

**“As The Image”: A Functional Understanding of the *Imago Dei*
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The doctrine of the *imago dei* is foundational for Christian anthropology. It informs the nature of humanity as individuals and as a corporate entity. It is the basis of the Christian valuation of human life. And it defines the purpose of humans both now and in the world to come. Unfortunately, what it means to be the *imago dei* is often not clearly defined. A clear understanding of the nature of the *imago dei* makes the nature, value and purpose of humans and humanity much clearer. This paper will attempt to define the *imago dei* in a purely functional manner and examine the implications of such a definition in the light of the doctrines of the fall and the incarnation.

A Functional Definition of the *Imago Dei*

God said:
Let us make humankind, in our image, according to our likeness!
Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the
 heavens, animals, all the earth, and all crawling things that
 crawl about upon the earth!
So God created humankind in his image,
 in the image of God did he create it,
 male and female he created them.
God blessed them,
God said to them:
Bear fruit and be many and fill the earth
and subdue it!
Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the fowl of the heavens,
 and all living things that crawl about upon the earth!¹

The first and primary passage on the *imago dei* in the Old Testament, Genesis 1:26-28 must be the starting point for any attempt at a definition. Rather than simply stating his intention and having it done, as was the case with his previous creative acts, God is portrayed as resolving with foresight and planning

the creation of humans. His participation in this divine act is more personal and intimate. This announcement of a divine decree, along with its placement at the end of the creation narrative, highlights the fact that humans are the apex, the climax, the goal of all creation.²

“In Our Image”

There is some controversy over the key phrase, “in our image.” To understand it as it is usually translated implies that humans are somehow like God. There is some characteristic of God that is also found in humans, and whatever that similarity is defines the *imago*. The most obvious definition simply based on the text is that the *imago dei* refers to the physical existence of humans. God made humans to look like he looked. This would certainly be the predominant understanding of Israel’s Near Eastern neighbors, where the gods were physical entities themselves, usually very similar in corporeal appearance to humans. Israel’s understanding of the nature of Yahweh would seem to rule out this view, but it has gained a degree of contemporary critical acceptance.³

The fact that Israel did not understand Yahweh as having a corporeal existence leads to a second way of understanding how humans could be “in” the image of God. Rather than focusing on a physical similarity between God and humans, the focus is on a spiritual similarity. This view had its beginnings with the church fathers, under the influence of Greek philosophical tradition. Reason, the faculty by which humans are exalted above the animals, was seen to be the primary characteristic humans shared with God. Augustine developed this theme

and made rationality (the combination of reason and will) the primary structural aspect of the soul, which became the seat of the *imago* in humans.⁴

This view persists today in the minds of many Christians, albeit in several different manifestations. The *imago dei* is said to involve our ability to relate to God in a religious capacity. Or it means humans have the ability to choose between right and wrong. The immortality of the spirit has also been put forwards as a candidate. Luther's proposal was that the *imago* consisted of the original righteousness and moral perfection that humans possessed before the fall. The unifying factor in all these views is that they conceive of the *imago* in a structural sense, as something that humans possess (or possessed) as a part of their nature, constitution or makeup.⁵

The problem in trying to understand the *imago dei* in a structural sense is that there is no agreement on what structural aspect makes up the *imago*. Is it reason, volition, spirituality, moral responsibility, personhood, aesthetic sense or speech and song? What about all of them together?⁶ The lack of agreement indicates that perhaps the speculation along these lines has been misguided. What about those humans who lack one or more of these structural characteristics? Many people are unable to speak or sing. The unborn child in the womb can hardly be said to possess reason or volition. Are they not in the image of God?

The recent emphasis in philosophy and theology on the unity of the person also raises questions about the structural *imago dei*. It is widely recognized that the division of humans into constituent parts (body and soul or

body, soul and spirit) derives from Hellenistic conceptions of reality. It is doubtful that the ancient Hebrews viewed the person in such a way, and modern theologians have become more cautious about dividing humans into constituent parts as well. Involving the structural *imago* with the whole person as a psychosomatic unity tends to make the definition of the *imago* so inclusive that its usefulness is compromised.⁷

“As Our Image”

Understanding the *imago dei* in functional terms avoids many of the problems inherent in the structural view. The first difference between the functional and structural view involves the translation of the key phrase, “in our image.” Making humans “in” the image of God presupposes that God has an image, which is problematic for a non-physical understanding of Yahweh. In what sense can God be an image of which we are a copy? A more accurate translation of the phrase, based on Hebrew grammar and inscriptional evidence, would be “as our image.” In this case, humans would be God’s representatives in the physical realm.⁸

In the ancient Near East, images were commonplace. Gods, goddesses and kings all had images. The primary purpose of these images was to represent the deity or ruler in the absence of their actual presence. In the case of the deities, the image was not necessarily a depiction but a portrayal of their character and an expression of their authority and dominion. For example, Baal was often represented by a bull. This was not meant as a depiction of Baal’s

actual corporeal manifestation but was a symbolic representation of his strength, power and role in fertility.⁹

This ancient Near East concept of representation, when applied to the *imago dei* in Genesis 1:26-28, brings with it several ramifications. First, it removes any trace of a structural aspect to the *imago*. Humans are the *imago dei* simply because God chose them to be his representation on earth. Our physical appearance and mental capacities may help us in our task as the *imago dei* but they have nothing to do with the *imago* itself.¹⁰

Second, the functional view of the *imago dei* makes humans the representatives of God as his vice-gerents.¹¹ The second phrase in Genesis 1:26 indicates that humans were given dominion over creation as a part of the *imago*. They were to rule over all that God created, exercising his authority through their own decisions. Dominion itself is not the *imago* but a necessary result of humans being the *imago*. The king was commonly accepted as the representative of the gods in the ancient Near East. He ruled by their authority and in their stead. It is likely that the same connotation applies here, except that it is humanity that is acting as God's representative rather than the king alone. The *imago dei* cannot be understood apart from this exercise of dominion.¹²

Third, the functional view of the *imago dei* resists dividing the person into component parts. It is the whole person as a psychosomatic unity that is the *imago*, not one aspect of a person like mental capacity, physical form or spirituality. The analogy of the *imago* does not relate the spiritual God with the spiritual aspect of humans. Nor does the *imago* mean that the human physical

form is similar to the physical form of God. The *imago* is the whole person because it is through the whole person that God has decided to manifest his presence on earth.¹³

One more observation must be made. The phrase “male and female he created them,” is extremely significant for understanding the *imago dei*. Karl Barth seized on this phrase in formulating his understanding of the *imago* as relationship. For him the *imago* was the I-Thou relationship within God himself, and between humans and God, as reflected in the male- and femaleness of humanity. Barth was right to emphasize the importance of this phrase but went too far in his interpretation. “Male and female” is parallel to “humankind” in the first part of verse 26, making the *imago* applicable to humanity as a whole. The point is not that the *imago dei* resides in sexuality or in relationship but that the *imago* is all humans.¹⁴

Making both males and females the *imago dei* excludes the possibility that only men are the *imago*. Even today, many societies make women out to be lesser creatures than men. Several patristic interpreters rejected the equality of male and female as portrayed in this passage but it is clear that both men and women are the *imago dei*. One might even say that only men and women together are the *imago*. The *imago* involves humanity as a whole as well as individuals. No one person, race or religion has the inherent right to rule over any other person. All humanity together is God’s representative. The corporate *imago* is problematic for a structural understanding but fits the functional view quite well. Humankind as a species represents God on earth.¹⁵

D.J.A. Clines sums up the functional understanding of the *imago dei* quite nicely.

Man is created not *in* God's image, since God has no image of His own, but *as* God's image, or rather *to be* God's image, that is to deputize in the created world for the transcendent God who remains outside the world order. That man is God's image means that he is the visible corporeal representative of the invisible, bodiless God; he is representative rather than representation, since the idea of portrayal is secondary in the significance of the image. However, the term "likeness" is an assurance that man is an adequate and faithful representative of God on earth. The whole man is the image of God, without distinction of spirit and body. All mankind, without distinction, are the image of God... Mankind, which means both the human race and individual men, do not cease to be the image of God so long as they remain men; to be human and to be the image of God are not separable.¹⁶

The Fall and the Functional *Imago Dei*

To this point we have been discussing the humans as the *imago dei* as they were initially created. But humanity is no longer in their primeval state, and neither is the *imago*. Any doctrine of the *imago dei* must take into account the fall and its affect. The summary of the various views regarding the structural *imago* were outlined above to highlight the contrast between the structural and the functional understandings of the *imago dei*. The purpose of this paper is to define the *imago* in a functional sense and examine the implications for the fall and the incarnation, and interesting as an examination of the structural view in relation to these doctrines would be, space does not permit it.

What impact does the fall have on the functional *imago dei*? To answer that question, it is necessary to understand the nature of the fall and its consequences.

YHWH, God, commanded concerning the human, saying:
From every (other) tree of the garden you may eat, yes, eat,

but from the Tree of the Knowing of Good and Evil –
you are not to eat from it,
for on the day that you eat from it, you must die, yes, die.¹⁷

The command given was to refrain from eating from the tree of the knowing of good and evil. Humans are God's *imago*, his representatives, his vice-gerents. As such, they must be totally dependant on him for guidance and direction. It is assumed that they will use discretion in carrying out God's rule, as Adam did in naming the animals, but being an image means being dependant upon the thing you are imaging. The fall, eating from the tree of the knowing of good and evil, was a grasping for autonomy, an attempt to move from being the *imago dei* to being God himself. Knowing good and evil is an attribute of God alone, for to truly know what is good and evil, one must know everything. A simple example is enough to prove this point. A man hails a taxi and, seeing a woman running down the sidewalk, allows her to take his cab. He may think he has done something good, but what if this woman was fleeing a robbery and his actions aided her getaway? Only a person who knows everything can be said to truly know the difference between good and evil.¹⁸

In one sense, the *imago dei* was not affected by the fall. Humans were created as God's image, his representatives on earth. After the fall, humans were still God's image, his representatives on earth. Genesis 5:1, which is after the fall, refers to humankind as the image of God, and refers to Adam passing on that image and likeness to his children. The prohibition against murder in Genesis 9:6 also appeals to the fact that humans are the image of God. The

punishment for the murder of a person is death because people are God's image. It is obvious that, despite the fall, humans are still the image of God.

What was affected by the fall was the ability of humans to properly represent God on earth. As God's representative, humans were, as a species and as individuals, to rule the earth in his name according to his will. In rebelling against God's authority, Adam and Eve lost their link with God. God is the source of all life and the life-giving communion between God and humans, necessary for the proper functioning as God's representatives, was symbolized by the tree of life. By being banished from the garden of Eden, humans lost access to God, the source of their life. This estrangement resulted in the inability to know and do the will of God as his representatives.¹⁹

The fall also produced disunity within humanity as a whole. Before the fall, man and woman were united as one flesh, together forming the *imago dei*. As a result of the fall we find conflict between husband and wife, and parents and children (Genesis 3:16). Individuals began to exalt themselves over others, taking revenge for real or imagined wrongs (c.f. Genesis 4:3-8; 4:23-24). Humanity was no longer able to function together as the corporate *imago dei*.²⁰

Finally, the fall produced an inability of humans to rule over creation. An integral part of the *imago dei* was the dominion over all the earth. But the fall brought a curse upon the ground and upon Adam's ability to rule over it.

Damned be the soil on your account,
with painstaking-labor shall you eat of it, all the days of your life.
Thorn and sting-shrub let it spring up for you,
when you (seek to) eat the plants of the field!
By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread,
until you return to the soil,

for from it you were taken.²¹

Humanity lost the capacity to exercise dominion over creation as they should. Their original mandate was to subdue the earth. But after the fall, the ability to subdue the earth was lost. It would now resist attempts to subdue it, producing weeds and thorns instead of grain and fruit. Humans will never be able to subdue the earth to the point where it will yield fruit without great effort.²²

The cumulative effect of the fall is that, although humans remain the *imago dei*, they are unable to properly carry out their responsibilities as the *imago*. Their relationship with God is broken, so they can no longer know and carry out his will. Their relationship with each other is broken, so they can no longer function corporately as the *imago*. And their relationship with creation is broken, so that they can no longer rule over it properly, and it will no longer submit to human rule. Humans do not cease to be the *imago dei*, but they no longer function as God's representatives should.

The Incarnation and the Functional *Imago Dei*

The New Testament also assumes that humans remain the *imago dei*. James 3:9 uses the concept of the *imago* in much the same way as Genesis 9:6 when it uses the *imago* as the rationale for the prohibition on cursing and slander. But more common is the New Testament's application of the *imago dei* to Christ himself. The question for those who hold a purely functional definition of the *imago* is whether the functional view can be applied to the New Testament's concept of Christ as the *imago dei*. Two passages will be examined here in relation to Christ and the *imago*; Colossians 1:15 and 3:10.²³

Colossians 1:15

He is the image of the unseen God, the first-born over all creation,
for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth:
everything visible and everything invisible,
thrones, ruling powers, sovereignties, powers –
all things were created through him and for him.
He exists before all things, and in him all things hold together,
and he is the Head of the Body, that is, the Church
He is the Beginning, the first-born from the dead,
so that he should be supreme in every way;
because God wanted all fullness to be found in him
and through him to reconcile all things to him,
everything in heaven and everything on earth,
by making peace through his death on the cross.²⁴

In this passage the *imago dei* motif is used to describe the nature of Christ. The background of the passages is Genesis 1:26-28, and the intent is to identify Christ with Adam. “The image of the unseen God” echoes the idea of the *imago* as representation. God, who is unseen, is revealed more fully in Christ, who represents him. In calling Christ the “first-born” over creation, the author emphasizes his preeminence, his authority over all things. Being the first-born from the dead means his preeminence extends over all realms; over creation, over the Church, even over death. The *imago dei* as ascribed to Christ in this passage fits well with an understanding of the *imago* as representation.²⁵

Whereas humans as *imago dei* were to bridge the gap between the transcendent God and his creation, Christ as the *imago* bridges the gap between the holy God and his fallen creation. The fall did not erase the *imago* but broke the relationship the humans had with God, themselves and nature that allowed them to function properly as the *imago dei*. Christ has come, as the true *imago*, to restore those relationships and allow humans to once again function as the

imago. His authority extends over all creation, over all humans and even over death itself. Therefore he is able to reconcile humans and creation with God, whom he represents.²⁶

Colossians 3:10

And these things made up your way of life when you were living among such people, but now you must give up all these things: human anger, hot temper, malice, abusive language and dirty talk; and do not lie to one another. You have stripped off your old behavior with your old self, and you have put on a new self which will progress towards true knowledge the more it is renewed in the image of its Creator; and in that image there is no room for distinction between Greek and Jew, between the circumcised and uncircumcised, or between barbarian and Scythian, slave and free. There is only Christ: he is everything and he is in everything.²⁷

The essence of this passage is a practical application of the first two chapters of the epistle. It calls those who belong to Christ to put aside their old ways of living and adopt new ways. The old ways are the ways of the old self, or the old humanity. The new ways are the ways of the new self, or new humanity. This new humanity is made up of those who are being renewed by Christ. The goal of this renewal is knowledge; the knowledge of God's will and knowledge of God himself. The renewal is said to conform to the image of the Creator. In the context of Colossians, this is probably a reference to Christ himself.

In being renewed, Christians are renewed into the image of Christ.²⁸

Traditionally this passage has been used to promote a structural view of the *imago*, making the renewal related to a human faculty that Christ possesses in perfection that we need to have perfected. He is already the *imago dei* and he already has dominion. Therefore the growth in the *imago* for Christians cannot mean growth in dominion; our dominion will only come when Christ returns.²⁹

However, when the *imago* is defined as representation, rather than simply dominion, the passage fits the functional *imago* rather nicely. The emphasis on putting off the old humanity and putting on the new humanity is essential for being a proper representative of God. The *imago dei* was not lost in the fall; what was lost was the ability of humans to properly represent God because of their estrangement from him, from each other and from creation. The old self can not function properly as the *imago*, but the new self, which is being renewed daily, can begin to function properly. The progression towards knowledge of God is the key, because without knowing God and his will, no one can represent him. But those who are being renewed in the knowledge of God can begin to function as his representatives. We are reconciled to him and to each other. This reconciliation with each other is outlined in the last part of the passage. All who are in Christ are one; there is no distinction made because of any human categories. Just like all humans are the *imago dei*, all believers are renewed as the *imago dei*.³⁰

These two passages portray Christ as the *sensus plenior* of the *imago dei*. In Christ, we see what humanity was meant to be. We were meant to be God's representative on earth, the presence of the transcendent one in his created world. Christ came as God's true representative, to re-establish God's authority on earth. He bridged the gap, not between the transcendent God and the created world but between the holy God and the sinful world. Where Adam exhibited disobedience, Christ showed obedience. In doing so he opened the way for

humans to regain the ability to function as the *imago dei*. Christ is the true *imago* and humans can once again realize the *imago* only through him.³¹

The tension between the now and not yet that is so fundamental to the New Testament is seen in the functional *imago dei* as well. Fallen humanity is still the *imago*, but unable to function. Christ, the true *imago*, has come and opened the way for humans to be renewed as the *imago*, and to begin to function properly as God's representatives. In essence a new humanity has been formed to function as God's representative to the rest of the human race. Thus the corporate aspect of the functional *imago dei* is present in the New Testament as well. However, the renewal is not complete. Christ has been given all authority, but not everything has been completely subjected to him. In the same way, the new humanity has been renewed into the true *imago dei*, but the full and complete function as God's representatives has not yet been realized. There still awaits a full and complete renewal of humans and humanity. Only then will the relationship between God and humans be restored so that we may perfectly know and do the will of God as his representatives in the new creation. Only then will humans be reconciled completely to each other so that corporately we can image God in the new creation. And only then will creation itself be restored so that it no longer resists the dominion of humans. Then once again and forever humans and humanity will be the *imago dei*.³²

Conclusion

It is clear that defining the *imago dei* in Genesis 1:26-28 as representation fits the context of the passage, the culture of the ancient Near East and the

context of the Old Testament as a whole. It presents fewer problems than the structural view of the image. It has also been shown that the understanding of the *imago* as representation fits the emphasis in the New Testament of Christ as the true *imago dei*, at least in the book of Colossians. The key to the promotion of a functional understanding of the *imago* in light of the New Testament witness is to define the functional *imago dei* as representation rather than simply as dominion. This broader definition encompasses the meaning and implications given in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

There are many issues that this paper has left unanswered. The implications of Psalm 8 for the functional *imago* could be examined in greater detail. Several New Testament passages must be accounted for if the functional *imago* is to be definitively accepted as fitting with all the New Testament evidence. The paper has endeavored to show that the functional *imago dei* is not inconsistent with the portrayal of the *imago* in Colossians, but there remains many passages, including Romans 8:9, 1 Corinthians 11:7, 15:49, 2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:4, Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 4:22-24, Philippians 2:5-11 and Hebrews 1:3 must also be shown to be consistent with the functional *imago* as well.³³ Another area that this paper only touched on briefly, but one that is prominent in the New Testament understanding of the *imago dei*, is eschatology. The future orientation of the *imago dei* and the issue of the presence of the *imago* within redeemed and non-redeemed humanity invite further research in relation to the functional *imago*, but it is the conviction of this author that they will prove not inconsistent with this functional definition of the *imago dei*.

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- ¹ Genesis 1:26-28, *The First Five Books of Moses*, translated by Everett Fox.
- ² Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 57.
- ³ J. Maxwell Miller, "In the 'Image' and 'Likeness' of God," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91/3 (September 1972): 291-293.
- ⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001): 141-148, 153-157.
- ⁵ Waldemar Janzen, *Still the Image* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1982):52-53; Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984): 79-81.
- ⁶ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986):70-71.
- ⁷ Hoekema, 70-71; Janzen, 52; von Rad, 58-59.
- ⁸ D.J.A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 73-80; A.H. Konkel, "Male and Female as the Image of God," *Didaskalia* 3/2 (April 1992): 1-2; James Barr, "The Image of God in the Book of Genesis – A Study in Terminology," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 51/1 (Autumn 1968): 13-22; von Rad, 58-59. Clines provides an extensive bibliography listing those who would support this reading.
- ⁹ Clines, 90; Konkel, 2-3.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Vice-gerent carries the connotation of one appointed to act in the place of a ruler, as opposed to a vice-regent who is a deputy or assistant to the ruler.
- ¹² Clines, 95-99; Konkel, 2-3; Michael Welker, "Creation and the Image of God: Their Understanding in Christian Tradition and the Biblical Grounds," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34/3 (Summer 1997): 446-448.
- ¹³ Clines, 85-87.
- ¹⁴ Blocher, 81-82.
- ¹⁵ Konkel, 3-4.
- ¹⁶ Clines, 101.
- ¹⁷ Genesis 2:16-17, (Fox).
- ¹⁸ Blocher, 130-137.
- ¹⁹ Blocher, 121-125; C.F.D. Moule, *Man and Nature in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), x-xii.
- ²⁰ Blocher, 173-178.
- ²¹ Genesis 3:17-19 (Fox).
- ²² Blocher, 182-184.
- ²³ Horace D. Hummel, "The Image of God," *Concordia Journal* 10/3 (May 1984): 90.
- ²⁴ Colossians 1:15-20, New Jerusalem Bible.
- ²⁵ David H. Johnson, "The Image of God in Colossians," *Did* 3/2 (April 1992): 10-11.
- ²⁶ Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1996): 66-68.
- ²⁷ Colossians 3:7-11, NJB.
- ²⁸ Johnson, 11-12.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Clines, 102-103.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Ibid.
- ³³ Douglas R. de Lacey, "Image and Incarnation in Pauline Christology: A Search for Origins," *TBI* 30 (1979): 23-25; Sherlock, 49-72.