



FROM THE GARDEN TO THE CROSS

A 20-WEEK STUDY OF MANKIND, SIN, AND SALVATION

WEEK 2—THE IMAGE OF GOD IN MAN

Handout 2-1: Millard Erickson on the Image of God

The Relevant Scripture Passages

Several biblical passages speak of the image of God. The best-known is probably Genesis 1:26–27: “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Verse 26 is God’s statement of intention; it includes the terms *צֶלֶם* (*tselem*) and *דְּמוּת* (*demuth*), translated, respectively, “image” and “likeness.” The former term is repeated twice in verse 27. In Genesis 5:1 we have a recapitulation of what God had done: “When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God.” The writer adds in verse 2: “He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them ‘mankind.’” The term used here is *דְּמוּת*. In Genesis 9:6 murder is prohibited on the grounds that the human was created in God’s image: “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.” While the passage does not explicitly say that humans still bore the image of God, it is clear that what God had earlier done still has some bearing or effect, even at this post-fall point. Beyond this we find no other explicit references in the Old Testament to the image of God, although two passages in the Apocrypha mention it, Wisdom of Solomon 2:23 and Ecclesiasticus 17:3.

Two New Testament passages mention the image of God in connection with the creation of the human. In 1 Corinthians 11:7 Paul says, “A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man.” Paul does not say that woman is the image of God, but merely points out that she is the glory of man as man is the glory of God. The word for image here is *εἰκών* (*eikōn*). And in James 3:9, on the grounds that humans are made in the likeness (*ὁμοίωσις*—*homoiōsis*) of God, the author condemns use of the tongue to curse

humans: “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness.” There is also something of a suggestion of the image of God in Acts 17:28, although the term is not actually used: “ ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’ ”

In addition, several passages in the New Testament refer to believers becoming the image of God through the process of salvation. Romans 8:29 notes that they are being conformed to the image of the Son: “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.” In 2 Corinthians 3:18 we read, “And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.” In Ephesians 4:23–24 Paul urges his readers “to be made new in the attitude” of their minds “and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” Finally, Colossians 3:10 also refers to putting on “the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”

Views of the Image

What then is the image of God? Formulating a definition will involve both interpreting individual references and integrating the several overt statements as well as various allusions in Scripture. There are three general ways of viewing the nature of the image. Some consider the image to consist of certain characteristics within the very nature of the human, either physical or psychological/spiritual. This view we will call the *substantive* view of the image. Others regard the image not as something inherently or intrinsically present in humans, but as the experiencing of a relationship between the human and God, or between two or more humans. This is the *relational* view. Finally, some consider the image to be, not something a human is or experiences, but something a human does. This is the *functional* view.

The Substantive View

The substantive view has been dominant during most of the history of Christian theology. The common element in the several varieties of this view is that the image is identified as some definite characteristic or quality within the makeup of the human. Some have considered the image of God to be an aspect of our physical or bodily makeup. Although this form of the view has never been widespread, it has persisted even to this day. It may be based on a literal reading of the word **צֶלֶם** (*tselem*), which in its most concrete sense means “statue” or “form.” Given this reading, Genesis 1:26 would actually mean something like, “Let us make humans who look like us.” The Mormons are probably the most prominent current advocates of the position that the image of God is physical. This position does not present them with any real problems, since they hold that God has a body.

One might expect that with the emphasis in many circles on a human as a psychosomatic unity, there would be renewed interest in the idea that the image of God is a physical factor in human beings. This would probably be the case except for the fact that most of those who stress the psychosomatic unity of human nature also tend to neglect the metaphysical. We should also note that some see the image as being a physical feature with metaphorical import. That the

human walks upright, for example, is taken as a symbol of the moral uprightness or righteousness of God, or of humans' relatedness to God.

More common substantive views of the image of God isolate it in terms of some psychological or spiritual quality in human nature, especially reason. Indeed, the human species is classified biologically as *Homo sapiens*, the thinking being.

There have been differing degrees of emphasis on reason. When rationality is highly stressed in society in general, as in the Enlightenment, it is also stressed in theological thinking. During more subjectively oriented times, reason receives less attention. In a period such as the latter part of the twentieth century, with its strongly voluntaristic and visceral emphases, reason plays a lesser role. There are also different ways of understanding reason—as abstract contemplation (Platonism) or as a more empirical and scientific matter (Thomistic-Aristotelianism). All hold that the cognitive, cerebral aspect of humanity is most like God; therefore, it is to be emphasized and developed.

It is not surprising that theologians should single out reason as the most significant aspect of human nature, for theologians are the segment of the church charged with intellectualizing or reflecting on their faith. Note that in so doing, however, not only have they isolated one aspect of human nature for consideration, but they have also concentrated their attention on only one facet of God's nature. This may result in a misapprehension. To be sure, omniscience and wisdom constitute a significant dimension of the nature of God, but they are by no means the very essence of divinity.

On the basis of Genesis 1:26–27 a tendency gradually developed to understand “image” and “likeness” as two aspects or dimensions of the image of God. At times there were naturalistic overtones: the human was created in God's image only, but gradually evolved into God's likeness as well. More commonly, however, the presence of God's likeness in humanity was attributed to a spiritual or supernatural cause. Origen, for example, saw the image as something given immediately at the creation, with the likeness to be conferred by God at a later time. It was Irenaeus, however, who gave the distinction between image and likeness a direction that theologians followed for some time, although his statements vary greatly and are not completely consistent. By the former he meant that Adam had reason and free will; by the latter Irenaeus pointed to some sort of supernatural endowment that Adam possessed through the action of the Spirit. Unlike some later theologians, Irenaeus was not thinking of an original righteousness. As a childlike being, Adam bore a likeness to God that was present only in germ form, only as a potential of what he was to become. When, however, Adam fell into sin, he lost the likeness, although the image persisted at least to some degree.

In medieval scholastic theologizing, Irenaeus's distinction was developed further. Now the difference was clarified and the effects of the fall isolated. The image was the human's natural resemblance to God, the powers of reason and will. The likeness was a *donum superadditum*—a divine gift added to basic human nature. This likeness consisted of the moral qualities of God, whereas the image involved the natural attributes of God. When Adam fell, he lost the likeness, but the image remained fully intact. Humanity as humanity was still complete, but the good and holy being was spoiled.

This perspective of course involved a conception of the nature of sin and the fall, but also a definite idea of the nature of humanity. One's human nature is unitary and relatively immune to the damaging effects of the fall. Even non-Christians and marginal believers are as fully human

as are sanctified believers. They possess the ability to evaluate evidence, to recognize the truth, to choose on the basis of knowledge of the truth. This leaves open the possibility of a rational or natural theology: even without special revelation, all persons are able to gain some true knowledge of God. It also leaves open the possibility of a natural ethic: being free, humans are capable of doing some good works apart from grace. Thus, this assumption lent much to the whole system of Catholic theology.

As a skilled exegete, Martin Luther saw that the difference in terminology that led to the conclusion that the image of God remained intact in fallen humans (only the likeness being lost) is not really a difference at all. “Image” and “likeness” in Genesis 1:26 do not have separate referents. Rather, this is simply an instance of the common Hebrew practice of parallelism. Consequently, there is no distinction between image and likeness either before or after the fall.

With this unitary view of the image of God, Luther held that all aspects of the image of God in humans have been corrupted; what is left is a relic or remnant of the image—not certain qualities but fragments, as it were, of all of what constituted the likeness to God. Luther’s response to Genesis 9:6 was that the uncorrupted image still exists as God’s intention for humans, but is not actually present in them.

Calvin adopted a view similar in many ways to that of Luther, rejecting the dualistic scholastic view, and instead maintaining that a relic of the image remained in each person after the fall. Because a relic remained, knowledge of ourselves and knowledge of God are interrelated. In knowing ourselves we come to know God, since he has made us in his image. Conversely, we come to know ourselves by measuring ourselves against his holiness. While all things, in a sense, display the image of God, humans particularly do so, most notably in our ability to reason.¹²

All of the substantive views we have mentioned, with their widely differing conceptions of the nature of the image of God, agree in one particular: the locus of the image. It is located within humans as a resident quality or capacity. Although conferred by God, the image resides in humans whether or not they recognize God’s existence and his work.

The Relational View

Many modern theologians do not conceive of the image of God as something resident within human nature. Indeed, they do not ordinarily ask what the human is or what sort of a nature a human may have. Rather, they think of the image of God as the experiencing of a relationship. Humans can be said to be in the image or to display the image when standing in a particular relationship, which indeed *is* the image.

In the twentieth century, neo-orthodox theology shifted the focus quite strongly to a more dynamic understanding of the image. Although Karl Barth and Emil Brunner differed on some points, sometimes very emphatically, their two views came to have much in common with one another.

Emil Brunner distinguishes between two senses of the image of God: the formal and the material. The formal image is the *humanum*, that which makes a person human, distinguishing the human from the animal, as a rational being, responsible and free. Persons as sinners have not lost this aspect of the image of God. In fact, the ability to sin presupposes it. This is what is meant by the Old Testament description of humans as being in the image and likeness of God.

The material sense of the image is the act of response, the relationship with God. The material image can be present or absent, but the formal image is always present. Even the person not responding to God still has responsibility. Beyond the human's relationship to God, there is a second command—that we love other human beings. Our “responsibility-in-love” begins to be met as we relate to our fellow humans. We cannot be human by ourselves.

Karl Barth also held a relational view of the image of God. In his early period he did not use the expression “the image of God,” but he did speak of a unity between God and humans that was something like the unity between mother and fetus. This unity has been lost since the fall, although the fall was not a temporal occurrence at some point in the history of the human race. In the second period of Barth's thought and writing, the period of controversy with Emil Brunner, he vigorously denied any point of connection between God and the human, any human capacity to receive the Word of God.

The third stage of Barth's thinking on the image is the most novel. In this stage Barth speaks of the image as still present within the human, inasmuch as the person still is human. Barth sees the image of God as consisting not only in the vertical relationship between human and God, but also in the horizontal relationship between humans. The image is not something a human 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.¹⁹ He especially sees this in the male-female relationship, so that the statement “male and female created he them” is in effect a parallel to the statement that God created humans in his own image.

Barth makes one other point: that we learn about humanity by studying Christ, not humans. There are significant differences between his humanity and ours, for his was human nature as it was intended to be.²¹ Only from revelation can we know humanity as created, and Jesus is the fullest form of that revelation. We cannot determine on some independent grounds what human nature is, and thus know what Jesus was like.

Despite the differences between the two, Barth and Brunner came to hold certain elements in common:

1. The image of God and human nature are best understood through a study of the person of Jesus, not of human nature per se.
2. We obtain our understanding of the image from the divine revelation.
3. The image of God is not to be understood in terms of any structural qualities within humans; it is not something a human is or possesses. Rather, the image is a matter of one's relationship to God; it is something a human experiences. Thus, it is dynamic rather than static.
4. The relationship of a human to God, which constitutes the image of God, is paralleled by the relationship between humans. Barth makes much more of the male-female relationship; Brunner tends to emphasize the larger circle of human relationships, that is, society.
5. The image of God is universal; it is found in all humans at all times and places. Therefore, it is present in sinful human beings. Even in turning away from God, one cannot negate the fact of being related to God in a way in which no other creature is or can be. There is always a relationship, either positive or negative.

6. No conclusion can or need be drawn as to what there might be in a person's nature that would constitute ability to have such a relationship. Brunner and Barth never ask what, if anything, is required structurally for the image of God to be present in a human. Even the formal image of which Brunner speaks is relational, not structural.

Because existentialism is the philosophy underlying the relational view of the image of God, it is important to review some of this philosophy's characteristics. One of these is de-emphasis of essences or substances. The important question is "Is it?" ("Does it exist?"), not "What is it?" There is a suspicion of any reification of qualities into some sort of permanent structural reality. Rather, with the emphasis on will and consequent action, what is important about any individual person or thing is, according to existentialism, what he or she or it does. Reality is more than an entity that is simply there and that one accepts; rather, it is something one creates. Just as this view underlies Brunner and Barth's view of revelation, their view of the image of God presupposes it. The image is not an entity that a human possesses so much as the experience that is present when a relationship is active.

In recent years, the influence of postmodernism has resulted in an even stronger stress on the social dimension, the relationship of human to human more than the relationship of human to God. In postmodernism the self tends to be dissolved, just as do real essences or independently existing truth. Beyond that, postmodernism's emphasis on community means that humans are really only fully human when in social relationship. Thus, from a postmodern Christian perspective, it is humans collectively that are the image of God, rather than individuals, in the eschatological dimension as well as the ongoing present reality.

The Functional View

A third type of view of the image has had quite a long history and has recently increased in popularity. This is the idea that the image is not something present in the makeup of the human, nor the experiencing of relationship with God or with fellow humans, but rather consists in something one does. It is a human function, the most frequently mentioned being the exercise of dominion over the creation.

While the relational view gives relatively little attention to the content of the image of God, this view attempts to determine from the biblical text itself the content of the image. In Genesis 1:26, the statement "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness" is followed immediately by "so that they may rule over the fish of the sea...." A close connection between these two concepts is found not only in this verse, where God expresses his intention to create, but also in verses 27–28, where we read that God did in fact create humans in the image of God and issue to them a command to have dominion. Some regard the juxtaposition of these two concepts as more than coincidental. The exercise of dominion is considered to be the content of the image of God. This was propounded by the Socinians and included in their Racovian Catechism. As God is the Lord over all of creation, humans reflect the image of God by exercising dominion over the rest of the creation. The image of God is actually an image of God as Lord.

A second passage containing a close connection between the image of God in humanity and human exercise of dominion is Psalm 8:5–6: "You made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you

put everything under their feet.” “Commentators generally are satisfied that Psalm 8 is largely dependent on Genesis.” One of their proofs is the catalog of creatures in Psalm 8:7–8: beasts of the field, birds of the air, and fish of the sea. The conclusion is then drawn that verse 5 is equivalent to the statements in Genesis 1 that the human was created in God’s image. Sigmund Mowinckel says that “the ‘godlikeness’ of man in Psalm 8 consists above all in his sovereignty and power over all other things, in his godlike ‘honour and glory’ compared to them.” Norman Snaith asserts, “Biblically speaking, the phrase ‘image of God’ has nothing to do with morals or any sort of ideals; it refers only to man’s dominion of the world and everything that is in it. It says nothing about the nature of God, but everything concerning the function of man.”³¹ Another extensive interpretation of the image of God as humanity’s exercise of dominion is Leonard Verduin’s *Somewhat Less Than God*, which makes the point quite strongly: “Again the idea of dominion-having stands out as the central feature. That man is a creature meant for dominion-having and that as such he is in the image of his Maker—this is the burden of the creation account given in the book of Genesis, the Book of Origins. It is the central point the writer of this account wanted to make.”

In Genesis 1:26, 28, the Hebrew terms *קָבַץ* (*kavash*) and *רָדָה* (*radah*) carry the meaning that the human was to exercise a rule over the whole of creation similar to the rule that in later times the Hebrew kings were expected to exercise over their people. The kings were not to rule for their own sakes, but for the welfare of their subjects. When Israel desired a king (1 Sam. 8:10–18), God warned them that a king would exploit them. For one person to dominate others is contrary to God’s will because it represents exploitation of the rest of creation.

The perspective that the exercise of dominion is the very essence of the image of God has given rise to a strong emphasis on what is sometimes called in Reformed circles the cultural mandate. Just as Jesus sent his apostles forth into the world and commissioned them to make disciples of all persons, so God sent his highest creatures, humans, out into creation and commissioned them to rule over it. This commission implies that humans are to make full use of their ability to learn about the whole creation. For by coming to understand the creation, humans will be able to predict and control its actions. These activities are not optional, but are part of the responsibility that goes with being God’s highest creature.

We observed that the relational view of Barth and Brunner draws on existentialism. This functional view similarly draws on philosophical functionalism or pragmatism, another prominent twentieth-century philosophy.

Evaluation of the Views

We now need to evaluate the three general views of the image of God. We will begin with the less traditional views, the conceptions of the image as relationship and as a function.

The relational view has correctly seized upon the truth that the human alone, of all of the creatures, knows and is consciously related to God. The portrayals of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden suggest that God and they customarily communed together. Humans were not created merely to be a work of art, statues displaying God’s creativity and wisdom, but to fulfill God’s special intention for them. It is significant that both in the Old Testament law (the Ten Commandments in Exod. 20) and in Jesus’s statement of the two great commandments (Matt.

22:36–40; Mark 12:28–31; Luke 10:26–27), the thrust of God’s will for humans concerns relationship to God and to other humans.

There are certain problems, however, with the view that the image of God is totally a relational matter. One of them is the universality of the image. In what sense can it be said that those who are living in total indifference to God, or even in hostile rebellion against him, are (or are in) the image of God? Brunner has attempted to answer this by indicating that there is always a relationship, that one is always “before God.” But this seems to carry little meaning. Brunner’s distinction between the material and formal elements of the image, together with his insistence that even the formal element is relational rather than structural, seems lacking in biblical basis and rather forced.

Another problem surfaces when we ask what it is about humans that enables them to have this relationship no other creature is able to have. Although Barth and Brunner resist posing the question, it must be asked. Certainly there are some prerequisite factors if relationship is to occur. In criticism of Brunner’s position, John Baillie notes that there is no form without content. It may be contended that Brunner in effect answered this criticism when he stated that the current content is different from the original content.³⁶ In Brunner’s view, then, there is content (although it has changed), and therefore there can also be form. This seems not to avert the difficulty, however, for Baillie is asking what makes the formal image possible, while Brunner’s statement that there is a change in content is actually a reference to the realization of the material sense of the image.

We must conclude that Barth and Brunner were led astray by their wholeheartedly antisubstantialist presuppositions, which we have suggested stemmed from existentialism. This leads to the position that human uniqueness must be formal rather than substantive. But the exact basis of the human’s formal constitution as a being capable of relationship is never delineated.

When we turn to the functional view, we again see an insightful seizing upon one of the major elements in the biblical picture of the image of God, namely, that God’s act creating the human is immediately followed by the command to have dominion. There certainly is, at the very least, a very close connection between the image and the exercise of dominion. There is also, to be sure, a parallel between Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 (i.e., in the description of the domain over which humans are to have dominion). Yet there are difficulties with this view as well.

One difficulty concerns the connection between Psalm 8 and Genesis 1. The terms *image* and *likeness* do not appear in Psalm 8. If the psalm is indeed dependent upon Genesis 1, where we do find specific reference to the image, and if exercising dominion over the creatures mentioned in verses 7–8 of the psalm does indeed constitute the image of God, then one would expect in this passage as well some specific reference to the image, although this is of course an argument from silence.

Further, Genesis 1 contains no clear equation of the image of God with the exercise of dominion. On the contrary, there are some indications that they are distinguishable. God is said to create the human in his own image; then God gives the command to have dominion. In other words, the human is spoken of as being in God’s image before being ordered to practice dominion. In verse 26 the use of two hortative expressions—“Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness” and “let them rule”—seems to distinguish the two concepts. Walter Eichrodt points out that a blessing is given when the human is created, but that a second blessing is necessary before

dominion over the creatures can be exercised. It appears, then, that the functional view may have taken a consequence of the image and equated it with the image itself.

We must now look carefully at the substantive or structural view. It is significant that the text of Scripture itself never identifies what qualities within the human might be the image. The criticism that, in misguided attempts to identify such qualities, a number of advocates of the structural view have actually suggested nonbiblical concepts (e.g., the ancient Greek notion of reason) is justified. Further, the structural view often is narrowed to one aspect of human nature and, particularly, to the intellectual dimension. This in turn implies that the image of God varies with different human beings. The more intellectual a person is, the greater the extent to which the image of God is present. And then there is the additional problem of determining just what happened when Adam and Eve fell into sinfulness. It does not seem to be the case that the fall affected intelligence or reason in general. Moreover, some unbelievers are more intelligent and perceptive than are some highly sanctified Christians.

Conclusions regarding the Nature of the Image

Having noted difficulties with each of the general views, we must now attempt to form some conclusions as to just what the image of God is. The existence of a wide diversity of interpretations often indicates that there are no direct statements in Scripture to resolve the issue. Our conclusions, then, must be reasonable inferences drawn from what little the Bible does say on the subject.

1. The image of God is universal within the human race. We will go into more detail in chapter 24, but at this point we note that the first and universal human, Adam, not merely a portion of the human race, was made in the image of God. Note also that the prohibitions of murder (Gen. 9:6) and cursing (James 3:9–10) apply to the treatment of all humans. No limitation is placed upon these prohibitions, which are based on the fact that humanity was created in God's image.

2. The image of God has not been lost as a result of sin or specifically the fall. The prohibitions against murder and cursing apply to the treatment of sinful humans as well as godly believers. The presence of the image and likeness in the non-Christian is assumed. If this is the case, the image of God is not something accidental or external to human nature. It is something inseparably connected with humanity. All humans have this image, whether they are in the relationship or fulfilling the function of dominion-having.

3. There is no indication that the image is present in one person to a greater degree than in another. Superior natural endowments, such as high intelligence, are not evidence of the presence or degree of the image.

4. The image is not correlated with any variable. For example, there is no direct statement correlating the image with development of relationships, nor making it dependent upon the exercise of dominion. The statements in Genesis 1 simply say that God resolved to make the human in his own image and then did so. This seems to antedate any human activity. There are no statements limiting the image to certain conditions or activities or situations. While this is essentially a negative argument, it does point up a flaw in the relational and functional views.

5. In light of the foregoing considerations, the image should be thought of as primarily substantive or structural. The image is something in the very nature of humans, in the way in which they were made. It refers to something a human *is* rather than something a human *has* or

does. By virtue of being human, one is in the image of God; being so is not dependent upon the presence of anything else. By contrast, the focus of the relational and functional views is actually on consequences or applications of the image rather than on the image itself. While we may and should speak of the image as involving all three of these foci, the substantive is the primary one. Although very closely linked to the image of God, experiencing relationships and exercising dominion are not in themselves that image. Yet having said that, we must reckon with the fact that the person most fully bears the image of God when that image is active, not merely static.

6. The image refers to the elements in the human makeup that enable the fulfillment of human destiny. The image involves the powers of personality that make humans, like God, beings capable of interacting with other persons, of thinking and reflecting, and of willing freely.

God's creation was for definite purposes. The human was intended to know, love, and obey God, and live in harmony with other humans, as the story of Cain and Abel indicates. The human was certainly placed here on earth to exercise dominion over the rest of creation. But these relationships and this function presuppose something else. Humans are most fully human when they are active in these relationships and performing this function, fulfilling their telos, God's purpose for them. But these are the consequences or the applications of the image. The image itself is that set of qualities that is required for these relationships and this function to take place. They are those qualities of God that, reflected in human beings, make worship, personal interaction, and work possible. If we think of God as a being with qualities, we will have no problem accepting the fact that humans have such qualities as well. The attributes of God sometimes referred to as communicable attributes constitute the image of God; this is not limited to any one attribute. Humanity qua humanity has a nature encompassing all that constitutes personality or selfhood: intelligence, will, emotions. This is the image in which humans were created, enabling them to have the divinely intended relationship to God and to fellow humans, and to exercise dominion.

Beyond this matter of what the image of God consists of, we must ask why the human is made in God's image. What in actual application does it mean for one to be in the image of God? What is God's intention for one within life? Here the other views of the image are of special help to us, for they concentrate upon consequences or manifestations of the image. Jesus's character and actions will be a particularly helpful guide in this matter since he was the perfect example of what human nature is intended to be:

1. Jesus had perfect fellowship with the Father. While on earth he communed with and frequently spoke to the Father. Their fellowship is most clearly seen in the high priestly prayer in John 17. Jesus spoke of how he and the Father are one (vv. 21–22). He had glorified and would glorify the Father (vv. 1, 4), and the Father had glorified and would glorify him (vv. 1, 5, 22, 24).

2. Jesus obeyed the Father's will perfectly. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42). Indeed, throughout his ministry his own will was subordinate: "My food ... is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work" (John 4:34); "I seek not to please myself but him who sent me" (John 5:30); "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me" (John 6:38).

3. Jesus always displayed a strong love for humans. Note, for example, his concern for the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 9:36; 10:6), his compassion for the sick (Mark 1:41) and the sorrowing (Luke 7:13), his patience with and forgiveness of those who failed (e.g., Peter).

God intends that a similar sense of fellowship, obedience, and love characterize humans' relationship to God, and that humans be bound together with one another in love. We are completely human only when manifesting these characteristics.

In drawing on Jesus as embodying the image of God, it is important to bear in mind that the import of passages such as Philippians 2:6 and Hebrews 1:3 seems to be that the Second Person of the Trinity (the Son) bore this similarity to and even qualitative identity with the First Person (the Father) even prior to his incarnation. Thus this may be a clearer revelation of the archetype (that of which the human is the image) than of the ectype (the actual image itself).

Implications of the Doctrine

1. We belong to God. While the fact that we are in the image of God means that some of his attributes belong also to us (at least to a limited degree), it is even more a reminder that we belong to him. Although the expression "image of God" does not appear, it is crucial to a full understanding of Mark 12:13–17. The issue was whether to pay taxes to Caesar. When brought a coin, Jesus asked whose image (εἰκὼν) appeared on it. The Pharisees and Herodians correctly answered, "Caesar's." Jesus responded, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." What are "the things that are God's"? Presumably, whatever bears the image of God. Jesus then was saying, "Give your money to Caesar; it has his image on it, and thus it belongs to him. But give yourselves to God. You bear his image, and you belong to him." Commitment, devotion, love, loyalty, service to God—all of these are proper responses for those who bear the image of God.

2. We should pattern ourselves after Jesus, the complete revelation of the image of God. He is the full image of God and the one person whose humanity was never spoiled by sinning (Heb. 4:15). The dedication of him who said, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39), is to characterize us. The determination of him who said, "As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work" (John 9:4), is to be our model. And we are to emulate the love manifested in the life and death of him who said, "Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). This is the image of God in its purest sense, the forming of the likeness of Christ in us (Rom. 8:29).

3. We experience full humanity only when we are properly related to God. No matter how cultured and genteel, no one is fully human unless a redeemed disciple of God. This is the human telos, for which we are created. There is room, then, in our theology for humanism, that is, a Christian and biblical humanism that is concerned to bring others into proper relationship with God. The New Testament makes clear that God will restore the damaged image, and perhaps even build upon and go beyond it (2 Cor. 3:18).

4. Learning and work are good. The exercise of dominion is a consequence of the image of God. Humanity is to gain an understanding and control of the creation, developing it to its ultimate potential for its own good and for God. This also means exercising dominion over our own personalities and abilities. Note that the exercise of dominion was part of God's original intention for humanity; it preceded the fall. Work, then, is not a curse, but part of God's good plan. The basis for the work ethic is to be found in the very nature of what God created us to be.

5. The human is valuable. The sacredness of human life is an extremely important principle in God's scheme of things. Even after the fall, murder was prohibited; the reason given was that humans were made in the image of God (Gen. 9:6). The implication of the passage is that even sinful humans still possessed the image. For had they not, God would not have cited the image as the grounds of the prohibition of murder.

6. The image is universal in humankind. It was to Adam, a human, that the image was given. Whether one regards him as the first human being or as a representative or symbolic being, "Adam" was the whole human race and "Eve" was the mother of all living (Gen. 3:20). Both Genesis 1:27 and 5:1–2 make it clear that the image was borne by both male and female.

The universality of the image means that there is a dignity to being human. Cairns suggests that Calvin urged the reverencing of persons. While this terminology is too strong a characterization of what Calvin actually said,⁴⁵ the general concept is valid. We should not be disdainful of any human being. They are all something beautiful, even though they are distortions of what God originally intended humankind to be. The potential of likeness to the Creator is there. There are good acts done by non-Christians, not meritorious in terms of procuring divine favor for salvation, but pleasing to God in contributing to his overall purpose.

The universality of the image also means that all persons have points of sensitivity to spiritual things. Although at times these points may be deeply buried and difficult to identify, everyone possesses the potential for fellowship with God and will be incomplete unless it is realized. We should look for areas of responsiveness or at least openness in everyone.

Because all are in the image of God, nothing should be done that would encroach upon another's legitimate exercise of dominion. Freedom must not be taken from a human who has not forfeited this right by abusing it (the latter would include murderers, thieves, etc.). This means, most obviously, that slavery is improper. Beyond that, however, it means that depriving someone of freedom through illegal means, manipulation, or intimidation is improper. Everyone has a right to exercise dominion, a right that ends only at the point of encroaching upon another's right to exercise dominion.

Every human being is God's creature made in God's own image. God endowed each of us with the powers of personality that make it possible for us to worship and serve him. When using those powers to those ends, we are most fully what God intended us to be, and then are most completely human.

¹ Millard J. Erickson, [*Christian Theology*](#), 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 459–475.