

HUMANITY IN GOD'S IMAGE: IS THE IMAGE REALLY DAMAGED?

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When God created humanity, according to the biblical authors, humanity was given the special status of being “in the image of God” (Gen 1:26–27).¹ Those who are a part of this humanity were not to be killed or abused precisely because of this image.²

Not surprisingly, the implications of this concept in human history have been enormous. It has had great influence on Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike.³ According to one analysis, it “has been the primary influence in the world to maintain the value and dignity of human beings.”⁴ The image of God is today being heralded as “the necessary bridging concept” for understanding

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¹ In the first five chapters of the Bible (not to mention the Bible as a whole), humanity is said to be created in the “image and likeness” of God, in the “image” of God, and in the “likeness” of God. The most commonly adopted summary term “image of God” will suffice for this essay to encompass all that is meant by these terms. It is not necessary to resolve here the question of whether the “image” and the “likeness” represent somewhat different components of the broader notion of “image” discussed here or if they are essentially synonymous. In either case, the biblical foundation that the image/likeness provides for how people are to be viewed and treated is at stake. Similarly, the considerable debate regarding whether humanity “is” or “is in” the image of God—or both—is important, but unnecessary to resolve here. Damage to the image in any of these understandings would lead to the problems discussed in the final part of this essay. Accordingly, cumbersome dual expressions such as “is/in” will not be repeated throughout. The use of “in” or “is” (or “as”) alone should not be understood as an affirmation of one of those expressions in contrast to another, unless so explicitly indicated.

² While the question of what constitutes the image is an important one, the answer is complicated and requires more space than is available here. The book-length discussions of the image in the notes below summarize and categorize the answers that have been given to date. Choosing among them is not necessary for the purposes of this essay. If anything, many commentators have been misled by taking a controversial position on the meaning of the image that is not explicitly taught in the biblical texts. Then they impose that interpretation on the question this essay is addressing rather than allowing the biblical texts to shape the answer to this question directly. Whether the image has been lost or damaged is one of several matters that must be resolved with careful attention to all relevant biblical texts before a more complete account of what constitutes the image of God is possible.

³ Krister Stendahl, “Selfhood in the Image of God,” in *Selves, People and Persons* (ed. Leroy S. Rouner; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992) 141–48.

⁴ William H. Baker, *In the Image of God: A Biblical View of Humanity* (Chicago: Moody, 1991).

biblical theology and ethics.⁵ Clarifying how that works is “crucial”⁶ in light of the huge importance and ongoing influence of this concept.⁷

Against this backdrop, a vital and controversial question warrants careful consideration. Does the image still exist, work, or manifest itself in humanity today—or has it been lost or at least been significantly damaged? Nothing less than the foundation and motivation for the church’s protection of human life and dignity is at stake.

Many biblical and theological scholars, clergy, and others maintain that the image has indeed been lost or damaged.⁸ Some argue that the image is completely lost.⁹ Others suggest that the image is virtually lost.¹⁰ A third

⁵ Ben Witherington III, *The Theological and Ethical Thought World of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2009) 5.

⁶ Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Alone in the World?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) 116.

⁷ As Emil Brunner (*Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947] 93) puts it, “The history of this idea is the history of the Western understanding” of humanity. Roger Ruston (*Human Rights and the Image of God* [London: SCM, 2004] 287) emphasizes “the debt that secular thought owes to theology” regarding this basis for human dignity and rights, echoing William Baker’s contention above. Douglas Hall (*Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* [Library of Christian Stewardship; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986] 64), invoking Paul Ricoeur (*History and Truth* [trans. Charles Kelbley; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965] 110), notes the “wealth of meaning” contained in this “indestructible symbol.” According to Philip Hefner (“Imago Dei: The Possibility and Necessity of the Human Person,” in *The Human Person in Science and Theology* [ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen, William B. Dress, and Ulf Gorman; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000] 87–88), “this concept has often been cited as the single most important statement that the Judeo-Christian-Muslim tradition makes concerning human beings, as illustrated in Hollinger (*The Meaning of Sex* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009] 74). Hermann Haring (“From Divine Human to Human God,” in *The Human Image of God* [ed. Hans-Georg Ziebertz; Leiden: Brill, 2001] 3) similarly highlights the opening biblical affirmation that humanity is created in God’s image as “one of the most important passages of Scripture for Western culture.” Regarding Christian theology in particular, David Gelernter (“The Irreducibly Religious Character of Human Dignity,” in *The President’s Council on Bioethics: Human Dignity and Bioethics* [Washington, DC: U.S. Govt., 2008] 396) maintains that “everything else flows from this seminal assertion.” Charles Feinberg (“Image of God,” *BibSac* 129/515 [1972] 236) insists that this concept “determines every area of doctrinal declaration. Not only is theology involved, but reason, law, and civilization as a whole.”

⁸ I begin by listing myself as one who has taught that the image of God has been damaged in humanity. This is not “their” view—it is “our” view. I, like so many others, have inherited a view that is dubious, biblically speaking. At least those involved can all take comfort that we are in good company.

⁹ This view has been promoted by “many Christian theologians . . . since early times” (W. Sibley Towner, “Clones of God,” *Int* 59 [2005] 351)—early examples being Augustine of Hippo (*Sermons* [ed. John E. Rotelle; trans. Edmund Hill; vol. 1; Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1990] 267; *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* [trans. John Taylor; vol. 1; New York: Newman, 1982] VI, chap. 27); and Theodore of Mopsuestia (*Commentary of Theodore of Mopsuestia on the Lord’s Prayer and on the Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist* [trans. Alphonse Mingana; Cambridge: Heffer and Sons, 1933] 28; *Les Homelies Catechetiques de Theodore de Mopsueste* [trans. Raymond Tonneau and Robert Devreese; Vatican City: Vaticana, 1949] 333). George Forell (*The Protestant Faith* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975] 126–27) and Charles Carter (“Anthropology,” in *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology* [ed. Charles W. Carter; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983] 198) characterize it as the position of “classical Protestantism.” During the Reformation, there was a resurgence of the view that “the image of God may be utterly lost” (see Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1950] 282)—as evidenced in the writings of Martin Luther

group contends that the image is partly lost.¹¹ And still others insist that at least the appearance of the image (unavoidably an aspect of the term "image") is compromised.¹²

(*Luther's Works* [ed. Jaroslav Pelikan; trans. George Schick; St. Louis: Concordia, 1958] 1.63) and then later in John Wesley ("Heavenly Treasure in Earthen Vessels," in *The Works of John Wesley* [ed. Albert Outler; Nashville: Abingdon, 1985] 162; "The Image of God," in *The Works of John Wesley: Sermons IV* [ed. Albert Outler; Nashville: Abingdon, 1985] 295). Twentieth-century theologians Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*Creation and Fall; A Theological Interpretation of Genesis 1-3* [trans. John C. Fletcher and Kathleen Downham; New York: Macmillan, 1959] 36; *The Cost of Discipleship* [trans. Reginald Horace Fuller; London: SCM, 1959] 270) and Karl Barth ("The Doctrine of the Word of God," in *Church Dogmatics* [trans. G. T. Thomson; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936] chap. 6, part 4) voiced similar views. Many more recent writings echo this position, including those by Gordon Kaufman ("The Imago Dei as Man's Historicity," *Journal of Religion* 36 [1956] 157); Werner Kümmel (*Man in the New Testament* [trans. John Vincent; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963] 67-69); Walther Eichrodt (*Theology of the Old Testament* [trans. J. A. Baker; vol. 2; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967] 130); James Dunn (*Romans 1-8* [WBC 38; Nashville: Nelson, 1988] 495); Arthur Patzia (*Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon* [NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993] 76); Harold Hoehner (*Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002] 611); and Robert Kraynak ("Human Dignity and the Mystery of the Human Soul," in *President's Council: Human Dignity* 75). Others, such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her poem "The Image of God" (*The Image of God: The Poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning* [New York: Frederick Warne and Co., 1893]), have popularized this view.

¹⁰ This view can be found in such prominent historical figures as Nestorius ("First Sermon against the Theotokos," in *The Christological Controversy* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980] 124) and Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica* [trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province; vol. 1; New York: Benziger, 1947] 1, q93, a8). John Calvin was particularly colorful in the language he used in his *Institutes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), calling the image "almost blotted out" (I,15:4), "all but obliterated" (III,3:9), and "so corrupted that whatever remains is frightful deformity" (I,15:4). Emil Brunner (*Man in Revolt* 94-96) finds this view to be widely influential in Protestant circles generally. Many others more recently have affirmed it as their own position, including Leslie Mitton (*Ephesians* [NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981] 166), David Johnson ("The Image of God in Colossians," *Didaskalia* 3/2 [1992] 10); Anthony Hoekema (*Created in God's Image* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994] 23); and Christopher Wright (*The Mission of God* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006] 424). In fact, the "ruined image" is the title theme of a chapter in a recent work on theological anthropology (Mark R. Talbot, "Learning from the Ruined Image: Moral Anthropology After the Fall," in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective* [ed. Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton, and Mark R. Talbot; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006]); and there is an entire chapter on the contemporary person entitled "Shattered Image" in a recent popular psychology book (Neil T. Anderson and Dave Park, *Overcoming Negative Self-Image* [Ventura, CA: Regal, 2003]).

¹¹ Philip Hefner ("The Creation," in *Christian Dogmatics* [ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984] 335); Stanley Leavy (*In the Image of God: A Psychoanalyst's View* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988] xi); and Ellen Ross ("Human Persons as Images of the Divine," in *The Pleasure of Her Text* [ed. Alice Bach; Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990] 102) all observe that historical Christianity, or a major segment thereof, has affirmed over the centuries that the image has been partly lost (i.e. damaged). Addison Leitch ("Image of God," in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* [ed. Merrill C. Tenney; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975] 257) finds this view common in Roman Catholic and Protestant circles, while Jean Mayland ("Made and Re-Made in the Image of God," *Modern Believing* 40/3 [1999] 61) observes the same in Greek Orthodoxy. Early church supporters include Irenaeus of Lyons ("Against Heresies, Book V," in *Ante-Nicene Christian Library: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325* [ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1967] V,6) and Gregory of Nyssa ("On Virginity," in *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatise* [ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wall; trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson; vol. 5: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers; Peabody,

MA: Hendrickson, 1995] 357). Many more recently have identified a particular part of the image that they consider lost or badly damaged—for example, Jonathan Edwards (*Freedom of the Will* [ed. Arnold S. Kaufman and William K. Frankena; New York: Irvington Publishers, 1982] 35–36), James Orr (*God's Image in Man, and Its Defacement in the Light of Modern Denials* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948] 59); Reinhold Niebuhr (*The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964] 269–71); Helmut Thielicke (*Theological Ethics: Foundations* [ed. William Henry Lazareth; vol. 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966] 169–70); John Murray (“Man in the Image of God,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977] 40); Herman Bavink (*Our Reasonable Faith* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977] 213); James Boyce (*Abstract of Systematic Theology* [Escondido, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990] 214); Pope John Paul II (“On the Dignity and Vocation of Women,” in *The Theology of the Body* [Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997] 455); J. I. Packer (“Reflected Glory,” *CT* 47/12 [December 2003] 56); and Kenneth Gardoski (“The Imago Dei Revisited” (paper presented at the Evangelical Theological Society Eastern Regional Conference [April 2004] 21). Others refer to the image as a whole being damaged in some way. Some speak of a process of degeneration (e.g. Gerhard von Rad, “The Divine Likeness in the OT,” *TDNT* 3:392; John Walton, *Genesis* [NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001] 130–31; Thomas Small, *Like Father, Like Son* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006] 59; John Frame, “Men and Women in the Image of God,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* [ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem; Wheaton: Crossway, 2006] 229; and Thomas Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* [Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008] 192). Others speak of a marring of the image (e.g. J. Greshem Machen, *The Christian View of Man* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947] 173; John Stott, *The Epistles of John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964] 119; John Piper, “Male and Female He Created Them in the Image of God” [May 14, 1989], online at www.desiringgod.org; Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998] 453; and Michael Horton, “Image and Office: Human Personhood and the Covenant,” in *Personal Identity* (ed. Lints et al., 192). Still others use a variety of similar terms (e.g. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 [Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947] 216; Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* [Wheaton: Victor, 1986] 192; Amy Plantinga-Pauw, “Personhood, Divine and Human,” *Perspectives* 8/2 [1993] 14; Murray Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005] 317; Witherington, *Theological and Ethical Thought World* 113). Lisa Cahill (“Embodying God's Image: Created, Broken, and Redeemed,” in *Humanity Before God* [ed. William Schweiker; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006]) and Scot McKnight (*Embracing Grace* [Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2005]) devote entire chapters of their books to the “broken” and “cracked” image. This view of the damaged image has been popularized through such poets as John Donne and Walter Hilton (see analysis in Brumble, “Imago Dei,” in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* [ed. David Lyle Jeffrey; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992] 372–73) and such novelists as Morris West (*The Clowns of God* [New York: William Morrow & Co., 1981] 349).

¹² Because the term “image” itself has a strong visual orientation in many languages, damage done to the appearance of the image is tantamount to damage done to the image itself. Sometimes the term for the visual damage is overtly moral, as in the writings of various early church fathers (see George A. Maloney, *Man, the Divine Icon* [Pecos, NM: Dove Publications, 1973] 193) and many others more recently such as Ann Salliss Eley (*God's Own Image* [Luton, England: White Crescent, 196] 155); Meredith Kline (*Images of the Spirit* [Baker Biblical Monograph; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980] 32); Nahum Sarna (*Genesis* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989] 13), Sewell Hall (“They Shall See His Face,” in *In His Image: The Implication of Creation* [ed. Ferrell Jenkins; Temple Terrace, FL: Florida College, 1995] 41); John Goldingay (“Image, Likeness (of God),” in *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible* [ed. Donald E. Gowen; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003] 223); John Bequette (*Christian Humanism: Creation, Redemption, and Reintegration* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004] 16); and Peter Ochs (“The Logic of Indignity and the Logic of Redemption,” in *God and Human Dignity* [ed. Kendall Soulen and Linda Woodhead; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006] 143–44). At other times the character of the visual damage done is not explicit, as in the writings of Carl Henry (“Image of God,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* [ed. Walter Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984] 547); Nicholas Wolterstorff (“Worship and Justice,” *Reformed Liturgy & Music* 19/2 [1985] 70); Matti Sidoroff (“Man as the Icon of God,” *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 38/1–4 [1993] 24); Ward Wilson and Craig Blomberg (“The Image of God in Humanity: A Biblical-Psychological Perspective,” *Them*

So in light of the great stakes involved, it will be important here in Part 1 to examine the biblical teaching on this matter. Because it turns out that there are no such biblical affirmations, Part 2 will consider why it is crucial to address the serious disconnect between biblical and contemporary teaching now.

I. BIBLICAL TEACHING

Has human sin in general, or the so-called “Fall” described in Genesis 3 that separated humanity from God—or both—done anything to damage or destroy the image of God? Two groups of texts are primary. The first are passages throughout the Bible that discuss the image and people generally. The second are NT passages that focus only on those experiencing new life “in Christ.”

1. *Texts addressing humanity as a whole.* The first group of texts begins, in the eyes of some, with Genesis 3. However, this chapter is about human beings, not their status as image/likeness of God. Neither of the primary Hebrew terms (*tselem* and *demuth*) used for the image in Genesis 1—or their equivalents—are mentioned here. Plenty is said about the people involved, including what about *them* has been lost or damaged; but nothing about the image.

Many interpreters of the Bible have embarked on the wrong path right at the outset by mistakenly conflating the image of God with the human being. As a result, they mistakenly assume that if the human being is changed, the image of God is also.

The logical fallacy here becomes clearer by considering the example of elephants. Elephants, like people, have many characteristics. Elephants are typically gray in color, mammals, large, etc. Just because one of those characteristics changes—for example, their color, if they get covered in mud—that does not mean that their size or mammal status necessarily changes as well.

Similarly, the Bible suggests many things about people as originally created—they were unstained by sin, they were human beings, they were in the image of God, etc. Humans sinning would not necessarily have any implications for whether or not they are still human beings, or whether they remain in the image of God. In particular, connecting the image with sin would only make sense if one has smuggled in an understanding of what constitutes the image of God—something that sin necessarily damages. But

18/3 [April 1993] 13); Mary Catherine Hilbert (“Imago Dei: Does the Symbol Have a Future,” *The Santa Clara Lectures* (Santa Clara University, CA) 8/3 [2002] 12); Eugene Merrill (“Image of God,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* [ed. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003] 444); G. K. Beale (*The Temple and the Church’s Mission* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004] 88); Kyle Fedler (*Exploring Christian Ethics* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006] 85); and Elizabeth McLaughlin (*Engendering the Imago Dei* [Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Microform, 2008] 93).

that understanding is the very thing that should *follow* from what the Bible teaches about the image, not be assumed for some reason at the outset and then used to read into biblical passages a meaning that accords with it.

Conflating the person and image has predisposed some people to equate the image of God with every way that people are somehow like God. There is no place in the Bible, as will be discussed in the coming pages, where the meaning of the image in which all humanity is created is explicated as one or more capacities or functions or relationships.

People indeed have many such things, and some of those are praiseworthy because they resemble something we know about God. But if no biblical passage affirms that any such resemblance is what the “image of God” constitutes, we are on precarious ground to conflate the two.

In fact, in light of teachings later in the Bible that root people’s significance and dignity in their image-of-God status, given by God, the early chapters of Genesis may imply a subtle warning. From the beginning, people have not been satisfied with what they have been given. They want to have a hand in their status. In Genesis 3 they come to think of that status in terms of how they are like God and try to increase that likeness by coming to “know good and evil.”

The entire enterprise of trying to establish our status by breaking it down into ways we are like God is arguably misguided. The attraction of this enterprise is understandable. If our status—(our connection with) the image of God—is a matter of certain characteristics or capacities or relationships that are ours, then we can somehow take credit for them. Even if they were originally given to us, they are ours now. But the biblical writings consistently refrain from explicating the image of God in terms of specific likenesses to God. There is good reason to consider that to be more than accidental.

Nevertheless, there are those who do tend to equate being “like God” with being in the image of God; and those may well see image of God language in Genesis 3. In verse 5, the serpent tells Eve that eating the forbidden fruit will make her “like God, knowing good and evil.”¹³ And, indeed, it turns out in verse 22 that, after she and Adam eat the fruit, God observes with concern that humanity “has become like one of us, knowing good and evil.” In other words, this passage addresses a problematic way of becoming like God, not the image/likeness in which God created humanity. Moreover, the concern voiced here is not that a likeness is decreasing but that it is increasing.

Whatever else is going on in Genesis 3, there appears to be no evidence here of the image of God being damaged by the Fall. Much is said about *people*, including their capacities, functions, and relationships (which are all damaged). However, none of those things are identified here or elsewhere in the biblical writings as what *constitutes* the image. Some or all of them may well be attributes of humanity intended to flow from being in the image of God, according to Genesis 1 and beyond. Nevertheless, something that “being in the image” enables people to do or be is not the image itself.

¹³ Biblical quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the NRSV.

Two chapters later, in Genesis 5, further generations of fallen humanity come into view.

After the reaffirmation that God originally created human beings in the image of God (verse 1), the text notes that Adam had a son, Seth, in his (Adam's) image. A similar Hebrew expression appears here in verse 3 as in Genesis 1:26 regarding the creation of Adam and Eve, involving both the terms *tselem* and *demuth*.

As in the case of Genesis 3, there are various controversial issues regarding the image of God involved here. But regardless of where one lands on those, there is no indication that the image of God has been lost or damaged.

For instance, one debate concerns whether Genesis 5 suggests that the image of God is passed on to subsequent generations, from parents to children. Some would say that it does, in light of the language parallel to Genesis 1 plus the reaffirmation of creation in the image of God to introduce the chapter. In their view, because Adam is in the image of God, anyone created in Adam's image is also in God's image. Others do not see this implication. But in either case, there is no affirmation in Genesis 5 that God's image does not continue in humanity or is somehow damaged. Since its continuation is explicitly affirmed only four chapters later, as we shall see below, it would appear mistaken to attempt to read into Genesis 5 the view that the image of God does not continue.

Another debate regarding Genesis 5 concerns whether or not this chapter teaches that there is such a thing as the "image of humanity" as opposed to the "image of God." Some say that there is, invoking support from passages such as 1 Cor 15:49, which contrast "the image of the man of dust" (Adam) borne by all people, with "the image of the man of heaven" (Christ, "the last Adam"—v. 45). If there is such an image of humanity/Adam, it is argued, it refers to our finiteness (earthiness) or our fallenness (sin). Particularly when given the latter meaning, this image would indeed refer to an image of humanity that is badly damaged. However, such an image, as a contrast to the image of God, would only further distance and distinguish the image of God from any sense of being damaged or lost.

Genesis 9 contains the clearest statement in the OT regarding the image of God after the Fall. According to verse 6, people are to act (or not act) in certain ways, the reason being: "for in his own image God made humankind." There is some debate over whether this rationale explains why people should not be killed or why people can inflict capital punishment on murderers. Some would say the rationale applies to both (or even to everything discussed in vv. 1–6a). In any case, the rationale and the image apply to people currently alive, either those killed or those doing the killing. So the text constitutes a direct affirmation that the image of God was not lost due to the Fall. Moreover, there is not the slightest indication that the image has been damaged.

Admittedly, a relatively small number of interpreters have suggested that this text does not affirm that people since the fall are in the image of God—only that Adam was originally created in the image and that the image can be restored in Christ. There are several problems with this interpretation. First, it is highly unlikely that the author of Genesis had in mind the prospect of

restoring the image in Christ. Without that prospect explicitly in view, were the author to be assuming here that God's image had been lost, there would be no rationale offered here for punishing murder at the time of the author.

Those who see the NT as teaching the restoration of a lost image understandably feel compelled to interpret that view back into the OT. However, because it turns out that this actually is not the NT teaching, as will be discussed below, the felt need to import into Genesis the understanding that the image has been damaged is unfounded.

The closest NT parallel to Gen 9:6, regarding whether or not people after the Fall are still in God's image, would appear to be Jas 3:9. That passage similarly grounds a current standard of moral conduct directly in human creation in the image of God. As discussed immediately below, the people who are being cursed are themselves identified as being according to God's image. There is no indication that re-creation in Christ is in view, or that it was their ancestor Adam alone who was in God's image. So the most plausible understanding of Genesis 9:6 is that it invokes the continuing post-Fall image-of-God status of human beings as the basis for punishing murder.

James 3 contains one of the only two direct NT statements that humanity in general is in the image of God. In verse 7, James notes the role that human beings have played in taming all kinds of land, air, and sea animals. That observation is reminiscent of the role given to human beings regarding all three types of creatures in Gen 1:28, immediately following the creation of humanity in the image of God in 1:27. So it is not surprising to find a reference to human beings in the image of God in verse 9 of James 3.

There are multiple indications that James is speaking of all people being in the image of God today. The humanity (*anthropos*) that tames creatures in verse 7 shows no evidence of being a reference only to Christians. That same humanity is then referred to as the humanity made in God's image in verse 9. James specifies that he has in view human activity in both the past and in the present by writing that every type of creature both "is tamed" (*damadzetai*) and "has been tamed" (*dedamastai*). Accordingly, he says *not* that human beings "were made" (aorist tense) in God's image, but he uses a form of perfect tense which refers to the present state resultant upon a past action. People are now in the image of God. They have become so (*gegonotas*), because God has made them so.

The point that James is making here requires this affirmation of the current status of human beings. He is giving the reason why his readers are not to curse human beings in general; and that requires an affirmation of who human beings are today—that is, why it is inappropriate to curse them today. The reason is that they are specially connected with God by virtue of being made in God's image.

Those James is addressing are identified as "brothers and sisters" (v. 10)—language used when Christians alone are in view. But since James is concerned about their speech not just toward one another but toward people in general, he uses different language to refer to those being cursed—the more generic *anthropous* in verse 9. In other words, there is no suggestion here that the image of God has been lost or damaged, or that only Christians are in the image of God.

That leaves one other direct biblical reference to humanity in general being in God's image: Paul's brief and cryptic affirmation in 1 Corinthians 11. As part of arguing that a man ought not wear something on his head while praying or prophesying, Paul invokes the man's status as image of God. He does not say anything one way or the other regarding a woman and the image of God. (He talks about "glory" in relation to her; but as we will note below in relation to 2 Corinthians 3, that is a different matter.) So rather than putting words in Paul's mouth, it is probably best here to confine our discussion to the questions of whether the image of God that Paul invokes in verse 7 applies to people today and, if so, whether only Christians are in view.

First, the discussion of the creation of human beings in verses 8–9 strongly suggests that the reference to a man as an image of God in verse 7 refers to the image in Genesis 1. In fact, the word "indeed" or "for" (*gar*) that begins verse 8 explicitly indicates that what follows is an explanation of what precedes. However, Paul does not leave the reference to the image in the past, as merely part of God's original creation. He uses the present tense to affirm that a man is now the image of God by virtue of the original creation. In other words, nothing has transpired or intervened since the original creation to change the fact that a man is the image of God.

As was the case in the James passage, the audience to which Paul is speaking appears to be exclusively Christian. Here they are those involved in or concerned about praying and prophesying. They are the "church of God that is in Corinth" (1:2), expected to live as do the other "churches of God" (11:16). But as in James, the basis invoked here for how they should view people is humanity's creation, not people's re-creation in Christ. In other words, a man's status as image of God has the particular implications for Christians noted here, just as it has the broader implications for non-Christians noted in James 3 and Genesis 9. Most importantly for our purposes, there is no indication that any image has been damaged or lost—regardless of who exactly is being affirmed here as the image of God.

No other biblical texts refer directly to all of humanity as being created in the image of God. However, because more than a few interpreters invoke Psalm 8 and a story in the life of Jesus as sources for insights regarding the image, a few comments about those texts are in order here. Even in these instances, there is no indication that the image of God has been lost or damaged.

When Psalm 8 reminds people of humanity in the image of God, it is generally because verse 5 says that God made humanity with an exalted status (a little lower than *elohim*—that is, "God" or the "heavenly beings"). Some hear an echo of the pinnacle of God's creation in Genesis 1 when humanity is created in God's image.

There is no indication here in Psalm 8 that this status has been reduced since that original creation. To the contrary, the praise due to God is linked to it and would be compromised if humanity's status were compromised. The exalted status the psalmist has in mind is a current status: "What *are* human beings . . ." (v. 4, italics added)—not what *were* they only in the original creation.

Another possible indirect reference to the image of God occurs when Jesus addresses people's obligation to pay taxes (Matt 22:15–22; Mark 12:13–17;

Luke 20:20–26). There, Jesus teaches that people have an obligation to give the denarius (tax) coin to Caesar because it is his. It is his—suggests Jesus by pointing to the coin—because Caesar’s image is on it. Jesus adds that people have a parallel obligation to give to God what is God’s. While he does not explicitly explain any identifying features of what belongs to God, the parallel to Caesar suggests that what bears the image of God is owed to God.

If people’s creation in the image of God is being invoked as the basis for that obligation, then there is no indication here that the image has been lost or damaged. Such damage would imply that the obligation itself has lessened—hardly the point Jesus is making.

In fact, the denarius that Jesus had the people look at was likely rather worn. Any such damage to the coin, however, was irrelevant and is not mentioned in the text. A worn coin was no less of a coin because of such damage. It was still a denarius and was still known to bear the image of Caesar. In modern U.S. coinage, were it a quarter, it would not be worth 22 cents or 15 cents, depending on how unrecognizable the face was on it. If it was a denarius, it bore the image of Caesar by definition and its worth and purposes were determined by that.

So it is with people and the image of God. There is no suggestion in the text of the gospels either directly or by way of parallel with the denarius that people have even partly lost the image of God or that obligations to them—or their own obligations as human beings—have diminished.

2. Texts addressing people experiencing new life in Christ. Before we move on from texts addressing humanity as a whole to texts addressing those with new life in Christ, one particular distinction needs to be highlighted. It concerns the difference between “human beings” and the “image of God.” We have already noted this difference, particularly in our discussion of Genesis 3.

People are many things in addition to having a status related to the image of God. So when we read in both the OT and NT writings about the terrible damage that sin has done to human beings ever since the Fall, that means nothing necessarily about the image of God. Acknowledging that the biblical writings recognize no damage done to the image of God in no way weakens or questions the gravity of sin and its devastating effect on the human race and beyond. If anything, sin is all the more heinous because of the way that it contradicts who human beings are intended to be by their Creator.

Once we recognize the distinction here between human beings and the image of God, we will be better able to see that it is humanity, not the image of God, that has been damaged according to the consistent teaching throughout the Bible. We can then be more careful in our examination of the texts addressing those experiencing new life in Christ. Is a damaged image restored, or are damaged human beings restored? We will have to read the texts carefully and be alert not to read into them ideas that are not there.

One prominent biblical text on the image of God that is limited to those experiencing new life in Christ is located in Romans 8. In verse 29, Paul explains the end to which God has predestined Christians, whom God will

ultimately glorify (v. 30). God has predestined them to be conformed to the image of his Son. Most importantly for our present purposes, what is being restored through a process of justification and glorification (v. 30) are people, not the image.

There is no language indicating that any sort of image is changing. Rather, God is changing people; and the image of his Son is that to which people are being conformed. If anything, it is the constancy of that image that provides a sure goal for all believers. Interestingly, the goal is consistently referred to in terms of the "image of Christ," not a broader "image of God" concept—suggesting that there may be involved here a development or glorification beyond what Adam and Eve experienced in the image of God before the Fall.

We turn next to 2 Corinthians 3, where Paul writes in verse 18 that believers are being transformed into the image of the Lord. As in Romans 8, there is no language indicating that any harm has been done to the image in which people were originally created; nor is there any suggestion of an image changing in any way. According to this text, the Lord provides (or is) the goal and the means of people's growth.

While the image does not change, believers as people change. Accordingly, the biblical writers use a term other than image—that is, glory—to refer to that which changes. According to verse 18, people are transformed "from one degree of glory to another." It is the (degree of) glory that changes, not the image. The terms "glory" and "image" are often confused or conflated in discussions of the image, resulting in the mistaken assumption that the image can be lost and restored the way that glory can. But the biblical writers consistently reserve language of change for the term glory, as in verse 18 here.

Instead of a damaged or lost image being restored, Paul writes in terms of something new happening because of Christ. The people of Israel were under the "old covenant" (v. 14) and their minds were hardened (v. 14). But now they are able to understand and accept the gospel message "in Christ" (v. 14). There was glory in the old covenant; but the glory of the new is so much greater that the old has lost its glory (vv. 9–10). Whereas Moses was incapable of retaining the glory he gained from his personal encounter with God (v. 13), believers now have a new capacity for ever-increasing glory (v. 18). Shortly thereafter, Paul describes what is happening in believers as a "new creation" (5:17).

The problem to be addressed is not a corrupted image but sinful people oppressed by the "god of this world" (4:4). Paul recognizes that one reason something new is needed is that people are being prevented from being and living as God intends. When people turn to the Lord, notes Paul, there is a veil over their inner selves which is removed (3:15). They then at last have the "freedom" (v. 17) to begin a growth in glory whose standard is the Lord's image. Whereas the image of God introduced first in the OT is about the *status* of humanity, the divine image concept introduced first in the NT is about the *standard* for humanity.

The image of Christ provides the standard for how humanity's status should be lived out. In Christ alone, as perfect God and human being, do the status of the image of God and the standard of the image of Christ cohere

perfectly. That's why Christ alone can be said to be not only the "image of God" (4:4; cf. Col 1:15), but also the "exact representation" of God (Heb 1:3).

Again, as always, there is nothing about this image of God that is deficient or damaged in any way. The image of God, whether in reference to Christ or human beings, is something that the Bible contrasts with human sinfulness—not something that is ever altered by sin.

A third key passage addressing people redeemed in Christ occurs in Colossians 3. There Paul¹⁴ writes that Christians (people "raised with Christ"—v. 1) are now clothed with a "new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (v. 10). Again, there is no indication of any image having been damaged or lost. Indeed, it is not the image mentioned here that is even being renewed. It is people who are being renewed. The image is the standard or goal according to which people are being renewed.

Instead of language specifying or implying a lost or damaged image, there is an emphasis here on something new happening. This is not merely a restoration of something old (whether an image or people). It is not a damaged "old self" that is being renewed. That has been discarded completely (v. 9)—it has "died" (v. 3).

A new self has replaced it, and this is what is being renewed in the image of its creator (v. 10). The creator mentioned here is not identified as the creator of the original creation, only as the creator of this new self. Even if "creator" here refers more precisely to God than to Christ, it is the new work of God in Christ—the new self being renewed—that Paul has in view, leading him to emphasize that "in that renewal . . . Christ is all and in all" (v. 11).

At the same time as something new in Christ is underway, there is an element of continuity suggested here. There is a "you" (plural) Paul is addressing here, who have taken off the old self and put on the new. So there is no reason to think that the status of all human beings created in the image of God has changed. Rather, a new possibility for human existence has come to the fore in Christ: living according to his image.

Ephesians 4 includes a related teaching from Paul,¹⁵ according to which Christians have a new self created to be like God (v. 24). There are important similarities and differences here compared with the passage in Colossians 3. In both places Paul refrains from any indication that the image of God has been damaged or lost, or that it is being renewed. It is people who are being renewed, not the image. The directive to "be renewed," in fact, appears earlier, in a separate verse (v. 23) talking about people rather than the image. The next verse is often said to be talking about the image. But in fact, the word never appears in verse 24, as will be discussed below. In any case, that verse refers to a standard or goal that is never itself characterized as damaged.

¹⁴ Since the letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians both indicate in their opening verse that they are written by a person named "Paul," their author will be referred to here as Paul.

¹⁵ See previous note.

Another similarity between the Ephesians and Colossians passages is that Ephesians 4 also locates the problem in sin rather than in a damaged image. With language reminiscent of 2 Corinthians 3, Paul observes that people without God are “darkened in their understanding” (v. 18). The only way to see the light, Paul reminds his readers, is to put off “your old self” (v. 22) and “clothe yourselves with the new self” (v. 24). Again, although human participation is required, human effort alone would never be sufficient. The new self must be “created” (v. 24) by God, since the “life of God” (v. 18) is what unbelievers lack.

As in Colossians 3, the language here suggests something new—corporately and not just individually—happening in Christ. This is not the restoration of an image that has been damaged. It is not a damaged “old self” that is being renewed. That has been put away (v. 22). A new self has replaced it.

However, the language describing the new self here is somewhat different than in the parallel passage in Colossians, and it accentuates the newness of what is happening in Christ. Paul here drops the word “image” entirely, suggesting that he may have in mind a different concept than the “image of God” *per se*. He focuses his concern instead on the importance of believers imitating God in certain ways.

This idea of imitating God and manifesting aspects of God’s character to the world appears at the beginning, middle, and end of chapter 4. Chapter 5 then summarizes the general point in its opening two verses: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us.” The teaching that people are to follow the example of Christ and be like God is found throughout the Bible. As noted above, this is not identical with the concept of being made in the image of God.

By examining here all of the “image of God” texts addressing humanity as a whole, we have found that being created in the image of God is a “yes-or-no” status that turns out to apply to all of humanity not only before the Fall but afterward as well. There is no indication that it is a matter of degree. Accordingly, it cannot be referring to the various ways people are like God, since that is *always* a matter of degree and is ever changing.

Conflating “being created in the image of God” and “being like God” is a confusion somewhat similar to the confusion of conflating “people” and the “image” discussed above. It is not the image of God that is damaged by sin—people are. It is not the image of God that needs to be restored—people need that. But one who thinks of being in the image as meaning the same thing as being like God will logically conceive of some people as being more in the image of God and some people less, depending on how like God they are. That way of thinking is foreign to the Bible. It is easy to understand how the English terms *image* and *imaging* can incline people to think in terms of the ways that one thing is like another. But in this case, the language and concepts of culture are misleading.

It may be the case in Ephesians 4, then, that Paul intentionally makes no explicit reference to the image of God. He is about to summarize his point in 5:1 in terms of imitating God, so he writes in 4:24 that the new self

is created to be like God—that is, created “according to” God (*kata theon ktisthenta*).

At this point, some comments may be helpful regarding two other passages that may or may not actually refer to the image of God concept we have been discussing. In 1 John 3, first of all, there is a passage that is often cited in discussions of the image of God. John writes in verse 2 that believers “are God’s children now” and that “when he is revealed, we will be like him.”

There is no mention here of the “image of God,” but rather a statement about being “like God.” As we have just noted, those two concepts are not the same in the Bible. Many passages suggest that people’s glory, and the degree to which they are like God, can increase over time. But there is no indication that the image of God itself changes. Even if an indirect reference to the image of God is intended in 3:2, the important point for our present purposes is that no hint of any image being or having been lost or damaged is present.

The other remaining passage is in 1 Corinthians 15. In this chapter Paul repeatedly contrasts dying physical bodies with resurrected spiritual bodies. He uses this contrast to explain the progression in the life of Christians. Like all human beings, they “have borne the image of the man of dust” (v. 49). But unlike others, Christians are not “of the dust” but are “of heaven” (v. 48). Accordingly, they “will bear the image of the man of heaven” (v. 49). Paul does not leave us to guess what he is talking about here, but continues: “What I am saying is this . . .” (v. 50). He explains that the perishable cannot “inherit the imperishable” (v. 50), but the “perishable body must put on imperishability” (v. 53).

In light of the overall argument here, it may be that the language concerning the “image of the man of dust” and the “image of the man of heaven” has little if anything to do with the biblical concept of the “image of God.” Rather than the image referring to God, or even to Christ as a person of God, the word “image” appears in both of its two uses (v. 49) as part of the expression “the image of the man” (*ten eikon tou [anthropou* implicitly carried over from v. 47]).

Nevertheless, since the presence of the term “image” in association with Christ (the man of heaven) suggests to some a connection with the image of God/Christ idea, it is worth noting what the text says about that image. There is no hint that this image has been lost or damaged. The only thing that is flawed and limited is Adam, the man of dust. It is the people who are limited, not the image of God.

Instead, there may be a suggestion here that because the first Adam, and humanity in general, was but dust, a bodily transformation would have been necessary even had humanity never sinned. Regardless of whether or not that is so, it is clear that a new body is necessary now and that Christ with his spiritual body is the first fruits of what dying accomplishes for believers.

Yet this does not imply that there is no continuity from the beginning of human creation to the end of human resurrection. The dying seed metaphor here suggests that while much that is useless and covering the core must be stripped away, there is something there (as in Colossians) that, because of

how God has made it to be, can be transformed into new life. From elsewhere in the NT, as discussed above, it appears that the status of being in the image of God is included with what continues.

3. *Biblical texts: conclusion.* An examination of numerous biblical texts, then, suggests that the “image of God” establishes a “status” for humanity whereas the “image of Christ” establishes a “standard” for humanity. There is no indication anywhere in the Bible that this status or standard has been lost or damaged.

The difference between status and standard can be illustrated by analogy with something high-quality made by a famous craftsman, such as a violin of the master, Stradivarius. A Stradivarius violin may be damaged, but it is still a Stradivarius—that is a label and status based on its creation, not a degreed category. That a Stradivarius violin has been damaged does not mean that the Stradivarius name itself is damaged. When a Stradivarius violin is damaged, the compelling reason for restoring it is the fact that it is a Stradivarius. Its status points to its creator.

The restoration is mandated by virtue of its status, though exactly what restorative work needs to be done is directed by the standard of what a Stradivarius violin ideally is like. In the restoration, the focus is not so much on the creator (Stradivarius) as on what the creator has produced (the undamaged violin). The analogy here is not exact, since violins are produced and Christ is begotten, for example; but Christ, like the newly-produced violin, is the standard for restoration—in fact, for even more than restoration.

Accordingly, the image of Christ and the image of God are closely related, but appear not to be referring to quite the same thing. The former is the standard for the restoration of humanity; the latter is the status that makes the restorative work warranted, even at a great price. Neither the status nor the standard are compromised when a Stradivarius violin is damaged by dropping it or when a person is damaged by sin—though indeed the violin and the person may be badly damaged.

All people, then, have the uncompromised status of being “in the image of God.” This is no more a matter of degree than the status of being “justified” is for Christians. Human beings and Christians can fail to live up to the standards that their status(es) should entail, but that does not mean that any status itself has been reduced. One’s continuing status becomes the very basis of the exhortation to be (live in accordance with) who one truly is.

II. VITAL IMPLICATIONS OF AN UNDAMAGED IMAGE

To summarize the discussion to this point, the Bible consistently avoids indicating that the image of God is either lost or damaged in human beings—now, or in any day. Yet many people are learning today that such loss or damage has occurred. Admittedly, the Bible does not contain an explicit affirmation that the image of God has *not* been damaged. So the question is really one of wisdom. Would the church be wise to follow the Bible’s lead by *not* suggesting that the image has been damaged?

1. *The wisdom of biblical language.* As has already been suggested, there are many reasons to answer that question in the affirmative. Prominent among them are the disturbing implications that the idea of a lost or damaged image has for the ways human beings may be viewed and treated. From that vantage point, it is hard to imagine a greater tragedy than the destruction or damaging of the image. The very basis for protecting human beings from verbal abuse (James 3) and from threats to their very lives (Genesis 9)—that is, their creation and continuing status as being in the image of God—is at stake.

At the same time that church leaders have been teaching the importance of upholding the dignity of those disadvantaged because of their race, gender, poverty, disability, etc., many of those same leaders have been communicating that the biblical basis of that dignity has been badly damaged. Their theology appears to be at cross purposes with their ethics, and the impetus for people to follow their ethical teaching is thereby weakened.

It is instructive to examine some of the terrible violations of human life and dignity that have taken place in history, to see if a connection with a faulty understanding of the image of God is ever indicated. Adolf Hitler, as part of developing his approach to the weaker members of society in his 1927 book *Mein Kampf*, identifies the stronger members of society as “images of the Lord” in contrast to the weaker members who are mere “deformities” of that image who ought to be “cleansed” from society.¹⁶

Dietrich von Hildebrand was one of a relative few in Germany who recognized that it was precisely the biblical teaching that all of humanity continues in the *undefomed* image of God that offered the greatest defense against Hitler’s destructive initiatives. As he wrote, soon after being forced to flee Nazi Germany in 1933: “All of Western Christian civilization stands and falls with the words of Genesis, ‘God made man in His image.’”¹⁷

Much more recently, a World Council of Churches consultation in England examined the mistreatment being experienced by various groups of people such as women, certain races, and people with disabilities. Many members of those groups who were present traced their mistreatment to the absence of the recognition that all human beings are “fully in God’s image.”¹⁸

The vitally important affirmation that every human being is truly/fully “in the image of God” is not the only biblical basis for advocacy and action. So the church has hardly been unengaged with the world. Nevertheless, this great biblical affirmation is among the most foundational and powerful bases for such engagement. With the diminishing of the image of God in the consciousness of the church has diminished the urgency of engaging that which ultimately depends upon all people being created in that image.

¹⁶ Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939) 606.

¹⁷ John E. Crosby, “The Witness of Dietrich von Hildebrand,” *First Things* 168 (December 2006) 9.

¹⁸ Theodore Maynard, “The Image of God,” in *The Last Night and Other Poems* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1920) 64.

2. *The growing stakes involved.* Every human being has a personal stake in these matters—especially those considered most expendable in their societal settings. Those most likely to be killed or verbally abused are those whom people would most like to be rid of or those whose marginalization would be most socially beneficial. Biblical writers invoke the image of God precisely to uphold the life and dignity of such “dispensable” and “marginal” people—though all other people benefit from the same respect and protection in the process.

The church's uneven track record in affirming and living these biblical teachings has been troubling enough with regard to such moral challenges as racism, sexism, poverty, and disability. But the stakes are now growing rapidly in the face of a great array of challenges to human life and dignity in the arena of bioethics: assisted reproduction, abortion, stem cell research, health care access, end-of-life treatment, genetic intervention, cybernetic enhancement, redesigning human beings—just to get the list started. Such crucial bioethical challenges are in danger of being largely overlooked by many churches today. Indeed, relatively few churches are very actively engaged in addressing such issues.¹⁹

This analysis is intended as a conveyor of hope, not of despair—of better possibilities for the future, not mere regret for the past. God has created humanity with a God-related significance that is wonderful indeed: People are created in the image of God. God's word has been written in a way that consistently refrains from indicating that this image has been damaged or lost, despite the grave harm that sin has caused to human beings. The church would be wise to pursue the same course.

¹⁹ This problem, and the need for a more influential role for teaching on the image of God as a result, are discussed in Peterson, “The Unquantifiable Value of ‘Imago Trinitatis’: Theological Anthropology and the Bioethical Discourse on Human Dignity,” *Human Reproduction and Genetic Ethics* 14/2 (2008) 28; Reinders, “Imago Dei as a Basic Concept in Christian Ethics,” in *Holy Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (ed. Hendrik Vroom and Jerald Gort; Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997) 199. Charles Colson and Nigel Cameron (*Human Dignity in the Biotech Century* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004] 20–21) are concerned that churches are “sleeping through another moral catastrophe . . . [for which] our churches are ill-prepared.”