

THE DOCTRINE OF THE *IMAGO DEI*:
THE BIBLICAL DATA FOR AN ABDUCTIVE ARGUMENT
FOR THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

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Abstract: Broad agreement among interpreters about the meaning of the *imago Dei* reveals that this doctrine portrays fallen human nature as paradoxical. That is, although human beings are immutably image-bearers, their fallenness conspires with this imagedness to render them existentially self-opposing. Drawing upon exegetical and theological considerations, this article presents six propositions about the doctrine of the *imago Dei*. In the hands of Christian apologists, these propositions serve as necessary biblical data for an abductive argument that presents Christian anthropology as the best explanation for the existential paradoxes of the human condition.

Key words: *imago Dei*, apologetics, paradox, fallenness, anthropology, theological anthropology

In their perverted way all humanity imitates you. Yet they put themselves at a distance from you and exalt themselves against you. But even by thus imitating you they acknowledge that you are the creator of all nature and so concede that there is no place where one can entirely escape from you.

Augustine, *Confessions*

Students of Christian theology would affirm with confidence that the doctrine of the *imago Dei* is fundamental to theological anthropology. But when pressed with the question, “What does it *mean* that humans were created in the image of God?” their answers are less than confident. In fact, a survey of the history of interpretation of Gen 1:26–27—the *locus classicus* of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*—leaves us bewildered at the variety of views on this keystone of Christian anthropology. Martin Luther himself declares that “there is here agitated a whole sea of questions ... as to what that ‘image’ of God was in which Moses here says that man was formed.”¹

The differences among these interpreters, however, should not obscure the important ways in which their views agree. Two points of agreement stand out as especially important. First, all the views agree that the *imago Dei* means that humans

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¹ Martin Luther, *The Creation: A Commentary on the First Five Chapters of the Book of Genesis* (trans. Henry Cole; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1858), 87.

are somehow fundamentally oriented toward God.² Second, most of the views attempt to address the apparent tension between the *imago Dei* in postlapsarian humans and the fact of human sinfulness. For example, Augustine admitted that humans' trinity of rational operations has been "defaced by losing the participation of God."³ Luther posited that the *imago Dei* had been lost completely.⁴ For Calvin, the postlapsarian *imago Dei* became "vitiated and almost destroyed, nothing remaining but a ruin, confused, mutilated, and tainted with impurity."⁵ And Barth denied that the *imago Dei* referred to an original ideal state at all.⁶ Even some proponents of the functional interpretation of the *imago Dei* recognize that sin has brought about a "distortion or diminution" of humans' ability to perform their God-intended purpose.⁷ Despite their differences, then, these interpreters betray a consensus that the doctrine of the *imago Dei* stands in tension with the doctrine of human sin: although humans were created with a fundamental God-orientation by virtue of the *imago Dei*, they also have another orientation that, paradoxically, is alien to and in conflict with this Godward orientation.

This tension, I believe, is ripe with implications for Christian apologetics; specifically, it provides the biblical data for arguing abductively that Christian anthropology is the best explanation for the existential paradoxes of the human predicament. Before such an argument can be made, however, it is necessary to establish on exegetical and theological grounds the legitimacy for concluding that human sinfulness and imagedness conspire to render the human condition paradoxical. My aim in this article is to do just that: drawing upon Scripture and broad areas of agreement among interpreters of the *imago Dei*, I present six propositions about this doctrine—propositions that will equip Christian apologists to explain the human predicament in terms that are both scripturally validated and existentially satisfying.

Before proceeding, an explanation of the term "imagedness" seems needful. Following Colin Gunton, I use this term to refer to humanity's having been created in the image of God.⁸ This term conveniently allows one to refer to imagedness as

² Nico Vorster, *Created in the Image of God: Understanding God's Relationship with Humanity* (Princeton Theological Monograph Series 173; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 4. This agreement holds even among interpreters whose conception of God and beliefs about Scripture are at variance with traditional Christian teaching—Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, for example. According to Karl Barth, Hegel considered the *imago Dei* to mean "the divine likeness in man means that the genuine being of man in himself, the idea of man in his truth, is an element of God Himself in His eternal being, so that the nature of man is divine" (Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/1:193).

³ Aurelius Augustine, *The Works of Aurelius Augustine* (trans. Marcus Dods; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1871), 7:357.

⁴ Martin Luther, *The Creation: A Commentary on the First Five Chapters of the Book of Genesis* (trans. Henry Cole; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1858), 91.

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Henry Beveridge; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 108.

⁶ Barth, *CD* III/1:200.

⁷ J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 207.

⁸ Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation: The Didsbury Lectures, 1990* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 101. The term "image-bearing" would be less cumbersome, but the verbal component ("bearing") renders it less satisfactory: it too easily suppresses the ontological aspect of the concept and gives one the

an immutable fact of human nature. Further, it avoids confusion that results when the term “image of God” is used to denote indiscriminately both imagedness and its various expressions.⁹

I. IMAGEDNESS MEANS THAT HUMANS ARE, BY THEIR VERY NATURE, RELATIONAL

Most interpreters agree that Gen 1:26–27 tells us something essential about what it means to be human. Peter Gentry, for example, explains that “Genesis 1:26 ... defines human ontology,” stressing that “it is important to note that this definition of the divine image is not a functional but an *ontological* one.”¹⁰ Although he does not use the word “ontology,” Hughes’s description of imagedness likewise has ontological overtones. “Nothing is more basic,” he writes, “than the recognition that being constituted in the image of God is of the very essence and absolutely central to the humanness of man. It is the key that unlocks the meaning of his authentic humanity. Apart from this divine reality he cannot exist truly as man.”¹¹

If the fact that God created humanity in his image has any ontological significance, it means (at least) that the question of what humans are cannot be rightly answered apart from their relationship to God. Indeed, the terms used in Gen

sense that being created in God’s image is primarily something humans *do*. With that in mind, however, I can find no satisfactory replacement for the term “image-bearers” to designate humans as those who have been created in God’s image. 1 Corinthians 15:49 supports this terminology: “Just as we have *borne* [ἐφορέσαμεν] the image of the man of dust,” Paul writes, “we shall also *bear* [φορέσωμεν] the image of the man of heaven” (emphasis added). While *φορέω* sometimes takes clothing as its object (rendered “to wear,” Matt 11:18, Jas 2:3), it may also refer to a *state of being*. Indeed, Louw and Nida include it in the semantic subdomain “indicating various aspects of states, existence, and events” (L&N 149). To “bear” *x*, then, means that *x* is an aspect of one’s being. Therefore, to bear the image of God means that the image of God is an aspect of one’s being. Accordingly, I use “image-bearers” as a shorthand reference to humans as created in the image of God, while stressing that being an “image-bearer” is fundamentally something humans *are*.

⁹ Consider, for example, the various senses of “image of God” used here: “In the Old Testament all men are the image of God; in the New, where Christ is the one true image, men are image of God in so far as they are like Christ. The image is fully realized only through obedience to Christ; this is how man, the image of God, who is already man, already the image of God, can become fully man, fully the image of God” (David J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *TynBul* 19 [1968]: 103). Writers who have used the term “image of God” or *imago Dei* to refer to humans’ imagedness have been misunderstood as saying that the image of God *itself* can be distorted, marred, or effaced. John Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 175, believes that John Calvin’s teaching that the *imago Dei* has been marred by sin is “dangerous” and “biblically unsupported,” putting “at risk” “human accountability to God,” “human dignity,” and “human destiny.” Craig Blomberg observes that Kilner’s “laudable concern is to avoid giving grounds for concluding that physical and mentally challenged people are less in God’s image than others, but these weaknesses are not sins so it seems that he has confused two separate categories.” Craig Blomberg, “‘True Righteousness and Holiness’: The Image of God in the New Testament,” in *The Image of God in an Image Driven Age: Explorations in Theological Anthropology* (ed. Beth Felker Jones and Jeffrey W. Barbeau; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 68 n. 7.

¹⁰ Peter J. Gentry, “The Covenant with Creation in Genesis 1–3,” in Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 200.

¹¹ Philip Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 4.

1:26–27 suggest that human nature is relational. As G. C. Berkouwer explains, **אֱלֹהִים** and **דְּמִיּוֹתָהּ** “refer to a *relation* between man and his Creator,”¹² implying, in the words of Richard Lints, that “the origin of human identity lies in the relationship of reflection to the Creator.”¹³ Thus, Colin Gunton affirms (with qualification) Barth’s insight that “it is in our relatedness to others that our being human consists.”¹⁴ He further infers from Gen 1:26–27 that “the human person is one who is created to find his or her being in relation.”¹⁵ To a similar effect, Vorster writes that imagedness means that “the human is a being focused on God, dependent on God, defined by his relationship with God, who finds his true destination in God.”¹⁶ The doctrine of the *imago Dei*, then, informs our understanding of a basic feature of human nature: we are *relational*.

II. IMAGEDNESS MEANS THAT HUMANS ARE CONSTITUTED FOR A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND THE REST OF CREATION

Yet the affirmation that imagedness means that humans are “beings-in-relation” says little *about* imagedness.¹⁷ We want to avoid, as Michael Horton warns, the “reductionism that renders the *imago* nothing more than relational.”¹⁸ Indeed, the meaning of imagedness goes much further than mere relationality. It suggests that imagedness involves two relationships: a primary relationship with God and a secondary relationship with the rest of creation. These relationships may be identified as “sonship” and “dominion,” respectively, and described as “vertical” and “horizontal,” respectively. Gentry explains this dual relationality in terms of covenant.

Genesis 1:26 defines a divine-human relationship with two dimensions, one vertical, and one horizontal. First, it defines human ontology in terms of a covenant relationship between God and man, and second, it defines a covenant relationship between man and the earth. The relationship between humans and God is best captured by the term sonship. The relationship between humans and the

¹² G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Studies in Dogmatics; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 69 (emphasis added). Similarly, Stephen Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (NSBT 15; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 59, writes that these terms “stress the unique relationship humanity has to its Creator.”

¹³ Richard Lints, “Imaging and Idolatry: The Sociality of Personhood in the Canon,” in *Personal Identity in Theological Perspective* (ed. Richard Lints, Michael S. Horton, and Mark R. Talbot; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 209.

¹⁴ Colin E. Gunton, “Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology: Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the Imago Dei,” in *Persons, Divine and Human: King’s College Essays in Theological Anthropology* (ed. Christoph Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 58.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁶ Vorster, *Created in the Image of God*, 19. See also Lints, “Imaging and Idolatry,” 206–7.

¹⁷ Lints, “Imaging and Idolatry,” 206–7.

¹⁸ Michael S. Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 104.

creation may be expressed by the terms kingship and servanthood, or better, servant kingship.¹⁹

Without using covenantal language, Gunton expresses basically the same idea about the dual relationality inherent in our imagedness. “It is in our relatedness to others,” he writes, “that our being human consists. That relatedness takes shape in a double orientation. In the first place, we are persons insofar as we are in a right relationship to God. . . . The second orientation is the ‘horizontal’ one, and is the outcome of the work of the first.”²⁰

1. *Sonship: the Godward, vertical relationship.* The primary, Godward relationship originates from God’s having made humanity in his own image (Gen 1:27). The nature of this relationship finds fuller explanation in Gen 5:1–3, which recounts God’s creating humanity in his image, then correlates it to Seth’s being in Adam’s image: “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them Man when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.” The same words (“image” and “likeness”) that express the relationship between humanity and God can also express the relationship between a son and his father.²¹ Not surprisingly, then, Luke closes his record of Christ’s genealogy by describing Adam as “the son of God” (Luke 3:38). That humanity’s imagedness implies a relationship with God that may be termed “sonship” finds further confirmation in parallels in ancient Near Eastern literature which, as Catherine McDowell points out, “demonstrate the link between image and likeness language and sonship.”²² Thus, as Gentry states, “The relationship between humans and God is best captured by the term sonship.”²³ Further, as Kline indicates, the “image of God and son of God are thus twin concepts.”²⁴ Because this relationship is toward God, conceived as “above” us, it may be described as our *vertical* relationship.

2. *Dominion: the otherward, horizontal relationship.* Only within this primary relationship may humanity’s secondary relationship—with the rest of creation—be properly realized.²⁵ On the heels of the divine deliberation to “make man in our image, after our likeness,” God expresses his intention that humans “have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock

¹⁹ Gentry, “Covenant with Creation in Genesis 1–3,” 200.

²⁰ Gunton, “Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology,” 58–59. Gunton’s statement that “we are persons insofar as we are in a right relationship with God,” must be rejected, for this would imply that unbelievers, who are not in a right relationship with God, are not persons. Further, Gunton appears to treat “human” and “person” synonymously, when in fact, they must be kept distinct (for example, God and angels are non-human persons). Still, Gunton rightly identifies a dual relationality, vertical and horizontal, inherent in imagedness.

²¹ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26* (NAC 1A; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 169.

²² Catherine McDowell, “‘In the Image of God He Created Them’: How Genesis 1:26–27 Defines the Divine-Human Relationship and Why It Matters,” in *The Image of God in an Image-Driven Age*, 40.

²³ Gentry, “Covenant with Creation in Genesis 1–3,” 200.

²⁴ Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1980), 23.

²⁵ Berkouwer, *Man*, 81.

and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Gen 1:26). The grammatical relationship between “make” and “have dominion” suggests that human dominion over the earth is a purpose for which God made humans in his image, so the verse may be translated, “Let us make man . . . *so that* they may rule.”²⁶ The close connection between imagedness and dominion has led many to believe “that man’s having been given dominion over the earth is an essential aspect of the image of God.”²⁷ Clines goes even further, arguing that the image of God “comes to expression not so much in the nature of man so much as in his activity and function. The function is to represent God’s lordship to the lower orders of creation.”²⁸ Whether Clines is correct to emphasize functionality over ontology, humanity’s relationship to the rest of the creation is integral to imagedness.

Scripture continues to unfold the meaning of this “dominion.” Psalm 8, considered to be a “commentary” on Gen 1:26, describes humanity’s status in terms of kingship and glory over the rest of creation.²⁹ Some scholars have seen in Psalm 8 and Gen 1:26 a “cultural mandate.” Hoekema, for example, sees the implication that “man is called by God to develop all the potentialities found in nature and in humankind as a whole. He must seek to develop not only agriculture, horticulture, and animal husbandry, but also science, technology, and art . . . to develop a God-glorifying culture.”³⁰ Regardless of whether one uses the term “cultural mandate” to describe this activity, humans, by virtue of their imagedness, are clearly expected to rule the rest of creation in such a way that will glorify its Maker. As Hughes states, “It is in and through God’s personal creature man, who has been given dominion over all the earth, that the created order as a whole relates to God and achieves the purpose of its creation.”³¹ Indeed, this accords with Rom 8:22, in which Paul reflects on the state of the postlapsarian cosmos. “For we know,” he writes, “that the whole creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” Thus, the destiny of the cosmos is bound up with the destiny of humanity, which has been created in the image of God.

3. *Representation: the purpose of this dual relationality.* Humanity, having been created in the image of God, thus exists for two relationships, the first with God and the second with the rest of creation. Humanity was created to *represent* God to the rest of the created order. Indeed, “representation” well describes this dual relationality, for it implies both one represented and one represented *to*. Scholars of ancient Near Eastern studies emphasize the representational nature of the *imago Dei*, pointing to parallels between the language of Genesis 1 and the practice of kings’ erect-

²⁶ Gentry, “Covenant with Creation in Genesis 1–3,” 188.

²⁷ Berkouwer, *Man*, 78.

²⁸ Clines, “Image of God in Man,” 101.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 95; Berkouwer, *Man*, 71–72. See also John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2013), 785–86.

³⁰ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 14.

³¹ Hughes, *True Image*, 5.

ing images of themselves in conquered territories.³² Berkouwer argues that the concept of representation “has the essence of the image of God in view.”³³ Similarly, Hoekema writes that “man ... was created in God’s image so that he or she might represent God, like an ambassador from a foreign country.”³⁴ Gentry comes to the same conclusion about the meaning of our imagedness, emphasizing “that the character of humans in ruling the world is what *represents* God.”³⁵ Likewise, Clines affirms that human imagedness “means that [man] is the visible corporeal representative of the invisible, bodiless God.”³⁶ Merrill invokes this concept without using the word “representation.” “Man,” he writes, “is to [other creatures] as God is to man; and just as God has dominion over man, so man is to dominate the animal world.”³⁷

In summary, a proper understanding of our imagedness reveals that fundamental to human nature is a dual relationality—primarily toward God and secondarily toward the rest of the cosmos. Within these two relationships, humans, as God’s “children” are to be God’s representative rulers, exercising dominion so that the cosmos fulfills its doxological purpose.³⁸

III. SIN PERVERTS EXPRESSIONS OF IMAGEDNESS

The preceding description of imagedness has a ring of unrealistic idealism. Indeed, it describes *prelapsarian* imagedness. But the question of what imagedness means for us *now* may be properly answered only in view of sin’s present effects. As observed above, the tension between imagedness and sinfulness has given rise to important differences among interpreters of the *imago Dei*. These differences, however, point to a basic agreement: sinfulness and imagedness are fundamentally at odds with each other.

1. *Imagedness and sin in conflict.* Yet to be faithful to Scripture, these two conflicting aspects of fallen humans must be held in tension. Even after the fall, when humans are thoroughly sinful, Scripture does not admit any diminishing of our status as image-bearers: Gen 9:6 and Jas 3:9 refer to our imagedness without qualification. As Clines puts it, “No hint is given that man has ceased to be the image of God.”³⁹ However, while fallen humans remain in the image of God, something about the expression of their imagedness is flawed. Mathews suggests this flaw can be seen as early as Gen 5:3, which repeats the teaching about humanity’s creation in the image of God without referring to dominion. “What we observe in [Gen] 5:3,”

³² Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 170; Middleton, *Liberating Image*, 27.

³³ Berkouwer, *Man*, 114.

³⁴ Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*, 68.

³⁵ Gentry, “Covenant with Creation in Genesis 1–3,” 200.

³⁶ Clines, “Image of God in Man,” 101.

³⁷ Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion*, 171.

³⁸ Herman Bavinck calls man, in his capacity of being in God’s image, “the prophet who explains God and proclaims all his excellencies,” Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *God and Creation* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 562.

³⁹ Clines, “Image of God in Man,” 99; Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 169.

writes Mathews, “is that the former emphasis in [Gen] 1:26–28 on human dominion is absent. This leads us to suspect that something has gone awry.”⁴⁰

The NT also intimates that something is awry when it speaks of the need for a “renovated” or “renewed” self, created in the image of God. In Colossians, Paul exhorts his readers upon the basis of their having “put on the new self,” he writes, “which is being *renewed* in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Col 3:9–10). Likewise, in Ephesians Paul reminds his readers that they had been taught to “put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:24). The necessity of such renewal indicates, at least, a deficiency in our expressions of imagedness. Calvin’s explanation in the *Institutes* suggests a similar line of reasoning: “Although we grant that the image of God was not utterly effaced and destroyed in him,” he writes, “it was, however, so corrupted that anything which remains is a fearful deformity; and, therefore, our deliverance begins with that *renovation* which we obtain from Christ.”⁴¹ Thus, our imagedness, while not eradicated, now remains in conflict with another reality: our sinfulness. The parable of the prodigal son provides an analogy for imagedness after the fall.⁴² As a rebellious vagrant in a distant land, the prodigal remains his father’s son. The distance and rebellion cannot nullify his sonship. Yet something has gone awry in the way that sonship is manifested. His clothing and habits no longer disclose his status as his father’s son. In fact, his filial bond exacerbates his sense of wretchedness: “How many of *my father’s* hired servants have more than enough bread, but *I* perish here with hunger!” (Luke 15:17; emphasis added). Similarly, human sin stands in direct opposition to imagedness but does not nullify it.

2. *Expressions of imagedness, perverted.* Therefore, instead of saying that sin nullifies or damages imagedness, it is better to say that sin *perverts expressions of imagedness*. In this way, we both uphold imagedness as an abiding feature of human nature *and* affirm the full effects and consequences of sin. Three expressions of imagedness are noted.

a. *The relational expression.* As discussed above, our imagedness means that humans were, and remain, relational creatures, ontologically constituted for communion with God and dominion over the rest of creation.⁴³ But our sin has perverted our relationships.⁴⁴ Instead of love and obedience, enmity characterizes our relationship with God; instead of godly dominion, self-gratification characterizes our relationship with creation. We have, as Paul states, “exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom 1:25). We ought to assent to “the truth about God,” exercise dominion over creation, and worshipfully serve the Creator. Instead, in our fallen state, we do precisely the op-

⁴⁰ Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 169.

⁴¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, 107.

⁴² An allusion to the parable of the prodigal son is found in Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology* (trans. Olive Wyon; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947), 171.

⁴³ So long as we recognize that Brunner refers not to the image of God *itself* but rather to our imagedness.

⁴⁴ Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, 136.

posite. Whereas Gen 1:26 teaches that one of God's purposes for creating humans in his image was that they exercise dominion "over the birds of the heavens, and over the livestock ... and over every creeping thing," they have now "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things" (Rom 1:23). Rather than exercising dominion *over* other creatures, humans have abdicated dominion *to* other creatures, representing them as gods, instead of representing God to them. Since the relational expression of our imagedness has been thus perverted, it is evident, as Schwöbel explains, that

after the Fall the image of God can no longer be read off from the factual existence of human beings. The dislocation of human beings in the created cosmos and their subsequent disorientation does not permit an unambiguous distinction between what in human existence is indicative of the created destiny of humanity and what documents the fate of sin.⁴⁵

While continuing to affirm that our imagedness remains intact, other writers also describe our relational "dislocation" and "disorientation." Bray, for example, encourages us to "think of the image as something given and immutable, an ontological reality in the human being."⁴⁶ Yet because of the fall, man's "relationship with God was altered from one of obedience to one of disobedience, but there was no ontological change in man himself."⁴⁷ Sin does not eradicate our relationality, for relationality is an immutable aspect of imagedness. Instead, sin distorts our relationships. Fallen humans exist in conflict with God, and, as a consequence, in distorted relationships with others. This conflict and these distorted relationships are a perversion, not a nullification, of the relational expression of our imagedness.

b. *The teleological expression.* Our imagedness has a teleological expression as well. Moving beyond Genesis into the NT, we discover that God's creating humans in his image adumbrates his Christiformic purpose for believers.⁴⁸ For Christ, the only unfallen human, perfectly satisfies everything God intended for his image-bearers. As the very image of God, he submitted to his Father perfectly and represents him faithfully (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). Therefore, our imagedness finds its consummation in Christiformity (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49). Mathews uses telic language to explain the NT's development of the *imago Dei* concept. "Thus," he writes, "Paul's appeal to Jesus as 'image of God' in 2 Cor 4:4 and Col 1:15 is not the created humanity of Gen 1:26–27; rather, it refers to Christ, who must be understood uniquely as one with God, who is a glorified humanity. That the 'image of Christ' is the Christian's destiny is certain, but not that it was Adam's starting point."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Christoph Schwöbel, "Human Being as Relational Being: Twelve Theses for a Christian Anthropology," in *Persons, Divine and Human*, 151–52.

⁴⁶ Gerald L. Bray, "The Significance of God's Image in Man," *TynBul* 42 (1991): 223.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 224. See also Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, 135.

⁴⁸ Robert J. Wozniak, "The Christological Prism: Christology as Methodological Principle," in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* (ed. Francesca Aran Murphy and Troy A. Stefano; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 528.

⁴⁹ Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 170.

Romans 8:29 also suggests the teleological expression of our imagedness: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” When God’s final decree for believers is accomplished and each believer is not only justified but also glorified, then their “family” resemblance to Christ will be displayed as it was meant to be: a vast throng of brothers and sisters, of whom Christ, as the firstborn, is also their God (see also Heb 2:10–12; 1 John 3:1–3). Stanley Grenz explains that this verse

delineates the final exegesis of Gen. 1:26–27. In his risen glory, Jesus Christ now radiates the fullness of humanness that constitutes God’s design for humankind from the beginning. Yet God’s purpose has never been that Christ will merely radiate this fullness, but that as the Son he will be preeminent among a new humanity who together are stamped with the divine image.⁵⁰

Other writers use the telic language in discussing imagedness. Calvin states that “the Celestial Creator himself, however corrupted man may be, still keeps in view the need of his original creation; and according to his example, we ought to consider for what *end* he created men.”⁵¹ More explicitly, Lutheran theologian Philip Hefner explains that “the image of God (*imago dei*) presents a fundamental image of human being as *being-with-a-destiny*.”⁵² Likewise, Grenz observes that the *imago Dei* may be legitimately viewed “as humankind’s divinely given *goal* or *destiny*, which lies in the eschatological future and toward which humans are directed.”⁵³ Along similar lines, Gunton affirms that “it is the specific distinction of humanity to share not only in the ontological status of createdness with the whole creation, but to have a specific *destiny* in being created in the image of God.”⁵⁴

Because of sin, fallen image-bearers have made themselves unfit for the *telos* for which they were created. Therefore, the consummation of imagedness will be accomplished only through the events of redemptive history—the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the divine Son. As Dorner explains, “Even after the *Fall* the divine image remains still man’s destination, although its fulfilment has been interrupted, nay, deflected into a by-path, by the *Fall*.”⁵⁵ God intends that Christ be

⁵⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 231–32.

⁵¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Genesis* (trans. James Anderson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 296 (emphasis added).

⁵² Philip J. Hefner, “The Creation,” in *Church Dogmatics* (ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 1:330 (emphasis added).

⁵³ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 177 (emphasis added).

⁵⁴ Gunton, “Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology” (emphasis added). For others who use telic language in referring to imagedness, see Horton, *Lord and Servant*, 100; Vorster, *Created in the Image of God*, 19; Clines, “Image of God in Man,” 103; Hughes, *True Image*, 27; Ronald A. Simkins, “Image of God,” *EDB* 632–33. Isaak August Dorner, *A System of Christian Doctrine* (trans. Arthur Cave and J. S. Banks; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1881), 2:78, puts it this way: “The divine image according to Holy Scripture is partly original *endowment*, partly *destination*” (emphasis original).

⁵⁵ Dorner, *A System of Christian Doctrine*, 2:83 (emphasis original).

the “firstborn among many brothers,” but, as Heb 2:10–18 declares, Christ’s “suffering” is necessary “in bringing many sons to glory” (Heb 2:10).

c. *The normative expression.* When God declared his intent to “create man in our image,” he also expressed what he wants humans to *do* as his image-bearers: “let them have dominion” (Gen 1:26–27).⁵⁶ As discussed above, this “dominion” denotes humans’ “horizontal” relationship toward creation: they are to represent God. But they cannot properly represent God unless they themselves submit to *his* dominion. Indeed, their obligation toward the creation is inseparable from their obligation toward their Creator. Imagedness, then, means that humans have duties to fulfill with respect to both God and creation.

The life of Christ provides further insight into what is meant by the normative expression of imagedness, since Christ himself is the very image of God. Because Christ fully submitted to God (humans’ “vertical” relationship), he perfectly represents God (John 1:14–18; Heb 1:1–3) and thus exercises perfect dominion (humans’ “horizontal” relationship, see 1 Cor 15:24–28). Paul, in fact, presents a causal link between Christ’s complete obedience to God and his reigning as Lord of heaven and earth: Christ “humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. *Therefore* God has highly exalted him ... so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:8–11; emphasis added). Therefore, as suggested by the meaning of God’s creating humans in his image, and as exemplified by Christ the divine image of God, imagedness implies certain moral norms. Granted, imagedness is not the *only* grounds for moral responsibility (angels, though not image-bearers, are nevertheless morally responsible creatures). Nevertheless, humans, by virtue of at least their status as image-bearers, stand morally responsible to God.

By sinning, however, humans pervert the normative expressions of imagedness. The first sin, in fact, involved humans’ failure to exercise dominion over creation. Instead of representing God *to* the serpent, humans allowed the serpent to (mis)represent God to them.⁵⁷ For, in claiming “You will not surely die” (Gen 3:4), the serpent contradicted God’s spoken word, which up to that point had produced only what is good (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Besides violating the “horizontal” norm, humans also violated the “vertical” norm: Adam and Eve broke the only stipulation God had given them. Perversely, what beguiled them to break this stipulation was the prospect of being “like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5), even though they were *already* in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:26). The same pattern of perverting norms implied by imagedness persists throughout biblical

⁵⁶ Clines, “Image of God in Man,” 96, observes that “Genesis 1:26 may well be rendered: ‘Let us make man as our image ... so that they may rule’ (i.e. *waw* joining two jussives with final force for the second).”

⁵⁷ Mark Twain humorously comments that Adam “did not want the apple for the apple’s sake; he wanted it only because it was forbidden. The mistake was in not forbidding the serpent; then he would have eaten the serpent,” in “Pudd’nhead Wilson,” in *The Writings of Mark Twain* (Hartford, CT: The American Publishing Company, 1908), 14:19.

history: prophets misrepresent God (Num 20:10–13; 1 Kgs 22:5–8; Ezek 13:19; Jer 23:16); priests approach God improperly (Lev 10:1–3); even the best kings exercise self-centered dominion (2 Samuel 11; 1 Kgs 11:1–10). Yet, as argued above, sinfulness does not eradicate imagedness. Humans remain in the image of God, even as their actions pervert the normative expressions of imagedness.

IV. IMAGEDNESS AND SINFULNESS TOGETHER RENDER THE HUMAN CONDITION PARADOXICAL

As sinful image-bearers, therefore, humans stand in the paradoxical condition of being constituted for a relationship with One whom they have rejected, intended for a *telos* for which they have made themselves unfit, and accountable to norms they have violated. As Brunner states,

the real enigma of man is the conflict within his own nature, not the fact that he is composed of body and soul; the real problem does not lie in the fact that man is part of the world and is yet more than the world; the real problem is that the unity of all these elements ... has been lost, and that instead of complementing and aiding one another, they are in conflict with one another. ... It is this duality which gives its particular imprint to human life as it actually is. Because man has been created in the image of God, and yet has himself defaced this image, his existence differs from all other forms of existence, as existence in conflict.⁵⁸

To return to the analogy of the prodigal son, as the son's sonship exacerbates his misery, so also our imagedness makes our sinful condition appalling to us. What makes actions sinful for humans is the very fact that we are constituted as beings who, by virtue of our imagedness, stand responsible to God. As Bray states, "The presence of the image is the presence of responsibility, which is at once the glory and the tragedy of fallen Adam."⁵⁹ Similarly, Berkouwer writes that "the image of God stands before us in the contexts of guilt and restoration, of being lost and being found."⁶⁰ Hughes also affirms the paradoxical nature of our imagedness, stating man's "refusal to conform to the true image of his being, his contradiction of himself, is also his judgment and his condemnation in the presence of his Creator."⁶¹

Even for redeemed humans, the tension that accompanies our experience of postlapsarian imagedness remains unresolved. In fact, this tension increases as some expressions of imagedness are restored, while others continue to be impacted by the fall (2 Cor 4:7). In Rom 8:23, Paul writes, "And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly

⁵⁸ Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, 168. While Brunner is right that human existence is "existence in conflict," he probably overstates his case in saying that this conflict is why "his existence differs from *all other forms of existence*" (emphasis added). Angels, for example, were created for God's glory, but many of them have rejected God's purpose for them. Therefore, a case could be made that the fallen angels' form of existence is also "existence in conflict."

⁵⁹ Bray, "Significance of God's Image in Man," 225.

⁶⁰ Berkouwer, *Man*, 117.

⁶¹ Hughes, *True Image*, 69.

for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.” The context of this verse indicates that the “adoption as sons” refers to believers’ eschatological conformity to the image of Christ “in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers” (Rom 8:29). Thus, the unfinished project of believers’ Christiformity creates a longing expressed by “inward groaning.” Whether redeemed or unredeemed, then, fallen image-bearers possess a nature in which two components are in fundamental opposition: imagedness and sinfulness.

V. THIS PARADOXICAL CONDITION HAS EPISTEMIC IMPLICATIONS

When considering the effects of sin, theologians often discuss its cognitive or epistemic consequences. Scripture speaks of the “deceitfulness of sin” (Heb 3:13); the “futile,” “darkened,” and “blinded” minds of unbelievers (Eph 4:17–18; 2 Cor 4:4); the danger of self-deception (Gal 6:7; 1 Tim 4:1; 1 John 1:8); and the devil as “the father of lies” (John 8:44). As sin brings about epistemic damage, so redemption brings about epistemic restoration. Salvation may be conceived as coming “to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Tim 3:7) and the effect of the proclamation of the gospel as opening “their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light” (Acts 26:18). Further, in contrast to the “wisdom of this age” (1 Cor 2:6), believers have received “the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given to us by God” (1 Cor 2:12).

1. *Imagedness and sin’s epistemic consequences.* Our imagedness also holds epistemic implications. As image-bearers, we have a God-given impulse to form beliefs about our Creator: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them” (Rom 1:19). The pagan Athenians, for example, worshiped at an altar with the inscription “To the unknown God” (Acts 17:23), whom Paul affirmed to be the true God “who made the world and everything in it” (17:24). The Athenians’ beliefs about this God were misguided, however, for they worshiped him “as unknown” (17:23). Indeed, our fallenness guarantees that, apart from special revelation, our beliefs about God are mingled with error, and thus do not constitute knowledge: “Although they knew God,” Paul writes about fallen humans, “they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and creeping things” (Rom 1:21–23).

The epistemic effects of sin are evident in the record of the fall. The very first enticement to sin came from the serpent’s duplicitous assurance to Eve that she would be “like God,” alluding to God’s having created humanity “after his” “likeness” (Gen 1:26), specifically by “knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). Of course, this assurance was not entirely false. Eve perceived that “the tree was to be desired to make one wise” (Gen 3:6); and after she and Adam ate from it, “the eyes of both were opened” in accordance with the serpent’s assurance. They had indeed gained moral experience, only at the expense of their moral standing before God. Hughes

describes this newly-found godlikeness as “a perverted godlikeness, for now that [man’s] life is based on the devil’s lie he calls good evil and evil good.”⁶² As a result, Adam and Eve’s first postlapsarian awareness was of nakedness—moral vulnerability—and their first response was subterfuge. Adam and Eve “sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths” (Gen 3:7) and later “hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Gen 3:8).

In language that echoes the record of Eve’s false belief “that the tree was to be desired to make one wise” (Gen 3:6), Paul writes of fallen humans that, “claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and creeping things. . . . They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom 1:22–23, 25). That fallen humans engage in “worship” accords with what was argued earlier about the horizontal orientation of our imagedness and about the pagan Athenians’ worship of the “unknown God” (Acts 17:23): we remain beings related to something “above” us. But now we deceive ourselves about what is “above” us. Because of imagedness, our perception of God cannot be eradicated (“what can be known about God is plain to them,” Rom 1:19); yet because of sinfulness, that perception is perverted (“they have exchanged the truth about God for a lie,” Rom 1:25). As doxastic agents, then, our cognitive faculties have been damaged, but not so damaged as to form no beliefs about God at all.

Other writers have explored the connections between epistemic dysfunction and fallen imagedness. In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Alvin Plantinga builds on John Calvin’s teaching about the noetic effects of the fall, connecting humanity’s original expression of imagedness with a proper knowledge of God, and humanity’s fallen expression of imagedness with a distorted knowledge of God and thus of everything else.⁶³ “God has created us human beings,” Plantinga writes, “*in his own image*”; this centrally involves our resembling God in being *persons*—that is, beings with *intellect* and *will*.⁶⁴ As a result, humans “loved and hated what was lovable and hateful; above all, they knew and loved God.”⁶⁵ But as a consequence of the fall, “our original knowledge of God and of his marvelous beauty, glory, and loveliness has been severely compromised. . . . We no longer know God in the same natural and unproblematic way in which we know each other and the world around us.”⁶⁶ Besides connecting fallenness with doxastic shortcomings, Plantinga also points out the paradox of these shortcomings. As he states, “We know (in some way and to

⁶² *Ibid.*, 117.

⁶³ Strictly speaking, Plantinga is not defending Calvin’s view *per se*; he is only, for the sake of his overall argument, offering Calvin’s (and Aquinas’s) ideas as a possible way in which belief in God would be warranted. Nevertheless, his explanation of Calvin helpfully elucidates the connections between the fall and our cognitive malfunctioning.

⁶⁴ Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 204 (emphasis original).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 205. Plantinga does not mean that our knowledge of “each other and the world around us” is wholly unproblematic but rather that our knowledge of God has been corrupted far more deeply.

some degree) what is to be loved (what is objectively lovable), but we nevertheless perversely turn away from what ought to be loved and instead love something else.” In keeping with Romans 1, Plantinga affirms that “the condition of sin involves *damage* to the *sensus divinitatis*, but not obliteration; it remains partially functional in most of us.”⁶⁷ Likewise, Schwöbel also recognizes the epistemic dysfunction of our fallen imagedness. “In the Fall,” he writes, “human beings have dislocated themselves in the relational order of created being. Dislocation produces disorientation. . . . Sin is not only self-deception, but also self-contradiction as by sinning human beings contradict their own destiny in the created order.”⁶⁸

2. *Christ as the true image of God.* Scripture thus teaches that fallen humans’ capacity to form true beliefs about God has malfunctioned. But Scripture further teaches that this capacity may be restored in redeemed humans. Specifically, by believing in Christ, fallen image-bearers may be restored to properly know God and themselves. This restoration is due, partly at least, to the fact that Christ “is the image [εἰκὼν] of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). In 2 Cor 4:4, Paul explains that Satan “has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image [εἰκὼν] of God.” Moreover, in a third passage (though it does not use the word εἰκὼν) the writer uses the word *χαρακτήρ* to similar effect. “He is,” the author of Hebrews states, “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint [χαρακτήρ] of his nature” (Heb 1:3). Barmby explains that *χαρακτήρ* “more distinctly brings out the idea of the Son being the Manifestation of what the Godhead is, and especially of what it is to us.”⁶⁹ If one objects that affirming that he is the image of God seems to diminish Christ’s divinity, it may be replied that the semantic range of εἰκὼν includes “image” not only as the representation of something (e.g. Luke 20:24), but also as the thing *itself*. Since other passages clearly teach Christ’s deity, and since the semantic range of εἰκὼν as standing for the *thing itself* is an option, it makes most sense to read it in this way here in Heb 1:3: Christ’s being the image of God means that he *is* God. Gerhard Kittel agrees with this assessment: “When Christ is called the εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ in 2 C. 4:4; Col. 1:15,” he writes, “all the emphasis is on the equality of the εἰκὼν with the original.”⁷⁰

Other writers also agree that Christ is to be understood as the divine image of God. Gunton writes that Christ “is not only the true image of God, but also the source of human renewal in it.”⁷¹ Likewise, Clines summarizes his studies of various NT terms with the conclusion that “the greatest weight in the New Testament doctrine of the image lies upon the figure of Christ, who is the true image of God.”⁷² Central to the argument of Hughes’s book is that “he who is eternally the

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁶⁸ Schwöbel, “Human Being as Relational Being,” 149.

⁶⁹ J. Barmby, *The Epistle of Paul to the Hebrews* (Pulpit Commentary; New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1909), 5. See also Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 221.

⁷⁰ Gerhard Kittel, “εἰκὼν,” *TDNT* 2:395. See also Bray, “Significance of God’s Image in Man,” 211.

⁷¹ Gunton, “Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology,” 100.

⁷² Clines, “Image of God in Man,” 102.

Son of God is also eternally the Image of God.⁷³ Grenz explains the connection between the original creation of humans in the “image of God” and Christ’s designation as the image of God by positing that, for the writers of the NT, “the Genesis narrative points to Jesus Christ, who as the revelation of the nature and glory of God is the image of God.”⁷⁴ Finally, Calvin affirms that, from the NT, “we now see how Christ is the most perfect image of God.”⁷⁵

3. *Imagedness and epistemic remedy.* Although sin perverts the epistemic expression of our imagedness (we form false beliefs about God and ourselves), Christ, as the true image of God, remedies believers’ knowledge of God and thus of themselves. This epistemic remedy is evident throughout the NT. In Colossians 3:10, Paul exhorts his readers, “Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.” Fallenness brought epistemic dysfunction; renewal in the image of God leads to “the new self” being “renewed in knowledge” (Col 3:10, emphasis added). Paul further calls his readers to “put off” deception as a practice of the “old self.” Deception precipitated the fall; self-deception characterizes the lives of those in sin (Rom 1:22–23, 25). Therefore, deception has no place in the life of one being conformed to the image of the Creator. In writing to the believers in Ephesus, Paul makes a similar point, exhorting those who “learn Christ” (Eph 4:20) “to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through *deceitful* desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your *minds*, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:22–24; emphasis added). Against the background of fallen humanity’s epistemic dysfunction, Paul focuses on putting away “*deceitful* desires” and being “renewed in the spirit of your *minds*” as essential to putting “on the new self.” Whereas fallen humans yield to duplicity, humans who have put on the “new self” are being restored to a proper grasp of truth.

This epistemic remedy is possible because Christ, as the divine image of God, discloses both God and perfect humanity to those who believe in him. As discussed above, Heb 1:2–3 makes it clear that God has spoken to us “by his Son,” who is the “radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.” Whereas humans were created to represent God, *Christ* has become God’s infallible representative, as he is himself both God and man. Accordingly, John writes that, though “no one has ever seen God,” “the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:18). In response to Philip’s plea, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us,” Jesus replies, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:8–9). As Grenz states, “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.”⁷⁶ Similarly, Kline demonstrates a connection between

⁷³ Hughes, *True Image*, 3.

⁷⁴ Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self*, 223.

⁷⁵ Calvin, *Institutes*, 108.

⁷⁶ Stanley Grenz, “Jesus as the Imago Dei: Image-of-God Christology and the Non-Linear Linearity of Theology,” *JETS* 47 (2004): 627.

“glory” and “image,” noting that “the biblical exposition of the image of God is consistently in terms of a glory like the glory of God.”⁷⁷ Thus, John writes of Christ, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). Although fallen humans have “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man,” redeemed humans, “with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord [i.e. Christ, the true image of God], are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18). Thus, fallen image-bearers form false beliefs about God; those who believe in Christ—the divine image of God—see God as he truly is.

Yet Christ, as the divine image of God, reveals not only God as he truly is, but humanity as it truly should be. The author of Hebrews highlights Christ’s humanity, explaining that, “since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, [Christ] himself likewise partook of the same things” (Heb 2:14), because “he had to be made like his brothers in every respect” (Heb 2:14). Unlike every other human, however, Christ was “in every respect ... tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). As a man, Christ perfectly exemplifies humanity. Thus, believers look “unto Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” as the one in whom they realize their own *telos* (Heb 12:2). Peter urges his readers to “follow in [Christ’s] steps” as the human exemplar of sinless suffering (1 Pet 2:21). Thus, Schwöbel insists, “the image of Christ is the only way in which human beings are enabled to recognize their created destiny as the image of God. ... The humanity of Christ is therefore the pattern for rediscovering the image of God.”⁷⁸ Similarly, Alan Spence builds on John Owen’s work to argue that “Jesus Christ exemplifies the true nature of man.”⁷⁹ Fallen image-bearers are blind to the true nature of God and humans. As Christ reveals God’s true nature, so he also reveals humanity’s perfected nature.

In summary, our imagedness and epistemic capacity are closely related. As image-bearers, we form beliefs about God and ourselves; but as sinners, these beliefs are guaranteed to be false. This is no surprise, for our sinfulness means not only that we stand guilty before God, but also that we attempt to convince ourselves that we are right, and God is wrong. The epistemic consequences of sin are brought into fuller light by the NT’s description of the *reversal* of these consequences, namely, believers’ renewal into the image of Christ. Only Christ, as the divine image of God, the perfect revealer of both God and true humanity, can restore fallen humans to properly know God and themselves.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Kline, *Images of the Spirit*, 30.

⁷⁸ Schwöbel, “Human Being as Relational Being,” 152.

⁷⁹ Alan Spence, “Christ’s Humanity and Ours: John Owen,” in *Persons, Divine and Human*, 97.

⁸⁰ For an argument that Jesus’s humanity is “the creational and teleological ground and goal for all other human beings,” see Marc Cortez, *ReSourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018). Cortez argues that “if we say that Jesus is the true *telos* of humanity, the eschatological end that God had in mind from the beginning,” it follows that “we must also maintain that this *telos* is intrinsic to the meaning of humanity. In other words, we cannot fully understand what it means to be human until we have seen true humanity revealed in Jesus” (p. 36).

VI. THE IMAGE OF GOD IS BEING RESTORED IN BELIEVERS

As mentioned above, the expressions of imagedness, once perverted by sin, may be restored in believers. In other words, they will be transformed into the image of Christ (Rom 8:29). Yet Scripture describes this transformation as an incremental process: "And we all," Paul writes, "with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3:18). Similarly, he teaches that, though believers are *already* sons and daughters of God, they nonetheless await the consummation of their "adoption as sons" (Rom 3:23). The already/not-yet nature of believers' Christiformity is evident also in 1 John. Believers are *already* "God's children now," but "what we will be has not yet appeared" (1 John 3:2). Nevertheless, "when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). Although believers know God through Christ the image of God, we still "see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face" (1 Cor 13:12).

This inceptive Christiformity involves both knowledge of God and transformed behavior. That our knowledge of God is restored has been argued earlier, but it is also evident in other passages of Scripture. For example, Paul affirms that believers "have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). Similarly, in his "high priestly prayer," Jesus tells the Father that he "made known to [his disciples] your name, and will continue to make it known" (John 17:26). We also see transformed *behavior* as a result of Christiformity. Paul describes this behavior in terms of "true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:24) in contrast to conformity "to this world" (Rom 12:2). Scripture further indicates that such behavior may be a kind of apology for Christian belief. In Phil 2:15–16, Paul exhorts his readers to be "blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world." An allusion to the *imago Dei* may be seen in Paul's description of believers as God's "children," who, bearing the likeness of their heavenly Father, represent him to others. Thus, an integral aspect of the doctrine of the *imago Dei* is that the expressions of imagedness which have been perverted by sin, may be restored in redeemed image-bearers as they become increasingly like Christ. Christiformity as the ultimate *telos* of imagedness is being inceptively realized in redeemed humans.

VII. CONCLUSION

Fallen humans remain image-bearers. As an immutable feature of our nature, imagedness cannot be erased, corrupted, or marred. We are ineradicably constituted for a relationship with God as his children, and with creation as God's representatives. But the *expressions* of imagedness have been thoroughly perverted by sin. As fallen image-bearers, our relationships have gone awry. We fail to submit to God and fulfill his expectations. Moreover, our knowledge of God and others has malfunctioned: we form false beliefs about God and others. Nevertheless, imagedness and sinfulness coexist in fallen human nature. These scriptural observations support this general statement about the doctrine of the *imago Dei*: imagedness and

sinfulness conspire to render the human condition paradoxical. Fallen human nature exists in opposition to itself.

This conclusion about human nature, I suggest, provides an essential biblical grounding for an anthropological approach to commending the Christian faith. Arguing abductively, Christian apologists may reason thus: if this *imago-Dei*-derived portrayal of the human condition is accurate, we should expect to see it instantiated in human thinking and behavior. The next phase of the argument, of course, belongs to general anthropology, which would produce data to confirm or deny this expectation. But in light of humans' tendency to self-destruct and self-deceive—paradoxically, even in their very efforts to achieve greatness—this data, it seems, will be abundant.