

The Imago Dei: Biblical Foundations, Theological Implications, and Enduring Significance

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I. Introduction: The Concept of the Imago Dei

THE CONCEPT OF THE IMAGO DEI, meaning “image of God”¹ (Hebrew, *b'tselem elohim*), refers to the truth that humans are created in God’s image and likeness. This idea, first introduced in Genesis 1:26–27, is a foundational doctrine with profound implications for human identity, value, and purpose. For instance, it grounds humanity’s capacities for relating to God and exercising responsible dominion over the earth. Additionally, the imago Dei points to the Creator endowing people with rational, moral, and creative faculties. Furthermore, the imago Dei invests humanity with inherent meaning and purpose, namely, to know God, responsibly steward his creation, and manifest His holy character.

The imago Dei, while tarnished by sin, has not been destroyed. The New Testament affirms that Christ, who is the perfect image of God, restores in redeemed humanity what was distorted at the Fall. As believers are transformed into Christ’s likeness by the Spirit through the means of grace, the original purpose of bearing God’s image finds greater and ultimate fulfillment. As such, the imago Dei is a powerful unifying concept for Christian theology, ethics, and understanding of human identity and vocation. Accordingly, the upcoming sections of this essay explore the imago Dei’s biblical foundations, theological implications, and enduring significance.

II. The Imago Dei in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)

A. Genesis 1:26–27, the Creation of Humanity in God’s Image

IN GENESIS 1:26–27, THE CREATOR declared, “Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over the livestock, and over all the earth, and over every

creeping thing that crawls on the earth. God created the man in his own image. In the image of God he created him. Male and female he created them.”

The Hebrew noun translated as “image” is *צלם* (*tselem*). It can also mean “likeness” or “similarity,” and conveys the sense of a visual representation of person or object. Also, the Hebrew noun translated as “likeness” is *דמות* (*demuth*). It can also mean “resemblance” or “similitude,” and conveys the sense of a correspondence in appearance, character, or nature between a person or object. Both terms emphasize a close interrelationship between the original and the copy and, in turn, highlight the intimate connection between humanity and God.

The use of the plural pronouns “us” and “our” in verse 26 has been interpreted in several ways. For instance, some see it as a reference to the plurality within the triune Godhead (i.e., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). A more likely option is that the plural pronouns could be either a *pluralis majestatis* (Latin, a plural of majesty) or a reference to God and the members of his heavenly court (1 Kings 22:19; Job 1:6; 2:1; Pss 82:1; 89:5–8; Isa 6:1–3; Dan 7:9–10).

The repetition of “image” in verse 27 highlights the deep relational connection the Creator intended to exist between himself and humanity. Indeed, being created in God’s image is a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human.

More generally, the phrase “image of God” indicates that people—both male and female genders—are designed to be the Lord’s vice-regents (a royal identity), representatives (a priestly identity), and stewards on earth, especially by reflecting his characteristics and attributes in a unique way compared to the rest of creation. The implication is that the *imago Dei* endows humans with the distinctive capacity to exist in a covenant relationship with God.

As bearers of God’s image, humans have a unique capacity for intimate covenant relationships, not just with the Creator but also with one another. The biblical description of the first marriage between Adam and Eve—where a man leaves his family to cleave to his wife, and together they become “one flesh” (Gen 2:24)—serves as a foundational model for the marriage relationship between a man and a woman. This union is further extended metaphorically in Scripture to illustrate the covenant relationship between God and his people. Specifically, the Old Testament prophets depict God as the bridegroom of Israel, and the New Testament presents Christ as the bridegroom of the church.

Yet, as the account of the Fall recorded in Genesis 3 reveals, people have ruptured their intimate communion with the Creator through acts of rebellion against him. The consequence is incurred guilt and death spreading to all biological descendants of Adam and Eve (Gen 2:16–17; Rom 5:12–17; 6:23; 1 Cor 15:21–22). Moreover, the divinely ordained royal and priestly identity is marred by sin. However, as noted

below, for repentant, believing sinners, this dual identity is being restored through their union with Christ.

The significance of the phrase “image of God” has been interpreted in various ways throughout history. The following are five of the most common understandings.

1. *Literal Interpretation*: This view suggests a physical resemblance between humans and God. However, since Scripture reveals that “God is spirit” (John 4:24), this interpretation raises questions about God having a physical form (anthropomorphism) and what that form might be.

2. *Functional/Representational Interpretation*: According to this view, the “image of God” refers to the role and function of humans as God’s representatives on earth. Humans are entrusted with the responsibility to manage and care for creation, in which they act as God’s agents or ambassadors, as well as reflect His dominion. The “image” here signifies a role or function rather than a physical appearance.

3. *Substantive Interpretation*: This view emphasizes the “likeness” to God in non-physical attributes. It suggests that humans share certain qualities with God, such as reason, self-awareness, free will, creativity, and other capacities. This “likeness” reflects God’s non-corporeal nature, even though humans are embodied souls.

4. *Relational Interpretation*: This view highlights the unique relationship and communion that humans can have with God. Humans are set apart from the rest of creation by their capacity for intimate connection with the Divine.

5. *Ethical Interpretation*: According to this view, the “likeness” to God is connected to an innate moral compass. It is maintained that humans, like God, can discern right from wrong and follow ethical principles. The “likeness” here is tied to the capacity for moral reasoning and acting in accordance with God’s righteousness.

Aside from the first view, the rest work together harmoniously to paint a richer, more nuanced portrait of humanity’s unique status and role within God’s creation as his vice-regents. The following observations illustrate this truth.

1. *Functional and Substantive* (views 2 and 3): Here, God is envisioned as the supreme Creator and humans as his stewards. For instance, view 2 spotlights humanity’s function as caretakers and managers entrusted with the responsibility of overseeing and preserving God’s creation. View 3 adds that people are not mere managers but unique beings endowed with specific abilities (such as reason and creativity) that reflect God’s own attributes. People can plan, problem-solve, and manage the created world in accordance with God’s intended purpose.

2. *Relational and Ethical* (views 4 and 5): Beyond function, humanity has a special connection with God. For example, view 4 emphasizes the unique relationship people can have with God, their Creator. Specifically, unlike other created beings, people

are not just instruments but have the capacity for intimacy and deep connection with God. View 5 builds on this by suggesting that this relationship is fueled by humanity's moral compass. Like God, people can distinguish between right and wrong, allowing them to manage creation ethically and strive to reflect God's righteousness.

3. *Synergy*: Each view complements and strengthens the others. For instance, humanity's function (view 2) and abilities (view 3) equip people to be capable stewards. Their relationship (view 4) with God shapes their moral compass (view 5), which guides how they wisely and responsibly manage creation (view 2). Together, these views elevate humanity's role beyond merely existing. People become active participants in fulfilling God's purposes, reflecting His character, and building a world that aligns with His will.

4. *Distinct from Creation*: Views 2 through 5 work together to show that humans are not just another component of creation but rather vice-regents, responsible managers, and ethical representatives who reflect God's nature in a way no other creature can. The implication is that humanity should be distinguished from the rest of creation. While animals may possess some intelligence, they lack the full range of abilities, as well as the capacity for the complex relationship with God that humans possess.

B. Other Old Testament References to the Image of God

1. Genesis 5:1–2, Passing on the Divine Image to Humanity's Offspring

GENESIS 5:1–2 CONNECTS BACK to 1:26–27, where God creates humanity in His “image” and “likeness.” In 5:1–2, it is reiterated that, even after the Fall, the preceding truth applies to both Adam and Eve, whom God created as “male and female.” Several key interpretations arise regarding the “image of God” in relation to humanity, as follows:

a. *Spiritual Inheritance*: The “image of God” is seen as a spiritual reality passed down from Adam and Eve to all their descendants. The use of “man” (Hebrew, אָדָם, *adam*) for both male and female suggests a shared essence across humanity.

b. *The Nature of the Image*: The exact nature of the image remains open to interpretation. In keeping with what was noted earlier, it likely encompasses aspects such as rational faculties (reasoning and thinking), moral awareness (distinguishing right from wrong), a capacity for relationship with God, and stewardship over creation (caring for the earth).

c. *Material and Immaterial*: While the spiritual image is inherited, humanity also possesses a physical aspect, namely, being formed “from the dust of the ground” (literally, “as dust from the ground”; 2:7). This reality creates a dynamic tension between the material and immaterial aspects of humanity after the Fall (Gen 3).

d. *Procreation and God's Rule*: Some interpretations see 5:1–2 as reinforcing the command to “be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it” (1:28). Procreation becomes a way to extend God’s “dominion” through his human “vice-regents” on earth.

What follows are three main points of debate with respect to the preceding interpretations:

a. *Focus of the Image*: Is the image primarily physical, functional, rational, relational, or moral?

b. *Impact of the Fall*: Was the full image preserved or distorted by sin (Gen 3)? Does it require restoration through faith in Christ? From a New Testament perspective, the answer to the second question is yes.

c. *Thematic Connections*: How does the image of God connect to concepts like human dignity, dominion over creation, and humanity’s original sinless state versus their current fallen condition?

In stepping back from the above queries, most interpretations see Genesis 5:1–2 as affirming that the *imago Dei* is passed down to all humanity. This truth makes all humans inherently valuable, designed for a relationship with God and having a special role in creation, even though that image is now adversely affected by sin.

2. Genesis 9:6, the Image of God as the Basis for Human Value and Dignity

GENESIS 9:6 IS FOUNDATIONAL for the concept of the *imago Dei*, for it states, “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for God made man in his own image.” This verse is seen as establishing a basis for human dignity and the sanctity of human life. That said, different interpretations understand this connection in the following ways:

a. *Sacredness of Human Life*: The statement “for God made man in his own image” grounds the Creator’s prohibition against murder. Despite the adverse effects of the Fall, humans still reflect God’s nature and so have inherent worth and dignity.

b. *Human Rights*: Some specialists think this verse establishes a biblical basis for human rights. Since humans bear God’s image, their dignity deserves respect and protection.

c. *Capital Punishment*: The verse prescribes capital punishment for murder (“Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed”). Some specialists regard this as God’s endorsement of capital punishment, while others view it as a principle of just retribution, allowing for different forms of punishment besides execution.

d. *Corporate Responsibility*: Some specialists interpret “by man” as referring to society’s collective responsibility to uphold justice, not just individual executioners.

e. *Imago Dei after the Fall*: While affirming creation in God’s image, this verse raises questions about the impact of the Fall on the imago Dei. Some specialists think it is partially lost, while others see it as defaced, yet not destroyed.

f. *Applying the Principle*: There is debate about whether the concept of the imago Dei applies only to those fully formed in God’s image, potentially excluding the unborn and those with severe mental disabilities. Most classical expressions of the historic Christian faith have taken an inclusive, affirming view.

g. *Traditions and Interpretations*: Based on this verse, Catholic and Protestant Christian traditions generally emphasize human dignity and rights. However, some Reformed traditions, like the Anabaptists, are more cautious about endorsing capital punishment from this verse.

In stepping back from the preceding observations, despite varied interpretations, Genesis 9:6 is widely seen as grounding the inherent worth and dignity of human life. This is because all people—including an unborn fetus, a newborn infant, and people suffering from severe forms of dementia—are created in God’s image. This truth bestows a sanctity that should be respected and protected through just systems and ethical conduct.

3. Psalm 8, the Glory and Honor Bestowed on Humanity

PSALM 8 OFFERS A PROFOUND PERSPECTIVE on the glory and honor the Creator has bestowed upon humanity. The author (traditionally identified as King David; Hebrew, דָּוִד, “of, by, to, or for David”) expresses awe and wonder at the exalted status of human beings within God’s creation, despite their apparent insignificance compared to the vastness of the universe.

Regarding the above, modern astronomy and cosmology estimate the observable universe to contain over two trillion galaxies, with some galaxies containing hundreds of billions of stars. An even greater number of planets potentially accompanies these galaxies, all spread across a vast sphere roughly 93 billion light-years in diameter, based on the age of the universe (approximately 13.8 billion years) and the expansion of space.

a. *Humanity’s Exalted Status and Dominion (vv. 3–8)*

The psalmist marvels at God’s concern for humanity and his decision to crown people with glory and honor. Although humans seem insignificant compared to the vast heavens (vv. 3–4), God has elevated them to a position of dominion and authority over the works of his hands (vv. 5–6). This vice-regency extends over domesticated animals, wild creatures, birds, and even fish (vv. 7–8). The composer emphasizes the sweeping nature of humanity’s rule over the earth and its inhabitants.

b. *Reflection of God's Glory* (vv. 1, 9)

The psalm begins and ends by declaring God's majestic name and renown throughout the earth (vv. 1, 9). This observation suggests that humanity's glory and honor are derived from and reflect the Creator's glory. Expressed differently, humans are vice-regents, representatives, and stewards of God's splendor on earth.

The above observations notwithstanding, there are diverse interpretations and emphases regarding the specific implications of humanity's glory and honor, as follows:

a. *Functional Interpretation*: This view focuses on humans as stewards and caretakers of God's creation. The dominion granted is seen as a responsibility to manage and care for the earth and its inhabitants, reflecting God's character as a benevolent Ruler.

b. *Theological Interpretation*: This view emphasizes the theological significance of humanity being made in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:26–27). The glory and honor bestowed upon humans are seen as a reflection of their unique relationship with God and their ability to represent him on earth.

c. *Christological Interpretation*: Some specialists view Psalm 8 through a Christological lens, seeing in it a foreshadowing of the incarnation of Christ and his ultimate exaltation as the true representative of redeemed humanity. This interpretation highlights the fulfillment of redeemed humanity's glory and honor in union with Christ (Heb 2:5–9).

d. *Ecological Interpretation*: In light of contemporary environmental concerns, some specialists emphasize the responsibility of humans to exercise their dominion over creation in a sustainable and responsible manner, especially by acting as faithful stewards of God's creation.

In stepping back from the above sets of views, while they vary in their emphases, they all acknowledge the unique status and privilege God has granted to humanity. Psalm 8 invites readers to appreciate the dignity and responsibility bestowed upon human beings while maintaining a sense of humility and reverence for the Creator who has granted such honor.

III. The Imago Dei in the New Testament

A. Jesus Christ as the Perfect Image of God

1. 2 Corinthians 4:4, Christ as the Visible Likeness and Precise Representation of the Divine Image

IN 2 CORINTHIANS 4:4, PAUL STATES that the gospel he and his missionary colleagues proclaimed displayed the "glory of Christ," who is the "image [Greek, εἰκὼν, *eikon*] of God." The emphasis here is on the radiant, incarnate Son being the visible likeness and precise representation of the Father.

a. *Christ as the Flawless Expression of God's Being*: This verse portrays Christ as the perfect, unblemished representation of God's nature, character, and splendor. In Christ's essence, he is the visible manifestation of the "invisible God" (Col 1:15). Also, as the "exact imprint of the divine nature" (Heb 1:3), Christ reveals God most fully and clearly.

b. *Theological Views*: Some specialists interpret 2 Corinthians 4:4 as referring to Christ's preexistent, eternal nature as the second Person of the Trinity, along with being the perfect image of the Father from before creation. Others argue that the verse refers to the incarnate Christ—God the Son taking on human form—and so being the perfect, embodied image of God. A broader interpretation holds that the verse encompasses both Christ's eternal, divine nature and His incarnation as the God-man.

c. *Contrast to the Imperfect Human Image*: Unlike fallen humans, who bear a distorted, imperfect image of God (Gen 3; Rom 3:23), Christ is the unblemished, radiant image of the Godhead. Christ restores the marred image of the Creator in redeemed humanity through spiritual rebirth so that they may obtain a full knowledge of the Son (Col 3:10; Phil 3:10; 2 Pet 3:18).

d. *Revelation of God's Glory*: As the "image of God," the resplendent Christ reveals and displays the Creator's full glory in a way that no one and nothing else can. Hence, to see Christ is to perceive the triune God's glorious majesty, perfections, and effulgence (John 14:9; Heb 1:2; 1 John 3:2; Rev 1:12–15).

e. *Implications and Interpretations*: Admittedly, there are diverging views on whether "image" refers primarily to Christ's eternal divine nature, incarnate state, or both. Be that as it may, seeing Christ rightly—by the Spirit through the means of grace—is essential to understanding God and experiencing His glorious salvation.

Furthermore, specialists generally agree that 2 Corinthians 4:4 presents Christ as the ultimate revelation of the Creator in human form. Put simply, the Son is the perfect and unblemished image of the Father. Moreover, this verse indicates that the incarnate Savior is the fullest expression of God's nature and glory, made tangible for humanity. Therefore, as the gospel proclaims, to truly know God, people must focus the eyes of their faith on the glory revealed in Christ.

2. Colossians 1:15, Christ as the Ultimate Expression and Embodiment of the Invisible God

COLOSSIANS 1:15 STATES THAT "the Son is the image [Greek, εἰκὼν, *eikon*] of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation." This verse presents Christ as the ultimate expression and embodiment of the "image of God" concept first introduced in Genesis 1:26–27 and reiterated in 2 Corinthians 4:4. What follows are the main interpretations and implications of Colossians 1:15.

a. *Christ as the Perfect Image of God*: While humans were created in the “image of God” (Gen 1:26–27), Christ is described as the very “image of the invisible God.” This truth indicates that Christ fully and perfectly represents and reveals the nature, attributes, and character of the unseen Creator in a way that fallen humanity cannot. Indeed, Christ is the definitive and flawless expression of what it means to bear God’s image.

b. *Relationship with the Father*: Some interpretations emphasize the unique relationship between the Son and the Father, where Christ perfectly reflects and reveals the unseen Creator. As the “image of the invisible God,” Christ makes the Father known and visible to humanity through the Son’s incarnation, teachings, and redemptive work.

c. *Christ’s Preeminence and Divinity*: The phrase “firstborn over all creation” does not imply that Christ was created or born in a temporal sense. Rather, it affirms Christ’s preeminence, sovereignty, and divine nature as the eternal Son of God who preexisted before and is superior to all creation. This phrase establishes Christ’s deity and his position as the heir and ruler over all creation.

d. *Creator and Sustainer of All Things*: Verse 15 is often connected to verses 16 and 17, which affirm Christ’s role as the originator and preserver of the cosmos. Hence, as the “firstborn over all creation” (v. 15), Christ has the authority and power to bring into existence and uphold the entire universe, further establishing His divine nature and preeminence.

e. *Implications for Humanity*: Some interpretations suggest that since Christ is the perfect “image of God,” He restores and renews the marred *imago Dei* in repentant, believing sinners through salvation and sanctification. As a result of being united to Christ, the redeemed can progressively reflect the true image of God more fully (especially by the Spirit through the means of grace) and thereby receive back the dignity and purpose God originally intended for humanity in creation.

f. *Christological Emphasis*: Verse 15 is often interpreted within the larger context of the New Testament’s teachings about Christ. The emphasis is typically placed on the central role of Christ’s person and sacrificial work in revealing God’s nature, redeeming humanity from sin, and reconciling all creation to God (v. 20).

The main interpretive differences of Colossians 1:15 can be summarized as follows:

a. *Ontological vs. Functional Views*:

Ontological View: This perspective emphasizes Christ’s metaphysical and eternal nature. According to this view, the phrase “the firstborn over all creation” refers to Christ’s preexistent, divine nature as the eternal Son of God, who was begotten

before the creation of the universe. This view affirms Christ is coequal to the Father and the Spirit in divine essence and eternal preexistence. Expressed differently, it spotlights Christ's full divinity and his existence from eternity past, before the creation of the world.

Functional View: This perspective interprets the phrase "the firstborn over all creation" as referring to Christ's preeminence, sovereignty, and authority in relation to creation rather than necessarily implying his eternal pre-existence. According to this view, the emphasis is placed on Christ's functional superiority and headship over the created order. Proponents suggest that the phrase highlights Christ's role and status as the supreme ruler and potentate over all of creation without necessarily stating his temporal human origin or relationship to the created universe before his incarnation.

b. *Preincarnate vs. Incarnate Focus:*

Preincarnate Focus: This perspective emphasizes Christ's preexistence and eternal nature before his incarnation. It interprets the phrase "the firstborn over all creation" as referring to Christ's eternal relationship with the Father and the Son's role in the act of creation itself.

Incarnate Focus: This view focuses on Christ's entry into the created order as the God-man. It interprets the phrase "the firstborn over all creation" as referring to Christ's preeminence and authority within the created order, particularly in relation to his redemptive work and the establishment of the new creation.

The preceding sets of interpretive differences need not be mutually exclusive, and various theological traditions have combined elements of these perspectives. For example, some traditions affirm both the ontological and functional aspects, particularly by emphasizing Christ's eternal, divine nature, along with his functional preeminence and authority over creation.

On the one hand, the ontological view is more prominent in traditional Trinitarian theology, especially by stressing Christ's eternal divinity and full equality with the Father and the Spirit. On the other hand, the functional view has been more common in certain Protestant traditions that emphasize Christ's role and authority in creation and redemption.

Meanwhile, the pre-incarnate focus is often associated with a high Christology that affirms the Son's preexistence and eternal relationship with the Father and the Spirit. Alternatively, the incarnate focus is more prominent in perspectives that emphasize Christ's redemptive work and his role as the head of the new creation.

While the various preceding interpretations contain nuances and different emphases, the overarching message remains that Christ is the ultimate and perfect revelation of God, the preeminent and divine Creator, and the one through whom the distorted image of God in regenerate humanity is restored and renewed.

3. Hebrews 1:3, Christ as the Brilliant Outshining and Exact Imprint of God

HEBREWS 1:3 STATES THAT the Son is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact imprint of the divine nature.” What follows is a detailed explanation of the verse, including its various interpretations.

a. *Radiance of God’s Glory*

The phrase translated as “the radiance of God’s glory” (Greek, δόξης, *doxes*) depicts the Son as the brilliant outshining that emanates from the divine splendor. Just as the sun’s rays beam outward from it, the Son radiates and makes visible the intrinsic glory of God. Moreover, the phrase conveys the idea that the Son fully manifests and expresses the infinite resplendence, majesty, and perfections of the triune God in a unique and unparalleled way. Some specialists think the phrase refers to the pre-incarnate glory of the Son before taking on human form (John 17:5). Other specialists maintain the phrase has in view the glory exhibited by the incarnate Son during his earthly ministry and death on the Cross (1:14; 12:23).

b. *Exact Imprint / Representation of God’s Nature*

The phrase rendered as “exact imprint” (Greek, χαρακτήρ) conveys the Son’s unique relationship and unity with the Father and the Spirit. This observation implies that the Son, as the precise expression of the Godhead, possesses the same being and bears the same attributes as the Father and the Spirit. Indeed, there is no aspect of the triune God’s character and nature that is not found perfectly in the Son. Some specialists consider the Greek noun to be a reference either to the impression made by a seal or engraved with a stamp. In both cases, the incarnate Son is the perfect representation of the divine essence. This truth affirms the Son’s full deity and co-equality with the Father and the Spirit.

The main interpretive differences of Hebrews 1:3 can be summarized as follows (mirroring those associated with Col 1:15):

a. *Ontological vs. Functional View:*

Ontological View: According to this perspective, Hebrews 1:3 deals with the essential nature or being of Christ. Hence, the phrases “radiance of God’s glory” and “exact imprint of the divine nature” are interpreted as referring to Christ’s inherent and eternal divinity, in which his equality with the Father and the Spirit is affirmed. Indeed, this view upholds Christ’s full deity and coequal status within the triune Godhead.

Functional View: This interpretation considers the references to Christ as the “radiance” and “exact imprint” to be metaphorical expressions of his role in revealing and representing the triune Godhead’s character and glory. Hence, this perspective focuses on the functional roles and attributes ascribed to Christ, rather than his essential nature or ontological equality with the Father and the Spirit.

b. Preincarnate vs. Incarnate Focus

Preincarnate Focus: Some scholars interpret this verse as primarily referring to Christ before he became a human being. Accordingly, the descriptions of “radiance” and “exact imprint” are seen as speaking about Christ’s preexistent, divine nature and his eternal relationship with the Father and the Spirit before taking on human form.

Incarnate Focus: Other scholars view this verse as primarily addressing Christ’s incarnate state, emphasizing His divine nature as manifested in His earthly life and ministry. Correspondingly, the descriptions of “radiance” and “exact imprint” are seen as referring to Christ’s perfect revelation of God’s character and glory through Christ’s words, deeds, and sacrificial death.

As with Colossians 1:15, the above interpretive perspectives need not be mutually exclusive. For instance, some specialists hold a view that incorporates both ontological and functional elements, as well as recognize the significance of Hebrews 1:3 for both Christ’s preincarnate and incarnate states. Additionally, the broader context of the letter and its emphasis on the superiority of Christ over angels and every aspect of the Old Testament revelation inform the interpretation of this verse.

So, then, despite whatever interpretive nuances that may exist, Hebrews 1:3 has several theological implications regarding Christ as the “exact imprint” of God. First, the verse affirms the Son’s full divinity and co-equality with the Father and the Spirit as the second Person of the Trinity. Second, the passage establishes the Son as the perfect and definitive self-revelation of God’s glory and nature. Indeed, only through the Son can the triune Godhead’s real nature and splendor be fully known (John 1:18). Third, the Son’s divine nature enables him to serve as the sole, perfect mediator and great high priest between the Creator and sinful humanity (1 Tim 2:5; Heb 2:14–18; 4:14–16; 1 John 2:1).

B. The Full Restoration of the Divine Image in Believers

1. Second Corinthians 3:18, the Spiritual Transformation of Believers into Christ’s Glorious Image

SECOND CORINTHIANS 3:18 IS PART of Paul’s larger discussion in which he contrasts the old covenant (represented by the veiled glory of Moses’ face) with the new covenant in Christ, whose glory is unveiled and transformative. Specifically, the redeemed, with an “unveiled face,” reflect the “Lord’s glory.” Alternatively, they “contemplate,” as those who gaze at someone or something in a mirror, the “glory” of the Son.

In either case, the above reality becomes the basis for Jesus’ followers “being transformed into his own image” (Greek, *εἰκόνα*, *eikona*). The emphasis here is on them becoming increasingly similar in character and nature to Christ. Yet, believers

do not bring about this profound metamorphosis in their own strength and willpower. Instead, it is the “Lord”—namely, the “Spirit”—who produces an essential change in the redeemed (particularly through the means of grace) from “one degree of glory to another.” What follows are the key interpretations connected with 2 Corinthians 3:18.

a. *Progressive Transformation*: The phrase “are being transformed” (present tense) indicates an ongoing, progressive process of spiritual change. As believers behold and reflect the glory of Christ, they are gradually being conformed to his “own image.”

b. *From Glory to Glory*: The transformation happens in stages, namely, “from one degree of glory to another.” It is a lifelong journey of increasing Christlikeness, in which believers become increasingly radiant reflections of the “Lord’s glory.”

c. *The Agent of Transformation*: The transformation is ultimately accomplished by the “Lord, who is the Spirit.” This is a reference to the divine third Person of the Trinity, who is actively at work in the lives of believers.

d. *The Means of Transformation*: The catalyst for this transformation is reflecting/ beholding the “Lord’s glory.” Accordingly, as believers encounter the “glory” of Christ (e.g., through the ministry of the Word and sacraments), they are progressively changed into His “image.”

The main interpretive differences of 2 Corinthians 3:18 can be summarized as follows:

a. *The Nature of the Image*: Some specialists interpret the “image” as primarily referring to moral transformation, where believers are conformed to Christ’s character and virtues. Other specialists think Paul’s reference to the “image” also includes the future glorification of believers at the Second Advent, where they bear the physical, resurrected image of Christ.

b. *The Role of Human Effort*: Some specialists emphasize the passive nature of spiritual transformation, where believers simply reflect/behold Christ’s glory, and the Spirit does the transforming work. Other specialists highlight the necessity of human effort and cooperation with the Spirit’s work, either through the means of grace, the practice of spiritual disciplines and obedience, or both.

c. *The Basis of Beholding*: Different views exist on the primary basis for reflecting/ beholding Christ’s glory, such as through Scripture reading, prayer, corporate/individual worship, the sacraments, and/or various other spiritual practices.

d. *The Extent of Transformation*: While most specialists agree that full Christlikeness does not occur in this life, different perspectives exist on the degree of spiritual transformation possible before Christ’s return.

The above interpretive differences notwithstanding, the core theological truth remains clear. Through the Spirit’s presence and power, believers can behold and

manifest Christ's glory. Likewise, as they do so (especially through the means of grace), a gradual yet profound metaphysical change occurs. Specifically, the Spirit enables Jesus' followers to be increasingly conformed to his image and character.

2. Colossians 3:10, Redeemed Humanity Putting on the New, Regenerate Self

IN COLOSSIANS 3:9–10, PAUL SETS UP a contrast between the “old,” unregenerate “self” (Greek, ἄνθρωπον, *anthropon*) and the “new,” regenerate “self.” The first is characterized by wicked “practices,” whereas Christlikeness distinguishes the second. The Spirit uses the “knowledge” arising from Scripture (especially through the written, proclaimed, and enacted Word) to bring about the believers' continual renewal or renovation. This metamorphosis of their character and nature is consistent with the “image” (Greek, εἰκόνα, *eikona*) of the one who created the “new self.”

What follows are the key interpretations connected with Colossians 3:10.

a. *The Meaning of “Put on or Be Clothed with the New Self”*: This phrase refers to the believer's new nature and identity in union with Christ, which is being radically transformed. It contrasts with the “old self” (v. 9), which refers to the former sinful nature that is being “put off.”

b. *The Renewal Process*: The phrase “which is continually being renewed” (present tense) suggests an ongoing, progressive renovation. Hence, this spiritual transformation is not just a one-time event (i.e., occurring only at the moment of the believer's conversion at baptism) but a lifelong transformation consistent with being a follower of the Savior.

c. *The Means of Renewal “in Knowledge”*: The transformation of the believers' “new self” is facilitated by an increasing “knowledge” of Christ. This likely refers to a deeper understanding of the Creator's truth, ways, and will, which shapes the believers' thinking and character (Rom 12:1–2; Eph 4:23; Col 3:10).

d. *The Goal of Renewal “according to the Image of its Creator”*: The intended outcome of the spiritual transformation is the restoration of the imago Dei in Christ's followers. As previously noted, the divine image was marred by sin. Yet, the Spirit, especially working through the means of grace, progressively brings about an amazing change. It is nothing less than God recreating his regenerate children anew in union with Christ so that they become his living masterpieces (Eph 2:10).

The main interpretive differences of Colossians 3:10 can be summarized as follows:

a. *The Nature of the Image*: Some specialists see the “image” primarily as moral or spiritual renewal and emphasize the restoration of God's character and virtues in believers. Other specialists view the “image” as also including the future physical/

bodily transformation at the Second Advent, where believers bear the glorified image of Christ.

b. *The Role of Knowledge*: Some specialists understand “knowledge” as referring to a deep, experiential awareness of God and his ways, which is gained through the study of Scripture, prayer, and obedience. Other specialists view “knowledge” as more of an intellectual or doctrinal understanding of biblical truth.

c. *The Extent of Renewal*: Some specialists think that the renewal of the imago Dei can only be fully realized in the afterlife or at Christ’s return. Other specialists maintain that a significant degree of transformation and Christlikeness is possible in this life through the work of the Spirit (particularly through the means of grace).

d. *The Basis of Renewal*: Differing views exist on the primary basis by which this renewal takes place, such as through the study of Scripture, spiritual disciplines, the work of the Spirit, or a combination of these factors.

The above interpretive differences notwithstanding, the core theological truth remains clear. The Spirit, especially through the Word and sacraments, enables believers to undergo a process of metaphysical renewal, with the goal of being increasingly conformed to the image of Christ, their Creator. Admittedly, while this restoration of the imago Dei begins at conversion and reaches its completion at the Second Advent, it is presently a lifelong experience facilitated by believers growing in the “grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18).

C. The Ultimate Renewal of the Imago Dei in Believers

IN ETERNITY, BELIEVERS, DUE TO their union with Christ, experience the ultimate renewal of the imago Dei, namely, a complete restoration of the divine image within them. This renovation is part of the fulfillment of God’s redemptive plan and the culmination of the believer’s sanctification process. That said, there are differing interpretations regarding the nature of the renewal, as follows.

1. *Physical and spiritual renewal*

Some specialists focus more on the physical aspect of the believers’ renewal. Here, the emphasis is on them receiving glorified, resurrected bodies, which are free from sin, corruption, and death (Rom 8:23; 1 Cor 15:42–49). This physical restoration is part of the imago Dei’s full reconstitution, in keeping with the body being originally created in God’s image.

Other specialists focus more on the spiritual aspect of the believers’ renewal. Here, the emphasis is on restoring the believer’s inner nature, mind, and soul to

reflect God's character and holiness more fully. This interpretation highlights the moral and ethical aspects of the *imago Dei*.

2. *Relational and functional renewal*

Some specialists view the renewal of the *imago Dei* primarily in terms of the restoration of the believer's relationship with God. Here, the emphasis is on believers in eternity, enjoying unhindered fellowship and communion with God, reflecting the original, intended relationship between the Creator and humanity (Gen 3:8; Rev 21:3, 7; 22:3–5).

Other specialists focus more on the functional aspect of the believers' renewal. In this case, the restored *imago Dei* enables believers to fulfill their intended role and dominion mandate (Gen 1:28; Ps 8:6–8; Heb 2:8). This includes them exercising godly stewardship and authority in the new heavens and the new earth (Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30; 1 Cor 6:2–3; Rev 22:5).

3. *Degree of renewal*

There are differing views concerning the degree of the *imago Dei*'s renewal in eternity. Some specialists think it will be complete and perfect within regenerate humanity, including the removal of sin and corruption (Rev 21:4; 22:3). In this case, the "humble bodies" (Phil 3:21) of believers are transformed to be like the Savior's "glorious body." This new, everlasting reality mirrors the "image" (Greek, εἰκόνας, *eikonas*; Rom 8:29) of the "Son," the "heavenly man" (1 Cor 15:49), who stands in sharp contrast to humanity's first male progenitor, Adam, the "man made of dust" (vv. 44–48).

Other specialists hold a more nuanced view. On the one hand, they maintain that the renewal is profound and transformative. Yet, on the other hand, in the eternal state, aspects of the believers' individuality and uniqueness remain preserved. This condition allows for a diversity of expression within the unity of the divine image (Isa 2:2–5; 60:3, 5; Micah 4:1–5; Rev 21:24–26).

The preceding differences in interpretation notwithstanding, most Christian traditions affirm that the renewal of the *imago Dei* in eternity is a glorious promise for believers. It reflects the culmination of God's redemptive work and the full restoration of regenerate humanity to its intended purpose and glory.

IV. Theological Implications of the *Imago Dei*

THE PRECEDING SECTIONS OF THIS ESSAY HAVE ARGUED THAT people being created in God's image significantly impacts how they view human nature, dignity, and purpose. By delving deeper into this biblical concept, foundational truths about the connection between God, humanity, and the contemporary intellectual and cultural horizon can

be uncovered. As explained below, exploring this concept is crucial for building a well-defined understanding of humanity (anthropology) from a theological perspective. Ultimately, such a framework can guide ethical reasoning and practical application (praxis) across various aspects of human life.

A. The Dignity and Value of Human Life

THE DOCTRINE OF THE IMAGO DEI establishes the inherent dignity and value of all human life from conception onward. Since people are created in God's image (Gen 1:26–27), they possess an intrinsic worth that transcends utility or social status. This grounds a biblical basis for human rights and respect.

Key implications:

1. Humans have sacred value simply by being created by God in his image (Gen 1:27; 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9).
2. All human life, including the unborn, aged, and disabled, deserves protection and respect (Lev 19:32; Prov 31:8; Ps 139:13; Micah 6:8; Jer 1:5; Jas 1:27).
3. The imago Dei counters philosophies that devalue or objectify human beings (Ps 8:4–8; Jas 3:9).
4. God's image in humans provides a unique status above all other created beings (Gen 1:26, 28).

B. The Basis for Human Creativity and Dominion over Creation

BEING CREATED IN GOD'S IMAGE means humans reflect divine communicable attributes (i.e., traits God chooses to share with humanity) like rationality, morality, and creativity. In turn, this reality equips people to exercise dominion over creation as God's vice-regents, representatives, and stewards (Gen 1:26–28). As noted earlier, this status reflects a dual royal and priestly identity, which is being restored in believers through their union with Christ (Rom 8:16–17; 12:1–2; 2 Cor 5:18–20; 2 Tim 2:12; Heb 13:15–16; 1 Pet 2:4–5, 9; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

Key implications:

1. Humans can innovate, create, and harness the natural world through their God-given reason and creativity (Gen 2:19–20; Exod 31:3–5).
2. The cultural mandate stems from bearing God's image as his subordinate creators and cultivators (Gen 1:26–28; 2:15).
3. Humans exercising dominion over creation is a God-given responsibility involving wise management, not oppression or exploitation (Gen 2:15; Num 35:33–34; Ps 8:3–8).

4. Human inquiry, invention, and appreciation of beauty reflect God's own creative nature (Exod 35:30–35; Prov 8:30–31; Eccl 3:11; Rom 1:19–20).

C. The potential for relationship and communion with God

THE IMAGO DEI ENABLES A unique communion between God and humanity. Being created in God's likeness means humans can relate to him in a way animals cannot. After the Fall (Gen 3:8), this innate ability for divine fellowship and intimacy can only be fully realized among the Father's reborn children in union with Christ (John 6:56; 15:4–7; 1 John 2:24; 3:24).

Key implications:

1. God created humans as relational beings who thirst for intimacy with their Maker (Pss 42:1–2; 63:1; John 7:37–38).
2. Sin damaged, yet did not destroy, the imago Dei and the possibility of knowing God (Gen 5:1; 9:6).
3. So, even after the Fall, humans still have capacities (e.g., reason, spirituality, and so on) that create the potential for relationship and communion with God (Eccl 3:11; Ps 8:3–4; John 14:6; Acts 17:26–28; Rom 1:19–20).
4. Christ, the perfect, incarnate image of the invisible God, restores the broken relationship between the Creator and redeemed humanity (Rom 5:1–2; 2 Cor 5:17–21; Col 1:15–19).

D. The Responsibility to Reflect God's Character and Attributes

IT IS BY THE SPIRIT, THROUGH the means of grace, that God's reborn children, as his image-bearers, reflect his ethical nature and represent his holy character among lost humanity. Indeed, doing so is a high calling and high privilege for Jesus' followers (Matt 5:14–16; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 5:1–2, 8–10; Phil 2:14–16).

Key implications:

1. Believers must rely on the Spirit to cultivate virtues that reflect God's holiness, love, justice, and so on (Rom 14:17; Gal 5:22–23).
2. The imago Dei in Jesus' followers is most clearly manifest when they mirror God's character and attributes (Matt 5:43–48; Eph 4:24; Col 3:10; 1 Pet 1:15–16).
3. Moral failure distorts the imago Dei, while Christlikeness restores it (Rom 3:23; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 4:24; Col 3:10).

4. For redeemed humanity, maintaining ethical conduct, showing compassion, and prioritizing social responsibility stems from the fact that humans are created in God's image (Micah 6:8; Matt 22:37–39; Jam 2:164–17).

To sum up, the concept of *imago Dei* forms the basis for the inherent worth of every human life. It grounds the God-given capacities within humanity for creativity and stewardship over creation. The presence of the divine image also establishes the potential for a unique relationship with the Creator.

Yet, after the Fall, the preceding aspects are not fully realized on their own. For God's reborn children, remaining united to Christ by faith and empowered by the Spirit, who works through the means of grace, allows for a fuller expression of these capacities. This includes offering a foundation for Christian ethics and the recognition of human rights.

V. The Implications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for the *Imago Dei* in Humans

THE EMERGENCE OF AI RAISES significant questions about the concept of humans being created in the image of God. For example, in what ways are people, as God's image bearers, distinctively unique when it seems that large language models (LLMs) can replicate and even surpass human capabilities in reasoning, language use, and creativity? This state of uncertainty presents the following ethical challenges and potential opportunities, especially for believers, whom (as noted above) the Spirit is transforming into the image of Christ by the means of grace.

A. *Responsible Management and Creativity*

The *imago Dei* equips humans with creativity and the responsibility to manage creation wisely. LLMs can augment this capacity. For instance, AI systems can leverage vast datasets and computing power to generate increasingly sophisticated tools that assist humans in various fields. Similarly, believers can utilize this technology to reason, innovate, and shape the world in productive ways that honor the Creator.

B. *Ethical Considerations and Development*

With the creative and technological prowess of LLMs comes immense responsibility for humans to operate as prudent stewards of God's creation. Here, ethical considerations around the development and deployment of AI remain crucial. For example, it is imperative that the use of these systems respect human dignity and rights. Accordingly, people of faith should thoughtfully consider, anticipate, and manage the societal impacts of LLMs. As image-bearers of Christ, believers are called to exercise wisdom and foresight, ensuring that their values guide the development and use of these powerful technologies.

C. Enhancing Knowledge, Without Replacing Human Value

While AI can significantly enhance human capability in accessing information, analyzing data, and expressing creative ideas, it should not be seen as replacing the inherent worth and dignity of humans as bearers of the *imago Dei*. On the one hand, AI tools can facilitate knowledge expansion; yet, on the other hand, human faculties for reason, moral judgment, and creativity remain irreplaceable. In this regard, believers can use LLMs to unveil more of the remarkable creativity God has embedded in humans as his image-bearers.

D. Reflecting God's Nature

When used carefully and ethically, AI systems can potentially assist humans in comprehending, expressing, and exploring profound truths across various languages and contexts. However, this potential is only realized for believers when LLMs operate as supportive tools under their control and are continuously refined to align with God's perfect moral character.

E. The Uniqueness of the Divine-Human Relationship

No matter how advanced AI systems become, they can never replicate the profound connection between the Creator and humans, which remains even after the Fall. Believers, as image-bearers of Christ, have a renewed capacity to experience far greater communion with God. Moreover, while LLMs can be used to address various facets of this transcendent reality, these tools can never be an adequate substitute for the divine-human relationship. Instead, the Spirit can enable Jesus' followers to use emerging AI technologies to affirm and safeguard the unique connection they have with the Father in union with the Son.

In stepping back from the preceding observations, discerning believers recognize that the rise of AI signifies a new frontier for the responsible stewardship of the *imago Dei* in humans. Achieving this necessitates wisdom, the continuous refining of LLMs to serve the common good, maintaining an unwavering commitment to preserving human dignity and value, and recognizing the unique relationship humans have with their Creator. As AI continues to evolve, the ongoing conversation about its implications for the *imago Dei* in humans remains crucial.

VI. Conclusion: The Enduring Significance of the *Imago Dei*

THE CONCEPT OF THE *IMAGO DEI*, meaning humans are created in God's image, is a profound and enduring idea with significant implications. Being rooted in Genesis 1:26–27, it shapes the biblical view of human identity, worth, purpose, and connection to the Creator. This concept is both unique and uplifting.

At its core, the *imago Dei* emphasizes the inherent dignity and value of all human life. By virtue of being created by God, every person possesses intrinsic

worth. This truth safeguards against viewing people as mere objects to be exploited and provides a strong foundation for universal human rights. The fight against injustice, oppression, and the dehumanization of vulnerable groups also finds moral grounding in this principle.

Yet, the *imago Dei* encompasses more than just human value. It highlights the ability of people to reason, create, and understand morality, reflecting aspects of God's nature. It casts humanity's role as overseers of the earth as a significant responsibility stemming from their original creation mandate as God's vice-regents, representatives, and stewards. The greatest achievements in art, intellect, and culture spring from this unique human capacity.

Unlike any other creation, the *imago Dei* reveals humanity's potential for an intimate relationship with God. Although sin has marred this image, it remains inextricably linked to redemption. Through faith in Christ, the perfect embodiment of God, the *imago Dei* can be restored. As the Spirit works within believers through the means of grace, they become more Christlike and fulfill their true, God-given, and everlasting purpose.

The concept of the *imago Dei* remains important for its ethical demands and potential for redemption. As God's image-bearers, believers are called to manifest the Creator's moral character through their thoughts, feelings, and actions. This includes embodying God's love, justice, and mercy in this fallen world. Their responsibility to reflect the divine image extends to how they treat everyone, from the beginning to the end of life.

Whether forming a human rights doctrine based on the Bible, restoring human dignity through social reform, or encouraging believers to embrace their creative potential, the *imago Dei* shines as a guiding light. This ancient truth remains as relevant and applicable today as when it was first expressed thousands of years ago in Genesis 1:26–27. Contemplating its many facets regarding human identity and purpose ensures that Jesus' followers uphold the incomparable value of human life and fulfill their God-given calling as ambassadors for Christ to their unsaved peers.

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Note

1. Unless otherwise noted, the English renderings of Scripture are taken from the Evangelical Heritage Version (EHV), © 2019 Wartburg Project, Inc. All rights reserved.

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