

The Glorious Image  
of God

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# The Glorious Image of God

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# THE GLORIOUS IMAGE OF GOD

## 1. MAN, THE GLORIOUS IMAGE OF GOD

The Scriptures present us with a very high view of man. It is the great dignity of humanity which gives the very high number of statements describing the corruption of humanity their potency. The glory of man, however, lies not in himself but in his relationship to God. Hence David wrote in Psalm 8:

- <sup>1</sup> O LORD, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth!  
You have set your glory above the heavens.
- <sup>2</sup> Out of the mouths of babes and infants  
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,  
to silence the enemy and the avenger.
- <sup>3</sup> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;
- <sup>4</sup> what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?<sup>1</sup>
- <sup>5</sup> Yet you have made them a little lower than God,  
and crowned them with glory and honor.
- <sup>6</sup> You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
you have put all things under their feet,

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<sup>1</sup> The NRSV aims to avoid gender specific language where none is needed. Here 'human beings' translates the Hebrew word *enōsh* (man) and 'mortals' the Hebrew *ben ādām* (son of man). A problem with this arises when the New Testament, and Jesus himself in particular, chooses to use the phrase 'Son of Man'.

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<sup>7</sup> all sheep and oxen,  
and also the beasts of the field,  
<sup>8</sup> the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.  
<sup>9</sup> O LORD, our Sovereign,  
how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Ps. 8:1–9).

The wonder expressed in this Psalm is not that man is glorious but that such a glorious God should form such an intimacy with him that this creature may actually administer all else in creation. Some two hundred years later, the prophet Isaiah records God saying:

I am the LORD, that is my name;  
my glory I give to no other,  
nor my praise to idols (Isa. 42:8).

Plainly, then, the implication is that God has created humanity to live in such intimacy with himself that to see God means also to see man the creature standing within the glory of God. Inasmuch as the Creator is later more fully revealed as Trinity,<sup>2</sup> we may say that creation bestowed on man not merely existence over against God but a participation in the divine nature of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Peter's perception of redemption, in 2 Peter 1, indicates that the grace of God restores men and women to their true creaturely status:

May grace and peace be yours in abundance in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.<sup>3</sup> His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.<sup>4</sup> Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:2–4).

When we read the accounts of creation in Genesis 1–2 we are presented with a stylised description of the place of man in the divine

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<sup>2</sup> From early in the history of the church, it has been suggested that the plural word *elohim*, used for God in Genesis 1:26, may contain the implication of plurality in unity: 'Let us make Adam in our image, according to our likeness . . . So *elohim* created Adam in his image.' Given such statements as Deut. 6:4 (even with its range of possible translations), I think that such an implication is unlikely.

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economy. In particular, God is described as choosing to ‘make [*ādām*] in our image, according to our likeness’ (Gen. 1:26) and as creating *ādām* ‘in his image’ (v. 27). The words ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ have prompted some to suggest that a distinction may be in the writer’s mind. Philip Hughes summarises some of the issues:<sup>3</sup>

There has long been an opinion that in the terminology of Genesis 1:26, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness,’ a distinction of meaning or nuance is intended between the nouns ‘image’ and ‘likeness.’<sup>4</sup> Etymological considerations, however, are not necessarily related to semantic reality, as the history of language shows over and over again. In general, those who postulate a distinction between the two terms have tended to understand ‘image’ as referring to the natural or physical and ‘likeness’ as referring to the spiritual or ethical aspect of man’s constitution, or, more philosophically expressed, as differentiating between ‘form’ and ‘matter’ in the being of humanity. Some have even convinced themselves that the use of different prepositions in this verse—‘*in* our image’ and ‘*after* our likeness’—confirms the rightness of making a distinction between the import of the nouns. But the precarious character of these judgments is demonstrated by the following considerations. For one thing, the statement in verse 27, which announces the fulfilment of the decision of verse 26, that ‘God created man in his own image,’ without the addition of ‘after his own likeness,’ suggests that the combination of ‘image’ and ‘likeness’ in the earlier verse is designed to convey but one notion, not two. For another, in the broader context of these opening chapters of Genesis precisely the same nouns and prepositions are treated as interchangeable. Thus in Genesis 5:1 we read that man was created ‘*in* the *likeness* of God,’ and in verse 3 of the same chapter that Adam ‘became the father of a son *in* his own *likeness*, *after* his *image*’: the reordering and recombination of the terms at issue could not be more complete. It follows that to say ‘in or after the image’ is the same as saying ‘in or after the likeness.’ The terms are employed here synonymously, and the form of expression is better explained, as, for example, Martin Luther and Emil Brunner explain it, as a case of Hebrew parallelism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1989, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> “Image” in Gen. 1:26 corresponds to the Hebrew *tselem*, which in the Greek (LXX) is rendered *eikōn* and in the Latin (Vg) *imago*; and “likeness” to the Hebrew *dēmuth*, which in the Greek (LXX) is rendered *homoiōsis* and in the Latin (Vg) *similitudo*’ (Hughes, *The True Image*, p. 7, n. 3).

<sup>5</sup> P. E. Hughes, *The True Image*, pp. 7f., n. 4 says:

James Barr, in an article entitled ‘The Image of God in the Book of Genesis—a Study of Terminology’ (*Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Vol. 51 [1968–69], pp. 11ff.),

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To a certain extent, these semantic questions lose some of their significance when the whole creation account is considered in the light of what we have said above. To be ‘in the image of God’ must relate to the intimacy which created man had with God and, indeed, the second creation account (Gen. 2:4ff.) carries this sense. There man is a living being precisely because God breathed into him ‘the breath of life’ (v. 7). While the Hebrew word here used for ‘breath’ (*neshamah*; cf. LXX *pnoē*) is not the word used for the Spirit (or, spirit) of God—*ruach*—elsewhere the Old Testament writers do identify the spirit by which man lives with the *ruach* of God (Gen. 6:3, 17; 7:15, 22; Job 27:3; 33:4; Ps. 104:29–30).

To be in the image of God is, then, a high dignity for man since it implies first and foremost intimacy of relationship. Later questions as to the precise meaning of ‘the image of God’ involved the question, ‘In what respect is man a copy or reflection of God?’ There is a difficulty in answering this, inasmuch as we lack precise detail in the accounts of creation. Yet the question is not without significance, since, when God had brought Noah and his family through the flood, he restated the creation blessing but added a new element concerning blood:

Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood.<sup>5</sup> For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings [*ādām*], each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human [*ādām*] life.

<sup>6</sup>Whoever sheds the blood of a human [*ādām*],  
by a human [*ādām*] shall that person’s blood be shed;  
for in his own image  
God made humankind [*ādām*] (Gen. 9:4–6).

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suggested the reason for the use of two words, and not one only, as follows: ‘The probability is that, though *tselem* is the more important word, it is also the more novel and the more ambiguous. *Dēmuth* is added in order to define and limit its meaning, by indicating that the sense intended for *tselem* must lie within the part of its range which overlaps with the range of *dēmuth*. This purpose having been accomplished when both words are used together at the first mention, it now becomes possible to use one of the two alone subsequently without risk of confusion. In later exegesis the loss of sense for this literary device caused interpreters to suppose that the “image” might be one thing and the “likeness” something quite other’.

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So close is man to God that to shed the blood of a human being is to attack God himself. We should also note James' comment that 'with [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God' (James 3:9). This is surely what lies behind the prohibition against making 'graven' images in Exodus 20:4; there must not be any graven (hacked or carved) images<sup>6</sup> nor any cast images (Exod. 34:17). We are to understand that an idol is not only a denial of the majesty of God (cf. the scorn poured on idols in the prophets, see Isa. 40:18–20; Jer. 10:1–10; etc.) but a complete perversion of the true nature of the living image, man. Thus Paul wrote:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.<sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.<sup>20</sup> Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse;<sup>21</sup> for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened.<sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools;<sup>23</sup> and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles (Rom. 1:18–23).

They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling the image or resembling those things over which the living image was given dominion. Later Paul put it that 'all have sinned and fall short [continually] of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). 'Rejection of God is really rejection of one's *essential* self . . . Sin is against true human nature . . .'<sup>7</sup> Of course, there is no hint that this would imply any deity in man.

Man, created in the 'image of God', is a glorious being. When the full meaning of the 'image' is discussed, the variety of suggestions may lead us to conclude that 'the full meaning of the image of God is nowhere unfolded for us'.<sup>8</sup> While this is not completely accurate, as we shall see, it nonetheless demonstrates that it may be true that 'Genesis

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<sup>6</sup> A different Hebrew word to that of Genesis 1.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey C. Bingham, *Man of Dust! Man of Glory!* NCPI, Blackwood, 2006, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Herman Bavinck, quoted in G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics—Man: The Image of God* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1962), p. 72.

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1:26 [is] “one of the most mysterious passages in all of Scripture,” one which is “for man, since the Fall, a deep secret” . . . we can not analyse it, but we must understand it and respond to it in adoration.<sup>9</sup>

Attempts to understand the ‘image’ have resulted in a number of solutions, most of which need not occupy us here, although they do open up various aspects of what it means to be human. Basically, they involve three areas. The first is that of human nature itself. By this is implied that the image of God lies in man being a moral being, corresponding to the moral being of God. Man is created to reflect and express the ‘communicable attributes’ of God. We will return to this later.

The second is that of relationships. Since God is Trinity in his essence, and since the persons of the Godhead exist in intimate relationship with each other, it follows that the image of God also finds his identity in relationships. Thus man is created to relate to God, to his fellow man and to the creation:

Brunner points out that God created all of the other creatures in their final or finished state. They were created what they were meant to be and that they have remained. Man, on the other hand, remains within God’s workshop, within his hands. God did not make man in a finished state. Rather, God is producing in man the ‘material realization’ of the freedom, responsibility, and answerability which man has received from God. It is the act of response, the relationship with God, that constitutes the material image. God in effect says to man, ‘Thou art mine.’ Man’s having been endowed with the capability of being spoken to, and the freedom to respond, is the formal image. When he does indeed respond by saying, ‘Yes, I am thine,’ then the material image is also present.

We should not draw the inference that the image is substantive or, as Brunner puts it, structural. He points out that even the formal aspect is not structural; it is relational. Being in the formal image of God means that man stands responsible and answerable before God; hence the image is relational. Even when man turns his back on God, thus losing the image in the material sense, he still stands ‘before God.’ He still has responsibility; he is still a human being. Being in the material image of God means ‘being-in-the-Word’ of God. This is the New Testament use of the term ‘image of God.’ It hardly needs to be pointed out that the material sense of the image is dynamic and relational, not static and substantive.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> J. C. Sikkels, quoted in Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1985, p. 503.

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. . . Barth speaks of the image as still present within the human, inasmuch as he still is man. The nature of man remains unchanged regardless of his sin. Sin does not and cannot re-create man, making bad a being who was originally good. Rather, it conceals his true nature from himself and his fellows, but not from God.

Barth sees the image of God as consisting not only in the vertical relationship between man and God, but also in the horizontal relationship between men. It is not advisable to ask in which of man's peculiar attributes or attitudes the image of God is to be found. Such a question assumes that the image of God is some quality in man, an assumption Barth emphatically denies. The image is not something man is or does. Rather, the image is related to the fact that God willed into existence a being that, like himself, can be a partner. In that man is capable of relationship, he is a 'repetition' or 'duplication' of the divine being.

Evidence that there is some sort of relationship within the Godhead is to be found in the very form of the decision to create: 'Let *us* make man.' Barth maintains that within the very being of God there is a counterpart; thus God experiences a genuine but harmonious self-encounter and self-discovery. Man reflects this aspect of God's nature on two levels—man experiences relationship with God and with man. The similarity between God and man, then, is that both experience I-Thou confrontation. It is, Barth maintains, peculiar that the writer of the creation account makes no mention of man's particular intellectual and moral talents and possibilities, his exercise of reason, if these characteristics do indeed constitute the image of God in man.

Barth insists that we must inquire further what this image of God consists of. Barth notes that in both Genesis 1:27 and 5:1-2 the statement that man was made in the image of God is coupled with the words 'male and female he created them.' The image of God in man, then, is found in man's being created male and female. Both within God and within man an 'I' and a 'Thou' confront each other. Man does not exist as a solitary individual, but as two persons confronting each other.

The image of God is rooted in what is common to man and the beasts: the differentiation into male and female . . . <sup>11</sup>

It is hard to avoid the implications of this aspect in today's world. The issues of sexuality are proving intractable because those arguing their cases do so often without a clear understanding of what true humanity is, that is, they do not have an *ontology* of man. This relational aspect is clear in that there are not two races, male and female, but one: male/female. Furthermore, it is plain that if the primary relationship is male/female it is also the first to suffer dislocation after the Fall.

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<sup>11</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, p. 505. Karl Barth has emphasised this point strongly in his *Dogmatics*.

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Related to this is the contention that no individual human being, of himself, constitutes the image of God:

We do well always to understand that according to the biblical picture there is only *one* image of God. This expressed itself first in two people, husband and wife, who by reproduction constituted a family out of which grew other families, then clans, tribes, nations, races. But always when few became many and many became thousands and thousands became millions, there was always one, and only one, *imago Dei*.

In that one image all human beings *participate*. But this participation means exactly what it says: all reflect one image, which like a tree producing ever more branches and foliage does not cease to be one and the same tree. It is the fact of participation in the one image of God that makes her, that makes him, a human being. But there is only one humanity which is the image of God. No one person is or has ever been *the* image of God. Only mankind, whether as two or as many, is *imago Dei*.<sup>12</sup>

In both Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:22, 45–49, Paul contrasts Adam and Christ, not merely as individuals but as representatives of humanity. All participate in Adam, just as ‘all’ participate in Christ. However, Paul also said that ‘a man ought not to have his head veiled, since he is the image and reflection [glory] of God; but woman is the reflection [glory] of man’ (1 Cor. 11:7). In this statement, the ‘man’ is specifically the ‘male’ (*anēr*). He is in no way superior to his wife (see vv. 8–12), indeed, she is his glory, but within the order of creation each has a distinct role and the woman is not described here as the image of God. And we should note that Christ was ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col. 1:15). In other words, as an individual, like other human beings, he was the image of God. Boer’s point, though valuable, is perhaps overstated.

The third area is that of function. The image of God is seen in what man does, or at least what he is created to do. As we have probably discerned, the various areas dealing with the image of God are not exclusive. So here, we ought to ask what it is that one who reflects the character of God and who is created for intimacy with him should do.

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<sup>12</sup> Harry R. Boer, *An Ember Still Glowing: Humankind as the Image of God*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1990, p. 7.

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When Genesis 1 says that God made man in his own image, it proceeds immediately to describe how:

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' (Gen. 1:28).

This placing of 'image' and 'dominion' together is similar to Psalm 8 where 'glory' and 'dominion' are connected. Bill Dumbrell has argued that the word 'image' carries the significance of something visible, and concludes:

By creation, man is then the visible representative in the created world of the invisible God . . .

If man in the image is thus being viewed in terms of a representative but derived kingship role in Gen. 1, then standing behind the representation, and being the reality of which the image is but a shadow, is the kingship of God.<sup>13</sup>

However, we go further and say that the obligations laid on man before the Fall were not qualitatively different from those laid upon him after the Fall. So a possible way of discovering the answer to the question of the image of God may lie in asking another question, 'What does the Lord require of these creatures?' Put in another form the question becomes, 'How may man measure his consistency with his own identity as the image of God?' and then, 'How may man know God's character?' Man's moral nature and his capacity and responsibility to choose, although initially only recounted in terms of the choice between the fruit of the two trees, meant that he was created to be continually making moral decisions. It would be naive not to see the two trees as representative of the moral realm in which man lived and to which he must continually relate. The choice in the garden was not substantially different from that which Moses presented to Israel:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live,

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<sup>13</sup> W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenantal Theology*, Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1984, p. 34.

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<sup>20</sup> loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob (Deut. 30:19–20).

What is meant is not that man lives in some continual existential moment of decision—that may also be true, but it is not the whole truth—but that man, by virtue of being created in the image of God, must continually reflect the character of God. Indeed, as ‘image’, man has no purpose beyond that. That fulfilling such a purpose is satisfying beyond imagination is repeatedly made plain in the Scriptures, for example:

I delight to do your will, O my God;  
your law is within my heart (Ps. 40:8, etc.).

Oh, how I love your law!  
It is my meditation all day long.  
<sup>98</sup> Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,  
for it is always with me.  
<sup>99</sup> I have more understanding than all my teachers,  
for your decrees are my meditation.  
<sup>100</sup> I understand more than the aged,  
for I keep your precepts.  
<sup>101</sup> I hold back my feet from every evil way,  
in order to keep your word.  
<sup>102</sup> I do not turn away from your ordinances,  
for you have taught me.  
<sup>103</sup> How sweet are your words to my taste,  
sweeter than honey to my mouth! (Ps. 119:97–103).

Were we to ask the psalmist, he would reply that the law he has in mind and heart is to be found in ‘Moses’, but plainly the law is not restricted to ‘Moses’. For example, ‘Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws’ (Gen. 26:5). Paul, in Romans 5:12–14, makes the same point:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—<sup>13</sup> sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. <sup>14</sup> Yet death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.

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The implication here is that sin was in the world before the law of Moses; that it is not reckoned where there is no law must mean that there was law before law, otherwise the previous statement becomes meaningless (v. 12). On the contrary, law existed and as a result of Adam's sin against that law, death exercised dominion right up to the point where law was put in specific covenantal form under Moses (and death has exercised dominion ever since).

J. A. Motyer has said:<sup>14</sup>

*Law in the Image of God.* Turning now to a very different genre of Scripture, we find in Lev. 19 that God has provided another image of himself on earth. Every aspect of human experience is gathered into this rich review of man's life under God's law: filial duty (vs. 3), religious commitment (vs. 4), ritual exactness (vs. 5), care of the needy (vs. 9), honesty in deed and word (vss. 11–12), and many more, touching on relationships and even on dress, hygiene, and horticulture. Yet all this variety suspends from one central truth: 'I am the Lord'. Lord is the divine name, the 'I am what I am' (Exod. 3:14), so that the significance of the recurring claim is not 'You must do what I tell you' (i.e., 'lord' as an authority word) but 'You must do this or that because I am what I am'; every precept of the law is a reflection of 'what I am.' Man is the living, personal image of God; the law is the written, preceptual image of God. The intention of Lev. 19 is declared at the outset: 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy' (vs. 2). The Lord longs for his people to live in his image, and to that end he has given them his law.

*A Truly Human Life.* When man in the image of God and law in the image of God come together in the fully obedient life, then man is indeed 'being himself.' His nature is the image of God, and the law is given both to activate and to direct that nature into a truly human life; any other life is subhuman. Of course, it is true that in a world of sinners the law, regrettably, has to give itself to the task of curbing and rebuking antisocial and degrading practices, but OT law has, to a far greater extent, the function of liberating man to live according to his true nature. For it is only when man finds the law of liberty that he becomes free. For this reason the OT asserts that the law has been given for our good, to bring us to a hitherto unrealized fullness of life (Deut. 4:1; 5:33; 8:1).

His observation that the law is the written preceptual image of God, while not reflecting any use of the word 'image' in the Scriptures, at least has drawn our attention to the function of law. The law which

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<sup>14</sup> J. A. Motyer, 'Law, Biblical Concept of', in Walter A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1990), p. 624.

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existed from creation and continues to be the expression of the character of God, by which the image of God would understand its own being.

Man, the image, is in the glorious position, not of becoming anything, but of being the reflection of all that is true of God. He is this by participation in the glory of God and thus in the whole purpose of God for creation. Moreover, this glorious honour flowed out of the nature of God as Creator/Father. Adam was the son of God (Luke 3:38). He did not become the son.

If we must come to a conclusion concerning the nature of the image of God, it will not be by making a choice between the various options presented above. On the contrary, we must stand in wonder that our mental struggles do not leave us uncertain but force us to worship. It is not possible to 'reduce' man, the image, to a definition. As the psalmist was left breathless with wonder in Psalm 8, we can probably do no better than echo Geoff Bingham's phrase: Anything that God is, man is *like* that; but anything God is essentially, man is none of that.<sup>15</sup> Psalm 103:13–14 remind us that:

As a father has compassion for his children,  
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.  
<sup>14</sup> For he knows how we were made;  
he remembers that we are dust.

It is the glory of man that he need not ever attempt to be other than dust. It is as dust of the ground that he receives the breath of life and participates in the life of God.

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<sup>15</sup> G. Bingham, *Man of Dust!* p. 2.

## 2. JESUS, THE GLORIOUS IMAGE OF GOD

The subject of the *imago Dei* reveals the great glory of man to be of such a dimension that we may say that only in worship can it be fully comprehended. This is, of course, true of all theology. Theology which is not *doxological* can never proceed beyond the reasoning capacities of man into the dynamic of God's self-revelation.

It is the *self*-revelation which is most significant. This is because ultimately all we know of the image of God we know because of the incarnation of the Word. This is: (i) because Christ is himself the true image of the invisible God; and (ii) because in and through him we know restoration into the true image.

For example, we saw that there are three basic areas which delineate the substance of the image, namely the moral elements, the relational and the functional. The Scriptures not only say that Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15) but indicate strongly the way he fits the criteria of the three areas. We will look at this in more detail below, but what must occupy us first is Paul's statement in Colossians and its implications for our understanding of the person of Christ:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; <sup>16</sup> for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. <sup>18</sup> He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. <sup>19</sup> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell . . . (Col. 1:15–19).

When Paul says that 'He is the image of the invisible God', to whom is he referring? The answer is that he is referring to the 'beloved Son' of verse 13. But does Paul mean that the pre-incarnate Son was the image of God or is he only saying that as God incarnate, that is, as the man Jesus, he is the image?<sup>16</sup> The rest of the paragraph continues the

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<sup>16</sup> Peter O'Brien says: 'As the first title of majesty, "image" emphasizes Christ's relation to God. The term points to his revealing of the Father on the one hand and his

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description of the majesty of Christ. He is ‘the firstborn of all creation’. Were this phrase to be taken in isolation and in its modern English sense, we may be tempted to assume that the Son was born as a result of God’s creative activity. This, however, is quite different from Paul’s intention, as can be seen from what follows; ‘for in him all things were created’. The ‘for’ (Gr. *hoti*) indicates that he is the firstborn *because* he is the one by whom creation came into being.

Furthermore, ‘firstborn’ has a meaning in the Old Testament which is far fuller than merely ‘the first in a sequence’. W. Michaelis writes:

The examples of בְּכוֹר [b<sup>e</sup>chor] or πρωτότοκος [prōtotokos] and related terms . . . express the great importance which the firstborn had in the experience both of antiquity in general and of the men of the OT in particular. Because the land belongs to God, God has a claim to the firstfruits and the firstborn of animals and men . . . In the family the firstborn son took precedence, cf. Gen. 25:29ff.; 49:3; 2 Ch. 21:3 and also the echo of this in the laws of inheritance.<sup>17</sup>

With this Old Testament background, we would understand that Christ, as the firstborn, stands as the one to whom all creation belongs as the inheritance. Since elsewhere Christ is specified as the ‘only begotten Son’ there is no sense that he must share creation with others. It is by virtue of the fact that we are taken up into his sonship that we become fellow heirs (Rom. 8:17). Michaelis concludes that in Colossians 1:15:

The only remaining possibility is to take [prōtotokos] hierarchically. What is meant is the unique supremacy of Christ over all creatures as the Mediator of their creation . . . If πρωτότοκος is selected in Col. 1:15 and then again in 1:18 to express this supremacy, this is because of the great importance which the term ‘firstborn’ took on as a word for rank in the OT and then retained in later Judaism.<sup>18</sup>

Since Christ is also described as ‘the firstborn from the dead’ (v. 18), this second use of the word *prōtotokos* adds to the picture of Christ’s

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pre-existence on the other—it is both functional and ontological’, *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC vol. 44, Word, Waco, 1982), p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> W. Michaelis, πρωτότοκος [prōtotokos], in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 6, (eds G. Kittell and G. Friedrich, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977), pp. 872f.

<sup>18</sup> πρωτότοκος, *T.D.N.T.*, vol. 6, p. 879.

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supremacy. In this case he is supreme as leader of those who have come out of death. This is consistent with the language Paul used in verse 13, 'He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son'. Paul's reason for all this is to demonstrate in what way in all things the beloved Son is pre-eminent (v. 18).

Taken as a whole, the language of Colossians 1:15–19 leads us to see the Son at every point supreme, both before creation and now. But are we then to take the statement, 'He is the image of the invisible God', to mean that before the incarnation the Son was the image of God? My suggestion is that this passage, while strongly acknowledging the 'pre-existence' of Christ (a foolish term really), does so to indicate the dimensions of the pre-eminence which the *incarnate* Son now has. Thus verses 19–20 seem to have particular emphasis on the person and work of the incarnate Son:

For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell,<sup>20</sup> and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

If this is so, then there is no reason why the language of 'the image' should not be a reference to the man Jesus.

I suppose that I have other reasons for wanting to reach this conclusion. They flow from what I see as the wonder of the incarnation and the focus on the nature of the humanity of Jesus Christ. For example, while the New Testament authors quite obviously believe that Jesus is God in the flesh, as for example seen in the large number of occasions when Old Testament titles and designations of God are applied without explanation to Jesus (cf. Luke 2:9 and Isa. 42:8; Luke 2:11 and Isa. 43:11; Acts 2:21 and Acts 2:36; John 12:39–41; Isa. 6:9–10; etc.) the thrust of much of the New Testament seems to be to stress Jesus' *humanity*. John explicitly does so, apparently over against the claims of teachers later known as *docetists*. In 1 John 4:1–3, he argues that false prophets, those teachers who do not speak by *the* Spirit, are those who assert that Jesus' humanity is somehow not the sphere of salvation.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Note the comment by Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John* (The Anchor Bible, Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1982), p. 505: 'the issue is not that the secessionists are denying the incarnation or the physical reality of Jesus' humanity; they are denying

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Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.<sup>2</sup> By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,<sup>3</sup> and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world.

This is not to suggest that there was anything simplistic about the incarnation. Paul called it a great mystery:

Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory (1 Tim. 3:16).

If, for Paul, the incarnation is God revealed in the flesh, for John it was ‘the Word’ who became flesh (John 1:14).<sup>20</sup> For Matthew, it is ‘God with us’ (1:23) and ‘I am with you always’ (28:20). Repeatedly we are presented with comments indicating the aspects of true humanity found in Jesus. Geoffrey Bingham has put it that:

The normal ways of showing his humanity are to point out that he became weary, thirsty, hungry, that he laughed, wept, slept, talked, in fact had what we call human faculties and experiences, and of course this is right. What is often missed is that in fact he did things far beyond what men normally do, but which are still human things. Peter is careful to point out that because of the anointing Jesus of Nazareth does remarkable things, ‘doing good and healing all those who were oppressed of the devil’ [Acts 10:38].

Hence we say he was truly man, rather than merely describe him as ‘sinless’, and ‘perfect’. It is true he was sinless and perfect, but it is better to describe him as true man, rather than ‘special’—or ‘super’—man.<sup>21</sup>

This comment is quite profound. Rarely does anyone observe that what we call the ‘miraculous’ in Jesus’ life and ministry was actually done by the man Jesus. But assumptions to the contrary are precisely what

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that what Jesus was or did in the flesh was related to his being the Christ, i.e. was salvific’, cf. pp. 51–54, 73–76.

<sup>20</sup> Note the textual variants as described in the footnotes to the various translations. The Greek has ‘*who* was revealed in the flesh’, the antecedent plainly being ‘God’ in verse 15; some MSS have ‘*which* was revealed’ and others ‘*God* was revealed’.

<sup>21</sup> *The Person and Work of Christ*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2007, p. 52.

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Brown notes above in relation to the secessionists in 1 John. What we are observing in Jesus is at all times what true humanity does. Jesus' anointing with the Spirit at his baptism leads us exactly to this point. True humanity is to be found not in the humanity we express but in him. Hence the description in the letter to the Hebrews:

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. <sup>15</sup> For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. <sup>16</sup> Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

<sup>5:1</sup> Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. <sup>2</sup> He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; <sup>3</sup> and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. <sup>4</sup> And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

<sup>5</sup> So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

‘You are my Son,  
today I have begotten you’;

<sup>6</sup> as he says also in another place,

‘You are a priest forever,  
according to the order of Melchizedek.’

<sup>7</sup> In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. <sup>8</sup> Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; <sup>9</sup> and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 4:14–5:10).

This description of Jesus is stressing his humanity. It must, otherwise his high priesthood would be an illusion. He must be chosen from among men. The mention of the quote from Psalm 2:7, ‘You are my Son [etc.]’, is surely a reference to his ‘calling’ as high priest, which we know from the gospel stories to be the event of his baptism. The godly fear, the reverent submission (v. 7), was specifically ‘in the days of his flesh’. The only distinction between Jesus the high priest and other Jewish high priests is in the area of his freedom from sin. In that area Jesus stands alongside Adam *prior* to Adam's sin.

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Again, we may observe that prior to the incarnation there was no 'Jesus' and prior to his anointing there was no 'Christ' (*anointed one*). It was the man (the newborn baby) who was given the name Jesus, and that was because of the task he was to accomplish (Matt. 1:21).

The principle governing the work of atonement is that it is in man that both judgement and redemption are to be effected. This is because the eternal purpose of God to have a people (this can be discerned from the goal of history revealed in the book of the Revelation, etc.) has been denied by Adam (i.e. man) and those who participate in his (now) fallen humanity, so it will be accomplished *by* the new man (Eph. 2:15; cf. NRSV, 'one new humanity') and so in those who participate in his manhood (cf. Eph. 1:1, 'To the saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus'; Eph. 4:22, 24, AV, 'put off the old *man* . . . put on the new *man*').

For this to be achieved, the old man must die. That is because the old man is corrupt through guilt and any bride drawn from his humanity would be polluted and unfit for such a lover as the eternal Son (see Eph. 5:25–27). The great section of Romans, from 5:12 onwards, deals with salvation with this in view. In Romans 5:12–21, Paul shows how any human being may, indeed, be justified by faith. How can the 'propitiation through faith in his blood' (3:25, AV) come about? The answer is that all that Adam had brought by his act of disobedience, Christ by his act of obedience had completely and overwhelmingly removed (see 5:17, 20). Even more, Adam is dead (Rom. 6:6)! Our old *man* was crucified. The nexus between Adam and those now in Christ has been irrevocably broken. Hence Paul concludes that 'you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6:11).

Romans 8:1–4 is significant in this matter:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.<sup>2</sup> For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.<sup>3</sup> For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,<sup>4</sup> so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Condemnation is no more because God sent his own Son in the *likeness of sinful* flesh and to deal with sin. This does not imply any false

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incarnation. The fact that Jesus looked like any other human being but was not sinful meant a *genuine* incarnation.

This is why I am suggesting that the description of Jesus Christ as the image of the invisible God is a reference to his incarnate humanity. His pre-incarnate relationship to the Father is not in view at all here. We may well understand that the eternal Father always found the full expression of his fatherhood in the eternal Son; the point being argued is that the true image of God is now to be seen in the man Jesus. This is true still because the Scriptures give no indication that the eternal Son has ever divested himself of his manhood. One cannot help but wonder and worship that grace should be so powerful that it has effected a change within the Godhead. The eternal Son has taken flesh and never removed it.

This explains the sense of awe we find in the New Testament when the apostles gave their testimony. It is the man Jesus who was raised and who has been exalted at the right hand of God. It is the man Jesus who has received the promise of the Holy Spirit and who has poured out the Spirit on all who believe (Acts 2:22–33). It is the man Jesus who will return (Acts 1:9–11) and the Thessalonians are described as waiting ‘for [God’s] Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus who rescues us from the wrath that is coming’ (1 Thess. 1:10).

With the passage of time, we can only begin to imagine the amazement that gripped John on Patmos. The one whom he saw in majestic splendour, the lamb standing as though it had been slain and now administering all of the purpose of God, was none other than the very Jesus whom he had known so intimately (cf. 1 John 1:1).

From a theological perspective, this soteriological<sup>22</sup> understanding of Christ the image of God, means we do not have to struggle with such questions as whether humanity was created in the image of God or in the image of the image. By that some suggest that if the Son was always the image then he stands as the paradigm for our creation and hence also its goal. This study is not attempting to enter that domain. It

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<sup>22</sup> Relating to salvation.

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is vital that we do so at some time, but for the present the focus is on Jesus Christ, the man, as the true image of God. Having seen that, we are now brought back, past the distortions of fallen humanity which hitherto had been our only experience of the image, to the pure joy of seeing creation in all its radiance.

It also means that we can understand the great desire of believers for the return of Jesus. Their ‘Come, Lord Jesus!’ (Rev. 22:20) is both an expression of pure desire for their bridegroom and, with that, a desire for the fullness of what we presently know only by faith. Hence Colossians 3:4, ‘When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory’, and Romans 8:18–21:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.<sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God;<sup>20</sup> for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope<sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

### 3. CONFORMED TO THE IMAGE OF GOD

The two previous sections have shown us both the glory of man as created and the way we now come to know that glory, namely, in the person of the last Adam, the second man, Jesus. It is plain that the approach which was taken ran counter to much popular teaching concerning the person of Christ, which tends to regard him as the God/Man but in such a way as in fact to minimise his humanity.

The early church realised the problem of understanding the way the deity and the humanity of Christ were co-existent in one person and the records demonstrate the extent of their deliberations on the subject.<sup>23</sup> It has been suggested, validly, that without the incarnation there is no Christianity. James Dunn began his book, *Christology in the Making*, with the reflection:

[In order to appreciate the centrality of the incarnation] We need only think of the controversies of the early centuries which shaped the classic credal statements of Christianity—controversies basically as to whether it was possible for the divine truly to become one with humanity without ceasing to be divine, creeds all striving to express the central claim that true God became true man in Jesus Christ. We need only recall the famous assertions which proved decisive then and which still echo down the centuries with telling power—particularly the striking epigrams of Athanasius: ‘He became man that we might become divine’ (. . . *De Inc.* 54); and Gregory of Nazianzus: ‘What has not been assumed cannot be restored . . . it is what is united with God that is saved’ (*Ep.* 101.7); or the later thesis of Anselm in *Cur Deus Homo?*—

If, therefore, as is certain, it is needful that the heavenly state be perfected from among men, and this cannot be unless the above-mentioned satisfaction (for sin) be made, which no one *can* make except God, and no one *ought* to make except man, it is necessary that one who is God-man should make it (II.6).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See the various works on Historical Theology for an examination of the topic from this perspective; e.g. Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Banner of Truth, London, 1969); William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, vol. 1 (Banner of Truth, London, 1960); J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (A & C Black, London, 1977).

<sup>24</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, SCM Press, London, 1989, p. 1.

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These quotations from ancient writers highlight the two elements which dominate the subject, namely the cause for, and the goal of the incarnation: (i) the cause is the need to make satisfaction for sin; and (ii) the goal is that 'we might become divine'. This latter phrase ought not to be taken simplistically. We have already seen that man was created as one with the Creator without being, nor expected to be, the equal of the Creator, and the incarnation can only be understood as having the restoration of this unity in view (see John 14:17, 23; etc.).

It is the cause of the incarnation which must occupy us. In the previous study we examined the reason for the description of Jesus as 'the image of God'. There I suggested that Jesus was the image of God because of his high-priestly office and function. The incarnation and the atonement (which cannot be seen as separate events) was the establishment of a new humanity flowing out of the new image of God, Jesus Christ. But how are we to understand the objects of this great saving action? If created man is glorious, what is fallen man? Is he still the image of God or has that image been lost; or, further, has the image been defaced but not lost, and, if so, to what extent? To the question, 'What is man . . . ?' (Ps. 8:4), the reply is that man has been made a little lower than God (v. 5). But the writer of Hebrews, quoting the Psalm, observes that, in subjecting all things to him, God left nothing outside his control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to him (Heb. 2:8). All we see, in this regard, is Jesus. Now in saying that we do not *yet*<sup>25</sup> see all things in subjection to him, he means that all things will one day be subject to him; now, however, we see Christ the man, the pioneer and the perfecter of our faith (Heb. 2:10; 12:2).<sup>26</sup> Christ, then, stands over against fallen humanity. He is what man was created to be but has ceased to be.

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<sup>25</sup> Gr. οὐπω.

<sup>26</sup> In an interesting note, P. E. Hughes has argued that 'we do not yet see all things in subjection to him' is in fact a reference to Christ and not to man. He suggests that this is so because 'enemy forces are still active and as yet unsubdued in the world . . . [only] faith penetrates to the great reality that Jesus is already enthroned on high' (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1977, pp. 86f.).

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When we return to the account of creation, we come again to the statement, 'Let us make man in our image' (Gen. 1:26, RSV). We have seen the three areas to which the image relates; man's moral being, his relationships and his function under the divine dominion. To focus on one aspect of man's being as the image is probably not helpful. Keil and Delitzsch say that 'The image of God consists . . . in the spiritual personality of man . . .'<sup>27</sup> But that approach seems to overlook the fact that man is always presented to us as a unity. He is not body *and* mind *and* spirit; he is body-mind-spirit. This does not imply at all that God must, therefore, have a body. All it is saying is that this creature, man, has been made to continually reflect the truth of God's being. Man's body is both part of his creatureliness *and* of his great dignity.

In Genesis 5:1 we read that God made Adam 'in the likeness of God', but in Genesis 5:3 we are told that 'when Adam had lived one hundred thirty years, he became the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth'. On verse 3, Keil and Delitzsch have commented, '[Adam] transmitted the image of God in which he was created, not in the purity in which it came direct from God, but in the form given to it by his own self-determination, modified and corrupted by sin'.<sup>28</sup> This is also the position of Calvin.<sup>29</sup> Wenham, on the other hand, simply observes that 'This verse makes the point that the image and likeness of God which was given to Adam at creation was inherited by his sons. It was not obliterated by the fall.'<sup>30</sup> Now while Keil and Delitzsch and Calvin do take the sin of Adam strongly into consideration, it does not seem valid to apply it to Genesis 5:3. I say this first because the context does not support the contention that Adam, as the likeness<sup>31</sup> of God (v. 1) did anything but produce a son 'according to his image'. If Adam was the image and likeness of God so, then, was Seth. Interestingly, Genesis 4:25-26 points out that in the

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<sup>27</sup> C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol. 1—The Pentateuch, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988, p. 63.

<sup>28</sup> Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1, p. 124.

<sup>29</sup> John Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis*, Banner of Truth, London, 1965, pp. 228f.

<sup>30</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC, vol. 1, Word, Waco, 1987, p. 127.

<sup>31</sup> Note that 'image' and 'likeness' have been shown to be synonymous; see pp. 3ff.

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days of Seth and his offspring ‘people began to invoke the name of the LORD’. To imply that Seth was born with the defaced image of God seems contradicted by the description of the behaviour which arose in the time of Seth and his son Enosh and which was, presumably, associated with them.

Secondly, there is the statement in Genesis 9:5–6 instituting the death penalty:

For your own lifeblood I will surely require a reckoning: from every animal I will require it and from human beings, each one for the blood of another, I will require a reckoning for human life.

<sup>6</sup> Whoever sheds the blood of a [man],  
by a [man] shall that person’s blood be shed;  
for in his own image  
God made [man].

The reason why animals may be killed (and eaten) and man may not be killed lies in man’s unique status as being ‘in [God’s] own image’. What makes this statement significant is that it comes in the context of acknowledging that horrible sin is something to be both reckoned with and punished. Similarly, the New Testament also sees man as being still the image of God. Thus:

With [the tongue] we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God (James 3:9),

and Paul, when discussing the relationships of men and women in the church described the man (male) as ‘the image and glory of God (RSV, et al.)’ and the woman as the glory of the man (1 Cor. 11:7). If, then, the image of God remains, how are we to understand the present nature and behaviour of human beings? When we are faced with such devastating observations as Genesis 6:5:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually,

and Jeremiah 17:9:

The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse—who can understand it?

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among many others, we are surely aware of the deep corruption which exists in humanity and, sadly, all too often we see this corruption expressed in our own time and culture. But, at the same time, we are also faced with some features of present humanity which do not seem to be like this at all. Great deeds of heroism, incredible sacrifice and love are often in evidence in the same context as the horror of human depravity. Therefore, merely to preach that people are ‘totally corrupt’ without taking the full biblical picture into consideration may indicate that we have failed to see the complexity of mankind’s life and situation.

There are undoubtedly facets of human nature which are fearful and which are expressed with destructive energy. The history of man after the Fall is a chronicle of this. We see the destruction of the freedom between the man and the woman and their puerile attempts to redress the problem in Genesis 3:1–7. This is followed by the murder of Abel by Cain (4:1–8) and the subsequent mindless vengeance of Lamech (4:23–24). Even in Israel there are acts of deep perversity recorded. In Romans 1:18–32 we are given an explanation of this state of affairs. God in his wrath, his settled and implacable opposition to evil, has acted against those who, knowing the truth, have deliberately suppressed it by acts of wickedness. The truth of humanity as the image of God remains, and that is the dilemma of man; God constantly confronts him. Consequently man acts against the truth but cannot avoid the truth.

The sins described in this passage are evidence of God ‘giving man up’ to his choices. In particular, the rejection of the truth of God must imply a direct rejection of man’s own being as the image of God. As a consequence, man, being a worshipping creature, is compelled to worship idols. These are the gods he makes in his own image, that is, because they seem to answer man’s own perception of his need. Of course, those who make them are like them (Ps. 115:3–8), meaning that man can never cease to be what he essentially is, a creature in the image of God.<sup>32</sup>

As I observed earlier, the human body is part of man’s creatureliness and part of his dignity as the image of God. So it is not surprising that

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Like them’ uses the same Hebrew prefix as in Genesis 3:5, כִּי, although the LXX uses different words, ὅμοιοι here and in Gen. 3:5, ὡς θεοὶ.

when God gives man up to his rejection of the truth it is the dignity of the body and the relationships that are necessarily expressed through it which suffer. Hence there is the ‘degrading of their bodies among themselves’ (Rom. 1:24) and the ‘degrading passions’ which reverse the natural relationships (vv. 26–27).<sup>33</sup>

However, while these sins were so prominent, not all were engaged in them. But perhaps some of the confusion which arises when we try to understand the blanket judgements which are made may be alleviated when we observe that man is a corporate being. In other words, it is not simply individuals that are corrupt, it is the whole race. The argument

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<sup>33</sup> No doubt various times and cultures will express their sinfulness in various ways, but it may be instructive to give a brief outline of the ways that New Testament Christians were confronted by it. The following is from Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1993), pp. 63f.:

Several features of the social organization contributed to the debasing of morality. Slavery gave occasion for cruelty and sexual license. The punishment of criminals, notably through sentencing to the mines and execution by crucifixion, showed the brutality of the times. The gladiatorial contests and wild beast fights . . . reflect a brutal and cruel outlook. The Roman policy of ‘bread and games’ to keep the populace content prevented initiative and emphasized sensual satisfactions.

Paul’s judgment on Gentile morality in Romans 1:18–32 finds considerable confirmation in other sources of the time. Both Jewish and Christian writers agreed that the Greco-Roman world was characterized by moral corruption. The Jewish apologists said that the low morality sprang from idolatry. [See, Wisdom of Solomon 13–15.] Sex sins were prevalent, and nearly all of the catalogs of sins in the New Testament have many synonyms for licentiousness (e.g., 1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5:19; Col. 3:5). The numerous words in the Greek language for sexual relations suggest a preoccupation with this aspect of life. Homosexuality was a common result in Greek society, which considered the noblest form of love to be friendship between men. Some of the greatest names in Greek philosophy regarded it as not inferior to heterosexual love, but it was practiced primarily among males between their early teens and early twenties. All kinds of immoralities were associated with the gods. Not only was prostitution a recognized institution, but through the influence of the fertility cults of Asia Minor, Syria and Phoenicia it became part of the religious rites at certain temples. Thus there were one thousand ‘sacred prostitutes’ at the temple of Aphrodite at Corinth. Dio Chrysostom (*Discourse* 7.133–137) is the only Gentile author known to have attacked brothels on moral grounds . . .

Inscriptions on grave monuments have been an important source for giving a just estimate of moral virtue in the ancient world . . . The praises of the kindness and faithfulness of husbands and wives in these records are a reminder that many people lived lives of quiet virtue. Not all were given to the sexual sins that appear to have been so prominent in the society.

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of Romans continues to show that all, both Jews and Gentiles, are equally guilty before the law of God, whatever the way that their rebellion may be expressed. Paul wrote to Timothy that ‘the sins of some people are conspicuous and precede them to judgment, while the sins of others follow them there’ (1 Tim. 5:24).

What must be understood is that *sins* are not the problem; they are a result and consequence of the problem. The problem is *sin*, which may be defined as man’s fundamental determination to live as his own God.

The point is that, whether blatantly or virtuously expressed, man endeavours to suppress the truth of God and in doing so suppresses the truth of his own being. It is the sheer goodness of God that man is, ultimately, unsuccessful. There are restraints on evil (2 Thess. 2:7), even though on occasions in history the restraint seems to be considerably slackened.

Man is the image of God. He cannot cease being that but he will not *be* that and so man’s existence is a constant contradiction. This being so, even the virtuous living which we, happily, see around us is still part of the contradiction. We are grateful that man is still the image of God, but we recognise that his being so cannot be regarded as some form of merit. While ever man’s expression of the image is offered to God as a satisfaction for man’s guilt, these ‘good works’ must be considered as ‘dead works’. As Articles XII and XIII of the Anglican Church<sup>34</sup> express it:

### *XII. Of Good Works.*

Albeit that Good Works, which are the fruits of Faith, and follow after Justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God’s Judgement; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith; insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.

### *XIII. Of Works before Justification.*

Works done before the grace of Christ, and the Inspiration of his Spirit, are not pleasant to God, forasmuch as they spring not of faith in Jesus Christ, neither do they make men meet to receive grace, or (as the School-authors say) deserve grace

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<sup>34</sup> These Articles may be found in the Thirty-Nine Articles at the end of both *The Book of Common Prayer* and *An Australian Prayer Book*.

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of congruity: yea rather, for that they are not done as God hath willed and commanded them to be done, we doubt not but that they have the nature of sin.

In all this, we may well appreciate the tragedy of Paul's observation that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom. 3:23). It is from this perspective that Christ, the image of God, appears as more than a good man. He is the only hope of humanity if man is to be restored to the glory. The cross of Christ is the point where the corruption of man is both placarded and judged (see Isa. 52:13–53:12).

This is why the New Testament, when discussing the image of God, usually does so in terms of the transformation of the believer into Christlikeness. The pre-destiny of the elect is that we might be conformed to the image of God's son (Rom. 8:29). And it is this which is presently being effected:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.<sup>18</sup> And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, *are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another*; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

<sup>4:1</sup> Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. <sup>2</sup> We have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word; but by the open statement of the truth we commend ourselves to the conscience of everyone in the sight of God.

<sup>3</sup> And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. <sup>4</sup> In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

<sup>5</sup> For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup> For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup> But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. <sup>8</sup> We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies.

<sup>11</sup> For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, *so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh* (2 Cor. 3:17–4:11).