

The Image of God in Man: A Reformed Reassessment (1)

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(I) Introduction

Along with the great Biblical questions, “What think ye of Christ?” (Christology), “What must I do to be saved?” (Soteriology) and “What shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?” (Eschatology), the question, “What is man, that thou art mindful of him?” (Anthropology) must also be ranked.¹ The question, “What is man?” has engaged the minds of the greatest thinkers in the world and in the church in all ages. Looming large in the answer of the church is the concept of the “image of God.” Some theologians treat man as image of God as part of a chapter in their Anthropology,² others give it a whole chapter,³ others treat it as the dominant motif in the Biblical presentation of man⁴ and yet others use it as their starting point to draft a systematic presentation of the Christian faith.⁵

¹Matt. 22:42; Acts 16:30; Matt. 24:3; Ps. 8:4.

²E.g., Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), pp. 293-296, 298-299; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), pp. 442-450.

³E.g., J. J. Van Oosterzee, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. John Watson Watson and Maurice J. Evans (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1878), pp. 374-377; Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), pp. 159-195; G. H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 174-178; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rev. 1996), pp. 202-210; Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: RFPA, 1966), pp. 204-213; Gordon Clark, *The Biblical Doctrine of Man* (Jefferson, Maryland: Trinity Foundation, 1984), pp. 5-19. John Laidlaw gives the image of God in man two of his sixteen chapters (*The Bible Doctrine of Man* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1895], pp. 139-181).

⁴E.g., James Orr, *God's Image in Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1948); G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, trans. Dirk W. Jellema (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962); Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/New York: Friendship Press, 1986); Paul K. Jewett, *Who We Are: Our Dignity as Human* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

⁵E.g., Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ*

Though the phrase “image (or likeness) of God,” as referring to man, occurs relatively infrequently in the Bible,⁶ theology’s manifold use of it ought not surprise us.

First, the image of God concept is related, in the Bible itself, not only to the God whom we are to image, and Christ, the perfect image of God (II Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3), through whom we regain God’s image (Rom. 8:29; II Cor. 3:18), but also to creation (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1; 9:6), man’s dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:26f., cf. Ps. 8), marriage (Gen. 1:26-27; I Cor. 11:7), regeneration and sanctification (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10), and the sixth (Gen. 9:6) and ninth commandments (James 3:9). With a little bit of thought, and viewing each of these texts in their contexts, it will readily be seen that the *imago dei* concept has profound implications for doctrine and practice, both faith and life.

Second, the image of God is an especially attractive concept in today’s world. In one brief phrase, man is related to God—something very important in a day of widespread atheism—atheistic evolution is denied and man’s dignity and worth is upheld over against today’s abortion-on-demand culture.⁷

Third, the phrase’s appeal in itself is also great. The “image of God,” like the “new commandment” (John 13:34), the “keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 16:19) and “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1), is one of those highly memorable Biblical phrases that stick in our minds and roll off our tongues.

Given the theological breadth, manifold usefulness and powerful appeal of the image of God motif, one is not surprised that the various ecclesiastical groups have all utilized it and integrated it in their

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Harry R. Boer, *An Ember Still Glowing: Humankind as the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

⁶The Biblical passages are Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1; 9:6; I Cor. 11:7; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10; James 3:9.

⁷Cf. Herman Bavinck: man’s being created in the image of God “implies first of all that man cannot be known, thought of, or understood apart from God ... Nowadays men try [to] eliminate God entirely and ... explain man from the viewpoint of his connection with nature, environment and society” (*Biblical and Religious Psychology*, trans. Herman Hanko [Grand Rapids: Theological School of the PRC, no date], p. 75).

theological systems. This article will give a brief survey of the main conceptions of the *imago dei*, before paying particular attention to the debate between the two views held by Reformed and Presbyterian theologians. Finally, the image of God will be viewed in its proper dogmatic bearing in a distinctively Reformed theology.

(II) Survey of Views

(1) *Anthropomorphite View*. Anthropomorphites, including the Swedenborgians and Mormons, view the image of God as indicating that God has a body like man. The book of Moses in the *Book of Mormon* reads, "In the image of his [i.e. God's] own body, male and female, created he them" (6:9). Anthony Hoekema is correct: Mormons "understand the expression 'image of God' as referring primarily to man's physical nature."⁸ Thus the divine image is possessed by all men, including unbelievers.

(2) *Socinian View*. The Socinians, a Unitarian sect which arose after the Reformation, asserted that man's being in the image of God consists solely in his dominion over the lower creation.⁹ This view also holds that all men, believers and unbelievers, are in God's image.

(3) *Roman Catholic View*.¹⁰ Following some of the early church fathers and the medieval scholastic theologians, the Roman Church holds that the "image" (*eikon*) and the "likeness" (*homoiosis*) of God refer to different aspects of man. The "image" includes man's natural gifts, such as personality, intellect, will, etc. The "likeness" is the so-called *donum superadditum*, a superadded gift endowed upon man's nature after his creation but before his fall, consisting of the spiritual gifts of righteousness and holiness. The fall resulted in the loss of the *donum superadditum*.

⁸Anthony A. Hoekema, *Mormonism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), p. 52.

⁹Some of the Remonstrants (or Arminians) and many of the Rationalists followed the Socinians in this regard. Gregory of Nyssa, Chrysostom and other church fathers also taught that the image of God consists of dominion over the creatures (D. Miall Edwards, "Image," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, gen. ed. James Orr, vol. 3 [USA: Hendrickson, repr. 1996], p. 1450).

¹⁰Berkhof, however, observes, "Roman Catholics do not altogether agree in their conception of the image of God" (*Op. cit.*, p. 208).

and not the whole human nature, which was merely weakened. Fallen man still retains some good, including free will, and is capable of responding to God's grace and thus meriting more grace.

(4) *Eastern Orthodox View*. The Eastern Church, like the Roman Church, distinguishes between the "image" and the "likeness" of God (though without the *donum superadditum* terminology) and uses this distinction to preserve some good in fallen man.¹¹ As a further part of its doctrine of the image of God, the Eastern Church argues that since Christ is the image of God in our humanity, we can venerate and revere, but not worship, icons of the incarnate Son of God, Mary and the saints.¹²

(5) *The Broader and Narrower View*. The dominant view of Reformed and Presbyterian churches is that the image of God may be spoken of in broader and narrower senses.¹³ The *imago dei* in the narrower sense, consisting of knowledge, righteousness and true holiness, was wholly lost at the fall, but the *imago dei* in the wider sense, which includes man's "intellectual power, natural affections and moral freedom," was retained.¹⁴ Thus a seventeenth century Dutch Reformed theologian, Henrici a Diest writes,

The image of God (which cannot be lost) was the spiritual, immortal, rational substance of the soul, with the powers of knowing and freely willing: the divine image, which can be lost, lay for knowledge in wisdom, for the will and its effects in true righteousness and holiness.¹⁵

¹¹Cf. Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin, rev. 1993), p. 219.

¹²For helpful studies of the iconoclastic controversy in the eighth and ninth centuries in the Eastern Orthodox Church, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp. 91-145 (esp. pp. 117-133 which deal with the role of image of God in the debate) and, more briefly, Ware, *Op. cit.*, pp. 30-35.

¹³Charles Hodge notes that Reformed theologians also use the terminology "essential" and "accidental" for the two senses of the divine image (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1993], p. 99).

¹⁴Berkhof, *Op. cit.*, p. 204.

¹⁵Quoted in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thompson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), p. 235.

(6) *Spiritual/Ethical View*. Speaking of pre-Fall Adam in the image of God, Martin Luther declares,

In Adam there was an enlightened reason, a true knowledge of God, and a most sincere desire to love God and his neighbor, so that Adam embraced Eve and at once acknowledged her to be his own flesh.¹⁶

With the fall “the image of God was lost” *totally* and it is only “the Gospel [which] brings it about that we are formed once more according to that familiar and indeed better image, because we are born again into eternal life.”¹⁷ Following Luther, Lutheran theologians, generally speaking, denied that the image of God includes the so-called broader sense. They restricted it to the spiritual virtues of knowledge, righteousness and holiness.¹⁸ Some Reformed and Presbyterian theologians also share this understanding of the divine image, as we shall see later. Unlike the previous five views, the spiritual/ethical view alone denies that unbelievers are in the image of God in any sense.

Individual theologians often put the concept to a particular use. Some are especially interested in using the *imago dei* to explicate man’s relationship to the creation. Christian scholars trying to present a Biblical worldview find the image of God concept very helpful.¹⁹ Christian Reconstructionists emphasize man’s being in the divine image as involving dominion over the earth in keeping with their hopes that all of this world will be governed by Christian civil governments before the bodily return of Jesus Christ. Kenneth Gentry asserts “*One vital aspect of that image* [i.e. man’s being in the image of God] is that of man’s acting as ruler over the earth and under God.”²⁰ Liberal theologian, Douglas John Hall,

¹⁶Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 1, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. George V. Schlink (Saint Louis, Missouri: Concordia, 1958), p. 63.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 63, 64.

¹⁸Cf. Bavinck, *In the Beginning*, pp. 179-181, 185.

¹⁹E.g., Henry, R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1959).

²⁰Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1992), p. 179; italics mine.

also stresses the image of God as dominion over this world but his is a very different kind of dominion, that not of mastery but of sacrificial service of others.²¹

Hall also emphasizes the *imago dei* as relationship to God and our fellow man,²² as does Harry Boer.²³ Paul Jewett defines the image of God in man as

the human spirit (soul) imprinted by the Creator with those endowments that enable us to transcend the world of lesser creatures and live our lives in a unique I-thou relationship with God and [our] neighbor.²⁴

Neo-orthodox theologians, Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, also emphasize this I-thou relationship between man and God and between man and man, with the former being particularly interested in the I-thou relationship between a man and a woman in marriage. On the other hand, recently an American rabbi argued for same-sex marriages on the basis of the image of God in all men, despite the fact that the first page of the Bible records Genesis 1:26-28.

The uniqueness of man is another idea some wish to derive from the *imago dei*. Clarence Joldersma, for one, seeks to use this in fashioning a philosophy of education.²⁵ Another educator, T. Van Der Kooy believes, “The equality of all men before God lies also in their all being created in his image.”²⁶ Henry Van Til sees the unity of the human race in the concept of the image of God.²⁷

²¹Hall, *Op. cit.*, esp. chapters 1 and 6.

²²*Ibid.*, esp. chapters 4 and 5.

²³For Boer, “the central characteristic of Man as image of God is the quality of personhood” (*Op. cit.*, p. 8).

²⁴Jewett, *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

²⁵Clarence W. Joldersma, “What’s So Good About Being Different? Examining Uniqueness Through the Lens of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Nurturing and Reflective Teachers: A Christian Approach for the 21st Century*, eds. Daniel C. Elliot and Stephen D. Holtrop (USA: Coalition of Christian Teacher-Educators, 1999), pp. 203-216.

²⁶T. Van Der Kooy, *The Distinctive Features of the Christian School*, trans. Three Members of the Faculty of Calvin College (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1925), p. 38.

²⁷Van Til, *Op. cit.*, pp. 184, 187.

Others see the image of God as speaking specifically about man's constitution. Augustine's "primary use of the *imago* symbol," writes Hall, is in his *De Trinitate* "where he shows that a 'vestige of the Trinity' is found in [the] human being, namely, in the faculties of memory, intellect and will."²⁸ In his zealous crusade against anti-intellectualism, Gordon Clark emphasizes the mind in his presentation of the image of God.²⁹ Clark would have greatly approved of the following remark of Johann Kepler, a seventeenth century German mathematician and astronomer:

For what is implanted in the mind of man other than numbers and magnitudes? These alone we comprehend correctly and, if piety permits us to say so, this recognition is of the same kind as the divine. Geometry is one and eternal, a reflection out of the mind of God. *That mankind shares in it is one of the reasons to call man an image of God.*

Pelagius, as one would expect, emphasized the importance of the will in the *imago dei*.³⁰

Thus the issue of the grace of God lies behind many presentations of the image of God. Pelagius and the Roman and the Eastern churches define the image of God in order to preserve unregenerate man's ability to repent and believe. The image of God doctrine is not only used by some to overthrow sovereign grace via free will, but others use the *imago dei* to serve common grace. In Abraham Kuyper's thinking, "all men share in this common grace *by virtue of the image of God left in them.*" Thus, "Christians can and should work together with unbelievers towards improving living conditions, fighting poverty and promoting social justice for all."³¹

For others, their understanding of the divine image is helpful in

²⁸Hall, *Op. cit.*, p. 219 n. 22.

²⁹Cf. Clark: "The image must be reason because God is truth, and fellowship with him - a most important purpose in creation - requires thinking and understanding" (*Op. cit.*, p. 16).

³⁰Cf. Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. William Hendriksen (Great Britain: BOT, repr. 1991), p. 346.

³¹Cornelis Pronk, "Neo-Calvinism," *Reformed Theological Journal*, 11, 47; italics mine (1995).

presenting Christian ethics. This is the major note in Jewett's work on the image of God. Jewett views "conscience," "human dignity," "racial prejudice," "sex, love and marriage," "divorce," "homosexuality," "the ecological crisis," "dominion" and other ethical issues in the light of his view of the *imago dei*.

Furthermore, the frequent use of man as the image of God in many of the works of Francis Schaeffer shows the use of this concept for apologetics.³²

(III) Refutation of Several Views

The above list of six cardinal views plus the various other meanings and applications of the image of God in man might make us wonder if the *imago dei* is a wax nose to be shaped whatever way the theologian, educator, politician, ethicist or apologist wills. Van Der Kooy speaks of the "wealth of ideas" which the image of God concept presents for a Reformed pedagogy.³³ But Hall, in effect, confesses that he views the image of God as a phrase into which one is free to pour whatever content he wishes. "It was just this flexibility of the *imago Dei* symbol—its openness to discovery—that rendered it accessible and meaningful to New Testament and subsequent Christian writers," he explains.

This potential of symbols for incorporating new experiences and addressing emergent problems is what gives to the symbol of the *imago Dei* its positive usefulness for our present purposes.³⁴

While we acknowledge the Bible's unfolding, progressive revelation of the image of God and its various applications and the development of the church's subjective understanding of this truth, often occasioned by contemporary needs and circumstances, Hall's relativism must be rejected. The Bible clearly teaches what the *imago dei* is and how the

³²E.g., Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1976).

³³Van Der Kooy, *Op. cit.*, p. 38.

³⁴Hall, *Op. cit.*, pp. 63-64.

various ideas mentioned in connection with it ought to be related to it.

The anthropomorphites (II:1 *supra*) err grievously. Since Jesus expressly declared that “God is a spirit” (John 4:24), man’s body cannot be the principle thing in his being the image of God. Furthermore, according to Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10, the *imago dei* must, at the very least, be located primarily in spiritual characteristics.

Similarly, since Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10 speak of the image of God in terms of the moral virtues of knowledge, righteousness and true holiness, the *imago dei* cannot consist solely of man’s dominion over the earth as per Socinianism (II:2).

The Eastern Orthodox (II:4) fall into idolatry in their doctrine of the image of God. Whereas the anthropomorphites break the first commandment, which concerns *who God is*, the Eastern Church breaks the second commandment, which commands us *how He is to be worshipped*. Instead of appealing to the image of God motif in Scripture they would be better served in studying the Bible’s teaching on images (esp. Ex. 20:4-6).³⁵

The fact that the Bible teaches the total depravity of man, involving the bondage of his will to sin, precludes free will as constituting part of the image of God retained by man after the Fall. Thus the Roman (II:3) and Eastern Churches err fatally. They are also wrong, when in support of this heresy, they put different contents into the image of God and the likeness of God. Robert L. Reymond’s arguments at this point bear repeating:

2. Both Genesis 1:27 and 9:6 employ only *selem* (“image”), apparently regarding the one word as sufficient to explain the entire idea.

³⁵Cf. Harry Fernhout: “The reason the Lord was so dead set against the service of images was quite simple; as long as His people were enslaved to these imitation images, their calling as God’s image-bearer was frustrated” (“Man: The Image and Glory of God,” in *Towards A Biblical View of Man: Some Readings*, eds. Arnold H. De Graaf and James H. Olthuis [Toronto: AACS, 1978], p. 13).

3. Genesis 5:1 employs only *demut* (“likeness”) ... This again suggests that the one word is sufficient to express the entire idea.
4. In Genesis 5:3 both terms are employed, but the verse reverses both the order of the terms and the usage of repositions found in Genesis 1:26.
5. In Colossians 3:10 (see also 1:15 and 2 Cor 4:4) only “image” (*eikon*) is found, while in James 3:9 only “likeness” (*homoiosis*) is employed, again suggesting that either term sufficiently expresses the original idea.³⁶

If the words “image” and “likeness” do not have different contents, why then does the Bible use two different words? The answer is quite simple. There are images which bear little or no similarity to that of which they are images. They are, in effect, symbols. The addition of the word “likeness” tells us that man is an image in the sense that he is actually *like* God and reflects his glory. Thus, as Reymond observes, the use of the two words, “image” and “likeness,” states, “emphatically that man uniquely reflects God, that is to say, man as created was the ‘very image’ or ‘perfect likeness’ of God.”³⁷

(to be continued)

³⁶Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), p. 427. Berkouwer speaks of the “strong convergence of opinion ... in exegetical as well as in dogmatic literature” in support of this position and he even provides us with a list (*Op. cit.*, pp. 68, 68-69 n. 6).

³⁷Reymond, *Op. cit.*, p. 427; italics Reymond’s.