

of who God is, having been created to live as his created analogy. The image of God enables us to ground our worth, dignity, and purpose in our essence rather than our function. This means it is humans *as humans* — not some element or ability in us — that constitutes the divine image.

The image of God in humanity is distorted but not lost in the fall and is the basis for human dignity and biblical ethics (Gen 9:6; James 3:8; Matt 22:37–40, 1 John 4:20–21). We see the image of God displayed in humanity through things like our moral understanding and accountability, abstract reasoning, spiritual composition, immortality, and our ability to relate to God. These manifestations, however, do not define the image but display it in varying ways. We are defined by the image of God in our essence, not by any functional expression of that image.

Jesus perfectly shows us what the image of God in humanity looks like. He is the image of the invisible God in true human form (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15, Heb 2:17). This perfect image is fundamentally seen in his perfect fellowship with the Father, perfect obedience to the Father's will, and sacrificial love for others. In these activities he perfectly fulfills human purpose. Jesus perfectly fulfills the Creation Mandate to rule over and subdue creation and to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:28). He perfectly fulfills the Great Commandment by always abiding in the Father's love (John 15:9), and by loving humanity to the point of death (John 15:10, 13; Heb 5:8–9). Because Jesus is our perfect example of humanity, he is our example in all things, and we should pattern our lives after him (Mark 12:13–17; 1 Pet 2:21). This means we experience our humanity most truly

when we're in right relationship with God.

Every human being who has ever been created, regardless of any earthly limitations or fallenness, is deserving of profound dignity, value, respect, and protection (2 Cor 5:16). This truth is at the core of why Christians are commanded to love, even those who hate us and our enemies. Due to being made in God's image, our lives have eternal meaning and significance, and we are motivated to live lives that can glorify God and have an impact into eternity through the way we live.

The image of God gives us a basis for the way we view everyone — including ourselves. It also transforms the way we think about everything else. It is at the very core of our understanding of ethics, morality, education, government, parenting, anthropology, art, sports, economics, sexuality, mental health, work, recreation, sleep, marriage, and of course, worship. The Christian view of the world is grounded in who God is, and who we are as the pinnacle of his creation which displays his glory (Ps 19:1). ✕

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On the Image of God

“What is the image of God?” For me, this is not an easy question. Why? It has to do with how language works. God teaches us in the Bible primarily through whole sentences and paragraphs, not by words or phrases taken by themselves.¹ This short article focuses on an elementary level.

Let us start with the word “image.” Roughly speaking, “image” means a display that is similar to and reflects an original. “Image of God” means a display reflecting God. That is the meaning. By itself it does not say very much. We have to look

to additional passages. Some people expect that these passages will provide clues enabling us to uncover a secret precise meaning hidden within the key phrase by itself. But it does not work that way. Each passage provides meaning in the *whole* passage.

Consider Genesis 1:26–27. It indicates that God created man to be like God and to display God on a creaturely level. Genesis 1–2 and Genesis as a whole show that the resemblance of man to God consists not in one feature, but in many features that are holistically integrated in

¹ Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (rev. and expanded ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998); Vern S. Poythress, *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), chaps. 14 and 17; Vern S. Poythress, *Making Sense of Man: Using Biblical Perspectives to Develop a Theology of Humanity* (P&R Publishing, 2024), 100–107.



humanity. Human beings imitate God by speaking, exercising dominion, working, thinking, having personal communion, and being holy.

Then there is Colossians 1:15. The divine Son is “the image of the invisible God.” The Son displays and reflects God the Father (see also Heb 1:3). His relation to the Father is behind his role in creating the world. According to 1 Corinthians 11:7, man also is “the image of God.” But man is not God. How do

Colossians 1:15 and 1 Corinthians 11:7 fit together? “Image of God” is *not* “one thing,” with identically the same reference across all the verses of the Bible where similar phraseology occurs. It is a mistake to smash the passages together on the basis of a shared word and related ideas. The Son is the eternal original image of God. That is the background pattern within God, according to which God made man in his image.

Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10 are

discussing spiritual renewal, so that Christians conform to the pattern of Christ. The renewal is not identical with the Adamic state: Christ is not Adam. There are relations between all these passages. God intends for us to see these relations. Renewal in Christ takes place in a manner analogous to God’s original creation of Adam. And God’s original creation of Adam takes place in analogy with the Son as the eternal Image. The common pattern goes together harmoniously with the distinct nuances that belong to each passage. The distinctions add to and enrich the teaching of the whole Bible.

In the history of theology, the phrase “image of God” is sometimes used as a technical term. There is nothing the matter with technical terms. But technical terms need to have their meanings defined. In this case theologians disagree. A theologian may build into the technical term his perspective on what is central to humanity. Then this perspective is read into the key biblical texts. But from a methodological point of view, technical terms in theology must be distinguished from the occurrence of ordinary, nontechnical words and phrases in the Bible. A technical term is meant to have a single, precise, fixed meaning, while the Bible uses God-given common words in a range of ways. The Bible can also use more than one choice of words to construct expressions that make similar points (for instance, Col 1:15 compared to Heb 1:3).

The whole Bible teaches about humanity. It has much to say. God made man male

and female, in original innocence and holiness. He called them to have fellowship with God, to hear his voice, to respond to him, to love him, and to reflect his character on a creaturely level. They rebelled. God continues to create all the individuals who come into the world, to govern their lives, and to be present in their lives (Psa 139; Acts 17:28). Christ came to save those who have faith in him, to renew them, and to restore fellowship with God. Salvation comes to completion in the new heavens and the new earth. The key to human existence is to know God through Jesus Christ (John 17:3). The more we grow in knowing God and having communion with him, the more we become what he designed us to be. God transforms us into the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18), so that we reflect God.² ✕

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² See Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God’s Appearing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018); Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018).