

The Image of God in Man: A Reformed Reassessment (2)

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(IV) Is the Broader and Narrower View *the* Reformed View?

In the last issue of the *BRJ*, after considering the importance of the *imago dei* motif (I), six main views of it were identified: the anthropomorphite, Socinian, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, broader and narrower, and spiritual/ethical views (II). The first four were then refuted (III) so that only two now remain: the broader and narrower view (II:5) and the spiritual/ethical view (II:6). It remains, however, to consider if it is altogether accurate to call the broader and narrower view *the* Reformed position. Geerhardus Vos apparently thinks that it is. In an article entitled "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," Vos simply speaks of "the Reformed distinction between the broader and narrower sense of the image of God in man," before immediately contrasting this with the Lutheran view.³⁸ Louis Berkhof, however, sounds a note of caution: "The Reformed Churches ... do not all agree as to [the image of God's] exact contents."³⁹

Calvin is claimed as an advocate of the broader/narrower view of the divine image, though, of course, he never used these terms, but many have reservations about this. Calvin does speak of the *imago dei* as consisting in both the possession of intellect and will and their spiritual qualities, but often he mentions only the latter.⁴⁰ In his words, the latter is "primary."⁴¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson distinguishes somewhat between Calvin and the view of most later Reformed theologians:

³⁸Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Thought*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1980), p. 254.

³⁹Berkhof, *Op. cit.*, p. 206.

⁴⁰E.g., Calvin: "God's image is properly to be sought within him, not outside him, indeed, *it is an inner good of the soul*" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960], p. 190 [1.15.4]). See also Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1536 edition, trans. and ed. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rev. 1986), pp. 15-16 (1.B.2-3).

⁴¹Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 189 (1.15.4).

The image has been defined in ethical and cognitive terms. God is holy and righteous. Man made in his image is so as well. Calvin, in particular, argued for this position ... The image of God, therefore, consisting of holiness, righteousness and knowledge of the truth is dynamic rather than static in nature. *Reformed theology recognized that more than this was required* in order to express fully the Biblical teaching (cf. Calvin's belief that not even the body is excluded from the idea of the divine image).⁴²

Heinrich Bullinger apparently taught that the *imago dei* consists in ethical virtues. In his influential *Decades*, he writes,

I say, that this depravation of our nature is nothing else but the *blotting out of God's image in us*. There was in our father Adam before his fall the very image and likeness of God; *which image, as the apostle expoundeth it, was a conformity and participation of God's wisdom, justice, holiness, truth, integrity, innocency, immortality, and eternal felicity*. Therefore what else can the *blotting or wiping out of this image* be but original sin; that is, the hatred of God, the ignorance of God, foolishness, distrustfulness, desperation, self-love, unrighteousness, uncleanness, lying, hypocrisy, vanity, corruption, violent injury, wickedness, mortality and eternal infelicity? This corrupt image and likeness is by propagation derived into us all, according to that saying in the fifth of Genesis: "Adam begat a son in his own similitude and likeness."⁴³

Heinrich Heppe asserts that Johannes Cocceius

finds the divine image not in the "substance of the soul," nor yet in the "faculties of the soul," nor yet in the "*imperium* which man had over the living," but in the *rectitudo* of the soul.⁴⁴

⁴²Sinclair B. Ferguson, "Image of God," in *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson et al (Leicester: IVP, 1988), p. 328; italics mine. Henri Blocher writes, "Calvin's interpretation [of the *imago dei*] is quite complex" (*In The Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis*, trans. David G. Preston [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1984], p. 81 n. 8).

⁴³Heinrich Bullinger, *The Decades of Heinrich Bullinger*, Third Decade, ed. Thomas Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1850), p. 394; italics mine, cf. p. 377.

Nor, says Heppe, is Cocceius alone in this. Heppe tells us that Heidegger, Braun, Witsius, Rüsen *and others* agreed with Cocceius in speaking of, first, the “antecedent of the image” (man’s rational-moral nature); second, the “actual formal nature of the image of God” (the uprightness of the soul as a quality infused into the former); and, third, the “consequent of the image” (Adam’s dominion).⁴⁵ Witsius explains,

The first of these was, as one elegantly expresses it, as precious ground on which the image of God might be drawn and formed: the second, *that very image itself, and resemblance of the divinity*; the third, the lustre of that image widely spreading its glory; and as rays, not only adorning the soul, but the whole man, even his very body; and rendering him the lord and head of the world, and at the very same time immortal, as being the friend and confederate of the eternal God.⁴⁶

Significantly, Heppe states that this view was consciously adopted by these men over against that view of the image of God which we now speak of as the image of God in its wider and narrower senses. He writes that they “declared against” that conception.⁴⁷

The view that the image of God does not consist of man’s rational-moral nature but exclusively of spiritual qualities is not only found amongst the continental Reformed theologians; it also occurs in the British Isles.

Article 3 of the *Scottish Confession of Faith* (1560) penned by the “six Johns,” including John Knox, reads,

By which transgression, commonly called original sin, was *the image of God utterly defaced in man*; and he and his posterity of nature, became enemies of God, slaves to Satan, and servants to sin.⁴⁸

⁴⁴Heppe, *Op. cit.*, p. 232. Heppe also quotes Jerome Zanchius to the effect that the image of God consists of ethical qualities and dominion with no reference to man’s faculties (*Ibid.*, p. 233). Herman Bavinck, however, asserts that Zanchius also includes “the essence of man in the image of God” (*In the Beginning*, p. 181).

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 237-238; italics mine.

⁴⁶Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man: Comprehending A Complete Body of Divinity*, trans. William Crookshank, vol. 1 (Escondido, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, repr. 1990), p. 57; italics mine.

⁴⁷Heppe, *Op. cit.*, p. 237.

Elizabethan theologian, William Perkins was not comfortable with the image of God consisting of rationality, morality etc. He writes,

The image of God is nothing else but a conformity of man unto God, whereby man is holy as God is holy: for Paul saith, Put on the new man, which after God, that is in God's image, is created in righteousness and holiness. Now I reason thus: wherein the renewing of the image of God in man doth stand, therein was it at the first; but the renewing of God's image in man doth stand in righteousness and holiness: *therefore God's image wherein man was created at the beginning, was a conformity to God in righteousness and holiness.* Now whether God's image doth further consist in the substance of man's body and soul, or in the faculties of both, the Scriptures speak not.⁴⁹

Although theoretically opening the possibility that, though the Scriptures do not teach that the image of God includes man's faculties, it may be all right so to speak, Perkins goes on to write of the *imago dei* in such a way as to exclude this.

And hereupon Adam when he sinned, he deprived first of all himself, and then secondly all his posterity of the image of God; because all mankind was in his loins when he sinned. Now then upon the former appointment, when the souls of men are created and placed in the body, God forsakes them, not in respect of the substance of the soul or the faculties but only in respect of his own image, whereof the souls are deprived.⁵⁰

No man who believed that the soul itself was part of the divine image could so write.

Paul Bayne, the successor of William Perkins at the University of Cambridge, in his commentary on Ephesians 4:24 is very explicit.

⁴⁸*The Harmony of Protestant Confessions*, ed. Peter Hall (Still Waters Revival Books: USA, repr. 1992), p. 68; italics mine.

⁴⁹William Perkins, *The Workes of that Famous and Worthy Minister of Christ in the Vniuersity of Cambridge, Mr. William Perkins*, vol. 1 (London: John Legatt, 1626), pp. 150-151; italics mine. The spelling in all quotations from Perkins have been standardized according to modern usage.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 162.

The image of God is not to be conceived in bodily things, as the anthropomorphites imagined, nor yet standeth in the essence and faculties of the soul, as memory, reason, will, as Augustine took it, *for wicked men have these*; nor in dominion and rule, which made man as a little God amongst the creatures, for this is a consequence that followed on the image; but as Paul teacheth, *it standeth in these divine qualities*, which as certain signs and forms express the divine nature, most holy, most just, so far as the Creator can be figured forth in such a creature.⁵¹

Richard Sibbes, another English Puritan, writes,

Therefore, when you read of the image of God in the New Testament [this would include I Cor. 11:7 and James 3:9], it must be understood of the image of God in Jesus Christ, the second Adam. Now this image consists in knowledge, in holiness and righteousness. If we compare Col. iii. [verse 10] with Eph. iv. [verse 24], this was perfect in Christ, who was the image of his Father, and we must be like Christ the second Adam in sanctification ... When God set his image on the first Adam, it was rased, and decayed and lost, by the malice of the devil ... *For every man by nature carries the nature of the devil on him, till the image of God be stamped on, and the image of Satan rased out.*⁵²

Robert Rollock, a sixteenth century Scot and the first Principal of Edinburgh University, speaks of the image of God as the “soul of the soul,” that is godly qualities of the soul.⁵³

R. L. Dabney, a nineteenth century American Presbyterian, also rejects the broader/narrower view of the *imago dei*. He writes,

⁵¹Paul Bayne, “An Exposition of Ephesians, Chapter 2:11 to 6:18,” in *Puritan Exposition of Ephesians* (USA: Sovereign Grace Book Club, 1958), pp. 360-361; italics mine. Cf. also “Since man’s fall, we are begotten not to God’s image, but after the image of the corrupted Adam” (p. 359).

⁵²Richard Sibbes, *Works of Richard Sibbes*, vol. 4, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (Edinburgh: BOT, 1983), pp. 260-261; italics mine.

⁵³Robert Rollock, *Select Works of Robert Rollock*, vol. 1, ed. William M. Gunn (Edinburgh: Woodrow Society, 1849), pp. 254-255.

This image [of God] has been lost, in the fall, and regained, in redemption. Hence, it could not have consisted in anything absolutely essential to man's essence, because the loss of such an attribute would have destroyed man's nature. The likeness which was lost and restored must consist, then, in some *accidens*.⁵⁴

In the twentieth century the neo-orthodox Swiss, Karl Barth, argued against the image of God's including man's intellect and reason.⁵⁵

Two prominent Dutch theologians, Klaas Schilder (in his commentary on the *Heidelberg Catechism*) and G. C. Berkouwer have also defined the *imago dei* solely in terms of spiritual/ethical virtues.⁵⁶

Similarly, the Canadian, Harry Fernhout writes,

The search to locate the image of God somewhere inside man can never become concretely meaningful. *It can never give us comfort and encouragement because it is basically on the wrong track.* The essence or heart of man cannot be found by looking inside him at some of his faculties. Rather the essence of man comes out in his way of relating to the bond with which God ties man to Himself, the "Love me and keep my commandments." *When God's Word tells us that we are His image-bearers, it wants us to know not that we have certain qualities or abilities which remain vague and difficult to relate to the bread and butter of daily living, but that we, in the very way we are put together, in our whole way of living and acting, must give a reflection of the king whom we serve.*⁵⁷

These qualities set Adam as God's imagebearer. True knowledge, righteousness and holiness; that's what it's all about.⁵⁸

⁵⁴Dabney, *Op. cit.*, p. 293. Berkhof also observes Dabney's dissension from the broader/narrower or traditional view of the image of God (*Op. cit.*, p. 206).

⁵⁵For a helpful, brief presentation of Barth's view of the divine image, see Hockema, *God's Image*, pp. 49-52.

⁵⁶Berkouwer develops his objections to the distinction between the broader and narrower aspects of the image of God in the second chapter of his *Man: The Image of God* (esp. pp. 59-63). For a summary of Schilder's view, see Berkouwer (*Ibid.*, pp. 54-58). Berkouwer also notes F. K. Schumann and E. Schlink as holding this position (pp. 58-59).

⁵⁷Fernhout, *Op. cit.*, p. 12; italics mine.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 11.

Protestant Reformed theologians have serious objections to the broader/narrower view of the image of God. Herman Hoeksema, ever zealous for the sovereignty of God's grace, observes that this "distinction is not an innocent one" because "it prepares room for the further philosophy that there are remnants of the image of God left in fallen man, and that therefore the natural man cannot be totally depraved."⁵⁹ Rejecting the broader/narrower conception, Hoeksema opts for a formal/material distinction in the divine image. By this he means that man as man, unlike a dog, for example, is *capable* (formal sense of the *imago dei*) of bearing God's image, which consists of spiritual ethical virtues (material sense of the *imago dei*).⁶⁰ Robert C. Harbach follows Hoeksema in the distinction between the formal and material image of God.⁶¹ Homer C. Hoeksema, however, finds fault even with this distinction:

It is perhaps even well not to speak of the image of God in the "[f]ormal" and "material" sense, though this distinction is much safer [than that of the image of God in the broader and narrower sense]. For after all, the "image of God in the formal sense" is, strictly speaking, not the image of God in man, but his capacity to be an image bearer. And as such, he may bear either the image of God or the image of the devil. *It is well, therefore, to limit ourselves to the language of our Canons and to include in the image of God only what this article [i.e. III/IV:1] included, namely, the excellent spiritual, ethical gift which man forfeited through his rebellion and fall.*⁶²

Homer C. Hoeksema's statement draws attention to a very important matter in determining if the broader/narrower view of the image of God is indeed *the* Reformed view: what do the Reformed Confessions teach? Here we find absolutely no justification for the traditional distinction. Not once do we find a reference to such a thing, instead the *imago dei* is identified as knowledge, righteousness and true holiness in both the *Three Forms of Unity* and the *Westminster Standards*.⁶³ Strikingly all three of the *Three Forms* and all three documents of the

⁵⁹Hoeksema, *Op. cit.*, p. 207.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 208-209.

⁶¹Robert C. Harbach, *Studies in the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: RFPA, 1986), p. 44. Harbach appears to present a "softer" stance than Herman Hoeksema, in his treatment of Genesis 9:6 (pp. 177-178).

⁶²Homer C. Hoeksema, *The Voice of Our Fathers: An Exposition of the Canons of Dordrecht* (Grand Rapids: RFPA, 1980), pp. 433-434; italics mine.

Westminster Standards define the image in terms of these ethical virtues.⁶⁴ Furthermore the *Westminster Larger Catechism* clearly distinguishes between man's constitutional make up in body and soul and the image of God thus excluding man's soul from being part of the *imago dei*:

After God had made all other creatures, he created man male and female; formed the body of the man out of the dust of the ground, and the woman of the rib of the man, endued them with living, reasonable and immortal souls [this is man's constitution]; made them after his own image, in knowledge, righteousness and holiness [this is the image of God in man] (Q & A 17).⁶⁵

The *Canons of Dordt* take it a step further. After defining the *imago dei* as uprightness of heart, purity of affections and holiness of the whole man and explaining that it was completely lost ("he forfeited these excellent gifts") and, indeed, turned to its exact opposite by the fall ("blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity and perverseness of judgment," "wicked, rebellious and obdurate in heart and will;" III/IV:1), the *Canons* state, "Man after the fall begat children in his own likeness. A corrupt stock produced a corrupt offspring" (III/IV:2). We may express the argument of the *Canons* thus: (1) The image of God consists of spiritual virtues; (2) These were all lost at the fall where man was completely filled with moral corruption (III/IV:2-3); (3) Thus all the seed of Adam do not have the image of God. Moreover (4) *Canons* III/IV:4 speak of man's remaining a rational-moral creature after the Fall but with no reference to the broader sense of the image of God. Thus the Reformed Confessions are fully consistent with the position of Cocceius, Witsius, Perkins, Bayne, Dabney, Homer C. Hoeksema, et al., but present serious difficulties to those wishing to advocate the broader and narrower view of the image of God.⁶⁶

⁶³Thus they are in step with the *Scottish Confession of Faith*, Article 3, as we saw earlier. Heppe notes, however, that the *Confession of the Reformed Congregation at Frankfurt* (1554) advocates the broader/narrower view of the divine image, though not using this language (*Op. cit.*, p. 237).

⁶⁴*Belgic Confession* XIV; *Heidelberg Catechism* Q & A 6; *Canons of Dordt* III/IV:1; III/IV:R:2; *Westminster Confession* IV:2; *Westminster Larger Catechism* Q & A 17; *Westminster Shorter Catechism* Q & A 10.

⁶⁵Cf. *Westminster Confession* IV:2; *Canons of Dordt* III/IV:1; III/IV:R:2.

⁶⁶Thus J. J. Van Oosterzee, who believes that the *imago dei* is possessed by all men as rational-moral creatures, advocates that the *Three Forms of Unity* be revised so as not to limit the divine image to believers (*Christian Dogmatics*, trans. John Watson Watson and Maurice J. Evans [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1878], p. 375).

A further objection to the broader/narrower distinction of the image of God as being *the* Reformed view is the fact that it is not merely held by Reformed theologians. In speaking of unbelieving man as possessing the image of God in the sense that he is a rational-moral, personal creature it agrees with the Eastern Church, Aquinas and the Roman Church, ecumenical Wesleyans like Thomas Oden,⁶⁷ pentecostals like Wayne Grudem,⁶⁸ Lutheran anti-Calvinists like R. C. H. Lenski,⁶⁹ baptists like A. H. Strong,⁷⁰ dispensationalists like Lewis Sperry Chafer,⁷¹ neo-orthodox theologians like Emil Brunner,⁷² higher critics like Gerhard Von Rad,⁷³ Jews⁷⁴ and even Arminius himself.⁷⁵ It is evident that the wider/narrower view of the divine image is not a distinctively Reformed doctrine such as irresistible grace or particular redemption. Instead this conception can fit with almost the whole spectrum of theological systems.

Since the broader/narrower conception is (1) not confessional but rather fits ill with the confessions; (2) held, in various forms, by Jews, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, dispensationalists, Arminians, Pentecostals, neo-orthodox and liberals, as well as by many Reformed theologians, though not by any means all; and (3) not peculiar to the genius of Reformed theology but, as we shall see, in opposition to the distinctive character of the Reformed faith; it cannot simply be called *the* Reformed view. Though speaking of the various views of the *imago dei* which have been advocated through the whole of the church's history, Hall's remarks are apropos to the Reformed tradition also.

⁶⁷Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God* (USA: Prince Press, 1998), pp. 110, 151-152.

⁶⁸Grudem, *Op. cit.*, pp. 443-450.

⁶⁹R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James* (USA: Hendrickson, 1998), p. 611. Lenski distinguishes between the "general" and the "special" image but their contents are the same as the broader/narrower distinction.

⁷⁰Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*, Three Volumes in One (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Judson Press, repr. 1979), pp. 514-516. Like Lenski, Strong differs from the broader/narrower distinction in name only. Strong speaks of a "natural" and a "moral" likeness.

⁷¹Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), pp. 161-172.

⁷²Brunner speaks of "formal" and "material" senses of the divine image with the former consisting of freedom, reason, language and conscience which cannot be lost (Hockema, *God's Image*, p. 54).

⁷³Cf. Von Rad's contribution to Gerhard Kittel, "*eikon*," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 390-392.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 392-394.

⁷⁵James Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, vol. 3, trans. William Nichols (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1999), pp. 101-106.

The image of God, he observes, is “one instance (perhaps one among many, but a very important one) where the authority of the tradition has outshone Biblical authority.”⁷⁶

Having challenged the right of the broader/narrower conception to the name “Reformed,” theological objections to it will now be presented.

First, the Bible gives us an explicit statement of the contents of the *imago dei*: knowledge, righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10).⁷⁷ It gives no indications that there are other elements such as rationality which ought also to be included. Moreover, the introduction of such terms as rationality, spirituality, morality etc. as the contents of the image of God in its broader sense moves one’s treatment in a more philosophical rather Biblical direction. Furthermore, arbitrariness is involved. Who is to say what this broader aspect consists of?⁷⁸

Second, since fallen man is no longer a son of God, he is not the image of God either. The image of God is intrinsically related to sonship.⁷⁹ Christ is the Son of God. He is also the image of God, for the Son is the image of the Father (II Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). Adam was the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27; 5:1; 9:6) and the son of God (Luke 3:38 cf. v. 23) before the Fall. He lost the image in the Fall (*Canons* III/IV:1) and thereby lost His sonship.⁸⁰ Similarly God’s salvation restores both the divine image and sonship through the acts of regeneration and adoption respectively. Note Paul’s argument in Ephesians: on the basis of our regeneration in the *image of God* (Eph. 4:24), we are called upon to be “imitators of God, as dear *children*” (5:1).⁸¹

⁷⁶Hall, *Op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁷⁷Also the image of God is ascribed the same content as the new man (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10) and contrasted with the old man, its antithesis (Eph. 4:22; Col. 3:9), and the unbelieving Gentiles (Eph. 4:17-19, cf. vv. 20-24).

⁷⁸Van Oosterzee writes that the distinction “between the image of God in the narrower and wider sense of the words seems rather arbitrary” (*Op. cit.*, p. 375).

⁷⁹This truth is widely recognized. For example, the theological liberal Martin Luther King Jr. uses the broader sense of the image of God to argue for the universal brotherhood of men. In his sermon *Why I Oppose War in Vietnam* he declares, “All men are made in the image of God,” before immediately adding, “All men are brothers.”

⁸⁰Cf. Calvin: “Finally, they [i.e. unbelievers] are said to be of their father the devil [John 8:44]; for, as believers are recognized as the children of God because they bear his image, so are those rightly recognized to be the children of Satan from his image, into which they have degenerated” (*Institutes*, p. 178 [1.14.18]).

⁸¹For a refutation of the view that fallen man is a son of God in any sense, see Angus Stewart, “Adoption: A Theological Exposition of a Neglected Doctrine,” *British Reformed Journal*, 25, 18-35 (1999), esp. 20-23.

Third, the traditional broader/narrower view of the *imago dei* presents Christological problems. Surely, no one can be possessed of the image of God without the mediation and cross of Jesus, the perfect image of God. Yet the traditional view posits just that. It presents the unregenerate man as the image of God without Christ, *the* image of God. And if the unbeliever is in the image of God why cannot he see in Jesus the same image which he possesses (II Cor. 4:4)?

Fourth, if man is the image of God because he is possessed of intellect, will and emotions then the demons and Satan himself are also the image of God. Nay more, as Luther points out, the devil “has these natural endowments, such as memory and a very superior intellect and a most determined will, to a far higher degree than we have them.” Thus Satan must be a splendid image of God.⁸² Therefore according to the traditional view, man is the image of God *and* the image of the devil. Indeed, the devil is the archetype of the *imago diaboli* and he is the *imago dei*. At this point even Gordon Clark observes that he is moving in the sphere of the paradox, a seeming contradiction.⁸³ Abraham Kuyper is reduced to illustrations—five of them in fact.⁸⁴ Only Turretin directly faces the issue. He argues that it is not “absurd ... that in the same subject [i.e., fallen man] there is the image of God and of the devil in different respects.”⁸⁵ Logically, Turretin is correct and yet in things so important and weighty we have to marvel at a view which posits such a massive equivocation. Fallen man is a slave of Satan. He reflects the characteristics of his father the devil being “wicked, rebellious and obdurate in heart and will,” “impure in his affections” and possessed of “blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity and perverseness of judgment” (*Canons* III/IV:1). Yet he is the image of God in a different sense, we are told.

Fifth, if unregenerate man is the image of God (in some sense) then there must be some good in him. This follows not merely from God’s delight in His creation, including man who was created after His image (Gen. 1:26-27), as “very good” (v. 31) but also, and principally, from the idea of the *imago dei* itself. The image of God cannot be bad, nor can it be merely neutral. God is good and,

⁸²Luther, *Op. cit.*, p. 61.

⁸³Clark, *Op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁸⁴Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1975), pp. 224-225.

⁸⁵Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1992), p. 466.

therefore, the image of God is good.⁸⁶ Man must still have a spark of goodness in him.⁸⁷ Moreover, God loves that which is good and He loves His image. If the broader/narrower distinction is to be followed, there is a love or favor of God for all men.⁸⁸ This is absolutely intolerable. Moreover, if God loves all men, since His love is a giving love (cf. John 3:16), Christ must have given Himself on the cross for all men (cf. Eph. 5:1-2). Since God's love is also an active, omnipotent love, they will be saved. After all, God's love is not just an attitude. It necessarily involves seeking the good of the one beloved and bringing him into covenant fellowship with Himself, the Holy Trinity. This is demanded, for how could God possibly suffer even a tiny part of His image to reside eternally in Hell?⁸⁹ All these things follow, "by good and necessary consequence," as the *Westminster Confession* (I:6) puts it, from the teaching that the natural man is still, in the broader sense, the image of God. On the other hand the Scripture declares in the most emphatic terms that Jehovah's soul "hateth" (Ps. 11:5; 5:5), "abhors" (5:6) and "is angry with the wicked every day" (7:11). His wrath abides on them (John 3:36) and He will "destroy" them (Ps. 5:6) with "the instruments of death" (7:13, cf. 11:6). Yea, the Lord "despise[s] their *image* [*selem*]" (73:20). To conclude, the doctrine that all men are in the image of God in the wider sense is both theologically and Biblically untenable.

Theologians of false or departing churches exploit this faulty doctrine of the *imago dei* in support of their heresies.⁹⁰ For example, Timothy Ware, the English Eastern Orthodox bishop, points out, "[Eastern] Orthodox religious thought lays the utmost emphasis on the image of God in the human person."⁹¹ "However, sinful we may be," he writes, "we never lose the image."⁹² "The fact that the human person is in God's image means among other things," asserts Ware,

⁸⁶Moreover, it is hard to deny that if unbelieving men are in the image of God they must also be "partakers of the divine nature" (II Peter 1:4) to which belongs "all things that pertain unto life and godliness" (v. 3).

⁸⁷One can see how this could easily slip over to the Gnostic and New Age idea of a spark of the divine in every man.

⁸⁸Henri Blocher rightly connects the image of God with God's "glorious favor" (*Op. cit.*, p. 74).

⁸⁹Bernard of Clairvaux, the medieval mystic, however, was able to hold such a position: "The image of God in man cannot be destroyed. Even in Hell it can burn, but not be consumed: it may be tormented, but cannot be extirpated" (quoted in Van Oosterzee, *Op. cit.*, p. 377). This position is clearly unacceptable.

⁹⁰Laidlaw notes the dangers with the broader/narrower view of the imago. He states that it must be "properly handled" (*Op. cit.*, p. 160).

⁹¹Ware, *Op. cit.*, p. 220.

⁹²*Ibid.*, p. 219.

“that we possess free will.”⁹³ This means that we are “still capable of good actions.”⁹⁴ According to Ware, not only the freewill of the sinner but also God’s love for him flows from his retention of the *imago dei*: “Because she or he is an icon [or image] of God, *each member of the human race, even the most sinful, is infinitely precious in God’s sight.*”⁹⁵ To crown it all, Ware avers, “Because we [i.e., all of humanity including unbelievers] are God’s icon [or image], we can find God by looking within our own heart, by ‘returning within ourselves.’”⁹⁶

Harry Boer, a theologian of the Christian Reformed Church, uses the weakness in the traditional “Reformed” view of the divine image to overthrow Reformed theology. Total depravity is the first doctrine to go. Boer observes “that Reformed theology accepts as nonnegotiable two irreconcilable concepts: the retention, however marred, of the image of God after the fall, and the total depravity of Man.”⁹⁷ He continues,

In short, the glimmer, the residuum, the remnant, the spark of the image of God in its integrity is a glimmer, a residuum, a remnant, a spark of the one and undivided Light and Life and Being of God the Creator ... Whether we speak here of “spark” and “glimmer,” suggesting the idea of irreducible minuteness, or of “residuum” and “remnant,” implying a somewhat larger substantiality, makes no difference. A spark can start a fire. Faith like a mustard seed can remove mountains. *The life of God does not depend on its quantity but on its actuality, its reality, its authenticity.*⁹⁸

Thus God desires to save all. Boer writes, “Focusing on the *imago* of himself who stands at creation’s head as vicegerent, God pursues him in his estrangement with the intent of reconciliation.”⁹⁹ “A central thesis of [his] book,” Boer

⁹³*Ibid.*, p. 225.

⁹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 221. Later Ware writes, “Because we still retain the image of God, we still retain free will, although sin restricts its scope” (p. 224). Luther astutely spoke of the danger of an image of God in all men being “spun out further” to provide support for the doctrine that fallen man possesses free will (*Op. cit.*, p. 61).

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 221; italics mine.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁹⁷Boer, *Op. cit.*, p. 38. Arminius also uses the image of God in fallen man to maintain that, while man has lost “*spiritual* virtues,” he still retains “the principles and seeds of *moral* virtues ... though corrupted by sin” (*Op. cit.*, p. 115; italics mine).

⁹⁸Boer, *Op. cit.*, p. 55; italics mine.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 29.

tells us is that, “Man as *imago Dei*—and therefore all participants in the *imago*—has the competence to respond affirmatively to the proclamation of the gospel.”¹⁰⁰ What of those who never hear the Word? Boer responds, “The possibility of salvation outside the church and knowledge of the gospel lies in the reality of the *imago Dei*.”¹⁰¹ One can easily imagine how Boer proceeds to deny particular redemption, reprobation and election on the basis of the image of God. He even uses the divine image as basis for universalism—the hope that all men eventually will be saved.¹⁰² In short, with Harry Boer, the doctrine of the broader sense of *imago dei* is taken to its logical conclusions. The wider aspect of the divine image takes on a life of its own and eats up the Reformed faith.

Geerhardus Vos evidently also realized the difficulties presented by the broader sense of the divine image to total depravity.

In the extent that these capacities [i.e., understanding and will] are present after the fall, he [i.e., man] remains in the image of God. The purpose here is not to ascribe any good to fallen man, but rather to present him in the deepest recesses of his being and in his true destiny as somebody who has to take in the glory of God and allow it to shine through him.¹⁰³

Doubtless, Vos’s “*purpose*” in stating that the unbeliever “remains in the image of God” is not to ascribe any good to fallen man. Nevertheless if words mean anything—for the divine image can hardly be anything other than good—this is the *effect*. To obviate this he uses language which appears profound (“deepest recesses of his being” and “true destiny”). Taking “has to” to mean *ought* (a moral obligation), Vos says that presenting fallen man as being in the image of God means that his true destiny ought to be to image God. In other words, the traditional view teaches that fallen man *is* the image of God in order to declare *his duty* to image God. But why not avoid broader/narrower terminology and simply teach that fallen man has lost the image of God entirely through the Fall of Adam, our federal head? This would magnify the awfulness of the Fall, increase the urgency of the call that unbelievers repent of their imaging the devil, and avoid all Pelagianizing tendencies.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, p. 85.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁰²See, e.g., *Ibid.*, p. 185.

¹⁰³Geerhardus Vos, *Op. cit.*, p. 254.

Here one is reminded of Calvin's strictures regarding the obvious import of theological terminology. Commenting on the phrase "free will," Calvin writes,

If anyone, then, can use this word without understanding it in the bad sense, I shall not trouble him on this account. But I hold that because it cannot be retained without great peril, it will, on the contrary, be a great boon for the church if it be abolished. I prefer not to use it myself, and I should like others, if they seek my advice to avoid it.¹⁰⁵

There is much wisdom in this, because *words carry meaning*. No matter how one might seek to avoid it, the mistaken reference to fallen man as the divine image in the broader sense will be used by more and more heretics to deny total depravity. This is even more obviously the case since, given the premise that all men are the image of God in a wider sense—and therefore good to that extent—Boer's argument is solid. The time has come to reconsider the traditional Reformed formulation of the doctrine of the image of God. Surely the Reformed world *must* realize the inconsistency of this conception with Reformed theology. The right way is obvious. Luther wasn't always wrong. The Reformed churches ought to return to the fountainhead of the Reformation on the *imago dei*. The Bible's own explicit statements (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10) support this view of the divine image as spiritual virtues. Many Reformed men have gone this way too and, unlike the traditional position, understanding the *imago* as knowledge, righteousness and holiness fits with the genius of Reformed theology, more specifically, its doctrines of sovereign particular grace and the covenant. Since the Reformed Confessions also support this position it will henceforth be called the "confessional view."

(to be continued)

¹⁰⁴It is interesting that even Vos, when discussing of the broader sense of the image of God speaks of "*allow[ing]* [God's glory] to shine through him" (*Ibid.*, p. 254; italics mine).

¹⁰⁵Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 266 (2.2.8).