The Image of God in Man: A Critique of the Substantive View

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Thesis Statement

The Bible teaches that man was made in the image of God, therefore as God’s image bearer it is important to understand the nature of that status. While the substantive interpretation of God’s image in man (*imago Dei*) is not specifically affirmed in Scripture, and it is only one of the three traditional conceptions about the image of God in mankind, it is the most fundamental of these views.

Introduction

The Bible teaches in Genesis 1:26 that God made man in his own image. On its face this is a very important subject, but strangely, there are only a few references to this in the Old Testament. Kenneth Gardoski observes that in theological studies the more sparse the biblical information on a particular subject, the more theories are advanced to explain it. Such is the case with the subject of the image of God in man (*imago Dei*). As important as this subject is to our understanding of man’s relationship to God, there are only three Old Testament references (Gen 1:26-27; 9:6) which teach that human beings were created in God’s image.

Gerald Bray posits that man, being in the image and likeness of God means that, “unlike the rest of creation, human life is not an end in itself.” Because man is made in God’s image he is different from the other created beings. Man’s image-bearing status places upon him a privilege and responsibility of “fulfilling his earthly existence in relation to God, and this entails responsibility for his actions.” Bray argues that God's image in man is found on three dimensions; in his “uniqueness as a creature, his historical tragedy in Adam and his eschatological hope of redemption in Christ.”

The doctrine of the image of God in man is traditionally conceived of from three points of view. Herzfeld states that they are: (1) the “substantive interpretations, which views the image as an individually held property that is a part of our nature, most often associated with reason; (2) the functional interpretation, in which the image of God is seen in action, specifically our exercise of dominion over the earth; and (3) relational interpretation, in which God’s image in mankind is found within the relationships we establish and maintain.” Noreen Herzfeld argues that there are several other ways that God’s image in man has been conceived; as the quality of the human being in terms of our physical attributes, our rationality, personality, our capacity for self-transcendence, as exercise in our dominion over the created order, the interrelatedness of two beings, human with human, or human with divine.

While these three traditional views may be the most widely known, there are other postulations about what they image of God means. For example, Bray summarizes Philo’s concept of the image of God in the following way: “For Philo, there were images of God in Heaven, which he identified with Wisdom and Mind (*nous*). The human mind, though vastly inferior to the heavenly *Nous*, is nevertheless modelled on it; the Logos being regarded as the *archétypos idea*. The Logos is frequently referred to as the image of God, and the immortal soul is fashioned according to it.” Richard Briggs succinctly encapsulates some of the understandings of the image of God by various traditions. He argues that some have claimed that the image of God in humanity consists in man’s rationality. Another view is that the image of God is manifested in a soul on its way to divinization (many in the Eastern tradition hold this view). Others hold that it is the soul in humans that distinguishes humankind from other animals. Some
see it as an original righteousness (Luther). Others as an ontological characteristic combined with ethical relationality (Calvin and the reformed tradition). Still others see it as a summoned relationship before God, mirrored in the male-female relationship that follows it (Barth).

Louis Berkhof sees the image of God as having six dimensions: (1) that the image and likeness of God are used interchangeably, and that by creation that which was archetypal in God became ectypal in man. According to Berkhof this means that “man not only bears the image of God, but that he is the very image; (2) the image of God in man includes “original righteousness.” This means that man was created with true knowledge, righteousness and holiness; (3) the image of God includes certain attributes that are uniquely human, such as intellectual power, natural affections, and moral freedom; (4) the image of God in man means that man has spirituality. Since God is a spirit, and since man was made in his image, naturally there is an element of spirituality in man; (5) that man has immortality. While God’s immortality is essential to his nature, man has been given immortality by “endowment.” Man’s immortality comes from God; (6) that man has dominion, which points to the dignity and honor of being God’s image-bearers.

Given the diversity of views regarding the image of God in man, and the limited scope of this present work, we will restrict ourselves to the substantive, relational, and functional views of the image of God in man.

Three Major Views of the Image of God in Man

The Substantive View

The substantive view of the image of God in man holds that the image is regarded as some unique characteristics or quality within the human person, that is, man is structurally, by virtue of these qualities God’s image-bearer. These God-given qualities are psychological or spiritual resident in human nature. Premier among these is reason. Millard Erickson commenting on the substantive view of the image of God in man observes that: “Although conferred by God, the image resides in humans whether or not they recognize God’s existence and his work. The third dimension of Berkhof’s view cited above (that the image of God includes certain attributes that are uniquely human, such as intellectual power, natural affections, and moral freedom) perhaps best describes the substantive view.

The substantive view of the image of God in man holds also that the image of God is universally given to all humans, and none has more of it than others. Therefore, even the non-Christian is still fully human as are devoted followers of Jesus Christ. All humans are endowed with the ability, by virtue of their image-bearing status to reason, to distinguish between available alternatives, to recognize the truth, and to make intelligent choices based on sound judgment of facts. Erickson states that this view of the image of God in man admits the possibility of a rational or natural theology, even without the aid of the Scriptures. Such a view holds that humans are able to gain some true knowledge of God and as such are ethical beings, and are capable of doing some good works apart from grace.

The universality of Imago Dei as postulated by the substantive view is not found exclusively in the male species of the human race. Rather, universality means that both male and female are equally endowed with God’s image. Maryanne Horowitz indicates that ‘Gen 1:26-27 clarifies that the Hebrew term adam stands for the generic species of humanity which is composed of men and women.”

John Davis states that the terms “image” and “likeness” are used synonymously and “point to spiritual qualities shared by God and man, with man having the resultant capacity for
self-consciousness, speech, and moral discernment.” Davis here describes the substantive view of the image of God in man.

But the substantive view is not only seen in man’s spiritual, psychological, or moral character. Some have held that the substantive view is represented in man’s physical being. Jerome Wernow strives for an amalgamation in his view of the image of God in man. He conceives of Imago Dei, as a combination of the substantive, relational and functional. With respect to the substantive view, he sees man’s corporeality as being the foundational aspect of Imago Dei. He argues: “Without corporeality, the human imperative to glorify God is not realized in the phenomenal sphere of relationship with the "other."” To Wernow Imago Dei cannot be expressed without material substance. He maintains that mankind cannot perform actions (functional view), nor maintain relationships (relational view) apart from his corporeality. So for Wernow, the substantive view is most clearly realized in humanity’s corporeality. He recognizes however, that the substantive position alone is not adequate to explain Imago Dei. He sees the image of God in man most clearly represented through the medium of corporeality as it concomitantly expresses itself in relationships, both with God and with others as well as with the functional dimension, in particular man’s mandate to have dominion.

Like Wernow, Larry Overstreet seems to express the aspect of the substantive view which regards God’s image in man as expressed in his physical body. He holds that the Old Testament references to image (tselem) shows convincingly “that tselem consistently refers to that which has an external form and is visible to the eye.”

The Relational View

The relational View of the image of God in man is not something resident or inherent within human nature. It is seen instead in how humans establish, experience, and maintain relationships. Emil Brunner distinguishes between two senses of the image of God: the formal and the material. The formal image is the humanum, and is seen as that which makes a person human, and distinguishes humans from animals. Johan Buitendag states that the material aspect of the imago Dei, became totally lost at the time of the Fall, “making human beings ‘anti-personal persons’, who are without justification.” While the material image can be present or absent, the formal image is always present.

Erickson notes that Karl Barth also held a relational view of the image of God. He speaks of the unity between God and humans that was something like the unity between mother and fetus. The unity has been lost since the fall. Later Barth denied any point of connection between God and humans, and human capacity to receive the word of God. Just as there is a necessary and eternal relationship between the members of the Trinity, there is also in humans a necessity to establish and maintain relationships; human-to-human, and human-to-God. Stanley Grenz also sees the image of God in man as expressed in his relationships rather than a structural gift. He argues: "The divine image is a shared, corporate reality. It is fully present only in community.”

Alan J. Torrance seems also to reject the substantive or functional view of the image of God in man. He offers: “What has characterized theological anthropology in recent years....has been the shared conviction that anthropology must begin not with the individual defined in terms of individual capacities, capabilities, or attributes but in terms of that communion and relationality constitutive of the triune God.” Ron Highfield sees the image of God in man as reflecting the relation between members of the Trinity. He argues that: “God's very being is
relational, for God is Father, Son, and Spirit.” We most nearly reflect the image of God to the extent that we maintain relationships with God and our fellow human beings.

To summarize, then, the relational view of *imago Dei* is that our ability to relate to God and to each other makes us God’s image-bearers. Nicola Greegan concludes: “There is no assumed faculty or characteristic like intelligence that is thought to "house" the relationality. Indeed the relationality, like Israel’s special relationship with God, is understood as, at least partly the result of God’s decree or election or calling.” Greegan argues that the relational understanding is the Biblical teaching on *imago Dei*. To her Scripture views man’s essence in terms of his relationship with God. The “relational is a movement also away from the individualism of the modern age, with its accompanying structural definitions of person or image, in terms of rationality or a separable soul.”

Immanuel Kant rejects the relational view of the image of God in man. For Kant, instead of man gaining his majesty and dignity by virtue of his relationship to God, he sees human dignity as inherent in his nature. According to Kant, “autonomy is the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational creature.” Kant further argues: “The essence of things is not altered by their external relations.” In other words, man is in the image of God because of something intrinsic in his nature and not because he is related to God.

**The Functional View**

The functional view of the image of God in mankind denies the substantive and relational postulates. This view holds that the image of God in man is seen in what a man does. It holds that man was made to have dominion, and he therefore most closely demonstrates that image in fulfilling that functional role. Since Yahweh is sovereign and exercises total dominion over the created order, if humans are a reflection of him, then this will be observed in his dominating role over the creation.

While well within the purview of God’s sovereignty to directly control every aspect of his creation, he nevertheless, as it were, delegated certain responsibilities to mankind. As God’s surrogates on earth mankind is given the prerogative to dominate the rest of the created order. Herzfeld quoted Gerhard Von Rad as saying:

> The close relation of the term for God s image with that for the commission to exercise dominion emerges quite clearly when we have understood *selem* as a plastic image. Just as powerful earthly kings, to indicate their claim to dominion, erect an image of themselves in the provinces of their empire where they do not personally appear, so man is placed upon earth in God s image, as God s sovereign emblem. He is really only God’s representative, summoned to maintain and enforce Gods claim to dominion over the earth.

Berkhof points out that there is considerable debate as to whether or not man’s dominion over creation forms part of the image of God. He observes that some believe that dominion is an office given to man, and not as part of the image. But he points out that God mentions man’s creation in divine image and his dominion over the lower creation in a single breath, and is “indicative of the glory and honor with which man is crown, Ps. 8:5, 6.”

There are several views regarding the image of God in man, each of which claims to have biblical foundations. The substantive, relational, and functional views of *imago Dei* each captures some aspect of human nature. No one view fully represents all of what the human person is, and consensus may never be reached as to which view most accurately answers the
question: “what is the image of God?”

A Critique of the Substantive

One of the oldest efforts to understand and categorize the image of God in man is the substantive theories. The arguments are nuanced in different ways, some emphasizing the moral, physical, intellectual, psychological, cognitive, (reason), volitional, or spiritual aspects of God’s image in mankind. However, at the core these, theories are attempting to identify some human quality or characteristic which is indicative of image of God in man. According to Gardoski early church fathers typically defined the *imago Dei* along these lines.

Nowhere in Scripture does it specifically say that God’s image bearing status in mankind is represented by these characteristics. Nevertheless, implicit in the biblical data about the image of God in mankind is that it is represented, at least in part, by these characteristics. It seems self-evident that each person has a moral responsibility to treat his or her fellow man in ways that honor God. Daniel Weiss affirms that the prohibition against murder for example, is predicated on the truth that a man’s physical body is made in the image of God. According to Genesis 9:6 a murderer must “forfeit his life because God made man in his image.” Any attempt therefore, to kill or diminish human being is an affront on his Creator in whose image he was made. W. Sibley Towner concludes that “the image of God is manifested in our ability to make moral decisions, which presupposes free will and a knowledge of good and evil.” Our moral responsibility to treat others with dignity seems to be embedded in the notion that it is God who has imparted part of his self-contained dignity to humans; we honor God therefore, when we honor man, God’s image-bearer.

The substantive view of the image of God also suggests that inherent in man’s constitution is the need to worship (spirituality). The Preacher declares: “The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.” It would appear that even without special Revelation, people have a need for cultic expressions. This innate desire to worship seems instinctive to all human beings. The Apostle Paul seems to be making this argument when he wrote: “For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them,” (Rom 2:14-15). James Boice indicates that humankind exists to have communion with God. This communion is not temporary, but rather intended to be eternal. He states: “Here we may say that although we have physical bodies, as the plants, and souls, as do the animals, only human beings possess spirits. It is on the level of the spirit alone that we are aware of God and communion with him.”

Human’s ability to reason according to the substantive view of the image of God in man indicates that we are like God in that particular, since God has imparted to us that aspect of himself. God is a rational God and has graciously given to human beings his rationality, albeit in a measure. Towner indicates that Douglas Hall sees the image of God in man as falling under two broad categories; the substantialist understandings and relational understanding. Substantialists perceive the image of God in mankind in several attributes: “physical, emotional, or spiritual attribute, some substance or endowment, such as physical appearance, rationality, immortality or freedom.” As humans, our ability to make rational decisions is one indicator that we are made in God’s image for God is a rational God.

Those who are engaged in this debate as to what constitutes the image of God in man, seem to argue that the image of God in man is the substantive, the relational view, or the
functional view, but rarely do they see a synthesis of these views. Jerome Wernow seems to be a rare exception to this. But is any one view of *imago Dei* sufficient to explain the wonder and magnificence of arguably the highest of God’s creatures? May it not be that all these views contain elements of truth regarding man’s image-bearing status?

One may not dogmatically state that the image of God is only as seen from the perspective of the substantive view. Those who hold such a position must at the very least admit that there is no Scripture reference that specifically states that those elements of the substantive view (moral, physical, intellectual, psychological, reason, volitional, and spiritual) are what constitute the image of God in man. Intuitively, of course, it seems logical that these attributes which have their antecedent in God, to the extent that they are present in humanity, make a convincing argument that mankind bears God’s image. But to state that this view is unequivocally the only view is to ignore the teaching of Scripture that man was made to have relationships with God and other human beings (relational view), and was also made to have dominion (functional view).

To the extent that the substantive view of *imago Dei* holds that the essence of being human is more than his physical, relational, or functional aspects, it is a very good starting point in understanding humanity. Because before a person can have any meaningful relationships with others, and before he or she can have control or dominion over anything, there must be some intrinsic self-worth in humanity. What makes a human being human cannot be primarily in the relationships he keeps, or what he does, but rather who he is. The human “being” is ontologically grounded in the “Being” of all beings. The apostle Paul rightly observes “in Him we live and move and exist,” (Acts 17:28), or as the KJV puts it: “in him we live and move and have our being.”

Apart from God we are non-beings. Since it is evident that we are beings who share in some of God’s communicable attributes, the substantive view does well to equate those attributes with the image of God in man. But to ignore the relational or functional aspects is to negate the glory and majesty that are also manifested in our relationship with God and other human beings as well as what we do in the kingdom of God and in the created order.

If the conclusion of the proponents of the substantive view is that the image of God in man can only be identified with the elements referenced earlier, then it is an unfortunate misunderstanding of what it means to be in the image of God. It would be more accurate to argue that the basic essence of the human being is identified with his moral attribute, his intellectuality, his psychological bearing, his ability to reason, his volition, and his spirituality, etc., and that these undergird and inform his relational and functional roles. It may be more accurate to view *imago Dei* as a triangle, the base of which forms the largest part is the substantive attributes of mankind, while the other two sides are equal and represent the relational and functional aspects of God’s image in mankind.

**Conclusion**

John Kilner rejects the notion that the meaning of the image in which all humanity is created is to be understood in capacities or functions or relationships. Kilner notes that efforts “to establish our status by breaking it down into ways we are like God is arguably misguided.” He sees the image of God as something that was created in man, which is not expressed by any of the various categories that theologians have employed. Kilner further argues that the image of God in man has not in any way been damaged or diminished by the fall of Adam.
Bray asserts that: “The idea that the image implied dominion over the Creation was a popular theme, already found in Psalm 8, and repeated in Sirach 17:3. But to this traditional statement, Sirach adds that man was also able to distinguish between good and evil, thereby introducing a moral dimension into the concept of the image (17:6-10). This in turn leads to the statement that man is able to know God by keeping the Law (17:13), a view which was to become increasingly popular as Judaism evolved.”

Ronald Allen prefers not to regard the image of God in man as being represented solely by any one of the traditional views. Rather, the image of God describes man in his whole being (including his body), in his relationship as male and female and with God, and in his having dominion over God’s creation. He writes that “the image of God in man is inclusive and descriptive of his entire being. It is the essence of what man is.”

This study was enlightening as it dealt with this very important subject. The image of God in man cannot be defined solely by any one of these views. The human person is a complex being, and must not be looked at through only one set of philosophical lens. If we are fashioned after God, after all, it should not be expected that we can simply fit man into any particular grid and expect that to be a robust explanation of mankind, no more than we can apply any such grid to explain God. The apostle Paul once exclaimed: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (Rom 11:33). In some measure, but perhaps to a lesser degree, so is human nature.

One final question that has not been dealt with in this present work is; what is the status of the image of God in man as a result of the fall of Adam? If the substantive view has an advantage over the other competing views it is probably in addressing this question. For if the image of God in mankind is not seen in his relationships, or in what he does, but rather in what he is, then the fall of mankind in Adam, while it may have tarnished or obscured the image, did not obliterate it. If the image of God in man is intrinsic to his very nature as something with which he was created, that image can no sooner be annihilated than his soul can be. This would argue strongly for the reason for Christ’s redemptive work. If the image in derived from God, being part of God, it makes sense that God would redeem it.

Whatever may be one’s view of the image of God in man, one thing is clear from Scripture; Jesus Christ came to restore mankind to that image. If the substantive aspects of the image of God in man have not been lost, at the very least, they have become jaded and diminished by the fall. Whether it is seen in the relationships we keep or in our functionality, those too have been negatively affected by the fall. Today, mankind is a far cry from the majesty into which Adam was created. Only in Christ can mankind ever be restored to the splendor that characterized him before that fateful day in the Garden of Eden. We live in constant expectation however that our vile diminished state will be fully recovered in Christ. The apostle Paul tells us: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; 30 and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified” (Rom 8:29-30).
Bibliography


