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The Doctrine of Humankind



A WHOLE BIBLE APPROACH TO INTERPRETING CREATION IN GOD'S IMAGE

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In discussions of theological anthropology, the issue of human creation in the image of God usually takes a central place. It is seen as the most important and distinctive characteristic of humans. Yet understanding the meaning of our creation in the image of God has been problematic. The doctrine is built upon a surprisingly small number of biblical texts. It is true that some of these texts are found at “unusually significant” places in the biblical narrative, and “have a special urgency and importance” beyond what the mere number of references might suggest, but even so there is a striking paucity of biblical data.¹

And in the verses where our creation in the image of God is affirmed, there is nothing resembling an explicit definition. Thus, it is not surprising that there has been no unanimity in interpretations of the meaning of human creation in the image of God.

Most scholars affirm one of three major ways in which the image of God in humans has been understood, with differing combinations of the three forming a fourth approach. John Collins alliteratively calls them resemblance, representational, and relational; J. Wentzel van Huyssteen and Millard Erickson use the categories of substantive, functional, and relational; and Marc Cortez prefers structural, functional, and relational, and terms the fourth approach “multifaceted.”²

¹John Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2015), 37; G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, trans. Dirk Jellema (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 67.

²C. John Collins, *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 124–25; J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Gottingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 126–45; Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 457–74; Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2010),

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Despite the differences in nomenclature, they are all referring to the same basic approaches, and discussions of these three approaches can be found in various works on theological anthropology.³

One weakness of many who discuss this topic is to give the teaching in Genesis 1 an inordinate emphasis. Richard Middleton argues that there is a “virtual consensus” among OT scholars on the interpretation of Genesis 1 and what it means for our understanding of our creation in the image of God.⁴ Marc Cortez concurs, stating that biblical scholars have reached a “general consensus” on a functional view of the image of God, based on their interpretation of Genesis 1.⁵ But a significant weakness of the functional view developed from Genesis 1 is the fact that none of the other relevant texts on the image of God mention the function of dominion. They develop their view from Genesis 1 alone. By way of contrast, David Kelsey chooses “to privilege New Testament uses, rather than Old Testament uses, of the phrase ‘image of God,’” in his massive theological anthropology.⁶ But Kelsey may be critiqued for unduly minimizing the importance of a foundational text like Genesis 1.⁷

The approach in this article will be to privilege neither Genesis 1 nor the NT texts, but to take a whole Bible approach. We will survey all the pertinent texts in which the creation of humans in the image or likeness of God is mentioned. None of these texts give any definition of the meaning of our creation in the image of God, but they do give some clues that we can use to draw some parameters. Whatever the image of God in humans is, it must fit within these parameters. I will then offer one formulation of what it means for humans to be created in the image of God and argue for it based on how well it fits all the biblical parameters.

This article will also document a movement toward something of a consensus concerning a central aspect of the meaning of our

18–29.

³Such as Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*; Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*; and Anthony Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1986).

⁴J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 25. The subtitle shows the exclusive focus on Genesis 1.

⁵Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 30.

⁶David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 2:900.

⁷See the critique of Kelsey in Marc Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 103–06.

creation in the image of God in recent scholarship. In view of the longstanding disagreement among scholars and the three major approaches mentioned above, this is something of a surprising development, but one common element is found in slightly different forms in numerous recent publications on the image of God. This movement offers some additional support for the understanding of the image of God argued for in this article.

I. PARAMETERS FROM KEY BIBLICAL TEXTS

The relevant texts fall into three categories. From the affirmations made about humans as created in the image of God in these texts, we may draw parameters for the meaning of that phrase.

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

The initial text, Genesis 1:26–27, is emphatic, using the term “image” three times, and using “likeness” once as well. Specifically, the text says we are made “in” God's image and “according to” his likeness. The prepositions used (the Hebrew letters *beth* and *kaph*) serve to distinguish between humans and God's image itself; humans are not the image or likeness itself but are made in some sense like or in accordance with God's image. Trying to go further and make a clear distinction between “in” and “according to” seems unwarranted, since they seem to be used interchangeably. Scripture uses “in” with both image and likeness (Gen 1:26; Jas 3:9) and “according to” with both likeness and image (Gen 1:26; Col 3:10).⁸ Gordon Wenham

⁸While Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum agree that the two prepositions “have roughly the

concludes, "According to our likeness' therefore appears to be an explanatory gloss indicating the precise sense of 'in our image.'"⁹

The other two verses in this category, Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9, see our creation in God's image and likeness as bestowing on all humans a special dignity. In the former text, to kill a human is such a heinous and serious crime that the offender forfeits her own life; in the latter, even to curse one made in God's likeness is improper. Perhaps here James is remembering the teaching of Jesus that put cursing a brother on the same level as murder (Matt 5:21–22).

The key terms in these verses, image and likeness, also seem to be used interchangeably. Some verses use "image" (*tselem*) alone to describe humans (Gen 1:27; 9:6); some use "likeness" (*demuth; homoiōsis*) alone (Gen 5:1; Jas 3:9); only Genesis 1:26 uses both. Though some in the Catholic tradition sought to make a distinction between the two,¹⁰ the essentially synonymous nature of the two terms is one of the areas of general consensus today.¹¹

Another text, 1 Corinthians 11:7, is somewhat problematic. It affirms man as "the image and glory of God," while woman is described as "the glory of man." This verse should not be seen as denying that women are created in the image of God; Genesis 1:27 is explicit and all the other foundational texts refer to humans categorically. The contrast between man and woman in this verse has to do with the term "glory," not "image,"¹² thus making this verse less fitting in a list of foundational texts.

As noted earlier, none of these texts give anything resembling a

same value in these texts," they also note that "we must not assume that the meaning is identical," and cite the work of Randall Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism*, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 15 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), who argues for some distinction in meaning. See the discussion in Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 198–99.

⁹Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 29.

¹⁰Irenaeus and much of the Catholic tradition argued that the "likeness" of God was a gift of original righteousness lost at the fall, while the "image," usually seen as reason and free will, remained intact and unaffected. Irenaeus's view is seen in various parts of Books 3 (chapters 18 and 23) and 5 (chapters 2, 6, and 16) of his *Adversus Haereses (Against Heresies)*. For a concise exposition of the thought of Irenaeus, see David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man*, rev. ed. (London: Collins, 1973), 80–84.

¹¹Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 16 and Paul Sands, "The *Imago Dei* as Vocation," *Evangelical Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2010): 29, agree that the essentially synonymous nature of "image" and "likeness" is commonly acknowledged. For example, both Hebrew terms are used to refer to the same carved figures in Ezekiel 23:14–15.

¹²Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 515.

definition of what it means to be created in the image of God, but they do allow us to draw some parameters. First, whatever the image of God is, it is something true of all humans. It seems to constitute humans as humans. It is specifically affirmed of males and females, and is nowhere limited by age, race, or social class.

Second, whatever the image of God is, it is something that sets humans apart. It is hard to read the account in Genesis 1 and not note the special treatment of the creation of humans. It is positioned last in the account, is given more space, is introduced with a distinctive formula (“Let us make” versus “Let there be”), includes the distinctive terms “image” and “likeness,” and, of all God’s creatures, it is only humans to whom God speaks. In Genesis 9, the killing of a human is viewed in a more serious light than the killing of an animal, further implying a unique status for humans. James 3:9 underscores human dignity by prohibiting even the cursing of a human.

Third, all the texts discussed here, with the exception of Genesis 1, describe humans after the fall. Thus, whatever the image of God in humans is, it is not something destroyed by our fall into sin. Whether the image is in some sense damaged by our fall into sin is a question not answered in these texts.

2. *Christological texts.* At least two texts (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15) speak explicitly of Christ as the image (*eikōn*) of God. Hebrews 1:3 has the same idea in slightly different terms; Christ is the “exact expression” (*charactēr*) of God’s being. John 14:9 describes it in visual terms: “The one who has seen me [Jesus] has seen the Father.” I think it is wise to observe that Christ **is** the image, while humans are made **in** or **according to** the image. The context in Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1 suggests that calling Christ the “image of God” and “exact expression of his being” are ontological claims, claims of deity.¹³ This is also obvious in John 14:9. What ordinary human says, “The one who has seen me has seen the Father”? As God incarnate, Christ is the image of God in a way that humans can never be.¹⁴

¹³Stephen Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 180, sees the image language of Col 1:15 and 2 Cor 4:4 as requiring deity: “Only a divine Son can be *this* image” (emphasis in original).

¹⁴For a contrary view, arguing that the language of Christ as the image of God refers to his humanity, see Marc Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology*, 129. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 2:905–11, also identifies the image of God with Christ in his humanity, but in a slightly different way. Sadly, the space limitations of this article do not allow for fuller engagement with their arguments here.

But if that is the case, what does Romans 8:29 mean in speaking of our destiny to be conformed to the image of the Son? The solution is found in the twofold nature of Christ: true God and true man. As God, Christ *is* the image of God; as human, he is also *according to* or *in* the image of God, and he alone lived out image-bearing in a perfect way. Our destiny is Christlikeness, not as the Second Person of the Trinity, but as True and Perfect Human. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, in his study *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ*, writes:

Thus the Son, who *is* the Image, by becoming man became *in* the image, without however ceasing to *be* the Image. It is as consubstantial with God that he *is* the Image and as consubstantial with us that he identified himself with our human existence *in* the image; and thus he who is truly God revealed what it is to be truly man.¹⁵

This gives us a further biblical parameter in understanding our creation in the image of God: It is something that Jesus lived out perfectly in his humanity, and something to which we will one day be perfectly conformed.

3. *Renewal texts.* There is a final category of texts on the image of God in humans, all found in Pauline letters (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10; and Eph 4:24). These verses speak of the image of God in humans as something dynamic. It is something renewed in believers in conversion (Col 3:10; Eph 4:24),¹⁶ something into which believers are now being increasingly transformed (2 Cor 3:18),¹⁷ and something to which believers will one day be perfectly conformed (Rom 8:29).¹⁸ These descriptions give us one final parameter. They

¹⁵Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 1989), 29.

¹⁶Colossians 3:10 uses the phrase “image of your Creator;” Ephesians 4:24 refers to our creation *kata theon*, which F. F. Bruce interprets as meaning “in the image of God” and which English versions translate as “according to God’s likeness” or similar phrase. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 359.

¹⁷The verse does not specify image as “image of God” or “image of Christ,” but the context justifies seeing it as “transformation into the image of Christ” which is “none other than the restoration of the image of God.” Philip E. Hughes, *Paul’s Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 119.

¹⁸This is assuming that conformity to the image of Christ, who is himself the image of God, is

depict the image (or at least the manner in which humans live out the image) as something dynamic, capable of suffering damage,¹⁹ but also capable of renewal, transformation and perfection in believers.

4. *Summary.* To summarize, from the biblical texts which give us teaching on the meaning of human creation in the image of God, we may draw the following parameters. Whatever the meaning is, it must fit within the following parameters:

1. Creation in the image of God is something affirmed for all persons; it constitutes humans as humans.

2. Creation in the image of God is something affirmed only for humans, implying that humans are unique among God's creatures and giving them transcendent worth and dignity, simply because they are image-bearers.

3. Even after the fall, humans are spoken of as being in the image of God, so the image is not lost in the fall.

4. Since Christ is both the perfect image of God in his deity, and the perfect representation of what it means to live out our creation in God's image in his humanity, the image of God in us must be something that allows for some correspondence between Christ and humans. It is something that Jesus lived out perfectly in his humanity.

5. The numerous renewal texts require us to consider creation in God's image in dynamic terms. How humans live out their creation in God's image has been damaged in some way by sin. Now, in Christ, the living out of God's intention in creating humans in his image is progressively being realized in believers in renewal and transformation and will one day lead to complete conformity to the image of Christ.

"renewal of the believer into that likeness of God which is God's original purpose for man." C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 1:432.

¹⁹Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 160–75, argues strongly against the idea that the image of God has been damaged, on two grounds. First, while people have been damaged by sin, Christ is the image of God and he has not been damaged. Second, Kilner fears that the language of damaged image diminishes the protection afforded to all humans when they are seen as being fully in God's image. He has a point in that humans are not actually described as being the image of God. However, the way in which humans live out what it means to be created in God's image has been impacted by the fall and that is what is typically meant by the damage language. As Craig Blomberg notes, Kilner "represents a small minority of scholars who think the image was not damaged by sin." Blomberg, "'True Righteousness and Holiness': The Image of God in the New Testament," in *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey Barbeau (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2016), 68, n. 7. Moreover, if humans are damaged as image-bearers, that would seem to warrant greater protection, not less.

II. THE IMAGE AS CAPACITY FOR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

The biblical parameters enable us to construct something of a proverbial glass slipper. Now our task is to find a theological foot that fits it. I will first offer a formulation of the meaning of human creation in the image of God. Then I will seek to argue for it by showing how well it fits these parameters and avoids the objections that could be placed against it. Finally, I will conclude by showing a growing consensus supporting this view.

I believe our creation in the image of God involves the gift of a capacity for a particular type of personal relationship, primarily a relationship with God. This right relationship with God should lead to right relationships with other humans and the creation itself, unless conditions like dementia, severe autism, mental disability, or other extraordinary situations hinder or prevent the development of these relationships. In such cases, these individuals are still humans, made in the image of God, but the consequences that should flow from being in the image of God are being hindered by some of the conditions of fallen life.

This capacity for relationship with God, I argue, is centered in the human spirit, but normally utilizes other human capacities such as reason, conscience, and emotion, without necessarily requiring the use of them. Our creation in the image of God may also have a representational aspect, which is associated especially with our creation as embodied beings,²⁰ but I see that aspect as secondary. Identifying the *imago Dei* in terms of a capacity places this view technically in the substantive or structural category, but the emphasis on capacity for relationship puts it very close to what many mean by a relational approach to the image of God. Either way, the support for this view lies in the way it fits the biblical parameters identified earlier.

1. *The image as universal and constitutive.* Take, first, the idea that all persons are created in the image of God and that this constitutes humans as humans. Is capacity for a relationship with God something true of all humans? If that capacity is defined in terms of attributes such as reason, will, and conscience, the answer would seem to be no for very young children, the mentally disabled, those

²⁰Image bearing is associated with our future bodily resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:49: "we will also bear the image of the man of heaven."

with dementia or Alzheimer's, and others who may not have or be able to exercise such attributes.²¹ But there is a growing field of study on theology and disability that affirms the possibility that some of those suffering disability of rational capacities may experience a relationship with God on another level.²² We think that possibility is especially strong if we see the capacity for relationship with God as lodged primarily in the spirit.

In spirit, we deal with something that is constitutive of all humans and distinctive to humans, for while both humans and animals can be referred to as creatures with souls, only humans are clearly referred to as creatures with spirit. Anthony Hoekema notes that the word for "soul" in the OT (*nephesh*) can be used in a multiplicity of ways, including at times as a virtual synonym for spirit (*ruach*). Whereas *nephesh* can be used of both humans and animals, *ruach* is used only of humans, with one possible exception (Eccl 3:21),²³ and even that exception is phrased in the form of a question. The NT gives greater clarity on this, as it associates the human spirit (*pneuma*) with the capacity for relationship with God.²⁴ Only humans engage in personal relationships with God, because only humans possess that which enables them to relate to God.²⁵ Thus, if we link the capacity for relationship with God not to capacities that vary from person to person but to something that is present in all humans from before

²¹This fear of a definition of the image of God that excludes some people has been important in the rejection of the substantive or structural approach by many. As Cortez, *Theological Anthropology*, 20, puts it, "it is nearly impossible to find a structural capacity that applies to all human beings." Thus, "any structural definition of the *imago* runs the risk of excluding certain categories of human beings from its definition of humanity."

²²For a survey of key books in this emerging field, see David F. Watson, "Theology, Bible and Disability: An Overview," at <https://www.catalystresources.org/theology-bible-and-disability-an-overview/>, accessed 6/11/2019. See also Marc Cortez, "Beyond Imitation: The Image of God as a Vision for Spiritual Formation," in *Tending Soul, Mind, and Body: The Art and Science of Spiritual Formation*, ed. Gerald Hiestand and Todd Wilson (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019). Cortez narrates the account of the baptism of a profoundly disabled teenager by a student in Cortez's class who was prompted by that teenager's reaction to wonder "if there is a means of recognition and consciousness beyond the brain" (28). Cortez himself suggests that perhaps "a person may be able to exercise the relevant capacity or capacities in ways that transcend our current ability to understand" (29).

²³Hoekema, *Created in God's Image*, 210–11.

²⁴G. E. Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 463: "It is because man possesses *pneuma* that he is capable of being related to God."

²⁵For spirit as an element in human personality that enables the whole person to relate to God, see W. D. Stacey, *The Pauline View of Man* (London: Macmillan, 1956), 89–90, 141; Ladd, *Theology of the New Testament*, 458–64.

birth²⁶ to death and even beyond death,²⁷ we have something that is truly universal and inclusive.

Care should be taken here, for we are not arguing that spirit is one “part” of human nature. Humans are made in God’s image in their entirety, and spirit is a capacity that interacts with the whole of a person’s being. W. D. Stacey says of the OT, “When reference is made to man in his relation to God, *ruach* [spirit] is the term most likely to be used,” but “*the whole man was involved*.”²⁸ James Dunn says much the same for *pneuma* (spirit) in the NT. It denotes “*that dimension of the whole man wherein and whereby he is most immediately open and responsive to God*.”²⁹ Normally one’s relationship with God and others, including the created order, involves the use of reason, will, emotions and other capacities as the spirit energizes, directs, and stimulates them. Seeing the capacity for relationship with God as lodged primarily in the spirit does not denigrate the body, for the way a spirit acts in our world is normally by use of a body. But these other aspects of personality may not be absolutely necessary in every case. Seeing our capacity for relationship with God as dependent on spirit leaves open the possibility that God can establish relationships with humans in exceptional ways in exceptional circumstances, such as when reason is impaired, or no longer functioning, or not yet functioning.

2. *The image as grounds for unique dignity.* From Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9, we draw the parameter that humans have a unique status that demands they be treated with a special dignity because they have been created in the image of God. Does understanding the image of God as the capacity for personal relationship with God fit within this parameter? It would certainly seem so. Humans are the only creatures to whom God speaks in Genesis 1 and 2 and pronounces words of blessing and command. He assigns them tasks and holds them accountable. They alone may experience the eternal life that consists in knowing God (John 17:3). And perhaps it is because they

²⁶See Luke 1:44. When the baby still in Elizabeth’s womb leaped with joy at the sound of Mary’s voice, it seems unlikely that it was the result of the operating of rational faculties. Romans 8:16 suggests the possibility that the communication was on the level of spirit.

²⁷See Heb 12:23, which describes those in the heavenly Jerusalem as “the spirits of righteous people made perfect.”

²⁸Stacey, *The Pauline View of Man*, 90. Emphasis added.

²⁹James Dunn, “Spirit, Holy Spirit,” *NIDNTT* 3:693. Emphasis added.

alone will face divine judgment that it is unfitting for humans to curse or kill them. Humans are not just created *by* God; creation in God's image means humans are created *for* God. They alone can experience a special relationship with him.

3. *The image as enduring after the fall.* The presence of numerous texts affirming our status as image-bearers after the fall is sufficient to sustain possession of the image post-fall as a biblical parameter. How does this parameter harmonize with understanding creation in God's image as the capacity for relationship with God, centered in the human spirit? We think it gives us a way of understanding the damage that the image sustained in the fall, without seeing the image as totally destroyed in the fall. God's warning in Genesis 2:17 was that the man would die "the day" he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Wenham says, "Though this phrase ['the day'] can mean vaguely 'when' (cf. 2:4; 5:1), it tends to emphasize promptness of action."³⁰ But Adam lived for hundreds of years after he ate of the tree. The death he died that very day, or at least with promptness, would seem to be a spiritual death. John Collins notes that the semantic range of the Hebrew word used in Genesis 2:17 for "die" includes spiritual death, which he calls "estrangement from a life-giving relationship with God."³¹

Thus, the fall gave a mortal wound to the human spirit in Adam. He remained human, with the spirit within him, still having the status of an image-bearer of God but now in a deadened condition. Fallen people today do not live out a positive relationship with God, but they have not lost the capacity for such a relationship. The proof is what happens in salvation; the spirit must be present to be given new life by the Holy Spirit (John 3:5–8; Titus 3:5). Scripture uses the language of renewal and transformation with reference to the image of God in us; something must be present to be renewed and transformed. God can breathe new life into those spiritually dead; he can reactivate the spirit left dead by the ravages of sin. The fall had a horrific impact, but it does not change our status as created in the image of God. The image is still present in us but requires renewal.

4. *Christ as the perfect image of God and perfectly in the image of*

³⁰Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 68.

³¹C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006), 117.

God. The identification of Christ as the image of God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15) raises the question: Does Christ as the image of God conflict with the view that we are arguing for, that being created in the image of God is being created with the capacity for relationship with God? Answering this question requires us to remember the twofold nature of Christ and to maintain the distinction made earlier between being the image and being created in or according to the image.

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

5. *The image as dynamic.* There are a number of NT passages that we considered earlier under the heading of renewal texts. These texts indicate that we should consider our creation in the image of God as something dynamic and capable of suffering damage and experiencing renewal in the course of Christian conversion and sanctification. When we do so, many traditional interpretations of the image of God are revealed to be inconsistent with such a description. But the capacity for a relationship with God seems to fit this parameter especially well.

The first renewal text, Romans 8:29, speaks not of the image of God but of the image of the Son, and not of our creation in that image but of our eventual conformity to it. But there need be no conflict here. Because Christ both *is* the image and is the perfect expression of life lived *in* the image of God, conformity to the image of Christ would seem to be perfect conformity to life lived in the image of God brought to eschatological completion. What will it mean to be completely conformed to the image of the Son? We think that one major aspect of that conformity will be the full development

of Christlike character.³² But central to Christ's character was his perfect relationship to the Father, so being conformed to the image of the Son would include living in perfect relationship with God, which fits our understanding of the image of God as the capacity for relationship with God. Christians experience the living out of that capacity to a degree now; we will experience it to the full then.

The second primary text is 2 Corinthians 3:18. Here the language is not renewal but transformation, and the key preposition is not "in" but "into." We do not think the suggestion can be that humans are not in God's image until they are transformed into the Lord's image, but that the different texts are speaking of one reality—our creation in God's image—in two different ways. Texts that speak of our creation in God's image (Gen 1:26–27) speak of something that is always true of all humans, something stable. This text on our transformation "into his [the Lord's] image" speaks of this same reality, but as something dynamic. As John Kilner interprets this text, it means "Christians are already becoming better able to fulfill the divine intentions that have always marked their lives as created in God's image."³³ What is one major divine intention that has always marked our lives as created in God's image? It has always been God's intention for us to live in relationship with him. This text speaks of that capacity for relationship with God being progressively more and more utilized, or, as another puts it, by this transformation, humans are more and more "realizing the meaning of their original status as creatures in God's image."³⁴

In the third primary passage, Colossians 3:10, we have the language of renewal. The verses preceding verse 10 speak of a definitive change taking place in those whom Paul addresses, a change that can be described as death to an old life (vv. 5–7), or taking off an old self and putting on a new self (vv. 9–10). These can describe Christian conversion. But even before conversion all humans are created in the image of the Creator. So what happens after conversion in the life of a Christian? This passage describes it as renewal in the image of the Creator. This assumes that while humans are still created in God's

³²See the description of glorified humans as "the spirits of righteous people made perfect" (Heb 12:23) or then expectation that when we see Jesus, "we will be like him" (1 John 3:2).

³³Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 242.

³⁴Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 119. Hughes is citing A. M. Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ*, 151.

image (i.e., still have the capacity for relationship with God), there has been some damage affecting how humans live out their created status. Renewal involves people coming to live out God's intention more and more fully, as the capacity for relationship with God comes alive. Interestingly, it is described as renewal "in knowledge according to the image of your Creator." What is this knowledge? Paul does not specify what he means here, but Colossians 1:6, 9, and 10 speak of knowledge of God's grace, God's will and God himself. All these would be involved in a growing relationship with God, which, as we have been arguing, is the central significance of our creation in the image of God.

There are two other passages we may deal with much more summarily. Ephesians 4:24 largely echoes Colossians 3:10, but with less explicit reference to the image of God. First Corinthians 15:49 introduces a secondary aspect of our creation in the image of God. It pictures our resurrected bodies as bearing the image of the heavenly man, implying a representational function. But this is the only text that focuses on this aspect, and thus I see it as secondary.

Together, these texts require that our creation in the image of God be something dynamic and capable of renewal. Such renewal is associated with life in Christ. And life in Christ concerns the development of one's relationship with God, something the NT associates with the human spirit. All these considerations support the interpretation of the image of God being argued for here and do not seem to fit well with many other interpretations.

Thus, by the parameters we gathered from Scripture, the idea that being created in the image of God means being created with the capacity for personal relationship with God, with that capacity centered in the human spirit, seems to be biblically supported.

III. TOWARD A CONTEMPORARY CONSENSUS

It is somewhat surprising but gratifying to see that, after centuries of discussion and division, a degree of consensus is emerging on an understanding of humanity's creation in the image of God. The element of consensus lies in the idea of relationship; more specifically, the image of God is being seen as involving a relationship with God or being created with the capacity for relationship with God. Some add secondarily that it includes the capacity for relationships with

other persons or even with creation. As we said earlier, technically, if we see the key element as a capacity, this view would fall within the substantive family of approaches, but the central idea of relationships is causing many to place these formulations within the relational family. Regardless of classification, here are some of the places where this consensus is emerging.

Jason McMartin has gone back to Augustine and his idea of the image as *capax dei* (capable of participation with God) found in his treatise *On the Trinity*. McMartin develops this idea into a model of the image of God that sees it as “the capacity for relationship with God,”³⁵ which is identical to the central phrase I developed independently for my understanding of *imago Dei*.

From the progressive Reformed tradition as seen in feminist theologian Mary McClintock Fulkerson, we have much the same thing, with the language of capacity: “To say that we are created in the image of God is to identify the human capacity to be in relationship with God, or better, to claim that relationship with God is the human vocation.”³⁶ Evangelical theologian Kevin Vanhoozer includes a similar idea as the first element in his understanding of this topic: “To be in the *imago Dei* refers, first of all, to humanity’s unique capacity for communion with God.”³⁷

Douglas Moo and son Jonathan combine a definition of *imago Dei* with its purpose. The

first part is the definition: “Our argument, in keeping with that of many interpreters, is that the image of God means being placed into a particular set of relationships with God, each other, and the rest of creation.” and then its purpose: “for the purpose of ruling as his royal representatives.”³⁸ Here they are drawing primarily on Genesis 1. In an earlier work, in which Douglas Moo deals with NT teaching, he describes the image of God as “having to do primarily

³⁵Jason McMartin, “The Theandric Union as *Imago Dei* and *Capax Dei*,” in *Christology: Ancient and Modern*, ed. Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 137.

³⁶Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “The *Imago Dei* and a Reformed Logic for Feminist/Womanist Critique,” in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 95–106, cited in *T & T Clark Reader in Theological Anthropology*, ed. Marc Cortez and Michael Jensen (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2018), 100.

³⁷Kevin Vanhoozer, “Human Being, Individual and Social,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin Gunton (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 163.

³⁸Douglas Moo and Jonathan Moo, *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology for the Natural World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 74.

with the power to form appropriate relationships—between humans and God, between humans and other humans, and between humans and creation.”³⁹ Moo’s term “power” seems very close to the term advocated in my view (“capacity”), suggesting that these two views are very close to each other.

Robert Jenson and Colin Gunton do not use the language of capacity, but link the image of God with a human’s relationship with God, which seems to presuppose a capacity for such a relationship. Here is how Jenson puts it: “The ‘image of God,’ if we are to use this phrase comprehensively for humanity’s distinctiveness, is simply that we are related to God as his conversational counterpart.”⁴⁰ Two statements by Colin Gunton lead to the same conclusion. First, he says, “To be a person is to be made in the image of God.” He then adds, “We are persons insofar as we are in right relationship to God.”⁴¹ The implication seems to be that the image of God involves being in right relationship with God, which, again, assumes that we have the capacity for such a relationship.

J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays cite numerous scholars in OT studies and other disciplines who are coming to see relationship with God as “a critical part of the *imago Dei*.”⁴² Many of these scholars do not use the precise language of the image as the capacity for a relationship with God, but what they do say seems to presuppose it. Robin Routledge, in discussing relationships as one of the implications of human creation in God’s image, states, “Human beings are made for relationship with God.”⁴³ Brevard Childs says of the image of God, “In spite of its unclarity, at least one can say that it denotes a special relationship between God and mankind.”⁴⁴

Speaking from a survey of the opinions of writers from the Early

³⁹Douglas Moo, “Nature in the New Creation: New Testament Eschatology and the Environment,” *JETS* 49, no. 3 (September 2006): 481.

⁴⁰Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 95, cited in *T&T Clark Reader in Theological Anthropology*, 350.

⁴¹Colin Gunton, “Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the *Imago Dei*,” in *Persons, Divine and Human*, ed. Christoph Schwobel and Colin Gunton (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 58.

⁴²J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *God’s Relational Presence: The Cohesive Center of Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 17.

⁴³Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008), 140.

⁴⁴Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985), 34.

Church through those in the Reformation and beyond, Paul House says, “All agree that in Genesis 1–2 ‘image’ means that humans can relate positively to God in ways the rest of creation has not been made to do.”⁴⁵ J. van Huyssteen adds, “The concept of the *imago Dei*... has always in some broad sense functioned to express the relationship between Creator and creatures, God and humans.”⁴⁶ Jonathan Threlfall concurs, claiming that one point of agreement among the varying interpretations of the image of God in Christian history is that “humans are somehow fundamentally oriented toward God,” or as he himself puts it, humans “are constituted for a relationship with God and the rest of creation.”⁴⁷

John Kilner objects to those who define the image of God as relationship with God, for he sees the image of God as a status that sin cannot alter, and sin can and does interfere with one’s relationship to God. But it does not seem that Kilner’s objection would apply to the image of God as *capacity* for relationship with God, for the capacity itself is not altered by sin, though the exercise of that capacity is. Kilner himself does see a connection between being in God’s image and engaging in relationship with God: “Actual God-honoring relationships flow from being in God’s image, to the degree that sin does not interfere.” This statement, as well as Kilner’s language that “relationship has to do with God’s intentions,”⁴⁸ seem very consistent with the understanding of the image of God being advocated here.

Finally, Richard Lints insists that “the *imago Dei* is fundamentally a relational term.” He later states that “a relationship with God is that which secures our identity as humans.”⁴⁹ This seems at least consistent with the idea advocated here, that the image of God is the capacity for a relationship with God, though Lints does not use that exact language.

⁴⁵Paul House, “Shaped into the Creator’s Image: Spirituality and Spiritual Formation in the Old Testament,” in *Biblical Spirituality*, ed. Christopher Morgan (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 59. For the sources cited for House’s survey of opinions, see 59, n. 11.

⁴⁶Van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World*, 160.

⁴⁷Jonathan Threlfall, “The Doctrine of the *Imago Dei*: The Biblical Data for an Abductive Argument for the Christian Faith,” *JETS* 6, no. 3 (September 2019): 543–44; 546.

⁴⁸Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 229–30.

⁴⁹Richard Lints, *Identity and Idolatry: The Image of God and its Inversion*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 36 (Nottingham, UK: Apollos; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2015), 153.

IV. CONCLUSION

These writers differ slightly in that some define the image as the capacity for relationship with God, while others link the image of God to an existing relationship with God, and others include relationships with others and/or creation, and still others omit the language of capacity. However, all these scholars link the image of God in humans in some way to the idea of a relationship with God, and in so doing assume that humans have the capacity for a relationship with God.

The argument here is that: (1) parameters for understanding the meaning of human creation in God's image are given in numerous places throughout the Bible; (2) because it so aptly fits these parameters, capacity for relationship with God should be considered as the primary meaning of human creation in the image of God; and (3) the movement of recent scholarship toward something of a consensus on the centrality of relationship to the meaning of our creation in the image of God strengthens the case for such an interpretation.

But we should not conclude this article without noting the profound practical application our creation in the image of God has on human dignity. The weightiness of this understanding of human beings was vividly made years ago in a classic essay by C. S. Lewis:

It is a serious thing... to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics.... It is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.⁵⁰

All humans are headed toward one of these two destinations because

⁵⁰C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 14–15.

we are created in the image of God with all the privileges and responsibilities this includes.

