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A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

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# The *Imago Dei* as Vocation

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## Introduction

Christian theologians agree that human beings are defined by their creation 'in the image of God'. This agreement unravels when theologians try to specify the precise nature of the image. Given that the relevant biblical texts are few and ambiguous, different interpretations are inevitable. These differences are exacerbated, however, when theologians read into the Bible anthropologies derived from extra-biblical sources. While it is true that Christian theology must interpret scripture in light of contemporary questions and background beliefs, the resulting construals must nevertheless maintain an inner connection with their warranting texts. In short, interpretations of the *imago Dei* should be tethered to historical-critical exegesis and not float free into abstractions or speculations.<sup>1</sup>

I will begin this paper with a survey of biblical texts that bear directly on the nature of the *imago Dei*. I will then set out three alternative interpretations of these texts: the substantialist, relational, and vocational. I will argue that the vocational view subsumes the legitimate insights of the other views into its own more biblically faithful perspective. I will conclude with comments on some ethical implications that follow from a vocational view of the divine image.

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1 Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 91, observes, 'Throughout the history of theology there has been a conspicuous tendency to identify the 'gifts' ('characteristics', 'traits', etc.) that the *imago* is thought to stand for with values embraced by the particular cultures within which the theologians were doing their work'. Hall echoes Hendrikus Berkhof's oft quoted remark that a study of how systematic theologians have read their own ideas into Gen. 1:26 would enable one to 'write a piece of Europe's cultural history'. Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of Faith*, translated by Sierd Woodstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 179. I share the concerns of Phyllis Bird and J. Richard Middleton concerning the tendency of systematic theology to float free of historical-critical interpretation of scripture. See Phyllis Bird, "'Male and Female He Created Them": Gen 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account,' *Harvard Theological Review* 74, no. 2 (1981): 131; J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 24-25.

## Survey of the biblical texts

The Old Testament contains only three passages that refer explicitly to the *imago Dei*, all of which are found in the so-called priestly strand of Genesis. To these three should be added Psalm 8, which closely echoes the Genesis texts. In the New Testament, only eight verses refer explicitly to the 'image', all but one of which appear in the Pauline epistles. Although the Bible rarely speaks explicitly of the *imago Dei*, the concept itself is foundational for biblical anthropology.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Old Testament witness*

The key Old Testament text on the *imago Dei* is Genesis 1:26-28. The passage reads as follows:

<sup>26</sup> Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth'.

<sup>27</sup> So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

<sup>28</sup> God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth' (NRSV).

Genesis 5:1-3 adds that Adam begot 'a son in his likeness, according to his image'; and Genesis 9:6 says the image establishes the inviolability of human life. Finally, Psalm 8:5-6 says that humans have been made 'a little lower than God', crowned with glory and honor, and given dominion over God's creation.

Although Old Testament exegetes debate among themselves details of interpretation, a broad scholarly consensus on these texts can be summarized as follows:

1. The words 'image' (*selem*) and 'likeness' (*demut*) are essentially synonymous. They indicate that human beings resemble God but do not themselves specify the precise nature of the resemblance.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Given the Old Testament emphasis on the lowliness of humanity before God and its strictures on images of deity, the marvel is that a concept like the *imago Dei* arose at all. Cf. Gerhard von Rad, 'eikōn', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, edited by Gerhard Kittel, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 390. On the importance of the concept in spite of its rare mention in scripture, see Hall, 75.

3 Bird, 139-40. Many scholars have done careful word studies on *selem* and *demut*, but the results have returned little of value for a theological appraisal of the *imago Dei*. Middleton, 44. *Selem* ('image') appears seventeen times in the Old Testament. Usually it refers to idols (e.g., Num. 33:52; 2 Kings 11:18; Ezek. 7:20; Amos 5:26), but it can refer to other three dimensional images (1 Sam. 6:5, 11; Ezek. 23:14) or even to a 'dream-image' or 'shadow' (e.g., Ps. 39:6; 73:20). The basic meaning appears to be

2. The prepositions governing 'image' and 'likeness' are interchangeable.<sup>4</sup> Most interpreters translate them 'in', 'after', or 'according to', but some prefer 'as', arguing that human beings are created *as* the image of God rather than *after* the image of God.<sup>5</sup>
3. All human beings – women as fully as men – bear the divine image.
4. The image is closely associated with dominion and dignity. Dominion is conferred on humanity in Gen. 1:26, 28 and Psalm 8:6. Dignity is a function of dominion and of humankind's status as the only creature to result from divine deliberation (1:26, 'Let us make'), the only one to whom God speaks directly (1:28, 'Be fruitful and multiply'), and the only one said to be 'a little lower than God' and crowned with 'glory and honour' (Ps. 8:5).
5. The image was not lost in the 'fall'.<sup>6</sup>

### *The New Testament witness*

The central confession of the New Testament is that Christ is the *imago Dei*.<sup>7</sup> He

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'form'. Middleton, 45-46. *Demut* appears in the Old Testament twenty-five times and is a general word that denotes similarity (e.g., Ps. 58:4; Isa. 13:4; 40:18; Ezek. 1:5, 10, 13, 16, etc.). Some scholars believe that *demut* either (1) 'deliteralizes' *selem*, making it clear that humans are *only* images of God, or (2) clarifies that the *imago Dei* is a 'likeness-image', that is, *representational*. See D. J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," in *Tyndale Bulletin*, A. R. Millard (London: Tyndale Press, 1968), 90-92. In view of the fact that *selem* and *demut* are used interchangeably in Genesis (cf. Gen. 1:27, 5:3, and 9:6), such nuanced readings – if correct – do not undermine the claim that the terms are essentially synonymous. See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 203.

- 4 Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary*, translated by John J. Scullion (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg, 1984), 145-46, notes that scholars have abandoned attempts to find distinct meanings for the two prepositions (*be-* and *ke-*). 'There is no particular significance', comments von Rad, 'in the change of prepositions ("in" our image, "according to" our likeness). In 5.3 they are exchanged without any difference in meaning'. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, Penn.: Westminster Press, 1972), 58.
- 5 Clines, 75-76, argues for 'as' or 'in the capacity of' and cites Exodus 6:3 as a parallel. Evidence for the more common reading is found in Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, vol. 1 of *Word Biblical Commentary*, edited by David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, and John D. W. Watts (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), 29, 127; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, in *New International Commentary*, edited by R. K. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 137.
- 6 Even after the flood, the image forms the basis for the high value placed on human life (Gen. 9:6). Moreover, Genesis 5:3 parallels Genesis 1:26-28 and appears to mean that Adam passed the image to his offspring, though on this point there is some debate. Westermann comments, 'One point on which scholars are agreed is that according to the Old Testament the person's "likeness-to-God" was not lost with the "fall", but remained part of humanity'. Westermann, 148.
- 7 James 3:9 says that all human beings are created in God's 'likeness' (*homoiōsi*; used in LXX for *demut*), and 1 Cor. 11:7 states – notoriously – that men rather than women are the 'image and glory' of God. These texts are anomalous. Although they show that the

is the *eikōn tou theou*, the perfect embodiment of the divine prototype. At work here is the Pauline ‘last Adam’ motif. Whereas ‘the first man was from earth, a man of dust’, Christ is the ‘second man from heaven’ (1 Cor. 15:47). One might say the first man was created *according to* the image of God, the second man *is* the image of God.<sup>8</sup> Human beings participate in the divine image only as they become disciples of Christ, and then only to the extent that their lives conform to Christ. The *imago Dei* is thus a *dynamic* reality. Believers are being transformed by the Spirit into the image ‘from one degree of glory to another’ (2 Cor. 3:18). They are exhorted to put on the ‘new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator’ (Col. 3:10). The *imago Dei* is a *communal* reality. Renewal in the image unites one with others in a community where ‘there is no longer Greek or Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all’ (Col. 3:11). Ultimately, the *imago Dei* is an *eschatological* reality, for Christians must await the day when they will be fully ‘conformed to the image’ of the Son (Rom. 8:29; cf. 1 John 3:2). ‘Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust’, says Paul, ‘we will also bear the image of the man of heaven’ (1 Cor. 15:49).

We may summarize the New Testament view of the *imago Dei* as follows:

1. Christ *is* the image of God.
2. Human beings participate in the image of God to the extent that their lives conform to Christ. The *imago Dei* is a *dynamic* and *communal* reality rooted in redemption.
3. Since complete conformity to Christ must await the new age, the *imago Dei* is an *eschatological* reality.

### Alternative interpretations of the *imago dei*

Clearly, the Old and New Testaments diverge on this subject. The Old Testament embeds the *imago* in creation and ascribes it to all human beings; the New Testament assumes the *imago* has been lost due to sin and must be restored through Christ. Christian theologians have tried to synthesize the evidence into a single, coherent view of the *imago Dei*; their attempts have commonly been grouped under three broad categories: substantialist, relational, and functional. My own view of the *imago* is essentially functionalist, but I have substituted the term ‘vocational’ to highlight what I believe is the central idea conveyed by the biblical concept. I will take up each view in order.

#### *The substantialist view*

According to substantialist view, the *imago Dei* is an endowment given by God

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Old Testament notion of the *imago* as a permanent feature of human existence was not abandoned by the early church, they diverge from the central thrust of the New Testament.

8 The writer of Hebrews says the Son is the ‘reflection of God’s glory and the exact representation of God’s very being’ (Heb. 1:3). The Johannine Jesus says, ‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14:9; cf. 12:45).

at creation – an inalienable component of human nature that may be misused but cannot be lost without losing one’s humanity.<sup>9</sup> For historical reasons, this endowment came to be identified with reason. Plato (reason as humanity’s noblest part) and Aristotle (humans as ‘rational animals’ and God as pure intelligence) had bequeathed to the Greek mind a rationalistic bent. The first century philosopher Philo shared this rationalism and maintained that ‘mind’ (*nous*) was the divine, image-bearing element in humankind.<sup>10</sup> Early Christian thinkers followed suit, and the identification of the *imago Dei* with reason became the dominant view among theologians until the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

When identified with the *imago*, ‘reason’ is understood broadly and includes such notions as self-consciousness, moral sense, freedom, self-transcendence, and ‘spirituality’. The Scottish theologian James Orr offers a typical expression of this view:

[The divine image is] a mental and moral image. It is to be sought for in the fact that man is a person – a spiritual, self-conscious being; and in the attributes of that personality – his rationality and capacity for moral life, including in the latter knowledge of the moral law, self-determining freedom, and social affections; highest of all, in his capacity for fellowship with God.<sup>12</sup>

Notice that Orr says nothing about the body. The omission is not accidental. In practice, a substantiality view almost always places the body below the mind and ascribes the *imago* only to the latter.

All humans are endowed with reason, but fallen beings inevitably use their rational capacities in sinful ways. Substantialist views distinguish, therefore, between the formal possession of rational capacities and the material realization of godlikeness. Human beings retain the *imago* (rationality, moral sense, etc.) in spite of sin, but human beings no longer resemble God because of sin. This distinction between formal and material aspects of the *imago* has not always been clearly made (as when, for example, Reformed theologians said a ‘relic’ of the image remained even after it had been ‘lost’ in the fall). Sometimes it has been based on faulty exegesis, as when Irenaeus assigned distinct meanings to the

9 According to Herzfeld, this approach is ‘ontological in the sense that it is a quality or characteristic intrinsic to our species, inherent in our human nature, shared with God alone, thus serving to distinguish us from the rest of nature, and in particular, from the other animals. The divine image as a human quality, becomes part of the substance of our very being’. Noreen L. Herzfeld, *In Our Image: Artificial Intelligence and the Human Spirit* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2002), 16. Cf. Hall, 89; J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World? Human Uniqueness in Science and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 126.

10 Deborah Krause, ‘Keeping It Real: The Image of God in the New Testament’, *Interpretation* 59, no. 4 (October 2005): 363; van Huyssteen, 127.

11 For a historical review of the *imago Dei* concept up to the theology of Karl Barth, see David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1953).

12 James Orr, *God’s Image in Man: And Its Defacement in the Light of Modern Denials* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 56-57.

‘image’ and ‘likeness’ Genesis 1:26.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the distinction is important because it helps to harmonize the perspectives of the Old and New testaments. Later, I will reframe the distinction between formal and material aspects of the *imago* in terms of a God-given vocation and its fulfillment.

In recent times, the substantialist view has faced sustained criticism from scholars. It has been faulted for

- its *static character*, which fails to do justice to the dynamic view of the image found in the Pauline epistles;<sup>14</sup>
- its *individualistic focus* on the inner life, said to overlook the Old Testament ascription of the image to the human species (Gen. 1:26-28; Ps. 8:5-6) and the New Testament linkage of the image with the ecclesial community;
- its *misogynistic tendencies*, which are rooted in the assumption that men are more rational and less tied to embodiment than women and thus more perfect specimens of the *imago*;<sup>15</sup>
- and its *rationalism*, which establishes a mind-body dualism inconsistent with a biblical view of humanity.

Not all of these criticisms hit their mark. First, a substantialist view is not necessarily *static*. It maintains the image has been defaced and must be restored through Christ. Second, a substantialist view is not necessarily *individualistic*. One can identify the image with traits shared by all individuals without assuming that individuals are detached, autonomous units. Third, a substantialist view is not essentially *misogynistic*. It has certainly been employed to enforce patriarchy but only when combined with cultural stereotypes about the lesser intellectual gifts of women. Such stereotypes are not necessary features of the substantialist view.

The substantialist view does, however, assume a rationalistic, mind-body dualism inconsistent with scripture. Nowhere does the Bible suggest that only the ‘higher’, intellectual (or ‘spiritual’) part of human beings is made in the image.<sup>16</sup>

13 On this point, Irenaeus must be given appropriate credit. Cairns observes, ‘Irenaeus has acted with true insight in seeing that within the concept of the image, a distinction must be drawn between that which remains to man even in his sin and that which God purposes for him in Christ – between what we have already called the Old Testament image and the New Testament image. Granted that he attaches his two concepts of the image and likeness by a wrong exegesis of Genesis 1:26, introducing the double sense to a passage where no double sense was intended by the writer. Yet there *is* a line of cleavage in the concept “image of God”, and, as we shall see, doctrines which try to get on without noticing it always come into difficulties. So by drawing our attention to the cleavage, Irenaeus has done a service to theology.’ Cairns, 81.

14 Cf. Herzfeld, 20.

15 van Huyssteen, 127-32.

16 Berkouwer notes that ‘we never encounter in the Bible an independently existing abstract, ontological, structural interest in man’. G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 196.

The whole person – body and mind – bears the *imago* of God.<sup>17</sup> Clines rightly asserts, ‘man is a totality, and “solid flesh” is as much in the image of God as his spiritual capacity, creativity, or personality, since none of these “higher” aspects of the human being can exist in isolation from the body.... Man is the flesh-and-blood image of the invisible God’.<sup>18</sup> The substantialist view must, therefore, be rejected because it reads an extra-biblical anthropology into the Bible.

### *The relational view*

If the substantialist view of the *imago Dei* dominated theological opinion until the middle of the twentieth century, the relational view has been ascendant since – at least among systematic theologians. This circumstance is due in part to Karl Barth’s influential discussion of the concept in *Church Dogmatics*. More broadly, it reflects the ‘turn to relationality’ in late-modern philosophy and science documented by F. LeRon Shults.<sup>19</sup>

Rather than viewing the *imago Dei* as an endowment that humans possess, the relational view interprets the *imago* dynamically. As the triune God is not a solitary being but one who exists in eternal relatedness, so human beings reflect the divine image not as solitary individuals but in social relatedness. The *imago Dei* is not a trait found in humans but a dynamic happening that occurs when human beings are turned toward God and one another. In short, humans do not ‘have’ the image of God; rather, they *image* God.<sup>20</sup>

The relational view makes much of the enigmatic plural pronouns in Genesis 1:26 and the close association of the *imago* and sexual differentiation in 1:27. The key statements are:

v. 26 – Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness’,

and,

v. 27 – So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

The plural pronouns in v. 26 are interpreted as an adumbration of the Trinity and thus an early indication that God is essentially relational.<sup>21</sup> The sexual dif-

17 Westermann, 150. Von Rad rightly comments that ‘one would do well to split the physical from the spiritual as little as possible: the whole man is created in God’s image’. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 58.

18 Clines, 68

19 F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids; Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 2003).

20 Hall, 98.

21 Barth states, ‘The well-known decision of early exegesis was that we have in Gen. 1:26 a reference to the divine trinity. It may be objected that this statement is rather too explicit. The saga undoubtedly speaks of a genuine plurality in the divine being, but it does not actually say that it is a Trinity’. Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. 3.1 of *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 192. Cf. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 12.



ferentiation mentioned in v. 27b is interpreted as specifying the nature of the *imago* in v. 27a.<sup>22</sup> Taken together, these verses are said to show that the internally differentiated and thus essentially relational God has a counterpart in sexually differentiated and thus essentially relational humanity. As Karl Barth explains, 'In God's own being and sphere there is a counterpart: a genuine but harmonious self-encounter and self-discovery; a free co-existence and cooperation; an open confrontation and reciprocity. *Man is the repetition of this divine form of life; its copy and reflection*'.<sup>23</sup> Humankind thus reflects the 'divine form of life' in two ways: (a) as God's 'counterpart' – a species able to be God's partner in I-Thou encounter; and (b) as God's 'copy' – a single species that is also a duality in relation, analogous to the way in which God is both one and plurality in relation. In short, human beings image God as they enter into reciprocal relations with God and others.<sup>24</sup>

It is important to note that the issue here is not whether humans are essentially social beings. Who would deny it? The question is whether or not the relational view is biblically and theologically justified. On that narrowly focused question, there are two reasons to answer 'no'.

First, *the relational view utilizes a quasi-trinitarian interpretation of Genesis 1:26 that is exegetically unjustified*. I have in mind Barth's claim that v. 26 posits a plurality within God. He notes the enigmatic plural pronouns, claims they posit a plurality within God, and then explicates them in fully trinitarian terms. He speaks of a mutuality and reciprocity among the persons of the Godhead that is 'imaged' both in God's relationship with human beings and in the relationships of human beings with one another. Although ingenious, Barth's exegesis is flawed. Some Old Testament scholars interpret the plural pronouns in v. 26 as God's self-summons to action – that is, a 'plural of deliberation'.<sup>25</sup> Others interpret God's words as addressed to a 'divine council' of heavenly beings.<sup>26</sup> Virtually all reject the quasi-trinitarian reading upon which the relational view of the *imago Dei* depends. Even Brevard Childs, an Old Testament scholar in deep sympathy with Barth's project, criticizes the theologian's unnatural reading of Gen. 1:26 because it 'over-interprets the plural form of address'.<sup>27</sup> A canonical reading may go beyond the historical sense of a text, but it must not invent meanings with no connection to the historical sense.

Second, *the relational view wrongly identifies the imago Dei with the sexual differentiation of humankind and then draws unwarranted conclusions from this*

22 Barth, 185-86.

23 Barth, 185. Emphasis added.

24 Barth, 185, 196.

25 Westermann, 145, asserts that this is 'an attested and sufficient explanation'. Also Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 568.

26 Impressive historical and literary parallels are set out in Middleton, 56-60; *contra* Westermann, 144-45; Barth, 191-92.

27 Childs, 568.

*identification.* Genesis 1:27 says:

So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them.

Relying on the work of Robert Alter, J. Richard Middleton points out that in Hebrew the last line in three line poetic units usually introduces a new thought.<sup>28</sup> Thus, it is unlikely that the coda ‘male and female he created them’ is meant to define the *imago*; rather, it specifies an additional characteristic of the creature made in God’s image. The mention of ‘male and female’ prepares the reader for the blessing of fertility in the next verse, necessary because ‘the word of blessing assumes, but does not bestow, the means of reproduction.’<sup>29</sup> Even if we were to suppose that ‘male and female’ defines the *imago*, there is nothing in the text to suggest a modern abstraction like I-Thou relationality.<sup>30</sup> ‘Male’ and ‘female’ are biological, not social terms.<sup>31</sup> As already noted, they are closely linked with fertility (v. 28). If they imply relationality at all, it would be of a sexual nature. Concepts like I-Thou relationality are brought to the text, not derived from it. Pannenberg’s verdict is justified:

The reference to the creation of humankind as male and female is an addition to the statement that humankind is made in the image of God. It allows us to conclude that both man and woman are created equally in the divine image but not that the likeness consists of the relation between the sexes.<sup>32</sup>

In sum, the relational view of the *imago Dei* fails because (a) it cannot justify its quasi-trinitarian reading of v. 26 and (b) because it wrongly identifies the *imago Dei* with sexual differentiation and then draws unwarranted conclusions from the identification. Like the substantialist view, it skews the biblical concept by interpreting it in terms of an extra-biblical anthropology.

### *The vocational view*

The *imago Dei* is best understood as a God-given vocation. A vocation arises out of a summons – a divine call to a task that confers dignity and imposes obligation. Failure to fulfill one’s vocation incurs guilt, but it does not remove the obligation. Nor does it blot out the dignity of the summoned individual. A personally dishonorable ambassador retains the dignity of his post; likewise, a sinful human being retains the dignity of his or her God-given vocation.

28 Middleton, 49.

29 Bird, 148.

30 The same could be said of Grenz’s view, which merely replaces I-Thou relationality with human sexuality as a drive toward bonded relationships. See Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 280-83, 303.

31 Bird, 148-49; cf. Middleton, 50.

32 Pannenberg, 205-06.

The language of vocation is *functional*, which correlates well with the ‘royal-functional’ view of the *imago Dei* favored by most Old Testament scholars.<sup>33</sup> The royal-functional view is based on the recognition that Genesis 1:26-28 says less about the nature of the *imago* than about the task assigned to humankind;<sup>34</sup> the assumption that the *imago Dei* was left undefined in Genesis because it did not require clarification; and the conviction that the biblical concept is best explicated in terms of similar ideas shared among other cultures in the ancient Near East.<sup>35</sup>

Representational images were common in the ancient Near East. Statues of gods were installed in temples as ‘the visible side of an otherwise invisible divine reality.’<sup>36</sup> These statues were not merely symbolic; they were believed to mediate the presence and power of the deity they signified. Because kings were thought to be earthly representatives of deity, they themselves were regarded as ‘images’ who mediated the divine presence and power. Kings were godlike beings elevated by divine election and appointed to rule. Like the deities they imaged, they had statues of themselves placed in distant territories to signify and establish their sovereignty. These images were thought to mediate royal power and hold back the forces of chaos that might threaten the king’s rule.<sup>37</sup>

As divine image bearers, human beings represent God in a way analogous to kings representing deity and statues representing kings.<sup>38</sup> In a remarkable ‘democratization’ of the *imago Dei* concept, Genesis 1 indicates that all humans – not just rulers or other elites – are called to mediate God’s presence, power, and rule in the earth.<sup>39</sup> Far from being burden-bearing slaves of the gods,<sup>40</sup> human beings are God’s vicars preparing the way for God’s own rule.<sup>41</sup> Middleton states, ‘the *imago Dei* designates a royal office or calling of human beings as God’s representatives and agents in the world, granted authorized power to share in God’s rule or administration of the earth’s resources and creatures.’<sup>42</sup>

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33 See Middleton, 29.

34 von Rad, Genesis, 59; Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 1, translated by Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 560.

35 For the purposes of this paper, detailed differences among the ancient Near Eastern sources may be ignored. Similarly, we leave to specialists the question of whether an Egyptian, Mesopotamian, or a yet undiscovered Canaanite tradition more directly shaped the biblical concept.

36 Andreas Schüle, ‘Made in the “Image of God”’: The Concepts of Divine Images in Gen 1-3,’ *Zeitschrift Für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 117, no. 1 (2005): 10.

37 Clines, 87-88; Middleton, 104-7; Hoekema, 67-68. The close link between the king and his image is indicated by the fact that reviling the image was considered rebellion against the throne. Grenz, 198.

38 Clines, 101; von Rad, *Genesis*, 60; Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 32.

39 Grenz, 202.

40 Clines, 99; Schüle, 6.

41 Pannenberg, 203.

42 Middleton, 27.

In keeping with this royal vocation, human beings have been granted 'dominion' in the earth. There is general agreement that dominion does not define the *imago Dei*, but the ideas are intertwined and inseparable. The syntax of 1:26 suggests that humans were created in the image *so that* they might exert dominion.<sup>43</sup> Psalm 8:5-6 says that human beings have been 'crowned with glory and honor' (a royal coronation) and given dominion over the creation. Human beings thus image God as they fulfill their royal vocation to mediate God's rule in the earth.

As already noted, the *imago Dei* is not lost in the 'fall' but remains the basis for human dignity (Gen. 9:6; Jas. 3:9). In royal-functional terms, one might say that in spite of sin humanity's God-given vocation has not been revoked.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, sin has certainly affected how human beings pursue their vocation. The primeval history shows how humankind has fulfilled ironically the mandate of 1:28, 'filling' the earth with violence (Gen. 6:11) and 'increasing' in evil (Gen. 6:5). Middleton notes that 'humans as *imago Dei* exercise their God-given power, but not in the manner that God intended'.<sup>45</sup> *From the perspective of its purpose*, one could say the *imago* has been lost and must be restored. That is exactly what the New Testament *does* say. But the New Testament could not envision a restoration of the *imago Dei* if humanity's God-given vocation had been revoked.<sup>46</sup>

When the New Testament says that Christ is the image of God, it is because he mediated the presence, power, and rule of God. Jesus came announcing the arrival of God's rule (Mark 1:15) and manifesting kingdom power (Matt. 12:28). His life fleshed out the spirit of his prayer, 'Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven' (Matt. 6:10), and he imaged God by always doing the Father's will (e.g., John 5:19, 36; 8:28; 10:37-38; 12:49; 14:10-11). Refusing to grasp at the prerogatives of sonship, Jesus obeyed to the point of death, and thereby established his royal rule (Phil. 2:5-11). In short, Christ imaged God by fulfilling the human vocation.<sup>47</sup> Christians image God as they are progressively conformed to the image

43 Clines, 96-97; Middleton, 53; Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Mifflintown, Penn.: Sigler Press, 1974), 161.

44 'Once an image in the Ancient Near East has become the dwelling-place of divine fluid, it remains the image of the god, regardless of the vicissitudes to which it is subjected. The Egyptian king is constantly the image of God until the moment of his death, when he is re-united with the god whose image he was while on earth'. Clines, 99.

45 Middleton, 220.

46 Here I verge on Emil Brunner's distinction between the formal and material image. The former consists in humanity's responsibility before God; the latter to humanity's faithful response to God. According to Brunner, only the material image has been lost in the fall. Brunner's valuable analysis is marred when he imposes the modern concept of I-Thou relationality upon the *imago*, but it is easy to see that his 'formal image' and 'material image' corresponds to my 'vocation' and 'fulfilled vocation'. See Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, vol. 2 of *Dogmatics*, translated by Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, Penn.: Westminster Press, 1952), 55-61.

47 In Pannenberg's words, 'our destiny as creatures is brought to fulfillment by Jesus Christ'. Pannenberg, 210.

of Christ. One day believers shall reign with him who even now reigns in heaven (2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 22:5).

The vocational view of the *imago Dei* is superior to its alternatives for at least three reasons. First, it derives its orientation from the results of historical-critical biblical scholarship and thus resists the lure of extra-biblical anthropologies and abstractions. Second, the vocational view subsumes within its framework the legitimate insights of the alternatives. It does not deny that human beings are rational, free, and relational; it merely notes that they are much else besides and claims that humans image God when *whole persons* mediate the divine presence, power, and rule. Third, the vocational view provides theological grounding for an actively engaged, missional approach to the world. If the *imago Dei* is constitutive of the human and entails the fulfillment of a God-given vocation, then the fulfillment of this vocation is the actualization of the human. Put differently, human beings find themselves as they lose themselves in service to God. When Jesus said to his followers, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me; go therefore and make disciples of all nations', he was calling God's vice-regents to find their true identity and recover authentic humanity.

### Ethical implications

The *imago Dei* is a theological concept with ethical implications. I will briefly note four of them.

#### *1. Human beings possess an inalienable dignity that must be respected.*

Because human dignity is derived from God and his call, it can be sullied but not lost. Because all humankind is created in God's image, equal dignity belongs to both sexes and to people of every race, ethnic group, and tribe. Even those who reject God and his summons retain the dignity of persons subject to his attention and care. It is this inalienable dignity that makes the degradation of human beings disturbing, painful, and tragic. Created to image God on earth, refugees live in squalid settlements, women are forced into prostitution, children are sold into slavery or compelled to become soldiers, and the mentally ill live homeless on city streets. Dignity calls for respect, and an '*imago Dei* ethic' requires:

- Respect for women – not by forcing them into subordinate roles and then praising their docility, but by allowing them equal access to education, economic opportunity, political power, and spiritual leadership.
- Respect for the 'other' – not by building walls and calling separation 'peace', but by sharing space with people of different colors, cultures, and creeds.
- Respect for the poor – not by imposing paternalistic charity, but by promoting economic justice and opportunity.
- Respect for enemies – not by appeasing or excusing them, but by standing firm against them, without bitterness, and in a spirit of peace.
- Respect for the shameful – not by condoning sin or self-abuse with a heartless moral relativism, but by speaking truth in love, expecting responsible behavior, and remaining ever humble and patient.

## 2. *Human beings must value and protect human life.*

On the basis of humankind's creation in the image of God, Genesis 9:6 forbids the unlawful taking of human life. Admittedly, the text seeks to ward off violence by threatening the same, but its basic concern is the protection of life. An *imago Dei* ethic thus requires all to choose:

- For life and against war, torture, and institutionalized violence of all kinds.
- For life and against abortion, infanticide, and the neglect of the infirm and elderly.
- For life and against the inequitable distribution of wealth among the nations of the world that inflicts suffering and feeds resentment.

Of course, policies to promote consistently pro-life principles must deal with existing realities, sometimes compromising the highest to achieve lesser goods that are within reach. But a pro-life ethic must seek to remain faithful to the ever-beckoning ideal.

## 3. *Human beings must resist ideologies of power.*

Postmodern thought has sensitized us to the role ideology plays in creating and sustaining hierarchies of power. These ideologies provide cover for injustice by denying its existence or excusing it as necessary. Sometimes these ideologies are explicitly religious, as when they appeal to divine providence or *karma*; at other times only implicitly so, as when they speak of the 'invisible hand' of market forces, the 'survival of the fittest', or 'manifest destiny'.

Ancient Mesopotamia had an ideology of power that traced the origin of the monarchy to the gods.<sup>48</sup> Kings were the 'image' of deity and ruled by divine right. Crimes against the king were sins against heaven. Against this backdrop, it is striking that Genesis 1 says humankind – not just the king – is created in the divine image with a mandate to rule. This democratization of the image subverts ideologies by denying that hierarchies of power are embedded in the nature of things. All human beings are born to rule, but none are born to rule over other human beings. The right to rule, therefore, can only be justified on pragmatic grounds – that is, on the ruler's success in securing the common good. Governments are accountable to the persons they govern. An *imago Dei* ethic resists every effort to sacralize hierarchies of power.

## 4. *Human beings must care for the earth and non-human life.*

As God's vice-regents, humans have been given dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28). This dominion does not confer a right to poison the earth but rather a stewardship that must reflect the character of God.<sup>49</sup> Thus, humans should exercise dominion:

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48 For the general tenor of these remarks, I am indebted to Middleton, 185-231.

49 It has often been said that the language of dominion in Gen. 1:28 implies violent subjection. Some have traced the modern environmental crisis to this biblical motif of dominion. See Lynn White, 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', *Science* 155 (1967): 1203-07; *contra* Pannenberg, 204-05. The issue turns, not on word studies, but on the character of the God who sets the paradigm for dominion.

- In the image of the artisan who brings order to chaos by creating space, filling it, and blessing all creatures (Gen. 1).
- In the image of the gardener, who planted a garden and created a human being to till and keep it (Gen. 2).
- In the image of the creator of the new heavens and earth, who has resolved to redeem the earth from the wrong and woe that threaten to crush it.

In short, an *imago Dei* ethic accepts the responsibility to protect the ecosystem and restore it to health wherever possible.

## Conclusion

I have argued that the *imago Dei* is best interpreted as a God-given vocation. This view accords better than its alternatives with the witness of Old and New Testaments while subsuming the legitimate insights of those views within a missional framework. Perhaps most importantly, a vocational view of the image provides a theological foundation for a robust '*imago Dei* ethic'.

## Abstract

Christian theologians agree that human beings are defined by their creation 'in the image of God'. This agreement unravels when theologians try to specify the precise nature of the image. Given that the relevant biblical texts are few and ambiguous, different interpretations are inevitable. In this paper, I set out three alternative interpretations of these texts: the substantialist, relational, and vocational. I argue that the vocational view subsumes the legitimate insights of the other views into its own more biblically faithful perspective. I conclude with comments on some ethical implications that follow from a vocational view of the divine image.

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