

JESUS AS THE *IMAGO DEI*:
IMAGE-OF-GOD CHRISTOLOGY AND
THE NON-LINEAR LINEARITY OF THEOLOGY

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That Jesus is central to Christianity is one of the least contested assertions in theology today. Furthermore, nearly all evangelical theologians deduce from the centrality of Jesus the principle that Christology must form the center of Christian theology. Evangelicals are less likely to be of one mind as to what forms the center of Christology. Yet most tend to elevate Christ's saving work—the atonement—to center stage. Moreover, following the trajectory of Western theology, evangelical theologians typically present the atonement as God's antidote for the predicament posed by human sin. This focus, in turn, determines both the shape and the flow of the typically evangelical delineation of systematic theology. Such depictions routinely begin by presenting God as the Creator who fashions humankind in the divine image, which is generally understood as involving some sort of endowment, such as reason or will. Evangelical presentations then delineate the sinful human condition that resulted from the primordial fall, before describing Christ as the one who overcomes the debilitating rule of sin.

Understanding the Christian message as centering on God's work in remedying the human sin problem through Christ's death is not devoid of biblical precedence. Yet it is not the whole story. Indeed, throughout church history Christians—drawing from Scripture—have devised additional ways of describing God's gracious activity on behalf of humankind, ways that evangelicals tend either to reduce to secondary importance or to ignore completely. One such approach that dates at least to Irenaeus and has remained prominent in Eastern Orthodoxy speaks of God at work bringing humankind to the divinely determined goal for human existence. Like every articulation of the gospel story including the narrative that "Jesus paid it all," this recounting reflects a particular understanding of Christ's role in God's overarching purpose. And what is the divinely-given goal for human existence that Jesus both exemplified and accomplished on our behalf? The answer to this question leads to a biblical theme that in evangelical presentations is generally discarded halfway through the anthropology section, the idea of the *imago Dei*, and with it, the telling of the salvation story in terms of Jesus' role as the image of God.

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My goal in the following paragraphs is to indicate how this overlooked understanding of the purpose of Christ's coming can occasion a more nuanced understanding of the flow of systematic theology than is generally evident in evangelical thought—an understanding, I should add, that is in keeping with certain insights arising out of the postmodern condition. To this end, I begin by outlining the *imago Dei* Christology of the NT. I then place this Christology within the context of the overarching biblical story of the coming to be of the image of God in humankind. Finally, I draw out the implications of the study for the overarching flow of theological construction.

I. THE NEW TESTAMENT *IMAGO DEI* CHRISTOLOGY

In his essay on the image of God published in the 1962 edition of the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, N. W. Porteous observes, "Nothing could make clearer the tremendous impact of the revelation of God in Christ than the fact that it has almost completely obliterated the thought of man as being in the image of God and replaced it with the thought of Christ as being the image of God."¹ In this terse comment, Porteous has put his finger on a crucial but often overlooked aspect of the theological agenda of the NT. The early Christian writers set forth a Christocentric understanding of the image of God that drew from, but also transformed, the perspective found within the pages of the OT in accordance with their belief that Jesus was the fulfillment of what God had intended from the beginning.

The Christocentric transformation of the OT's understanding of the human vocation is evident in the NT relegation to Jesus of the status of being the glory of God, a status which the Hebrew Scriptures accorded to humankind as a whole. Thus, in Psalm 8:5 (which forms a commentary on Gen 1:28–30), the psalmist declares that God has crowned humankind with "glory and honor." Yet when NT writers pick up the theme, they shift the focus away from humankind in general to one particular human, Jesus. In fact, we might say that the entire OT "glory"-theology gains a Christological focus in the New.

Although the theme is sounded repeatedly in the NT, the link between the *imago Dei* and the divine glory is especially evident in the book of Hebrews, which brings the glory-Christology of the NT full circle back to the reference in Psalm 8 that formed its basis. One text in particular, Hebrews 2:6–9, stands out, for it interprets the psalmist's universal anthropology Christologically. Apparently influenced by Jesus' designation of himself as "Son of Man" and the Son-of-Man Christology that consequently arose in the NT church² or perhaps also by the conception of Jesus as the Second Adam,³ the author ascribes to Jesus the psalmist's depiction of humankind

¹ N. W. Porteous, "Image of God," IDB 2.684.

² For a helpful discussion of the Son of Man concept and this text in Hebrews, see George Wesley Buchanan, *To the Hebrews* (AB 36; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972) 38–51.

³ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 35.

as crowned with glory and honor. Drawing this OT text together with other pictures of the king as a son that are found in the book of Psalms,⁴ the writer presents Jesus not only as having dominion over creation (as was God's intention for humankind according to Gen 1:26 and Psalm 8) but also as the ruler of the cosmos. G. W. Buchanan rightly concludes: "The author of Hebrews, like the New Testament authors generally, was no longer interested in Ps 8 in relationship to the nature of man as such, but interested only in Jesus, the Son of man, who was king and messiah, and as such was destined to rule 'all things,' since God has 'established' him 'heir' of all."⁵

The idea of Christ as the *imago Dei* that is implicit throughout much of the NT is explicitly set forth in several texts. These declarations follow the lead of the translators of the Septuagint, who used the Greek term *eikōn* to render the Hebrew *selem* found in Gen 1:26–27. In the NT, *eikōn* carries the force of "what completely corresponds to the 'prototype'" or the "perfect reflection of the prototype," to cite Porteous's description.⁶ Furthermore, an *eikōn* was not understood to be completely separate from its counterpart, but was seen as actually participating, in some sense, in the reality it depicts. It is not surprising, therefore, that the *imago Dei* texts in the NT elevate Jesus as the one who makes manifest the reality of God. Two texts, both in the Pauline writings, are especially important in this regard—2 Corinthians 4:4 and Colossians 1:15.

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul links Christ as the *imago Dei* with the glory-Christology evident elsewhere in the NT. He declares that the message he proclaims centers on Christ's glory as the image of God (v. 4). Christ, the *imago Dei*, radiates the very glory of God (v. 6). These verses ought not to be read as if Paul's primary goal were to offer some great philosophical or speculative conclusion about the ontological nature of Christ. Rather, as occurs in Colossians 1:15 as well, Paul's declaration evidences a narrative focus. The text embodies an implicit allusion to the creation of humankind in the divine image narrated in Genesis 1:26–27 which is now understood through the lens of Christ as the Second Adam.⁷

Colossians 1:15–20 extols Christ's preeminence over all things, by means of a series of affirmations that form what might be termed a "cosmology of creation" and a "cosmology of redemption."⁸ Central to the whole is the declaration with which the hymn begins: Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15 NRSV). The key to the designation of Christ as the *imago Dei*, in turn, lies in the repetition of *prototokos*, which brings together the themes of the two strophes: the "firstborn of all creation" (v. 15 NRSV) and the "firstborn from the dead" (v. 18 NRSV). This term may carry overtones of the OT

⁴ On this topic, see Buchanan, *To the Hebrews* 27–28.

⁵ *Ibid.* 28.

⁶ Porteous, "Image of God" 684.

⁷ For an explication and defense of this connection, see Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (trans. John Richard de Witt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 70–76.

⁸ See James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 97.

designation of the nation of Israel (Exod 4:22) or Israel's king (especially Ps 89:27) as Yahweh's firstborn, which texts were applied to the Messiah.⁹

The focal point of the hymn, however, lies in the second use of *prōtotokos*, which designates Christ as the Second Adam and provides the perspective from which to understand him as the "firstborn" in the first strophe. The designation of Christ as the "firstborn from the dead" forms the basis for the all-encompassing significance of the narrative of Jesus. This significance spans the ages. It not only culminates in the eschatological new creation, which it inaugurates, but it also reflects back to the beginning, to the creation of humankind in the divine image, which now finds its full meaning in Christ, who through his death and resurrection is the true *imago Dei*. As Herman Ridderbos declares:

. . . the glory that Adam as the Image of God and Firstborn of every creature was permitted to possess was only a reflection of Christ's being in the form of God. Thus Christ's exaltation as the second Adam refers back to the beginning of all things, makes him known as the one who from the very outset, in a much more glorious sense than the first Adam, was the Image of God and the Firstborn of every creature. . . . The new creation that has broken through with Christ's resurrection takes the place of the first creation of which Adam was the representative.¹⁰

In this manner, the hymn extols Christ above all as the one who is the divine image because he is preeminent in the salvation-historical story from beginning to end. Like 2 Corinthians 4:4–6, therefore, Colossians 1:15–20 must be read in connection with the narrative of the creation of humankind in the divine image (Gen 1:26–28), a reading in which the theme of dominion, found in the creation account, reemerges in the hymn's focus on Christ's preeminence. This preeminence places him, as the truly firstborn, above the first human. Moreover, it designates him as both the manifestation of God and the true human.

The Colossian text brings to light a theme that is evident throughout the NT: Jesus Christ emerges as the *imago Dei* above all in his death and resurrection, and hence in his work in salvation history. This theme is succinctly set forth in one additional significant NT text, the opening three verses of the book of Hebrews, in which the glory and image Christologies coalesce. The point of the text is that God has spoken through "one who has the rank of Son." Although this rank is confirmed by Christ's status as the divinely-appointed "heir of all things" (cf. Ps 2:8) and by his role as the one through whom God created "the worlds" (v. 2 NRSV), the supreme confirmation occurs in Jesus' historical work of making "purification for sins." Only when this had been accomplished, did he sit down "at the right hand of the Majesty on high." In this manner, Hebrews 1:1–3 declares that Jesus ultimately fulfills his role as the *imago Dei* and therefore comes to possess this accolade through his historical work in salvation history.

⁹ J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (rev. ed.; 1879; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 146.

¹⁰ Ridderbos, *Paul* 85.

II. THE *IMAGO DEI* AND THE VOCATION OF HUMANKIND

As the preceding overview suggests, in contrast to the Christologies articulated by many evangelical theologians, the NT presents Jesus as the true image of God, who through his mission on God's behalf—especially in the cross and resurrection—reveals the divine reality and thereby completes the vocation of humankind. This NT Christological perspective is connected to the broad sweep of the biblical narrative that not only looks back to original creation but also anticipates the eschatological fullness in the new creation.

The reference to the creation of humankind found in the first creation narrative is, of course, the linchpin of the biblical teaching regarding humankind as the *imago Dei*. The linchpin of the text, in turn, is the Hebrew term, *šelem* (“image”). Biblical scholars are in general agreement that *šelem* carries a broad meaning, at the heart of which is the idea of “representation.”¹¹ Yet they are not of one mind regarding the significance of the creation of humankind in the divine image. Historically, the most widely held conjecture views the *imago Dei* as entailing some type of similarity between humankind and God, whether this resemblance be solely physical,¹² spiritual, or embracing the human person as a whole.¹³ Another opinion sees the divine image as residing in the capacity for relationship with God, and thus as what constitutes humans as God's counterpart.¹⁴ A third perspective proceeds from a more dynamic or functional conception, namely, the idea that the divine image is somehow connected to human dominion or rulership over creation,¹⁵ as “God's vice-regent on earth.”¹⁶ The realization that rulership emerges in Genesis 1 (as well as Psalm 8) as the consequence, rather than the definition, of the divine image has led a fourth group of scholars full circle back to the idea of representation inherent in the Hebrew term *šelem*.

In the ancient Near East, images were often thought to represent and even mediate the presence of one who is physically absent. This was the case with physical images of monarchs. Ancient Assyrian kings, for example, erected statues of themselves in conquered territories, often as a way of representing their occupation of the land. So close was the link between the image and the king that reviling the former was viewed as an act of treason. The representational motif was especially strong, however, when an image was designed to depict a deity. According to ancient Near Eastern understandings, the god's spirit or immaterial fluid actually indwelt the image (or idol), for it was able

¹¹ See, for example, Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; London: SPCK, 1984) 146.

¹² See, for example, the conclusion of J. J. Stamm, “Die Imago-Lehre von Karl Barth und die theologischen Wissenschaft,” *Antwort. Karl Barth zum siebenzigsten Geburtstag am 10. Mai 1956* (Zollikou-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1956) 88, as cited in Westermann, *Genesis 1–11* 150.

¹³ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (trans. John H. Marks; rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) 58.

¹⁴ See, for example, Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (trans. Margaret Kohl; London: SCM, 1974) 159.

¹⁵ For a helpful development of this theme, see *ibid.* 162–64.

¹⁶ For this characterization, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC 1; Waco, TX: Word, 1987) 31–32.

to permeate the physical substance of which the image was made.¹⁷ This effected a close unity between the god and its image.¹⁸ D. J. A. Clines claims that an image was “the most perfect type of representative” known to the ancient peoples, in that “it is the only representative that is actually in spiritual union with the one it represents.”¹⁹ The intent of these images was not necessarily that of portraying what the corresponding god looked like, for they were occasionally not actual pictorial portrayals but unhewn lumps of rock or other objects.²⁰ Edward M. Curtis notes that the central purpose of an image “lay in the fact that the statue was a place where the deity was present and manifested himself. Thus, the presence of the god and the blessing that accompanied that presence were effected through the image.”²¹

These various themes lead many exegetes to conclude that the concept of the *imago Dei* delimits the role of humankind as that of mediating within creation the presence of the transcendent Creator. Viewed from this perspective, Genesis 1:26–27 stands at the pinnacle of the biblical creation narrative that, unlike the myths of other ancient peoples, posits a God who creates the world in freedom as a reality external to himself and then places humankind within creation as a creaturely image of the Creator. Genesis 1:26–27, therefore, functions not so much as an ontological declaration about human nature as a prologue to all that follows in the biblical narrative. Viewed from this perspective, the first creation narrative is intended to indicate that God has endowed humankind as a whole with a vocation: to live as God’s representative within creation, that is, to be that image through whom God’s presence and self-manifestation in creation may be found.

Although the Genesis text sets forth the theme that humans are to represent God, the narrative does not indicate the precise form that this representational vocation is to take. Gerhard von Rad rightly concludes, “The declaration about God’s image is indeed highly exalted, but it also remains intentionally in a certain state of suspense.”²² By leaving the matter open-ended and suspenseful, Genesis 1:26–27 awaits a future fulfillment of the quest of the full meaning of the *imago Dei*. In so doing, it opens the way not only to the Christological transformation of the idea that occurs in the NT, but also to the NT theme of a new humanity formed according to that image, which comprises the final fulfillment of God’s intent for humankind from the beginning. This theme is explicitly developed in several Pauline texts.

In Romans 8:29, Paul presents the idea of the new humanity in Christocentric language reminiscent of Genesis 1:26–27. According to the apostle, God’s intention is that those who are in Christ participate in Christ’s destiny and thereby replicate his glorious image. The language of the text is eschat-

¹⁷ Karl-Heinz Bernhardt, *Gott und Bild: Ein Beitrag zur Begründung und Deutung des Bilderverbotes im Alten Testament* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1956) 17–19.

¹⁸ Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* 30–31.

¹⁹ D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *TynBul* 19 (1968) 93.

²⁰ Bernhardt, *Gott und Bild* 31–33. My statement reflects Clines’s more cautious conclusion. Clines, “Image of God in Man” 82.

²¹ Edward M. Curtis, “Image of God (OT),” *ABD* 3.390.

²² Von Rad, *Genesis* 59.

ological. Paul declares that his readers will be caught up in the Christ event and become copies of God's Son. The climax of the verse comes in the declaration, "that he might be the firstborn," which expresses the Christological intent of God's foreordination, namely, the preeminence of Christ among those who participate in the eschatological reality. The designation of these as Christ's indicates the communal interest of the text which marks Romans 8:29 as the final exegesis of Genesis 1:26–27. Although in his risen glory, Christ now radiates the fullness of humanness that constitutes God's design for humankind from the beginning, God's purpose has never been limited to this. God's goal is that as the Son, Jesus Christ be preeminent within a new humanity stamped with the divine image. Consequently, the humankind created in the *imago Dei* is none other than the new humanity conformed to the *imago Christi*, and the *telos* toward which the OT creation narrative points is the eschatological community of glorified saints. In this manner, the narrative of the emergence of the new humanity provides the climax to the entire salvation-historical story and becomes the ultimate defining moment for the Genesis account of the creation of humankind in the *imago Dei*.

The question as to the exact nature of conformity to Christ leads beyond Romans 8:29 to its "essential commentary,"²³ 1 Corinthians 15:49. Here Paul connects the *imago Christi* with the new humanity by means of an Adam-Christ typology, in which an eschatologically-orientated, Christologically-determined anthropology comes explicitly to the fore. Paul sets forth Jesus' resurrection body as the paradigm for all who will bear his image. To this end, the apostle introduces an antithesis between the *psychikon sōma* and the *pneumatikon sōma*, and then draws a contrast between Adam and Christ as the representations of these two communal realities. Involved here is a type of "midrashic" reflection on Genesis 2:7 in the light of the apostle's own experience of having seen the risen Jesus. Paul's Christological reading of this OT text yields the conclusion that the advent of the spiritual body was in view at the creation, yet not as an aspect that was inherent within human nature from the beginning but as the eschatological destiny of the new humanity in Christ. Paul's Adam-Christ typology, therefore, indicates that the creation of Adam did not mark the fulfillment of God's intention for humankind as the *imago Dei*. Instead, this divinely-given destiny comes only with the advent of the new humanity, with the community of those who participate in the *pneumatikon sōma* by means of their connection to the last Adam.

The biblical narrative of the *imago Dei* that climaxes with the glorified new humanity sharing in the divine image contains a present component as well. The new humanity already shares in the divine image through being "in Christ." This is explicitly stated in 2 Corinthians 3:18 ("And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit"). In forming the climax

²³ Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, vol. 6 of *Sacra Pagina* (ed. Daniel J. Harrington; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996) 268.

of Paul's midrash on Exodus 34:29–35, the verse contrasts believers who now see the Lord's glory, albeit indirectly, and Israelites who in Moses' time could not look upon God's splendor and who in Paul's day remained veiled.

Paul does not simply equate the new humanity with the *imago Dei*, however. Instead, he declares that those who behold the divine glory are participants in a process of transformation into the divine image that is gradual and progressive, reaching its climax at the eschatological resurrection. This metamorphosis involves the reformation of relationships and the establishment of a new community of those who share together in the transforming presence of the Spirit and who thereby are, as A. M. Ramsey notes, "realizing the meaning of their original status as creatures in God's image."²⁴ The theme of transformation takes on an ethical tone in Colossians 3:9–11 and Ephesians 4:17–24, as the apostolic author admonishes those who are destined to be the new humanity and therefore are already in the process of being transformed into the divine image to live out that reality in the present.

III. JESUS AS THE *IMAGO DEI* AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Despite the important role it plays in the NT, the idea that Jesus is the *imago Dei* has been accorded surprisingly little attention in most of the evangelical systematic theologies that have appeared over the past several years. Moreover, the manner in which evangelical theologies present the concept differs greatly from the perspective set forth in Scripture. I cite as evidence two of the most widely-hailed texts in the field, Millard Erickson's massive *Christian Theology* (1983–1985; 2d edition: 2001) and the work that some observers consider to be its successor, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (1994) by Wayne Grudem.

In his systematic delineation of Christian doctrine, Erickson gives little place to the motif of the *imago Dei*. Furthermore, we could safely say that in his presentation the image of God functions almost exclusively as an anthropological concept. Not only is the term expounded only in the anthropology section, like many other evangelical theologians Erickson grounds his understanding solely in original creation. To cite his summary statement, "The image is something in the very nature of humans, in the way in which they were made."²⁵ Erickson does connect Jesus with the divine image. Yet the explication of this idea encompasses only a brief paragraph near the end of his treatment of the *imago Dei* in the anthropology section. And it only finds its way into the discussion because Erickson believes that Jesus provides us with "a helpful guide" as to "what human nature is intended to be."²⁶ Even more astounding is the paltry space Erickson gives to the idea in his treatise on Christology, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (1991). Although his exposition grows to over 600 pages,

²⁴ A. M. Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1949) 151.

²⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) 532.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 533.

the reader finds no extended treatment of the theme. In fact, the *imago Dei* appears in the title of only one, short sub-section late in the book. And even in the two pages that comprise this sub-section, Erickson's chief concern is not to set forth an understanding of Jesus as the image of God that can inform anthropology, but to do the exact opposite—to argue that the creation of humankind in the divine image opens the way for the incarnation, in that “divine and human nature are not directly and categorically opposed.”²⁷

In his *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem pursues a similar course. Like Erickson, he defines the *imago Dei* almost exclusively in terms of the nature of humans as originally created. In declaring that the Fall has marred the divine image, he asserts, “it is important that we understand the full meaning of the image of God not simply from observation of human beings as they currently exist, but from the biblical indications of the nature of Adam and Eve when God created them and when all that God had made was ‘very good’ (Gen. 1:31).”²⁸ *En route* to declaring that we will be restored to the divine image at Christ's return, Grudem does acknowledge that “the New Testament emphasizes that God's purpose in creating man in his image was completely realized in the person of Jesus Christ.”²⁹ Yet this perspective plays no role in his delineation of what it means to be the *imago Dei*. Indeed, in the subsequent four-page development of the “specific aspects of our likeness to God,” which he deems to include moral, spiritual, mental, relational, and even physical aspects, Grudem never mentions Jesus Christ. Moreover, once he has completed the anthropology section of his monumental work in dogmatics, he conveniently tosses aside the concept of the *imago Dei*.

I wish that I could report that my seminary-level systematic theology text, *Theology for the Community of God*, provided a stark contrast to the offerings served up by my two learned colleagues. But, alas, I cannot. There are readily discernible hints in my book that point in the right direction. Nevertheless, I must admit that when I wrote the book in the early 1990s, I had not yet ventured as far along this pathway as I now believe that I should have.

As these representative writings indicate, evangelical theologians generally assume that a sufficient, perhaps even a complete, understanding of the *imago Dei* (and hence of the nature of the human person) can be discerned from the act of creation in the primordial past. Furthermore, they tend to use the *imago Dei* merely as the backdrop within God's creative activity for the introduction of the theme of human sinfulness. This anthropological perspective, in turn, provides the basis from which evangelicals routinely set forth their understanding of the nature of the person and work of Christ. That Jesus came to fulfill our human vocation as the *imago Dei* is rarely mentioned. Rather, this biblical theme is overshadowed by the concern to present Jesus as the one who remedied the human sin problem.

²⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 544–45.

²⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 444.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 445.

The foregoing summary of the place of the *imago Dei* in Scripture suggests, however, a quite different perspective. As I have pointed out, the concept of the *imago Dei* is a crucial theme of NT Christology. It serves as a key motif by means of which the biblical writers narrate the story of the divine work in salvation history from start to finish. Moreover, the NT transformation of the OT concept means that the full significance of the creation of humankind in the divine image can only emerge when it comes to be understood from a Christological perspective, that is, from the vantage point of Christ and of the new humanity in Christ. In short, the method of theological engagement evidenced in the NT differs remarkably from the well-worn trail trod by evangelical theological feet.

This realization carries an even deeper implication. It offers a new perspective, I believe, for the manner in which we view the relationship between anthropology and Christology and, by extension, the connections among the theological *loci* as a whole. To state the point succinctly, the NT recasting of the OT theme of the *imago Dei* points to what we might call the non-linear linearity of theological construction.

Evangelical systematic theologies generally follow a standard linear ordering of the theological *loci*. This structure is based on the assumption that there is a fundamental, even inviolate, linearity to Christian dogmatics. The major *loci* are deemed to move in a particular sequential fashion: theology (proper), anthropology, Christology, pneumatology, ecclesiology and eschatology. This tried, tested, and true approach likewise generally assumes that the findings in any given *locus* constitute the basis for the discussion in subsequent *loci*. Insofar as the standard evangelical presentations of anthropology reach their climax with the delineation of humankind in sin, this theme sets the stage for the direction of the discussion in the subsequent *loci*, beginning with Christology, as focusing on the manner in which humans become the recipients of God's gracious work in overcoming human sinfulness.

As helpful as the linear approach to systematic theology is, when allowed to form the dominate influence shaping our theological construction, it poses certain dangers. Foremost among these is the danger of producing an anthropocentric Christology that runs counter to the centrality of Christ for Christianity. When the nature of the human person is assumed to emerge solely from creation—i.e. apart from Christ—and when Christ is cast as, above all, the divine antidote to human sin, not only is anthropology cut loose from any Christological grounding, but Christology is also made dependent on anthropology. We might say that the first Adam thereby becomes the measuring rod for the Second. Furthermore, the linear approach endangers the cosmic dimension of Christology. It suggests that Christ's connection to the wider creation story is mediated through the story of the fall of humankind rather than arising directly out of Jesus' vocation in the divine program. The result is an anthropocentric, rather than a theocentric, doctrine of creation. Creation becomes the background or stage for the drama of the fall and subsequent restoration of humankind, rather than an area in which Christ is Lord and as Lord completes the human vocation to be the *imago Dei*.

As the preceding survey of the biblical idea of the *imago Dei* suggests, Christology cannot be reduced to being merely the third topic of systematic theology, the discussion of which is dependent upon anthropology. Rather, by its very nature, Christology is a theology-informing *locus*. Christology informs the doctrine of God, for we cannot know who God truly is except through Jesus who as the true *imago Dei* is the revelation of God. Christology is crucial for the doctrine of creation, insofar as we cannot see God's purposes for creation except in relationship to Jesus who as the *imago Dei* in fulfillment of the human vocation is the cosmic Christ. And Christology informs the doctrine of humankind, for we cannot know what it means to be human without looking to Jesus, who as the *imago Dei* embodying the divine purpose for humankind is the true human. Indeed, in a similar manner the NT affirmations of Jesus as the *imago Dei* must be extended to the other three theological *loci* and hence to all of systematic theology from beginning to end.

The theology-informing character of Christology stands as a reminder of the fundamental non-linearity of all theological construction. Even though systematic theology might best be laid out in accordance with the traditional ordering that runs from theology proper through the other *loci* to eschatology, in the actual discourse that comprises theological construction all six of the *loci* must be brought into the conversation at every turn. To state the point in another way, the theology-informing character of Christology that arises out of a study of the *imago Dei* provides an indication of the validity of the rediscovery of coherence that has tended to mark the postmodern condition.

At the heart of the appeal to coherence is the suggestion that the justification for a belief lies in its "fit" with other held beliefs;³⁰ hence, justification entails "inclusion within a coherent system," to cite the words of philosopher Arthur Kenyon Rogers.³¹ According to coherentists, such a "fitting together" of beliefs not only entails that the various assertions do not contradict each other, but also that the corpus of beliefs be interconnected in some way. Rather than remaining an aggregate of disjointed, discrete members that have nothing whatsoever to do with one another, the set of beliefs must form an integrated whole, and this whole must carry "explanatory power." Beliefs, therefore, are interdependent, each being supported by its connection to its neighbors and ultimately to the whole,³² and they all come together to form an integrated belief system, a network or mosaic of beliefs. Viewed from this perspective, constructive theology is the attempt to present a unified, coherent declaration of the Christian belief-mosaic within a particular, contemporary context.

³⁰ W. Jay Wood, *Epistemology: Becoming Intellectually Virtuous* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998) 114.

³¹ Arthur Kenyon Rogers, *What Is Truth?* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1923) 12.

³² Nancy Murphy, *Beyond Liberalism and Fundamentalism: How Modern and Postmodern Philosophy Set the Theological Agenda* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996) 94.

At the heart of the Christian belief-mosaic is, of course, Christology. Central to a truly biblically informed Christocentric theology is the affirmation that Jesus is the one who came to be the *imago Dei* and to establish the new humanity of those who are confirmed to that image, in completion of what God intended as the human vocation from the beginning. Telling the salvation story in this manner serves to uphold the centrality of Christ for Christianity. But in so doing, it also provides a helpful motif for the construction of a theology that is truly non-linear in its linearity.