https://epao.net/epSub-PageExtractor.asp?src=reviews.poems.Violence\\_is\\_not\\_the\\_answer\\_By\\_Ganbam](https://epao.net/epSub-PageExtractor.asp?src=reviews.poems.Violence_is_not_the_answer_By_Ganbam).

When Zo tribes fight for administration,  
And Meiteis fret of disintegration,  
This haves and have-nots bring disasters with no solutions.  
Hence People's grief and the land suffers.

The mountains were covered with smoke,  
And the road filled with blood  
As the women died with agony and shame.  
This is my unfortunate India!  
Where daughter's become victims of war.

Come let us forgive and forget what has gone.  
And focus on ending ethnic cleansing.  
Forgiving is the key to rebuilding.  
And forgiveness is the key to negotiation.  
Let love restore it.  
Let love healed it.  
Let the peace reign.

These realities of the tribals make Lamentations 5 painful and reasonable. The experiences of violence, pain, and destruction that tribals are facing resonates with communal laments expressed in Lamentations 5. These laments indicate that humans have utterly failed and have sinned. We have failed to look at other beings as created in the image of God. Women are raped, and children are left as orphans in society. Such laments of the narrator show that violence has taken its toll and human suffering has reach its climax. The community laments, for the sins of humans have led to such suffering in society. Sexual exploitation of women's bodies has taken its toll because women are often seen as objects of violation. These laments show that humans have failed, resulting in the fall of the crown. The Israelite community lamented for former days where food and water was easily accessible, and the sins of humans have left them in a situation where they had to pay the price for water and food at the cost of their lives. These signify that humans have sinned by not taking care of natural resources available at their dispose. The waters are contaminated and food is adulterated. The woods that were available in the forest have been overexploited in the name of development. Thus, these laments come as the lived experience of the tribals grieving at the fall of humanity.

Biblical text has often been translated from an anthropocentric point of view

that does not correlate with tribal worldview. But tribal anthropological understandings of the *imago dei* correlate in shared experience with other human beings and nature. Unless humans truly understand that men and women are made in the image and likeness of God and that our sustenance in life is interwoven with nature, restoration of relationship with God is a far-off scene. The folktale of Kasho Papu Ghau demonstrates how tribals live in close relationship with the ecosystem that provides for them in abundance. It also illustrates the close-knit relationship tribals share with their neighbours and villagers. These help them to live as a society that helps each other and to reap bountiful harvest. In modern society, tribals have been alienated from the culture and traditions of the rich. Therefore, Lamentations 5 resonates with the fallen nature of humans because of human greed and sin (i.e., the fall of the crown). The violence and disturbance in the state of Manipur are paradigms that tribals have failed to live in harmony.

## VII. CONCLUSION

This paper uses the tribal worldview to comprehend Lamentations 5, where the community laments in deep despair at the fall of the crown because of the wickedness of humans in the world. The prophet utters in pain as violence towards the marginalized is heightened in the exilic context. In lamenting, prophet Jeremiah is longing and hoping for better days to unfold in the future. These prophetic laments have deep-seated anthropological arguments that humans have wrestled with since antiquity. Communal laments expressed in Lamentations 5 are relevant and contextual for tribals, as lament is a natural process of profound emotions resulting from pain and grief. The fall of the crown is significant in the violence and bloodshed causing pain and suffering, in the rape and victimization of women and orphans, and in the cry for livelihood and sustenance in society.

Thus, failure to understand *imago dei* and the fall of humanity synchronizes through the distorted relationship of humans with each other and with nature. These laments help us to look back and hope for restoration. As a tribal living in NEI, the communal laments in this chapter resonate with the contextual realities. I read Lamentations 5 as a tribal living in the twenty-first century with a hope for a restored community in the future. Because the deeper meaning of these laments is in a restored relationship with other beings and nature. However, today we humans have failed to live in harmony with one another, we have failed to care for other beings and nature, and we have failed to care for the orphans, widows, and marginalized, leading to the fall of the crown.



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