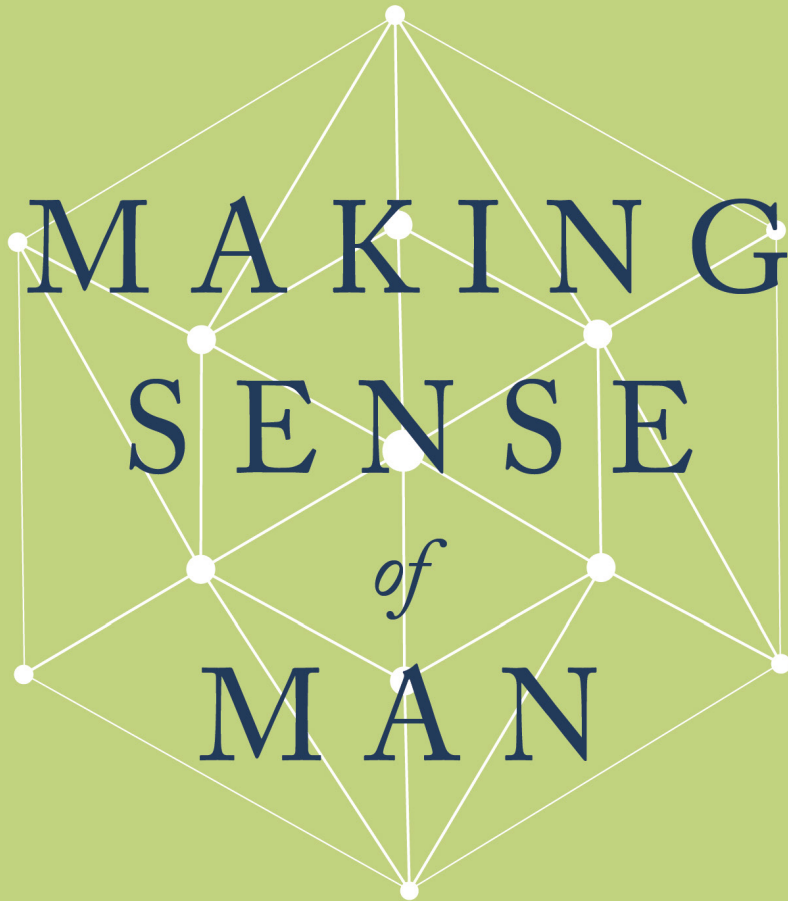


*Foreword by Sinclair B. Ferguson*



*Using Biblical Perspectives to  
Develop a Theology of Humanity*

VERN S. POYTHRESS

“Among in-depth treatments of biblical anthropology, this volume makes a fresh and impressive contribution by utilizing a *lex Christi* framework—the Ten Commandments with their implications, positive as well as negative, taken as providing a comprehensive grid of perspectives for exploring the truth of Scripture on a given topic. One need not be fully conversant with this framework to benefit from the fruitful way in which Dr. Poythress considers multiple issues such as the image of God, body and soul, the intermediate state, sexuality, and total inability, to mention just several. While the approach of the book as a whole is novel, it is knowledgeable about, interacts with, and often builds on past treatments. In its deepest concern to be true to the teaching of Scripture, it is consciously and appreciatively tethered throughout to the Westminster Standards’ relevance for today. All told, readers will find that the book’s contents make good on the promise implicit in its title.”

—**Richard B. Gaffin Jr.**, Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

“If an edifying, helpful overview on the human person in biblical perspective could be written in our day with both vigor and charity, with both courage and circumspection, Vern Poythress would be the one to write it. And so he has. Man does require a ‘making sense of’ today, and Poythress has led us back to the inscripturated revelation of man’s Maker, where true sense-making must begin. In doing so, Poythress has not pretended to say the last word on anything (and others should be read alongside and after reading this work). But he has reminded us of the first words that must be said, to the end that a properly Christian theological vision of humanity would arise and blossom from the good soil of what God has said concerning us.”

—**Mark A. Garcia**, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary; President and Fellow in Scripture & Theology, Greystone Theological Institute, Pittsburgh

“Building on a remarkable pyramid of his own publications, Dr. Poythress brings to the reader the wisdom of decades of studies across a wide

range of issues related to Christian anthropology. Few deny that the great questions for most people today are ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What does it mean to be human?’ Poythress makes no apologies for placing the Bible and the triune God as central and essential in this full-sweeping panorama of *Making Sense of Man*. Sometimes accessible and stimulatingly simple, Dr. Poythress’s book at other times takes us deep, weighing complex issues and challenging us with concepts such as *lex Christi*. With its related theologies of theology proper, hamartiology, and soteriology, the work stands as a majestic, in-depth exposition of the Christian doctrine of humanity—this for Reformed and non-Reformed alike.”

—**J. Scott Horrell**, Senior Professor Emeritus of Theological Studies, Adjunct, Dallas Theological Seminary

“I find this the most stimulating and incisive contribution that Poythress has made. Even where I might disagree with him, there is much that informs and challenges. Poythress’s expertise in science and mathematics, combined with his vast knowledge, theological acumen, and linguistic and exegetical skill, makes this a book that cannot be missed.”

—**Robert Letham**, Senior Research Fellow, Union School of Theology; Associate Professor, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam; Senior Fellow, Newton House, Oxford; Fellow in History and Theology, Greystone Theological Institute, Pittsburgh

“Vern Poythress is one of the most important theological voices of our time, and in this book, Dr. Poythress confronts one of the great intellectual and apologetic challenges of our age—the development of a faithful theology of humanity. The apocalyptic warnings of the twentieth century have turned into the very real threats to human dignity that we face in our own times. Christians need the conviction and scholarship that Dr. Poythress brings to this book. One of the most important aspects of this volume is the author’s willingness to take on so many of the most vexing questions of our age, and to respond very clearly with biblical truth.”

—**R. Albert Mohler Jr.**, President and Centennial Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The biblical and Christian theology of humanity has become a focal point of controversy in the academy and the public square in recent decades. Questions of human identity, sexuality, and purpose are often disputed, but biblical understanding and wisdom regarding them are increasingly rare. Within this setting, Poythress’s latest book is a timely and welcome contribution. Poythress provides a comprehensive, provocative exposition of a rich diversity of biblical themes concerning the nature and destiny of humanity within the triune God’s purposes in creation and redemption. Throughout the book, Poythress exhibits a rare combination of careful exegesis, methodological transparency, philosophical acumen, and pastoral sensitivity. His treatment of two important topics, the image of God and human freedom, offer especially constructive contributions to long-standing debates.”

—**Cornelis P. Venema**, President, Professor of Doctrinal Studies,  
Mid-America Reformed Seminary



MAKING  
SENSE  
*of*  
MAN

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*Theophany*

*Understanding Dispensationalists*

*What Are Spiritual Gifts?*

MAKING  
SENSE  
*of*  
MAN

*Using Biblical Perspectives to  
Develop a Theology of Humanity*

VERN S. POYTHRESS

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817



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To my wife, Diane



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## FOREWORD

In *Making Sense of Man*, readers already familiar with the prolific output of Vern Poythress will find all his signature marks: a thoroughgoing biblical-theological approach to exposition, a depth of treatment, a recognition of the issues, the multiperspectival considerations of a deeply inquiring mind, an unobtrusive but careful attention to proper logic, and an authorial as well as a theological instinct for the principle that complexity of subject does not necessitate obfuscation of expression.

For those who are new readers of Professor Poythress's work, and may feel a little daunted by the sheer magnitude of *Making Sense of Man*, perhaps a few words of introduction, first to its author and then to his subject, will help.

Vern Sheridan Poythress has—remarkably—taught in the New Testament Department at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia for a period now spanning six decades. In his early academic life, he taught mathematics—having graduated as valedictorian from the California Institute of Technology at the age of twenty and from Harvard with a PhD in mathematics four years later. Drawn to the study of theology, he had added three further degrees from Westminster Seminary and the University of Cambridge by the time he was thirty.

But to this description I should add that—lest any new reader find this academic record impressive to the point of being daunting—I have had the privilege of knowing Dr. Poythress for many years and can attest that any personal sense of being daunted by his intellect is both well matched and relieved by the sense of his personal humility, his love for his Lord, and his devotion to his students. His goal in writing extensively is not to daunt but to lead and to feed. He is, in essence, a *shepherd-theologian*.

This helps explain why his work always exhibits the disciplined logic so vital to mathematics. He leads us step by step, constantly seeking to maintain coherence of thought in his exposition. Thus, new readers, even those who are unaccustomed to large works of theology, may well be surprised at how understandable a theologian can be! This, whether consciously or unconsciously, is the fruit of not merely a mathematical cast of mind, but the reflection of the instinct that the God whose image we were created to be, for all the complexity of his creating activities, nevertheless possesses the attribute that the older theologians called *simplicitas*—simplicity.

*Making Sense of Man* is an important book because it deals with an especially important topic. Theologians and pastors are often asked which of the foundational Christian doctrines require concentrated attention either because of their central importance or because they are under attack. The reality, of course, is that God's truth is unified and, to speak metaphorically, that to pull a loose thread at any point in the garment of theology can eventually lead to the unraveling of the whole.

Evangelicals have long held that the doctrines of God and Scripture lie at the epicenter of the Christian faith and, especially since the Enlightenment, have been constantly under pressure. But it has not always been recognized that if this is the case, then the biblical view of human nature and identity has also been under threat. For when we lose hold of or distort the understanding of the God who speaks and creates, we eventually lose hold of the fundamental nature of man, and of male and female. Since we are created in his image and likeness, male and female (Gen. 1:26–27), we cannot lose God without the disintegration of his image. And when that tragic loss of identity has taken place, it is but a short step to the disintegration of the correlative truth that the Creator, whose image we bear, also embedded in human nature the twofold complementarity of being male and female.

All this was long ago made plain theologically by Paul in Romans 1:18–32. Now in the Western world, it has become a manifest existential reality.

Some years ago, the area where we live experienced a devastating flood. Fifty percent of the homes in our village were flooded. A small castle, upriver now, stood only three feet or so from collapsing into the river.

A picture of the scene would prompt the question, “Why build a castle on the edge of the river?” In fact, however, the castle had been built some distance from the river. But over the years, the river’s direction of flow had gradually changed. The truth is that the near collapse of the castle was the result of what had been imperceptibly taking place over many decades.

Therein lies a parable of our times. There appears to have been a sudden collapse of identity during the past few decades. But in fact, it has been the virtually inevitable result of the power of an unchecked river eroding the theological land on which Western society has been built. Sadly, this demonstrates the truth of John Calvin’s famous dictum:

Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.<sup>1</sup>

Since true and right wisdom consists in the inextricable connection between the knowledge of God and of ourselves, when we lose the former we will also eventually lose our true identity.

It is in this context that *Making Sense of Man* (the title itself is significant) is a noteworthy and relevant addition to Vern Poythress’s substantial expositions of the biblical doctrines of God and Scripture. For the “identity crisis” experienced today by young people is the result of the destruction of both doctrines. And apart from the recovery of a robust understanding of the *imago Dei*, stemming the tide of both personal angst and society’s woes will prove to be impossible.

These pages, then, are not only a significant contribution to our theological understanding, but a major help to stimulate us to think biblically and theologically. In addition, *Making Sense of Man* will enable pastors and teachers to equip the coming generation of Christians to shine as lights

1. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 47.

in a dark place. And it will help equip our churches to become cities set on a hill, shining the light of life renewed as it was meant to be—the light of the new creation and the restoration of the image of God in Christ, a light that cannot be hidden.

Sinclair B. Ferguson  
Chancellor's Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary  
Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to Dr. Robert Strimple for what he taught decades ago at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, in the area of theological anthropology. With his permission, in the present book I have retained some of the structure of his lecture outline and have employed and built on some of his ideas. But he is not responsible for the contents of this book. I would also like to thank Dr. Carlton Wynne and Dr. Mark Garcia for generously sharing with me their notes for courses on the doctrine of man, and the students who have interacted with me in class. Sarah Kim Lee has made suggestions for changes. I am grateful for the guidance and suggestions from P&R Publishing: John Hughes and Karen Magnuson. Finally, I much appreciate my wife's editing input and advice.



# HOW EXPLORING THE BIBLE'S TEACHING ABOUT MAN TRANSFORMS US

Questions about ourselves and our humanity are always relevant. Who are we? What is the nature of humanity? The answers might throw light on the meaning of our lives and provide guidelines on how to live well.

## Knowing the Truth

But how may we know whether there are answers, and what the answers are? Within our pluralistic times, we hear a plurality of voices. Hard-nosed materialistic philosophy might say that human beings are nothing more than collections of molecules. Some forms of New Age thinking say that human beings are all divine.

Human beings are not condemned simply to wander about among various opinions and various worldviews. God exists, and he has undertaken to tell us who we are and how we should live. His instruction is found in infallible form in the Bible. This book examines what he has said about humanity. It would take a big detour to argue the case that the Bible is the Word of God. I am leaving that to other books,<sup>1</sup> in order to move directly into discussing what the Bible teaches.

1. See J. I. Packer, *"Fundamentalism" and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958); Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God at His Word: Why the Bible Is Knowable, Necessary, and Enough, and What That Means for You and Me* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014); John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010).



## **The Importance of Doctrine**

The Bible's teaching on human nature and on sin is important for several reasons.

First, everything that the Bible teaches on any topic is of importance simply because God speaks it in the Bible. The Bible's teaching is "profitable," according to 2 Timothy 3:16—even when people might not immediately see *how* it is profitable.

Second, the various cultures of the world are confused about what it means to be human, and about the nature of what is wrong with the world (sin). People need the Bible's teaching to overcome the confusion.

Third, there are competing views about the meaning of human living. These views may claim an authority deriving from science or intuition or philosophy or some false religion. In addition, some false views build on distorted interpretations of the Bible. These views influence not only non-Christians but sometimes fellow Christians. People need to reject false ideas and to find the truth about humanity by studying and listening submissively to the Bible.

Fourth, the various teachings of the Bible belong together in harmony. What a person thinks about the nature of humanity, the nature of the fall of man, and the nature of sin influences what he thinks about the nature of redemption, the work of Christ, and even the doctrine of God. Views on these other topics also have an influence back on the doctrine of human nature. Deviations from the truth can propagate from one topic of systematic theology to another. A deviation at one point often tends to produce further deviations down the line.

For example, if sin is merely ignorance, the remedy for sin can be merely to obtain knowledge. If humanity is merely the product of random, unguided biological evolution, "sin" becomes merely a part of our animal nature. The remedy can only be further evolution. In both cases, the work of Christ becomes unnecessary or is radically redefined.

## **Enriching Systematic Theology**

Bible students do not need to start fresh because much has already been done. Over the centuries, books of systematic theology have summarized the Bible's teaching on many topics, including that of humanity.<sup>2</sup> This book builds on that past, but it gives special attention to the use of analogies and multiple perspectives in examining each of the subtopics concerning humanity. Using multiple analogies provides three interlocking benefits: (1) The multiplicity of analogies corresponds to the nature of humanity, which is rich and multifaceted. Humanity reflects the richness of God's plan.<sup>3</sup> (2) Using multiple perspectives in line with the Bible helps people notice new aspects of the truth. God has built analogies into creation and uses them in his Word. (3) Analogies tied to common life help people see the relevance of biblical teaching to the breadth of human life.

2. We especially draw attention to works in the classical tradition of Reformed theology: Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970); Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 2, pt. 5, "The Image of God," and vol. 3, pt. 1, "The Fallen World" (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8); Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, pt. 2, "The Doctrine of Man in Relation to God," 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939); John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976–77), 2:3–89; Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, pt. 3, "The Doctrine of Man in the Image of God," 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020). There is also earlier work: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 1.15, 2.1–5; and many post-Reformation works of systematic theology. Within the tradition of Reformed theology, there are variations and sometimes disagreements about details. It is not feasible to explore them in the present book. For the history of doctrine, see Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1937); Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine: A Companion to Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology*, with a foreword by Wayne Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015).

Much has been written more recently, but some of it is corrupted by a loss of confidence in the divine authority of the Bible's instruction and by the influence of the mainstream conception of Darwinian evolution. See Frame, *History of Western Philosophy and Theology*, especially chaps. 6, 8, 10, 11.

3. On the multifaceted nature of created reality, reflecting the beauty of the Trinity, see Vern S. Poythress, *Making Sense of the World: How the Trinity Helps to Explain Reality* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2024).

## **Themes from Biblical Theology**

This book is written so that it will be understandable and profitable for almost any Christian who has begun to study the Bible seriously. But professional theologians may profit as well, because themes from biblical theology can enrich the insights from past generations of systematic theology. Biblical theology can enrich systematic theology by examining the Bible's use of multiple themes and analogies.

By contrast, systematic theology of the past, in its understandable focus on the unity of the truth, has often contented itself with a single prime analogy in treating a given topic. For example, as in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, sin can be defined as “any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (WSC 14). That is useful. But it is also useful to say that sin is displayed in pride, or lovelessness, or ingratitude, or idolatry. A multitude of perspectives on sin can help us see its deadliness. The same goes for our understanding of the original relation of Adam to God. It can be viewed as a covenantal relation, but also as a sonship relation or a priestly relation. The benefits will appear as we take up specific topics.

## **Topics in the Doctrine of Man**

The theological study of humanity is called *theological anthropology* or the *doctrine of man*. What is the significance of the latter expression? This book sometimes uses *man* or *mankind* to designate the human race, including both men and women.<sup>4</sup> This distinctive use is always without a definite or indefinite article (not: “the man” or “a man”), so there is little chance for confusion.

Theological anthropology includes discussion of the nature of human beings, the nature of the situation before the fall into sin, the nature of the fall, the nature of sin, the nature of human free agency, the nature of

4. On the propriety of the generic use of *man* and *mankind*, see Vern S. Poythress and Wayne A. Grudem, *The TNIV and the Gender-Neutral Bible Controversy* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2004), chap. 18; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 563–65.

the image of God, the nature of the soul, and the nature of Adam's unique role, to name a few of the subtopics.

## **How to Read Genesis 1–3**

In seeking answers, people need to interpret Genesis 1–3 well. But the interpretation of these chapters is controversial. Whole books are devoted to the question.<sup>5</sup> The view in this book is that Genesis 1–3 provides a sober, nonfiction account of events that really happened in space and time.<sup>6</sup> God really did create the universe, and he created Adam from dust of the ground. This book briefly reviews the main issues for interpreting Genesis 1–3 in chapter 1. Given these conclusions, it moves on to consider how Genesis 1–3 and other passages of the Bible contribute to an overall understanding of the nature of humanity.

## **Extra Resources from Apologetics, Semantics, Analogy, and Metaphysics**

Systematic theologies have already been discussing the doctrine of man for centuries. But this book brings a fresh slant. It pays special attention to theological *method*. It asks: “How do we go about arriving at our conclusions? How do we interpret the Bible, and how do we interact with past generations of theology in order to arrive at conclusions about mankind?” The book focuses especially on the contributions to theological method offered by four resources: (1) presuppositional apologetics; (2) semantics; (3) analogy (including insights from biblical theology and multiperspectivalism); and (4) awareness of metaphysical frameworks. The third resource includes a cross-cultural framework, entitled *lex Christi*

5. E.g., J. P. Moreland and John Mark Reynolds, eds., *Three Views on Creation and Evolution* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999); David G. Hagopian, ed., *The G3n3sis Debate: Three Views on the Days of Creation* (Mission Viejo, CA: Crux, 2001); Matthew Barrett and Ardel B. Caneday, eds., *Four Views on the Historical Adam* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013).

6. Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); Vern S. Poythress, *Interpreting Eden: A Guide to Faithfully Reading and Understanding Genesis 1–3* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

("the law of Christ"),<sup>7</sup> based on the Bible. These resources receive fuller explanation later (chapters 7–8).

Good method is important in considering any topic in systematic theology. But it becomes especially important in considering the topic of humanity. As Marc Cortez observes:

Another challenge that one encounters in theological anthropology is the lack of explicit biblical and confessional data with respect to some of the most fundamental anthropological questions. What does it mean for a human person to have a "free will?" Although the Bible routinely assumes that human persons are in fact "free," one looks in vain for any biblical discussion of what this means. Similarly, the Bible regularly uses terms such as "body," "soul," and "spirit" to describe the human person, and yet their use is remarkably fluid in the biblical texts, leaving room for significant ambiguity in understanding their precise relationship. This problem recurs with most of the major issues in theological anthropology. . . . Thus, theologians are seldom able to cite clear biblical texts in support of particular positions.<sup>8</sup>

Does the Bible provide the needed answers? The Bible is reliable and truthful in everything that it affirms. It *does* provide solid answers. But it does not explicitly devote a whole paragraph or more of its exposition to the specific topic of the nature of the soul, or the relation of body and soul, or the topic of free will. By assimilating biblical teaching as a whole, people can come to definite conclusions about some of the topics. But the process is more difficult than it would be if whole paragraphs in the Bible directly addressed a topic such as free will. So how is a reader supposed to assimilate its teaching? It is easy to make mistakes.

7. Vern S. Poythress, "Introducing the Law of Christ (*Lex Christi*): A Fruitful Framework for Theology and Life," 2024, <https://frame-poythress.org/introducing-the-law-of-christ-lex-christi-a-fruitful-framework-for-theology-and-life/>.

8. Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 9.

This book endeavors to show how the standard topics concerning humanity can be addressed in a way that is genuinely faithful to God's Word in the Bible, avoids misreading and overreading individual verses, and avoids importing speculative theories.

The avoidance of speculative theories is important because the Bible indicates that it is *sufficient* to equip the people of God fully for living the Christian life:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be *complete, equipped for every good work*.  
(2 Tim. 3:16–17)

If the Bible is sufficient to equip “the man of God,” that is, a Christian teacher, it follows that it is also sufficient for an ordinary Christian.

The Bible's sufficiency for ethical guidance is confirmed by another verse:

Blessed are those whose way is blameless,  
who walk in the law of the LORD. (Ps. 119:1)

For those who follow the true God, it is sufficient to have “the law of the LORD” and to “walk” in it. That commitment results in being “blameless.” But who can say that he has achieved this blamelessness? Christ alone walked in the law blamelessly. Nevertheless, the implication is that people do not need extrabiblical theories as a supplement. Those theories may have interest for some kinds of academic exploration. Some of them may be true. But they are not needed as supplementary principles to guide Christian living.

The principle of sufficiency also applies to teachers in the church. As 2 Timothy 3:16–17 reminds us, the teachers in the church may receive full equipment without adding nonbiblical supplementary principles to their teaching content. The task of the teacher in the church is to teach the contents of the Bible, not the extrabiblical theories surrounding it.

Of course, his teaching has flexibility as to arrangement of details. He may draw extended inferences from individual verses and from larger contours of biblical teaching.<sup>9</sup> He may also interact with all kinds of elements in the surrounding culture, by way of illustration and application. For example, he may interact with current and past philosophical theories about humanity. He may interact with the mainstream Darwinian theory of the origin of species and the origin of humanity. He may adjust the selection of topics and illustrations to suit the needs of his hearers. He may note where there are uncertainties in interpreting the Bible. But all of that is different from using an extrabiblical speculation as if it were an authoritative pronouncement from God.

This book, therefore, focuses on what can rightly be inferred from the Bible's teaching. It endeavors to distinguish those inferences from speculations that go beyond the Bible's teaching. Of course, inferences that are more solidly and more directly based on the message of specific biblical passages have a greater weight than inferences about which there may be greater human uncertainty.

## **Implications of Presuppositional Apologetics**

At this early point, consider one of the implications of presuppositional apologetics.<sup>10</sup> Presuppositional apologetics counsels Christians to live as Christians as they engage in defending the Christian faith. Christians are not religiously neutral, but are followers of Christ. Their non-Christian conversation partners are not religiously neutral either; they are serving

9. The Westminster Confession of Faith perceptively indicates that inferences from the Bible are part of the total process of absorbing its contents: "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or *by good and necessary consequence* may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men" (WCF 1.6, italics added).

Speculative theories belong under the category "traditions of men."

10. Richard L. Pratt, *Every Thought Captive: A Study Manual for the Defense of Christian Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979); Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008); John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015).

some substitute for the true God. Presuppositional apologetics counsels us to take into account the presence of God everywhere in nature, and to take into account the clear testimony of created things to their Creator (Rom. 1:18–23). Unbelievers are guilty for suppressing the truth that is displayed in creation. Because of remaining sin, even Christians have not fully recovered from suppressing the truth.

In addition to its narrower focus on apologetic engagement, presuppositional apologetics encourages analysts to ask broad questions about how people's presuppositions or basic commitments affect their reading and understanding of the Bible. What are the effects of one's own presuppositions and those of other interpreters of the Bible?<sup>11</sup> What are the implications of the reality of God for how people think about human knowledge?

Believers ought to read and study the Bible as servants of Christ. Jesus Christ now rules as Lord of the universe (Eph. 1:19–23). Everyone in the world is obligated to submit to him. Christian believers recognize this obligation. Jesus is our Lord and Master; we are his servants. All our thoughts and all our doings should conform to his will (1 Cor. 10:31; 2 Cor. 10:4–5).

But within this life, that does not happen with perfect purity. The Spirit of Christ has fundamentally transformed all those who are united to him by faith, so that they begin to serve him. But sin and its corruptions still remain in Christians to some degree. And they easily corrupt thinking in theology as well as in other areas. Christians must not think the same way that the godless world thinks:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be *conformed to this world*, but be

11. See Vern S. Poythress, *Science and Hermeneutics: Implications of Scientific Method for Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), reprinted in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 431–531; Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999).



*transformed by the renewal of your mind*, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:1–2)

## **The State of the Western World**

Consider now briefly what is happening in the world. In the West, many people are highly opinionated and passionately committed to some conception about themselves and about mankind. They have convictions before they open the pages of the Bible. It is easy to notice some of these commitments when we compare the mainstream of current Western thinking with practices in other parts of the world. People in other parts of the world, such as mainland China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, North Korea, Somalia, and Zimbabwe, also have strong commitments. Tribal cultures in the Amazonian basin and in the highlands of Papua New Guinea also have their commitments. But they have different commitments. So where did the commitments in the West come from?

Some of them are an indirect influence of Christianity, which has been in the West for centuries. But now other influences predominate in elite Western culture. People in the West experience influences not only from universities and schools, but from media and entertainment. They may find reinforcement from social media. Not many individuals are really too original in their commitments. They mirror what is around them. They believe what other respected people in their circle believe. Their moral convictions are similar to the convictions of other respected people.

Among the intellectual classes and in elite subcultures of the West, these beliefs are actually quite fragile. How is this so? Among the predominant commitments in elite Western culture is a commitment to believing that no culture is superior to any other. People among the elite may especially emphasize that the dominant culture of Western civilization is not superior. Nor is it permissible to single out some particular strands within the West as superior. People may think differently in their hearts, but they refrain from saying it because it is impolite and considered a sign of prejudice, if not racism.

Let us consider as a hypothetical example a person named Frank. Frank maintains that no strand in the West is superior to a comparable strand in other cultures. It would follow that Westerners can have no basis for criticizing the culture in mainland China or Iran or North Korea or tribes in the Amazonian basin. Nor do they have a basis for criticizing cultures of the past, whether traditional Chinese culture of the eighteenth century, or Aztec culture of the sixteenth century, or Greco-Roman culture of the first century, or Babylonian culture of the sixth century B.C. Consequently, they have no basis for holding to the superiority of multiculturalism (the affirmation of the goodness of many cultures) or of other Western values concerning freedom and individual identity, values that other cultures do not accept. All the Western values get degraded; they become merely arbitrary personal or social preferences. As a result, the West has no basis for criticizing the North Korean government. Nor does it have a basis for criticizing the Bible or anyone's interpretation of the Bible.

If Frank wakes up to this fragility, he may realize that his moral ground is disappearing from underneath him. He may want to take a step back. He might say, "Okay, I have to admit that I think that some values, like the value of affirming many cultures, are universal values." But it is not so easy to recover from the cultural relativism into which Frank (and the West) has already sunk. The blanket affirmation of many cultures logically includes the affirmation of those cultures that contain within them an assertion of their own cultural superiority. For example, traditional Islam claims to be the one true religion, with the religious obligation to take over the world. The white racist claims that his white ethnicity is superior to other ethnicities.

Frank, like most other inhabitants of elite Western culture, disagrees with this claim to superiority. But why? All that Frank can do in reply is either to affirm the superiority of some elements of Western culture, namely, its affirmation of multiple cultures, or to cease to claim superiority. Affirming superiority even at one point creates a further problem: how does Frank know, from within a cultural situation in which he is influenced by the cultural propaganda of the West, that he has universal values?

This fragility needs attention in order to help people in the Western world have insight into the foundation for what they think they know. They need a transcendent source of values. Western culture as a whole is not such a source. In fact, it consists of many subcultures, and the elite cultures of the universities and the media of the various countries of the West are only some among many. Other cultures of the world have an analogous problem. All cultures need a foundation in the clear truths of God's words. Many people, however, do not have this foundation. With respect to views of humanity, they are living by half-truths. It is difficult for people immersed in half-truths to see their failure and to seek God for help.

As an example, consider the key values in the West of freedom and individual identity. Other cultures, such as traditional Chinese and Japanese cultures, value collective unity and harmony. Each individual has the obligation to fit in socially with his fellows. The individual is less important than the collective, the freedom of the individual less important than the harmony in the larger society. This comparison already shows that the Western values of freedom and individual identity, far from being universal, are limited cultural products. So how can the Westerner justify them as if they were absolute? And how could he resist someone within Western culture who wanted to argue that the West should abandon its present preferences for individualism in favor of collective harmony? The values of freedom and individual identity prove to be fragile if they have no deeper support than cultural preferences.

The same difficulty arises with the whole spectrum of ethical issues. People in the West, like people everywhere, have ethical commitments. Where do their ethical standards come from? Why is murder wrong? If each person is only a bag of molecules, why is it a big issue to rearrange some of those molecules with a bullet? Or would it be okay to eliminate people whom the elite has determined to be worthless pests? What about people who are handicapped or too old? What about people who are too young (still in the womb)?

The elite cultures of the West have abandoned the idea that they should appeal to a transcendent God as the ultimate source. No real

transcendence remains. Immanuel Kant thought that he could find a source through the proper use of reason. But confidence in the unity of human reason across cultural and subcultural divides has gradually ebbed away. Conceptions of reason, along with conceptions of the value of reason, vary with cultures. Each person is left only with the counterfeit god<sup>12</sup> of his own self. Each person treats himself as if he were sovereign and transcendent in his values. But then there is no basis for social unity, other than the unity of propaganda that molds a whole group of selves in the same direction. And with the accessibility of the internet, each self can pick its own source of its own preferred propaganda. (Baseless assertions and lies on the internet amount to forms of propaganda.) In sum, the loss of transcendence leaves the West bare in the long run. In comparison, even the most obscure false religion of a conventional type claims to have a transcendent source for its ethics.

Some people hope to solve the conflicts between religions by claiming that there is no one true religion. Allegedly, all are equally true. But this claim is itself a competing religious claim that pretends to have transcendent insight into the origin and nature of all religions. It is a product of the current propaganda in the West and is not accepted by serious adherents to the various religions.<sup>13</sup>

The West is also influenced by evolutionary naturalism, a philosophy that says that human beings are purely the product of random evolutionary change, with no divine guidance or interference. Naturalism claims support from the neo-Darwinian theory of biological evolution. But it is more than a scientific theory. It is a philosophy or worldview that claims to know about divine activity—or rather, the lack of it. According to this view, transcendence either does not exist or is not relevant to understanding

12. A counterfeit god is a false god that on the surface is attractive because it looks like the real thing. Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Riverhead, 2011); Vern S. Poythress, "Counterfeiting in the Book of Revelation as a Perspective on Non-Christian Culture," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40, no. 3 (1997): 411–18, <https://frame-poythress.org/counterfeiting-in-the-book-of-revelation-as-a-perspective-on-non-christian-culture/>.

13. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), chap. 1.

human beings. The result is a removal of the basis for ethics. There exists only the realm of facts; ethical values are merely personal or social preferences. For example, you have evolved in such a way that you have the desire and motivation to help the old lady across the street. Another person has evolved in such a way that he has the desire and motivation to mug the old lady and steal her purse. If you object, he answers: "I respect your evolutionary desires; you do not respect mine. That is because you evolved in such a way as to look down on me. In the end, it is not going to matter, because in the end we are all dead. In the meantime, I am more 'fit' for evolution than the old lady." Dostoevsky and Nietzsche both saw that if God does not exist, everything is permitted.

Christ rescues people from atheistic and religious delusions by the power of the gospel, which leads people to surrender to him from within all the cultures of the world. Presuppositional apologetics is relevant in this process because it uses biblical resources for showing both the positive truths of the message of Christ and the vanity of false religions—including atheism. This book does not enter into the details.

## **The Position of Liberal Theology**

One particular Western tradition in theology and in biblical interpretation needs attention. This tradition has come into prominence with the rise of the Enlightenment. It is the tradition of modernist theology or modernism or liberal theology. This tradition includes the fundamental assumption that the Bible is not directly the Word of God, but a product of human religious experience, which points to the mystery of God. There are many variations. This book cannot enter into them all.<sup>14</sup>

Some forms of liberal theology say complimentary things about the Bible. But the basic conviction of liberal theology includes the proviso that the Bible may from time to time be mistaken in some of the details

14. Frame, *History of Western Philosophy and Theology*, chaps. 6, 8, 10, 11. Frame defines *liberal theology* as "any kind of theology that does not submit to the infallible authority of Scripture" (216–17). This broad category includes neoorthodoxy as well as classical liberal theology.

of its verbal affirmations. As a result, the ultimate standard for finding theological truth and for sifting claims to truth shifts from the Bible itself to other sources. Liberal theology may appeal to human reason, or to theological tradition, or to subjective religious experiential feelings of the analyst, or to an intuitive impression of revelatory insight, or to the alleged insights of the growing knowledge in the modern world, or to general philosophical analysis, or to all of them together. The result is that the tradition of liberal theology can be nothing other than very shaky in its convictions. There is no one definitive text to hold it together.

This result shows the influence of presuppositions. In this case, the decisive presupposition of liberal theology is that the Bible in its particular declarations is not actually the Word of God to which people have a basic religious obligation to submit. The body of this book does not pay much attention to the tradition of liberal theology, even though it is currently dominant in the academic world.<sup>15</sup> It is corrupted by its false presupposition.

### **The Doctrine of Man as Controversial in the West**

The doctrine of man is an especially vulnerable area in the Western world today. It is vulnerable because many people are already living with strong commitments about humanity. And typically, those commitments are not based on the Bible. Many people do not care very much what you believe about God. They might say, "Oh, you may believe in some kind of god, whatever god you like." But they are passionate about what it means to be human, because they are human. They are passionate about their own commitments in life.

Some people are passionate in destructive ways. They may show their passion in a commitment to use illegal drugs or to engage in criminal behavior or to hate some other group of people. But many people have

15. We include *postmodernism* as a substream of *modernism* because it shares in the same mistaken estimate of the contents of the Bible. There is much of positive value in modernism, by virtue of common grace. But to separate discerningly within the mixture of good and bad is a monumental task.

commitments that seem on the surface to be nobler. Some are passionate about a political or social ideal. Some find satisfaction and fulfillment in defending the rights and standings of minority groups. Some people are attracted to older nationalistic commitments. Some people are passionate about serving their own individual dream. Many are passionate about each individual's being "free" to define himself and find his own way in life.

This passion is at root a religious passion. Each person serves an ultimate commitment. A person may not call it "god," but it serves as a god-substitute—it functions as something sacred, and the person reacts when his sacred thing or idea is attacked.

Without quite recognizing why, people with these commitments are not going to easily accept what the Bible says. They may, of course, accept some things from the Bible *selectively*, whenever the particular ideas that they encounter appear to them to be right and pleasing. But other things in the Bible they consider to be distasteful or erroneous.

In contrast to this selective attitude toward the Bible, the Bible itself reveals that God will "have no other gods before me" (Ex. 20:3). The true God is the only God, and all the alternative passionate commitments are actually counterfeit gods. The biggest counterfeit god in the West is the *self*. People want to be free to fashion their own destiny and to make up their minds freely about what ideas they should accept. It seems to them like slavery to submit to one Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ. But that is exactly their difficulty, that they are in rebellion against God. They are slaves to false gods. They are slaves to the propaganda that they have absorbed from school and from peers and from entertainment and from media sources, as well as from hidden sources in their own desires. Or they may be slaves to some counterfeit religion, either a traditional religion or a newfangled one. And it is indeed slavery. They cannot escape the enslaving power of false promises of counterfeit forms of salvation.

Jesus Christ came into the world as the Savior precisely to overcome and heal personal rebellion against God. People will never get on the right footing, with respect to the meaning of life and the meaning of who they are as individuals, without beginning at the proper beginning. Proverbs 1:7 identifies what that beginning is: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning

of knowledge.” People need to repent, to ask God for forgiveness, and to turn to Christ as Lord and Savior.

This book picks up on the other side of that fundamental life change, the change of placing one’s faith in Christ. Christ is the one true God. No one can divide his allegiance. So all the hopes and dreams and plans for personal fulfillment, all the desires for feeling virtuous and being admired in the eyes of the world, all the passions for a specific political program—all must go by the wayside (Luke 14:25–33). Each person must abandon everything for the sake of following Christ our Master. He is trustworthy. He has loved us to the point of death. He is worthy of our allegiance.

### **Straying from the Truth**

People who have not repented and turned around are going to be at odds with the Bible. From time to time, they will also be at odds with what this book says because it bases itself on the Bible.

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me [Jesus] before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. (John 15:18–19)

We should be realistic. This book cannot discuss all the world’s ideas about humanity. It cannot devote equal attention to every viewpoint of every individual and every culture. It cannot explicitly explore all the currents of culture and thought that influence people’s views about humanity. Rather, it chooses to focus on what the Bible says.

There is another element in trying to be realistic. It is realistic to announce near the beginning that Christ is the way to God (John 14:6). He is the way to truth and to a sound understanding of humanity. This is a way of saying that first things are first. And it is a way of saying that it is unlikely that people will come around to agree with many of the points made in this book without having first been rescued by Christ “from the domain of darkness and transferred . . . to the kingdom of his beloved



Son” (Col. 1:13). The issues raised in this book are not questions that can be debated back and forth without reference to the central personal question: What is your relation to the personal God? What do you think of Christ, who is this personal God (together with the Father and the Holy Spirit)? (See fig. i.1.)

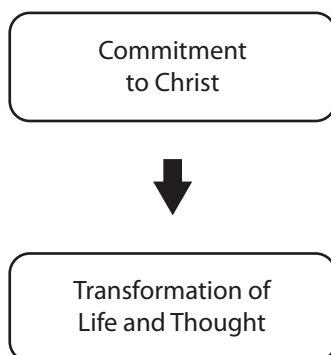


**Fig. i.1. The Primacy of Allegiance to Christ**

The Bible declares that Christ came to earth. He lived, died, and rose again in order to be the one path to God and to salvation. What do you think? Have you ever read the New Testament seriously, with these questions in mind? Have you ever allowed yourself to ask God to show you the truth, no matter what the cost, rather than resting in a vain self-confidence that you already know enough to declare the Christian message in the Bible to be false?

### **Difficulties for Followers of Christ**

Even people who have repented and who *do* follow Christ are going to have difficulty, as John 15:18–19 reminds us. Nearly every culture of the world, including Western culture, has a poisonous atmosphere. It entices believers in Christ, and threatens them, in ways contrary to God’s ways. Believers must grow in loving Christ and throw away the love of the world:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15–17)

Being aware of presuppositions means trying not to let oneself be swept away by fashionable currents in the surrounding culture. Christians should go to the Bible and listen to what God says. Even in this listening, Christians are not perfectly free from sin. But the goal is to follow Christ. Christians ask him for his power in helping us to serve him. They ask for the Holy Spirit to guide them. They may still deceive themselves because of the influence of the subtlety of sin that remains. But they have a clear path to follow, a path that Christ himself identifies when he declares that he is “the way” (John 14:6). That is enough for us to say near the beginning of our exploration.

### **Using Christian Thinking from the Past**

Christian thinking from the past can help. For centuries, Christian believers have been thinking about what the Bible teaches, including its teachings on the nature of humanity. Much can be learned from it. In particular, the general framework of Christian teaching about God, Christ, and redemption forms a guiding context for thinking about humanity. In addition, specific Christian writings from past centuries discuss the nature of mankind. There is much to explore here.

This book, however, interacts only selectively with the past history of Christian thought. There are several reasons. First, Christian thought from the past, though valuable and insightful in many ways, is fallible. Only the Bible is infallible. So just going back to the history of Christian thought never suffices to establish the truth.

Second, this book is relatively concise. It tries to stick to the main points; it chooses not to go on to illustrate them by including many examples from Christian thought.

Third, this book brings to bear some elements in method that have not been consistently used in the past, namely, the four extra resources mentioned above: presuppositional apologetics, semantics, analogies, and attention to metaphysical frameworks. Some of the writings of the past have some flaws or deficiencies. Other writings are true in what they say, but can be supplemented with other insights using more resources. (See fig. i.2.)

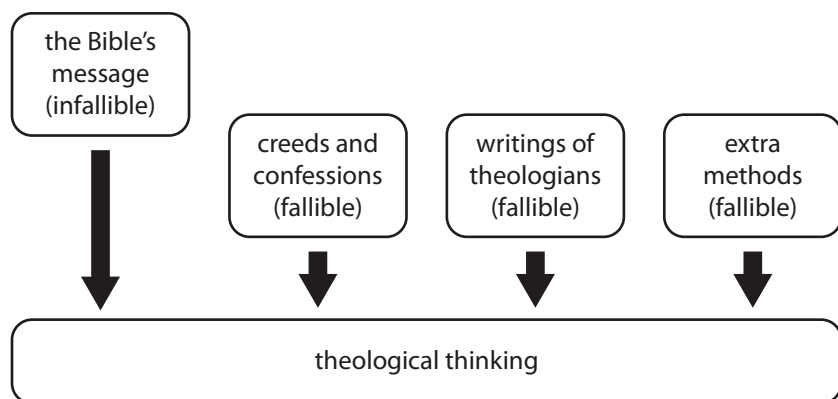


**Fig. i.2. Resources**

## **The Plan of Exploration**

We will begin by considering several opening topics: the interpretation of Genesis 1–3, the origin of mankind, the original created condition of humanity, the nature of humanity, and the image of God. The first two topics are important because they form the natural background for everything else that this book discusses. The third and fourth topics, the original situation and the nature of humanity, explain in a summary way the basic teachings of the Bible on humanity. The final topic, the image of God, may specially serve to illustrate some of the effects of using the four resources mentioned above (“Extra Resources”). Afterward comes discussion of each of the four extra resources in greater detail (chapters 7–8). Finally, we will move on to consider other topics in detail, using the resources that we have introduced.

Most chapters include a section reflecting on the implications of Acts 2 for the topic. Acts 2 serves as a perspective on the topic, in line with the method of analogies to be discussed in chapter 7. Each chapter also includes a closing prayer, because theology is meant not only for our intellectual guidance, but for whole people who need communion with God.

### **Acts 2 as a Perspective on Our Task**

How may Acts 2 be useful in the task? Acts 2 tells us that on the day of Pentecost God poured out the Holy Spirit: “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he [Jesus] has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (Acts 2:33). The Holy Spirit came on each individual (vv. 3–4) and on the church as a whole (vv. 42–47). Peter, who had earlier denied Christ three times, gave a bold sermon. The Holy Spirit has come to guide the people of God into the truth: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13). This promise in John may focus first of all on the apostles to whom Jesus was speaking. But in a secondary way, it applies to the whole church and to each one of us as believers.

So Christians need to depend on the Holy Spirit to understand the doctrine of man in a proper way. This Spirit is the Spirit given from the Father to the Son, and from the Son to us (Acts 2:33). Students of the Bible need communion with God, who is Father, Son, and Spirit.

Paul states explicitly that without the Spirit, people will not understand:

And we [Paul and his fellow apostles] impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person [indwelt by the Spirit] judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:13–16)

The study of all the topics needs to take place in dependence on God.

### Key Terms

|                                          |                              |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| analogy                                  | multiculturalism             |
| apologetics                              | multiperspectivalism         |
| biblical theology                        | presuppositional apologetics |
| doctrine of man                          | reason                       |
| fall of man                              | religious neutrality         |
| false religion                           | semantics                    |
| <i>lex Christi</i> ("the law of Christ") | sufficiency of Scripture     |
| liberal theology                         | systematic theology          |
| materialistic philosophy                 | theological anthropology     |
| metaphysical framework                   | transcendence                |
| method                                   |                              |

### Study Questions

1. What does the *doctrine of man* designate?
2. Why is the study of the doctrine of man important?
3. What is *liberal theology*? What is the difference between it and earlier theologies?
4. In what way is the commitment of elite Western culture fragile?
5. What is the value of the resources of past centuries of systematic theology?
6. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in theology?
7. What is your main reason for studying the doctrine of man? Can you see practical value for your own life? If so, what?

### For Further Reading

Keller, Timothy. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Dutton, 2008. Chap. 1.

## **Prayer**

Our God and Father, thank you for giving us your Word in the Bible as “a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). Purify our hearts, so that we may receive your instruction with all humility. Enable us to see its implications and to grow in discernment in sifting ideas from the world. Enable us to understand who we are as human beings, and to open the truth to those who do not yet know it.





## SAMPLE TOPICS ABOUT HUMANITY

Part 1 considers the interpretation of Genesis 1–3, the origin of humanity, the original condition of humanity before the fall, the nature of humanity, and basic issues about the image of God and the meaning of Genesis 1:26–28. These topics lay the groundwork for considering all the other topics in the doctrine of man.





# 1

## INTERPRETING GENESIS 1–3

What is the meaning of Genesis 1–3? How people interpret it influences the doctrine of humanity. As the introduction to this book indicated, the interpretation of Genesis 1–3 is controversial. Whole books have been written, advocating a variety of positions. We must be content to summarize the view adopted in this book.<sup>1</sup>

The summary consists in giving answers to a number of basic questions.

### Who Is God?

Who is God? The Bible faithfully describes who God is. There is only one true God, though there are many false and distorted ideas about him. God is a God who governs the world in both its regularities (what people call *scientific law*) and the exceptions (*miracles*). God can work miracles. The miracles are not “violations” of the real law, which is God’s specification for the world (Pss. 33:6, 9; 147:15–18; Heb. 1:3). Rather, they are violations of people’s *expectations*, or violations of what scientists have postulated as their best approximation to the real law. God can if he wishes bring about the events that Genesis 1–3 describes. (See fig. 1.1.)

1. Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); Vern S. Poythress, *Interpreting Eden: A Guide to Faithfully Reading and Understanding Genesis 1–3* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019).

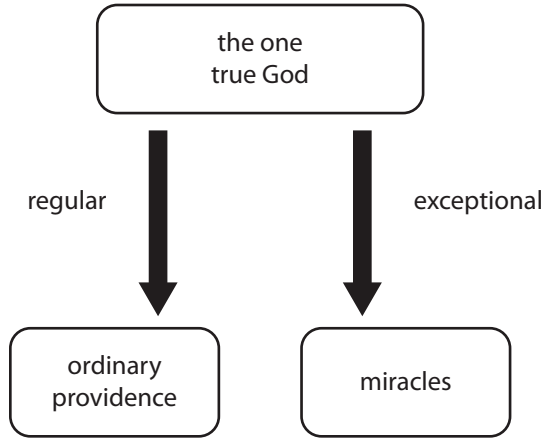


**Fig. 1.1. The God of Miracles**

## **What Is the Bible?**

What is the Bible? The Bible is the Word of God and is fully trustworthy in what it affirms.

At some points, the books of the Bible may have incorporated earlier sources (2 Kings 15:6, 11; Luke 1:1; etc.). The focal task is to interpret what the Bible means, not its sources (which are mostly not available). In cases in which the postulated sources are not themselves the product of divine inspiration, the Bible may disagree with its sources. This possibility of disagreement is important because scholars have frequently focused not on Genesis 1–3 itself but on alleged underlying sources, which they attempt to reconstruct. By contrast, this book focuses on the finished text of Genesis.

## **What Is the Genre of Genesis?**

How should people interpret the book of Genesis? Genesis is nonfiction ancient Hebrew prose narrative, with some smaller embedded pieces of various kinds (e.g., Jacob’s poetic prophecy in Genesis 49:2–27). The first four chapters of Genesis are part of Genesis as a complete book. They are

nonfiction Hebrew prose narrative, comprising the first two major literary sections of Genesis, namely, 1:1–2:3 and 2:4–4:26. In genre, Genesis is similar to other instances of nonfiction ancient Hebrew prose narrative, such as Numbers and 1–2 Samuel.

### **What Broad Conclusions Should People Draw from Genesis 1–3?**

Since God is the divine author of Genesis as a whole and of Genesis 1–3 in particular, what he says is trustworthy. Since he is writing nonfiction, the events described in these chapters actually happened long ago in time and space.

### **How Should People Evaluate Modern Scientific Claims about the Origin of the Universe, of Life, and of Human Beings?**

Christian believers have offered a number of alternative explanations, such as the six-24-hour-day theory, the mature-creation theory, the day-age theory, the analogical-day theory, the framework theory, and the intermittent-day theory.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the simple affirmation view says that God created the world in six days, but does not go further.<sup>3</sup> That is, it does not attempt to develop a full theory about how to harmonize Genesis 1 with modern scientific claims. This book cannot consider these views in detail. What this book says about the doctrine of man is compatible with each of the major alternative explanations in the list above.

### **What Principles Can Help Answer Interpretive Questions?**

*Ordinary language.* God had the Bible written in ordinary language, not in the technical language of modern sciences. God had the Bible

2. Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, chaps. 4–10.

3. Poythress, *Interpreting Eden*, 251–52.

written that way so that ordinary people could understand his Word and learn what they most need to know. They need to know that God is the only true God. He is the one Creator of the world and of human beings. They do not need to know all the details of science or all the details of how God brought about his work of creation. We must respect that there may be mystery about details that Genesis 1–3 does not address.

*Presuppositions.* Presuppositions, that is, a framework of assumptions and prior personal commitments, influence what people say and think both about the Bible and about scientific analyses. Mainstream science nowadays typically includes a commitment to *methodological naturalism*, which in principle does not allow scientists to reckon with miracles. Many scientists presuppose that the world is run not by a personal God but by impersonal laws, which allow no exceptions. They do not accept that miracles are possible.

But God can work miracles. God's acts of creating Adam and Eve, as well as some other acts described in Genesis 1, were miracles. Scientists who maintain a firm commitment to methodological naturalism will always and inevitably produce erroneous accounts when God acted miraculously. Because the methodology is flawed, the product is not trustworthy. A Christian who believes in the Bible and believes in the possibility of miracles must therefore not naively accept the claims made by scientists with respect to origins. In the end, one should reevaluate the entire body of evidence and argument in a mass of scientific technical papers and more accessible textbook summaries and popular summaries.<sup>4</sup> This is a large task, and it continues as scientific investigation and scientific theory-making continue.

*The tentative nature of scientific claims.* Christians must also realize that the knowledge of modern scientists is limited and tentative. There is always room for ongoing research. And there are extra limitations with respect to scientific investigation of events in the past (*historical science*). Scientists can run repeated experiments when they are examining laws or regularities that hold in the present. But they cannot run repeated

4. Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, chap. 19.

experiments on the past. And some of the evidence that they might like to have has been permanently lost in the passage of time.

### **Acts 2 as a Perspective on Genesis 1–3**

Now consider how Acts 2 throws light on Genesis 1–2. Genesis 1–2 tells about the original acts of God in creating the world. It is related to Acts 2 because Acts 2 tells about *new* creation. The expression “new creation” occurs in 2 Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.” In a broad sense, everyone in the Old Testament in whom God worked a new birth became a new creature. But Christ’s resurrection inaugurated the new creation in a definitive way. In his resurrection, he is the foundation for the whole new order of the world. He is not subject to death (Rom. 6:9). When he poured out the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:33), his Spirit united believers to him, and they became participants in this new creation.

Both the original work of God in Genesis 1–2 and the work of God in forming the church in Acts 2 are acts of creation, in a broad sense. Both create something new, and this new thing has its own new order. Both acts show his mighty power. Both involve miracles—in Acts 2, the miracle of speaking in tongues. Seeing what God did in Acts 2 helps us appreciate more deeply the wonder of Genesis 1–2. Genesis 1–2 shows God’s wisdom, power, beauty, love, and goodness. The methodological naturalism of mainstream science does not do justice to it.

### **Summary**

People should use Genesis 1–3 as a completely trustworthy source for biblical teaching about mankind. When people find apparent discrepancies with scientific claims, it opens space for further reflection and investigation. God is the God who wrote the Bible and who governs the universe that scientists investigate. God is in harmony with himself. There is no real conflict between the Bible’s affirmations and what God has done in the world. When people find apparent discrepancies to be

troubling, they should ask whether the Bible has been misinterpreted, or whether scientific data and sources have been misinterpreted, or both.<sup>5</sup> Interpreters must be patient in a situation of limited knowledge.

### Key Terms

genre

miracle

historical science

ordinary language

methodological naturalism

### Study Questions

1. What kind of genre is Genesis 1–3?
2. Why is it important to ask whether God can work miracles?
3. What is a key faulty assumption in much of the practice of mainstream science?
4. What is your attitude when hearing claims from mainstream science? Do you need to adjust it, in the light of Scripture?

### For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *Interpreting Eden: A Guide to Faithfully Reading and Understanding Genesis 1–3*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019. Chap. 6.  
———. *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006. Chaps. 6–10.

### Prayer

Our Lord and Creator, thank you for making the world and for telling us about what you did. Help us to absorb what you tell us in Genesis 1–3, and to sift the claims of mainstream science with discernment. Open our eyes to stand in awe of you.

5. Poythress, chaps. 2–3.

## 2

# THE ORIGIN OF HUMANITY

The Bible in Genesis 1–2 indicates that God created mankind (Gen. 1:26–27; 2:7, 21–22).

How does the Bible’s account compare to claims from mainstream science? The principles from the previous chapter apply to the question of how humanity originated. The issues of the divine authority of the Bible, the influence of presuppositions, and the tentative nature of science remain relevant.

### **The Continuation of Scientific Investigation**

Scientific investigations of human origins continue. The amount of information to digest in the scientific fields is massive. Moreover, articles and books that compare the scientific and biblical accounts are multiplying. Without extended space, it is not possible to address the issues in detail.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, this chapter offers a brief summary and some references to other literature.

1. Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006); Vern S. Poythress, *Interpreting Eden: A Guide to Faithfully Reading and Understanding Genesis 1–3* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019); Matthew Barrett and Ardel B. Caneday, eds., *Four Views on the Historical Adam* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013); Casey Luskin, “Evolutionary Models of Palaeoanthropology, Genetics and Psychology Fail to Account for Human Origins: A Review,” in *Science and Faith in Dialogue*, ed. Frederik van Niekerk and Nico Vorster (Cape Town: AOSIS, 2022), 243–81; Casey Luskin, “Comparing Contemporary Evangelical Models Regarding Human Origins,” *Religions* 14, no. 6 (2023): 748:1–30, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14060748>. Platforms such as [reasons.org](https://reasons.org) and [discovery.org](https://discovery.org) supply information about recent scientific research.



## Influence of Presuppositions

Previous chapters have already mentioned the influence of presuppositions. Many contemporary scientists presuppose a framework of methodological naturalism.<sup>2</sup> The framework specifies that *only* purely “naturalistic” explanations are allowed. There can be no appeal to purpose or to a divine plan. This framework disallows all cases of special and exceptional works of God (miracles). The framework itself therefore automatically rejects the idea that God specially created Adam and Eve. It rejects this idea *before* examining any evidence, either in the world or in the Bible.

Consider as an example a more specialized issue, the influence of presuppositions on the interpretation of data from DNA. After the completion of the first stage of the human genome project, in 2003, many people were swayed by the striking similarities between human DNA sequences and analogous sequences in chimpanzee DNA. (In fact, there is considerable overlap between human DNA and yeast DNA.) These similarities were alleged to demonstrate that human beings were not specially created.

The framework of assumptions has an influence on this interpretation. The framework of evolutionary naturalism must explain the overlap in genetic information as evidence for common descent and gradual change, because that is the only plausible way that the similarities could be generated without an intelligent plan. But of course, God could craft all the similarities for functional reasons.

Theorists in intelligent design have sometimes used the example of the “evolution” of the automobile.<sup>3</sup> What accounts for the many similarities between automobiles, not only at the level of obvious visible features, but at more technical levels, in their motors and heaters and electrical systems? A methodological naturalist might argue that this level of similarity is

2. Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, chap. 19.

3. One instance: Ann Gauger, “Science and Human Origins,” in *Science and Human Origins*, by Ann Gauger, Douglas Axe, and Casey Luskin (Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2012), 18.

conclusive evidence that later automobiles could have derived only from earlier automobiles' giving birth to automobiles like themselves. But the conclusion is absurd because it leaves out the human designers. The human designers reuse and adapt design features and engineering design solutions in their latest productions. The similarity is one belonging to the reuse of effective designs, rather than a result of automobiles that reproduce themselves mindlessly.

Once people see that the framework influences the interpretation of the meaning of the similarities, it becomes evident that a simple appeal to the *existence* of detailed genetic similarities proves nothing.

## Reporting

People should also be aware of biases that arise in reporting scientific work to the public. Because of the cultural dominance of the idea of common descent and purely gradualistic, mindless evolution, many books and news sources predominantly report new findings that are thought to support common descent and gradualism. One seldom hears about new findings that might point in another direction.

For example, there exist what geneticists call *orphan* (or "orfan") genes, genes in the DNA of one species that have no close analogue in any other species. Increasing information about the human genome and neighboring species shows that the human genome contains a considerable number of these orphans.<sup>4</sup> Each instance of an orphan is difficult to account for by random processes. Where did these genes come from? Common descent does not help because there is no evidence that the genes existed in the alleged common ancestor.<sup>5</sup>

Orphan genes are only one of many difficulties for a theory of unguided evolution (the theory advocated by evolutionary naturalism). Another difficulty is found in trying to explain major transitions between different kinds of plants and animals. Experiments in the laboratory that

4. Luskin, "Evolutionary Models," 268, gives the number "over 600 unique genes."

5. "Orphan Gene," [https://www.creationwiki.org/Orphan\\_gene](https://www.creationwiki.org/Orphan_gene).

increase the mutation rates in *Drosophila* fruit flies have produced lots of dead flies, but nothing that might show the promise of becoming a new kind of living thing. They produce only more fruit flies. Similar results have arisen with many generations of *E. coli*. In addition, in the wild, huge quantities of mutations in the malarial parasite and in the HIV virus have not produced any fundamentally new mechanisms.<sup>6</sup>

The intelligent-design community continues to find insuperable limits to the possibility of unguided origin of the very first life, or to evolution of major new kinds of creatures by purely random, unguided processes. But people do not hear about these things in mainstream media. Nor would a teacher mention them in a typical mainstream biology class or textbook. News that does not appear to confirm the standard Darwinian story is not considered news.

## Retractions

Note also that scientists sometimes back away from earlier claims.

Geneticists earlier proclaimed that the human genome project found huge amounts of “junk” DNA that had no function. This so-called junk was interpreted as firm evidence for the fact that the human race was the product of messy, random genetic change according to the standard neo-Darwinian model. The junk was what might be expected from a purely trial-and-error, mindless process. But the claim about “junk” had to be retracted as further research uncovered many cases of functionality.<sup>7</sup>

6. Michael Behe, *The Edge of Evolution: The Search for the Limits of Darwinism* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

7. See, e.g., “Next Phase of ENCODE Finds MORE Functional Information in Genome ‘Junk,’” *Evolution News*, August 4, 2020, <https://evolutionnews.org/2020/08/next-phase-of-enencode-finds-more-functional-information-in-genome-junk/>, accessed November 9, 2020; Richard Sternberg, “DNA May Be ‘Junk’ at One Level but of Utmost Significance at Another,” *Evolution News*, July 29, 2020, <https://evolutionnews.org/2020/07/dna-may-be-junk-at-one-level-but-of-utmost-significance-at-another/>, accessed November 9, 2020; Casey Luskin, “Francis Collins, Junk DNA, and Chromosomal Fusion,” in *Science and Human Origins*, by Ann Gauger, Douglas Axe, and Casey Luskin (Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2012), 85–104; Luskin, “Comparing Contemporary Evangelical Models,” § 2.1.1, 5.

Some geneticists also earlier proclaimed that human genetic origin from a single pair (such as Adam and Eve) was impossible because of the nature of genetic diversity in human beings now living. That claim also had to be retracted.<sup>8</sup>

The lesson here is that we should not jump to conclusions. The Bible is the Word of God. As such, it is trustworthy. We must allow scientists to continue to investigate and debate openly, yet be aware of the influence of presuppositions.<sup>9</sup>

### **The Teaching of the Bible**

What about the teaching of the Bible? The Bible teaches that Adam and Eve were specially created. In the case of Adam, this is most evident from Genesis 2:18, which indicates that Adam was “alone” until God created Eve. There were no other human beings. Verse 5 indicates that before the creation of Adam, “there was no man to work the ground.” In the case of Eve, the special nature of her creation is evident in the fact that God used a process, which included putting Adam in a deep sleep and removing a rib. He made Eve from the rib (Gen. 2:21–22):

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.

8. Ann Gauger, “#2 of Our Top Stories of 2019: *BIO-Complexity* Paper Shows We Could Have Come from Two,” *Evolution News*, December 31, 2019, <https://evolutionnews.org/2019/12/2-of-our-top-stories-of-2019-bio-complexity-paper-shows-we-could-have-come-from-two/>, accessed November 9, 2020; S. Joshua Swamidass, “The Misunderstood Science of Genetic Bottlenecks,” paper presented at the 2022 Annual Meeting of the American Scientific Affiliation, <https://doi.org/10.54739/1w7j>, accessed March 21, 2023; Luskin, “Comparing Contemporary Evangelical Models,” § 2.1.1, 6–7.

9. We may cite as additional reference points Gauger, Axe, and Luskin, *Science and Human Origins*; Vern S. Poythress, “Adam versus Claims from Genetics,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 75, no. 1 (2013): 65–82, <http://www.frame-poythress.org/adam-versus-claims-from-genetics/>. But both these earlier sources could be updated in view of continuing research.

The book of Genesis is nonfiction prose (with some embedded poetry, such as 49:2–27). So the records in Genesis 2 describe real events. Adam and Eve are the sole progenitors of the whole human race. A fuller defense of this understanding of Genesis 1–2 is found in other books.<sup>10</sup>

The special care of God in his acts of creating confirms the special nature of the people that he created. Only human beings, not the animals, are created “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:26–27). God gives them dominion over the world of animals and plants (vv. 28–30).

### John Murray’s Analysis

Consider now John Murray’s analysis of the creation of man as a useful starting point for further reflection. In a key essay, “The Origin of Man,” Murray lists four key aspects of “distinctiveness” that set mankind apart from the animals.<sup>11</sup> In his essay, Murray chooses for the most part<sup>12</sup> not to interact directly with the standard neo-Darwinian theory of purely gradualistic and purely random origin of humanity. But each of his points indicates a discontinuity in the origin of man, rather than a pure gradualism with no discernible boundaries. God’s engagement in the origin of humanity also contrasts with the idea of a purely mindless origin by unguided random mutations and other physical processes.

Here are the aspects of distinctiveness, as Murray expounds them:

10. Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, especially chap. 18; Poythress, *Interpreting Eden*; J. P. Versteeg, *Adam in the New Testament: Mere Teaching Model or First Historical Man?*, trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012). Articles and books on the subject continue to appear, including those that hold quite different views.

This book cannot discuss whether there might be time gaps in the genealogies of Genesis 5:1–32 and 11:10–26. If there are not, the evidence from human remains and from genetic studies must be reinterpreted. If there might be gaps, Adam and Eve may have existed much further back in time.

11. John Murray, “The Origin of Man,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976–77), 2:3–13, reprinted from *The Law and the Prophets: Old Testament Studies Prepared in Honor of Oswald Thompson Allis*, ed. John H. Skilton (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974), 147–57. Page numbers will be cited from the *Collected Writings*.

12. But see Murray, *Collected Writings*, 2:12.

(1) “Distinctiveness arising from the unique engagement of God’s counsel.”<sup>13</sup> Murray cites the language “let us” in Genesis 1:26. Chapter 6 in this book will discuss the significance of the plural “us.” Murray and other interpreters rightly draw attention to this element of consultation, which is distinct from the direct commands in earlier verses, such as “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3). This distinct manner of action sets mankind apart from the other created things mentioned in Genesis 1.

Note, however, that other places in the Bible, by analogy, describe instances of divine consultation with angelic beings (1 Kings 22:19–22), or with the divine Spirit (Isa. 40:13–14), or with divine wisdom (Prov. 8:30), or with the Son (Ps. 2:8; John 17). Such consultation becomes the basis for particular events in history.

The divine consultation in Genesis 1:26 is special in comparison with the rest of Genesis 1. But it does have some analogies with other cases elsewhere in the Bible. Genesis 1:26 singles out mankind for special attention. But there are analogies between the creation of human beings and other creative acts of God. All of God’s acts in creating new things and in providentially ruling the world are acts of the Trinity. All of God’s acts take place by speaking: “he [the Son] upholds the universe by the *word* of his power” (Heb. 1:3). This includes the act of creating light (Gen. 1:3), the act of creating the plants (v. 11), and the act of creating the heavenly lights (vv. 14–18). It also includes God’s providential rule over the completed creation order (Ps. 103:19).

(2) “Distinctiveness arising from the nature with which man is endowed.”<sup>14</sup> Murray has in mind the “image” and “likeness” of God in Genesis 1:26. Chapter 6 will discuss this aspect at greater length. The language in Genesis 1:26 is notably distinct from the language describing animals and plants, which are created each “according to its kind.”

This language concerning the image does indeed contribute to underlining the distinctiveness of humanity in contrast to the animals. But once again, the Bible contains some analogies of a looser kind. Genesis 5:3

13. Murray, 2:4.

14. Murray, 2:4.

indicates that Adam “fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image.” Adam reproduced after his kind, so to speak. And plants and animals reproduce after their kinds. Still other analogies exist. First John 1:5 says that “God is light.” In Genesis 1:3, God creates light. In a broad sense, the created light is a created reflection of God’s character.

(3) “Distinctiveness arising from the lordship with which man is invested.”<sup>15</sup> In Genesis 1:28, God gives man dominion. This dominion is unique, in relation to the animals and plants. But in addition, there are some analogies with other instances of dominion. The animals are given a kind of dominion over the plant kingdom in verse 30. And the lights of heaven in verse 18 “*rule* over the day and over the night.”

(4) “Distinctiveness of God’s procedure in the formation of man.”<sup>16</sup> Here Murray distinguishes two aspects: (a) “*Formation*. ‘The Lord God formed the man [of] dust from the ground’”<sup>17</sup>; and (b) “*Impartation*. ‘Breathed in his nostrils [the] breath of life, and man became [a] living creature.’”<sup>18</sup> These two actions do indeed show God’s involvement with and intimate care for the origin of Adam.

But again the Bible contains analogies in the case of later acts of God. According to Ecclesiastes 3:20, “All [animals as well as human beings] are from the dust, and to dust all return.” According to Psalm 139:13, “For you [God] formed my [David’s] inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.” In Job 33:4, “The Spirit of God has made me [Elihu], and the *breath* of the Almighty gives me life.” A more distant analogy occurs in the description of God’s bringing new animals into being within the order of providence:

When you [God] hide your face, they [animals] are dismayed;  
when you take away their *breath*, they die  
and return to their dust.

15. Murray, 2:5.

16. Murray, 2:5.

17. Murray, 2:6 (italics original).

18. Murray, 2:7 (italics original).

When you *send forth your Spirit* [a word that also has the sense “breath”], they are *created*,  
and you renew the face of the ground. (Ps. 104:29–30)

God imparts life to each new generation of animals.

## **The Creation of Eve**

Murray’s essay focuses on the creation of Adam in Genesis 2:7. But the creation of Eve in verses 21–22 is, if anything, even more striking. The details show that the work of God is miraculous, and they contradict any purely “naturalistic” evolutionary account of the origin of humanity.<sup>19</sup>

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on the Origin of Humanity**

Acts 2 provides an account of the origin of the *new* humanity, as a new creation brought about by the pouring out of the Holy Spirit. New creation is not the same as the original creation in Genesis 1–2, but it is analogous. The Holy Spirit was present and at work in Genesis 1, according to verse 2. There is a hint of the work of the Spirit in Genesis 2:7, when God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life.” This breathing is the work of God. The Holy Spirit is not explicitly mentioned. But the Holy Spirit is God. And there is a general principle that all three persons of the Trinity participate in the works of creation and redemption. Ezekiel 37 mentions the Holy Spirit explicitly in connection with breath coming to the house of Israel to give them new life (Ezek. 37:5–6, 9–10, 14). The Holy Spirit gives breath both to the first man, Adam, and to the new community, the church, in its post-Pentecostal form.

The special gift of the Spirit at Pentecost makes the church a unique, Spirit-filled organization, in comparison with all the organizations of human origin. Likewise, the special gift of the breath of life, from God himself, makes Adam a unique, Spirit-filled creation. This special nature of Adam is one of the aspects that differentiate him from the animals.

19. Poythress, *Redeeming Science*, 249–51.



## Summary

The conclusion is that Adam and Eve were the first human beings and that both were specially created by God. Mainstream science today does not accept that account of things. But one of the main reasons is that many scientists have presupposed that miracles either are impossible or must not be considered as a possibility within the scientific enterprise. It is therefore *necessary* for them to produce an alternative, purely gradualistic account. That necessity is in place *before* they consider any evidence.

## Key Terms

|                         |                           |
|-------------------------|---------------------------|
| common descent          | intelligent design        |
| counsel, God's          | "junk" DNA                |
| DNA                     | methodological naturalism |
| dominion                | miracle                   |
| evolutionary naturalism | Murray, John              |
| formation (of man)      | origin                    |
| image of God            | special creation          |

## Study Questions

1. What is the principal alternative theory to Genesis 1–2 concerning the origin of the human species?
2. Why does this modern alternative seem so convincing to many people?
3. What are its flaws?
4. What should be our attitude to the continuing developments in scientific discoveries and claims about human origins?
5. What does the Bible show about the special character of God's making man?
6. How does the Bible's teaching about God's creation of Adam and Eve affect your attitude toward what it means that he made *you*?

### **For Further Reading**

Murray, John. "The Origin of Man." In *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 2:3–13. Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976–77.

Poythress, Vern S. *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006. Pp. 249–51.

### **Prayer**

Thank you, Lord, that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Ps. 139:14). Thank you for making a world around us that has many delights and special foods. Thank you for the special care you took in making Adam and Eve. Help us not to forget the care that you continue to exercise for us.



# 3

## THE ORIGINAL CONDITION OF HUMANITY

What was the original condition of humanity before the fall of man, when Adam and Eve were originally created? This chapter looks in summary fashion at some of the main features. Genesis 1–3 and later parts of the Bible indicate that the original condition of human beings included at least three noteworthy features: (1) they were a good creation, (2) they were in fellowship with God, and (3) they were morally upright.

### **Original Goodness**

First, human beings were originally good, and they were part of an overall creation order that was “very good” in God’s sight. We know from Genesis 1:31 that when God finished his work of creation on the sixth day, he saw that “it was very good.” Evaluations at earlier points in Genesis 1 say that something was “good”:

And God saw that the light was good. (Gen. 1:4)

And God saw that it [the situation after the gathering of the waters into seas] was good. (Gen. 1:10)

And God saw that it [the situation of the growing plants] was good. (Gen. 1:12)

Genesis 1:18, 21, and 25 are similar. At the conclusion of Genesis 1, it is not only “good,” but “very good.” The statement includes the creation of humanity in verses 26–27. It implies not only that there was nothing defective, but that there was a positive goodness about humanity. This positive goodness is confirmed by the blessing in verse 28:

And God *blessed* them. And God said to them . . .

This picture of goodness and blessedness contrasts with the later curse that comes with the entrance of sin (Gen. 3:14–19) and with the exile imposed on man in driving him out of the garden of Eden (vv. 22–24). It also contrasts with the modern picture from evolutionary naturalism. Evolutionary naturalism says that humanity is a product of unguided evolution, and therefore an accident. Evolutionary naturalism makes it almost meaningless to speak of humanity as being either good or bad because, in the absence of God, there is no absolute standard for evaluation. According to this view, human tendencies toward murder, envy, hatred, and selfishness are just as much a product of evolution as are their opposites. In the end, moral evaluation has no meaning, except as it is generated by human opinions and human preferences, which themselves are products of evolution.

In Genesis, the contrast between good and evil is also a contrast between life and death. In Genesis 2:9 and 16, God gives man access to the tree of life, symbolizing life in fellowship with God (cf. Gen. 3:22). Death would come in if Adam disobeyed (2:17). Hence, human death is not normal. That is, it is not an integral and inevitable aspect of the created order, but is a curse, a judgment of God resulting from sin. This abnormality of human death is confirmed in Romans 5:12:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and *death through sin*, and so death spread to all men *because* all sinned . . .

## **Implications of Original Goodness**

Important long-range implications come from knowing about this original goodness. It means that our present experience is not normal. The uncooperative character and sometimes the hostility of fellow human beings is not normal. The uncooperative character of the created order around us, with the thorns and thistles mentioned in Genesis 3:18, is not normal. If such things were just normal, as evolutionary naturalism claims, there would be no hope for an escape.

Technology has allowed modern people a limited escape from the “sweat of [the] face” of Genesis 3:19, but it cannot eliminate the internal disorders, the sinfulness of humanity. If sin is normal, human beings can never escape it, but at best only mitigate it. If, on the other hand, it is not normal, God can provide a way out that eliminates the abnormality of sin without also inevitably eliminating the normality belonging to what humanity originally meant. And of course, the Bible does announce that God has provided a way out, in Christ and his work.

The principle of original goodness also affects the meaning of the work of Christ. Christ became fully human. If there were no original good situation, then being human would also mean being sinful. Christ himself would have been caught in the problem and could not offer us a solution. But he became human *without* being sinful:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, *yet without sin*. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:15–16)

The abnormality of death means that it is something hostile and also something that Christ overcomes. There is hope for eternal life: “Death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15:54).

## **Original Fellowship with God**

The second significant feature in the original situation is that human beings were created to enjoy personal fellowship with God. This feature comes out when God personally addresses humans in speeches about their privileges and responsibilities:

And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” And God said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” (Gen. 1:28–30)

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Gen. 2:16–17)

These speeches are a form of personal fellowship. God speaks his mind, and human beings receptively interpret what he says. The positive atmosphere of the speeches contrasts with the atmosphere of judgment after sin has entered (Gen. 3:14–19). The atmosphere of fellowship indicates that humanity enjoys friendship with God. There is untroubled communion with God.

## **Implications of Original Fellowship with God**

This original fellowship with God has implications. It means that the present human situation of alienation from God, such as is depicted by

the exile in Genesis 3:23–24, is not normal. Having fellowship with God is not a total impossibility, as it would be if human beings simply did not have such a capability. Human beings have religious desires. They have personal longings for God, or, in their confusion, longings for some kind of contact with the infinite. These desires make sense because there was fellowship with God in the beginning and will be in the end for those whom God redeems (Rev. 22:4). Mankind is *meant* to have communion with God the Creator.

The work of Christ makes sense against this background. Christ can restore and enhance what was lost. Fellowship with God is not an absurd impossibility. It is not, as some allege, that God is too far away, too remote for any finite being to hope for personal contact. It is sin, not our finiteness, that bars the way. Christ through his work opens the way. He is himself the Way (John 14:6). Christ is the path to renewed communion with God.

### **Moral Uprightness**

The third notable feature of the original situation of humanity is moral uprightness. What was the moral state of mankind in the original situation of creation? Theologians have often described it as *innocence*. This innocence contrasts with the later situation in which Adam and Eve have fallen into sin and guilt. Genesis 2–3 makes this contrast evident. But was the original innocence a mere negation, an absence of sin and nothing more? Does the later path into sin imply that Adam and Eve already had the tendency toward sin, from the beginning? Or were they morally neutral? Were they morally naive, without a sense of moral standards?

A significant indication about the original condition of man occurs in the specific instruction that God gave to Adam concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). God gave a command, clearly expecting that Adam could understand it and could understand that he had to keep it. He knew tacitly that obedience to God is morally good and that disobedience is evil. He was already oriented to fellowship with God, as we observed in considering God's speech in Genesis 1:29–30.



Later verses provide confirmation. Ecclesiastes 7:29 states, “God made man *upright*, but they have sought out many schemes.” This verse sums up the basic picture of Genesis 2–3. Ecclesiastes describes both original righteousness (“made . . . upright”) and a fall and deviation from that righteousness (“they have sought out many schemes”).

Ezekiel indicates that the original garden of Eden was on “the holy mountain of God” (Ezek. 28:14). This holiness is comparable to the holiness that belonged to Mount Sinai when God descended on it in cloud and fire and thunder (Ex. 19). No one can access God’s holiness without being qualified as holy. Exodus 19 illustrates this necessity by the restrictions placed on the people of Israel, who are a sinful people. And the tabernacle illustrates it through the ceremonies of purification that are necessary to approach God’s presence in the tabernacle. The fact that Adam and Eve were there in the garden of Eden, as a holy mountain, implies that they were themselves holy. They were qualified to stand in the presence of the most holy God, who is “holy, holy, holy” (Isa. 6:3).

### Implications of Moral Uprightness

Understanding the original moral uprightness has implications. One is that it underlines the seriousness of Adam and Eve’s guilt. They forfeited an honored position of integrity and holiness; they did not merely make an “innocent mistake.”

As with the earlier observations about the original condition, this one too opens the way to hope. When uprightness has been lost, it is possible for it to be restored. And it *is* restored through the work of Christ:

And by that will [of God] we have been *sanctified* through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. (Heb. 10:10)

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to *righteousness*. By his wounds you have been *healed*. (1 Peter 2:24)

## **The Bearing of Acts 2 on the Original Condition of Humanity**

What light does Acts 2 shed on the original condition of humanity? Acts 2 is, of course, not a direct account of the original humanity, but rather tells of *renewed* humanity. Humanity is renewed through the completed work of Christ and then through the gift of the Holy Spirit's applying the benefits of that work to the church, the people of God. This renewal is in harmony with the original, though it also surpasses it. The renewed people of God have the approval of God. It is as though God said, "Very good." They desire to live in harmony with God and with fellow human beings and with creation. They are once again in fellowship with God and with one another, as the description in Acts 2:42 briefly indicates:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

They show moral uprightness by their commitment to God ("prayers") and to fellow members of the church in need:

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:44–45)

### **Summary**

A basic understanding of the original condition of mankind provides a contrast with the present fallen condition of mankind. This affirmation of original righteousness is unlike false views that deny the unique original condition and see only a gradual rise from animal ancestry. Understanding the original condition plays a part in providing an understanding of the restorative work of Christ and hope for a future that completely eliminates sin and its consequences.

## Key Terms

|                         |           |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| evolutionary naturalism | innocence |
| fall of man             | normal    |
| fellowship, personal    | original  |
| good                    | upright   |
| holy                    |           |

## Study Questions

1. What important features characterize the original condition of humanity?
2. What contrasts are there between the biblical view of the original condition of humanity and the view of evolutionary naturalism?
3. Why are these contrasts important?
4. What difference does an understanding of original innocence make concerning our hope?
5. What difference does an understanding of the original condition make in our understanding of the meaning of the work of Christ?

## For Further Reading

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pp. 209–10.

Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970. Pp. 2:92–116.

## Prayer

Our Lord and sovereign God, thank you for your wisdom in making humanity in the beginning, and for the hope of restoration and consummation that you have provided in Christ. Thank you for not casting us off but having mercy through our Lord Jesus Christ.

## THE NATURE OF HUMANITY

Now consider the nature of humanity. What is humanity? What does it mean to be human? Are human beings distinct from animals in some significant way? And if so, how? Clearly, these are important questions within the topic of the doctrine of man. The Bible provides rich teaching throughout its pages. It begins with Genesis 1–3, but the rest of the Bible fills out much more. This chapter presents a summary of some of the main biblical teachings; details follow in subsequent chapters.

### **Humanity Characterized by Its Origin**

As the preceding two chapters showed, the Bible illumines what humanity is partly by its unique origin. God uniquely created human beings. He created Adam from dust and Eve from the rib of Adam. God was intimately involved in their creation. His unique involvement indicates the unique character of humanity. This uniqueness contrasts with the competing narrative from evolutionary naturalism, which says that anything in which humanity is different from the animals or inanimate matter is only a matter of chance.

In addition, the preceding chapter showed that:

- God created humanity good, in the context of a completed creation order that was “very good.”
- God created humanity in fellowship with himself.
- God created humanity morally upright.

## Features of Humanity

The list of features can be extended by observing further implications of the information in Genesis 1–3 and also by adding to it the instruction in the rest of the Bible.

*Creatureliness.* Human beings are creatures, created good alongside the other creatures mentioned in Genesis 1.

*Interdependence.* Human beings are created by God with a plan for their relations to the rest of creation. They have plants for food, and they share the space of the earth with other creatures. The subsequent parts of the Bible illustrate in passing many kinds of human interaction with plants and animals and the physical world.

*Earthiness.* One aspect of human interdependence is that human beings are made of dust. And as a consequence of sin, they return to dust:

By the sweat of your face  
you shall eat bread,  
till you return to the ground,  
for out of it you were taken;  
for you are dust,  
and to dust you shall return. (Gen. 3:19)

Human beings have a physical side. They have bodies.

*Sexuality.* Human beings are male and female (Gen. 1:27; 2:22–25).

*Dominion.* God gives humanity a unique dominion in relation to the animals and plants (Gen. 1:28–30).

*Personal fellowship.* Human beings can and do enter into relations of personal fellowship with God and with other human beings—one of which is marriage (Gen. 2:24).

*Ability to love.* As an aspect of personal fellowship, human beings have the ability to love.

*Spirituality.* Human beings have a depth of spirit, so that they can be in tune with other spiritual beings. Though the main point of the verse

is elsewhere, 1 Corinthians 2:10–11 indicates that there are analogies between the human spirit and God's Spirit:

For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the *spirit* of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the *Spirit* of God.

*Religiosity.* Human beings must serve a superior being. They serve either the true God or idols:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, 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 animals and creeping things. (Rom. 1:19–23)

*Knowing God.* Romans 1:18–25 indicates that all human beings, even in our fallen world, know God. But they suppress the truth about God (Rom. 1:18) and turn to idols (v. 23).

*Having knowledge.* Knowing God is a special case of the broader principle that human beings have a capacity for knowledge and that they know things and can know other human beings.

*Reason.* Human beings can evaluate and draw conclusions. Adam presents a kind of reasoning when he names woman:

She shall be called Woman,  
*because* she was taken out of Man. (Gen. 2:23)

Some of the ancient Greek philosophers made much of reason, treating it as perhaps *the* major distinguishing mark of humanity. The Bible recognizes human reasoning ability, but Genesis 1–2 does not single it out for special attention. Sin corrupts the human mind as well as other aspects of human nature:

Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their *minds*. They are darkened in their *understanding*, alienated from the life of God because of the *ignorance* that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. (Eph. 4:17–19)

*Moral responsibility.* God's commandment concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17) presupposes that man is a morally responsible being.

*Conscience.* Moral responsibility has an inward dimension, in the form of conscience. Human beings can suppress the voice of conscience and have distorted ideas about right and wrong. First Timothy 4:2 mentions people who are “liars whose consciences are seared.” Yet the context still indicates that these people are responsible before God. The knowledge of God cannot be completely eliminated.

*Ability in language and communication.* The speeches of God to man, the speeches of man in naming the animals (Gen. 2:19), and the speeches of human beings to one another all presuppose an underlying ability to learn, use, and communicate with language.

*A purpose and a destiny.* God gives humanity a goal, namely, to fill the earth and subdue it (Gen. 1:28). Genesis 1 does not further develop the thought, but the goal is analogous to the goal that God achieved when he finished the work of creation. Later Scripture makes it clear that God has planned for humanity (not for the wicked, but for renewed humanity in Christ) a final Sabbath rest in the new heaven and the new earth (Heb. 4:8–11; 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 21:1–4). This rest is a rest of consummate personal communion with God:

No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. (Rev. 22:3–4)

The list could be further extended. Let this much suffice for the present.

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on the Nature of Humanity**

Acts 2 provides a valuable perspective on the nature of humanity by painting a vivid, positive picture of the nature of *renewed* humanity, humanity as it ought to be. Of course, the early church is not morally perfect, and soon enough, struggles arise with blatant lying (Acts 5:1–11) and with complaints (6:1). But the spiritual and moral renewal that takes place at Pentecost is real. The change is real. The spiritual life is real. Renewed humanity displays obvious features such as creatureliness, interdependence, and dominion (wonders and signs, 2:43; also in the ordinary use of possessions, 2:44–45). Christians have spirituality, religiosity, language use, and so on. The noteworthy thing is that these now operate with renewed uprightness, in communion with God the Holy Spirit.

### **Key Terms**

|                      |                      |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| conscience           | love                 |
| creatureliness       | moral responsibility |
| dominion             | purpose              |
| earthiness           | reason               |
| fellowship, personal | religiosity          |
| good                 | sexuality            |
| interdependence      | spirituality         |
| knowing God          | upright              |
| language             |                      |



### **Study Questions**

1. What features characterize human beings?
2. How do human beings differ from animals?
3. What does our unique origin say about us?
4. How may the features about how God made us stir us up to praise him?

### **For Further Reading**

Psalms 8.

Psalms 139.

Revelation 22:1–5.

Grudem, Wayne A. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*.  
2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020. Chap. 21.

### **Prayer**

Our Lord, how marvelous is your work in making us. What is man, that you are mindful of him? We thank you that you have crowned him with glory and honor and given him dominion over the works of your hands (Ps. 8:4–6). Renew us and fill our hearts with praises of you.

## 5

# THE IMAGE OF GOD: BASIC ISSUES

One topic that has received much discussion is the nature of the image of God. It is an important topic because for many people the question of the image of God is closely bound up with the nature of humanity. What is a human being? Does the language in the Bible concerning the image of God provide the answer to this question?<sup>1</sup>

### **Importance of the Image of God**

People are interested in the question of who they are, and of the significance of humanity as a whole. But many modern people want to avoid confrontation with a personal God. They go astray from him, missing the only key to understanding themselves and other human beings. The knowledge of God and the knowledge of human beings are closely related, as John Calvin saw:

Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But, while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings

1. For a recent survey, see Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2010), chap. 2.

forth the other is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he “lives and moves” [Acts 17:28]. For, quite clearly, the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves; indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God. . . .

Again, it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God’s face, and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinize himself.<sup>2</sup>

The question about the image of God is significant because it offers a way of discussing not only what human beings are but how they should see themselves in relation to God, who made them.

### The Primary Biblical Data

We may start with Genesis 1:27. It says that “God created man in his own image.” What is the meaning of this image? The discussion becomes more complex when it includes other passages that allude to this early statement in Genesis.

Some passages in the Bible appear to indicate that fallen human beings still possess the image of God. In Genesis 9:6, the seriousness of murder and the authority of human beings to execute judgment on the murderer are linked to man’s being made “in his own *image*.” James 3:9 rebukes those who “curse people who are made in the *likeness* of God.” Genesis 5:3 indicates that Seth was in Adam’s likeness: “When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own *likeness*, after his *image*, and named him Seth.” The conception of Seth takes place after the fall into sin, which corrupts humanity (4:25). So an interpreter might think that Seth’s likeness to Adam includes his sinfulness. But then note the immediately preceding verses, 5:1–2:

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 1.1.1–2.

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.

These verses allude to Genesis 1:26–27, which describe the original creation of mankind. Genesis 5:3 also uses the same two words, “image” and “likeness,” that occur in 1:26–27. So does 5:3 suggest that Seth, after the fall of man, is *still* in the image and likeness of God? Is this “likeness” in 5:3 distinct from or in continuity with “the likeness of God” in 5:1 and “our likeness” in 1:26?

First Corinthians 11:7 declares that “a man . . . is the *image* and glory of God.” This verse might seem to be decisive. But in the context, is the verse including only redeemed mankind, or does it include all fallen human beings as well? The context contains an *application* to practices within the redeemed community, the church. But the statement itself appears to be unqualified and general. The verse does not say “a Christian man” or “a believing man” or “a man in Christ,” but simply “a man.”

Other texts appear to suggest that human beings lost the image in the fall and must be restored to it in redemption. Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10 speak of an image relation closely connected with knowledge, righteousness, and holiness:

[You were taught] to put on the new self, *created after the likeness* of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph. 4:24)

[You] have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the *image* of its *creator*. (Col. 3:10)

Knowledge of God, righteousness, and holiness belonged to human beings before the fall. They were lost in the fall and are restored in Christ. In addition, Romans 3:23 and 8:29 and 2 Corinthians 3:18 may seem to imply that the image of God has been lost:

For all have sinned and *fall short* of the glory of God. (Rom. 3:23)

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. (Rom. 8:29)

And we all, 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)

Finally, 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Colossians 1:15 say that the Son of God is the image of God:

In their case [unbelievers] the god of this world 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* of God. (2 Cor. 4:4)

He [the Son] is the *image* of the invisible God. (Col. 1:15)

Without using the word *image*, Hebrews 1:3 makes a similar point:

He [the Son] is . . . the *exact imprint* of his [God's] nature.

Altogether, quite a few texts include language on the topic of the image of God. (See table 5.1.)

**Table 5.1. Relevant Passages for the Image of God**

| Image Retained                                      | Image Lost                                                         | The Son as Image                    |
|-----------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Gen. 5:1, 3<br>Gen. 9:6<br>1 Cor. 11:7<br>James 3:9 | Eph. 4:24<br>Col. 3:10<br>Rom. 3:23?<br>Rom. 8:29?<br>2 Cor. 3:18? | 2 Cor. 4:4<br>Col. 1:15<br>Heb. 1:3 |

But no text defines the content of the image of God. In what, then, does this image consist? In the spirituality or religiosity of human beings? In dominion over other creatures? In rationality? In original righteousness? To some people, the question appears to be important because human beings are distinguished from animals by the special act of creation in the image of God. The image of God would seem to offer the key to understanding human nature and its distinctiveness. But because the Bible does not explicitly define the term, theologians have been left to offer various answers, and their answers disagree with one another.

### **Proposed Solutions**

In response to the apparent tension in biblical data, various answers are possible.<sup>3</sup> A person may say that fallen human beings are still in the image of God; that they have lost the image; or that they both have and do not have the image, in different senses. Pelagians, Arminians, Socinians, and classical Roman Catholics say that fallen human beings are still in the image of God. Lutherans<sup>4</sup> and G. C. Berkouwer say that they are not, until renewed through Christ. The mainstream of Reformed tradition has said that they are and are not, in different senses.

Pelagius said that the image consists in reason, free will, and dominion. Fallen human beings, in his judgment, have all three of these. Most Arminians have thought similarly. Socinians identified the image with human dominion (Gen. 1:26, 28).

Old Testament scholars have noted that ancient Near Eastern material includes instances in which kings are said to be in the image of a god. Following this connection, many scholars have maintained that the

3. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 29–32; Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 220–21; Gunnlaugur A. Jónsson, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26–28 in a Century of Old Testament Research* (Lund, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988); Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1937), 127–61.

4. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 207, mentions exceptions.

“image of God” indicates that man represents God.<sup>5</sup> He might represent God’s kingship by functioning as a king. Genesis 1 indicates that human dominion, mentioned in Genesis 1:26 and 28, is one main function in which man represents God.<sup>6</sup>

The classical Roman Catholic position distinguishes “image” from “likeness.” “Image” consists in “natural” gifts of rationality, free will, and spirituality. These are retained after the fall. “Likeness” consists in the “supernatural” gifts of righteousness and immortality, which are lost in the fall. The terminology is less significant than the total picture. In this picture, before the fall there is already a tension between soul and body, between higher and lower desires. The tension is overcome by supernatural endowment of holiness.

Classical Reformed theology distinguishes between the image of God in a narrower and a broader sense.<sup>7</sup> The broader sense includes rationality, moral agency, language, and spiritual capacity. The narrower sense is moral excellence (righteousness). The latter is lost in the fall.

Karl Barth maintains that the image of God is personal relationship, such as exists between man and woman.

G. C. Berkouwer has a complex, nuanced view. Roughly, Berkouwer says that the Bible points to a dynamic imaging or imitation of God. The dynamic action of imaging ceases with the fall.

Still further options exist: the image of God is the divine Son, the second person of the Trinity (Philip Edgcumbe Hughes); the image is the Spirit theophany alluded to in Genesis 1:2, involving glory (Meredith G. Kline); or the image means that human beings are like God and represent God, but Genesis 1:26–27 is not more specific (John M. Frame, Wayne A. Grudem).

Chapter 10 will devote more attention to some of these views.

5. William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker/Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 1984), 33–34; Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 142–60, especially 151–52.

6. Jónsson, *Image of God*, 219–25.

7. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 206–7, indicates that there are variations and complexities.

## **Analysis of Method**

Before plunging into the controversy, it is wise to stand back and consider what is challenging about the discussion. The controversy shows several telltale symptoms of underlying methodological problems:

- *Overloaded meaning.* A single phrase, “image of God,” is loaded up with meaning and bears a large weight in the controversy.
- *A quarrel about words.* The controversy seems at least partly to involve a decision about how to define a technical term or technical concept, “image of God.” But if people mean different things, they may be partly talking past one another. The controversy may partly be a quarrel about words, similar to what is condemned in 1 Timothy 6:4, 2 Timothy 2:14, and Titus 3:9.
- *Displaced controversy.* In the older tradition of systematic theology, the most significant disputes about the image of God align with disputes about redemption. Pelagians, Arminians, Socinians, Lutherans, Reformed, and Roman Catholics have deep differences over redemption. The differences about redemption tend to be mirrored by differences in the views about the unfallen state and the fall.

Consider further the last point, concerning the relation of the fall to redemption. Pelagians are one instance. Pelagians tend to have a high view of the capabilities of human beings after the fall. Human beings can virtually save themselves, with the encouragement of Christ as a moral example. This optimistic view of mankind in his fallen state goes naturally together with a denial that man has lost key abilities at the time of the fall. By contrast, traditional Roman Catholicism and Arminians think that man needs divine help and divine grace to be saved. Mankind is damaged by the fall. But he has some key positive spiritual abilities still left.<sup>8</sup> In the traditional

8. At a fine-grained level, Arminians differ about the extent of remaining human ability. See J. I. Packer, “Arminianisms,” in *Through Christ’s Word: A Festschrift for Philip E. Hughes*, 121-48, ed. W. Robert Godfrey and Jesse L. Boyd, III (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985).



Roman Catholic view, man is by nature still the same, but has lost the extra supernatural endowments. Lutheran and Reformed theologians, who hold more consistently to the principle of *sola gratia* (by grace alone), leave fallen mankind with no internal spiritual inclination to reach out to God for salvation. In each of these cases, the theological differences about redemption get reflected in differences about the details of the state of mankind after the fall.

Often, the image of God is the starting point for discussing the unfallen state, so it becomes the foundation that sets the ultimate context for everything else. The fall is measured by its deviance from the unfallen state, which is foundational in relation to thinking about the fall. And redemption is measured by the needs introduced by this deviance in the fall. So people's view of redemption gets influenced by what they think concerning the foundation, the unfallen state. Unfortunately, this foundational function can put an unbearable burden on exegesis. Genesis 1:26–28 *by itself* provides human readers with too little information to settle the large-scale disputes about redemption.

In ethical literature, the theme of the image of God has also served as the starting point for discussing all kinds of issues with regard to the uniqueness of human beings and the innate dignity of each human being. Ethical issues arise because sin tempts people in their practical social interactions to treat some other human beings as effectively subhuman. For example, people who are handicapped or less intelligent or less skilled or still in the womb or members of a distinct ethnic group may be seen as not possessing the image of God or possessing it only in fragmentary form, and therefore as less deserving of attention or care.<sup>9</sup> But it is the whole Bible that addresses these issues—not Genesis 1:26–28 alone. The Bible commands people to love their neighbor (Matt. 22:39). The Bible pays attention to people who are socially outside favored groups: “He [the Lord] executes justice for the *fatherless* and the *widow*, and loves the *sojourner*, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt” (Deut. 10:18–19). Jesus indicates that you are to love even your enemies:

9. John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). Despite its ethical importance, we will not focus on the question of human social treatment in this book. It belongs more properly in a book on Christian ethics.

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, *Love your enemies* and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt. 5:43–48)

One implication is that no human being is to be excluded from the scope of human love.

In view of these teachings, it is a tactical mistake to take up the issue of human treatment of fellow humans as though everything depended on the proper definition of “the image of God.”

One part of the solution, therefore, is to clarify where ideas come from. Is the question really about redemption? Then go to the biblical passages that speak directly about redemption and how people receive its benefits. Is the question really about proper ethical treatment of outsiders or people who are viewed as disfavored in some way? Then go to the biblical passages that set forth ethical norms. Do not give the impression that you are getting all the information from Genesis 1. Genesis 1 is, of course, relevant, but it needs to be taken together with all the other relevant teachings in the Bible. And beware of imposing on Genesis 1 philosophical ideas that come from general speculations about human nature or from church tradition rather than from biblical teaching.

### **Causes of the Problems**

Several causes contribute to the symptoms that we have just described. One such underlying cause is the assumption that the Bible consistently uses technically precise terminology. According to this assumption, in its simplest form, every use of the same word or phrase throughout the Bible

has the same precise meaning. In the controversy about the image of God, people may easily assume that the phrase “image of God” and its equivalents must mean exactly the same thing in every one of the occurrences. This assumption ignores possible differences between different human authors, different genres, and different contexts. More seriously, it tends to equate the later, technical uses of systematic theology with the more ordinary uses in the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

Ordinary words in Hebrew or Greek or any other language do have stable, fixed meanings. People cannot rightly make words mean anything they want. But in actual use, the meaning varies slightly with context. It varies over a range. Dictionaries try to do justice to this variation by listing several distinct senses for a word. A word in any one sentence and utterance typically has one of the possible senses listed in the dictionary. People who use English and other natural languages make the adjustments naturally, usually without realizing it.<sup>11</sup>

A closely related assumption is what might be called a *referential view of language*. This is the view that any piece of language must refer to one *thing*, a particular referent, and that this referent is the meaning of the language. Thus, with the phrase “image of God,” a referential view tells people to look for a single referent in the world. Something *in* human beings, or perhaps a complex of things, is *the* referent. Some people have thought that human rationality, which distinguishes human beings from animals, is the referent. Or mankind as a whole is the referent. Or some *function* of human beings, or their capacity for personal relationships, is the referent. The task of understanding is to find this referent and describe it accurately.

The difficulty here is that the same referent can be described in different ways. Philadelphia is the largest city in Pennsylvania, the city just across the Pennsylvania border from Camden, New Jersey, and earlier the home of

10. For more on this problem, see Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 64–79, especially 74–79.

11. See the discussions of semantics in James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), chap. 1.

the First Continental Congress. The referent, namely, Philadelphia, is the same in all three descriptions. But the descriptions have different *meanings*. So likewise, humanity is a species to which people refer, but they can give many differing descriptions with distinct meanings.

A final flawed assumption is that a theologian can make confident inferences from the present fallen state of humanity back to the original state by removing the defects from the present situation. Since Genesis 1–2 does not provide nearly enough detail to settle all the controversies, it becomes tempting to spin out the detail by comparison with the present.

As we will see, each of these assumptions has flaws.

### **On the Way to a Remedy**

How does one proceed toward a remedy? In order to deal with the problem of technical terms of systematic theology, one must bear in mind a number of points:

- People should not load the phrase “image of God” in Genesis 1:26–28 with the later weight of technical discussion in systematic theology. At the time it was written, it was ordinary language. As James Barr observes:

The conscious definition of terms as an attempt to mark the semantic value of words is common in philosophy and fairly common in law but is quite uncommon in biblical language, although it reappears in some, if not all, kinds of later theology. . . . In Israel at any rate much of the biblical language is unspecialized.<sup>12</sup>

- People should recognize that Genesis 1–2 *by itself* will not provide all the answers that theologians want in order to satisfy curiosity or to resolve the long-standing problems about the nature of redemption

12. Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language*, 3.

and the ethical treatment of outsiders. Theology needs to use the whole Bible.

- People should recognize that the fundamental theological issues at stake are the nature of humanity and the nature of redemption. The whole Bible instructs us on those issues.<sup>13</sup>
- People should recognize that for technical purposes, anyone has the ability to stipulate a special meaning for a term. This possibility exists in particular for the phrase “the image of God.” More than one choice is possible for such a stipulated meaning. Any such choice emphasizes certain things and leaves others in the background. But stipulating a special meaning has hazards. It can easily be confused with the ordinary or traditional meaning, and then be imposed where it does not belong.

Once an analyst absorbs these points, he can see almost at once that all or nearly all the positions delineated above have some truth in them. All see some analogies or likenesses between God and human beings and single these out for attention. The different views focus on different analogies between God and man—rationality, or freedom of will, or righteousness, or dominion, or kingship, or capacity for personal relations. All make legitimate observations, and any could in theory be used as the starting point for stipulating a technical meaning for “image of God”—as long as this meaning was not confused with the meaning of “image of God” in its original contexts in the Bible.

Of course, when an analyst gets into the details of (say) the Roman Catholic or Pelagian view of the state of humanity at creation and after the fall and in the process of redemption, he finds problems. In details, these views are not in harmony with the teaching of the Bible. But the problems do not arise primarily just from interpretations of Genesis 1 and 2. They have to do with various philosophical views and views of redemption.

13. Barr, 269: “the linguistic bearer of the theological statement is usually the sentence and the still larger literary complex and not the word or the morphological and syntactical mechanisms”; “the question of distinctiveness of biblical thinking has to be settled at this level and not at the lexical level.”

It just confuses the issue when people import such controversies into a definition of “image of God.”

All the classical positions have some truth. But as we will see, none of them formulates precisely the actual meaning of “image of God” in Genesis 1:27.<sup>14</sup>

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on the “Image of God” in Genesis 1**

How does Acts 2 serve as a perspective on the theme of the image of God? In Acts 2, God creates the church as a new community that is filled with the Spirit poured out by Christ (Acts 2:33). New creation is analogous to the first creation. So do the church and the individuals in it have the image of God? They reflect God as they magnify him and bear witness to him: “we hear them telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (v. 11). They live in harmony (vv. 44–47), reflecting the harmony of God. They are in communion with God’s Word (v. 42), reflecting God’s truth and wisdom. Verse 43 shows one kind of effect: “many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.” The wonders were done through the power of the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ. So these wonders and signs show the power and wisdom and goodness of God. They reflect God. They are analogous to the wonders in God’s acts in creating the world in Genesis 1. So yes, Acts 2 shows the church as a people who reflect God or “image” him. What happens at Pentecost is related to the broad theme of the image of God.

## **Goal**

By way of responding to the controversy, there are three tasks: (1) to exegete Genesis 1:26–28 accurately; (2) to critically analyze past arguments concerning the image of God; (3) to describe accurately the original unfallen condition of human beings. The next chapter takes

14. John Frame’s position and Wayne Grudem’s position are similar to the one in this book. We will comment briefly on their view in chapter 10.

up the first of these tasks, leaving the other two tasks for later chapters (chapters 10, 12–13).

### **Key Terms**

|                             |                              |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Arminian                    | natural gifts                |
| Barth, Karl                 | ordinary language            |
| displaced controversy       | Pelagian                     |
| dominion                    | quarrel about words          |
| fall of man                 | reason                       |
| Frame, John M.              | referential view of language |
| Grudem, Wayne A.            | Reformed theology            |
| Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe     | represent                    |
| image, dynamic              | Roman Catholic               |
| image in the broader sense  | Socinian                     |
| image in the narrower sense | stipulate meaning            |
| image of God                | supernatural gifts           |
| Kline, Meredith G.          | systematic theology          |
| likeness of God             | technical term               |
| Lutheran                    | theophany                    |
| method                      |                              |

### **Study Questions**

1. Why is the issue of the image of God important?
2. What are the biblical passages that contain the theme of the image of God, and what do they indicate about the image of God before and after the fall of man?
3. What are the main theological explanations of “image of God”?
4. What are some of the difficulties in method that crop up in discussions involving the image of God? Why do you think people cannot come to agreement?
5. What relevance does the issue of technical terms have to discussion of the image of God?

6. How should it affect you to know that you are made in the image of God?

### **For Further Reading**

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pp. 206–8.

Grudem, Wayne A. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020. Pp. 567–76.

### **Prayer**

We thank you, our Father, for making us in your image. Help us to understand the honor with which you have created us and the shame of our deviation from you in our sin. Help us to understand the meaning of “image of God” in the Bible.





## 6

# INTERPRETING GENESIS 1:26–28

We now focus on exegeting Genesis 1:26–28. What do these verses mean? We will spend some time on the details, because past discussions of the doctrine of humanity have often treated these verses as *the* major key to understanding humanity.

The major difficulties in interpreting the verses all arise even in the first of the three verses, Genesis 1:26:

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

### Disputed Issues

In interpreting the details, there are four main difficulties:

- What is the meaning of the two words “image” and “likeness,” and how are the two related to each other? In particular, is there a difference between “image” and “likeness,” and if so, what?
- Is man himself the image, or merely “in” the image? What is the sense of the key word “in” (ב [bē] in Hebrew)?
- What is the significance of the plural “us” and “our” in Genesis 1:26?
- Does the image consist in being male and female, as Karl Barth argues from the following verse, “male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27)?

Let us consider these one at a time.<sup>1</sup> The last of the four will be treated in chapter 10, which discusses Barth's view.

### “Image” and “Likeness”

The first difficulty concerns the meaning of “image” and “likeness.” The words “image” and “likeness” are roughly the English equivalents for the two relevant Hebrew words, *tselem* (צֶלֶם) and *demût* (דְּמוּת). The two Hebrew words are closely related in meaning. Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum survey a large body of research concerning Genesis 1:26.<sup>2</sup> They provide a useful summary in the following words:

Although both terms [in Hebrew] specify the divine-human relationship, the first [likeness, *demût*] focuses on the human in relation to God, and the second [image, *tselem*] focuses on the human in relation to the world.<sup>3</sup>

In their text, Gentry and Wellum are focusing on the meaning of Genesis 1:26. We need to step back first and ask broadly about the meanings of *tselem* and *demût* in the Hebrew language. The English glosses “image” and “likeness” actually do the job reasonably well. If A is a “likeness” of B, it indicates that the item A is *like* B. The focus is on the inner connection between A and B. On the other hand, the English word “image” indicates that the item A, which is an “image,” appears or manifests itself to some

1. For a recent treatment, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 222–44. This treatment is further updated by Peter J. Gentry, “Humanity as the Divine Image in Genesis 1:26–28,” *Eikon* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 56–69, repr., Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, June 10, 2020, <https://cbmw.org/2020/06/10/humanity-as-the-divine-image-in-genesis-126-28/>, accessed August 11, 2020, which is essentially the same as Peter J. Gentry, “Humanity as the Divine Image in Genesis 1:26–28,” in *Biblical Studies*, vol. 1, pt. 1 (Peterborough, Canada: H&E Academic, 2020), 1–23.

2. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 226–32, building on Paul Dion, “Ressemblance et Image de Dieu,” in *Suppléments aux Dictionnaire de la Bible*, ed. H. Cazelles and A. Feuillet (Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1992–), 55:365–403; and W. Randall Garr, *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

3. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 230.

observer. The observer sees the image and is reminded of or knows something about the item B of which A is an image.

There is a difference here, but it is easy to exaggerate. The difference between the two Hebrew words is probably not much greater or much less than the difference between the two English words “image” and “likeness.” It is not an earth-shaking difference, but a subtle one. As Gentry and Wellum say, it is a difference in “focus.”

A difference in focus is compatible with affirming that the two terms could function in a complementary way. If A is an image of B that presents itself to an observer, the observer is meant to think of B because of some similarity between A and B. Perhaps there is a similarity in appearance, as when a statue of a pharaoh looks like the pharaoh. Or the similarity could be merely a conceptual similarity, if A conceptually represents B. For example, the flag of a country conceptually represents the country. In any case, the idea of A’s being an image of B will typically imply some “likeness” between A and B. Conversely, suppose that A is a “likeness” of B. Then an observer looking at A will easily be reminded of B, and A then functions as an “image” of B.

In Genesis 1:26, the two words are in parallel constructions, and hence the meaning of each is nuanced by the other. Even in this context, there remains a nuance of difference. But the parallelism leads the ordinary reader in the direction of similar, overlapping meanings rather than two utterly disparate meanings. The sense of “likeness” or “similarity” belongs to the semantic range of both words, and so this meaning belongs to their overlap in Genesis 1:26.<sup>4</sup> The two words are not meant to describe two

4. John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 89–91. Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 66, makes the additional point that “in the ancient Near East, the word *likeness* serves to clearly distinguish God from humans.” This observation is in harmony with the idea that the meaning of both phrases together is to be found in their overlap. *Likeness* reduces the area of overlap by excluding part of the possible range of usage of *image*. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 232–35, offer “precise meaning” (p. 232), maintaining distinct nuances for the prepositions and the nouns. When we have two parallel constructions and when there is variation (Gen. 1:26; 5:1, 3), the primary result is going to be for the meaning of the whole to be found in the overlap of the range of meanings of the two constructions.

distinct objects or to make two separate affirmations, but rather to say the same thing in two overlapping ways. As an image, man displays God to the surrounding world; as a likeness, man is like God. He displays God (imaging God) because he is like God. And he is like God in reflecting (imaging) and displaying to the world the nature of God.

In conclusion, Genesis 1:26 is saying that God created man with the design that man was like God;<sup>5</sup> therefore, he reflects God. The ways in which he is like God and reflects God would obviously include his dominion, analogous to the original dominion of God over the world. But the description of man is open-ended, so that the reader is invited to range through the rest of the Bible and indeed through the full spectrum of experience to see all the ways that there may be similarities or likenesses.<sup>6</sup>

Why, then, did the text not simply say that God made man to be like himself? The text has a more elaborate phrasing. It uses the noun “image,” and not just a simple comparison, “like me” or “like us.” It also doubles the phrase, by using not only the expression “in our image” but also “after our likeness.” This elaboration suggests a little more than the meaning of an expression such as “like me.”

“Image” sometimes describes statuary (1 Sam. 6:5, 11) and pictures (Ezek. 23:14). A statue or picture of a thing is analogous not simply at one point or in one feature, but in many. If Debbie says, “He is like a lion,” she may mean simply that he is lionlike at one point, in courage or in fierceness. But a physical image of lion has a whole elaborate structure of similarities to the lion. Genesis 1:26 invites its readers to look for a multifaceted complex of similarities. Of course, that does not mean that *everything* is going to be similar. There will be dissimilarities as well. But it does mean that there will be a group of similarities, rather than merely similarities at one or two isolated points.

5. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 2:96: “The simple declaration of Scripture is that man at his creation was like God.”

6. Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 568: “the text only needs to affirm that man is *like God*, and *the rest of Scripture fills in more details to explain this*” (italics original); Andrew E. Steinman, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 17.

Note also that in a statue or a picture, the primary impression derives from the *whole*, not just from a mechanical addition of a large number of specialized features in a long list. An image is *holistically* an image. By analogy with what happens with a statue, it is natural to conclude that mankind *as a whole*, both individuals and the race, is in the image of God (“man” in Genesis 1:26, 27, subsequently referred to with both singular and plural pronouns). The reflection of God in mankind consists not merely in a list of special similarities, however long the list, but in what is true holistically.

As an example, consider a statue of a king (Egypt had many statues of pharaohs). A statue is not less a statue of a king if it is done sketchily or if it is later disfigured. Even if someone digs up a statue of a pharaoh and finds that the head has been knocked off, it is still a statue of a pharaoh, though now broken into two pieces. The statue’s artistic purpose and its relation to what it reflects remain in place. So it is with mankind and with individual human beings.<sup>7</sup> They remain, even after the fall, even in disfigured form, a “statue” reflecting God.

Some interpreters have suggested that the idea of representation, rather than similarity, is primary. But what is meant by *representation*? A picture or a statue represents the thing that it pictures. It represents it precisely by being similar to it. If someone has this meaning in mind, is he really saying anything different from “picture”? But not all representations depend on physical similarity. The word *dog* “represents” a dog without being like a dog in any obvious physical way. An ambassador represents his country not by being physically shaped like the country or like its ruler, but by having an appointed authority to speak and act and attend ceremonies on behalf of his country.

So one meaning might be that man represents God by being his *delegate*, his representative or stand-in or substitute in relation to some third party. Undoubtedly God delegates to man a dominion (Gen. 1:26, 28). This dominion is derivative from God’s dominion. Does man then function as God’s vicegerent as he rules over the animals? In some

7. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 99.

ways he does. But is this vicegerency the meaning of “image”? Any delegate has some power or authority similar to the delegator. So the possession of this authority is one point of similarity, along with many others that are possible. Moreover, in Egypt and Mesopotamia, kings were sometimes called the “image of god,” perhaps in indication of the authority that they had from God, or as a reminder that they should be honored like a god.

In the ancient world, a statue or image of a king was sometimes used as a reminder of the presence of the king’s authority over the territory and its inhabitants. To insult or to deface the statue would be a symbolic way of insulting the king or beginning a rebellion against the king. It would be analogous to the insult that Hanun the Ammonite gave to David when he disgraced David’s messengers—the delegates that David had sent (2 Sam. 10:4–5). The statue, like a delegate, represents the king, not simply by representing his authority, but by representing his presence, his power, his honor, and, in the end, his entire person. So what a responder does to the representative is a symbolic expression of what the responder does to the person who is represented. But all these features express similarities between the delegate and the one he represents. They are not physical similarities, but rather symbolic or social or relational similarities. Such representative aspects, if active, are automatically included under the general category of similarities. But neither “image” nor “likeness” in its usual sense suggests a restriction *only* to this one point of similarity, namely, similarity in representative authority.

We may note that the Hebrew lexicon by Brown, Driver, and Briggs offers various glosses or English equivalents. For *tselem* (צלם), it gives us “image,” “likeness,” and “semblance”; for *demût* (דמוּת), it gives “likeness,” “similitude,” “resemblance,” and, when used adverbially, “in likeness of,” “like as.” These lexical descriptions of the two words are quite similar.

Are there differences? Inspecting the uses in the Bible has led some interpreters to claim that *tselem* (צלם, “image”) designates a concrete object, while *demût* (דמוּת, “likeness”) describes an abstract relation. It is true that some occurrences of *demût* describe a relation of likeness:

The sound of a tumult is on the mountains  
as of (“in the likeness of”) a great multitude! (Isa. 13:4)

One in the *likeness* of the children of man touched my lips.  
(Dan. 10:16)

But many of the occurrences of *demût* describe visual phenomena, not invisible conceptual relations. Isaiah 40:18 uses “likeness” in the context of idols, and Ezekiel 23:15 uses “likeness” in a way parallel to “images” (צִלְמֵי, *tsalmê*, a form of צֶלֶם, *tselem* “image”) on a wall (Ezek. 23:14). Contrariwise, *tselem* can designate something insubstantial, “a shadow” (Ps. 39:6 [Hebrew 7]). The two terms *tselem* and *demût* overlap in their ability to designate concrete images. And human beings have bodies that are concrete objects.

In contrast to these established meanings, the Hebrew lexicon by Brown, Driver, and Briggs does not give us “delegate” or “representative.”<sup>8</sup>

8. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, with Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, repr. with corrections (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 853–54, 198.

Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 5 vols. (Leiden/New York: Brill, 1994–2000), 3:1028–29, lists five senses for the Hebrew word צֶלֶם (“image”): “1. **statue, inscribed column**”; “2. **idol**”; “3. pl. [plural] —a. **images, figures** . . . ; —b. **replicas, likenesses**”; “4. a. transitory **image**”; and “5. **likeness**” (boldface original). Under the fifth category are listed only the key passages in Genesis: (5a) Gen. 1:26–27; 9:6; (5b) Gen. 5:3. Sense 2 appears to be distinguished from sense 1 not mainly by meaning (it is still a statue), but by what use the referent is put to, namely, as an object of worship. It is also not clear that senses 3, 4, and 5 are really distinct, rather than being variations under one broad sense, “image.” (But James Barr, “The Image of God in the Book of Genesis—A Study of Terminology,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 51, no. 1 [1968]: 11–26 [21], indicates that sense 4 may represent a different word with a different etymological history.) Under sense 5a, the lexicon comments further: “man, God’s likeness, God’s image, i.e. he is God’s viceroy, representative or witness among the creatures” (Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 3:1029). The added “i.e.” introduces a gap between “God’s image” and the later words beginning with “God’s viceroy.” “I.e.,” Latin *id est*, “that is,” could be interpreted as introducing a completely equivalent meaning. But in fact, the expressions that follow the “i.e.” are *not* completely equivalent. “Viceroy,” “representative,” and “witness” are not synonymous with “likeness” (which is the main gloss at the beginning of the fifth category). The linguistic sense is still “likeness, image.” The material following “i.e.” should then be construed as a further development of the overall description. It indicates that in



Note also that a proposed translation “representative” does not fit cases such as 1 Samuel 6:5, 11 and Ezekiel 23:14. So the idea of similarity or likeness is the main idea. In some contexts, similarity or likeness may include or imply similarity in authority, with the associated social meanings and responsibilities. Such is the case in Genesis 1:26–27 because dominion, a form of delegated authority, is explicitly mentioned in verses 26 and 28. But delegated authority is still not actually the sense of the English words “image” and “likeness” or the underlying Hebrew words.

We find further confirmation in Genesis 5:3:

When Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son in his own likeness, after his *image*, and named him Seth.

The language “in his own likeness, after his image” clearly alludes to Genesis 1:26. A human son is like a human father in many respects, not just one. The idea of vicegerency is surely not the exclusive thought here. It cannot even be the primary thought, since the baby, when first born (when Adam was 130 years old), was already like his father, but would not assume his father’s authority until he was full-grown. In the fullest sense, he would not have his father’s authority until his father died.

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Genesis 1:26–27 and the larger context, the overall thrust is interpreted to imply the idea “viceroy,” “representative,” or “witness.” The lexicon provides no evidence that these latter ideas actually belong to the sense of the word *tselem* (צלם).

An earlier German edition of the same lexicon, namely, Ludwig Koehler, *Lexicon in veteris testamenti libros* (Leiden: Brill, 1953), has a list of only four senses. Its sense 3 corresponds to sense 5 in the 1994–2000 edition. Under this sense 3, it lists the same verses, Genesis 1:26–27, 5:3, and 9:6. But it just offers the gloss “image,” a parenthetical addition, “*imago dei*,” “image of God,” and not much more. One might suspect that the additions in the 1994–2000 edition about “viceroy,” “representative,” and “witness” are an attempt to summarize some of the thrust of scholarly articles that this later edition adds in its citations. Thus, these additions are really theological interpretation, not a direct comment on the linguistic sense of the Hebrew word צֶלֶם. All the editions show senses clustering in the near vicinity of “image” (or German “Bild”).

D. J. A. Clines, ed., *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010), 7:124, offers “**image**” as an opening gloss. It differentiates three senses, with a further subdivision within the first sense: “**1a. image, replica** of plague symptom”; “**b. image** of deity”; “**c. image** of male/male organs”; “**2. image, likeness**, of resemblance”; “**3. transitory image, silhouette, semblance**” (boldface original).

## The Meaning of the Preposition “in” within the Expression “in the Image”

Now consider the force of the Hebrew prepositions in Genesis 1:26. This key verse has two distinct Hebrew prepositions lying behind the English, “*in* [א, *b*<sup>e</sup>] our image, *after* [א, *k*<sup>e</sup>] our likeness.” The two prepositions have some overlap in function. In addition to other functions, *b*<sup>e</sup> (corresponding to English “in”) is used “of a standard of measurement. . . . Of a model.”<sup>9</sup> *k*<sup>e</sup> (corresponding to English “after”) is used in “expressing conformity to a standard or rule.”<sup>10</sup> A good parallel is in Exodus 25:40, “See that you make them *after* [*b*<sup>e</sup>] the pattern for them, which is being shown you on the mountain.” The expression “make . . . after the pattern” (וַעֲשֶׂה אַחֲרֵי הַתְּבַרֵּךְ) corresponds almost exactly to “make . . . in our image [בְּצֶלְמֵנוּ . . . עֲשֶׂה]” (Gen. 1:26).<sup>11</sup> The tabernacle and its furniture are to be made in correspondence with and following the pattern of what Moses was shown on the mountain. God made man in correspondence with and following the pattern of God himself. The result is that man is like God, just as the tabernacle is like its heavenly pattern. Note that the tabernacle “represents” or symbolizes God’s presence among the people of Israel. It represents God’s dwelling precisely by being *similar* to the original, the pattern of God’s dwelling in heaven. The similarity is holistic.

D. J. A. Clines has proposed an interesting alternative interpretation of Genesis 1:26.<sup>12</sup> According to Clines, the preposition *b*<sup>e</sup> is a *beth essentiae*

9. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, § 3.8, 90.

10. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, § 1.c, 454 (as well as § 1.b).

11. Barr, “Image of God in the Book of Genesis,” 16.

12. D. J. A. Clines, “The Image of God in Man,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 19, no. 1 (1968): 53–103. In the context of this book, we can offer only a short and sketchy response to Clines’s elaborate argument. In the end, many of our conclusions stand even if Clines is right in his claim that א, *b*<sup>e</sup> in Genesis 1:26 is *beth essentiae*. Whether man is created after the pattern of God (our view) or to function as an image of God (Clines’s view), verse 26 affirms a likeness between God and man. Clines finds representation rather than likeness to be the primary idea. But representation implies similarity. Man represents God in a meaningful way only if there is a similarity of some kind between the two, such as if man has an authority derivative from God and imitates God. The likeness or similarity need not have anything to do with appearance or physical shape. God does appear in human form later in Genesis (Gen. 18:1–2), but he does not have a body, so the idea of physical resemblance is not primary in the context of Genesis 1:26–27.

(a Latin expression meaning “beth [the name of the Hebrew letter transliterated by *b*] of essence”). According to this interpretation, what follows the *b<sup>e</sup>* indicates the role that Adam is assigned. Thus the translation would run, “Let us make man *to be* our image.” Man is to *function as* the image of God. Such a use for *b<sup>e</sup>* is well attested.<sup>13</sup> But this proposal does not work well, for a number of reasons:<sup>14</sup>

(1) The parallel preposition *k<sup>e</sup>* will not easily bear this proposed meaning of *b<sup>e</sup>*.<sup>15</sup> Given the parallel between the two phrases, “in our image” and “after our likeness,” each is to be interpreted in the light of the other. And that means interpreting *b<sup>e</sup>* “in” in the light of the meaning of *k<sup>e</sup>* “after,” which expresses “conformity to a standard or rule.”

(2) The *beth essentiae* is customarily used to define the role taken by the *subject* of the clause.<sup>16</sup> But Clines’s proposal requires us to make it function to define the role of the *object* (“man”).

(3) The interchange of the two prepositions in Genesis 5:1, 3 shows that there is little difference between them.<sup>17</sup> In particular, the wording in Genesis 5:1 has “in [*b<sup>e</sup>*] the likeness [*demût*] of God,” pairing the

13. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, § 1.7, 88–89.

14. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 137.

15. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 234, interpret *b<sup>e</sup>* and *k<sup>e</sup>* both to have the meaning “as.” But it appears that they have confused two distinct functions of the English word *as*. *As* can be a synonym for *like*, *similar to* (which is similar to one meaning of *k<sup>e</sup>*); or together with a verb, it can mean *to serve in a role*: “man *functions as* the image of God” (which is similar to *beth essentiae*).

16. “*ב* introduces the *predicate*, denoting it as that *in which* the subj. [subject] consists” (Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 88 [italics original]). The context of this entry in the lexicon does offer certain instances in which *ב* modifies the *object*, but only in a few constructions having to do with inheritance and some other cases that appear to be specialized. In the key verse Genesis 1:26, the subject of the verb “make” is “us” (represented by a prefix in Hebrew), while the object of the verb is “man.” The construction as a whole does not fit the normal requirement that *beth essentiae* further defines the *subject* of the clause. See Barr, “Image of God in the Book of Genesis,” 17.

17. For further discussion, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 29. In favor of a distinction, see Christopher D. Kou, “God’s Statue in the Cosmic Temple: *צֶלֶם* and *דְמוּת* in Genesis and the Plural Cohortative in Genesis 1:26 in Light of Sanctuary Setting and Christological Telos,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 66. no. 1 (2023): 11–31 (20–25); Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 232–34.

preposition “in” with the noun “likeness” instead of “image.” Likewise, Genesis 5:3 has “in [*b<sup>e</sup>*] his own likeness [*demût*], after [*k<sup>e</sup>*] his image [*tselem*],” which switches the pairing found in Genesis 1:26.<sup>18</sup> Gentry and Wellum cite Ernst Jenni, who investigated all the occurrences of *b<sup>e</sup>*, *k<sup>e</sup>*, and *l<sup>e</sup>* in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>19</sup> They summarize:

*bē* indicates something locative and proximate while *kē* indicates something similar but distal and separate.<sup>20</sup>

But when combined with the terms *tselem* and *demût*, the two descriptions are complementary. Depending on one’s focus, an image is both proximate and distal in relation to that which it images. An image is proximate in that it presents conceptually that of which it is an image. Conceptually, it brings the original “near” to the observer. At the same time, an image is distal in that it is distinct from the pattern that it images. The idea of *image* includes both aspects intrinsically. The same is true for a likeness. The idea of *likeness* includes both similarity (“proximate”) and dissimilarity (“distal”). It is a question here of a subtle difference in focus, not a huge gap in meaning.

### The Plurality of “Us”

Now, what about the plurals “us” and “our” in Genesis 1:26? The issue is complex. We will confine ourselves to four main alternatives: (1) it is a

18. In Genesis 5:3, some Hebrew manuscripts switch the order of *b<sup>e</sup>* and *k<sup>e</sup>*, so that the English would read “after his likeness, in his image” (the word “own” in the ESV translation does not correspond to a separate Hebrew word). This variation is probably due to scribal copying. Whether accidentally or deliberately, a scribe reproduced the connection of prepositions that occurred in the more well-known verse, 1:26. But these variant manuscripts still have “in” (*b<sup>e</sup>*) instead of “after” (*k<sup>e</sup>*) attached to “likeness” in 5:1. This is a switch in comparison to 1:26. So we have in 5:1 a clear instance of the two prepositions’ having been interchanged. Little significant change in meaning is detectable. Kou, “God’s Statue,” 25–26, finds a difference, but he depends on prior decisions in favor of Clines’s interpretation of *b<sup>e</sup>* and underplaying the effects of overlapping meaning ranges.

19. Ernst Jenni, *Die hebräischen Präpositionen*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1992–2000).

20. Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 234.

plural of “majesty” or “fullness”; (2) it is a “plural of deliberation”; (3) it refers to the angels assembled in the presence of God as a heavenly court (1 Kings 22:19–22; Pss. 82:1; 89:6–7; Isa. 6:8; Dan. 7:9–10); (4) it refers to a plurality in God himself, adumbrating God’s Trinitarian nature.

Consider alternative 1, the plural of majesty. What is the plural of majesty? It could mean a number of different things. Gesenius’s grammar describes the occurrence of certain plural nouns, including *ʾelohim* (“God”), as a plural of majesty.<sup>21</sup> But in Gesenius, the context is a discussion about plural *nouns*, not *pronouns*. This usage fails to explain the occurrences of plural *pronominal* affixes in Genesis 1:26. Note also that Genesis 3:22, “become like one of *us*,” makes the real plurality inescapable, because the singularity of “one” is clearly distinguished from the plurality of “us.” Genesis 3:22 alludes to Genesis 1:26 in an ironic way. Its allusion to Genesis 1:26, and the common theme of being “like” God in the two verses, shows that Genesis 1:26 is a case of genuine plurality.<sup>22</sup>

At various times, kings have been accustomed to use a “royal *we*.” But such usage is not attested in the Hebrew Bible. Kings talk in the singular (1 Kings 3:24; 5:5; Ezra 1:2; 6:8, 11, 12), except when they associate their court of nobles with their action (2 Chron. 30:1–6; Jonah 3:7). The usage to include the nobles seems to suggest by analogy that God is associated with his assistants, who are the angels. This analogy leads in the direction of meaning 3, involving the angelic court.

Now consider the second alternative, the “plural of deliberation.”<sup>23</sup> Cohortatives of deliberation occur in both first-person singular

21. E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910), § 124g–i.

22. The tradition of historical-critical scholarship says that Genesis 1:26–27 and 3:22 come from different sources. But as indicated earlier, we are interpreting the finished composition of Genesis, not its alleged sources. It is unwise to ignore what the text of Genesis indicates by the connection between Genesis 1:26 and 3:22 and to let this connection be virtually overruled by hypotheses about sources that are not available and whose literary and historical context we do not know. Even if hypothetically we had these sources, it would be impossible to show that Genesis 1:26 could not use them with a different meaning, as indicated by 3:22.

23. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 145, (4).

(“let me . . .”) and first-person plural (“let us . . .”). The question is not whether such plurals of deliberation occur, but whether they occur in contexts where the *referent* of the plural pronominal prefix is singular. Genesis 11:7, 2 Samuel 24:14, and Isaiah 6:8 (with pronominal suffix attached to a preposition) are sometimes cited as other cases of the same usage. But 2 Samuel 24:14 has a context in which the reference may include David’s people, not merely David himself; and Isaiah 6:8 may have a reference including the seraphim.<sup>24</sup> Genesis 11:7 is a true parallel to Genesis 1:26, but it involves the same potential ambiguity as does Genesis 1:26. Is the angelic court being addressed, or does the plural form indicate a genuine plurality in God?<sup>25</sup>

There is reason to be skeptical about a claim that a plural cohortative prefix can be used to refer to a singular referent. Gesenius’ *Hebrew Grammar* (§ 124) catalogues a large number of uses of plural nouns with a singular referent. But Gesenius can almost always find some *rationale* for these uses. What would be the rationale for using a plural cohortative prefix to denote a single person? The term “self-deliberation” that Gesenius uses<sup>26</sup> might suggest a kind of plurality. If one is deliberating with oneself, one may distinguish “I” who deliberate and “myself” with whom I deliberate. But in a sense, this is automatically true in all cases in which a single individual is deliberating. With whom else is he deliberating than himself? One does not need a special plural form to mark it.

It is not obvious that any meaning is gained, and there is a definite loss because, other things being equal, it is confusing to designate a singular referent with a plural form when one could just as well have used the normal singular form. Why introduce potential confusion when it is not necessary?

What would be helpful in order to firmly establish the existence of such a use would be a number of examples of its use *in the human sphere*,

24. Kautzsch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, § 124g n2.

25. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 145, (4), cites *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* (§ 414f n3 [sic], for § 124g n2), which describes “a plural of *self-deliberation*,” but provides no evidence, and cites Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2009), § 114e, which is noncommittal.

26. Kautzsch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, § 124g n2.

from which one could verify that no genuine plurality of referent is in view. But such examples are not forthcoming.

Finally, remember the occurrence of genuine plurality in Genesis 3:22. This verse has a definite thematic connection with Genesis 1:26. The connection confirms that Genesis 1:26 also involves genuine plurality.

Next comes the third alternative, a reference to angels. There are several difficulties:

(1) Angelic beings do not explicitly appear in Genesis until Genesis 3:24. When they do appear, they are not explicitly part of God's court. In this respect, Genesis 3:24 contrasts with 1 Kings 22:19–22, Job 1:6, Isaiah 6:1–7, and Daniel 7:9–10, all of which describe a picture in which God appears and the angels are around him. So Genesis 3:24 does not lead us to a picture that includes God and his court. And neither does anything in Genesis 1–2 directly describe God as seated in his court. The immediate context in Genesis 1 does not supply any positive textual clues that lead to a reference other than God himself.

(2) Genesis 1 as a whole pictures creation as the act of God. For angels to participate in creation confuses the monotheistic picture and is not elsewhere attested. Is Job 38:7 an exception? Job 38:7 says that

the morning stars sang together  
and all *the sons of God* shouted for joy.

The context of earlier verses indicates that the time was when God “laid the foundation of the earth” (Job 38:4). The “sons of God” in Job 38:7 are angels. Job does not say that they participated as agents in laying the foundation. Rather, they were there, rejoicing in what God alone did.

(3) The continuation of Genesis 1:26 in verse 27 reverts to the singular, “his own image [בְּצַלְמוֹ],” that is, the image of God. A singular pronominal suffix occurs in Hebrew, which is translated in English with “his.” It must refer to God. Accordingly, the verse does not describe the image of God-and-angels-together.

Finally, consider the fourth alternative. Does Genesis 1:26 provide a reference to plurality in God himself? The main objection seems to be

that this reference comes too early in the history of revelation and would not be intelligible to an Israelite. But it is in fact intelligible, given the context. In the context of Genesis 1 itself, the Spirit of God has already been mentioned in verse 2. A kind of plurality is already present in the differentiation between God and his Spirit.<sup>27</sup> In Genesis 1:3 and subsequent verses, God speaks. He says, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), “let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters” (v. 6), and so on. A distinction exists between God and what he says. What he says is a divine word, with divine power and authority, but also mysteriously distinct from God, who is the speaker. This distinction foreshadows the fuller revelation in John 1:1, which affirms the eternal existence of the eternal Word. The Word is God and is also distinct from the one who speaks (“the Word was *with* God,” that is, with God the Father). Genesis 1 does not contain as full an exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity as the New Testament. But when an interpreter looks back at Genesis in the light of the New Testament, and especially in the light of John 1:1–3, he can see a foreshadowing of the fuller revelation in the New Testament. Distinctions within God already exist in the text of Genesis 1:1–3. These distinctions prepare for the explicit plural in Genesis 1:26. Hence, the plural in verse 26 indicates a plurality in God himself, but it remains highly mysterious.

It is also possible to acknowledge an *indirect* influence from the theme of the angelic court, the theme that characterizes interpretation 3. The concept of an angelic court was familiar to Israelites. But this concept was also somewhat mysterious and fluid. The angelic beings in the heavenly court reflect the glory and majesty of God. They point to the original glory and being of God. God consults them (1 Kings 22:19–22) and commissions them as his servants. But it is also clear that as the Almighty One, he does not need their wisdom. The wisdom of these mighty angelic beings is only a dim reflection of God’s original uncreated wisdom. God’s consultation of his angelic court is thus a reflection of the original, more profound truth that God consults his own wisdom (Prov. 8:22–31) and his Spirit:

27. Hamilton, *Genesis Chapters 1–17*, 134.



Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand  
and marked off the heavens with a span,  
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure  
and weighed the mountains in scales  
and the hills in a balance?  
Who has measured the Spirit of the LORD,  
or what man shows him his counsel?  
Whom did he *consult*,  
and who made him understand?  
Who taught him the path of justice,  
and taught him knowledge,  
and showed him the way of understanding? (Isa. 40:12–14)

According to Isaiah 40:14, God does not need to consult anyone else. The implication is that he consults only himself. Note also that verse 13 mentions “the Spirit of the LORD.” The Spirit of the Lord is God himself. But he can also mysteriously be distinguished from the Lord of whom he is the Spirit. So the passage implies that God consults his Spirit.

The plurality of the angelic court is thus a creational reflection of a plurality of self-consultation.

Since angelic creatures reflect God’s power and carry out his will, in a variety of passages it would not always be clear to an Israelite whether a reference is to a created angelic being, as God’s messenger, or to God himself (thus the ambiguity over some occurrences of “the messenger/angel of the Lord”).<sup>28</sup>

In Genesis 1:26, then, the familiar idea of the angelic court would be a natural starting point for Israelite understanding. But the use of the singular “his own image” in 1:27, and the previous mention of the Spirit in verse 2, would move the focus toward God himself rather than the angels, who are his created servants, and would adumbrate the plurality in God standing behind the created plurality of his heavenly servants. In sum,

28. Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God’s Appearing* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022), app. A.

the plural “us” in verse 26 indicates a plural in God himself, anticipating the fuller revelation of the Trinity in later Scriptures.

### **Man Is like God**

The total effect of the statements in Genesis 1:26–28 is to assert that human beings are like God. In fact, they are like God holistically, in analogy with a statue that pictures a king holistically. But the verses leave open-ended the specification of the ways in which they are like God. The context can then suggest some of these ways, without being exhaustive. The most immediately obvious similarity is in dominion. God has dominion as Creator, and he gives to human beings a subordinate dominion (Gen. 1:28).

### **Associations in the Pentateuch with the Image of God**

Now observe how the rest of Genesis and the rest of the Bible fill out many ways in which man is like God.

In the immediate context in Genesis 1–2, God speaks, names, forms, and evaluates things. Human beings can do likewise. Adam names the animals (Gen. 2:19) and is given charge to carry on a work in the garden after God has made it grow (2:9). He is instructed to “fill the earth” (1:28) after God has already filled a once-barren world with creatures (2:1). Adam has a son “in his own likeness,” in imitation of God, who “made him in the likeness of God” (5:1, 3).

The first chapters of Genesis are set in the larger context of the whole Pentateuch. God gives the book of Genesis to Israel in a context in which they had experienced God’s redemption, his deliverance from Egypt. They are redemptively “created” as a nation and are promised a new land of Eden, the land of Canaan, “flowing with milk and honey” (Ex. 3:8). They are thus invited to see themselves as analogous to Adam. Individually and corporately, they are to reflect God. God addresses them in speech and in naming, and he enters into a covenant relation with them. They are called on to imitate him, to “be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev.

19:2). Their moral imitation includes keeping the Sabbath, in imitation of God's rest on the seventh day (Ex. 20:11).

In sum, Israel is God's son (Ex. 4:22–23; Deut. 8:5). The son is like the Father, in the image of the Father, as in Genesis 5:3. The son is under the authority of the Father, as is clear from the instructions of Genesis 1:28 and 2:15–17. The son receives the Father's care, as in Genesis 2:8–14, 18–22. So the idea of man's being the image of God is closely related to the Father-son relation between God and Israel. And this relation that Israel enjoys has its background in the elements of creation that suggest a Father-son relation between God and Adam.

### Later References Containing “Image of God”

What about later references in the Bible to “image of God”? Genesis 1:26–28 is the foundational passage. Later references, such as the ones in Genesis 5:1, 3, build on the foundation. They assume that the reader already knows about Genesis 1:26–28. But that does not mean that the phrase “image of God” means *exactly* the same thing in each verse. Such a view would treat all the later cases, and perhaps the first one also, as if they were occurrences of a technical term, with a precise, fixed meaning. This meaning would allegedly be exactly the same, independent of context. But ordinary language has more flexibility. In each occurrence, of course, “image” means “image,” and “image of God” means, roughly, “likeness of God.” But nuances may arise in each verse from the surrounding words. An interpreter has to consider whole sentences, not merely phrases in isolation.

This flexibility in nuance occurs in Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10. The background to Ephesians 4:24 is partly in Ephesians 4:13, 15, 21, where the newly created Christian is made in the likeness of Christ. This re-creation is surely *analogous* to the original creation of Adam, but it is not *identical* to it. When God saves people in Christ, he does not put them back into the situation of Adam and his probation, but moves them forward into the new creation that has already begun in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Christ is like Adam, but he is “the last Adam,” not the first (1 Cor. 15:45). A pure equation between the first Adam and a Christian's renewed condition would

miss the difference between the two. The expression “the last Adam” makes an allusion to the first Adam, without equating Christ with the first Adam. Likewise, the new nature in Christ corresponds in some ways with Adam, who was in the image of God. But the two are not the same. This kind of similarity without perfect identity is common in Scripture. An interpreter should avoid jumping to the conclusion of pure identity just because of an identical or similar terminology.

An even more striking case of the use of “image” occurs in Colossians 1:15: “He [Christ the Son] is the *image* of the invisible God.” This statement is made in the context of the Son’s role in *creation*, not redemption (redemption becomes the topic in verses 18–20). Verse 15 gives a description of the eternal divine Son. He is the image of the Father. But that relation of imaging is clearly on a different level from the creation of mankind in the image of God. The Son is the *archetypal* image, the original image. He is the original pattern for all other instances of images. When God made Adam and Eve in the image of God, they were images on the level of the creature. They were *ectypes*, derivative images in relation to the archetype. The two uses of the word “image” are not identical. One is related to the other, as an ectype to the archetype.

## Acts 2 as a Perspective on Genesis 1:26–28

Acts 2 shows that the church reflects God in its harmony and in the presence of the Word of God in it (see remarks on Acts 2 in chapter 5). There are analogies between Genesis 1:26–28 and the relation of God to the church even though the word *image* is not explicitly used. The *idea* of reflecting or imaging God in human life can be on display even when the word is not.

### Key Terms

archetype  
dominion  
ectype

image of God  
likeness of God  
open-ended

plurality in God  
represent

son of God  
technical term

### **Study Questions**

1. What are the main difficulties in interpreting Genesis 1:26?
2. What is the relation of “image” to “likeness” in Genesis 1:26?
3. What is the significance of the plural “us” and “our” in Genesis 1:26?  
What are the main views? Which view is preferable, and why?
4. How does the rest of the Pentateuch show ways in which man is like God?
5. What are the other main verses that contain the theme of the image of God? Are there any differences in nuance among the verses? If so, what?

### **For Further Reading**

Hamilton, Victor P. *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990. Pp. 132–40.

### **Prayer**

We thank you, our God and our Creator, for the ways in which you made us like you. We pray that, according to your will, we would grow in likeness to you, through our union with Christ our Savior.



# PRINCIPLES AND FRAMEWORK FOR INTERPRETATION

Part 2 considers issues of biblical interpretation and method.



# PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETATION

The analysis on “image of God” illustrates four broader principles of interpretation, which touch on four areas of difficulty: (1) presuppositions; (2) semantics; (3) analogy; and (4) metaphysical frameworks. The principles in these four areas can help interpreters strengthen their ability to deal with doctrine. None of these resources is completely new, but each of the four areas provides insights to help in systematic theology.

## Presuppositional Apologetics

First, consider *presuppositional apologetics*.<sup>1</sup> It was developed by Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987) in the twentieth century. He built on insights from Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921), Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), and John Calvin (1509–64). At its heart, presuppositional apologetics is a way of doing apologetics, the defense of the Christian faith. But it has further implications for all areas of life.

What are some of the basic ideas in presuppositional apologetics? Among the ideas are two complementary truths that need attention: the truths about antithesis and the truths about common grace.

1. Richard L. Pratt, *Every Thought Captive: A Study Manual for the Defense of Christian Truth* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979); Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til's Apologetic: Readings and Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1998); Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008); John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015). This tradition in apologetics has also been called *transcendental apologetics* or *covenantal apologetics*.



First, consider the principle of antithesis. There is a spiritual antithesis between faith in Christ and unbelief. As a consequence, non-Christian thought is corrupted by sin. But there is a complementary principle of common grace. Kuyper and Van Til also emphasize that many fragments of truth can be found in non-Christian thought, and many non-Christian actions are morally good from an external point of view. These good things are benefits of common grace, whereby God distributes good gifts to the undeserving (and Christians are also undeserving!).

We can apply the principles of presuppositional apologetics both in appreciating the unity of Christian theology, as a distinct whole, and in critically analyzing presuppositions in theology that have crept in from anti-Christian origins. Through the centuries, Christian theologians have always to some degree appreciated that Christian thought is distinctive and should not be mixed with anti-Christian views. That is the principle of antithesis. Presuppositional apologetics strengthens this practice. But it also counsels interpreters to recognize fragments of truth that remain in non-Christian thought (common grace).

Attention to presuppositions throws light on the various interpretations of “image of God” and Genesis 1:26–28. It asks, “How do theological and ideological presuppositions affect people’s interpretations?” Previous theological and ideological commitments do not absolutely determine a person’s conclusions about Genesis 1:26–28. But they can have an influence.

For example, consider the view that the image of God consists in dominion. This view can be more attractive to someone who thinks that the fall of man damaged human nature in only a minimal way. Human beings clearly still have dominion now, as demonstrated both by direct observation and by verses in the Bible (Gen. 4:17, 20–22; 9:3). So if dominion is the meaning of the image of God, and if the image of God is central to defining what humanity is, humanity seems to be relatively unchanged by the fall. This unchanging ability in humanity could harmonize well with a view of redemption in which human beings save themselves primarily by their own efforts—though perhaps assisted by God.

People might, of course, believe that dominion is the chief focus of the image of God without drawing further implications about redemption.

The point here is only that critical analysis should be aware of motivations coming from other directions, having little to do with the details of Genesis 1:26–28. In addition, it is true that people can come to a correct view for the wrong reasons. The fact that there are bad motivations does not disprove any particular view. But it counsels caution.

Consider another example of a possible attraction due to presuppositions. Karl Barth says that the image consists in relationship (especially man and woman). This view might be attractive to anyone who wants to emphasize personal relationship as a key to appreciating the distinctiveness of humanity.<sup>2</sup> In his exposition, Barth at one point uses the terminology of “I-Thou.”<sup>3</sup> He indicates that human beings can have an “I-Thou” relationship with God, while other created things cannot. He may be making a simple point. But it can prove attractive to people who want to see “I-Thou” as a label for the sphere of personal encounter, in contrast to the sphere of investigation of objects (“I-it”) by science.

Barth’s view, or some variation of it, could appeal to someone with a particular set of presuppositions about the scope of science and the meaning of religion. Such a person may conceive of religion as having to do only with a sphere of inward personal thoughts and feelings, and *not* with the world of external events in space and time. This outer sphere is then left free for investigation by an allegedly “neutral” scientific enterprise and a sphere of ordinary affairs that can be adequately dealt with apart from any religious commitment. One result might be that, from the standpoint of “science,” human beings have bodies that can be explained by a secular, Darwinian view of chance origins. The sphere of theology, by contrast, gives a different account, but it is an account that deals only with the “I-Thou” dimension.

The point here is that people may be drawn to this particular view because it harmonizes with or appears to support views that they already hold about an “I-Thou” dimension. Once again, bad motivations do not by themselves disprove the conclusion.

2. Daniel J. Price, *Karl Barth’s Anthropology in Light of Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 97–98, 117–18.

3. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 184.

In chapter 2 as well, which discussed the question of the origin of man, presuppositions played a role. The philosophy of evolutionary naturalism, which denies the existence of God, produces an atmospheric framework in which people think it is legitimate to consider *only* gradualistic explanations for the origin of humanity. This atmospheric influence is there before people actually investigate the evidence.

## Semantics

Next, consider a second resource, *semantics*. In the twentieth century, technical discussion of semantics blossomed,<sup>4</sup> but people had been aware of meanings long before that. Technical attention to semantics may sometimes lead to further insights, but the theoretical frameworks that it uses can never be comprehensive.

Semantics concerns the meanings of words or phrases or sentences. The main principle is simple: that people should take care to understand the working of language when they discuss meaning. Arguments in systematic theology always involve considerations of meaning. Moreover, when people deal with languages such as biblical Hebrew and Greek that they know imperfectly, it is easy to make subtle mistakes in evaluating meanings. Study of semantics in greater detail yields more principles. Good summaries and examples in biblical interpretation can be found in several books.<sup>5</sup>

Though many of the resources have been available for some time, discussions about the doctrine of man can still profit from using these

4. E.g., Alan Cruse, *Meaning in Language: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); John Lyons, *Linguistic Semantics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); John Lyons, *Semantics*, 2 vols. (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Note that we need to use resources from presuppositional apologetics to sift through good and bad presuppositions that may have influenced the theoretical developments in semantics. See Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).

5. The foundational book in many respects is James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). We find similar points in more digestible form in Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), chap. 1; Vern S. Poythress, *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), chaps. 14, 17.

resources more consistently. The same goes for any other topic in systematic theology. But the resources are particularly relevant for the doctrine of man because the focus of discussion concerning mankind often narrows down to the first chapters of Genesis (1–3). These chapters are indeed important, but they do not supply all the details about mankind that people might wish to know. Consequently, in the absence of more detail, it becomes tempting to read into the passages more than they actually say. The danger of importing anti-Christian assumptions about mankind becomes more acute. In fact, God never intended Genesis 1–3 to stand alone. The contents of Genesis 1–3 need to be supplemented with material from the rest of the Bible.

In the case of the issues with the image of God, interpreters have to deal with a phrase, “image of God,” rather than just the word *image*, and they must consider the underlying Hebrew and Greek expressions. The central question is, what is the meaning of the key expressions?

*Range of meaning.* One principle of semantics is that words may have a range of meaning and may have more than one meaning. For example, the word *trunk* can designate the trunk of a tree, the torso of a human body, the storage compartment of a car, or a sturdy box-shaped container used for storing or shipping goods. And there is variation in the use of any one of these meanings. The trunk of a tree can be bigger or smaller. If it is small enough, and the tree is only a sprout or a sapling, people might find it awkward to call it a *trunk*, instead choosing to speak about its *stem*. The boundary of what might be called a *trunk* is fuzzy. That does not mean that the word *trunk* can mean anything at all. In any one occurrence, it has a definite sense that fits with its immediate context.

When an interpreter considers a phrase such as “image of God,” rather than a single word, the use of a fixed phrase may suggest a narrowing of meaning. But even with a phrase rather than a single word, there may be nuances of distinctions in different occurrences, as illustrated by Colossians 1:15, Ephesians 4:24, and Colossians 3:10.

*Influence of context.* A second principle is that meaning is influenced by context. This principle is at work in Colossians 1:15, Ephesians 4:24, and Colossians 3:10. Take Colossians 1:15 first:

He [the Son] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

The context, as we already observed, is that of the Son's role in creating the world. The image relation is a relation between two persons in God. That is a different context from Genesis 1:26–27 and other passages that use the expression “image of God” with reference to mankind. The meanings in the context of God and in the context of man cannot be equated. They are related to one another. The relation between divine persons is the archetype for the ectypal relation between God and man. But archetype and ectype are still distinct.

Yes, Colossians 1:15 alludes to Genesis 1:26–27. It evokes Genesis 1 as a background. But an allusion is not an exact equation. Colossians 1:15 invites people to see an analogy between mankind's relation to God in Genesis 1:26–27 and the Son's relation to God the Father in Colossians 1:15. An analogy can be revealing. But it is not an identity. Readers need to respect both the bond between verses that is created by the use of “image” and the distinction between the Son as Creator and Adam as a creature.

Next, consider Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10:

[You were taught] to put on the new self, created after the *likeness* of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph. 4:24)

[You] have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the *image* of its creator. (Col. 3:10)

In both verses, the context deals with renewal that brings conformity to the pattern of Christ and his life, not the original situation with Adam. As we observed earlier, this renewal does not return us to a prefall, Adamic situation, but advances Christians toward the consummation, which is the fullest realization of conformity to the image of Christ. Yes, there is a relation between the two. But it is not an identity.

Next, consider Genesis 9:6. Here also, it is important to pay attention to context. Genesis 9:6 in its final line says “for God made man in his own

image,” with an obvious allusion to Genesis 1:27. But the verse as a whole addresses the penalty for murder, and murder is a reality that entered in after the fall. Genesis 9:6 seems to imply that man in some sense retains consequences from having been originally created in the image of God. But given its redemptive-historical setting after the fall, it allows a differentiation as well. Mankind is not in every respect the same after the fall as he was before. This differentiation may touch on ways in which man reflects, imitates, or shows likeness to God. Just because Genesis 9:6 uses an expression similar to Genesis 1:27, it does not commit itself to a precise affirmation of exact identity between the nature of man as innocent, represented by Adam before the fall, and the nature of man as fallen, after the fall of Adam.

*Words and concepts.* A third principle of semantics is to distinguish words from concepts.<sup>6</sup> A *word* has a meaning or a list of senses such as can be found in a dictionary. A *concept* is closely connected with someone’s view or knowledge or opinion about a subject. It is typically much richer than what is captured by a word in a dictionary. The word *image* means a reproduction or imitation or likeness or picture of something.<sup>7</sup> It is not the same as a theologian’s view of the nature of humanity, that is, his *concept* of humanity. The phrase “image of God” is, of course, more specific than the single word *image*. But in itself, it *means* little more than “likeness or semblance of God.” It takes whole paragraphs to clearly explain a theologian’s view, that is, his *concept* of humanity.

Over the centuries, theologians have developed some technical vocabulary. For example, the word *Trinity* is a technical word for summarizing the doctrine that God is three persons. In the case of the word *Trinity*, there is no difficulty in understanding what is going on, because the word

6. A good deal of Barr’s groundbreaking book *Semantics of Biblical Language* labors to show the fallacies produced when the distinction between word and concept is ignored. See also Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning*.

7. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/image](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/image), accessed August 16, 2016, provides the meaning of the English word *image*: “1 : a reproduction or imitation of the form of a person or thing . . . 3 a : exact likeness . . . 5 a (1): a mental picture or impression.” Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, with Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, repr. with corrections (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 853–54, under the Hebrew word *tselem* (צלם), has the meanings “image, likeness, semblance.”

*Trinity* does not occur in English translations of the Bible, nor is there an analogous word in the Bible in the original languages. Because *Trinity* is a *new* word used to summarize the teaching of the Bible, people are not tempted to *confuse* it with some word or phrase that is in the Bible.

But the danger of confusion can arise when theologians use a word as a technical term and the same or a similar word *also* occurs in the Bible. For example, the word *justification* has become a technical term in Reformation theology, to designate the act of God whereby he declares sinners to be righteous in his sight for the sake of the righteousness of Christ, imputed to them by faith. This use is distinct from the use of the word *dikaioō* (“justify” or “vindicate”) in James 2:21.

John Calvin clearly recognizes the complexities when he discusses James 2 in connection with what he has said about justification.<sup>8</sup> He points out that James and Paul do not mean the same thing by the word “justify” (or the corresponding Greek word *dikaioō*). James means something like “show to be righteous,” while Paul means “declare to be righteous.” Nor do James and Paul mean the same thing by “faith” (Greek *pistis*). James includes in his discussion the “faith” of demons, who believe that there is one God (James 2:18–20). In the key passages in Paul, he has in mind personal trust in Jesus Christ as the Savior (Rom. 3:22). (See table 7.1.)

**Table 7.1. Key Variations in Meaning**

| Greek Word                 | Paul (Rom. 5:1, etc.)   | James 2                         |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <i>dikaioō</i> (“justify”) | declare to be righteous | show to be righteous            |
| <i>pistis</i> (“faith”)    | trust (in Jesus)        | believing that there is one God |

People have always been able to distinguish between *word* and *concept*, though they might not use these labels. They can distinguish between

8. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 3.17.11–12.

the word *trunk* and everything they know about a particular tree with a particular trunk.

Calvin makes use of the distinction between *word* and *concept*, without using these particular labels. In his key discussion of justification, he distinguishes between the use of the word “justify” (or the underlying Greek word) in a particular verse, such as James 2:21, and the Bible’s total teaching about the doctrine of justification. The distinction between word and concept is illustrated by his argument. The word “justify” (or the underlying Greek word) has a range of usage and is not to be equated with the *concept* of justification, which would be a summary of all the relevant teaching in the Bible about how people are accounted righteous in the sight of God.

The same challenge confronts people with respect to the phrase “image of God.” The phrase (or rather the Hebrew equivalent) appears in Genesis 1:27. But it appears as a piece of ordinary language, not as a technical term. Because theologians are interested in the nature of mankind, they are free to develop a technical terminology on the basis of Genesis 1:27 and similar passages. And indeed they have developed such terminology, using the phrase “image of God.” In modern times, theology sometimes uses the Latin expression *imago Dei*. It is the Latin equivalent of “image of God.” The use of the Latin expression *in English* is a clear indication that the user is treating it as a specialized expression, a technical term, that he will then use to summarize several paragraphs of discussion.

Unfortunately, the expression *imago Dei* in Latin or “image of God” in English does not have the same meaning for everyone who uses it. Theologians differ as to what the image of God is, and therefore they differ in the meaning that they attribute to the technical expression “image of God.” But the whole discussion is confused as long as theologians do not clarify whether they are using “image of God” with a special, stipulated meaning or attempting to use it with exactly the same meaning as it has in the Bible. If they say that they are doing the latter, they still may not realize that it does not in fact have exactly the same fixed meaning in every occurrence. The exact nuance varies with



context.<sup>9</sup> If an essayist wants to “blend” meanings from here and there, it is up to him *how* he will select the blend. Any generality inevitably leaves out the particularity of the distinctiveness of the individual verses. One cannot simultaneously express in a single term the flexibility of the Bible’s own discourse and the precision of a technical term for use in systematic theology. One must choose one or the other. Either choice can serve to communicate the truth. But communication is going to be clear only if one understands that there *is* a choice and tells others which meaning one is using.

*Sense and referent.* Still another source of confusion arises if people fail to distinguish between *sense* and *referent*. The sense of the word or an expression is the *meaning* that it expresses—in a particular context. There may be different meanings in different contexts. The *referent* is the thing in the real world or an imaginary world to which the expression refers. So, for example, if Bill remarks that “Philadelphia is the largest city in Pennsylvania,” Debbie, who hears him, can distinguish *sense* and *referent* with respect to the word *city*. The referent is *Philadelphia*. What is the sense? The word *city* has its normal sense, “a place where people live that is larger or more important than a town.”<sup>10</sup> It does not magically contain within its meaning all the information that Debbie could look up about Philadelphia. In an encyclopedia she can find out much more information about the referent than what is contained in the sense of the common noun *city*.

By analogy, how do we describe what happens with the phrase “image of God”? When the phrase occurs in Genesis 1:27, its sense is “likeness of God.” Its referent is mankind. There are lots of things that people may know about mankind. But they are not mysteriously concealed within the meaning of the English expression “image of God” as it occurs in verse 27.

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9. At a technical level, the variation in meaning is often mostly a variation in the meaning of a whole clause or sentence, rather than a variation in meaning of the word within the clause or sentence. Yet the two kinds of variation are not perfectly separable. At a technical level, the word “image” in the biblical contexts means “image.” It is fairly colorless. But what it does in its clause or sentence may vary.

10. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/city](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/city), accessed November 8, 2016.

Nor are they concealed within the meaning of the corresponding Hebrew expression. As we have indicated, the Hebrew expression means that man is like God. But to understand all the ways that man is like God, one has to read the rest of the Bible.

In sum, a lot of the classical discussion of “image of God” is troubled by confusion as to just what is being discussed. Suppose that Bill is discussing the image of God. Is he stipulating a special meaning for a technical expression? Or is he interpreting the meaning of a single occurrence of an expression somewhere in the Bible? In the latter case, the result depends on which verse he is examining. Or is he doing still a third thing, namely, examining all the occurrences of the expression and perhaps similar expressions (“likeness of God” in James 3:9)? In that case, a careful analysis needs to distinguish the meaning that is expressed in each verse. The verse as a whole means more than the meaning of one expression within it. And Bill must beware of naively running together all the meanings, as though there were no differences in nuances, generated by the differences in context.

If Bill is examining all the verses, he also has to confront the fact that the verses have their meaning in relation to the larger context of the books of the Bible and the entire canon. If he wants to expound the relation of the verses to the entire canon, he will be engaged not only in systematic theology, but in systematic theology that necessarily touches on every topic that the Bible addresses. It is not clear what the limits are of such a study.

## **Analogy**

The third main resource for interpretation is the occurrence of *analogy*. A lot of our knowledge depends on analogy. When a person’s thoughts are rightly ordered by the Holy Spirit, they are *analogous* to God’s thoughts. This principle holds true for all of a person’s thoughts, both thoughts about God and thoughts about the world.

Moreover, people understand some of the characteristics of God by analogy with similar characteristics among human beings, and vice versa. God’s knowledge is analogous to human knowledge, but God’s knowledge

is complete and never changes, unlike man's knowledge. God's dominion is analogous to human dominion, but it is complete and extends over all time and all places, unlike the limitations of human dominion. When the Bible says that God is "my rock and my fortress and my deliverer" (Ps. 18:2), it uses analogies with rocks, fortresses, and human deliverers. Even within the created world, people use analogy. They identify a new instance of a horse by *analogy* with other instances.

Analogies have some points of similarity and other points of dissimilarity. And typically, when people use an analogy, they do not specify in complete detail just what the points of similarity are. Such is true, as we have seen, with the expression "image of God" in Genesis 1:26–27. It indicates that there are similarities between God and man, but does not provide a complete list. People have to figure out salient similarities from other passages of the Bible.

There are two lessons about method to learn here. The first is a simple one, namely, to recognize that analogies occur in theology and to admit that they occur. The second lesson builds on the first. When people encounter an analogy, they may explicitly reflect on what features of similarity it evokes. Some will be obvious, others not so obvious, others debatable. People can be confident about the obvious core of similarities, and this core is reinforced by other passages of the Bible. But the similarities do amount to an identity. Analysts must be content with the fact that they do not know everything.

The lesson holds with respect to the question of the image of God. The Bible does not provide one definitive, complete list with the ways in which human beings are like God. And the list is going to be somewhat different before and after the fall. In fact, the goal of having a "list" is not quite right, because it suggests that analysts can focus wholly on the individual items within the list. In fact, the Bible considers the whole human person, and how specific features and capabilities and relations of that person are shaped by the whole person. Moreover, redeemed human beings are renewed in the image of Christ. As redeemed, they will display some kinds of similarity to Christ that are not present with people who are not yet redeemed. And the similarities will vary subtly from one

person to another, because one person who has been a Christian for a long time may have grown more into the image of Christ than a new believer (2 Cor. 3:18). In addition, men and women will not be analogous to God in quite the same ways in detail.<sup>11</sup> Scripture as a whole teaches us a good deal about many similarities and analogies between God and humanity. But not everything that the Bible teaches is captured in a single, simple formula. It is wise to recognize that the total teaching of the Bible about humanity is rich.

### Analogies in Biblical Theology

A second, more specialized use of analogy occurs in reflections on biblical theology. The phrase *biblical theology* needs explanation. All theology ought to be based on the instruction found in the Bible. So all theology ought to be “biblical” in this sense. But the phrase *biblical theology* has been used in a variety of ways, some of which are problematic.<sup>12</sup> In the context of this book, we use *biblical theology* to refer to a theological approach to the Bible that reckons not only with the fact that the whole Bible is the Word of God, but also with the fact that it was given *progressively through time*. Biblical theology pays special attention to this process of progressive unfolding in God’s actions and in his revelatory words.<sup>13</sup> The designation *biblical theology* can also be used to describe any study of the Bible that pays attention to major themes that belong to specific books of the Bible or to the Bible as a whole. For example, the idea that God’s character is reflected in the world that he has made is broader than the specific language of “image,” but it is pertinent to a consideration of the phrase “image of God.” The idea of reflecting God’s character is part of the larger thematic context. Many of the larger themes in biblical theology

11. John M. Frame, “Men and Women in the Image of God,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 225–32.

12. Vern S. Poythress, “Kinds of Biblical Theology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 70, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 129–42.

13. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1975).

use analogies. All the reflections of God's character are loosely analogous to one another, but not identical.

This book uses the expression *biblical theology* broadly to include both the study of the progress of revelation and also the study of various themes in the Bible. Both kinds of study can help people have a better understanding of the Bible.

Meredith G. Kline's book *Images of the Spirit*<sup>14</sup> is an example of a biblical-theological exploration that has a bearing on "image of God." Because Kline pays attention to the context of biblical-theological themes, the book helps in appreciating that the phrase "image of God" in the Bible enjoys rich, complex relations with broader themes, and is not therefore to be equated with the later technical terminology of systematic theology.

The previous chapter already illustrated this principle by introducing the theme of sonship in connection with Genesis 5:3. Sonship is a biblical-theological theme that has analogy built into it. Being a son of God is analogous to being the son of an earthly father. And this theme is relevant to understanding Genesis 1:26–30 and the image of God.

Adam is not explicitly called "son of God" in Genesis 1. But Genesis 5:1–3 shows that the themes of sonship and image are connected. The fact that Adam has a son, Seth, after his image suggests that Adam is imitating God, who created Adam himself as a son in his image.

God has a special personal relation with Adam and grants him a special home in the form of the garden of Eden. So God is treating Adam like a son. When Christ comes, he is identified both as "the last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45) and as the beloved Son (Heb. 1:2). Like a human son inheriting from his father, Christ inherits the world as his inheritance (1 Cor. 15:25–28; Heb. 1:2–3). The New Testament applies to Christ the language of dominion. This use echoes the language of dominion applied earlier to Adam in Genesis 1:26–30. And then there is Luke 3:38, which explicitly calls Adam "the son of God." It makes explicit what is already implicit in Genesis 1:26–30.

14. Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980). For further analysis of Kline's approach, see Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022).

The point here is that the biblical-theological theme of sonship is important in the Bible. Adam is a son of God. Adam fathers a son, Seth, “in his own likeness” (Gen. 5:3). Later in history, Israel as the people of God is a son (Ex. 4:22). Christ is the final Son (Heb. 1:2). Christians become sons through Christ (Gal. 4:1–7). To be a son includes being in the image of one’s father. So the language concerning “image of God” in Genesis 1:26–27 does not function like a technical term, but like analogical language, which has connections outward to other instances and kinds of sonship and reflections and likenesses. People miss these connections if they just focus narrowly on trying to determine the reference (what in man is like God?).

Once the pertinence of the theme of sonship is taken into account, the language concerning the image of God in Genesis 1:26–27 and in 5:1, 3 can be related by analogy to an archetype in the Trinity. The second person of the Trinity is the eternal *Son* of God and also the eternal *image* of God (Col. 1:15; see also Heb. 1:3).<sup>15</sup> The second person of the Trinity has always existed and has always been related to the first person, the Father. He is the Son and the image even before the creation of the world. So this eternal Trinitarian relation is the archetype of original pattern for earthly instances of sonship and image. The eternal Son is the archetype not only for the creation of Adam but for all human father-son relations and for the redemptive sonship that Christians receive through Christ (Gal. 4:1–7).

It is worthwhile noting that angels are called “sons of God” in a few verses in the Bible (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7). Angels are not related to God in *exactly* the same way as human beings are. But the word “sons” is appropriately used for both angels and human beings because angels and humans in their relation to God are analogous in appropriate, yet different, ways. Likewise, some theologians have said that angels are in the image of God<sup>16</sup>

15. On son and image, see Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chaps. 8–9.

16. Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706), *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol. 3, *The Works of God and the Fall of Man*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 1.3.9.26, 282. Many theologians have rejected the idea that angels are created in the image of God. But why? There is a truth to be digested in

because they reflect him holistically. They reflect God, but not in exactly the same way that human beings do. Their reflection is analogous.

Subsequent chapters will show that the theme of sonship has pertinence to other issues within the general topic of the doctrine of man. Biblical-theological themes such as sonship enhance appreciation of how Genesis 1–3 functions within the canon of Scripture as a whole. This enhancement can also help in explaining the Bible to other people. Analogies and illustrations shaped by Scripture help people grasp more deeply what Scripture is teaching.

Chapter 2 considered the issue of the origin of man. Analogy occurs in this context as well. One of the questions is whether the works of God are all analogous to one another in being subject to allegedly impersonal scientific laws. Or can there be exceptions? To deal faithfully with the descriptions in Genesis 2, interpreters have to allow *disanalogous* activity of God in creating Adam and Eve. At the same time, as we saw in considering John Murray's discussion of the distinctiveness of mankind, people can easily overlook genuine analogies in the Bible if they are concerned *only* to emphasize one aspect of the text, namely, its distinctive account. A comparison with other passages in the Bible shows that they affirm analogies between the first creation of Adam and the later care of God in forming people in the womb (Ps. 139:13). Analogies exist between God's creation of birds and his creation of new human beings. Using multiple analogies and multiple kinds of distinctions can increase appreciation for both the distinctiveness of one event, the creation of Adam on the sixth day of the creation week, and its analogies with other events in creation and providence.

Closely linked to the topic of analogies is the idea of multiple *perspectives*. Each analogy that applies in understanding mankind is like a distinct perspective on man. Using a variety of analogies may often help

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the verses that affirm the sonship of angels and their role in reflecting God. Is it because theologians could not find a specific biblical text, and because they wanted to reserve the phrase "image of God" for technical use, to designate what is distinctive to human beings in contrast with all other creatures? The single-minded goal can easily lead to overlooking themes that cut across the goal.

in producing a richer overall knowledge. The variety of analogies produces a variety of perspectives. Multiple perspectives may complement one another. Each perspective may highlight something about mankind that is left comparatively in the background by another perspective. And yet, by carefully seeking the truth from the starting point of one perspective, an analyst may be able to incorporate *within* that perspective the insights of a second perspective, or more.

For example, consider using both the theme of image and the theme of sonship in thinking about Adam's initial situation as a creature. The two themes overlap. For Adam to be a son of God suggests that he is *like* God, since earthly sons are like their earthly fathers. So the perspective of sonship leads to *including* an affirmation of likeness. The perspective of sonship, rightly understood, affirms everything that people would discover using the perspective that starts with the theme of image. But the perspective of image has the advantage of making more explicit and central the aspect of likeness. If an analyst had just the perspective of sonship, he might think primarily of affection or privilege or inheritance, and not focus on likeness.

Suppose now that analysis starts with the theme of image. The archetype for the image of God, as we have seen, is Christ, who is the eternal image (Col. 1:15). Christ is also the eternal Son. This dual truth suggests that Adam's imaging includes the features of sonship. So using image as a perspective leads to affirming that Adam is a son of God, as Luke 3:38 says explicitly. Rightly understood, the perspective of image leads to including everything that people could notice with the theme of sonship. But sonship makes more explicit aspects such as intimacy.

Multiple perspectives may help not only in analyzing humanity, but in contemplating God, or indeed any subject matter.<sup>17</sup>

In contemporary culture, the idea of each person's having a perspective is sometimes used to promote relativism. It may be claimed that each person has his own truth, which cannot be harmonized with someone

17. Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001).



else's truth. But such relativism is not compatible with the Bible. God is absolute truth, and he makes known his truth to human beings. God is in harmony with himself. And so all the truth that God knows is in harmony. Failure to harmonize human *claims* to truth is merely a sign that someone is in error.

As an illustration, consider what it means to use more than one spatial perspective.<sup>18</sup> People may look at a single chair from more than one angle. No one human being can simultaneously see the chair from all angles or perspectives at once. But there is no disharmony or contradiction between the perspectives. Each spatial perspective informs observers about the chair, and people learn truth from what they see from any of the angles. So it is with the right use of multiple perspectives.

Subsequent chapters consider specific topics about the doctrine of man. For each topic, analysis may deliberately use more than one perspective, as appropriate. Analysis may invoke more than one helpful analogy. Whenever a person uses more than one perspective, he should understand that the multiple perspectives work together intrinsically in harmony. Properly understood, each perspective encourages progress in knowledge. A person grows and finds himself actually affirming and including everything he might notice using a complementary perspective. All the perspectives are based on the unified, harmonious knowledge of God, who is one God in three persons. Human beings should be trying to think God's thoughts after him, on a creaturely level.

## **Metaphysical Frameworks**

The fourth main resource for interpretation is to critically inspect the role of *metaphysical frameworks* or metaphysical assumptions in influencing theological formulations and theological arguments.<sup>19</sup>

What does *metaphysics* mean? Metaphysics is an account of what is most basic or most ultimate in the structure of the world. In studying

18. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chap. 2.

19. Vern S. Poythress, *Making Sense of the World: How the Trinity Helps to Explain Reality* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2024).

theology, someone may ask: “What is a particular theologian or a particular theological argument presupposing about the nature of ultimate reality? And how do such presuppositions affect the argument?”

This type of effect occurs in the classical Roman Catholic interpretation of the image of God. Roman Catholic teaching distinguishes “image” and “likeness.” “Image” consists in “natural” gifts of rationality, free will, and spirituality. These are supposedly retained after the fall. “Likeness” consists in the “supernatural” gifts of righteousness and immortality, which are lost in the fall. This idea of natural and supernatural gifts is not actually visible in the text of Genesis 1:26–27. It is a metaphysical framework that is imported from elsewhere. That “elsewhere” is tied in with the Roman Catholic theory of tradition as an extra source for theology. It is also tied in with the traditional Roman Catholic theory that human beings as originally created had a tension between lower and higher desires, a tension to be overcome by a supernatural addition.

The issue of metaphysical frameworks also comes up when chapter 10 examines the position of G. C. Berkouwer. Berkouwer expounds the meaning of “image of God” as a dynamic *process* of imaging. This focus on process contrasts with a more classical approach, which focuses on stable, more permanent features about the nature of mankind. The difference in focus raises the question, “Which are more significant biblically and theologically, constant features or processes?” The prioritizing of constancy over process, or process over constancy, produces a kind of metaphysical framework, and that framework influences what someone notices. In the end, it also influences how a person ends up defining the image of God.

The major underlying difficulty is that metaphysical frameworks can all too easily be imported from elsewhere, from a place other than the Bible. They then influence the structure of theology. But when this influence takes place, the metaphysical frameworks themselves may not be thoroughly inspected to see whether in fact they have an adequate basis in biblical teaching or whether they are compatible with that teaching. Even if they are compatible, when they are not based on the Bible they do not have the authority that belongs to what actually follows from biblical teaching.

It is a mistake to incorporate such metaphysics as though it had the same standing as teaching that derives from the Bible.

Metaphysics can also influence the discussion about the origin of man. If someone holds a materialistic metaphysics and believes that matter is the ultimate origin of everything, he must exclude the activity of God such as Genesis 1–2 describes.

## **Philosophical Metaphysics**

Consider a bit more the variations in metaphysics, which are influenced by philosophy. For this purpose, take a very simplified tour of the history of Western metaphysics.<sup>20</sup> Metaphysical speculation goes back to the early days of Greek philosophy. The Greek philosopher Thales said that all is water. If so, water is the most basic “thing.” Other things are somehow differentiations of this one thing, which is most basic. Anaximander said that the original thing was indeterminate; Anaximenes said that all was air. These speculations are no longer popular. But the point is that they are early philosophical attempts to specify what everything is built on and what everything comes from. They provide an account of metaphysics, of what is most ultimate in the constituents of the world.

Democritus said that the world is composed of tiny particles, individual atoms. Everything else takes place by mechanical interactions and recombinations of the atoms. A view something like this metaphysical view crops up centuries later in modern philosophical materialism.

The two most influential ancient Greek philosophers were Plato and Aristotle. Their ideas were modified by Christian thinkers. But Christians still to some extent took on board the metaphysical frameworks provided by these two men. The metaphysics provided some convenient vocabulary for deep-level analysis of reality.

For Plato, the eternal *forms* were the most ultimate framework. The forms included the form of the good, the form of justice, the form of the

20. John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015).

beautiful, and so on. These forms were then imperfectly embodied or expressed in particular instances of things on earth. The form of the good is more ultimate than individual good things. Likewise, *chairness* is more ultimate than an individual chair.

Christians influenced by Plato were apt to prioritize the realm of ideas. The soul was supposed to have contact with the realm of ideas. The body was inferior. Plato believed in the preexistence of souls. They existed even before they took on bodies. And their proper destiny was to cast off the body, in order to enter into the purity belonging to the realm of ideas. Christians rejected these ideas in their most extreme form, but could still be influenced by them and retain a stark dualism between body and soul.

Aristotle was a student of Plato, but was more earthly. The forms existed. Yet they existed not in an ethereal realm of ideas, but *in* the things around us. *Chairness* exists in individual chairs. A *substance*, such as a statue, is composed of two aspects, form and matter. A statue is a statue of some particular thing—let us say a lion. So the form is this particular shape, the shape of a lion, while the matter is the material, whether marble or wood or bronze, out of which the statue is made.

Immanuel Kant has been a watershed in the history of Western philosophy because he attempted to show that the old metaphysics of Greek philosophy is impossible to carry through. It is impossible because of the limitations of human reason. Human reason works well in analyzing the phenomena of the world. It is adapted to the phenomena. Or rather, more precisely, the phenomena already undergo a kind of organization by perceptual and mental processes before they even enter into consciousness. So human reason can never reach the thing in itself, but only the thing in its appearances. Suppose that Debbie sees a dog. According to this view, she does not see the thing in itself, but only the appearance of a dog. The thing in itself is beyond reach. But Debbie has to postulate its existence in order to account for the appearance. This realm of postulated existences is the realm of the *noumenal*, the realm of ideas, in distinction from the realm of the *phenomenal*, which makes its impressions on observers.

The result of Kant's position is that the old quest for an ultimate metaphysical analysis of the thing in itself is abandoned. It is permanently

blocked off because human observations of phenomena cannot access the thing in itself. But in a larger sense, Kant still provides a kind of replacement form of metaphysics. Kant's metaphysics tells fellow philosophers that there are two realms, the realm of the noumenal and the realm of the phenomenal. And it tells them at least in general terms what they may expect to find in each realm, and why. It even tells them about the thing in itself. What it tells them is that this thing is permanently inaccessible. That principle functions as an important classifying and structuring principle in Kant's view of knowledge. His view of knowledge then functions as itself the substitute metaphysics. It tells people what the boundaries of knowledge are. And therefore it also tells people what the boundaries and ultimate structure of the human "world" are.

One thing to observe from this story is that it is not so easy to dispense with metaphysics. If, with Kant, one *says* that one is dispensing with it, what actually happens is that an older metaphysics is dumped. But it is dumped in order that a new form of metaphysics, that is, a new form of an account of what is ultimate, may then replace the older metaphysics.

Suppose, however, that one attempts to just dump the older metaphysics, not to replace it. Is that viable? If one is going to do any persuading, one must give an account for why the older metaphysics has to be dumped. And that account already conceals the beginning of a new order of things because it must have some form of plausible rationality. Moreover, just dumping the old leads to a blank. Total skepticism is not livable. If someone is skeptical about whether speeding cars and buses are real, he might die by walking in front of one of them. If someone is skeptical about the law of gravity, he might die by jumping off a tall building. Things and ideas creep in to fill the vacuum of skepticism.

Various forms of postmodernism have come in to challenge Kant's metaphysics and the metaphysics of those who followed him. Kant believed in the universality of human reason. As a result, he could also postulate the universality of the distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal realms, and the universality of the processes of scientific investigation of the phenomena. Many postmodernists have challenged that idea of universality. But they do not end with nothing as a result.

If they did, they would have nothing to say. Instead, they offer an alternative ultimate account. Paradoxically, this alternative also says that there can be no *one* ultimate account because of the limitations of our language, our culture, and our finiteness.

That postmodernist alternative (or rather, several alternatives, with their own variations) is included in what this book calls *metaphysics*. It is an attempt to provide a standpoint of ultimacy, or at least as close to ultimacy as people can hope to get, compatible with their finiteness.

One modern offering in metaphysics is modern materialistic philosophy, which has returned to a point of view similar to Democritus. According to this worldview, everything else arises from the mechanism of atoms in motion. Modern materialistic philosophy seeks support from twentieth-century physics, in which the indivisible particles are elementary particles rather than the combinations of particles that physics and chemistry call *atoms*.

These metaphysical views are important because they are often used as a background when trying to understand human nature. The point is that such background influence is questionable and might lead theologians astray. Here is one reason why this book does not extensively interact with philosophical approaches to the questions about humanity.<sup>21</sup> Human reasoning does not operate well without massive instruction from the Bible.

The Bible does not teach any of the views above, but proclaims a two-level reality, consisting of God on the one hand and the created world on

21. We may cite as an example Joshua R. Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology: Humans, Both Creaturely and Divine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020), because it is relatively recent and introduces readers to a much larger body of philosophical discussion. It would take many books to explore the mixture of good, bad, and doubtful that is to be found in this larger body of literature. Suffice it to say that for my own part, I find this literature to contain difficulties with respect to all four of the special methods that we employ. (1) Presuppositions. Philosophical approaches often display a confidence in fallen human intuition, “common sense,” scientific pronouncements, or fallen human reason that is unfounded. (2) Semantics. Key terms are used either without any explicit definition or with a definition that does not itself adequately clarify the meaning and make it precise. (3) Analogy. The use of key terms often relies on analogies that are not acknowledged to be analogies, but are thought to be clear and literal, because the philosophical approach hopes to penetrate to a level of ultimate structure. (4) Metaphysics. Philosophical approaches often rely on metaphysics that has not been inspected with enough critical discernment.

the other hand. The metaphysics is all determined by God, who specifies everything by his word. In particular, God specifies all the human perspectives on reality. There is a unity to reality because there is only one God. There is also an irreducible plurality to reality because God is three persons. Van Til rightly emphasized what he called “the equal ultimacy” of the one and the many, unity and plurality.<sup>22</sup> They both have their ultimate basis in God, who is both one and three.

There is unity and plurality in God, and then also unity and plurality in the created world. Likewise, there are many perspectives on reality. No *one* system of categories gives an exclusive and comprehensive answer about the nature of created reality.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, when perspectives are rightly used, they cohere in one unified system of truth.

Thus, the attention to metaphysical frameworks has a close relation to the use of analogy. If no one perspective provides an exclusive, ultimate picture of reality, people are free to use many perspectives, and the many analogies that come with them. If a person chooses to use only one perspective, that perspective may still display the truth. But it will not provide an ultimate analysis, and it will not be superior in every respect to what a person would notice by using another perspective, or many perspectives together.

The older metaphysical approaches of the ancient Greeks also used analogies. But they tended to use a single analogy, or cluster of analogies, as though it were not really an analogy at all, but a definitive, nonanalogical ultimate analysis. For example, Thales claimed that all was water. So water is the starting analogy. Plato used the analogy of a single concept applying to many particulars. For example, the concept of the good applies to many particular things in the world. Aristotle used the concept of substance, in which the natural starting point is a unified solid object such as a statue or an animal. He also utilized the concepts of form and matter as a pair. In this use, he claimed that every substance was analogous to instances like a bronze statue of a lion. The form is the form of a lion, and the matter is the bronze of which it is made.

22. Van Til, *Defense of the Faith*, 31, 47–51.

23. Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014).

The effect of metaphysical systems can be briefly displayed by considering the three main current approaches to the nature of the image of God: a structural, a functional, and a relational approach.<sup>24</sup> A structural approach says that the image of God consists in some permanent feature in human nature, such as reason or spirituality. A functional approach says that the image of God consists in a *function* or functions that human beings exercise in practice—dominion, perhaps, or the function of representing God to the world. A relational approach, such as Barth's, says that the image consists in relationship.

There are, of course, a host of reasons why these three approaches have attractions. But one of the sources of attraction for readers lies in preferences for one or another metaphysical foundation. One such foundation is Aristotle's metaphysics. It still has its subtle effects on systematic theology in a more traditional style. It puts the focus on constant features of a substance. The salient constant features are what belong to its essence. In the case of humanity, the essence of humanity consists in an unchanging core. This focus on what is constant has an affinity with the structural approach (in which reason or moral responsibility may be seen as part of a fundamental structure).

A second approach builds on the success of modern science. The advent of the modern scientific revolution resulted in turning away from searching for essences. Researchers in the natural sciences studied the activities or functions in the interactions of physical things. This focus has an affinity with the functional approach. The functional approach to the image of God says that the image of God designates man's function in relation to the world. He exercises dominion and is God's representative in the world. The function is manifest in human activities and engagements.

24. Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 567–68, citing Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 460–69. Jonathan King, *The Beauty of the Lord: Theology as Aesthetics* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2018), 113–31, includes all three aspects. See Ryan S. Peterson, *The Imago Dei as Human Identity: A Theological Interpretation* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), chap. 2.



A third approach focuses on structural analysis. Structural analysis has risen to prominence in the social sciences. (This modern structural focus should not be confused with the earlier structural approach to the image of God.) This structural analysis has an affinity with the relational approach. A relational approach says that the relation to God and to other humans is what is most significant about mankind.

Readers' own interests, along with their comfort with a particular worldview, may influence their attraction to one of the three approaches with respect to the image of God. Suppose that a reader inhabits a worldview that includes one of the three options: (1) the traditional philosophy of substances or Platonic forms; (2) the functional view of the universe common in natural sciences; or (3) the relational view common in social sciences. The reader is already accustomed to expecting that the universe will reveal its secrets in line with his favored framework. When he comes to read about the image of God, one of the views feels intuitively natural, and "just sounds right," because it happens to run along the lines that he has already absorbed. He is not motivated to ask critical questions, because it feels to him that the one approach is "obviously" superior and answers the question about the image of God in a "rational" way. He does not realize how much he is being influenced by his worldview.

The three approaches to the image of God have correlations with three perspectives developed by Kenneth L. Pike: the particle, wave, and field perspectives.<sup>25</sup> (These three perspectives have a subtle relation to the three persons of the Trinity.)<sup>26</sup> The particle perspective treats the world as "particles," stable wholes. The wave perspective treats the world as a *dynamic* world, consisting in "waves" of events flowing into one another. The field perspective treats the world as a system of relations.

How do these three perspectives correlate with the three approaches to the image of God? The structural approach uses primarily a particle

25. Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* (Lincoln, NB/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), chaps. 3–5; Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy*, 143–44; Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, app. D; Pierce Taylor Hibbs, *The Trinity, Language, and Human Behavior: A Reformed Exposition of the Language Theory of Kenneth L. Pike* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018).

26. See Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, app. D.

perspective, treating human beings as stable, particle-like wholes. The functional approach uses more prominently a wave perspective, treating humanity with a focus on the dynamics of development. The relational approach uses prominently the field perspective, which focuses on relations. In a broad sense, Pike's three perspectives provide three frameworks for looking at humanity. The frameworks deeply influence what one notices when one looks at a subject for investigation.

Return now to Kenneth Pike's three perspectives. Pike developed his idea of three perspectives partly by considering what was happening with competing linguistic theories.<sup>27</sup> Linguistic theorists could approach the same linguistic data from any one of the three perspectives and proceed to make sense of it. Because they could make sense of the data, it might seem "obvious" to them that theirs was the one "correct" theory. In their zeal, they might fight against competing theories. In their haste and bias, they might not realize that, given enough work, the competing theories could also make sense of the same data. In reality, no one theory worked *to the exclusion* of the others.

Note that one perspective *can* be better or at least simpler than the other two in a specific setting. Some kinds of linguistic data are more easily and conveniently dealt with by using one of the three perspectives, rather than the other two. But *which* perspective is most convenient depends on *which* data in *which* language is under investigation. In the long run, it proves better and more insightful to have all *three* perspectives available, in order to notice phenomena of many kinds.

By analogy, the same lesson holds for theories of the image of God. Each theory sees most readily what it is best at seeing. Each theory *seems* on the surface to account for the data found in the key biblical texts and in the larger theological affirmations surrounding them. So an early zeal, accompanying the excitement of discovery and insight, can tempt each theorist to think that he has the one "correct" theory. He then discounts and repudiates the competing theories; he does not notice their positive strengths.

27. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts*, chap. 1.

Because each of the three perspectives is a perspective *on the whole* of the field, any one of the perspectives can “feel” as though it is not only correct but complete. In the minds of the users, it displaces all the alternative perspectives. But the feeling of completeness is an illusion. It is in tension with who God is and how he made the world, as well as how he made human beings.

### **The Role of Attending to Metaphysics**

If we like, we can see this principle of attending to metaphysics as merely a subdivision of the broader principle of attending to presuppositions. Assumptions about metaphysics are merely one form of presupposition. This book continues to treat the principle of metaphysics as a fourth principle because it has considerable importance. People should not forget it in the midst of attention to other kinds of presuppositions.

### **The Four Principles Together**

The four principles, concerning presuppositions, semantics, analogy, and metaphysics, are applicable throughout systematic theology. But they become more crucial in considering the doctrine of man because Genesis 1–3 does not by itself provide all the information that people might like to have. Note also that issues concerning presuppositions can sometimes be a source for difficulties in dealing properly with principles in the other three areas. Let us look at these three other areas, 2 to 4, one at a time.

(2) *Semantics*. In semantics, word meanings are frequently complicated and difficult to describe and control completely. Temptation arises if an analyst presupposes that he can master meaning. The desire for mastery may drive him to oversimplify and to treat ordinary terms as though they were technical terms, or to treat technical terms as though they did not involve a choice of focus. He may redefine a word meaning in a way that matches his larger system of assumptions.

(3) *Analogy*. In treating analogies, an analyst may encounter a similar temptation to oversimplify analogies in order to master them. The desire for

mastery may lead to treating an analogy as though it were an identity, or as though it provided a perfect map of the subject being examined. An analyst may also be motivated to choose one particular analogy as the exclusive key because it provides answers that he already desires for other reasons. The one preferred analogy becomes the one preferred perspective, which allegedly provides a complete theory. An analyst may without realizing it ignore the possibility of multiple perspectives.

(4) *Metaphysics*. A temptation can arise to treat a particular metaphysical framework as the one that provides people with an “ultimate” analysis. A particular metaphysical framework may be attractive because it provides a stable ultimate framework for mastering the subject. An analyst may also prefer a particular metaphysical framework because of basic commitments that are unexamined.

All in all, there may be a host of hidden reasons that subtly corrupt theological reasoning. Here is one reason to pay attention to *methods* for exploring what is true in theology.

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on Methods**

Acts 2 shows us the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit as the divine Helper for Christians in the work of theology and life. The apostles and the early church received the Spirit from the ascended Christ, and it was the Spirit that enabled them to be faithful in understanding and proclaiming the Word of God. The Spirit was God’s gift to them. He is also God’s gift to us when we are united to Christ. The Spirit is God’s fundamental “method” for aiding our interpretation, if we may call him that. The Spirit operates in transforming our minds, according to the pattern of Romans 12:1–2. In principle, this transformation includes our appreciation for the four resources that we have discussed. (1) Our presuppositions are transformed. (2) The Holy Spirit teaches us to care for the truth. And care for truth includes care for not presuming too much as we consider the meaning of words (semantics). (3) The Holy Spirit uses many analogies in the Bible, and love for God implies respecting these analogies. (4) Finally, the renewal of the mind in Romans 12:1–2

includes renewal that moves us away from dependence on half-truths in philosophical metaphysics.

### **Key Terms**

|                                              |                                              |
|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| analogy                                      | metaphysics                                  |
| Anaximander                                  | method                                       |
| Anaximenes                                   | noumenal                                     |
| antithesis                                   | particle perspective                         |
| archetype                                    | perspective                                  |
| Aristotle                                    | phenomenal                                   |
| Barth, Karl                                  | Pike, Kenneth L.                             |
| biblical theology                            | Plato                                        |
| Calvin, John                                 | postmodernism                                |
| common grace                                 | presupposition                               |
| Democritus                                   | presuppositional apologetics                 |
| distinction between word and<br>concept      | range of meaning                             |
| ectype                                       | referent (in linguistics)                    |
| fall of man                                  | relational approach (to the<br>image of God) |
| field perspective                            | relativism                                   |
| functional approach (to the<br>image of God) | Roman Catholic                               |
| I-it                                         | semantics                                    |
| image of God                                 | sense (in linguistics)                       |
| <i>imago Dei</i>                             | son of God                                   |
| influence of context                         | structural approach (to the<br>image of God) |
| I-Thou                                       | systematic theology                          |
| Kant, Immanuel                               | technical term                               |
| Kuyper, Abraham                              | Thales                                       |
| materialistic philosophy                     | Van Til, Cornelius                           |
| matter                                       | wave perspective                             |
| metaphysical framework                       |                                              |

## **Study Questions**

1. What is *presuppositional apologetics*?
2. What is the nature of semantics, and why is it relevant to doctrine?
3. Why can analogies be useful in studying the doctrine of man?
4. What were some of the early metaphysical speculations among ancient Greek philosophers?
5. Why does it help to be aware of the influence of metaphysical frameworks as we study the doctrine of man?
6. How do the four resources in method—presuppositions, semantics, analogy, and metaphysical frameworks—help in sifting through claims about the image of God?
7. How could it improve your own study to be aware of the four resources in method?

## **For Further Reading**

- Carson, D. A. *Exegetical Fallacies*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996. Chap. 1.
- Frame, John M. *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015.
- . *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015. Pp. 46–77.

## **Prayer**

Dear God and Father, thank you for giving us multiple resources for examining the Bible. We pray that you would enable us to use resources without being captivated by them, and in cases of mixed ideas not to absorb what is false.



## THE FRAMEWORK OF *LEX CHRISTI* (THE LAW OF CHRIST)

In the previous chapter, we noted the importance of the use of analogy in studying Scripture. One instance of the use of analogy can be particularly useful to us, namely, an analogical use of the Ten Commandments. Each of the Ten Commandments can be used as the starting point for a perspective or an analogy in order to better understand any of the specialized subtopics in the doctrine of man. In all, we obtain ten perspectives, one corresponding to each of the Ten Commandments. This use of ten perspectives needs further explanation because it will serve as a framework for the rest of our discussion of the doctrine of man.

The special framework using the Ten Commandments was developed by Timothy P. Yates. He calls this framework *lex Christi*,<sup>1</sup> which is the Latin expression for “the law of Christ” (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). This framework is useful for the doctrine of man for six main reasons: (1) it shows the close relation between God’s attributes and human

1. T. P. Yates, “Adapting Westminster Standards’ Moral Law Motif to Integrate Systematic Theology, Apologetics and Pastoral Practice,” PhD thesis, North-West University, 2021, iii, <https://dspace.nwu.ac.za/handle/10394/38819>, accessed April 11, 2024. Dr. Yates has a longer descriptive title, but one short form is *lex Christi*.

His most recent version is at <http://www.bethoumyvision.net>. It is licensed under Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org>). It is under these terms that this introduction creatively interacts with his thesis.



nature—especially relevant for understanding the nature of humanity; (2) it contains multiple analogies that alert us to biblical truths about humanity; (3) it serves as a framework to unite coherently all the topics in systematic theology as a whole; (4) it develops further the interlocking of God and man, doctrine and life, divine salvation and grateful human obedience found in the theology of the Westminster Standards; (5) it is cross-culturally universal (see “Cross-Cultural Relevance” section below), so that it facilitates the communication of systematic theology in the multiple languages and cultures of the world; and (6) it is useful apologetically in critically testing ideas coming out of the world, and in critically analyzing metaphysical frameworks that may be invoked in studying mankind.

We will therefore take time to explain this framework in this chapter, and then use it as one main framework for expounding all the topics in the doctrine of man.<sup>2</sup>

## **An Overview**

Let us begin with a central feature of the *lex Christi* framework. It is the principle that God’s character is displayed in his law. God is righteous. Therefore, his law displays his righteousness: “*Righteous* are you, O LORD, and *right* are your rules” (Ps. 119:137). His righteousness is fulfilled in Christ, and then also in us, by faith in Christ. God’s universal rule over the world also displays his righteousness.

Next, how does this principle illumine the Ten Commandments? The Ten Commandments are a summary of God’s righteousness. A closer look at the commandments shows that each of them reflects God’s character. Each commandment reveals more prominently a distinct attribute of God. Here is a list. (See table 8.1.)

2. The rest of this chapter, through the “Cross-Cultural Relevance” section, largely reproduces Vern S. Poythress, “Introducing the Law of Christ (*Lex Christi*): A Fruitful Framework for Theology and Life,” version 1.6, 2024, © CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://frame-poythress.org/introducing-the-law-of-christ-lex-christi-a-fruitful-framework-for-theology-and-life/>.

**Table 8.1. The Ten Commandments and Attributes of God**

| Summary of the Commandments       | Attributes of God |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1C: do not have other gods        | supreme           |
| 2C: do not bow to images          | holy              |
| 3C: do not use God's name in vain | blessed           |
| 4C: keep the Sabbath              | dynamic           |
| 5C: honor parents                 | harmonious        |
| 6C: do not murder                 | living            |
| 7C: do not commit adultery        | intimate          |
| 8C: do not steal                  | giving            |
| 9C: do not falsely witness        | truthful          |
| 10C: do not covet                 | contented         |

As a result, the attributes of God are also displayed at a creaturely level when human beings keep God's commandments. Each commandment can serve as a perspective on human life, and also on God's universal rule in Christ.

Now we may proceed to explain the framework in more detail, beginning with its relation to Jesus and the Great Commission.

### **The Rule of Christ**

We who are Christian believers have become disciples of Jesus Christ. What does that mean? It means that we should pay attention to what he teaches. We find a summary of his teaching in the Great Commission:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son

and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:18–20)

Jesus initially spoke these words to the eleven disciples (Matt. 28:16). But he indicated that his teaching should be passed on (v. 20). So these words come also to you and me today.

Jesus’ directions in Matthew 28:19–20 are motivated by verse 18 (note the word “therefore” near the beginning of verse 19). Verse 18 indicates that Jesus has “all authority in heaven and on earth.” It “has been given to” him from the Father. Jesus exercises comprehensive rule. And this rule is also the rule of the Father. Ephesians 1:19–23 further explains Jesus’ authority and indicates that Jesus is seated “at his [the Father’s] right hand in the heavenly places.” The position at the Father’s right hand shows that the Father and Jesus both rule (Ps. 110:1). We may infer that this rule also includes the Holy Spirit, who is God, together with the Father and the Son.

This rule of God is a continuation and a fulfillment of the reign of God in the Old Testament:

The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,  
and his kingdom *rules over all*. (Ps. 103:19)

This rule of God, now fulfilled in Christ, provides the basis and power for being disciples.

According to Matthew 28:19–20, discipleship has several aspects. One is that we are to be baptized. Baptism has a rich significance. Among other things, it indicates by an outward sign that we belong to God’s people and that we are disciples. Second, we are to receive Jesus’ teaching, which includes everything that he has commanded (Matt. 28:20). Third, we are actually to *observe* all that he commanded. We are to carry it out in our lives.

Obedience to commandments is not the basis for salvation. *Jesus’* obedience is the basis. His completed work includes bearing the guilt of our sins on the cross (1 Peter 2:24). He has already completed that work when he speaks in Matthew 28:18–20. We do not enter into salvation on

the basis of works of obedience, but simply by placing our trust in Christ and in his work (Acts 16:31; Rom. 10:9–10). As the resurrected Christ, he has now been given “all authority” (Matt. 28:18). One of the *fruits* and consequences of salvation is that people begin to obey his commandments. The commandments have an integral role. In Matthew 28:20, Jesus promises to be “with you always, to the end of the age.” His presence and his fellowship with us empower our life of being disciples.

**Table 8.2. Aspects of the Great Commission**

| Verse | Text from Matthew 28:18–20                                                              | Summary                                             |
|-------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| 18    | And Jesus came and said to them,                                                        | introducing Jesus’ words                            |
|       | “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.<br>[See also Eph. 1:19–23.] | God appoints Jesus to rule                          |
| 19    | Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,                                         | therefore make disciples                            |
|       | baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,         | baptize: sign of union with Christ                  |
| 20    | teaching them                                                                           | give and receive Jesus’ teaching                    |
|       | to observe all that I have commanded you.                                               | <i>keep his commandments</i> : fruit of being saved |
|       | And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”                               | Jesus empowers us by his presence                   |

## **The Significance of the Ten Commandments**

How do Jesus’ teaching and his commandments relate to the *Ten Commandments*? In his teaching, Jesus confirms the divine authority of

the Old Testament (Matt. 5:17–20; 19:4–5; Luke 24:44–49; John 10:35). He also reaffirms the Ten Commandments as a summary of the Old Testament law (Matt. 5:17–20; 19:18–19; 22:40). So let us consider the Ten Commandments. The text of the commandments is found in Exodus 20:1–17. We can give a brief summary of each commandment, as indicated in table 8.3.

**Table 8.3. The Ten Commandments and Their Summaries**

| No.     | Text from Exodus 20:1–17                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Summary                       |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Preface | And God spoke all these words, saying, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” (Ex. 20:1–2)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | the Lord redeemed             |
| 1C      | “You shall have no other gods before me.” (Ex. 20:3)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | do not have other gods        |
| 2C      | “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.” (Ex. 20:4–6) | do not bow to images          |
| 3C      | “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.” (Ex. 20:7)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | do not use God’s name in vain |

**Table 8.3 (continued)**

| No. | Text from Exodus 20:1–17                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Summary                   |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 4C  | “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” (Ex. 20:8–11) | keep the Sabbath          |
| 5C  | “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.” (Ex. 20:12)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | honor parents             |
| 6C  | “You shall not murder.” (Ex. 20:13)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | do not murder             |
| 7C  | “You shall not commit adultery.” (Ex. 20:14)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | do not commit adultery    |
| 8C  | “You shall not steal.” (Ex. 20:15)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | do not steal              |
| 9C  | “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.” (Ex. 20:16)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         | do not bear false witness |
| 10C | “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor’s.” (Ex. 20:17)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | do not covet              |

Note that table 8.3 includes Exodus 20:1–2. These verses are not themselves a commandment, but are the preface to the Ten Commandments. We need to make sure that we do not forget verses 1–2, because they provide the framework and background for appreciating the commandments. They indicate who God is (“I am the LORD your God”) and what gracious deeds he has already done for his people (“who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery”). These truths motivate obedience to the Ten Commandments.

In this respect, the message in Exodus 20:1–2 runs parallel to Matthew 28:18, which motivates the Great Commission. In fact, God’s work in redeeming his people out of Egypt is a “type,” a shadow and an anticipation of the greater redemption that Christ has accomplished (see John 1:29; 1 Cor. 5:7). The same God has worked both acts of redemption. Christ redeemed us, not from physical slavery, but from spiritual slavery. We were under a death sentence because of our sins, and we were slaves to sin and to the devil (John 8:34; Col. 1:13–14; Heb. 2:14–15; 1 John 5:19). Christ, having delivered us from slavery, makes us his people and instructs us by his teaching. His teaching is thus a fulfillment of the Ten Commandments.

### **God’s Work and Our Response**

As a summary, we can represent the relation of God to his people in three related aspects: (1) the Lord is God, the everlasting King; (2) through Christ, he accomplishes redemption and proclaims the way of salvation; and (3) we respond by putting our faith in Christ, by listening to his teaching, and by beginning to follow his commandments. (See table 8.4.)

### **Covenantal Speech**

God’s initiative includes his speech, which explains the meaning of his works of salvation. So in the column in table 8.4 that describes how salvation is accomplished, we may also include his speech to instruct us. His speech is *covenantal* speech, whose function is to express a covenant or spiritual bond between God and his people (Ex. 24:7–8; Matt. 26:28; Luke 22:20). (See table 8.5.)

**Table 8.4. God Works Salvation**

| <b>Passage</b> | <b>God Identifies Himself</b> | <b>Salvation: God Accomplishes Salvation</b>                        | <b>Application: God Applies It to Us</b> |
|----------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Ex. 20:1–17    | “I am the LORD your God”      | “who brought you out”                                               | keep my commandments (Ex. 24:3)          |
| Matt. 28:18–20 | “all authority”               | Jesus’ work, especially in his crucifixion, death, and resurrection | “observe all that I have commanded you”  |

**Table 8.5. God Makes a Covenant with Us**

| <b>God’s Identity</b>    | <b>God Accomplishes Salvation and Instructs (Covenantally)</b>                                                                         | <b>God Applies It to Us</b>             |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| “I am the LORD your God” | “who brought you out”; speaking Ex. 20:1–17 and other words through Moses                                                              | keep my words                           |
| “all authority”          | Jesus’ work, especially in the crucifixion, death, and resurrection; Jesus speaks in Matt. 28:18–20 and elsewhere in the New Testament | “observe all that I have commanded you” |

## **The Wide Relevance of Law**

We should not think of the theme of the law of Christ as *only* prescribing what we should do. The theme of law and the theme of the rule



of God are manifested in the salvation that Christ accomplished. Salvation is God-centered. God displayed his majesty and glory when he created the world. Likewise, he shows his majesty and glory in the work of Christ, which accomplishes salvation. In addition, on the basis of that work of Christ, God frees us from condemnation and transforms us to begin to be followers of Christ, awaiting his second coming.

All of God's work shows us his *righteousness*:

*Righteousness* and *justice* are the foundation of his [God's] throne.

(Ps. 97:2)

The LORD is *righteous* in all his ways

and kind in all his works. (Ps. 145:17)

For in it [the gospel, the good news of salvation] the *righteousness* of God is revealed. (Rom. 1:17)<sup>3</sup>

The Ten Commandments are a summary of God's righteousness. "*Righteous* are you, O LORD, and *right* are your rules" (Ps. 119:137). So the Ten Commandments can be used as a starting point or perspective in considering God's universal rule. That is what Dr. Yates proposes in his *lex Christi* framework. The result is the following table. (See table 8.6.)

**Table 8.6. God Saves Us in Covenant**

| God's Identity              | Salvation in Covenant              | God Applies It to Us                      |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| "I am the LORD<br>your God" | God speaks the Ten<br>Commandments | we are to be conformed<br>to God's speech |
|                             | 1C: do not have other gods         |                                           |

3. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to us by faith, but the starting point for understanding righteousness is in God himself.

**Table 8.6 (continued)**

| God's Identity | Salvation in Covenant             | God Applies It to Us |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|
|                | 2C: do not bow down to images     |                      |
|                | 3C: do not use God's name in vain |                      |
|                | 4C: keep the Sabbath              |                      |
|                | 5C: honor parents                 |                      |
|                | 6C: do not murder                 |                      |
|                | 7C: do not commit adultery        |                      |
|                | 8C: do not steal                  |                      |
|                | 9C: do not bear false witness     |                      |
|                | 10C: do not covet                 |                      |

### **Prohibitions and Commands**

Most of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1–17 are expressed as prohibitions. They forbid a particular kind of sinful activity. But they indirectly show that we should seek to do the opposite. How does this work?

One principle for interpreting the commandments is that where we find a prohibition of some action, the corresponding positive duty is indirectly implied. Likewise, when a duty is affirmed, the contrary action is forbidden.<sup>4</sup> This principle makes sense because God's righteousness is the ultimate basis for both forbidding and commanding. The one side naturally implies the other. Passages in the Bible outside the Ten Commandments confirm these implications.

4. The Westminster Larger Catechism articulates this principle: "4. That is, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded" (WLC 99).

Let us illustrate how the principle might work with the eighth commandment, the commandment not to steal. If stealing is forbidden, what is the opposite that we ought to pursue? We should respect our neighbor's property (e.g., Ex. 23:4–5). We should work rather than steal to supply our needs. When appropriate opportunities appear, we should positively help those in need:

Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to *share* with anyone in *need*. (Eph. 4:28)

For each of the commandments, we can infer that there is something forbidden and also something commanded. (See table 8.7.)

**Table 8.7. What Is Forbidden and Commanded**

| Summary                           | What Is Forbidden      | What Is Commanded                                       |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| 1C: do not have other gods        | having other gods      | have God supreme                                        |
| 2C: do not bow to images          | bowing down to images  | worship and serve God in the way that God has specified |
| 3C: do not use God's name in vain | misusing God's name    | honor God's name                                        |
| 4C: keep the Sabbath              | working on the Sabbath | keep the Sabbath holy                                   |
| 5C: honor parents                 | dishonoring parents    | honor parents                                           |
| 6C: do not murder                 | murder                 | protect human life                                      |
| 7C: do not commit adultery        | adultery               | protect marriage                                        |
| 8C: do not steal                  | theft                  | protect property; give                                  |

**Table 8.7 (continued)**

| Summary                    | What Is Forbidden | What Is Commanded |
|----------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| 9C: do not falsely witness | false witness     | speak the truth   |
| 10C: do not covet          | coveting          | be contented      |

### **The Commandments Reflecting God's Attributes**

We have already seen that the Ten Commandments reflect the righteousness of God. This principle holds true for each of the Ten Commandments. Can the same be said with respect to other attributes of God? The fact that God is righteous is closely related to all his other attributes. Righteousness can be seen as a kind of covering label, which points to God and therefore indirectly calls to mind everything that God is.

So we may ask how each commandment reflects who God is. We may notice that some commandments can be more prominently associated with corresponding attributes. For example, the first commandment points to the supremacy of God, his absoluteness. The second commandment points to his holiness. How? In the law of Moses and in the instructions for the tabernacle, God prescribes to the priests and to the people how they must approach him. He is holy. The tabernacle, where he dwells on earth, is holy because of his presence. The priests and the people can approach God in the tabernacle only if they are holy. To take care to approach God in the right way is to obey the commandment. To bow down to an image, contrary to God's instructions, is to violate his holiness. It treats the image as though *it* were a proper location of holiness. In God's covenantal words, he specifies the proper way to approach him. So we can also associate the second commandment with covenant.

We may think in the same way about each of the Ten Commandments. We ask what attribute of God is preeminently displayed in the commandment. We can then produce a table that lists an attribute of God alongside each commandment. (See table 8.8.)

**Table 8.8. Commandments Display God's Attributes**

| Summary                           | Attributes of God                                   |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| 1C: do not have other gods        | supreme (absolute)                                  |
| 2C: do not bow to images          | holy (covenantal)                                   |
| 3C: do not use God's name in vain | blessed                                             |
| 4C: keep the Sabbath              | dynamic (active, purposeful, holy)                  |
| 5C: honor parents                 | harmonious                                          |
| 6C: do not murder                 | living                                              |
| 7C: do not commit adultery        | intimate (beautiful, glorious, loving, omnipresent) |
| 8C: do not steal                  | giving (sufficient)                                 |
| 9C: do not falsely witness        | truthful                                            |
| 10C: do not covet                 | contented                                           |

Some of the entries need further explanation. To several of the commandments we have added further words in parentheses. Some commandments can easily be associated with more than one idea and more than one attribute of God. The main attribute chosen in table 8.8 should be understood as one helpful association; it does not exclude other possible associations. Since all of God's attributes are closely related to one another, no one of them excludes the others.

The third commandment concerns the proper use of God's name. One proper use is seen in Numbers 6:22–27:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

The LORD bless you and keep you;  
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you;  
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

“So shall they put *my name* upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”

Numbers 6:27 indicates that the priest puts “my name upon the people of Israel.” Thereby the priest blesses them (Num. 6:23, 27; note v. 24). The opposite is to be cursed for misusing God’s name: “the LORD will *not* hold him *guiltless* who takes his name in vain” (Ex. 20:7b). The third commandment is thus associated with the fact that God is blessed and is the source for all blessing.

The fourth commandment indicates that human beings should imitate God’s pattern of work and rest, the pattern he used when he created the world:

For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Ex. 20:11)

When God created the world, he exhibited the dynamism of his power. God always remains the same God. He is always active in the eternal relations of love among the persons of the Trinity. He also acts in bringing about events in the world. After six days of work in creating the world, he rested on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2–3). A dynamic of actively imitating God should animate human beings in their work and rest. The fourth commandment focuses on the seventh day of rest rather than primarily on the six days of work. With respect to God’s work, the seventh day is the day of completion, to which the first six days look forward. So the entire structure of days is filled with purpose. The *purpose* of the work on the six days is to lead to the complete world that exists at the end of the six days. So the idea of God’s being dynamic and active should be understood as a *purposeful* dynamic. Hebrews 4:9–11 indicates that God’s rest on the seventh day is analogous

to the rest that human beings will enter in the new heaven and the new earth, when they permanently rest from the work within this present world. Human beings have a dynamic purpose, the purpose of entering into final rest in Christ (Heb. 4:11). Finally, we can also associate the fourth commandment with God's holiness, because the specific command in Exodus 20:8 is "to keep it [the Sabbath] *holy*" (see also Ex. 20:11).<sup>5</sup>

The fifth commandment tells us to honor our parents. This giving of honor is one aspect of a broader principle, namely, of living in harmony with others. We should pursue harmony with others in all types of relations. In some cases, other people have authority over us (parents, civil rulers, church elders, teachers, employers); in other cases, we have authority over others (our children). We also have relations of cooperation (brothers, sisters, friends, neighbors, fellow students in a class, fellow employees). In all these situations, we should act in harmony with the kinds of relations that we enjoy. We should live in harmony because, first of all, God is harmonious in himself. The persons of the Trinity are in perfect harmony with one another.

The seventh commandment forbids adultery. The opposite of the forbidden act is the positive act of respecting and enhancing proper intimacy. Sexual intimacy in marriage is the most intense intimacy, but there are other forms of intimacy among human beings, and God himself invites us into intimate fellowship with him in the covenants that he makes with human beings. Covenantal intimacy is expressed in the fact that Christ is the husband and the church is his bride (Eph. 5:23–27).

We add to the seventh commandment an association with beauty. In the songs of the Song of Solomon, the lovers see the beauty of the one that they love. According to Psalm 27:4, God is beautiful:

One thing have I asked of the LORD,  
that will I seek after:

5. Dr. Yates uses the term *theosynchronic*, in addition to *dynamic*, to indicate that God's work is the pattern that human beings imitate (*Westminster's Foundations: God's Glory as an Integrating Perspective on Reformed Theology*, rev. ed. [Lancaster, PA: Unveiled Faces Reformed Press, 2024], 74).

that I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
to gaze upon the *beauty* of the LORD  
and to inquire in his temple.

In our ordinary experience, beautiful things are attractive to us. We have a mysterious longing to become intimate with them. So beauty and intimacy go together, not simply in a husband's love for his wife (Song of Solomon), but more broadly. The source for both is found in God. God is himself beautiful, according to Psalm 27:4. In addition, God loves himself and is intimate with himself. We see this beauty and intimacy in the love of the Father for the Son (John 3:34–35) and the mutual love among all three persons of the Trinity. Out of the fullness of who God is, he displays himself in the world, and especially to human beings. In Psalm 27, the psalmist delights in the beauty of God, and it is one aspect that draws him into intimacy. He wants to “seek after” God and to “dwell in the house of the LORD” (Ps. 27:4).

In the Bible, the beauty of God and the glory of God are closely related. The special garments for Aaron the high priest are “for *glory* and for *beauty*” (Ex. 28:2). Aaron's sons also have garments “for *glory* and *beauty*” (v. 40). Glory is the bright display of the excellence of God's beauty. Glory is elsewhere closely associated with the *appearing* of God, what theologians call *theophany*. At special times, the “glory of the LORD” appeared to the people in the wilderness (Ex. 16:7, 10; 24:16–17; Lev. 9:6, 23; Num. 14:10; etc.). After the tabernacle was constructed, the glory of God descended on it, signifying the presence of God in the tabernacle, in the midst of the people of Israel (Ex. 40:34–35). When God appears, he is intensively present, which shows his *intimacy* with the people to whom he appears. At the same time, he is present in glory and in beauty. It is fitting, then, to keep in mind several themes related to intimacy: beauty, glory, theophany, and presence.

The eighth commandment tells us not to steal. God owns everything because he made everything. He is all-sufficient. We must therefore respect everything he owns. And we also respect the subordinate ownership or



stewardship that he gives to human beings. He gives to each person sufficiency for the day (Acts 14:17). Because God has given to us, we should positively imitate him by giving to others—particularly others in need and in distress. Note the contrast in Ephesians 4:28 between the negative action of stealing and the positive action of giving:

Let the thief no longer *steal*, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his own hands, so that he may have something to *share* with anyone in need.

The tenth commandment tells us not to covet. The opposite is to be contented. The term *contented* may seem strange to apply to God. What do we mean? We mean that God has no needs (Acts 17:25). The persons of the Trinity have everything they need in having the attributes of God and having loving relations to one another. God is satisfied with being who he is. In imitation of him, we should be satisfied and find final satisfaction in God himself.

The attributes associated with the other commandments are reasonably evident.

Is the list of ten attributes complete? We can add other attributes. God is infinite, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, eternal, and loving. We could extend the list because God is infinitely rich in who he is. The ten attributes that we have singled out in examining the Ten Commandments are not meant to be an exhaustive list. We can see, for example, that the attribute that we label *intimate* is closely related to the love of God and the presence of God. We could have put the attribute of *love* under the seventh commandment. In addition, many attributes of God could be included under the broad term *supreme*. God is supreme in knowledge, so he knows all things (omniscience). He is supreme in power, so he is all-powerful (omnipotent). He is supreme in presence, so he is omnipresent. He is supreme in boundlessness, so he is infinite. He is supreme in love. And so on. Hence, when we use the summary in table 8.8, we should remember that we can expand on the implications of God's being supreme.

## Other Attributes of God

The attribute of supremacy can be viewed as though it had any number of additional attributes included under its title. If we like, we can add other attributes under the first commandment, under the heading of God's being supreme. (See table 8.9 [the newly added words are in boldface type].)

**Table 8.9. Other Attributes of God**

| Summary                           | Attributes of God                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1C: do not have other gods        | supreme:<br><b>absolute</b><br><b>indivisible ("simple")</b><br><b>omniscient</b><br><b>omnipotent</b><br><b>omnipresent</b><br><b>boundless/infinite</b><br><b>eternal</b><br><b>unchangeable</b> |
| 2C: do not bow to images          | holy                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 3C: do not use God's name in vain | blessed                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| 4C: keep the Sabbath              | dynamic (active)                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| 5C: honor parents                 | harmonious                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| 6C: do not murder                 | living                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 7C: do not commit adultery        | intimate                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 8C: do not steal                  | giving                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 9C: do not falsely witness        | truthful                                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 10C: do not covet                 | contented                                                                                                                                                                                          |

## God's Attributes and Covenant

In Exodus 20:1–17, the first two verses, which are the prologue, proclaim the majesty and supremacy of God, so they can be grouped together with the first commandment, which displays God's supremacy. The ten attributes associated with the Ten Commandments can be added to the first column of table 8.6. The result is given in table 8.10.

**Table 8.10. Adding God's Attributes to the Structure of Covenant**

| God's Identity                             | Salvation in Covenant                     | God Applies It to Us                   |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| "I am the LORD your God"                   | God speaks the Ten Commandments           | we are to be conformed to God's speech |
| <b>supreme</b><br>(and implied attributes) | 1C: preface; plus, do not have other gods |                                        |
| <b>holy</b>                                | 2C: do not bow to images                  |                                        |
| <b>blessed</b>                             | 3C: do not use God's name in vain         |                                        |
| <b>dynamic</b>                             | 4C: keep the Sabbath                      |                                        |
| <b>harmonious</b>                          | 5C: honor parents                         |                                        |
| <b>living</b>                              | 6C: do not murder                         |                                        |
| <b>intimate</b>                            | 7C: do not commit adultery                |                                        |
| <b>giving</b>                              | 8C: do not steal                          |                                        |
| <b>truthful</b>                            | 9C: do not bear false witness             |                                        |
| <b>contented</b>                           | 10C: do not covet                         |                                        |

## Mankind's Imitating God

Now let us consider how the Ten Commandments illustrate the principle of human beings' imitating God. Genesis 1:26–27 and other passages (Gen. 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9) indicate that human beings are made in the image of God. It is fitting that they should imitate God on the level of their creaturely existence. We have seen an example of this imitation already. It occurs with the fourth commandment, the Sabbath commandment. God worked six days and rested on the seventh. Human beings likewise are to work for six days and rest on the seventh. They imitate God. They reflect God's pattern of activity.

This pattern of imitating God is a broader principle, which can be applied to all Ten Commandments. Each commandment specifies actions that human beings are to do and not to do. These specifications are not arbitrary impositions on mankind. They reflect the character of God, as we saw in table 8.10. They *also* indicate the kinds of activities that fit the nature of mankind. All the commandments are instances of *imitative* activities, whereby human beings imitate God.

We can see this in greater detail by going through each of the commandments in turn. For each commandment, we can indicate what human beings are to be and to do in imitation of God. (See table 8.11.)

**Table 8.11. Human Beings' Imitating God**

| Attributes of God | Summary of the Ten           | Imitation by Human Beings            |
|-------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| supreme           | 1C: do not have other gods   | <b>supreme among earth creatures</b> |
| holy              | 2C: do not bow to images     | <b>holy</b>                          |
| blessed           | 3C: do not misuse God's name | <b>blessed</b>                       |
| dynamic           | 4C: keep the Sabbath         | <b>dynamic (active)</b>              |

Table 8.11 (continued)

| Attributes of God | Summary of the Ten         | Imitation by Human Beings     |
|-------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| harmonious        | 5C: honor parents          | <b>harmonious</b>             |
| living            | 6C: do not murder          | <b>living</b>                 |
| intimate          | 7C: do not commit adultery | <b>intimate (in marriage)</b> |
| giving            | 8C: do not steal           | <b>giving</b>                 |
| truthful          | 9C: do not falsely witness | <b>truthful</b>               |
| contented         | 10C: do not covet          | <b>contented</b>              |

This table is useful because it shows the underlying logic of the Ten Commandments. They guide us by indicating the ways in which we are supposed to imitate God and reflect his glory in our persons and our lives. “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

There is some flexibility in this list. We have chosen ten distinct attributes, one for each of the Ten Commandments. But again, various attributes of God are closely related to one another. And the implications of one of the commandments can be expanded. Dr. Yates, in his exposition of the framework of *lex Christi*, adds a number of other useful terms.<sup>6</sup> *Superior* can be added to the third column of the first commandment. God is not only superior to other gods, but absolutely supreme. But human beings are not absolutely supreme. They imitate God’s superiority by being superior to other earthly creatures. *Covenantal* can be added to the second commandment. The term *covenantal* reminds us that the larger context of serving God, on which the second commandment focuses, is guided by all of God’s words given to us in the form of covenant (Ex. 24:7–8). Dr. Yates

6. Personal communication, October 23, 2020; Yates, “Adapting Westminster Standards’ Moral Law Motif.”

adds *doxological* to the third commandment, third column, to indicate that our response to receiving God's blessings should include praising him. He adds *theosynchronic* to the fourth commandment, third column, to remind us that our activities should mesh with God's pattern of activities (in synchrony with God [*theo*-]). The theme of being harmonious, associated with the fifth commandment, should be understood in the light of the original harmony in the Trinity. Human beings are supposed to imitate this deep harmony, not just negatively avoid conflict. Dr. Yates adds *beautiful* to the seventh commandment, reminding us that God is beautiful and is the source of all beauty.<sup>7</sup> He uses *sufficient* as the main term for the eighth commandment, reminding us that God owns everything and supplies what we need, so that we do not have to steal.

### **The Distinction between God and Man**

It is important for us to remember that God and man are not on the same level. One of the implications of the first commandment, in particular, is that God and not man must have the preeminence. Each human being must acknowledge that God is supreme and human beings are not. We are made in the image of God, which is our dignity. But we should also underline the truth that we are *made*. God made us. We are dependent on him. He is the sovereign Creator, and we are his creatures.

To remind ourselves of this distinction, we may introduce modifying terms into our table. God's attributes are all *divine* attributes. They are attributes of the Creator, who is *supreme*. To distinguish these attributes from the reflections found in mankind, we may add the word *supremely* to them. Human beings, by contrast, have attributes that are *creaturely*. So we could add the expression *derivatively* or *on a creaturely level* to each of them.

7. Dr. Yates prefers to have *beautiful* as the main term under the seventh commandment, while I prefer the term *intimate*. Each implies the other. We seek to be intimate with what we regard as beautiful. Conversely, if we are intimate with someone, it is often because we find something beautiful about that person. Likewise, Dr. Yates prefers to have *sufficient* as the main term under the eighth commandment. *Sufficient* and *giving* imply each other. People give because they are sufficient, they have enough to give something. And they are sufficient because God has given to them.

Dr. Yates prefers to add the term *pro*-.<sup>8</sup> It indicates that human beings as creatures are to be *for God* in every aspect of their lives. Each of the commandments is not a self-standing commandment, but one that orients us *toward God* (“pro-God”). Each human being is not a self-standing, independent object, but rather a creature who is created *for God*. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism says:

Q. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

(WSC 1)

If we add the qualifying expressions to the summary table, we obtain table 8.12.

**Table 8.12. Human Beings’ Imitating God on a Creaturely Level**

| Attributes of God              | Summary of the Ten           | Imitation by Man       |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>supreme</b> , absolute      | 1C: do not have other gods   | <b>pro</b> -supreme    |
| <b>supremely</b> holy          | 2C: do not bow to images     | <b>pro</b> -holy       |
| <b>supremely</b> blessed       | 3C: do not misuse God’s name | <b>pro</b> -blessed    |
| <b>supremely</b> dynamic       | 4C: keep the Sabbath         | <b>pro</b> -dynamic    |
| <b>supremely</b><br>harmonious | 5C: honor parents            | <b>pro</b> -harmonious |
| <b>supremely</b> living        | 6C: do not murder            | <b>pro</b> -living     |
| <b>supremely</b> intimate      | 7C: do not commit adultery   | <b>pro</b> -marriage   |
| <b>supremely</b> giving        | 8C: do not steal             | <b>pro</b> -giving     |
| <b>supremely</b> truthful      | 9C: do not falsely witness   | <b>pro</b> -truthful   |
| <b>supremely</b> contented     | 10C: do not covet            | <b>pro</b> -contented  |

8. Yates, “Adapting Westminster Standards’ Moral Law Motif.”

## Christ as the Fulfillment of Righteousness

Now we may turn to consider the implications for our understanding of Jesus Christ and his work. In the New Testament, Christ is several times called “the Righteous One” (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14). He perfectly fulfilled and embodied all the righteousness of the law. In his own person, he is the climactic display of righteousness. As the last Adam, he is our representative. He kept the law so that his righteousness might be imputed to us (Isa. 53:11–12; Rom. 5:18–19; 2 Cor. 5:21).

In order to be our representative and our High Priest, he took on full human nature: “Therefore he [Christ] had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:17). Accordingly, we may add another column to our table, in order to indicate how Christ fulfills the law in his human nature (at the *pro*- level, the creaturely level). (See table 8.13.)

**Table 8.13. Christ’s Fulfilling Righteousness**

| Attributes of God    | Summary of the Ten           | Imitation by Man | Fulfillment by Christ              |
|----------------------|------------------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|
| supreme, absolute    | 1C: do not have other gods   | pro-supreme      | <b>perfectly</b><br>pro-supreme    |
| supremely holy       | 2C: do not bow to images     | pro-holy         | <b>perfectly</b><br>pro-holy       |
| supremely blessed    | 3C: do not misuse God’s name | pro-blessed      | <b>perfectly</b><br>pro-blessed    |
| supremely dynamic    | 4C: keep the Sabbath         | pro-dynamic      | <b>perfectly</b><br>pro-dynamic    |
| supremely harmonious | 5C: honor parents            | pro-harmonious   | <b>perfectly</b><br>pro-harmonious |



Table 8.13 (continued)

| Attributes of God   | Summary of the Ten         | Imitation by Man | Fulfillment by Christ          |
|---------------------|----------------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|
| supremely living    | 6C: do not murder          | pro-living       | <b>perfectly</b> pro-living    |
| supremely intimate  | 7C: do not commit adultery | pro-marriage     | <b>perfectly</b> pro-marriage  |
| supremely giving    | 8C: do not steal           | pro-giving       | <b>perfectly</b> pro-giving    |
| supremely truthful  | 9C: do not falsely witness | pro-truthful     | <b>perfectly</b> pro-truthful  |
| supremely contented | 10C: do not covet          | pro-contented    | <b>perfectly</b> pro-contented |

### The Deity of Christ

The Bible teaches not only that Christ is fully human, but also that he is fully divine (John 1:1; Heb. 1:8–12). He is the *divine* Son, who is eternal (John 1:1). So he shares all the attributes of God with the Father and with the Spirit. In view of this reality, the first column in table 8.13 applies directly to him. This column also describes the Holy Spirit.

The attributes of God show us the harmony between Christ's divine nature (table 8.13, first column) and his human nature (table 8.13, fourth column), in one person.

### The History of Redemption

Further benefits can come from using Dr. Yates's *lex Christi* framework. We can plot the history of the world and the history of God's dealings with mankind by using the Ten Commandments and the ten associated attributes of God. God is always the same God. He always has the

same attributes. So these characteristics belong to all the actions of God throughout the history of the world. The attributes are displayed progressively as history unfolds. We can therefore apply the attributes to various high points in the history of the world.

The first high point is the creation of the world. When God created the world as described in Genesis 1, his works of creation showed that he was supreme, holy, blessed, dynamic, harmonious, living, intimate (note the presence of the Holy Spirit in verse 2), giving, truthful, and contented.

A second high point is the creation of mankind, Adam and Eve. God made Adam and Eve with creaturely supremacy (“dominion,” Gen. 1:26, 28). They were at the beginning of their lives, not the end. They had to grow in maturity. But we can be sure that even at the beginning, God made them holy, blessed, dynamic, harmonious, living, intimate (loving), giving, truthful, and contented.

A third turning point is the fall of man into sin in Genesis 3. But it is actually a *low* point. Let us postpone our discussion of it.

A fourth point of prominence comes when God announces the Ten Commandments with his own voice from the top of Mount Sinai (Ex. 20:1, 19; Deut. 4:12–13; 5:4, 22, 24, 26). We have already dealt with that in focusing on the Ten Commandments.

Another turning point occurs in the coming of Christ into the world in order to accomplish salvation. We have already seen (table 8.13) how he fulfills all righteousness, the entire body of the Ten Commandments.

**Table 8.14. *Lex Christi* in the History of Redemption**

| Text                  | Stage in History                   | Display of the Law                              |
|-----------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Gen. 1                | God creates the world              | God shows his attributes                        |
| Gen. 1:26–27; 2:7, 22 | God creates Adam and Eve           | Adam and Eve reflect God’s attributes           |
| Gen. 3                | the fall of man                    | perversion of reflecting God                    |
| Ex. 20:1–19           | God announces the Ten Commandments | the commandments show us God and human response |

**Table 8.14 (continued)**

| Text       | Stage in History               | Display of the Law      |
|------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Matt.-John | Christ accomplishes redemption | Christ fulfills the law |

## The Application of Redemption

The final major step is that of applying to us the redemption that has been worked out by Christ. This application occurs in two phases. The first phase is the application to believers in Christ while they are still in this world. The second is the consummation, the new heaven and the new earth.<sup>9</sup>

We can apply the pattern of *lex Christi* to both phases. In the first phase, during this life, we are transformed into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18), but not yet made perfect. In the second phase, in the consummation, we have perfect resurrection bodies and perfect holiness (Rev. 22:1–5). All Ten Commandments and all ten attributes of God are relevant to both phases. (See table 8.15.)

**Table 8.15. Applying Redemption in Two Phases**

| No. | Attributes of God | Application in This Life                  | Consummation                |
|-----|-------------------|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1C  | supreme, absolute | <b>reigning with Christ</b><br>(Eph. 2:6) | <b>consummate rule</b>      |
| 2C  | supremely holy    | <b>growing holy</b><br>("sanctification") | <b>consummately holy</b>    |
| 3C  | supremely blessed | <b>receiving daily blessings</b>          | <b>consummately blessed</b> |

9. Premillennialists would add a third phase, the millennium, in between the second coming and the consummation.

**Table 8.15 (continued)**

| No. | Attributes of God    | Application in This Life                            | Consummation                                 |
|-----|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| 4C  | supremely dynamic    | <b>serving Christ</b>                               | <b>consummately active</b>                   |
| 5C  | supremely harmonious | <b>growing in harmony with God and neighbor</b>     | <b>consummately harmonious</b>               |
| 6C  | supremely living     | <b>beginning of eternal life (John 5:24; 11:26)</b> | <b>eternal life</b>                          |
| 7C  | supremely intimate   | <b>intimate with God (1 Cor. 6:19)</b>              | <b>consummately intimate</b>                 |
| 8C  | supremely giving     | <b>giving day by day (1 Thess. 5:18)</b>            | <b>God gives himself in the consummation</b> |
| 9C  | supremely truthful   | <b>speaking truth (imperfectly)</b>                 | <b>consummately truthful</b>                 |
| 10C | supremely contented  | <b>contented (imperfectly)</b>                      | <b>consummately contented</b>                |

### **The Imputation of Christ's Perfection**

In addition, the doctrine of justification teaches that Christ's perfection is reckoned or imputed to us as soon as we are united to him by faith. We are already perfect in God's eyes because we are clothed with Christ's righteousness.<sup>10</sup> We may therefore add another column to

10. Dr. Yates distinguishes justification (perfect status) and sanctification (growth toward inward perfection) by using two prepositions, *on* and *in*. *Justification* means Christ's righteousness *on* us, while *sanctification* means Christ's righteousness reflected *in* us, by the power of Christ's Spirit *in* us. These two prepositions are part of a larger set of prepositions that Yates uses to discuss Westminster Confession of Faith 2.2 and the pattern of redemption (Yates, *Westminster's Foundations*, chap. 4; see Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018], app. C).

our table in order to indicate that, in Christ, we are perfect in ten ways. (See table 8.16.)

**Table 8.16. Applying Christ’s Righteousness Perfectly (“upon Us”) and Gradually (“in Us”)**

| No. | Attributes of Christ | Application upon Us, Imputed from Christ | Application in Us, by the Spirit         |
|-----|----------------------|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| 1C  | perfect              | <b>perfect</b>                           | reigning with Christ (Eph. 2:6)          |
| 2C  | perfectly holy       | <b>perfectly holy</b>                    | growing holy (“sanctification”)          |
| 3C  | perfectly blessed    | <b>perfectly blessed</b>                 | receiving daily blessings                |
| 4C  | perfectly dynamic    | <b>perfectly dynamic</b>                 | serving Christ                           |
| 5C  | perfectly harmonious | <b>perfectly harmonious</b>              | growing in harmony with God and neighbor |
| 6C  | perfectly living     | <b>perfectly living</b>                  | growing in living in Christ              |
| 7C  | perfectly intimate   | <b>perfectly intimate</b>                | growing intimate with God                |
| 8C  | perfectly giving     | <b>perfectly giving</b>                  | growing in giving                        |
| 9C  | perfectly truthful   | <b>perfectly truthful</b>                | speaking truth (imperfectly)             |
| 10C | perfectly contented  | <b>perfectly contented</b>               | contented (imperfectly)                  |

## **Sin as Reversal**

Now let us return to consider the low point, the fall of man into sin, described in Genesis 3. The fall is the point at which Adam and Eve turn away from their harmonious fellowship with God. Through the serpent, Satan tempts them by saying, “You will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:5).

In a sense, Adam and Eve are already “like God,” just as we have seen. They have been made in the image of God and naturally imitate God. Satan’s temptation really amounts to saying that they can become like God by knowing good and evil *masterfully*. They can attain a godlike status. They can be gods.

After they have sinned, God himself comments, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:22). This comment doubtless has irony in it. The man has become the opposite of God. God is good, while the man has become evil. But the man has not actually escaped from the pattern of imitating God. Instead, he has tried to imitate God in the wrong way, an evil way, by aspiring to be a god. He has chosen a path of trying to be independent of God. He has chosen to make his own decisions *for himself*, ignoring the guidance of God. He has tried to have a godlike supremacy. The way he has chosen is a radical distortion of his duty to follow God and imitate God in an obedient way.

This is the way of all sin. All rebellion against God is, at its root, an attempt to be godlike, to be a god. Sin amounts to trying to displace the supremacy of God. One makes oneself supreme, at least in one’s own eyes.

We can describe the situation of fallen mankind by using the same pattern of the Ten Commandments that we have already used (*lex Christi*). Except now the pattern is distorted and reversed into sinful attempts to be autonomous. Each of the attributes of God is then reflected by sin in a reversed way. Table 8.17 shows the result.

The *lex Christi* framework provides useful preparation for us to critically analyze all kinds of temptations, sins, and distorted ideas in the world. The distortion or the counterfeit always builds from what is true. If it did not, it would have no attraction. But it is a distortion, a counterfeit. It does

not match the character of God. It does not match his righteousness, nor does it match the Ten Commandments, nor does it match the person of Christ in his righteousness.

**Table 8.17. Sin as Reversed Reflection of God**

| No. | Attributes of God    | Reversed, Sinful Imitation                                                                  | Actual Result                              |
|-----|----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|
| 1C  | supreme, absolute    | <b>counterfeit supreme (self as supreme)</b>                                                | <b>enslaved to sin</b>                     |
| 2C  | supremely holy       | <b>counterfeit holy (false gods)</b>                                                        | <b>unholy</b>                              |
| 3C  | supremely blessed    | <b>counterfeit blessing (seeking blessing, but receiving curse)</b>                         | <b>curse</b>                               |
| 4C  | supremely dynamic    | <b>counterfeit dynamic (seeking self-exaltation)</b>                                        | <b>self-destructive spiral</b>             |
| 5C  | supremely harmonious | <b>counterfeit harmonious (seeking self-harmony; egocentricity)</b>                         | <b>out of harmony, fragmented, chaotic</b> |
| 6C  | supremely living     | <b>counterfeit living (the way of death, Prov. 9:18)</b>                                    | <b>spiritual death</b>                     |
| 7C  | supremely intimate   | <b>counterfeit intimate (intimacy with false gods, including forbidden sexual intimacy)</b> | <b>alienated, lonely</b>                   |
| 8C  | supremely giving     | <b>counterfeit giving (giving self the supremacy)</b>                                       | <b>lacking</b>                             |
| 9C  | supremely truthful   | <b>counterfeit truthful (the lie of autonomy)</b>                                           | <b>false, lying</b>                        |
| 10C | supremely contented  | <b>counterfeit contented (seeking satisfaction in a false god)</b>                          | <b>discontented</b>                        |

When we attempt to analyze situations in the world, all Ten Commandments are relevant. They are all in harmony with one another, according to the principle of the harmonious nature of God himself (fifth commandment). By using all Ten Commandments, in their richness, we gain in our ability to detect and eliminate counterfeiting.

For example, suppose that we are dealing with a false religion. Ancient Greek paganism and modern spirit worship both believe in serving a multiplicity of gods or spirits. We can see right away that both religions are out of harmony with the first commandment. Or suppose that we meet someone who has a crystal that he wears in order to get special protection or special spiritual energy. He is using a false route to try to access the transcendent realm. It is out of harmony with the second commandment.

At the same time, we can see that both these religious practices are counterfeit forms. They substitute an idol for the true God, as Romans 1:18–23 describes. So underneath, the people in these practices still show that they have a knowledge of the true God (Rom. 1:19, 21), but they suppress it (v. 18).

Some modern people want to affirm human “freedom” to explore deviant forms of sexuality. This pursuit is out of harmony with the seventh commandment. The seventh commandment indicates God’s way to true, righteous intimacy. The larger context in the Old Testament and in the Bible as a whole also helps, because it provides God’s teaching on sexuality. It affirms marriage (between one male and one female). It forbids and passes judgment on adultery, fornication, rape, homosexual acts, incest, and bestiality.

Like false religions, deviant forms of sexuality are counterfeits. People in pursuit of sexual pleasure are seeking intimacy. But they seek intimacy outside of God’s way. It is a counterfeit of the true intimacy that God gives.

People are sinning when they pursue false intimacy. But they are also deceived. They are deceived by a counterfeit form. The counterfeit is always a counterfeit of what is true. So we can understand something about their motivations and their confusions. The answer to their struggle comes not simply from light given by God, but by Christ the Savior. He does give us light (John 8:12). He also forgives sins, changes hearts, and heals the wounds of the past.



## **The Ten Commandments as Perspectives**

Each commandment has a specific focus. But we may notice that the commandments have some overlap in their implications.<sup>11</sup> As an example, let us consider the eighth commandment. It forbids stealing. It focuses on the principle that you should not take someone else's property, carry it off, and make it your own. But when we combine it with the tenth commandment about coveting (Ex. 20:17), we see that indirectly it forbids people from dreaming and plotting and scheming about taking the property—not merely the final act in which they actually carry it off. So in its total implications, it overlaps with the tenth commandment.

We may also observe that Malachi 3:8–9 talks about stealing from God (“robbing me”). How were the people robbing him? They were not bringing in the tithe of their produce. Malachi 3 indicates that in this way they were breaking the eighth commandment.

The opposite of stealing is giving. Stealing consists in refusing to give God thanks for what he has given, and in refusing to give to others who are in need.

We can see a still more general principle. If we violate *any* of God's commandments, we are disrespecting him. Metaphorically speaking, we are “stealing” something from the honor that is due to him. So *all* human disobedience to God is a form of stealing. Stealing has become a *perspective* on the righteousness that God requires.

### **Each Commandment as a Perspective**

In fact, each commandment can be expanded in a similar way. We can use it as a *perspective* on the entirety of God's requirements.<sup>12</sup> Let us briefly consider how each of the other commandments has a specific focus, and in addition can serve as a starting point for a broader perspective.

11. The Westminster Larger Catechism states: “3. That one and the same thing, in divers respects, is required or forbidden in several commandments” (WLC 99).

12. See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008).

*The first commandment.* What is forbidden is to put other gods before the one true God. That is the specific focus. The contrary duty is to treat God as supreme.

Any sin whatsoever involves treating oneself as supreme, rather than God as supreme. So any sin is a violation of the first commandment. The first commandment offers a perspective on all righteousness, by showing that all unrighteousness involves a failure to make God supreme. All righteousness is an affirmation that God is supreme.

*The second commandment.* What is forbidden is to make images and bow down to them and serve them. The opposite duty is to worship God *only* according to the positive means and instructions that God himself provides (such as the instructions for the tabernacle and its service).

What does it imply as a perspective? Any sin represents a search for an alternative way, outside of God's prescription. Any sin makes oneself and the desired object of sin into an idol, a substitute for allegiance to the true God. Any sin is a violation of the second commandment.

*The third commandment.* What is forbidden is taking the name of God in vain. This might occur in a frivolous curse using God's name, or a vow in God's name that one does not fulfill (Eccl. 5:4–5). The corresponding duty is that we would honor God's name and use it only in the context of expressing reverence for God.

What does the third commandment imply as a perspective? God's name of ownership is on his people. Numbers 6:27 instructs the priests to "put my name upon the people of Israel." The 144,000 in Revelation 14:1 have God's name on their foreheads. We are baptized in God's name (Matt. 28:19), indicating that he owns us. In a wider sense, the whole world is owned by God. So anytime we misuse our own bodies or the world around us, we are dishonoring God's name. Obedience honors God's ownership of the world.

*The fourth commandment.* What is forbidden is working on the Sabbath. We work on the other six days: "Six days you shall labor, and do all your work" (Ex. 20:9). This principle covers all seven days!

More broadly, we are to imitate the pattern that God established in creating the world when he worked for six days and rested on the seventh (Ex. 20:11). Any disobedience to God is a failure to imitate him.

The commandment also says at the beginning that we are to “keep it [the Sabbath] holy” (v. 8). Any sin is a failure to treat God as holy. It is therefore also indirectly a failure to respect the holiness of God that is symbolized by the Sabbath.

*The fifth commandment.* “Honor your father and your mother” (Ex. 20:12). That is the focal duty.

The broader principle is to honor those in authority. Moreover, those in authority should act in a manner that properly uses authority and does not incite people to rebellion. God is the ultimate authority. Any sin is a violation of God’s authority. Therefore, any sin is a violation of the fifth commandment.

*The sixth commandment.* “You shall not murder” (Ex. 20:13). Actual murder is in focus.

How might it function as a broader perspective? Jesus shows in his explanation in Matthew 5:21–22 that the sixth commandment also implies that we should not harbor the anger that gives rise to murderous thoughts. The corresponding duty is to promote and protect human lives—both our own and our neighbors’ lives. All sin is destructive of life with God and leads to death.

*The seventh commandment.* “You shall not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:14). The focus is on adultery. By implication, the principle forbids sexual impurity more broadly. Jesus shows in Matthew 5:27–32 that it implies not harboring lustful thoughts.

God’s covenant with his people Israel is compared to a marriage. God is the “husband” and Israel is his “wife” (Hos. 2:2, 16; 3:1). Any sin is a kind of spiritual adultery.

*The eighth commandment.* “You shall not steal” (Ex. 20:15). We covered this commandment earlier.

*The ninth commandment.* “You shall not bear false witness” (Ex. 20:16). Positively, we have a duty to promote truth and speak the truth. Any sin is a false witness against God; it says that God is not worthy of being served and denies that he is true.

*The tenth commandment.* “You shall not covet” (Ex. 20:17). The commandment focuses on sinful desires to have what one does not have. The

sinful desires are the root of the open sins that often follow when the desires are nourished and fed.

All sin is a form of desiring to be one's own master, outside the scope of God's commandments. It is therefore at root a desire to be God. It is coveting what only God has.

### **The Rationale for Perspectives**

Is it striking that each one of the commandments can be used as a perspective? Is there a deep reason why?

The Ten Commandments have a deep coherence with one another. They have a deep harmony, when rightly understood. We have observed that *harmonious* is one of the attributes of God, related to the fifth commandment. If God's character is reflected in the Ten Commandments, then his harmony will also be reflected. The commandments will be in harmony with one another. The fact that each commandment can be used as a universal perspective follows from the deeper reality that each attribute of God belongs to the whole of God. God is *indivisible*. The attributes are like perspectives on God.<sup>13</sup>

We may represent the ten attributes of God and the Ten Commandments as projections of a crystal, in order to suggest in a diagram that each is a perspective on the others.<sup>14</sup> (See fig. 8.1.)

### **Using *Lex Christi* to Analyze an Issue in the Doctrine of God**

The *lex Christi* framework that we have explained has its root in God. So it is a useful framework in critically analyzing issues that arise in the doctrine of God.

Consider one such issue. How can God be absolute, and independent of the world, and then also have relations to the world and act in the world?

13. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chaps. 19, 32.

14. Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 46; the diagram imitates a similar diagram from Dr. Yates (personal communication, 2020).

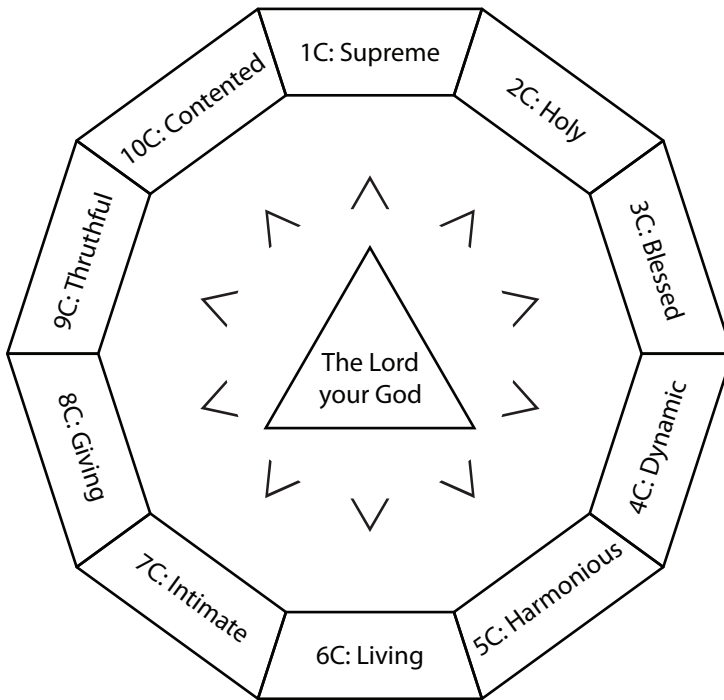


**Fig. 8.1. Ten Perspectives as Facets of a Crystal**

This issue is a question about how to harmonize two kinds of truth that the Bible teaches about God—his independence and his relations to the world. How do we address it? Several ways might be chosen, consistent with the teaching of the Bible.<sup>15</sup> We will use *lex Christi* as a framework to address this question.

*Harmony* is one of the attributes of God, displayed in the fifth commandment. That attribute affirms directly what we have already observed, that each of the commandments is a perspective on the whole. The commandments harmonize with one another. The attributes of God harmonize with one another. God's independence, which is another way of describing his supremacy, is expressed in the first commandment.

15. Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), chap. 39.

God's relations are affirmed in the attribute of intimacy, expressed in the seventh commandment. The commandments harmonize, according to the attribute of harmony (fifth commandment). Supremacy and intimacy harmonize.

We do not see completely how, because we are not God. We are creatures. We imitate God on our creaturely level. This imitation includes imitating him in truth and in our thoughts. God's attribute of harmony assures us that when we trust in him and in his Word, our thoughts are in harmony with his. We know the truth. It is true that God's independence and his relations harmonize.

We can also see how the attribute of being *indivisible*, listed under *supreme* (table 8.9), leads to the same result. God's supremacy (1C) cannot be separated or divided from his intimacy (7C). Rather, the two attributes belong indivisibly together.

In a similar way, the *lex Christi* framework, as a perspective on God and his works, can be used in dealing with other issues in systematic theology, in apologetics, in biblical interpretation, in pastoral theology, and in pastoral practice.

## **Cross-Cultural Relevance**

We can also observe that the *lex Christi* framework can function in any culture of the world. Why? There are several reasons why this framework is universally relevant.

First, God with his attributes is present in every culture of the world. So the attributes of God that are listed in *lex Christi* are relevant to every culture.

Second, the moral law of God is summed up in the Ten Commandments. This moral law is relevant to every culture because people in every culture have a sense of right and wrong (Rom. 1:32). People in every culture are responsible to obey the Ten Commandments, whether they have these commandments in written form or not. The Ten Commandments speak to conscience and connect to conscience—though people's consciences can be hardened by sin (1 Tim. 4:2).

Third, Christ perfectly fulfilled the law in all Ten Commandments. When people hear of what Christ has done, they eventually need to understand that it includes his perfect obedience. This obedience is obedience to the law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments.

Finally, note that the Ten Commandments are part of the biblical canon. For this reason they are relevant. People in all cultures need to hear the message of Christ's salvation. And when they turn to Christ, they need to hear and study the whole Bible, including the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 were originally given to Israel, in one specific cultural situation. But because the commandments reflect the attributes of God, their principles extend beyond that one situation.

In sum, the *lex Christi* framework is culturally universal. But it is also *adaptable*. The application to specific cultural situations will vary, depending on the situation. This adaptability is in harmony with the universality of the *principles*.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Lex Christi* in Harmony with Our Methods**

The *lex Christi* framework offers us ten perspectives on theology, one for each of the Ten Commandments. Each perspective employs one primary *analogy*. In this way, *lex Christi* fits *within* the third special method we employ, namely, attention to analogies (chapter 7, third method).

If we like, we can also see the *lex Christi* framework as *including* a display of all four of the special methods from chapter 7. It can serve as our *comprehensive* framework. (See Appendix D.)

### **Acts 2 as a Perspective on *Lex Christi***

Acts 2 is the point in history at which the gospel begins to explicitly and widely move out to all nations, to all the linguistic and people groups (Acts 2:5–11). The gospel is cross-cultural. The gospel can be expressed in many

16. An appendix on triperspectivalism that appears in Poythress, "Introducing the Law of Christ," § 22, online version, has been omitted here.

illustrative ways, but it always includes a revelation of the attributes of God (table 8.8), redemption in Christ (table 8.13; “The History of Redemption” and “The Application of Redemption” sections above), and application to human lives (table 8.11; Acts 2:37–47). The *lex Christi* framework is one suitable cross-cultural summary of the gospel in the larger context of God and his plan for the world.

### Key Terms

|                       |                        |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| absolute              | indivisible            |
| attribute             | infinite               |
| beauty                | intimate               |
| blessed               | <i>lex Christi</i>     |
| contented             | living                 |
| counterfeit           | metaphysical framework |
| covenant              | omnipotent             |
| cross-cultural        | omnipresent            |
| dynamic               | omniscient             |
| eternal               | perspective            |
| fall of man           | reversal               |
| false religion        | righteous              |
| giving                | supreme                |
| glory                 | systematic theology    |
| Great Commission      | Ten Commandments       |
| harmonious            | truthful               |
| history of redemption | unchangeable           |
| holy                  | Yates, Timothy P.      |
| imitation             |                        |

### Study Questions

1. What is the Great Commission?
2. What is the content of the Ten Commandments?
3. How are the Ten Commandments related to the Great Commission?



4. How does the *lex Christi* framework build on the Ten Commandments?
5. What attributes of God are displayed in the Ten Commandments?
6. How does each of the Ten Commandments serve as a perspective on the complete scope of our moral obligations?
7. How is each attribute of God a perspective on God?
8. How does the *lex Christi* framework serve as a perspective on the history of redemption?
9. How does the *lex Christi* framework center on Christ?
10. How does the *lex Christi* framework illumine the Christian life?
11. Can you try to use the *lex Christi* framework in analyzing a Bible passage or a Bible doctrine, or some claim from the world?

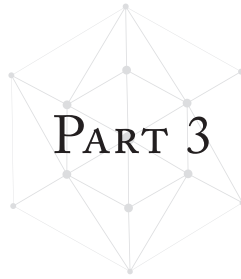
### **For Further Reading**

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008. Pp. 396–404.

———. *Perspectives on the Word of God: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999.

### **Prayer**

Our Lord, thank you for giving the Ten Commandments to Israel. Thank you that your words have larger implications. Thank you for the ways in which the working out of your plan of salvation has consistent harmony. Thank you for the contribution of Timothy Yates in giving us the *lex Christi* framework. Please help us live in harmony with your character and your plan of redemption. Enable us to be progressively conformed to the righteousness of Christ our Savior.



## SOME FUNDAMENTAL ASPECTS OF HUMAN NATURE

We consider the diversity of perspectives on human nature; image of God; and the original condition of humanity before the fall.



## PERSPECTIVES ON THE MEANING OF HUMAN BEINGS IN TIME

Let us now use the *lex Christi* framework to reconsider the topics that we have already treated, concerning the origin of man, the nature of man, and the image of God. How does the origin of man fit into the larger picture of human existence in time? And how does *lex Christi* provide a framework for understanding the nature of man and the theme of image?

### ***Lex Christi* Applied to the Origin of Man**

The *lex Christi* framework can provide ten illuminating perspectives both on the meaning of time and on the origin of humanity. Time and origin are related. The topic of the origin of humanity is one segment in the study of the history of humanity in time. All history unfolds because God works dynamically to bring events to pass. The *lex Christi* framework associates this dynamic work especially with the fourth commandment. The fourth commandment, used as a perspective on all reality, leads to paying attention to the issue of how humanity develops in time. This aspect of temporal development sets the larger context for the meaning of the origin of humanity.

### **Past, Present, and Future**

The controlling dynamicity of God applies to the past, the present, and the future. As Revelation 1:4, 8 points out, God is the one “who is and

who was and who is to come.” Some of the individual commandments have correlations with the triad of past, present, and future. According to the first commandment, God is supreme and is the only God. His supremacy is especially demonstrated by his past creation of the world and by his bringing the people of Israel out of Egypt (Ex. 20:2). So the first commandment has a prominent association with the past. The second commandment, by stating how people are to serve God, specifies human activity in the present. The third commandment, with its focus on blessing and cursing, anticipates the future final judgment.<sup>1</sup> It has a prominent association with the future.

God’s supremacy over time is manifest in another way. Romans 11:36 declares, “For from him and through him and to him are all things.” The expression “from him” focuses the attention on the past, including the events of creation. In addition, God had a plan even before the foundation of the world. All the events of all history are “from him,” as the planner of all things. The planning is a display especially of his supremacy. The second expression, “through him,” focuses the attention on God’s exercise of power in governing the world, including the present. It correlates especially with the theme of God’s being dynamic, associated with the fourth commandment. The third expression, “to him,” focuses the attention on the goal in the future. And what is this goal? It is the fullest display of the glory of God. Revelation 21:23 says of the final holy city that “the *glory* of God gives it light.” Numbers 14:21 states that “all the earth shall be filled with the *glory* of the LORD.” This theme of glory can be closely related to the seventh commandment and intimacy. God displays his glory and beauty climactically in the new heaven and the new earth. At that time, Christian believers also enjoy climactic intimacy:

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. (Rev. 21:3)

1. On the Trinitarian background for the three aspects of time, see Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), app. H.

They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.  
(Rev. 22:4)

This endpoint is also the final theophany, the final appearance of God to mankind.

Past, present, and future hang together because there is one comprehensive plan of God. Everything is rooted in the plan, and every event serves the goal of the glory of God.

A correlation also exists between the three phases of time and the three persons of the Trinity.<sup>2</sup> All three persons are active at every moment in time. But some differentiation among them appears in their distinctive roles. God the Father is preeminently the planner and the source of *authority*. He is the source for the unfolding of history (“from him”). God the Son is preeminently the executor of the Father’s plan, the one who *controls* the world (“through him”). God the Holy Spirit is preeminently the one who is *present* in the world, the one who applies the work of the Father and the Son. He is in this respect associated with the consummation, where God is most intensively present. Divine action operates from a plan, from the Father; it has power, through the Son; and it has a goal, the glory of God in the manifestation of the presence of the Spirit. All three persons are present at all times; all three persons participate in all phases of divine action in history. But one person may still be more preeminently associated with one phase in the working out of God’s plan.

In addition, Meredith M. Kline has shown that the Spirit is closely associated with the theme of the glory of God.<sup>3</sup> First Peter 4:14 calls the Holy Spirit “the Spirit of *glory*.” Isaiah 63:11 indicates that at the time of the exodus, God “put in the midst of them his Holy Spirit,” which may be a reference to the cloud of glory that accompanied the Israelites.

The activities of God in ruling the world have a deeper foundation in who God always is. God is eternally active. God the Father eternally begets

2. Poythress, app. H.

3. Meredith M. Kline, “The Holy Spirit as Covenant Witness,” ThM thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1972; Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God’s Appearing* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022), 131–32.

the Son. God the Father eternally speaks the Word, by the breath of the Spirit. These eternal activities are the ultimate ground for God's activities in the world. His activities in the world reflect who he is.<sup>4</sup>

This structure in divine action has reflections in human action. Consider past, present, and future with respect both to any individual and to the whole human race. In the past, the whole human race had an origin. That was the focus in chapter 2. The supremacy of God, which is the focus in the first commandment, is reflected in the unique position of relative supremacy that belongs to humanity, in comparison to other creatures. It is in harmony with this supremacy that humanity has a special origin, in the creation of Adam and Eve. Humanity also has a special future, in the supreme happiness of fellowship with God in the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:1–4; 22:3–4).

The history of the human race, as well as the history of each individual human being, is significant because God and his plan provide meaning for the whole of history and for each moment, however small. But it is also worthwhile to say that man does not exist for himself. The ultimate “center” of things is God, “who is and who was and who is to come” (Rev. 1:4, 8). God does not *need* anything, either a created world or human beings, to provide fellowship (Acts 17:25). He has perfect sufficiency in himself (10C) and perfect intimate fellowship (7C) among the persons of the Trinity. But it pleased him to create a world and to create each individual human being within it. Human beings should serve his glory (Isa. 43:7; 1 Cor. 10:31).<sup>5</sup> True and deep happiness is found in serving for his glory, because he is worthy: “Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created” (Rev. 4:11).

This large-scale structure of meaning is also reflected on smaller scales. In the fall of a sparrow, God has a plan:

4. Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), chap. 39.

5. Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 565.

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matt. 10:29–31)

God brings his plan to pass for the purpose of his glory. Human beings, as imitators of God, also make plans and execute them, with purposes in mind. The chief purpose ought to be to manifest the glory of God in each individual, in the human race as a whole, and in the products of human actions.

The fourth commandment, and its associated theme of dynamicity, implicitly includes all three phases within itself. God's acts of creation in six days manifest his plan. The plan unfolds in six days of works, and comes to rest on the seventh day, which is the day of "glory," so to speak. Human beings are supposed to imitate this activity of God, day by day. They plan, work, and then rest at night. They do it again the next day. And they also participate in a larger pattern, celebrated in the seventh day of rest (Ex. 20:8–11). This day points to the even larger pattern of filling and subduing the earth, which ends in consummation rest (Heb. 4:11).

## **Ten Perspectives on Time**

We have already cited some of the Ten Commandments in developing an understanding of time. In fact, each of the Ten Commandments can serve as a perspective on time.

*1C. God is supreme.* We have already discussed planning, execution in power, and arrival at a goal as aspects that together manifest the supremacy of God. Human action reflects on the level of the creature a derivative supremacy, and also a derivative movement from plan to powerful action to goal.

*2C. God is holy.* The second commandment is closely associated with covenant, which specifies how people are supposed to approach God in his holiness. God's covenant specifies the path along which human beings travel in time in order to follow God's way. Covenant is there near the beginning,



to spell out beforehand how human beings are to walk. It is there in the middle, guiding their walk. And it achieves God's purpose at the end, when God's blessings for obedience to the covenant are most fully manifested.

We can put it another way. At the beginning, Adam is already holy, in imitation of God's holiness. He dwells in the garden of Eden, which is holy ("the holy mountain of God," Ezek. 28:14). The goal is an even more intimate fellowship with God in his supreme holiness. This goal is described in Revelation 21:22–22:5, when the temple, a symbolic holy place representing the holiness of God, is displaced by the intense presence of God himself.

*3C. God is blessed.* God blesses mankind at the beginning with a pleasant garden environment, where he may enjoy the blessings of the fruits of the trees (Gen. 2:8–17), not to mention the blessings of light, water, dry land, heavenly timekeepers, and subordinate living things. This initial blessing is only a beginning. When Genesis says that God entered into a blessing of rest on the seventh day, it implies that mankind will enter into consummation blessing when his task (1:28) is completed. There is a movement from blessing to more intense blessing.

*4C. God is dynamic.* We have already noted that under the fourth commandment there is more explicit focus on the dynamics of temporal development. God works for six days, issuing in a seventh day. Man does likewise.

*5C. God is harmonious.* God is in eternal harmony with himself. Man as initially created is in harmony with God and with himself. Adam and Eve are in harmony—until sin enters. The destiny of the world, according to God's plan, is a consummate harmony. This consummation includes not only repair of the disruption and disharmony of sin, but also an advance. The harmony of seeing God at the end is an increase in depth over the beginning (Rev. 22:4).

*6C. God is living.* God is himself alive. He gives life to living things and to human beings. Their living is marked by reproduction according to one's kind. There is a dynamic of fruitfulness. The climax for life comes when the earth is filled with human image-bearers who reflect the life of God. The picture in Revelation 22:1–2 includes the presence of the tree of life and the "river of the water of life."

7C. *God is intimate.* God is eternally intimate with himself. He has intimacy with human beings, as he speaks to them in the initial times of Genesis 1–2. Revelation 21:1–22:5 depicts a consummation of this intimacy, with a more intensive intimacy than at the beginning.

As chapter 8 (“Mankind’s Imitating God” section) showed, intimacy correlates closely with beauty and with glory. In creation, God makes a world that is beautiful and glorious, reflecting his own beauty and glory:

The heavens declare the *glory* of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. (Ps. 19:1)

May the *glory* of the LORD endure forever;  
may the LORD rejoice in his works. (Ps. 104:31)

The whole earth is full of his *glory*! (Isa. 6:3)

The goal of history is that the world would display his glory with fullness (Num. 14:21; Rev. 21:23).

8C. *God is giving.* God is eternally giving in the fellowship of the persons of the Trinity (John 3:34–35). He gives initially to human beings in giving them the garden and the whole created order and human life itself. The giving comes to a completion with the consummation.

9C. *God is truthful.* God is eternally truthful as he speaks the eternal Word. He speaks truth to creation and to human beings as he creates and orders the world. And truth is supremely manifested and known to human beings in the consummation:

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I *know* in part; then I shall *know fully*, even as I have been fully known. (1 Cor. 13:12)

10C. *God is contented.* God is eternally contented in loving himself. He gives to human beings a garden dwelling where they can be content in fellowship with him and enjoy the fruits of the garden. Supreme

contentment comes with the completion of God's giving the fullness of all things in the time of the consummation.

In sum, the large-scale outline of history, according to the purpose of God, is an outline in which the attributes of God are always present, but also in which God's manifestation of himself unfolds progressively in history. (See table 9.1.)

There is a definite beginning point, in creation. There is a definite endpoint, in the consummation. The events in between cohere according to the plan and purpose of God.

What is true for the large-scale order of history is also subordinately true for small-scale actions.<sup>6</sup> Both the actions of God in ruling in providence and the actions of human beings in small-scale planned activities follow the purpose of God. These actions unfold the display of God in the glory of his attributes and the glory of the perfection of his Trinitarian being.

## **The Origin of Man**

Now consider how the Ten Commandments provide ten perspectives on the *origin* of humanity. The framework of the Ten Commandments does not directly provide answers to human origins. Genesis 1–2 provides the answers. But the framework of *lex Christi* does affirm the importance of the larger context of biblical teaching. The special work of God in creating Adam and Eve, such as Genesis 2 describes, is fully in harmony with the special supremacy of human beings in relation to animals and plants. This supremacy is suitable to people who conform to the righteousness of God expressed in all Ten Commandments.

Moreover, the sixth commandment concerning life is particularly pertinent. It forbids taking human life. But as Genesis 9:3, 6 clarifies, it does not forbid taking animal life. The sixth commandment distinguishes between human beings and animals at a fundamental level. It distinguishes ethically, in terms of what is permitted in the two cases. It distinguishes

6. Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chaps. 11, 19, 26.

**Table 9.1. Ten Perspectives on History**

| No. | Attributes of God   | Beginning of History                | Middle: God's Acting                     | Middle: Man's Acting<br>(especially in obedient acting)           | End                                    |
|-----|---------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| 1C  | supreme             | supreme in creation                 | God rules                                | man rules                                                         | consummate rule                        |
| 2C  | holy                | holy garden                         | structures of holiness                   | "bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1) | holy new Jerusalem                     |
| 3C  | blessed             | blessings of creation               | day-by-day blessings to his people       | receiving blessings and giving them                               | consummate blessing                    |
| 4C  | dynamic             | six days of creating the world      | providential activity                    | human work and rest                                               | final rest                             |
| 5C  | harmonious          | harmony between God and man         | dealing with the disharmonies of sin     | human seeking harmony, day by day                                 | consummate harmony                     |
| 6C  | living              | Adam living                         | supplying life (Ps. 104:30; Eccl. 12:7)  | living, multiplying                                               | consummate life, with the tree of life |
| 7C  | intimate            | initial intimacy with Adam and Eve  | broken intimacy with man, being repaired | partial intimacy                                                  | consummate intimacy                    |
| 8C  | supremely giving    | giving in creation                  | giving day by day                        | giving and receiving                                              | completion of giving                   |
| 9C  | supremely truthful  | truth about creation                | speaking truth in covenant               | receiving truth                                                   | consummate manifestation of truth      |
| 10C | supremely contented | contented environment of the garden | giving the gift of contentment to man    | content when in Christ                                            | consummate contentment                 |

religiously, in that human ethical obedience is an expression of religious service and of giving honor to God (1C and 2C).

Thus, the special work of God in creating Adam and Eve in Genesis 2 makes sense within the framework of divine righteousness and the righteousness of the sixth commandment. Through this positive emphasis, the *lex Christi* framework steers people away from an account of origins by purely unguided material processes, a view that blurs or even abolishes the distinction between man and animal.

### **The Meaning of the Image of God**

The *lex Christi* framework also throws light on the issue of the image of God. Chapter 8 showed that the *lex Christi* framework derives from a broad basis of biblical teaching. One of the prime foundations is in the nature of God, especially his righteousness. His holiness, expressed preeminently in the second commandment, is an expression of the righteousness of his law, which is an expression of the righteousness of his character. His holiness implies the requirement of holiness on the part of those who are to have relations to him: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2). So they must imitate him. His attributes, as expressed in the Ten Commandments, are to be reflected at a creaturely level in human beings. This relation of reflection takes place in a rich and multifaceted manner. The reflection of God in human life is not confined to one dimension or one sphere of life. All Ten Commandments express ways in which human beings imitate God (see tables 8.12, 8.13). Each of the Ten Commandments can serve as a perspective on the entire law.

The conclusion is that mankind reflects God in a multifaceted way. Mankind *images* God. Note that this conclusion is not dependent on our first having an extended discussion of Genesis 1:26–27 or the words “image” and “likeness” in these two verses. When we come to verses 26–27, we can easily fit them into a larger framework in which humanity reflects God, rather than trying to make these two verses bear the entire burden of informing readers about the nature of humanity.

We may put it another way. If an interpreter were to try to locate the meaning of “image of God” in some one feature or some cluster of features, he could easily miss the richness of what Scripture is presenting in its teaching *as a whole*. This teaching does not occur only in Genesis 1:26–27. The heart of the issue is not found in the meaning of the word “image” or the phrase “image of God.” The heart is that human beings find their meaning and their path in life in a framework of multifaceted reflections in communion with God. This meaning is articulated in the *lex Christi* framework. But this framework itself is only a summary, reminding us of the full teaching of the whole Bible. The framework also affirms that this teaching fits into the comprehensive plan of God, which governs all events. Much of the detail is mysterious to us (Deut. 29:29).

### **Images in the Second Commandment**

The importance of conformity to God’s character is confirmed in the second commandment. The second commandment tells people not to “bow down” or “serve” “a carved image” or “any likeness” (Ex. 20:4–5). The underlying Hebrew words for “image” and “likeness” are not the same as in Genesis 1:26 and 5:3. But the second commandment is nevertheless related to the issue of an adequate representation or “picture” of God. Animal images are not. Rather, human beings should display God’s character. They degrade themselves if they bow down to something less exalted than themselves. If people bow down to a human king to honor him for the special authority that God has given him, they still must not worship him.

### **Imitation in the Fourth Commandment**

The fourth commandment is also relevant for thinking about human beings’ reflecting God. Of all the commandments, the fourth commandment in some ways makes it the most obvious that man is to imitate God:

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD

your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. (Ex. 20:8–11)

The imitation is quite specific. God made the world in six days “and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Ex. 20:11). This pattern in the Lord’s activity provides the reason (“For,” v. 11) why human beings labor for six days and rest on the seventh (vv. 9–10).

### **Imitation in the Fifth Commandment**

The fifth commandment implies imitation of God because of its theme of harmony. The immediate focus of the fifth commandment is on harmony with parents. But as many expositors have inferred, parents are a prime example for human relations in general.<sup>7</sup> And human relations imitate the relation between God and man. God is the supreme authority, and he is the father in relation to Israel, his “firstborn son” (Ex. 4:22). They are supposed to live in harmony with him. And that implies being like him.

### **Features of Human Nature**

Chapter 4 discussed some of the features of human nature. Some but not all of those features are, in fact, imitations on a creaturely level of divine attributes. Other features show *contrasts* between God and humanity.

*Creatureliness.* God is the Creator, not a creature. So this feature is one contrast between God and man. But it does testify to God the Creator. It can be associated especially with the first commandment, which underlines God’s supremacy.

7. WLC 123–33.

*Interdependence.* God is independent of creatures, rather than dependent. The interdependence among human beings testifies to the wisdom of God's provision. The fifth commandment is one notable expression of interdependence, in commanding harmonious human relations.

*Earthiness.* Human beings are made of dust, while God is a spirit. God made the dust, and he formed Adam "of dust from the ground" (Gen. 2:7), both of which are acts testifying to God's power and wisdom. The life and intimacy and property of humanity, addressed in the sixth through eighth commandments, are deeply intertwined with the earth.

*Sexuality.* God does not have sex. So the sexuality of human beings is one feature of contrast with God. But sexual intimacy among human beings is one form of personal intimacy (addressed in the seventh commandment). And human personal intimacy reflects the original intimacy of the Trinity (see *lex Christi*, the seventh commandment, under table 8.11).

*Dominion.* Human dominion reflects on a creaturely level the original dominion of God. Human dominion is a reflection of God's supremacy in the first commandment.

*Personal fellowship.* The original personal fellowship is among the persons of the Trinity. Human personal fellowship is addressed especially in the fifth and the seventh commandments.

*Ability to love.* God's love among the persons of the Trinity is the original love. Love is a leading form of intimacy, addressed in the seventh commandment.

*Spirituality.* God is a spiritual being: "God is spirit" (John 4:24). This spirituality of God is related to the second commandment, which forbids material representations of him:

Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no *form* on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female, the likeness of any animal that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air, the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground, the likeness of any fish that is in the water



under the earth. And beware lest you raise your eyes to heaven, and when you see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, you be drawn away and bow down to them and serve them, things that the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven. (Deut. 4:15–19)

*Religiosity.* Worship directed above oneself to God the Creator is the appropriate stance of the creature. So this feature describes the creature rather than the Creator. Yet it also points to the Creator as the one appropriate object of worship. This feature is especially connected with the first and second commandments.

*Knowing God.* Human knowledge of God imitates on a creaturely level the original knowledge that God has of himself (Matt. 11:27; 1 Cor. 2:10–11). It is especially related to the ninth commandment, concerning truth, and also to the first three commandments, all of which pertain in various ways to the true knowledge of God.

*Having knowledge.* God is the original one who has knowledge.

*Reason.* God's own rationality is the original rationality, which human rationality imitates. This theme is also related to the ninth commandment, because reason ought to be in service of the truth.

*Moral responsibility.* Human moral responsibility is responsibility before God, who is the standard for moral goodness. There is a contrast here between the responsibility that belongs to human beings as creatures and the One to whom they are responsible. Moral responsibility is displayed in all the Ten Commandments.

*Conscience.* Conscience is an aspect of moral responsibility, which again points us back to God as the source for moral standards.

*Ability in language and communication.* God is the origin of language, as we see from John 1:1: "In the beginning was the *Word*." Human language and communication imitate God. This feature is especially connected with the ninth commandment, concerning truth, and the third commandment, in which the name of God is an instance of language.

*A purpose and a destiny.* God determines the purpose and destiny of each human being and the race as a whole. The idea of purpose is especially

connected with the fourth commandment, according to which God is working out his purposes in history.

### **Three Perspectives on Human Nature**

We can further illustrate the use of the *lex Christi* framework by employing three complementary perspectives on the richness of human imitation of God and reflection of God. The first commandment, among other things, displays God in his unchangeable character. On a creaturely level, human beings reflect this unchangeability by being relatively stable. Each person is identifiable as the same person through the passage of time. Without *some* stability or “sameness,” there can be no barrier to picturing change as one person’s being displaced by a second person one minute later, who in turn is displaced by a third person after a second minute, and so on interminably. When pressed, this procedure leads to the dissolution of what it means to be a person.

First, the focus on what is stable or what is the same leads to what might be called a *static* perspective or particle perspective on human nature. The static perspective asks, “What is permanently the same?” For one thing, each of the Ten Commandments has stability through the passage of time. The moral requirements for human beings remain fundamentally the same through time because God is the same and his righteousness is the same.

Second, the fourth commandment leads naturally to a focus on dynamism, and therefore on human change over time. How do human beings act and grow and develop? How do they strive to fulfill the command to subdue the earth? How do they *actively* imitate God in their activities? Asking these questions leads to what might be called the *dynamic* perspective, which focuses on change and development over time. The dynamic perspective is also called the wave perspective.

Third, the fifth commandment is a commandment expressing the harmonious nature of God. But it is fulfilled in human living partly through harmonious living in relation to one another. People are to respect their parents and other authorities, and this path involves

attention to relations. It suggests the value of looking at humanity from the perspective of relations. This perspective is called the *relational* perspective or the field perspective.

So we have three perspectives: the static perspective, the dynamic perspective, and the relational perspective. These three perspectives interlock and intertwine. One cannot really have any one of them without tacitly having the other two in the background. These are the same three perspectives from Kenneth L. Pike<sup>8</sup> that chapter 7 discussed briefly.

Together, these three perspectives alert people to the richness of human nature. Each individual is relatively stable in relation to God, which is the basis for God's evaluating a person on the basis of deeds already done. Each individual develops in relation to God. And the personal relation to God is the focus of the relational perspective.<sup>9</sup> (See fig. 9.1.)

This threefold harmony in understanding human beings contrasts with the partial accounts that can arise when people use only one of the three perspectives and apply it in only a truncated fashion. For example, the Aristotelian concept of essence prioritizes the stability of human nature. The essence is what is always the same. It is akin to the static perspective, used in a truncated way.<sup>10</sup> The atheistic existentialist emphasizes that each human being makes himself by his self-determined decisions and actions in time. In a way, it prioritizes the wave perspective. (The motto is "Existence precedes essence.") Traditional collectivist thinking and some forms of postmodernism emphasize that each individual is little more than an invisible point within a collectivity of relations. This thinking prioritizes the field perspective.

All three of these approaches contain grains of truth. But they fail in what they leave out. Most of all, they leave out God, who specifies all aspects: stabilities and developments and relations. One cannot thoroughly understand the meaning of humanity without the reality of all three aspects—all

8. Kenneth L. Pike, *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics* (Lincoln, NB/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), chaps. 3–5.

9. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, app. D.

10. It is true that Aristotle devotes attention to the contrast of potential and actual, and to four kinds of cause. But these are added to an overall worldview that prioritizes substances, which are conceived as unchanging in essence.

three in relation to God, who is stable (unchangeable), dynamic, and relational (in harmony with himself in the persons of the Trinity).

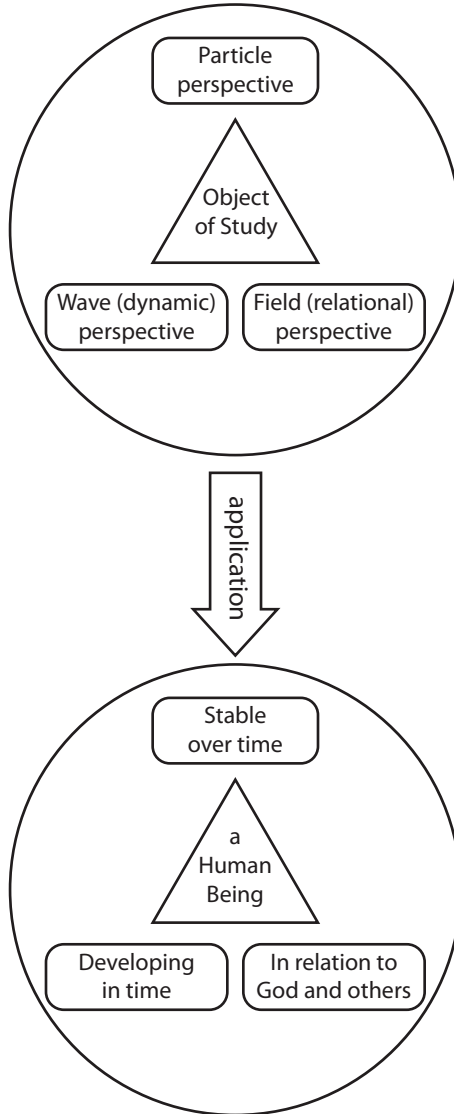


**Fig. 9.1. A Triad of Perspectives on Human Beings**

## **Unity and Diversity in Human Nature**

Now temporarily focus on the first two of these perspectives, the particle perspective and the wave perspective. The particle perspective focuses primarily on unity. A thing has the *same* basic unity over time. Each individual human being is the same individual over time. The wave perspective focuses more on change, on diversity. A thing varies in texture over time. Each individual changes over time.

The root for both unity and diversity is in God. God has unity and diversity in himself because he is one God in three persons. In God, the unity and diversity are equally ultimate.<sup>11</sup> Neither has a one-way logical priority to the other. Human beings reflect on an ectypal level this original unity and diversity in God. Human beings constitute one race; they are in this sense one. They are also distinct individuals. They are many. Neither aspect exists without the other. There are also both unity and diversity in time. We can distinguish humanity before the fall, humanity as fallen, humanity as redeemed, and humanity at the consummation. At all four temporal stages, humanity is a unified human race. At all four stages, humanity consists in distinct individuals. Each individual is the *same* individual over the course of his entire life. At the same time, each individual varies over the course of his life. He changes. He is not doing exactly the same things or thinking exactly the same thoughts at any two points in time. His unfolding life exhibits diversity.

The equal ultimacy of unity and diversity in the human race means that analysts cannot dissolve the mystery about the nature of mankind or about the nature of a particular human individual. By God's gift of knowledge, human beings can know both individual human beings and what it means to be human. But they know neither of these completely; they do not know as God knows. Each individual human being is indeed human. But he or she is also unique, with a uniqueness known ultimately only to God (akin to Rev. 2:17). An analyst cannot know an

11. Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 4th ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 47–49.

individual merely by knowing humanity. Conversely, humanity is not known in the abstract, apart from knowing individual human beings who are examples.

To say that mankind is *first* defined by an essence, and then individual human beings are created, all having the same essence, is to prioritize unity and deny the principle of equal ultimacy. Hence, the search for an essence preceding the individual is a mistake. Conversely, to say, as some existentialists have, that each person defines himself in the course of his life is to prioritize the diversity of the individual, and therefore also to deny the principle of equal ultimacy. Human nature is in one respect defined by what is common to the actual individual human beings, and possible human beings that God could have created but did not. This movement of thought travels from the individuals, as the starting point, to the race as a whole. But an analyst can equally well make the converse move. Individual human beings are in one respect defined by their common membership in humanity as a whole. It is God, in his unity and diversity, who has a comprehensive plan for all humanity. This plan includes humanity as an integrated whole, as one race, and also as distinct individuals.

Note that this equal ultimacy contradicts the approaches in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy. Both philosophies give a kind of metaphysical priority to the one, not the many. Plato's forms, including the form of humanity, are more ultimate than the individual things that embody the forms. Aristotle's essences are more ultimate than the individual substances that have these essences. (But there is also "matter" that allegedly accounts for the individuation of the substances.)

This equal ultimacy also contradicts modern Western approaches that assert the primacy of the individual and each individual's right to construct his own identity, to live his own dream. Yet each individual is never independent, never defined by himself, but defined in relation to God. According to God's plan, he is also defined in relation to his family, his near neighbors, and the whole human race.

The three perspectives on humanity encourage people to notice the richness in humanity, and not to reduce everything to one aspect.

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on Human Nature**

Acts 2 shows the re-creation of humanity as a new people of God, the New Testament church. The supernatural origin of the church is through the Holy Spirit, whom Christ pours out. By analogy, this supernatural origin reinforces the supernatural origin of humanity in Genesis 1–2.

Acts 2 also exhibits the applicability of Kenneth Pike's three perspectives: the particle perspective, the wave perspective, and the field perspective. First, the church, newly formed by the Holy Spirit, is *one* stable community. It is particle-like. Second, if someone uses the wave perspective, he sees that the church is a *dynamic* community, meeting together and growing in the Lord (Acts 2:41–47). Third, the field perspective observes that the church has within it a system of personal relations among its members and a relation to God (vv. 44–47). This threefold nature of the church is analogous to the threefold nature of humanity, as originally created. The church has within it unity and diversity, in analogy with the unity and diversity of humanity as a whole.

### **Key Terms**

|                   |                      |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| Aristotle         | origin               |
| authority         | particle perspective |
| control           | Pike, Kenneth L.     |
| diversity         | Plato                |
| fall of man       | presence             |
| field perspective | unity                |
| glory             | unity and diversity  |
| image             | wave perspective     |
| image of God      |                      |

## **Study Questions**

1. What is the principal purpose of creation?
2. How does the *lex Christi* framework reinforce the special origin of Adam and Eve?
3. How do the Ten Commandments show aspects of mankind's imitating God?
4. What is the source for unity and diversity in the world? Why is this important?
5. How are unity and diversity relevant in understanding humanity?
6. In what ways do you think you could deepen your own appreciation for the unity or the diversity of humanity, or the many aspects of humanity revealed in the Ten Commandments?

## **For Further Reading**

Pike, Kenneth L. *Linguistic Concepts: An Introduction to Tagmemics*. Lincoln, NB/London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982. Chaps. 1, 3–5.  
Van Til, Cornelius. *The Defense of the Faith*. 4th ed. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008. Pp. 47–51.

## **Prayer**

Thank you, our God and Creator, for making the world and making humanity with a rich unity and diversity. Thank you for making us significant individuals and placing us in a body of believers.





## INTERPRETATIONS OF THE IMAGE OF GOD: CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Now we return to the subject of “the image of God” in theology, in order to see how to critically analyze some theological interpretations of “image of God.” We consider only a few sample cases. These can serve as illustrations of many others.

### **Karl Barth’s Interpretation, concerning Personal Relationality**

Consider first Karl Barth’s view. He says that the image of God consists in relationship.<sup>1</sup> Is that right? Several things need to be said.

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 176–201. It would deflect from the main point if we took time to discuss some of the difficulties in interpreting Barth’s writing. His section on the image of God brings up a number of issues that might frame the whole discussion. We must be content simply to list them with some brief comments.

(1) The larger context for Barth’s discussion of Genesis 1 is the affirmation of the centrality of the Christ event in understanding the nature of humanity. Man is man in Christ (Daniel J. Price, *Karl Barth’s Anthropology in Light of Modern Thought* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 118; Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.2 [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960], 134, 219). This move has a grain of truth—Christ did become man. And Christ is the Mediator who gives human beings true knowledge. But the move confuses creation and redemption.

(2) What is the genre of the early chapters of Genesis? Barth uses the word “saga.” That could mean a genre that reads like nonfiction, and perhaps thinks of itself as nonfiction, but does not actually recount events that happened in space and time thousands

First, there is a grain of truth here, as there is in the formulations by other interpreters. Human beings have the ability to enjoy personal relationships with one another and with God. This emphasis is similar to the relational perspective or field perspective described in the previous chapter. Relational ability is *one way* among many in which human beings are like God. The verses in Genesis 1:26–27, as we have indicated, are open-ended. They leave it to other passages to show the various ways

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of years ago. Allegedly, it is a kind of theological overlay whose whole value, from the standpoint of theology, is in certain theological theses that are not in fact dependent on whether the events took place in the manner described. But would such an assessment of genre affect the assessment of the meaning of Barth's inferences as well? Barth appears in *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 495, to say that "there was no time in which man is not a transgressor"; "There never was a time when he [man] was not proud." But that is to radically reinterpret not only the meaning of Genesis 1–3 but the whole meaning of humanity, and so also the meaning of redemption that comes to this humanity. By comparison, the issue whether the image of God is found in personal relations fades into insignificance—unless, of course, all other relations are swallowed up by a saving relation to Christ that is alleged to belong to each human being innately.

(3) What is the meaning of "grace" in Barth's exposition of the image of God? Barth says that it is by grace that man is elevated above the status of animals (*Church Dogmatics*, III.1, 188). But does that mean that grace is an addition to the "natural," which is already presupposed? In that case, a potential dualism appears. By nature, man is just an animal. And then he has to have a special gift from God to rise above his animality. Such a view is akin to the traditional Roman Catholic view about the innate deficiency of man as originally created.

(4) Barth thinks that the Bible is a record and a witness to revelation, but revelation itself has the form of personal encounter that is nonpropositional. So what is the status of Barth's own discourse? Does it too aspire to be a channel for revelation? And if so, can its affirmations be taken at face value? Or are they indirect pointers to something else, which cannot be directly affirmed in language?

(5) If revelation is nonpropositional, and if some of the Bible's affirmations can be mistaken (i.e., errant rather than inerrant), how can a person possibly evaluate Barth's own discourse? What standard does one use, if the Bible's affirmations are removed as a standard?

For critical discussion of Barth's view of revelation and Scripture, see John M. Frame, "Scripture Speaks for Itself," in *God's Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 178–200; John M. Frame, "God and Biblical Language: Transcendence and Immanence," in *God's Inerrant Word: An International Symposium on the Trustworthiness of Scripture*, ed. John Warwick Montgomery (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 159–77; John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010); John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 364–83.

in which man is like God. Hence, personal relationship is in principle included. But Genesis 1:26–27 does not single it out, nor does it indicate that relationship constitutes the exclusive meaning of the image of God. As the previous chapter indicated, the field perspective is one of three perspectives on human nature. Barth's exposition treats it as though it were exclusive, and that is in tension with the *lex Christi* framework.

Second, Barth appeals to the plurals “us,” “our” in Genesis 1:26 as an indication that God himself exists with inner relation. That is theologically true, and the discussion in chapter 6 of the plural in verse 26 concluded that the plural adumbrates the doctrine of the Trinity. God engages in self-address or self-consultation. And that is important.

The expression “Let us . . .” adumbrates not only a plurality in God, but a plurality that is personal and that implicitly includes personal relations and communication. Those aspects of God have a bearing on who God is. And therefore, they also have a bearing on what mankind is, as created in the image of God. Plurality and personal relations and communication are some of many ways in which man is like God. Barth is correct to draw the conclusion about personal relationality as being one aspect of the whole. And it is an important aspect. But as we have observed, the phraseology of “likeness” invites an open-ended inquiry into ways in which man is like God. A focus on personal relationality, though appropriate, is not exclusive.

Moreover, the most obvious implication of the plurality of “us” in Genesis 1:26 is *plurality*, not relationality. God has unity and diversity. Man reflects this unity and diversity. In verse 26, relationality is there as well, because the plural persons have a deliberation in relation to one another. Barth has been selective in choosing to focus on relationality rather than plurality.

Third, in favor of his view Barth appeals especially to the third clause in Genesis 1:27, “male and female he created them.” Once again, it is theologically appropriate to observe that relations between men and women illustrate the larger principle of capacity for personal relationship. Personal relationships can exist between human beings and between God and man. But the implications about relationality are not the only feature in the passage.

The key clause link in Genesis 1:27 is an asyndeton between the second and third clauses. Such a linkage denotes *apposition*. But an apposition structure can be used not only as a synonymous parallelism (as between the first and second clauses in verse 27), but also to define two different aspects of the same event (e.g., in Gen. 15:15; 23:9). In one act of creation (one event) God created man in his image, and in the same act he created them male and female. There is only one act here.<sup>2</sup> But two *aspects* of the act are being described. Acknowledging the unity of the one act does not lead to equating the two modifying phrases describing the details of the two different aspects of the act.

Let us put it another way. “Made in the image” describes the same overall event as “made male and female,” in the sense that both describe God’s act of creating mankind. But the two expressions focus on two distinct *aspects* in the one overall event, namely, the aspect of being in the image and the aspect of being male and female. “In the image” does not have the same meaning as “male and female.” Consider a similar appositional construction in Genesis 23:11:

I give you the field,  
and I give you the cave that is in it.  
In the sight of the sons of my people I give it to you.

In this verse, “I give you the field” is the same overall event as “In the sight of the sons of my people I give it to you” (Gen. 23:11). But “the field” or “the cave that is in it” does not have the same meaning as “in the sight of the sons of my people.”<sup>3</sup> The key expressions focus on distinct aspects in one overall event.

2. The immediate context emphasizes the unity of the “one act” of creating mankind. That is an implication of the wording given in Genesis 1:26–27. In the next chapter, Genesis 2:7 and 22 show that this one act has two distinct temporal phases, namely, the creation of Adam in 2:7 and the creation of Eve in 2:22. The unity of the one act is not in tension with the diversity of the two phases.

3. For further discussion and examples, see Francis I. Andersen, *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew* (The Hague/Paris: Mouton, 1974), 46–49.

Fourth, the phraseology about “male and female” is relevant to the theme of relationality only by a two-stage linkage by association: first, “image of God” is linked to “male and female”; then, “male and female” is interpreted to mean a capacity for relationship. The necessity of two stages weakens the overall claim. Surely a one-stage linkage from image to dominion (Gen. 1:28) would be much more obvious to an Israelite reader.

Moreover, neither of the two-stage linkages is effectively evoked *in the particular context* of Genesis 1. As for the first linkage (the association of male and female with the image of God), in the original historical context in which Genesis is given, it would not occur to an Israelite to put this kind of meaning into Genesis 1:26–27. The language concerning “image of God” clearly functions to distinguish man from the animals. Animals exist “according to their kinds” (Gen. 1:25), whereas man exists “in the image of God,” that is, if you will, according to *God’s* kind! That means not that man is divine, but that his “kind” is radically distinct from each kind of animal (2:20b) and is distinct in particular in his being like God. The image of God is distinctive to man. But being male and female is *not* distinctive to mankind (cf. 6:19).<sup>4</sup> So the point about human uniqueness is destroyed if “image of God” means “male and female.”

4. In the key pages, Barth several times acknowledges this very point, that sexual reproduction belongs also to animals (Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.1, 185–87). Then he says, “And this strictly natural and creaturely factor, which is held in common with the beasts, is not in any sense an animal element in man but the distinctively human element—not in itself but because it has pleased God to make man in this form of life an image and likeness, a witness, of His own form of life” (187).

It sounds as though Barth is starting with “a strictly natural and creaturely factor,” a factor “held in common with the beasts,” a factor that *would be* “an animal element in man” if it were “in itself.” God pastes onto this factor something else, “an image and likeness,” as if it were an extraneous factor. It is like waving a magic wand to make Cinderella look like a princess. But, ignoring this awkward picture, we can acknowledge a legitimate theological point, namely, that all aspects of humanity are integrated into the whole of what humanity is in its relation to God. No aspect, including the bodily aspect and the sexual aspect, means exactly the same thing as it does within the framework of the animal kingdom. For human beings, sexual relations are deeply personal, and the personal aspect corresponds appropriately to the relation of Christ to his church (Eph. 5:22–33). But that is a mature theological conclusion, not immediately visible in Genesis 1:27. In Genesis 1:27, the context distinguishes mankind from the land animals in verses 24–25.

Barth has chosen to ignore the more obvious reading that an ancient Israelite reader would naturally adopt. Such a reader would see the relation of sexuality in Genesis 1:27

In addition, the Old Testament does not picture God as a sexual being. The existence of man as male and female suggests to an Israelite first of all a parallel with the higher animals, which exist as male and female and reproduce through sexual mating. Hence, sexuality does not in a direct way define the image of God. Note also that man's capacity to "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28) depends on sexual mating. This need is a sufficient reason for the inclusion of the specific mention of male and female. The context of Genesis 1 thus associates "male and female" not with the general idea of *relationship* but with the specifically sexual capacity for reproduction. The distinction of male and female has many sides. It so happens that in Genesis 1:27, the side closest to the surface concerns production of offspring. But this focus is not *exclusive*.

In sum, close inspection of the two steps that Barth needs reveals deficiencies in the argument. The two steps are the step from image to male and female and the step from male and female to capacity for relationship. Both steps actually are in tension with the immediate context of Genesis 1, which travels in other directions. Barth's view is nevertheless tempting because (1) it has a grain of truth, in the fact that mankind is indeed like God in his capacity for relationship; and (2) the differentiation into male and female is one spectacular illustration of this human relationality.

The major difficulty with Barth's exposition is not in his positive affirmation of relationality. The affirmation of the significance of personal relations is indeed justified by the teaching of Scripture as a whole. But Barth generates difficulties by claiming that this one aspect is the contents of the image of God. So, for example, he excludes dominion and rationality:

But it is not in this ["an exalted position of lordship"] that the divine likeness consists.

---

to the sexual reproduction implied in the animal kingdom in verses 24–25, and conclude that one main purpose for creating man male and female is for the sake of the directive "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:28).

Nor is any mention made in this connexion of his rationality as a feature which distinguishes him from them.<sup>5</sup>

The result is that Barth ends up with an untenable conclusion for Genesis 1:26–27:

The animals in their multiplicity are not confronted by different groups and species of men, but, for all the provisional and subsequent differentiations in every individual, by the one man—male and female. This is what gives and maintains his superiority.<sup>6</sup>

But what does Genesis 1:26–27 mean in its original historical context, when it came to the Israelites? Is the male-female differentiation “what gives and maintains his superiority”? Israelites know that male-female differentiation characterizes many land animals. So it is precisely the sexual differentiation that *cannot* serve to indicate human superiority. Barth has ignored the thematic connections presented in Genesis, and instead let himself be led astray by tantalizing thematic theological associations. Many of these associations in meaning can lead to true theological conclusions, but they lead an interpreter astray if they take his eye off the meaning that is accessible to Israelites.

5. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.1, 187, 188. The immediate context in Barth's exposition supplies no reasons for excluding lordship and rationality—only assertions. There are complications, however. To do justice to the unity of Barth's theology, one should consider how Barth's treatment of humanity may be influenced, or even governed, by his understanding of revelation as revelation in the incarnate Word. Thus Price observes: “Barth concludes that the point of contact [the *imago Dei*] is something provided in the revelation itself. . . . Therefore, the *imago Dei*, and the point of contact between God and humanity, which other theologians hold to be inherent in human nature, is seen by Barth to reside in an ontological relationship with the one who is both the Son of Man and the Son of God. The *imago Dei* is sharpened to its finest point when Barth equates the image of God with the humanity of Christ himself” (Price, *Karl Barth's Anthropology*, 118).

If only revelation in Christ creates the contact, it follows automatically that the image cannot include lordship or rationality or any other feature belonging to humanity “naturally.” Thus, Barth's interpretation of the image in terms of relationality is built into his understanding of revelation. If so, his interpretation of Genesis 1:26–27 derives from his prior doctrine of revelation. He finds it in the passage because it is already necessitated by his doctrine.

6. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.1, 188.



### **G. C. Berkouwer's Position**

Consider next the position of G. C. Berkouwer, as articulated primarily in his book *Man: The Image of God*.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, there is a difficulty in interpreting what Berkouwer says about the image of God. The overall thrust is complicated and many-sided. Much of his text comes in the form of quotations from others. To these quotations Berkouwer adds questions that probe the viability of various positions. And he adds negative statements about views that seem problematic. Most of the text does not provide a positive, direct exposition of Berkouwer's own position.

The result for some readers may be a sense of uncertainty. A reader might wonder whether perhaps Berkouwer has no position of his own, but is unsettled. Or perhaps he has a definite position, but chooses not to explain it. Perhaps, in spite of his apparent criticisms of the classical Reformed position, he is not far away from it. At one point Berkouwer allows that there is a "valid emphasis in the dogma of the image of God in the wider sense."<sup>8</sup>

There is still another plausible alternative. Berkouwer may be hinting that Klaas Schilder's position is the correct one. The tone of the questions, as well as the fact that Berkouwer takes a critical stance toward just about everyone *except* Schilder, gives the impression that Schilder's position is similar to his own. Accordingly, we will expound Berkouwer's position on the assumption that it is similar to Schilder's.

According to Berkouwer, human beings are persons with spiritual characteristics both before and after the fall. Before the fall, they had a righteousness that they wholly lost in the fall. Thus, substantially, Berkouwer's view agrees with Lutheran and Reformed views of man's original condition. But in discussing more narrowly the expression "image of God," Berkouwer's position appears to be similar to the classical Lutheran position. The image of God is "man's dynamic reflecting and representing

7. G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962).

8. Berkouwer, 59.

God,” wholly lost with the fall.<sup>9</sup> While this summary does not provide a complete picture of Berkouwer, it represents a dominant note.

In many respects, Berkouwer’s position suffers from the same problems as any other position that has not clarified its technical terminology. Berkouwer appears simply to assume that “image of God” must have a single well-defined meaning and a well-defined referent. It must, moreover, have the same referent in all occurrences. So Berkouwer gets into difficulty with the classic passages that speak of the image of God in a postfall context (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9; 1 Cor. 11:7).

Let us consider Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9–10 together. Here are the three verses:

Whoever sheds the blood of man,  
by man shall his blood be shed,  
for God made man in his own *image*. (Gen. 9:6)

With it [the tongue] we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the *likeness* of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. (James 3:9–10)

Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 speak of how man was created, so Berkouwer can claim that they provide a reference to the *past* condition of man, not the present.

But such an interpretation seriously weakens the main points that are being made in these two texts. Genesis 9:6 forbids taking human life, in contrast to animal life (Gen. 9:3). It does so because “God made man in his own *image*” (v. 6). James 3:9–10 forbids cursing people. We must not curse them because they “are made in the *likeness* of God.” The points made by these verses depend on something’s being true about the fallen man who is murdered or cursed within a postfall time period. If, as Berkouwer claims, fallen man has wholly lost the characteristic of being in the

9. Berkouwer, 56. The key quoted expression is taken from a quote of Klaas Schilder.

image of God, how can appealing to this wholly past reality of being in the image have any force in drawing conclusions about our *present-day* treatment of human beings?

Another text creates problems for Berkouwer's view. First Corinthians 11:7 runs as follows: "For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is *the image* and glory of God, but woman is the glory of man." The verse is almost impossible to evade because it uses the present tense, thus indicating that man is the image of God in the present, not only in the past.<sup>10</sup>

It is hard to say why Berkouwer is so concerned to reinterpret texts that testify to fallen mankind as being in the image of God. So let us focus on why the position might prove to be attractive to readers. For one thing, Berkouwer's position shows an understandable concern to stress the holistic character of man's relation to God and the dynamic, obedient character of this relation. Man's fellowship with God at the beginning was intertwined with every aspect of life and interpenetrated his life at every point. If someone divides in too simple a manner between aspects that remain after the fall of man and aspects that disappear, it can lead to a picture of two discrete parts, one of which is wholly the same and the other of which is wholly lost. Such a dichotomy does not thoroughly appreciate the original integration of each human individual. Moreover, the aspects that are alleged to be "unchanged" now function in a new context, a changed context, so in some sense these aspects have subtly changed.

In addition, the attempt to isolate some "unchanged aspects" can suggest that these unchanged aspects are still related in the same way to God as they were before the fall. But man's relation to God has changed as a *whole*, and the *whole* of the original relation was lost. An attempt to find an image of God that is not lost might serve as a platform for

10. In terms of detail, the first occurrence of "is" translates the present-tense participle ὑπάρχων (*huparchōn*), which is best classified as a general present participle (Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*, 3rd ed. [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1898], § 123). The time frame is the same as the main verb "ought" on which it depends. A further confirmation is found in its being parallel with the following clause, "but woman is the glory of man," which has a present-tense verb and expresses a general truth (Burton, § 12).

pride and for an attempt to reintegrate man with God through self-based effort.

Berkouwer's position is also attractive because it is close to the use of the dynamic (or wave) perspective, as defined in the previous chapter. It is legitimate for people to use the dynamic perspective as a means of insight. But it is not an *exclusive* perspective. Berkouwer seems to use the dynamic perspective exclusively when he reflects on the idea of "image."

Though Berkouwer's position expresses some legitimate concerns, his detailed discussion entangles itself in some problems. The problems relate to each of the four main methodological concerns examined in chapter 7.

Here are the four concerns, in brief:

(1) First, there is a problem with presuppositions. Does Berkouwer arrive at his conclusion primarily because he is already seeking it? Does he weigh all the evidence, including the evidence of continuation of the image of God in Genesis 9:6, 1 Corinthians 11:7, and James 3:9?

(2) Second, there is a problem related to semantics. As we observed, Berkouwer appears to assume without discussion that he can treat the use of "image of God" like a technical term, with one and the same meaning in all its occurrences.

(3) Third, there is a problem related to analogy. Berkouwer consistently uses only one main analogy for understanding the relationship with God, namely, the analogy of breaking and restoration. The exclusive use of only one analogy leaves out of account some of the implications of biblical texts.

(4) Fourth, there is a problem related to metaphysical frameworks. Berkouwer focuses on the dynamics of a relationship, and he contrasts his focus with a focus on "ontic structure." By "ontic structure" he appears to designate fundamental features that belong to human nature intrinsically. This focus on one, rather than the other, is similar to the distinction in the previous chapter between the dynamic perspective and the static (or particle) perspective. The static perspective would naturally focus on permanent "ontic structure." Berkouwer's selective focus opens the door to selective metaphysics.

## **Semantics of “Image” and the Difficulty with Dualism**

Now let us explore each of the problems more specifically. We have already said something about the first and second problems, those of presuppositions and semantics. But we can further illumine the problem of semantics by focusing on Berkouwer’s concern for *dualism*.

Berkouwer complains that previous treatments concerning the image of God have been dualistic:

The same sort of difficulties appears also if the image is understood as both ontological and active (i.e., as wider and narrower) [the classical Reformed view]. It has proved impossible to bring any real clarity to this duality in the image, this ontic structure [human characteristics] on the one hand, and man’s *conformitas* [conformity to God, religious and ethical uprightness] on the other. Despite all attempts to overcome the “antinomy” involved and to develop a unified view of the image, the “twofold image” remains stubbornly dualistic, because the image understood in the wider sense [permanent distinctive characteristics of human nature, such as reason and personality] has a very different content than the image understood in the narrower sense [righteousness].<sup>11</sup>

Much of a positive kind can be taken away from Berkouwer’s reasoning at this point. But there are also some difficulties that he has not brought to light.

Berkouwer speaks repeatedly of “the image.” His manner of speaking is revealing. Such language gives the impression that people ought to look for a single meaning that will be the meaning of “image” as a technical term. And, one may ask, will it *also* be the meaning for every occurrence of the key expression in the Bible? Berkouwer wants this meaning to be “unified,” not “dualistic.” Berkouwer expresses dissatisfaction with the classical Reformed approach, which speaks of a wider and narrower

11. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 61.

image. In Berkouwer's estimation, this classical view remains dualistic, in spite of efforts to overcome "the 'antinomy.'" Berkouwer thinks that the problem is to be cured by abandoning the reference to "ontic structure." The image then designates only the "active" conformity to God in righteousness.

In this reasoning, Berkouwer has failed to bring to light how the striving for a single technical term has itself brought about the "antinomy" and the lack of a solution to "duality." If an analyst seeks for a single technical term that will cover everything that he wants to say about human nature and about righteousness that is now lost, the resulting technical term will naturally be dualistic, because in the nature of the case in concept formation, an effective technical term cannot simultaneously have two disparate meanings. Within the field of semantics, the first step toward a solution is to acknowledge that "image of God" is not a technical term within the Bible itself. It has a range of usage. It is impossible to do justice to this range with a single precise technical term.

And Berkouwer himself has not succeeded. Instead, he has marginalized the passages that suggest continuity with unfallen man (Gen. 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7; James 3:9). At the same time, he has not entirely overcome the "dualistic" picture that he criticizes. Rather, he has shifted it to a new terminology. The "wider image" of the classical Reformed view has become "ontic structure," while the "narrower image" of the classical Reformed view has become simply "the image," or, to contrast it with earlier views, the "active" image. Berkouwer has not actually abolished the dualism, but has simply relabeled it. This relabeling is no more satisfactory than the original labels.

In fact, some kind of duality is built into the history of redemption because, as Berkouwer himself would acknowledge, there is both continuity and discontinuity between man in his original unfallen state and man after the fall. The duality originates with the fall. The continuity and discontinuity before and after the fall are two distinct ("dualistic") aspects. In the older Reformed terminology, elements of continuity comprise the "wider image," while elements of discontinuity, in the form of aspects lost in the fall, are associated with the "narrower image." This is a "duality" that

is real. It is not the business of theology to “overcome” this kind of duality by some kind of artificial “unity.” Berkouwer knows this. But he does not clarify what aspects of duality are bad and what are good.

Berkouwer’s inability to clarify some aspects of the difficulty shows the usefulness of the methods that chapter 7 introduced. It also shows the benefit of using another framework, the framework of *lex Christi*. *Lex Christi* invites people to develop a wider view of what the Bible has to say about human nature, about God’s relation to man, and about man’s reflection of God and imitation of God.

In fact, the situation is even richer than what is suggested with the terminology of “wider” and “narrower” image. These two terms have their usual meaning in close relation to creation and fall. But theology needs to consider redemption as well. Redemption renews us in the image of Christ the Redeemer. Chapters 5 and 6 commented on this renewal, using Ephesians 4:24 and Colossians 3:10. It does not involve merely a restoration to the situation of innocence before the fall, but an advance toward the confirmed righteousness of Christ’s resurrection and of the new heaven and the new earth (1 Cor. 15:45). (Recall within chapter 8 the use of *lex Christi* to plot the history of the world, through creation, fall, redemption, and consummation.)

Redeemed human nature is not the same as created human nature in every respect. Redeemed human nature is an *advance* over Adam. Berkouwer believes, and the Bible also affirms, that those who are savingly united to Christ will not fall away. God will preserve them until the end. This security differs from the situation of Adam. Moreover, at the time of the consummation, God’s people actually arrive at the endpoint of their salvation. This final time is when God’s people are fully and consummately conformed to the image of Christ. Christ is already perfect in holiness. God’s people too will be perfect in holiness at the last day. This endpoint is an *advance* in comparison with the original innocence of Adam.

So it is a mistake to flatten out all the “image” language. The image of Christ, given to us in the New Testament, is not simply the original state of Adam, though the two are related. It is ironic that Berkouwer, for all his concern for dynamicity, has little to say about the dynamic *advance*

contained in redemption. We might wonder whether a futile search for a unified technical term has inhibited his exposition.

### **The Analogy of Breaking and Restoring a Relationship**

Consider next the third problem, Berkouwer's selective use of one primary analogy. According to Berkouwer, man was originally related to God by dynamically imaging God. The fall makes this imaging cease. The relation is at an end. It is broken. It is restored in redemption. Berkouwer does not self-consciously use an analogy with breaking and restoration. But that is the natural picture that readers will take away.

This analogy with breaking and restoration is indeed one kind of analogy. It occurs in the Bible itself in the law of Moses, where a borrower is supposed to replace an item that he has damaged (Ex. 22:5–6, 14). This kind of damage to useful items sometimes happens in a world affected by the fall. A restoration of personal relationship with God is analogous to the replacement of a damaged pot, or the restoration of the body from disease or death. A bodily restoration takes place in some of the miracles of Jesus. These miracles illustrate concretely and symbolically what happens when Jesus restores people from sin.<sup>12</sup>

But the analogy of breaking and restoring is not the only kind of analogy used in the Bible to understand the fall. The events of the fall can also be construed as an *inversion* of the created relation. And in fact, that is what Genesis 3:22 does when it says that man has become “like one of us in knowing good and evil.” Chapter 8 (“Sin as Reversal” section) discussed this point.

Man is a creature. He cannot create anything absolutely new. He *must* imitate God, whether he wants to or not! From this point of view, the fall is not the beginning of a situation characterized by *no* relation to God, but the beginning of a situation of *rebellious* relation, a perverted, twisted relation, a relation still defined by man's inescapable dynamic, a dynamic

12. Vern S. Poythress, *The Miracles of Jesus: How the Savior's Mighty Acts Serve as Signs of Redemption* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).



of imaging God and imitating God. His sin is all the more serious because man still lives before the presence of God. He still lives as a responder to God. This picture of inversion, as well as Berkouwer's view, conveys the continued seriousness and radical nature of the fall.

The *lex Christi* framework alerts people to some of this richness when it focuses on the curse function of the law, not simply on its blessing. (See table 8.17.)

### **The Focus on Relationship**

Consider next Berkouwer's focus on relationship. At a key point he says:

The problem is not this, that some affirm and some deny that man remained man even after the fall, but rather in this, whether or not fallen man's humanness is part of the image of God. A decisive point then is this, whether the Biblical witness gives us any basis for relating man's *humanum*, his manness, the ontic structure of man, to the image of God—regardless of whether this ontic structure is used in the service of God. Does Scripture give us any reason to see in man's humanness as such, apart from the service of God and the richness of sonship, an analogy, an *analogia entis*, an analogy of being, an analogy between the being of God and the being of man, an analogy which can never be annihilated or destroyed, an analogy which on man's side expresses itself in, say, man's person, or his reason, or his freedom?<sup>13</sup>

And again:

It is regrettable that the valid emphasis in the dogma of the image of God in the wider sense has often taken on the form of an analysis of the ontic structure of man, e.g., as defined by person, reason and freedom. For it is undeniable that Scripture does not support such

13. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, 58.

an interpretation. Scripture is concerned with man in his relation to God, in which he can never be seen as man-in-himself, and surely not with man's "essence" described as self or person.<sup>14</sup>

We can see a grain of truth here. Berkouwer is suspicious of a speculative metaphysics that would be imported into the biblical language. He is suspicious too of an attempt to isolate features such as reason and freedom, and to consider them as though they were a kind of morally neutral substratum, on top of which the ethical direction is imposed as an afterthought. Berkouwer thinks, therefore, that the answer to his key question is clear and obvious: "it is undeniable that Scripture does not support such an interpretation."

In one sense, he is right. The Bible never pictures man as an autonomous, independent being, "man-in-himself." That is, the Bible does not depict man as simply existing in himself, with God as irrelevant to what he is. Moreover, person, and reason, and freedom have been radically perverted through the fall. For example, some people are born with mental damage, and those who are born with more developed mental capacities use these capacities to fight God: they have an axe to grind.

But Berkouwer's language leaves the door open to misunderstanding in another direction. The Bible sees all aspects of man as deriving from God's creative act. Why exclude "person," "reason," or "freedom"? As we have seen, the open-endedness of Genesis 1:26–27 invites readers to see in what ways God is like man, and these include personality, reasoning ability, and power to make decisions ("freedom").

Unfortunately, Berkouwer's discussion can be twisted and used in bad directions as well as good ones. Berkouwer enjoins people to be biblical in their thinking. And being biblical is undoubtedly a good thing. But what does it mean? Does it mean that interpreters should not uncritically import into Genesis 1:26–27 a pagan, speculative, philosophical concept of "person" or "reason"? Yes, that is an appropriate concern. Or does it mean that theologians ought not to think of "person" and "reason" because such

14. Berkouwer, 59–60.

vocabulary does not appear in Genesis 1 and closely related passages? The latter is not so good, because it tends to artificially inhibit theologians from applying the Bible's teaching to modern philosophy and modern science.

The problem is, in fact, larger than the mere issue of vocabulary. Berkouwer brings into his discussion the whole area of "man's person, or his reason, or his freedom." Berkouwer resists the idea that an analyst can break off these aspects. But the quotes from Berkouwer can easily tempt readers to separate person and reason and freedom from relationship to God. An analyst could try to break off what Berkouwer calls an "ontic structure." According to this picture, there is on the one side a dynamic imaging relation to God, which constitutes the image of God. On the other side there is man's "manness," his person, and reason, and freedom, which are "ontic structures" that belong to man as such, but do not pertain to the image, which is relational. On the one side are relational dynamics, and on the other side are nonrelational static structures. (Note here the similarity of these two sides to the dynamic perspective and the static perspective, respectively.)

But if an analyst looks at "man's person, or his reason, or his freedom," what will he in fact find? Can personality be understood at all without relating it to the archetypal personality in God? Can reason be understood without relating it to the wisdom of God? Can human freedom be understood except against the background of God's freedom? No. How can an analyst honestly consider "person," "reason," and "freedom," except as a "dynamic reflecting and representing God"? Contrary to Berkouwer's own best instincts, the exclusion of person, reason, and freedom from the image of God can tempt readers to set up some sphere of life that is "man-in-himself," a thoroughly secularized sphere. But there is no such thing. Every aspect of man makes sense only in relation to God.

Berkouwer is rightly suspicious of bringing into the Bible a speculative philosophical metaphysics. But ironically, within a modern theological context, the effects of his language on at least some readers are bound to be the very opposite of what he desires. Readers will bring in an alien metaphysics. Such a speculative metaphysics is close at hand, namely, the metaphysics of Immanuel Kant and its variations. From Kant modern

philosophy and theology have derived a dichotomy between the noumenal and the phenomenal, between the personal and the impersonal, between personal relations and objective scientific facts. We may represent this dichotomy in a simplified form through two columns. (See table 10.1.)

**Table 10.1. A Kantian Dichotomy: Noumenal and Phenomenal**

| Noumenal                  | Phenomenal        |
|---------------------------|-------------------|
| the real                  | the appearance    |
| domain of personal action | domain of science |
| personal                  | impersonal        |
| I-Thou                    | I-it              |
| relational                | isolated          |
| holistic                  | piecemeal         |
| dynamic                   | static            |
| ethics                    | facts             |
| free                      | deterministic     |

In much modern thinking, religious experience belongs to the realm of personal encounter, which is “real” in some sense but is not subject to logic and science. This realm of religious experience deals not with propositional truth but with the rationally inexpressible roots of human personality. Allegedly, the Bible has lessons only for the religious sphere or the religious dimension of existence. Everything else is “man-in-himself,” including reason, freedom, and so on, to the degree that these might be scientifically analyzed.

Berkouwer’s emphasis on the *relation* of man to God can unwittingly play into this dichotomy. Readers could interpret the relational versus the nonrelational as a dichotomy. Aspects of life involving personal relations are *contrasted* with the allegedly impersonal or subpersonal nature of

*other* aspects of life, whether these are matters of scientific investigation or questions about “ontic structure,” such as reason and freedom, which modern psychology or philosophy might investigate.

Now, this dichotomy is deadly for biblical Christianity, since it separates off large areas of the world into a “secular” sphere that is supposedly independent of personal relation to God. One can resist this tendency only by rejecting the dichotomy completely or, what amounts to the same thing, by observing that *everything* exists in dynamic relation to God, so that the focus on dynamic relation does not succeed in distinguishing anything special. What Berkouwer calls “ontic structure” is itself dynamically related to God. An analyst may then go on freely to speak of person and reason and freedom as aspects in which man is like God—contrary, apparently, to Berkouwer’s prohibitions.

Perhaps Berkouwer has in mind only the positive point, of emphasizing personal relation to God. But for his readers, there are at least two significant metaphysical backgrounds. One is the background of Aristotle and his philosophy. In Aristotle’s system, each individual human being is a primary substance. The substance does not change over the lifetime of the human being. Aristotle prioritizes stability and unchanging substance.

Aristotle also affirms change. The form of the substance guides the movement from potentiality to actuality. For example, the acorn has the same substance as the full-grown oak tree. What is potential in the acorn becomes actual in the oak tree. Likewise with human beings. The difficulty here is that Aristotle conceives of the whole process as guided by something internal to man (plus external motions impinging on him), not by God.

In Aristotle’s view, man’s essence remains the same in the entire process. But certain accidental (nonessential) properties or qualities may be added or subtracted along the path of development. Berkouwer’s language offers people a way to reject this Aristotelian conception of man. Instead, Berkouwer affirms that the image of God—which is all-important for our religious life—is not to be conceived as something that can be added or subtracted on top of an unchanging essence. Yet Berkouwer still affirms that man remains man. So has he really answered the Aristotelian picture?

The trouble arises partly from the need for some framework to furnish us with a metaphysical foundation, a fundamental system of categories for analyzing human nature. Berkouwer rejects the Aristotelian framework. He may wish that he could just use the Bible and not need *any* metaphysical framework. But in fact, he then uses language that, in some contexts, could be understood as presupposing a Kantian framework. Kant, as we have seen, is “anti-metaphysical” in a sense, in that he rejects the hope of rational knowledge of the thing in itself. But he has an alternative, namely, the framework of noumenal and phenomenal. That framework functions for practical purposes as his substitute for the earlier metaphysics.

Berkouwer’s choice of language, unfortunately, is open to being applied within such a Kantian framework. In a Kantian framework, the idea is that modern sciences investigate the “ontic structure” of man, whether in psychology or in physiology or in sociology. Allegedly, in contrast to this domain, the Bible addresses the *relational* character of man, especially his relation to God. That recipe soon leads to a Kantian dichotomy, in which God no longer appears in the world—in the phenomena.

### **Philip Edgcumbe Hughes’s Position**

Now consider briefly a few other approaches to the image of God, beginning with Philip Edgcumbe Hughes. In most respects, Hughes’s work<sup>15</sup> follows the lines of Reformed theology. But note one striking difference with respect to the image of God. The true image of God is the divine Son, the second person of the Trinity.<sup>16</sup> Man is created *in* the image. He is the “imprint of the image,” but is not himself that image. Hughes argues that “if he were himself the image it would be pointless to speak of him as a creature constituted in or according to the divine image.”<sup>17</sup> Such statements need further analysis.

15. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: Christ as the Origin and Destiny of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

16. Hughes, 3, 19.

17. Hughes, 15.

First, observe the important truth here. The second person of the Trinity is the image of God from all eternity, serving as the foundation for all creation (Col. 1:15–16). If human beings are made in the image of God, from a theological point of view they are in a way derivative from and analogical to the archetypal imaging relation within the Trinity. This broad conclusion follows from putting together all the various statements, in particular Genesis 1:26–27 and Colossians 1:15.

This conclusion is also in harmony with the *lex Christi* framework. Man imitates God. So it is not surprising that there is an original or archetype for the imaging relation. This archetype is found in God, in the relation of the Father to the Son, who is his image.

But Hughes is being unnecessarily scrupulous in his appeal to the phrase “in our image” in Genesis 1:26. Hughes has to postulate that the “image” designates a preexisting pattern, distinct from the man who is created as the imprint of this pattern. But this explanation does not work with the parallel verse in 5:3: Adam “fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image.” The pronoun “his” refers to Adam. Seth was in the likeness of Adam. Adam did not already have a picture of himself or a statue of himself, which he imitated in the act of fathering. The original was Adam. The image and likeness of the original was Seth.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, when God made man in his image, the original was God. The image was man.

Therefore, it is quite proper for Paul to say that “he [man] is the image and glory of God” (1 Cor. 11:7). A human being is the image and is also *in* the image. Both are true.

Hughes knows that 1 Corinthians 11:7 presents him with a difficulty. He replies that Paul is here “using the expression ‘image of God’ in a different sense. . . . His concern here is not with the creation of man but rather with the question of order and headship in both home and church.”<sup>19</sup> But this reply is weak. Ordinary readers cannot fail to see in the key phrase an allusion to Genesis 1:26–27, even if in the context Paul’s conclusions run beyond the time of creation.

18. John Piper, “The Image of God: An Approach from Biblical and Systematic Theology,” *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 1 (1971): 15–32 [17].

19. Hughes, *True Image*, 22. A fuller argument is found on pp. 22–23.

What Hughes might better have said is that in our theological reckoning, Christ is the original, archetypal, uncreated image of God, while man is God's image on a lower, ectypal plane. There is a difference. But the difference does not amount to denying that man is made like God, in a many-faceted and yet unified, holistic way. Hence, he is the image of God. We should not attribute to the Bible a scientific, technical precision about the phrase "image of God," as though it would be impossible to describe both man and the eternal Son as the "image" on two different planes (Gen. 1:26–27; 1 Cor. 11:7; Col. 1:15). If modern people want to use the phrase in a slightly narrower or broader way, that might still be useful, as long as they make their new meaning clear and acknowledge that it is not the only possible choice of meaning for the key phrase.

### **All Humanity *Not* Automatically Redeemed "in Christ"**

In discussing the Son as the eternal image, people need to distinguish his role in creation from his role in redemption. From creation onward, all human beings descend from Adam. Apart from Christ, they are all "in Adam" (1 Cor. 15:22; see chapters 22–24 below). And Adam as a creature made in the image of God reflects the eternal Son, who "is the image of the invisible God," Col. 1:15). But that does not mean that every human being is "in Christ" in a *redemptive* sense. No human being gets redeemed merely by participating in humanity. The New Testament radically distinguishes those who are "in Christ" (1 Cor. 15:22), who trust in Christ, from those who are "alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart" (Eph. 4:18). "We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (1 John 5:19). The eternal Son is Mediator for creation (Col. 1:15–17). But the *incarnate* Son becomes incarnate as a separate act, and he does so for the sake of *redeeming* his people, through his death and resurrection. This exclusive character of redemption is offensive in the modern West. Elite modern Western culture does not like to admit that there is a distinction between true and false religion, between those who are saved and those who are "perishing" (2 Cor. 2:15). The culture



wants “inclusion.” But this inclusion is a secularized distortion of the biblical principles of loving one’s neighbor and offering the gospel to all.

It is true that through Jesus Christ in his humanity we learn more about God. We also learn more about humanity because he is fully human. But this learning is a change in our knowledge, not a change in the nature of Adam. With respect to his human nature, Christ is “born in the likeness of men” (Phil. 2:7), rather than “the other way around.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Meredith G. Kline’s View on “Image”**

Consider now Meredith G. Kline’s discussion of the image of God. Kline opens up a fresh line of thinking by finding in Genesis 1 a specific model of which Adam is an image.<sup>21</sup> That model is the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters in Genesis 1:2. Kline makes a number of correlations in order to achieve his goal. First, Kline correlates the hovering Spirit in Genesis 1:2 with God’s leading of Israel through the wilderness in Deuteronomy 32:11. (The same verbal root רָחַף *rhp* “hover” in the pī’el stem occurs in both verses.) Then Kline correlates God’s leading in Deuteronomy 32:11 with the cloud of glory in Exodus 14:19–20, Numbers 9:15–23, and other passages. The cloud is associated with the angel (messenger) of God in Exodus 14:19 and 23:20, pointing to the function of the Son. Kline then distinguishes within the complex associations of the concept of glory a “royal-judicial office,” a “formal-physical expression in theophanic radiance,” and “an ethical dimension . . . [consisting in] justice and righteousness.”<sup>22</sup>

How should we evaluate Kline’s position? All these correlations indicate ways in which man is like God. But all are selective. The selection could have followed other paths. Instead of going in the direction of Genesis 1:2, an analyst may notice a reference to dominion quite near to Genesis 1:26–27. So he might pursue the idea of kingship as central to imaging. (Kline does

20. Norman Shepherd, “Image of God,” in *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 1.1017–20 [1018].

21. Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 13–34.

22. Kline, 27.

affirm a “royal-judicial office,” but only by a more roundabout route.) Or an analyst could note the use of speech and conclude that language and communication between God and man are central. Or an analyst could go to Genesis 1:2. Rather than linking it first of all with Deuteronomy 32:11 and then to the theophanic cloud, he could link it first to the later reflections on the Spirit of God as being like a wind that brings order and life (Job 26:13; 27:3; Pss. 33:6; 104:30; Ezek. 37). Or, having decided to pursue the link with theophany, he could refer not simply to cloud theophanies, but to theophanies with cherubim’s fluttering wings and with a human form. In this latter case, the physical form is then not “radiance” but precisely the form of the human body (Gen. 18:2; 32:24). To some extent, Kline indicates his appreciation for these further connections. But he does not quite make clear enough that the particular trail of correlations that he chooses to pursue is not the only possible one.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the number of steps that Kline has to make in successive correlations in order to arrive at his result vitiates the hope that he has found a key “core,” namely, *the meaning* of “image of God” in some exclusive or exhaustive way. He must make at least four steps: from Genesis 1:26 to 1:2; from Genesis 1:2 to Deuteronomy 32:11; from Deuteronomy 32:11 to the theophanic glory cloud; and from the idea of glory to the three aspects of glory. Kline endeavors to compress the steps by finding a theophanic glory cloud already in Genesis 1:2. But Genesis 1:2 does not speak directly of a theophany. In fact, there is a significant correlation, but not an obvious identity, between Genesis 1:2 on the one hand and Deuteronomy 32:11 and the theophanic cloud in the wilderness on the other.

In conclusion, the earlier exegesis of Genesis 1:26–27 in chapter 6 remains intact. Genesis 1:26–27 evokes not one insight or one trail of correlations but many. Nevertheless, a theologian should appreciate to the full Kline’s positive contribution. Kline opens up for theological study a refreshingly original trail that leads to uncovering a whole spectrum of ways in which man is like God. He shows that this likeness includes the

23. See further the discussion of Genesis 1:2 in Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God’s Appearing* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022), chaps. 17, 26 and app. B.

complex structural whole of theophanies. The new approach also shows indirectly, through its stark contrasts with the past, the fact that classical systematic-theological categories for describing mankind and the image of God do not contain an *exclusive* deeper grounding for understanding man. The way that Kline takes is *also* illuminating. In fact, if the classical categories limit people's vision and the framework of their approach or, worse, import antibiblical pagan assumptions, they may effectively block the way to appreciating the full import of biblical revelation.

### **Genesis 1:26–27 and the Classical Reformed View**

Chapter 6 has said that Genesis 1:26–27 uses the language about “image” to say that man is like God. But the likenesses are not yet further specified. To find out more, theologians have to explore other biblical texts. The surrounding material in Genesis 1–2 and 5:1, 3 and Israel's role as a son of God like Adam show ways in which man is like God.

The result of a thorough exploration of the Bible is going to be similar to the classical Reformed view. How so? The classical Reformed view is willing to include *many* aspects of our human likeness to God. In principle, this inclusion can extend out generously to any similarity that the Bible mentions. The Reformed view observes also that some of these aspects are lost in the fall. So there does not exist a single list of features of similarity that is valid for all time. This variation leads Reformed theology to develop the distinction between narrower image (righteousness) and broader image (every aspect of similarity).

In its positive observations, all this is in accord with the Bible. It differs little from what this book has done, except that it has clarified some issues of method: (1) the difference between the meaning of one verse (Gen. 1:27) and the overall teaching of the Bible; (2) the importance of the word/concept distinction; (3) the difference between ordinary language and technical terms; (4) the problem of trying to produce a technical term that covers a variety of uses with different nuances; and (5) the vulnerability of competing views, which are arbitrary when they select only some features of similarity.

## **A Historical Setting for the Frame-Grudem View of the Image of God**

John Frame and Wayne Grudem offer an interpretation of Genesis 1:26–27 similar to the one in this book, by saying that the “image” in these verses is open-ended—not further specified.<sup>24</sup> How did Frame and Grudem’s interpretation arise? Such an interpretation is more natural once attention is devoted to *diversity* and not simply *unity* in the human race.

It seems that the Frame-Grudem view is a distinctively twentieth-century formulation that does not find exact parallels in classical formulations.<sup>25</sup> The first published expression of this view may be in a 1991 essay by John Frame.<sup>26</sup> The same view is also present in the first edition of Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*, which appeared in 1994. Grudem may have arrived at his view independently, but as one of the

24. John M. Frame, “Men and Women in the Image of God,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 225–32 [225]; John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 785; Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 568.

25. There are precedents to the Frame-Grudem approach in earlier theological formulations. But earlier wordings do not directly comment on the open-endedness of Genesis 1:26 as an individual verse. Rather, they offer a general formula. As an example, consider Herman Bavinck. He says, “The image of God is the human similarity to God whereby we display, in our own creaturely way, the highest perfection of God” (Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity*, ed. John Bolt [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019], 1:36). On the surface, Bavinck’s wording comes close to the Frame-Grudem approach, in that it speaks broadly about “human similarity to God.” In the surrounding context, however, Bavinck says nothing about the distance between ordinary language in the Bible and the use of “image of God” as a technical term. As a result, there are several possible interpretations of his statement: (1) it defines “image of God” in Genesis 1:27, as a specific verse; (2) it sums up all the ways that man is like God; it brings to completion the train of thought begun in Genesis 1:26–27, which invites us to explore these similarities; (3) it gives the meaning of “image of God” as a technical term, which sums up past Reformed tradition; (4) it offers a technical term that would correspond to all the relevant occurrences of the word “image” in the Bible; or (5) some combination of 1–4. Options 4 and 5 do not produce clarity. Options 2 and 3 are helpful, but need to be distinguished from each other and from the exegetical meaning found in 1:26–27. See also Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8), 2:530–33. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 2:96, notes, “The simple declaration of Scripture is that man at his creation was like God.”

26. Frame, “Men and Women,” 225.

editors of the volume in which Frame's essay appears, he would have been aware that it matched Frame's 1991 view.

Now consider the topic of Frame's 1991 essay, "Men and Women in the Image of God." This topic allows Frame to raise the issue whether men and women may display "the image of God" in a differentiated fashion, rather than to have a sexual differentiation completely unrelated to the idea of the image of God. His answer is to affirm differentiation. Both men and women are like God and reflect God. They do so in similar ways, but not completely in the same way. Once this issue is raised, it opens the door to analyzing the language of "image" without assuming that it relates uniformly to a single monolithic referent, such as rationality, or dominion, or glory, or righteousness, or ability to enjoy personal relations.

This attention to differentiated humanity contrasts with the natural tendency of systematic theology to focus primarily on general truths that hold for every human being. Because systematic theology aims at summarizing biblical teaching on any topic that it addresses, it produces many true general statements. These statements are good and helpful. But in the process, it is possible for someone to forget the differences that are not directly in focus in general statements. This tendency can be reinforced if the principal background lies in Aristotelian metaphysics, which tells us to focus on the common "essence" of humanity. Over against this focus on commonality in human nature, John Frame asks whether there is room for *variation* in the way in which women in contrast to men reflect aspects of God. In God, unity is equally ultimate with diversity. Likewise, in human beings, unity is equally ultimate with diversity—the diversity between men and women, and also the diversity between any two distinct human beings.

This attention to diversity should be understood, then, as complementary to the traditional attention to unity. The two are not in competition.<sup>27</sup> The tradition in systematic theology has been right in asking what is

27. See Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), pointing out that some strands of postmodernism emphasize diversity of cultures and languages at the expense of unity. The disappearance of God makes the diversities unbridgeable. A biblically based approach, by contrast, affirms both unity and diversity in harmony.

common to all humanity. But in *addition*, it is possible to add complementary observations by focusing on diversity. It becomes easier to affirm this complementarity when we employ the four methods about which we have spoken: presuppositions, semantics, analogies, and attention to metaphysics. We are better able to understand why the tradition in systematic theology was attracted to definitions of the image of God that excluded diversity or put it in the background. Traditionally, the “image” as a technical term had to be *one* thing. At this point, the whole intellectual framework for discussing the image of God had an invisible weakness.

### **Acts 2 as a Perspective on Critical Analyses of the Image of God**

Acts 2 describes how God forms the church with his Spirit, as an act of re-creation and redemption. It is analogous to the original creation of humanity. So it suggests that the way in which man is like God is multifaceted. The presence of the Spirit in Acts 2 is even more striking and central than in Genesis 1:2. And the Spirit appears in a fire theophany in Acts 2:3. This theophany connects naturally to Meredith Kline’s discussion of theophany in Genesis 1:2 and the meaning of the image of God.

### **Key Terms**

|                   |                             |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|
| analogy           | Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe     |
| archetype         | image in the broader sense  |
| Aristotle         | image in the narrower sense |
| Barth, Karl       | image of God                |
| Berkouwer, G. C.  | Kant, Immanuel              |
| dualism           | Kline, Meredith G.          |
| fall of man       | metaphysical framework      |
| field perspective | metaphysics                 |
| Frame, John M.    | noumenal                    |
| glory             | particle perspective        |
| Grudem, Wayne A.  | phenomenal                  |

presupposition

Reformed theology

Schilder, Klaas

semantics

systematic theology

technical term

theophany

unity and diversity

wave perspective

### **Study Questions**

1. What is the positive element of truth in Karl Barth's understanding of the image of God, and how does it fall short?
2. What is the positive element in G. C. Berkouwer's understanding of the image of God, and how does it fall short?
3. What is the issue about "dualism" in the image of God? How do we address it?
4. In what way is there still a duality in Berkouwer's position, even though he attempts to move beyond it?
5. How do the metaphysical frameworks of Aristotle and Kant affect the way in which people think about the image of God?
6. What is Meredith G. Kline's interpretation of the image of God, and what are its strengths and weaknesses?

### **For Further Reading**

Frame, John M. *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015. Pp. 251–70.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, enable us to thoughtfully sort through the good and the bad in the various theories about the image of God. We thank you for their positive insights. We thank you also for critical tools that enable us to be alert to problems. Enable us also to move beyond the debates and live our lives with awareness of your gifts to humanity, and of the relation to you that you have made in creating us.

# 11

## THE UNITY OF DIVERSE TRUTHS IN *LEX CHRISTI*

We can now stand back and consider how the previous chapter used particular methods to evaluate a number of views concerning the image of God. We affirm unity and diversity, using the *lex Christi* framework.

### **Mixed Reception**

A number of views contain positive insights. But they also have difficulties in them. For example, Karl Barth makes a positive point that human beings engage in personal relations, and that these relations imitate their archetype, the relations among the persons of the Trinity. G. C. Berkouwer's focus on active imitation of God in righteousness is a way in which man imitates God. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes focuses on the Son as the image. Meredith G. Kline focuses on the theme of glory, as he connects it with Spirit theophany. The Socinians emphasize *dominion* as the content of the image. Each of these foci notices something positive about how human beings are like God.

At the same time, each view has difficulties. In detail, these views sometimes use unconvincing reasoning. They employ underreadings or overreadings or tendentious readings of a text, selectivity in emphasizing some themes at the expense of others, and unnecessary exclusion of



complementary themes. Difficulties arising because of presuppositions, semantics, analogy, and metaphysics sometimes lurk in the background.

The classical position of Reformed theology is the most inclusive, but it can be enhanced by attention to methods. Attention to methods can show how other solutions go astray, how confusion can enter because of different uses of the phrase “image of God,” and how distinct nuances may belong to any one verse with the phrase “image of God.”

### **A Unified View Using *Lex Christi***

The *lex Christi* framework provides a unified view. This framework can be used to integrate each of the positive insights.

- The focus on personal relations (Barth) arises naturally from the fifth commandment, which focuses on personal relations, using parents as the particular case (5C). God in the Trinity has personal relations within him. Human beings as imitators of God have personal relations with God and with other human beings. The fifth commandment implies that in these relations, human beings must give due honor and service to those to whom they relate.
- The focus on positive righteousness (Berkouwer) arises from the entire *lex Christi* framework, which is an exposition of God's righteousness. This righteousness is expressed in his law and in the perfect righteousness of Christ. Berkouwer's focus on active reflection has a close connection with the fourth commandment, which displays that God is dynamic and that humans imitate this dynamic (4C).
- The focus on Christ as the image (Hughes) has relevance both to Christ in his incarnation, as the fulfillment of all righteousness in the law, and to the eternal Son. The first commandment, in proclaiming the supremacy of God, implies the supremacy of all three persons. God has the original righteousness that is subsequently reflected in human beings as creatures. The Son as incarnate Mediator shows us the way to communion with God, fulfilling the

second commandment's focus on proper and improper paths to communion (1C and 2C).

- The attention to theophany and to glory (Kline) has natural affinity to the seventh commandment because God draws near to people and expresses his intimacy with them in theophany (7C). The theme of intimacy associated with the seventh commandment is also closely linked with the themes of beauty and glory, which belong to theophany. Theophany also has a natural affinity with holiness, which is a central aspect of the second commandment (2C).
- Human dominion (Socinian emphasis) takes place by active work, as indicated in the fourth commandment (4C). Dominion itself reflects God's dominion (1C).

The *lex Christi* framework in its tenfold fullness displays many points of comparison between God and man. Christ is the archetypal image (1C and 2C). Human beings are to reflect God in blessing (3C), in dynamic action, including dominion (1C and 4C), in harmonious relations (5C), in life, including the promise of eternal life (6C), in intimacy and glory (7C), in giving and receiving (8C), in truth (9C), and in contentedness (10C). Each of these is not isolated from the others. They all belong together in a single unified, coherent representation both of God and of his covenantal relation to mankind. Each commandment can be expanded into a perspective on the whole. (See table 11.1.)

**Table 11.1. Ten Perspectives on Man from the *Lex Christi* Framework**

| Cmd. | Specific Commands | Attributes of God | Meaning of Man                          |
|------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| 1C   | no other gods     | supreme           | Christ as archetype; dominion           |
| 2C   | no idols          | holy              | holy priest; manifestation in theophany |

**Table 11.1 (continued)**

| <b>Cmd.</b> | <b>Specific Commands</b> | <b>Attributes of God</b> | <b>Meaning of Man</b>                                      |
|-------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|
| 3C          | honor God's name         | blessed                  | blessed by God and blessing others                         |
| 4C          | keep the Sabbath         | dynamic                  | active imitation, in work and rest                         |
| 5C          | honor parents            | harmonious               | harmonious relations with God and man                      |
| 6C          | no murder                | living                   | living; hope of eternal life                               |
| 7C          | no adultery              | intimate                 | fellowship with God and man; God drawing near in theophany |
| 8C          | no stealing              | giving                   | giving and receiving                                       |
| 9C          | no lying                 | truthful                 | truthful                                                   |
| 10C         | no coveting              | contented                | contented                                                  |

This perspectival relation also has value in explaining why some interpreters have been inclined to be content with their own partial view. Any one of these views can be turned into a perspective on the whole.

Some interpreters have also related the image of God to the three offices of Christ, namely, Prophet, King, and Priest.<sup>1</sup> Christ as the last Adam fulfills the work that Adam should have done (1 Cor. 15:44–49). So it makes sense to consider whether Adam was a prophet, a king, and a priest. He has a prophetic role in naming the animals (Gen. 2:19–20). He has a kingly role in exercising dominion (1:26, 28). He has a priestly role as he dwells in the garden of Eden, which is “the holy mountain of God” (Ezek. 28:14), in which is a special presence of God (Gen. 2:16–17;

1. John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 786–91.

3:8–9, 22). The three offices are three aspects of moral responsibility. Adam must speak truthfully, in line with the prophetic office. He must exercise dominion wisely and justly, in line with the kingly office. He must be holy and respect the holiness of God, in line with the priestly office.

Since the Ten Commandments provide a summary of morality, they will directly or indirectly address the responsibilities associated with each of the three offices. All of the Ten Commandments can serve as perspectives. But does one commandment more directly address Adam's prophetic responsibility? The ninth commandment does, because it is about telling the truth. Prophetic responsibility also correlates with the second commandment, which is closely related to the covenant and how the covenant specifies verbally the way of communion with God.

What about the kingly office? It correlates especially with the first commandment. God is supreme, and mankind is derivatively supreme over the animals. It also correlates with the fourth commandment. Man is supposed to dynamically exercise dominion and to progress in dominion in time.

Finally, consider the priestly office. The priestly office is concerned with the presence of God, which correlates with the seventh commandment and the theme of intimacy. It also correlates with the third commandment and its theme of blessing and curse. The priest mediates the blessing of God (Num. 6:22–27). Finally, it correlates with the second commandment and its theme of holiness. The priest is supposed to be holy and to draw near to the holy presence of God.

Since each of the Ten Commandments can be expanded into a perspective on the whole, each of the Ten Commandments could in principle serve to underline the responsibility belonging to prophets, or to kings, or to priests. But as we have just seen, one or more of the commandments may address the responsibility more directly.

Perspectives from the Trinity also harmonize with *lex Christi*; in fact, each of the ten attributes of God associated with *lex Christi* can be seen as reflective of some aspect of the Trinity.<sup>2</sup>

2. Vern S. Poythress, "Introducing the Law of Christ (*Lex Christi*): A Fruitful Framework for Theology and Life," 2024, § 22, <https://frame-poythress.org/introducing-the-law-of-christ-lex-christi-a-fruitful-framework-for-theology-and-life/>.

In sum, by using multiple perspectives, the *lex Christi* framework integrates insights belonging to one-sided views from the past.

## Acts 2 as a Perspective on a Unified View of Humanity

Acts 2 presents a picture of re-created humanity with both unity and diversity. It is analogous to the unity and diversity in the original creation of humanity in Genesis 1–2. In Acts 2, the perspectives of the Ten Commandments come to bear on at least three levels: (1) God the Father, in his gift of the Holy Spirit, is the divine source of all attributes displayed in the Ten Commandments (Acts 2:33); (2) Christ has fulfilled the Ten Commandments in his human nature (vv. 33–36); (3) the Holy Spirit has renewed and transformed the people of God with his fullness (vv. 2–4), which includes writing the law on the heart (Jer. 31:33).

### Key Terms

|                         |                    |
|-------------------------|--------------------|
| analogy                 | Kline, Meredith G. |
| archetype               | <i>lex Christi</i> |
| Barth, Karl             | presupposition     |
| Berkouwer, G. C.        | priest             |
| dominion                | prophet            |
| glory                   | Reformed theology  |
| Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe | semantics          |
| image of God            | Socinian           |
| king                    |                    |

### Study Questions

1. How can the *lex Christi* framework include the positive insights of all the major positions on the image of God?
2. What are the three offices of Christ? How do they relate to the Old Testament? How do they relate to Adam?

3. How do the three offices of Christ harmonize with the *lex Christi* framework?
4. How does the biblical teaching on the three offices of Christ enrich your appreciation of how redemption applies to you?
5. In what way has God made you a prophet, a king, and a priest?

### **For Further Reading**

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8. Pp. 3:361–68.

Westminster Confession of Faith 8.1.

Westminster Larger Catechism 43–45.

### **Prayer**

We thank you, our Father, for giving to us in Christ a unity of mind reflecting your unity (Eph. 4:3–6). Thank you for the privilege of serving as prophets, kings, and priests.



## 12

# ORIGINAL RIGHTEOUSNESS

We now turn to a theological question concerning the original condition of human beings. Did human beings as originally created have a positive righteousness? And how does one understand this righteousness? The discussion here supplements the discussion in chapter 3 concerning the original condition of humanity.

### **Original Righteousness and the Image of God**

Traditionally, questions about the original condition have been closely linked to the question of what “the image of God” is. But the two topics are distinct. There are complexities about the term “image of God.” Theologians assign different meanings to the term. And the later theological meanings are not completely identical with what Genesis 1:26–28 affirms using the language of “image” and “likeness.”

This chapter focuses on whether humanity originally had a positive righteousness. One difficulty is that Genesis 1:26–28 by itself does not tell us everything. Genesis 1:26–28 says that man is like God. He may be like God in many respects, and these various respects may be closely related to one another. The fall of man may result in profound changes in some or all of these respects. Genesis 1:26–28 by itself does not enumerate in detail what human beings have lost and in what respect they have lost it.

Some similarities to God clearly remain after the fall: human beings still speak, still name things, still have the capability to have children who are like them. They still have a sense of religion, though it turns toward



false gods. Like a statue of a king that is subsequently defaced, human beings remain, metaphorically speaking, “statues” of God the King.

Nearly everyone has acknowledged some of these truths to some degree. The traditional position of Reformed theology was accurate in indicating that righteousness was lost and that nevertheless some other similarities remained. But the discussion has sometimes been confused by the idea that “image of God” is necessarily a technical term, referring to some one “thing” out there. If so, it could then be objected that there seem to be two meanings, “broader” and “narrower,” which would be in tension with the unity of meaning that people normally expect in a technical term. In fact, there are not two meanings, but one: man is created like God. That one broad meaning, because of its open-endedness, is linked by a variety of ties to later history.

After we have cleared up the “disputes about words,” what genuine controversies remain? There remains, of course, a controversy with the materialists and the mainstream evolutionary naturalists, who believe that God either does not exist or does not affect the development of life. But we want to focus on controversies within the realm of “classical” theology. There remain at least two: the classical Roman Catholic picture of concupiscence before the fall of man; and the Pelagian and Arminian view that before the fall man did not have positive righteousness.

### **The Roman Catholic View**

This book cannot undertake a thorough analysis of the traditional Roman Catholic approach. It is complicated, partly because the answers with respect to the original condition of mankind tie in with other points of doctrine concerning redemption. And they are supported by Roman Catholic tradition, so that one’s attitude toward the reliability of tradition affects the conclusions.

The Roman Catholic theory basically says that in man as created, there is a tension between “lower appetite” and reason.<sup>1</sup> This tension is

1. John J. Ming, “Concupiscence,” *Encyclopedia*, Catholic Answers, <https://www.catholic.com/encyclopedia/concupiscence>, accessed November 9, 2020.

*concupiscence*. Concupiscence is not itself sin, but can become the starting point for temptations that do lead to sin. Concupiscence is overcome, in the original setting before the fall, by a preternatural gift of the dominion of reason, in addition to the supernatural gift of righteousness. The dominion of reason enables man to govern his lower appetites. When man fell, these two gifts were lost.

In traditional Roman Catholicism, “image” was associated with what was natural to man, while “likeness” designated the preternatural and supernatural gifts. The doctrinal view can, however, be held without claiming that the two key words in Genesis 1:26 designate these two aspects.

This view does not arise from the text of Genesis 1–2, but comes from certain philosophical and speculative ideas rooted in tradition. So it stands or falls on the basis of views of tradition. Since the role of tradition affects theological method all along the line, it is an exceedingly important issue. But it is outside the scope of this book. The classical Roman Catholic idea that “image” and “likeness” refer to two different things cannot be sustained—that is, apart from an appeal to tradition that overrules the natural meaning of the text.

The Roman Catholic view has implications for how one thinks about redemption. Is mankind radically disabled by the fall? Is reason itself corrupted? Or is the damage confined, at least primarily, to the loss of things that are “above” nature, things that are added on top of an already complete human nature? If the damage is confined, people might still hope that they can trust partly in themselves—perhaps, for example, in an uncorrupted human reason—even when it comes to questions of receiving salvation. It should be clear that the Roman Catholic view of the fall has ties with the Roman Catholic view of receiving salvation. To enter into the dispute between the Roman Catholics and the Reformers about the way of salvation would require a separate book.

### **Positive Righteousness**

Next, do Adam and Eve originally have positive righteousness? Theologians have disputed whether Adam and Eve had a positive righteousness

when they were initially created, before they started acting. God declares his finished creation to be “very good” (Gen. 1:31). Chapter 3 inferred that human beings were created very good. As imitators of God, they would already have positive moral character and love for God. But the text is not explicit. Like almost all the other controversies with respect to the original condition, this one really arises because of concerns for the fall and redemption. For simplicity, we will look at one main representative of an alternative view, namely, John Miley.

### **John Miley on the Original State of Man**

John Miley wants to find an intermediate position between postulating an original righteousness (Reformed) and postulating an originally neutral state (Pelagian).<sup>2</sup> He does so by postulating that human beings were created with a subjective tendency toward good, but that this subjective tendency was not in itself “moral” or rewardable. According to Miley, only deeds arising from free personal action can have positive moral character and be rewarded:

The holiness of Adam, as newly created and before any personal action of his own, was simply a subjective state and tendency in harmony with his moral relations and duties [a tendency toward good]. But such a state, however real and excellent, and however pleasing to the divine mind, could not have any true ethical quality, or in any proper sense be accounted either meritorious or rewardable. A deeper analysis which reaches the most determinate moral principles must eliminate from theology the ideas of ethical character without free personal action.<sup>3</sup>

Why does Miley trouble himself to make this rather refined distinction? If Adam was originally holy and had a tendency toward good, what

2. John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Eaton & Mains/Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham, 1892).

3. Miley, 1:410.

difference does it make whether he calls this state “moral” or not? What difference does it make whether it was “rewardable”? Soon enough Adam would go through a test, and the results of the test would be rewardable according to anybody’s reckoning.

Actually, Miley is warming up for a situation after the fall. He wants to allow that all human beings after the fall enter the world with a systematic tendency toward evil. But that tendency, in his view, is not punishable. Only actual sins are punishable. Miley thereby avoids the possibility of the imputation of Adam’s sin. Establishing a distinction between subjective tendency and rewardability *before* the fall fixes the ground for establishing, in a symmetrical way, a distinction between subjective tendency and punishability *after* the fall. His views are also bound up with what he calls “the most determinate moral principles,” which place the weight on “free personal action.” Miley is on the way to developing a full-blown Arminian position.

In general, theological positions hang together. Each part influences the other parts. To a large extent, they stand or fall as wholes. Thus, at bottom the dispute is among several theological systems: Arminianism and Calvinism and Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism. The most directly relevant texts are those describing redemption, and it is these that bear the weight of the theological argument.

What happens here is what occurs repeatedly in some of the classical treatments of topics on the doctrine of man. Concerns about redemption drive the discussion of creation and fall. But when they do, they too often result in speculation. Genesis 1–2 does not provide an explicit discussion of “holiness,” “subjective tendency,” and “rewardability.” It is a mistake to get deeply involved in speculative distinctions on the basis of little or no evidence. Rather, people need to look for texts that speak to the issue. And these texts, over and over again, turn out to be redemptive texts in the New Testament, where the disputes among Arminians, Reformed, and Lutherans come into sharpest focus.

Can we salvage something of value from Miley’s argument? When dealing with speculative language, one helpful remedy is to try to convert it into language more specific and concrete. Adam’s condition, says

Miley, was not “meritorious” or “rewardable.” The word “rewardable,” at a simple level, consists in two parts: “reward” and “-able.” When added together, they indicate a potential for reward. What does it mean to have this as-yet-unrealized potential? What would show that it is or is not there? Concretely, a merit or reward would appear if God actually did give a reward.

Hypothetically, people can picture God as saying to Adam, “Here, Adam, you have done the task that I assigned, and now I give you the reward that I promised.” Could such a thing happen at the very beginning? Not easily. Why not? Because in the usual meaning of “reward,” a reward comes at the end, after a task is finished. It is part of God’s plan that there be a historical development and that not everything take place at once. The underlying biblical principle here is that of judgment according to *works*. At the beginning of a piece of contemplated action, a person has some character and some inclination. What he is as a person motivates him to undertake the action. At the end, the action is accomplished, and then a reward or punishment follows. Typically, the action displays the character of the person (cf. Matt. 15:19–20). There is an intrinsic connection between a person and his action, so that Miley’s “moral” distinction between the two threatens to collapse.

But the Bible chooses primarily to depict sanctions as following on specific acts of obedience or disobedience of a concrete historical kind. Judgment comes at the end of history. Judgment is also a form of theodicy (“a defense of God’s goodness”).<sup>4</sup> God shows to the whole world that he is righteous. Hence, judgment quite naturally focuses on the public manifestations of what people have done. These manifestations show what the people are in their character, and hence are a vindication in public of the rightness of God’s judgment.

Miley is right if all he wants to say is that judgment comes at the end, after the works have taken place. But such an observation, by itself, is obvious. People from all theological positions agree with it. Hence,

4. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theodicy](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theodicy), accessed October 4, 2021.

it cannot bear the theological weight that Miley might like to give to it. Moreover, other aspects of the judgment threaten to undermine the absoluteness of Miley's proposed distinction. A judgment according to works is just only if the works accurately display and match the character of the person involved. The works of some *other* person, or works done while sleepwalking, would not have the same weight in a judgment of rewards. Thus, the principle of judgment by works tacitly includes an assumed tie between works and character, a tie that threatens to make Miley's distinction of no consequence.

The pronouncement "very good" in Genesis 1:31 implies that mankind was created morally good. We will save further discussion until we come to the topic of free agency, where we can see the meaning of the distinctions that Miley introduces.

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on the Original Condition of Humanity**

Acts 2, as a passage about re-creation, shows us an analogy with the original situation in creation. The people who are re-created by the Holy Spirit have an inward desire to serve God, a desire that manifests itself in action (Acts 2:11, 41–47).

### **Key Terms**

|                             |                        |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Arminian                    | Lutheran               |
| Calvinist                   | Miley, John            |
| concupiscence               | original righteousness |
| evolutionary naturalism     | Pelagian               |
| fall of man                 | Reformed theology      |
| image                       | reward                 |
| image in the broader sense  | Roman Catholic         |
| image in the narrower sense | technical term         |
| image of God                | works                  |
| likeness                    |                        |

### **Study Questions**

1. What is *original righteousness*?
2. What is *concupiscence*, in the Roman Catholic theory of the original state of humanity?
3. What is John Miley's position on the original state of Adam? What are its difficulties?
4. How do controversies about redemption get reflected in theories about Adam?
5. What have you learned about being discerning in reading theological claims about Adam? about other topics?

### **For Further Reading**

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Vol. 2, *God and Creation*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004. Pp. 534–54.

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. 4th ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939. Pp. 206–10.

### **Prayer**

Thank you for making humanity with moral goodness. Thank you for working moral goodness in us through the Spirit of Christ, uniting us to Christ.

## 13

# ANALOGIES APPLIED TO THE ORIGINAL STATE

Now consider how several biblical-theological themes can be used as analogies or perspectives to illumine the original state of Adam.

Chapter 7 showed that Adam can be considered to be a son of God. How can sonship as a perspective throw light on Adam's original state?

### **Sonship as a Perspective on Redemption**

Consider what sonship means in the context of redemption. A redeemed person belongs to the family of God. Membership in God's family includes various aspects and privileges. These aspects include intimacy, inheritance, freedom, and family likeness. Romans 8 is one of the principal passages that discuss the theme of sonship. Let us consider it briefly.

To be a child of God includes addressing God as Father: "For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Rom. 8:15). This address expresses intimacy. Intimacy is also closely related to sharing possessions, which the passage expresses as the theme of inheritance: "and if children, then *heirs*—*heirs* of God and fellow *heirs*



with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (v. 17). Thus, *inheritance* can be treated as a kind of subtheme of intimacy.

The theme of freedom occurs in several places in Romans 8, as it discusses freedom from the power of sin:

For the law of the Spirit of life has set you *free* in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. (Rom. 8:2)

[God] condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be *fulfilled in us*, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Rom. 8:3–4)

For you did not receive the spirit of *slavery* to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons. (Rom. 8:15)

Romans 8:15 explicitly contrasts slavery with being a son. The implication is that to have the status of son includes being free, as opposed to being a slave.

Family likeness becomes explicit in Romans 8:29: “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.” Likeness is more implicit in passages where Christians are imitators of the Father or the Son:

You, however, are not in the flesh but *in the Spirit*, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. (Rom. 8:9)

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will *also* give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (Rom. 8:11)

You have received the Spirit of *adoption as sons*. (Rom. 8:15)

We are re-created in the likeness of God and are renewed in his likeness (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). We are imitators of God. Subordinately, mature Christians offer patterns of imitation for those who look up to them:

Be *imitators* of me, as I am of Christ. (1 Cor. 11:1)

[Be] *examples* to the flock. (1 Peter 5:3)

Beloved, do not imitate evil but *imitate* good. (3 John 11)

All these privileges of adoption come to believers through Christ. Christ is the eternal Son. He has intimacy with the Father from all eternity. He has inheritance, in that God the Father gives him the Holy Spirit (John 3:35) and the whole world (Ps. 2:8; Rom. 8:17). He has the freedom of God as the eternal Son, and the freedom of rule as the resurrected Son (Eph. 1:20–22). He has the original family likeness because he is the Son and the image of God (Col. 1:15).

### **Sonship as a Perspective on Adam's Original State**

Now apply the motifs of sonship to Adam's original situation.

First, Adam has intimacy with God. Intimacy is implied by the fact that Ezekiel 28 calls the garden of Eden “the holy mountain of God” (Ezek. 28:13–14). God is intensely present in the garden. God comes to Adam and Eve in judgment in Genesis 3:8. But if they had not sinned, God would have continued in fellowship with them, as the language of holiness in Ezekiel 28:14 indicates.

Second, consider the motif of inheritance. In Genesis 2, Adam has inherited the garden of Eden. And in a sense, he has been given the world as a whole, in the directions that God gives in Genesis 1:28–30 concerning his dominion.

Third, Adam has freedom. He is free to obey God, not in bondage to sin (John 8:34; Rom. 6:16–17).

Fourth, Adam as a son is like his heavenly Father. This likeness is proclaimed in the imaging language of Genesis 1:26–27.

### **Redemptive Sonship in John's Writings**

So far, Romans 8 has been the principal source for themes associated with sonship. It is connected with the larger body of the writings of the apostle Paul. Now consider the writings of John—primarily the Gospel of John and 1 John, where the theme of sonship comes up prominently.<sup>1</sup> John's writings have some of the same emphases as Paul's writings. But there are also some differences in emphasis.

The differences begin with terminology. John's writings mostly use the term “son” (ὁ υἱός, *huios*) to designate Christ. The term “children” (τέκνα, *tekna*; τέκνία, *teknia*) designates believers. In John, believers enter their new state by new birth, birth from God (John 3:5–8; 1 John 2:29; 3:9; 5:1; etc.). In Paul, they enter by adoption (Rom. 8:15). In ordinary human life, being born into a family and being adopted into a family are normally incompatible. But both expressions are being used analogically, and they make complementary points. The imagery of birth stresses the power of God to change people radically when he brings them into his kingdom. The imagery of adoption indicates that God grants people new status and new privileges.

John indicates that Christ is the original Son, the eternal Son (John 1:1). The language of the Father's sending the Son, which is common in John, presupposes that he was the Son even before he was sent—in other words, that he preexisted his time on earth. Christ has special knowledge of the Father, which expresses his intimacy (1:18). He imparts knowledge to his disciples (17:3, 6–8). He perfectly displays the Father's character (14:9–10) and perfectly carries out his will (5:19). He loves the Father and obeys his commands.

1. Some scholars doubt whether the Gospel of John and 1–2–3 John share the same human author. But they have common features in themes and style. These features along with other evidences confirm common authorship. The authorship of the book of Revelation is also debated. I believe it too has the same author, the apostle John. But the theme of sonship is not prominent in Revelation. So this book focuses on John and 1 John.

These aspects belonging to Jesus Christ are reflected in those whom he makes the children of God. The children of God do not, of course, preexist. But their new birth, birth from God, is the analogical expression corresponding to Christ's eternal sonship. They have knowledge of God and believe in the Son. They love God and Christ and keep his commandments. Their love reflects the love of the Father and the Son. So they are in the likeness of God. John's emphases can be summed up in four motifs: new birth, intimate knowledge (which goes together with trust in Christ), likeness to God, and service to God in love and keeping the commandments of God.

How does this picture of being redemptive children compare with the status of Adam when he is newly created?

(1) At the time that he is first created, Adam does not have new birth, which would mean a second, redemptive birth. But he does have an original birth from God, which is supernatural. His special birth from God implies that he is a child of God, as Luke 3:38 confirms.

(2) Adam has knowledge of God, such as is communicated in the specific utterances in Genesis 1:28–30 and 2:16–17. These communications presuppose that Adam already had some intuitive knowledge of God as his Creator. He has to know *who* is speaking to him. He has to know that the one who speaks has intrinsic authority, and that he is obliged to obey because of who God is and because of the relation that he already has to God.

(3) Adam has likeness to God, as expressed in Genesis 1:26–27.

(4) Adam is called on to love God and to keep his commandments. Specifically, there is the commandment not to eat of the special fruit (Gen. 2:17). Because Adam is a child of God, he has a natural inclination to love God and to keep his commandments. But he is not fully mature in his ability. That is one reason for the test that God lays out: to lead him to maturity.

Motifs from Paul's writings and motifs from John's help provide a richer picture of what it means for Adam to be the son of God (Luke 3:38) when he is created. Redemptive sonship is not identical with created sonship. Redemptive sonship is secure (John 10:28), while Adam fell from his. Nevertheless, the two are analogous. Both reflect in some way the archetypal sonship of the second person of the Trinity.

## **Adam as Priest**

Now consider Adam as a priest. The idea of priesthood is a natural implication of the fact that Israel is an Adamic figure and that Israel as a whole is said to be “a kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:5–6). By analogy, Adam is a priest, whose responsibility it is to serve God. In particular, he is to maintain his own holiness and the holiness of those under his charge, namely, his wife. Later on in the Old Testament, the garden of Eden is described as not only “the garden of God” (Ezek. 28:13), but “the holy mountain of God” (v. 14). It is holy because God is intensely present, both through the symbolic representations in the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and through God’s special visits, as in Genesis 3:8. In 2:15, God gives Adam the charge concerning the garden, “to work it and keep it.” Both verbs in the original Hebrew are fairly broad in meaning. But commentators have rightly drawn attention to the fact that these verbs are sometimes used in describing the responsibilities of the Aaronic priests. They work or “serve” in the tabernacle, and they keep or “guard” it. The guarding involves preserving the special holiness of the tabernacle precincts.

Likewise, Adam is to “guard” the holiness of the garden. The serpent intrudes with blasphemous words. He is an evil intruder. He is profaning the holy space. According to the regulations pertaining to the tabernacle, he should be killed (Num. 1:51). He is blaspheming God, and that act also deserves death (Lev. 24:16).

The priest should be holy. He imitates and reflects the holiness of God. As a holy person, he is intimate with God. The people of Israel were delivered out of slavery in Egypt in order that they might be a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6). Thus, the theme of priesthood displays some of the same aspects that are found under sonship.

## **Adam’s Original Condition according to *Lex Christi***

What do the issues concerning the original human condition look like using the *lex Christi* framework? Four sections from chapter 8, beginning with “Christ as the Fulfillment of Righteousness,” indicate that the *lex*

*Christi* framework can apply to the whole history of redemption by noting the ways in which human beings do or do not reflect conformity to God in their lives. The cumulative evidence for this pattern of conformity or disconformity comes from the whole Bible. Genesis 1–2 by itself does not make everything explicit. But the pattern as a whole suggests that man as originally created is already designed for conformity with God. God saw that the whole created order “was very good” (Gen. 1:31).

This very good condition included conformity of mankind to the pattern of God. The Bible does not indicate that at the early point in history in Genesis 1–2, God had given the Ten Commandments in explicit oral or written form. But the *lex Christi* framework encourages Bible interpreters to understand that the heart of the matter is in actual conformity to the character of God—his supremacy, holiness, blessedness, dynamicity, harmony, eternal life, intimacy, and so on. The written form of the law in Exodus 20 is an external verbal expression of realities that derive from God himself. God already exists as Creator in Genesis 1–2. And when he causes mankind to come into existence, that initial existence is in harmony with God. So already at the beginning, human beings are in conformity to God with the kind of conformity that God spells out later, in the Ten Commandments. The principle of harmony in the fifth commandment underlines the harmony between God at the beginning and God who gives the Ten Commandments.

The beginning of human existence is indeed the beginning. There is going to be a *dynamic*, as the fourth commandment reminds us. At the beginning, mankind is not yet mature. Human beings have growth in which they participate. But the growth is from a starting point that is already in harmony with the character of God, as reflected in human nature, according to the *lex Christi* pattern in all ten of the commandments. The terminology in table 8.12 is applicable to the beginning: at the beginning, human beings are already pro-supreme, pro-holy, pro-blessing, pro-dynamic, pro-harmonious, pro-living, pro-marriage (pro-intimate), pro-giving, pro-truthful, and pro-contented. This list is a kind of perspectival unpacking of what is meant by *original righteousness*. The aspect of being pro-holy corresponds well to what it means that Adam is a priest. The aspect

of pro-harmonious corresponds well to the themes of sonship. The fifth commandment, with which *lex Christi* associates the attribute of harmony, starts with a focus on honoring one's father and mother. The relation is a relation of parent and child. The principle of honor extends from there to other personal relations, including the relation of human beings to God.

## **Personal Presence**

Now focus especially on the seventh commandment within the framework of *lex Christi*. The seventh commandment charges people to have proper personal intimacy. The most intense interpersonal intimacy on earth is found in the union of a husband and wife. God uses this intimacy by analogy in speaking of his relation to Israel. God is the husband to Israel, and she is his wife (Hos. 2:2, 7, 16; 3:1; Ezek. 16; etc.). The archetype for all human intimacy is found in God himself. There is intimacy among the persons of the Trinity. This intimacy is expressed in the reality that each person indwells the other two: "you, Father, are in me, and I in you" (John 17:21). This original intimacy is called *coinherence*.<sup>2</sup>

The intimacy of God with himself is then reflected when he creates the world. God's acts toward the world have to be in harmony with who he is. So they express intimacy. God is present everywhere in the world, without in any way being identical with the world (Jer. 23:24). God is present with all his attributes, and in all his Trinitarian glory. The result is that Adam—and all humanity after him—is confronted everywhere, on every side, and even inside him, with personal presence. Adam does not experience an impersonal environment, from which personality is absent or to which it is added as an afterthought. He experiences the presence of the tripersonal God. All of Adam's thinking, all of Adam's willing, all of Adam's acting takes place in the presence of God. And the presence of God is an omnipotent presence. God's divine acting supports Adam's thinking, willing, and acting. No vacuum would be allegedly carved out by God's

2. Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 7 and app. J.

inaction or withdrawal. There is no merely unipersonal space for Adam to act as a sole actor.<sup>3</sup> All of Adam's thinking, willing, and acting is thinking, willing, and acting *together* with God's acting through his presence as he fills all things (v. 24), including Adam. As Acts 17:28 expresses it, "In him we live and move and have our being."

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on the Original State**

How does Acts 2 throw light on the original state of Adam? The coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 makes the people sons of God (Rom. 8:15–17). They are also a holy temple of God, in that they are filled with the Spirit. They function like priests (1 Peter 2:5). These features are analogous to the condition of Adam when he was created.

## **Summary**

By using the framework of *lex Christi* and the ten perspectives that it offers, theology can say quite a bit about the original state of mankind. Inferences about the original state follow because of the harmony involved in every stage of God's plan, and the inner harmony of all of God's attributes.

## **Key Terms**

|              |                         |
|--------------|-------------------------|
| adoption     | inheritance             |
| analogy      | intimate                |
| child of God | keep God's commandments |
| freedom      | knowledge of God        |
| holy         | <i>lex Christi</i>      |

3. Cornelius Van Til says, "So we see that the whole atmosphere of man is surcharged with the personal [of the presence of God]" (*A Survey of Christian Epistemology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977], 87, and chap. 7). See also Vern S. Poythress, *Inerrancy and Worldview: Answering Modern Challenges to the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), pt. 6.



likeness  
new birth  
priest

slave  
son of God

### **Study Questions**

1. What do we learn about Adam and about our own redeemed status when we consider the biblical teaching about adoption? about new birth?
2. Why is it appropriate to consider Adam as a priest? What are the parallels with Israel as a kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6)?
3. How does the *lex Christi* framework illumine the original condition of Adam?
4. How does the teaching about Adam and the teaching about adoption and new birth affect your view of what God is doing in your redemption?

### **For Further Reading**

Westminster Confession of Faith 4.2.  
Westminster Larger Catechism 17, 20.

### **Prayer**

Thank you, God, for the ways in which you enrich our knowledge by the connections that you have established between creation and redemption. Thank you for Christ's being the last Adam (1 Cor. 15:44–49).



# BODY AND SOUL: THE COMPOSITION OF THE HUMAN INDIVIDUAL

We consider whether the human individual is composed of two parts, body and soul, and how to understand human composition.



## BODY AND SOUL: QUESTIONS AND DIFFICULTIES

We now ask, “What is the composition of an individual human being?” In particular, are human beings composed of two parts, body and soul?

Each human being is a distinct individual and also a social creature. Each human being is different from others, and each is dependent on others. Each owes his very existence to others. Each person had a mother who gave him birth. Each had people who raised him when he was a small child. People also have a relation to God, who made them and sustains them. It is he who superintends all the relations that people have with other human beings.

The classical questions about the composition of human beings focus on the *individual*. This focus already puts into the background some aspects of who people are as human beings. But granted this focus, the questions may still be posed. What is the metaphysical composition of a human individual? What are body and soul, and how do they relate to each other?

### **The Variety of Answers**

Classically, two positions have contended with each other: dichotomy and trichotomy. Dichotomy says that human beings consist of two parts: body and soul. Trichotomy distinguishes three parts: body, soul, and spirit.

Today, other views offer themselves. Secular materialistic philosophy has denied survival after death. But materialists disagree among themselves on the relation between the higher functions of human beings and their physical basis. Can something fundamentally new arise from structural integration of physical components? If so, how? Some materialists would say that the mind is a metaphysical illusion. There is nothing but the body. Others would say that the mind has a certain reality, as some kind of higher function arising from the integration of complexities in the brain. But materialism cannot allow that the mind continues once the brain disintegrates. In this way, materialism denies the existence of the “soul” as traditionally conceived.

From a Christian point of view, the metaphysics of materialism has to be rejected. There are two main reasons: (1) Human beings are whole people, not just chemicals. God created them that way. He created a world (Gen. 1–2) with multiple aspects to it, not just “matter.”<sup>1</sup> (2) The existence of an intermediate state, after the time of bodily death and before the resurrection of the body, requires a different approach, in conformity with the Bible.

The Christian community, broadly conceived, now includes a number of views in addition to the traditional dichotomy and trichotomy.<sup>2</sup> Some people have adopted a holistic approach. They see dichotomy as based on Greek metaphysics rather than biblical revelation. Among cults, soul-sleep has been maintained.

In addition, Eastern religions have advocated reincarnation and ancestor worship.

1. Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Philosophy: A God-Centered Approach to the Big Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), chaps. 5–10. And what do we mean by “matter”?

2. Joshua R. Farris, *An Introduction to Theological Anthropology: Humans, Both Creaturally and Divine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2020), 287–88, mentions books by several authors who represent forms of “Christian materialism.” John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), considers and rejects other options that involve the avoidance of a disembodied intermediate state. For the sake of space, this book will not discuss these variant views with any thoroughness.

## **The Importance of the Answers**

The answers about human composition may clearly have a vital influence on major questions about human meaning and human destiny. But not all differences have a major effect. Some lay evangelical Christians are trichotomists because they have been told at some point by a Bible teacher that human beings have three parts. But for them, their views on this subject just sit on the shelf. Trichotomy is a merely theoretical truth, having no real operable value in influencing their practical thinking about human destiny or (let us say) the process of sanctification.

For others, however, trichotomy has functional value. Watchman Nee has made trichotomy the foundation for a certain approach to understanding conversion, sanctification, and a supposedly higher Christian life.<sup>3</sup> Trichotomy has found other uses. Some Christians in psychology assign responsibilities for healing on the basis of trichotomy. According to their view, the physician cares for diseases of the body, the psychologist cares for diseases of the soul, and the pastor or spiritual counselor cares for diseases of the spirit.

In addition, there are implications in other areas. Some theories influenced by Platonism end up depreciating the importance of the body, or seeing the body as a hindrance to the deepest life. Some theories picture the difference between body and soul as so radical that one wonders whether the connection is anything more than very tenuous.

Theories of body and soul and their relation have a potential effect on one's view of the intermediate state, that is, the state of human beings after physical death. Do human beings simply cease to exist, as some cults advocating soul-sleep would have it? Or if a disembodied soul lives in the presence of God, how is this possible when the body is no longer functioning? How do classical theories about body and soul relate to

3. Watchman Nee, *The Release of the Spirit* ([Indianapolis?]: Sure Foundation, 1965); Watchman Nee, *The Spiritual Man* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1968). See the critical analysis in Luke Pei-Yuan Lu, "Watchman Nee's Doctrine of the Church with Special Reference to Its Contribution to the Local Church Movement," PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1992.

modern neurophysiological investigations of the connections between the human brain and human consciousness?

### **Listening to the Teaching of the Bible**

On the surface, it therefore appears that the questions are important ones. But how shall people obtain adequate answers? There are two difficulties: one with respect to the Bible, the other with respect to ourselves.

The difficulty with the Bible is that it does not directly address the topic of the composition of the individual as consisting of body and soul. The composition of a human individual never becomes a separate, focused topic to which a biblical writer devotes *undivided* attention. If anything, the views on this subject tend to be presupposed while the writers go on to discuss *other* subjects.

In the absence of direct teaching, one traditional method of deriving conclusions starts with the lexical stock of the Bible, in particular *sōma* (“body”), *psychē* (“soul”), and *pneuma* (“spirit”). It then proceeds to read off a theory from the vocabulary stock. But such a procedure ignores the key distinction between words and concepts (see chapter 7 above). Using *words* from the vocabulary of a particular language does not automatically commit the user to a detailed theory or a whole system of *concepts* or views about the subject matter of the discussion.

The second difficulty concerns the interpreters. The lack of an extensive body of direct biblical teaching tempts people to read into the Bible metaphysical assumptions that they have derived from other places. How do they avoid imposing on words such as “body” and “soul” (or rather, the underlying Greek and Hebrew terms) connotations derived from Platonic or Aristotelian philosophy, or existential philosophy, or metaphysics coming out of modern scientism?

These difficulties are weighty enough to deserve further illustration. Several chapters to come are devoted to the topic of body and soul and the composition of the human individual. It takes some space to sort out the issues.

## The Significance of Vocabulary

Consider first how vocabulary functions within a language. English uses a range of vocabulary to talk about individual human beings. It includes words such as *flesh, body, soul, spirit, mind, heart, will, emotions, psyche, personality, character, life, lifestyle, intellect, feelings, ego, self, reason, conscience, memory, intuition*. Can theorists read off a theory of human composition from this vocabulary? No. For one thing, speakers of English hold to various theories, some of which are incompatible with one another. The use of a particular item of vocabulary may or may not be indicative of commitment to a whole theory. Much depends on the context. For example, if a person explicitly refers to Plato and says that he is using Plato as a basis for a technical use of the words *body* and *soul*, he indicates commitment to Platonic dualism. But another person may use the same words in a loose way. “She is troubled in soul” may mean nothing more than “she is anxious, disturbed, not peaceful.”

A similar situation exists with Greek vocabulary from the New Testament. A Greek dictionary includes words such as *sarx* (“flesh”), *sōma* (“body”), *psychē* (“soul”), *pneuma* (“spirit”), *nous* (“mind”), *kardia* (“heart”), *zōē* (“life”), *bios* (“life”), *suneidesis* (“conscience”), *sunesis* (“understanding”), *dianoia* (“understanding”), *splanchna* (“bowels”), *chrōs* (“skin”), not to mention verbs describing various bodily and mental actions and states.

In the list just given, each Greek word has been glossed with a corresponding English word. But the correspondences are only approximate. A close examination shows that no one English word matches exactly the full range of meaning and connotative associations of a single Greek word. The classical Hebrew of the Old Testament is yet a third language whose vocabulary has still different properties, matching neither Greek nor English exactly. Aramaic is a fourth language. Some portions of the Old Testament are in Aramaic, and the common people spoke Aramaic in Palestine at the time of Jesus. On some occasions, Jesus probably taught in Aramaic. In principle, native speakers of Hebrew or Greek or Aramaic or English could hold to any of several incompatible theories concerning



human composition. Hence, it is not the case that vocabulary in itself determines people's commitments.

Some people think that the theory of dichotomy (body and soul as two parts) can be clearly found in Genesis 2:7: "then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." The KJV translates "living creature" as "living *soul*." The verse does indicate that God first formed the man's body from dust. But it does not say that God added a second *part* to the man. Rather, it describes an activity, in which God breathes "the breath of life." He imparts life. The result is that the man "became a living creature." The last expression, "living creature" (Hebrew *nephesh hayyāh*, נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה), is describing the whole man, not a part of him. The KJV translates the Hebrew word "creature" (*nephesh*, נֶפֶשׁ) as "soul." This occurrence of the word is like many other occurrences in which the Hebrew word has an ordinary meaning, rather than a technical meaning. A similar Hebrew expression for "living creature" occurs in Genesis 1:20, 21, 24, 30, and 2:19 in describing animals. "Living creature" is a good rendering. Thus, Genesis 2:7 does not necessarily show that man is permanently composed of two parts.

In New Testament times, the Greek-speaking world was familiar with pagan philosophical speculations about human composition.<sup>4</sup> These included Plato's theory that man was composed of two parts, body and soul, the soul being the nobler, immaterial part. Plato went on to divide the soul into three parts: the rational, the spirited, and the sensible.<sup>5</sup> According to Plato, the body was the prison house of the soul, a hindrance to true knowledge, which consisted in direct vision of immaterial forms. Human fulfillment was achieved after death, when the soul cast off its prison house. The details of this view are clearly incompatible with the biblical teaching of the goodness of God's creation, including its material aspect.

Aristotle, a disciple of Plato, had a different view. In each animate being, the soul is the "form" of the individual thing, which is composed

4. Hendrik Lorenz, "Ancient Theories of Soul," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2009), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/ancient-soul/>.

5. Lorenz, § 3.2.

of form and matter together.<sup>6</sup> According to Aristotle, animals as well as humans have “souls.” “Form” is what “shapes” the thing, while “matter” is the stuff out of which it is composed. It is difficult to see how, in the typical case, the form could exist apart from the matter. It would seem to follow that souls can exist only when they are closely tied to the matter of which they are the form. But this view contradicts the traditional Christian view of the intermediate state (the state of the “soul” after bodily death).

In the Septuagint version of the Old Testament (the main ancient Greek version), the Greek word *psychē* (ψυχή “soul”) usually translates the Hebrew *nephesh* (נֶפֶשׁ), a word with a fairly broad range of meaning. *Soul, living being, life, self, person, desire, passion*<sup>7</sup> may all be appropriate glosses, depending on context. Here are some examples:

So God created the great sea creatures and every *living creature* [*nephesh*] that moves, with which the waters swarm. (Gen. 1:21)

But you shall not eat flesh with its *life* [*nephesh*], that is, its blood. (Gen. 9:4)

From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the *life* [*nephesh*] of man. (Gen. 9:5)

And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the *people* [*nephesh*] that they had acquired in Haran. (Gen. 12:5)

These are the sons of Zilpah, whom Laban gave to Leah his daughter; and these she bore to Jacob—sixteen *persons* [*nephesh*]. (Gen. 46:18)

6. Christopher Shields, “Aristotle,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2022), § 11, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/aristotle/>.

7. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, with Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, repr. with corrections (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 659.

I will divide the spoil, my *desire* [*nephesh*] shall have its fill of them.  
(Ex. 15:9)

. . . or if *anyone* [*nephesh*] touches an unclean thing . . . (Lev. 5:2)

This flexibility carries over into the Jewish use of the Greek word *psychē*. In addition to this flexible use, some pre-Christian writings outside the Old Testament exhibit a dualistic contrast of soul and body, influenced by Greek philosophy.

The Stoics and the Epicureans had their own theories:

In a way that reminds one of Presocratic theories, both Epicurus and the Stoics hold that the soul is a particularly fine kind of body, diffused all the way through the perceptible (flesh-and-blood) body of the animate organism.<sup>8</sup>

One also finds the use of “soul” or “spirit” to designate people in the intermediate state. “Souls” exist in the heavenly places or in Hades, awaiting the resurrection and the final judgment (Rev. 6:9; 20:4).<sup>9</sup>

Because of the sheer number of usages, as well as the variety of detailed theories, an analyst must be cautious about assuming the truth of any one particular theory and then reading it into the Bible when the word “soul” occurs (or the underlying Hebrew or Greek). The mere use of a particular word does not of itself commit one to a full-blown philosophical theory.

Systematic theology confronts the challenge of how to synthesize the teaching of the whole Bible. That is a different challenge from that of understanding all the uses of a Greek word such as *psychē* (“soul”). One possible way to approach the challenge is to try to move from *words* to *concepts* without fallaciously equating the two. That is, an interpreter starts with a flexible usage of words such as *sōma* (“body”), *psychē* (“soul, life”),

8. Lorenz, “Ancient Theories of Soul,” § 5.

9. Cooper, *Body, Soul*, chap. 4.

*pneuma* (“spirit, wind”), and *kardia* (“heart”) in Greek. In Hebrew, the interpreter finds *basar* (“flesh”), *nephesh* (“life, self”), *ruach* (“spirit, wind”), and *lēb* (“heart, mind”). He notes the flexibility. Starting with the contexts of many statements that use these words, he might hope to somehow distill a precise technical term or terms—perhaps the terms *body* and *soul* within a technical context of systematic theology.

But this proposed route is perilous because there is no guarantee beforehand that the flexibility in using a particular word in the Bible will yield any special insight. Theological truth resides in the message of the Bible, not in isolated vocabulary in a dictionary. Insight into the Bible’s teaching comes not from inspecting a Greek dictionary but from reading the whole Bible. The teachings of the Bible are articulated in its sentences and paragraphs, not in the vocabulary stock of Greek. Of course, each word in each context contributes to the meaning of the sentence in which it is found, but words contribute in different ways, depending on the context in which they appear. That is one effect of the flexibility in natural languages that God has given to humanity.

In the case of the words *body* and *soul*, many works in systematic theology undertake to use these terms precisely in summarizing the biblical teaching on human composition. But if a work of systematic theology takes this route, it cannot at the same time use the key terms in the flexible way that they are used in the Bible. It has to either give its own special definition of the way that it will use the terms or else produce confusion because the reader does not know the special, precise meaning. If it gives its own special definition, it also needs to *justify* this definition. And the justification cannot be that a term matches a word in Greek or Hebrew vocabulary, because it does not—not in a precise way. A term cannot simultaneously be technically precise and flexible.

### **Platonizing Influences on the West**

Consider also the influence of philosophy. Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy has had a lasting influence on the history of theology and on Western thought as a whole. In the last century or so, materialistic

philosophy and naturalism have made tremendous inroads. But before this time, it seemed natural to many people to read the Bible with a Platonic or Aristotelian system of categories in the background. A Greek philosophical system, or at least a piece of it, could be read in and afterward read back out, by appeal to the key words *body* and *soul*. Of course, such “reading in” is illegitimate. But it can seem natural because it is so common.

What happens if a Bible interpreter imposes a philosophical system? The soul and the body can be seen as two distinct *substances* in an Aristotelian sense. (But the idea of two *distinct* substances differs from Aristotle’s view that the soul is the form of the body.) There are liabilities to a Platonic or Aristotelian framework. In Plato, the forms provided the ultimate categories; and in Aristotle, the substances are the foundation for the continued existence of things. In both systems, ultimacy belongs to things conceived of as existing in essential independence of God. Both systems indirectly result in a denial of the biblical teaching on creation and providence, which imply a continued involvement of God in everything that he has made (cf. Heb. 1:3). There is no such thing as a *substance*,<sup>10</sup> if by that term a person means what Aristotle means, namely, some thing-like foundation that subsists and remains itself, in and of itself, without regard to the will of God, without regard to the word of God specifying its existence, and without regard to the power of God continually exercised in its very existence.

Of course, some writers may use the word *substance* more loosely. They do not intend to evoke Aristotle’s whole philosophical system. But in that case, they need to specify what they mean, and to specify how to determine what counts as a substance. It turns out to be challenging.<sup>11</sup> One suggested criterion for being a *substance* is “being the paradigm subjects of predication and bearers of properties.”<sup>12</sup> But personality, character, life, lifestyle, intellect, feelings, ego, self, reason, conscience, memory, and

10. More precisely, we might say that only God is self-existent.

11. Howard Robinson, “Substance,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2021), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/substance/>; Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), chaps. 20–21.

12. Robinson, “Substance,” § 1, typification iii.

intuition can all be subjects of predication and have properties ascribed to them. That is far too broad to be useful. If *substance* is defined that way, does the term distinguish anything significant? And what counts as “paradigm subjects”? Would not the “paradigm” cases depend on the subjective choice of the analyst?

In addition to this problem, the philosophical frameworks of Plato and Aristotle bring with them assumptions about categories and about logic that are at root unitarian rather than Trinitarian in nature. Since this problem is addressed at length elsewhere,<sup>13</sup> this book passes over it. The point is this: it is problematic to read into particular vocabulary more than context warrants. And when an interpreter does read in too much, the result may easily be contaminated by antibiblical notions.

### **How to Proceed**

As a result of the difficulties, biblical interpretation needs to proceed with wisdom. Here are several guidelines:

- *Guideline 1.* In the Bible, the words “body” and “soul” and other terms referring to individual human beings are used flexibly, with a range of usage.
- *Guideline 2.* An interpreter cannot simply equate the meaning of one of the key words in the Bible to the use of such a word in technical discussions in philosophy or theology.
- *Guideline 3.* Technical discussions in philosophy and theology need to specify what they mean by their terms. They need to define their terms. Otherwise, they produce a fog and are of little help.
- *Guideline 4.* To be soundly based on the Bible, any particular special meaning of a technical term in philosophy or theology needs to be justified by biblical teaching, not just assumed.

13. Vern S. Poythress, “Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til’s Idea of Analogy,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 187–219; Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

- *Guideline 5.* Interpreters need to distinguish between the teaching of the Bible and the supplements to the Bible that offer detailed *theories* of human composition. As we have noted, Plato and Aristotle and the Stoics and other ancient Greek philosophers offered competing theories of the soul. Likewise, theologians and philosophers in later times can offer detailed theories as tentative proposals, just as a natural scientist can offer theories about chemical reactions or star formation or functions in a biological cell. A detailed theory concerning human composition may contain much more than what can actually be deduced from the Bible itself. It might still be *compatible* with the Bible. Or it might be incompatible. It needs to be analyzed and evaluated on the basis of what the Bible teaches. Even if the theory is compatible, some aspects of the theory might go beyond what the Bible affirms. In that case, they ought to be seen not as part of the teaching of the Bible, but as a fallible supplement, which might or might not be true.

### **The Subtlety of Importing Philosophical Assumptions**

To show the subtlety of the ways in which Greek philosophical ideas may slip in, consider John Murray's reasoning concerning the soul in his chapter "The Nature of Man" in *Collected Writings*.<sup>14</sup> Murray is aware of some of the dangers of pagan philosophy. He stresses that the human body is good, over against the depreciation of the body in Plato. In addition, Murray is a first-class theologian, very careful and precise in exegetical reasoning. So he offers a particularly challenging exhibition of the difficulties. His argument is careful, but still—in my judgment—not careful enough.

Near the beginning of the key section, Murray formulates his general thesis:

14. John Murray, "The Nature of Man," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976–77), 2:18–22.

The Scripture provides us with copious evidence to establish the thesis that there belongs to man a subsistence or entity distinguished from the body and characterized by qualities in virtue of which it does not undergo the dissolution that befalls the body in death. The Scripture designates this as spirit or soul.<sup>15</sup>

Elsewhere in this section, Murray indicates that he is aware that the Hebrew and Greek terms have a range of usage (guideline 1 given above). So at this early point, he must here be understood as introducing something other than that full range of meaning. Instead, he is proposing a specialized meaning. He is introducing *body* and *soul* as technical terms. But if that is what he is doing, he needs to tell us what he means (guideline 3). That is regularly a challenge with the terms *body* and *soul*, if a theologian wants to use them as technical terms.

What does Murray mean by *body* and *soul*? He clarifies his use with the words *subsistence* and *entity*. What does Murray mean by these words? Could he have in mind merely an aspect of man, like mind, will, emotions, conscience, heart, memory, personality? (We are using the English word *aspect* as an ordinary word, with flexibility.) There are an indefinite number of aspects. Each of the aspects—mind, will, emotions, conscience, etc.—is “distinguished from the body.” Murray repeatedly uses the word “aspect.” He writes in his conclusion, “The biblical doctrine is then to the effect that there are two aspects of man.”<sup>16</sup> But his focus on *two* aspects, instead of an indefinite number, hints that he is thinking of something more fundamental than aspects in a broader and vaguer sense. Is he talking about *substances*? He does not use the word, though he does use the word “subsistence.” How does the reader know what he means by “subsistence” or “entity” unless he tells the reader what he means? Does human memory subsist? It does endure over time. Does it count as an entity? Does human personality subsist?

A reader might try to look up the word *subsistence* in a dictionary. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* supplies as the first meaning of *subsist*

15. Murray, 2:19.

16. Murray, 2:21.



“a : to have existence: BE b : PERSIST, CONTINUE.”<sup>17</sup> This meaning is far too broad to be helpful. Certainly human memory exists and continues over time. So does human personality and human will. So it is important to probe further to try to understand what Murray is claiming.

Murray also says:

Using the word “entity” to denote that which has distinctness of being, we can say that there are two entities in man’s constitution, diverse in nature and origin, the one derived from the earth, material, corporeal, phenomenal, divisible, the other derived from a distinct action of God, immaterial and ordinarily not phenomenal, indivisible and indestructible.<sup>18</sup>

This sentence sounds like Murray is talking about parts, not aspects. Are soul and body two distinct parts, like the seed and flesh of a peach, or like a metal bolt and the nut that screws onto it? Murray’s essay has moved from the term “aspect” to “entities,” which are “diverse in nature.” But the phrase “distinctness of being” is still not very clear. Memory is distinct from will, which is distinct from emotions. And all three exist; they have “being”—though not in independence of the persons who have them.

If we are to understand in depth an argument such as Murray’s, we need some clarity about what he means. In his essay, what is the difference between aspects on the one hand—of which there may be an indefinite number—and parts or entities on the other? What kinds of situations can count as instances showing “distinctness of being”? One of the difficulties lies in the variations in meaning in a single individual word in normal English. What is an “aspect”? What is “distinctness of being”? An aspect such as memory or conscience or emotions is distinguishable in meaning from any other aspect. And any aspect that is actually there in human beings has “being” in some sense. It exists; it *is*. So in this sense, any aspect has “distinctness of being.” Moreover, any two aspects that are actually

17. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subsist](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subsist), accessed April 26, 2024.

18. Murray, *Collected Writings*, 2:21.

distinguishable are in one sense “diverse in nature.” They are diverse from other aspects. But as we have observed, there are an indefinite number of aspects. Murray wants just two. What, then, does he mean by “distinctness of being”? Is Murray committing himself to a particular metaphysical picture at such a point? It is not clear.

There is nothing the matter with using ordinary English, with many vocabulary items that are flexible in their use. In principle, there is nothing the matter with words such as *aspect* and *entity* and *subsistence*. In the English language as a whole, they, like many other words, have a flexible range of usage. But if Murray is going to use them with special precision, to tell his readers about two parts of human individuals, the readers need to know what *he* means, partly to make sure that they are not reading in their own meanings that may be different from his.

Since Murray’s introductory summary does not by itself clarify everything, we need to move forward into his exposition.

As the first scriptural evidence, Murray points to Matthew 10:28:

Our Lord taught: “Fear not them that kill the body but are not able to kill the soul” (Matt. 10:28). It is obvious that “soul” is used here in a metaphysical sense.<sup>19</sup>

The expression “metaphysical sense” indicates that Murray thinks that in this verse, the word “soul” provides information about a deeper level, the level of metaphysics. (He elsewhere observes that there is a broader use of the word in some other verses.) He appears to indicate that in this verse, the word “soul” does not designate merely an “aspect” alongside an indefinite number of aspects. Does Murray think that the verse implies that man consists of two distinct parts? But is it actually obvious that there are two parts? What counts as a *part*, and what distinguishes a part from an aspect? Murray does not use the word *part*. We are still trying to understand what he means.

This passage (and some others) could also be interpreted as dealing with aspects of man, in the sense in which there are an indefinite number

19. Murray, 2:19.

of possible aspects. Suppose that the Greek word *psychē*, underlying the English word “soul,” is translated with the English word *personality*, or *self*, or with the phrase *essential life*. Does the passage still make reasonable sense? It does. And yet expressions such as *personality* and *self* and *essential life* might denote an aspect, not a separate “thing.” It seems that Murray has not really reckoned with the possibility that the passages are dealing with aspects, but has too quickly assumed that the passage necessarily includes the idea of “entities.” And we are still left with the question of how Murray thinks an “entity” differs from an “aspect.” Are the two entities “parts” of the person? Or does the information mean something else?

Murray cites a number of other passages in confirmation of the conclusion that he draws from Matthew 10:28. Some of the passages that Murray cites can be naturally understood as using the word *psychē* (“soul”) or *pneuma* (“spirit”) with different colorings and as involving aspects. Matthew 26:41: “The spirit [source of animating desire] indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” First Corinthians 2:11: “For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit [mind, reflective consciousness] of that person, which is in him?” Similarly in Romans 8:16: “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit [very self, mind] that we are children of God.” James 2:26: “For as the body apart from the spirit [animating life] is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.” A number of passages speak of body and spirit (1 Cor. 7:34), flesh and spirit (2 Cor. 7:1), or other combinations (1 Thess. 5:23), but all these verses may be dealing with aspects, not necessarily metaphysical parts. The passages do not actually *say* that they are describing parts, *in contrast to* aspects. If people do not read these passages with the idea of *looking for* a metaphysical analysis into parts, they do not necessarily get that metaphysics out of them. (See also the discussion in the next chapter concerning the analogy with possessions.)

Murray also cites some passages that describe giving up the “spirit” at death. These can be interpreted as involving an *aspect* of man, namely, life. “Jesus . . . yielded up his spirit [the breath of life]” (Matt. 27:50); “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit [life]!” (Luke 23:46); “And he bowed his head and gave up his spirit [his life]” (John 19:30); “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit [life]” (Acts 7:59).

Finally, Murray cites passages that describe persons in the intermediate state, between the time of physical death and resurrection: Luke 9:30–31; 16:19–31; 23:43; 24:39; 2 Cor. 5:1–10; Phil. 1:22–23; Heb. 12:23; 1 Peter 3:19. The word *psychē* (“soul”) or *pneuma* (“spirit”) can designate a person in this state (Luke 24:39; Heb. 12:23; Rev. 6:9; 20:4). These passages are the most convincing. The easiest and most obvious interpretation, for many readers, is to see these passages as evidence that one part of a two-part human being, namely, the soul part, has broken off at death and now exists independent of the other part, namely, the body.<sup>20</sup> The body is left behind, here on earth, and gradually disintegrates. The soul is elsewhere—in “Hades” or in “paradise” or in heaven or “with Christ.” The two things, body and soul, have separate existences, in two spatially separate places. These verses seem to provide clear evidence for the fact that each individual human being has two parts, which are separated from each other at death.

The idea that, after death, body and soul have separate and distinct existences is correct. But the verses themselves are describing the situation after death. They do not directly describe this present bodily life. They do not say that an individual *in this present life* is composed of two metaphysical parts. What they describe is the intermediate state, which is distinct from the present life. We will devote particular attention to these passages a little later. For the moment, we need only to say that there are some complexities.

Leaving aside the passages that describe the intermediate state, the other passages do not require that the word *psychē* carry the full “metaphysical” load of assumptions about “entities.” The passages are explainable in terms of more ordinary, flexible uses of the word. Thus, Murray has derived from the passages more than the passages themselves necessarily warrant. And he has not actually supplied readers with complete clarity about what he means by terms such as “entity” and “subsistence.”

Finally, Murray provides a summary description of his view in his conclusion. The soul is “immaterial and ordinarily not phenomenal,

20. Cooper, *Body, Soul*, discusses other theories, but most of them involve straining some of the biblical texts.

indivisible and indestructible.”<sup>21</sup> Murray has provided a description that is not fully backed up by the verses that he cites, but at one point is in tension with them. Murray characterizes the soul as indestructible. Yet Matthew 10:28, in the latter part of the verse, says that God can “destroy” the *psychē* (“soul”) in hell: “Rather fear him who can *destroy* both *soul* and body in hell.”

Murray’s readers could easily pass over this apparent disharmony in Murray’s conclusions. They already know that the soul is in reality indestructible and that Matthew 10:28 is using language loosely. But how do they know? They know from the Bible’s teaching about the everlasting existence of human beings in the future. The Bible does teach that human beings are never actually annihilated.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, in Matthew 10:28, “destroy” does not mean “annihilate,” but has a broader meaning. It involves the end of vigorous health and positive functions.

So Matthew 10:28 does harmonize with biblical teaching about the everlasting future of human beings. But Murray’s argument, appealing to only a few texts, does not fully establish the idea of an everlasting future. He has not established the idea of indestructibility from the biblical passages to which he appeals. Nor has he said anything about the surface-level apparent tension between Matthew 10:28 and indestructibility.

Consider also the rest of Murray’s list of properties of the soul: “immaterial, ordinarily not phenomenal, indivisible, indestructible.” The immateriality and indivisibility of the soul can be found in various philosophies. But neither is demonstrated by the passages that Murray cites. Even the passage about the ghost (Luke 24:39) does not show immateriality, because the hypothetical ghost alluded to may have a semitransparent, gauzy material aspect.<sup>23</sup>

What can we conclude? Murray’s conclusions may be right. The point here is only that they are not completely grounded by the passages to

21. Murray, *Collected Writings*, 2:21.

22. At this point we cannot enter into a debate with annihilationists. Matthew 25:46 and Revelation 14:10–11 may be mentioned as verses that imply an everlasting future existence of the wicked.

23. Some of the ancient Greek views conceived of the soul as having a material aspect: Lorenz, “Ancient Theories of Soul,” § 2.

which he appeals. We still have to deal with the biblical passages about the intermediate state, which provide further evidence.

The problem in dealing with body and soul is one that we observed earlier, in the introduction to this book and in an earlier part of this chapter, namely, that the Bible does not address in a whole paragraph of explicit teaching the specific issue of human composition, the issue in which people are interested. Its main focus is elsewhere. Still, people might hope that they can *infer* what has to be presupposed about body and soul. But if it is a matter of inference, people have to make sure that the inferences are warranted. They cannot automatically read in everything they know about a Platonic conception of the soul.

### Acts 2 as a Perspective on Body and Soul

Acts 2 shows that the church corporately has life from the Spirit. At the same time, this life is visible in the bodies of those who belong to it. The same is true at the individual level. Other passages indicate that a similar ordering takes place with the individual Christian. The Christian's body is "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19). Now, this is a distinct idea from the idea that the body is the dwelling place of the *human* spirit or soul. But there is a suggestive analogy between the two ideas. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit shows that an individual human being has a mysterious inward side, not simply the visible side that his body presents to the world. So this inward side could also include the human spirit of the individual. Both the church and the individual have an inward side and an outward expression through the body. Are these two distinguished as *aspects* or as *parts*? We will consider this question further in subsequent chapters.

### Key Terms

ancestor worship  
Aristotle  
aspect  
body

dichotomy  
entity  
Epicurean  
form

|                          |                     |
|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Hades                    | reincarnation       |
| holistic                 | soul                |
| human composition        | soul-sleep          |
| immaterial               | spirit              |
| intermediate state       | Stoic               |
| materialistic philosophy | substance           |
| matter                   | systematic theology |
| Murray, John             | technical term      |
| Nee, Watchman            | trichotomy          |
| part                     | vocabulary          |
| Plato                    |                     |

### **Study Questions**

1. What is *dichotomy*? What is *trichotomy*?
2. What are the main available views about the composition of the human individual?
3. What are the main views of human composition among Christians who believe in the divine authority of the Bible?
4. Is the issue of human composition important? Why or why not?
5. Why is it difficult to find a complete answer to the issue of human composition in the Bible?
6. What are the major key vocabulary terms in the Bible that people appeal to, and why is there difficulty with the vocabulary?
7. How is the word/concept distinction relevant to the debate about human composition?
8. What are Plato's and Aristotle's views of body and soul? How have they influenced the history of theology?
9. What difficulties arise in John Murray's analysis of biblical teaching on body and soul?
10. In the discussions about body and soul, what do you think is most relevant and least relevant to the challenge of living the Christian life day by day?

### **For Further Reading**

Cooper, John W. *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989. Chap. 1.

Frame, John M. *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015. Pp. 67, 75.

### **Prayer**

Our Lord, we pray that you give us discernment in considering the difficulties in the issues of body and soul. Help us to see what the Bible is teaching in this and in all other topics that it addresses. We thank you for your promise of eternal life in Christ and the resurrection of the body.





## THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

Consider now what the Bible teaches about the intermediate state. The intermediate state is “intermediate,” between this present life and the future resurrection of the body. It is the state of people who have already died but are still awaiting the future resurrection.

### **The Bible’s Primary Emphasis**

In the Bible, the primary focus for Christian hope is on the coming of Christ and the resurrection of the dead. In speaking about the future, the New Testament devotes most of its teaching to the second coming of Christ and the consummation that ensues. It also encourages the Christian to hope for this coming: “Set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13). We are “waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). In comparison with this emphasis, New Testament writers devote comparatively little attention to a hope of dying and going to heaven.

But this difference is a relative one. A number of passages *do* give attention to the fact that Christians who die before the second coming go to be with Christ (e.g., Phil. 1:22–23; Rev. 6:9–11). They enjoy fellowship in his presence.<sup>1</sup> Paul in Philippians 1:23 says, “My desire is to depart and

1. For extensive discussion, see John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), especially chaps. 5–7.

be with Christ, for that is far better.” This verse expresses a positive desire, a hope. What is the nature of this intermediate state?

### **Basic Teaching on the Intermediate State**

The New Testament as a whole presents us with some considerable complexity.

First, the word *psychē* (“soul”) is sometimes used to describe people in the intermediate state (Rev. 6:9; 20:4).<sup>2</sup>

Next, in describing the intermediate state, the New Testament uses a variety of language, not merely the special term *psychē*. The emphasis frequently falls on the fact that *people* continue to exist. In Philippians 1:22–23, Paul says not that his “soul” goes to be with Christ, but “*My desire is to depart and be with Christ,*” implying that he, Paul, will depart. Luke 23:43 discusses the repentant thief on the cross. Jesus says not that “your soul will be with me,” but that “today *you* will be with me in paradise.” Similar language occurs in 2 Corinthians 5:1–10. “*We* would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). First-person and second-person language describing the intermediate state does not usually include the use of either *psychē* (“soul”) or *pneuma* (“spirit”), but simply “you” or “me/I.” Does this choice in language make any difference?

2. By the New Testament period, Greek philosophical ideas have penetrated the Jewish world. Some pre-Christian Jewish writings use the word *psychē* (“soul”) to designate people in the intermediate state. This usage may be parallel to an earlier usage in the Hebrew language with the term *repha'im* (רפאים), Job 26:5; Ps. 88:10(11); Prov. 2:18; 9:18; 21:16; Isa. 14:9; 26:14, 19, for which Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, with Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic*, repr. with corrections (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 952, offers the gloss “shades, ghosts.” This use of the word *psychē* may involve influence from Greek philosophy. But the Greek philosophers varied among themselves (Hendrik Lorenz, “Ancient Theories of Soul,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta [Summer 2009], <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/ancient-soul/>). And Jews would have varied in the way in which they reacted to Greek philosophies. Once the usage of *psychē* was established, it might be used to designate people in the intermediate state *without necessarily committing the user to a particular philosophical theory of the intermediate state*. It becomes just a convenient shorthand for “person in the intermediate state.” Hence, one must beware of reading too much out of this usage of the word *psychē*.

In fact, the choice results in a more personal focus and more personal character to the assurance. People using a bipartite picture of soul and body may be tempted to slip into impersonal language: “When I die, my body will be put into the grave and my soul will go to heaven. There it will be cared for.” Notice the entrance of “it.” The soul has become an “it,” in contradistinction to the vigorous personal language whereby a person says, “I will be with Christ.”

It is also important to note that in its details the Bible uses more than one kind of comparison, or analogy, or paradigm to present the realities of the intermediate state. Reflecting explicitly on the use of various analogies is helpful. Since no ordinary human being within this life has direct experience of the intermediate state, descriptions of that state that God intends for human use necessarily use analogies that make comparisons with the present world. What analogies are involved? As we will see, more than one is used. If people are willing to use *only one*, they may get themselves in trouble.

### **Analogies for the Intermediate State**

The main analogies are these: (1) another world; (2) sleep; (3) possessions lost or retained; (4) housing. Let us consider them one by one.

#### **The Analogy with Another World**

First, the Bible describes death and the subsequent intermediate state as being like a journey to another world. The other world is then described as being inhabited by people who function in a manner very like ourselves. The description may include movement of people from this world to the next, or it may focus wholly on people who have already arrived in the other world. Let us consider some of the main passages.

Luke 16:19–31 uses this comparison strikingly:

There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to

be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us." And he said, "Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment." But Abraham said, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." And he said, "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."

Luke 16:22 has angels carrying Lazarus to Abraham's side. The picture is analogous to a person's being carried from one location to another *within* this world. Once Lazarus and the rich man arrive at their new locations, the main action begins. The rich man "lifted up his *eyes*" and "saw Abraham." He "called out." He asked that Lazarus "dip the end of *his finger* in water and cool *my tongue*." This language can leave interpreters with unanswered questions. The rich man has been buried. His body is nonfunctioning. So how does he have eyes to see, vocal cords to call, or a tongue to receive the water? And where does Lazarus get the finger that he is supposed to dip? How does he have an arm by which he may move his finger to the appropriate location?

The Bible confronts us here with a mystery. It pictures that other life in terms like this life, perhaps because there is no other easy way to picture

it to people whose experience belongs to this life! The main strength of the picture is that it vividly underlines the continuity with this life, and makes plain the way in which the other life addresses a person in his humanity and brings home the consequences of decisions in this life. Yet theologians cannot work out *how* it could all take place without dealing with details such as eyes, fingers, tongues, and voices.<sup>3</sup>

3. Some people propose the theory that people in the intermediate state inhabit a kind of intermediate body. What, then, do they mean by “body”? Do they mean simply that the person has some minimal way of acting? Or do they have in mind some more specific theory of the body? Do they picture the “body” as having specific physical parts, such as eyes and tongues and fingers? And what counts as “physical”? Would some gauzy gossamer count? We cannot here deal with all the possible variations. Some interpreters of 2 Corinthians 5:1–10 have seen verses 1–2 as implying the existence of a second, new “house” *immediately* after bodily death, rather than later, at the time when Jesus returns and the dead are raised (1 Thess. 4:16). But 1 Corinthians 15 is an earlier communication between the apostle Paul and the Corinthian church on the subject of the resurrection. Given this background, Corinthian readers will naturally understand 2 Corinthians 5:1–2 as involving uses of the present tense to express general truths, not a specific indication of the point in time at which God provides a new body.

As further confirmation, observe the reference in 2 Corinthians 5:3 to being “naked,” the allusion in verse 4 to the possibility of being “unclothed,” and the language in verses 6–9 about being at home or away. These verses are naturally understood in harmony with a disembodied intermediate state. It is better, then, *not* to interpret the passage as a whole as involving an affirmation about the existence of an intermediate body. The natural understanding of verse 8, “away from the body,” is that we are indeed away from “*the* body,” that is, the body left behind in the grave, and so we are left without our own body until the time of the resurrection of the body. The resurrection is a raising of this same body of ours; it is still future from the standpoint of 5:1–10. (See Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997], 258–60.)

Jesus’ personal resurrection is the pattern for our future resurrection (1 Cor. 15:48–49; Phil. 3:21). Jesus “will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21). The term “transform” implies a decided change. But there is still continuity. To transform is a positive move that is incompatible with merely discarding the old. There is a mystery about this transformation (1 Cor. 15:35–44). But transformation cannot mean a *replacement* of one body by another body, so that the first body would be discarded. Jesus in his resurrection body still has the nail prints in his hands.

Now, the continuity in the resurrection body is a continuity with the body previously laid in the grave. Philippians 3:21 has the expression “our lowly body”; the scope of “our” cannot be confined only to those still alive at the time of Christ’s coming. Daniel 12:2 describes an end-time event in which “many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake.” It is naturally interpreted as referring to people whose bodies have died and been laid “in the dust.” Those are the bodies that will “awake.”

Now, there are those who postulate a *third* body for the intermediate state, a body that exists at the same time but in a different location from the body in the grave. But this idea

Some interpreters attempt to discount the implications of Luke 16:19–31 by appealing to the fact that it is a parable. It appears to function as a *fictional* story. As in other parables, the point of the story is not to give details about the fate of a specific individual like Lazarus, but to provide a narrative that illustrates concretely a principle about the kingdom of God. In this case, it illustrates a general principle about decisions in living and their consequences.

Yet like other parables that are fictional, this parable presupposes that life is, or can be, like what the story presents. For example, the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:3–6 is not really about literal shepherds and sheep, but about Jesus as the true Shepherd and the lost sinners of the house of Israel (Luke 15:7). At the same time, it presupposes that there are such things as shepherds and sheep, and that things described within the story *could* have happened in a real-world setting. By analogy with

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has no direct basis in Scripture and potentially undermines the continuity between the body of dust and the body of the resurrection.

To be sure, in a few instances we read about events in which dead people appear to the living (Samuel in 1 Samuel 28:13–14; Moses in Matthew 17:3 and parallels). But these appearances are unusual, and they are temporary. The passages themselves provide no information about how it takes place. Angels appear in human form in Scripture, and even God himself appears in human form in some of the Old Testament theophanies. But we cannot rightly postulate for them a permanent physical “body” with arms and legs on the basis of these mysterious appearances. Some of the descriptions of activities in the intermediate state, such as Luke 16:19–31, could serve as evidence for an intermediate body. But this inference would be overpressing the passages as though they represented a detailed theory.

The theory of an intermediate body is like a thought experiment. People may try to test it out to see whether it works. One of the main reasons for attempting the experiment in the first place is to try to affirm or underline the biblical theme that the body is actually integral to robust, normal human existence. So then the question arises, “How can there be a conscious, active intermediate state without it?” The question is reasonable. But the paradoxical result of the experiment is actually to suggest a kind of thinking that travels in the opposite direction. The apparent total discontinuity between the body in the grave and the alleged intermediate body suggests that what particular body we have is a relatively minor matter. It disconnects each of us from the particularity of the actual body that we have, which is not just a random body, but *my* body. It belongs to me uniquely and *not* to any other human being (of course, it is the Lord’s, 1 Cor. 6:15, 19).

The thought experiment must therefore be judged to be a failure.

Still another view is that when a person dies, he is taken out of our timeline and arrives immediately (in terms of his own timeline of conscious experience) at the time of the

this parallel, it seems that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31 presupposes that people do go to another world after death, and that they can be in torment or in comfort. So Luke 16:19–31 actually provides us with some information about life after death, even though this information is not the primary focus or the whole purpose of the story.

Other verses contain smaller instances of the same type of picture:

Why have you [Saul] disturbed me [Samuel] by *bringing me up* [from the abode of the dead]? (1 Sam. 28:15, reinforced by neighboring verses)

But now he [the child born to David and Bathsheba] is dead. Why should I [David] fast? Can I *bring him back again*? I *shall go to him*, but he *will not return to me*. (2 Sam. 12:23)

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resurrection of the body. There would be several ways of construing such a scenario. One way is to speak of separate timelines, as we just did. Another way would be simply to say that the person himself ceases to exist while his body is in the grave. Then the person is reconstituted once the body is raised. The latter explanation is less complicated than trying to postulate a distinct “timeline.” But in either form, this view is speculative—it is being inferred from general theological considerations and (it may be) from modern neurological research, not from specific verses of the Bible. The Bible talks directly neither about time transport nor about persons’ ceasing to exist until they are reconstituted.

This speculative view does not work because it is incompatible with specific biblical passages: 1 Samuel 28:15, Luke 16:19–31, Revelation 6:9 and 20:4, and especially 2 Corinthians 5:6–9. The verses in 2 Corinthians contain a contrast between “away” and “at home.” That contrast makes no sense if human beings when they die make a direct jump from being “at home” here in the body to being “at home” in the resurrection body at the time of the general resurrection. In 2 Corinthians 5:6–9, making the contrast in spatial terms presupposes that the body that is here and the person that is there at home with the Lord are in these two locations at the same time. There is only one timeline. In addition, Luke 16:27–28 contemplates sending Lazarus back to warn the rich man’s five brothers. Abraham does not say to the rich man, “Sorry, we are too far along in your timeline; your brothers have already died and themselves met the last judgment.” The theoretical possibility of Lazarus’s going back shows that the rich man and Lazarus and everyone in the other world share the same timeline as everyone in this world. Heaven, earth, Hades, and Abraham’s bosom can be distinct places, but there is only one timeline common to them all. The interaction of heaven and earth, such as takes place in Exodus 24, 1 Kings 22, Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 23:18, 22, and Revelation, presupposes a common timeline. (Inaugurated eschatology is a reality in New Testament teaching about the meaning of the work of Christ, but it is not a quasi-physicalistic theory about having different clocks for different people.)



Sheol [the abode of the dead] beneath is stirred up  
to meet you [the king of Babylon] when [at the time of your  
death] you *come*;  
it rouses *the shades* to greet you,  
all who were leaders of the earth;  
it raises from their thrones  
all who were kings of the nations.  
All of them will answer  
and say to you:  
“You too have become as weak as we!  
You have become like us!” (Isa. 14:9–10)

And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you [the repentant thief] will be with me [Jesus] *in paradise* [the other world].” (Luke 23:43)

We would rather be *away from* the body and *at home* with the Lord. (2 Cor. 5:8)

My desire is to *depart* and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to *remain* in the flesh is more necessary on your account. (Phil. 1:23–24)

### **The Analogy with Sleep**

As a second analogy, the Bible describes death as being like sleep:

Then David *slept* with his fathers and was buried in the city of David. (1 Kings 2:10; also 1 Kings 11:21)

And Solomon *slept* with his fathers and was buried in the city of David his father. (1 Kings 11:43)

And he [Jeroboam] *slept* with his fathers. (1 Kings 14:20)

And Rehoboam *slept* with his fathers and was buried with his fathers in the city of David. (1 Kings 14:31)

And many of those who *sleep* in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Dan. 12:2)

Our friend Lazarus has *fallen asleep*, but I go to awaken him. (John 11:11)

And when he had said this, he fell *asleep*. (Acts 7:60, when Stephen died from being stoned)

For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, *fell asleep* and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption. (Acts 13:36)

For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have *fallen asleep*. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have *fallen asleep*. (1 Thess. 4:14–15)

This comparison with sleep is apt in describing how death looks from the standpoint of those who are still alive in this world. The dead person is not moving and not functioning; he looks like someone who is asleep. Moreover, in 1 Thessalonians 4:14, the picture is intended as a comfort to those Christian believers who are left alive (1 Thess. 4:13, 18). Just as we rest safely in the hands of God when we are literally asleep, so we rest safely when the body is dead. And just as we are confident that we will awaken from sleep to meet a new day, so we may be confident that these people will awaken at the day of resurrection.

With this picture also, interpreters could get into trouble. Ideas about soul-sleep could be derived if the interpreters attended *only* to this picture

and not to the others. They might then postulate that “sleep” is a kind of detailed theory of the intermediate state. They might then conclude that the intermediate state is a kind of unconscious suspended animation until the resurrection. But such a route would overpress the significance of the picture, which is intended to complement the other pictures. The answer to the idea of soul-sleep is that the picture of sleep describes how the person’s body looks from the standpoint of those who are still in this life; it does not contradict the positive teaching of the Bible about conscious existence in the intermediate state, which derives from the analogy with another world.

Note also that the Bible sometimes describes the resurrection as the rising of the *person*. So the person is still being associated with his body, which was in the grave:<sup>4</sup>

And many of *those who sleep in the dust* of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Dan. 12:2)

For an hour is coming when *all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out*, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. (John 5:28–29)

When he [Jesus] had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, “*Lazarus, come out.*” (John 11:43)

And the *dead in Christ* will rise first. (1 Thess. 4:16)

At death, it is “you,” not only your body, that returns to the dust:

For you are dust,  
and to dust *you* shall return. (Gen. 3:19)

4. John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 800.

For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was *laid* with his fathers and *saw corruption*. (Acts 13:36)

Not all these verses explicitly compare death to sleep. But all the verses are looking at death and resurrection from the standpoint of how it looks to someone on this earth. Interpreters produce a tension if they ignore this distinctive viewpoint, or if they do not distinguish it from the viewpoint of the analogy with another world, which pictures the process of traveling or pictures the person in the other world to which he goes. The analogy with another world shows that the intermediate state is one of conscious existence.

### **The Analogy with Possessions**

Third, the Bible compares the passage at death to an issue about possessions, an issue about property. Luke 9:24–25 is a clear instance: “For whoever would save his life [*psychē* “soul”] will lose it, but whoever loses his life [*psychē*] for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself [*heauton*]?” The language is that of keeping, losing, gaining, acquiring. A person “has” or possesses certain things—a soul, material possessions, the “world,” “himself.” The verse sets up an analogy, according to which these items are compared to ordinary possessions such as houses and furniture and sheep and coins, which can be gained, kept, or lost. Among the numerous possessions, the all-important possession is identified as his *psychē* (“his life”; the same word elsewhere translated “soul”) or “himself” (Luke 9:25).

This comparison serves very well to make a point. Its point is that a person’s inmost life in relation to God is of overwhelming importance and significance. It is foolish to be distracted by baubles, just as it would be foolish for a merchant to miss the biggest deal of his life through being occupied with a few coins. People must reckon with eternal realities. People must realize that if their prime loyalty is to this world, they will lose everything about themselves of real value when they face the judgment.

Like all the other pictures, this one is limited. How can a person literally regard “himself” as a possession that he might “lose”? Who, then, is the person who is losing, if what is lost is the whole “self”? The analogy with possessions is an analogy, not a complete theory that will answer all the questions that people might have about just what way things can be gained or kept or lost.

It is worth noting also that *everything* belongs to God:

Behold, all *souls* are mine; the *soul* of the father as well as the *soul* of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die. (Ezek. 18:4)

This same picture of or analogy with possessions recurs in Matthew 10:28, Matthew 16:24–28, and Mark 8:34–9:1. In Matthew 10:28, the particular terminology of “body” and “soul” occurs: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the *soul*. Rather fear him who can destroy both *soul* and body in hell.” (But should *psychē* be translated as “life” or “self,” as in Luke 9:24–25 *ESV*?) Using this analogy, a theologian may speak of *having* or *possessing* a body, and *having* a soul/life/self. But the picture also involves the possibility of “losing.” If a person loses the body, that is of little moment, as Matthew 10:28 points out. If he loses the soul as well, it is an inestimable loss, as Matthew 16:24–28 points out: “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul [*psychē*]? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul [*psychē*]?” (Matt. 16:26). But who, then, is the referent of the pronoun “he”? Who is the owner who has lost *both* body and soul? In Plato, body and soul together make up everything. In that case, there is no “he” *in addition to* body and soul.

In its verses, the Bible is presenting not a detailed philosophical theory, but an analogy—an analogy between material possessions on the one hand and a person’s true life before God on the other. The analogy cannot be pressed into a detailed theory of human composition.

In fact, it is this language of possessions that most suggests to people that they should see an individual human being as composed of two or three parts. Literal possessions are typically *things*, pieces, tangible, solid, material objects that one can count, distinguish, separate, and buy and sell

in separate actions. Hence, goes the reasoning, “body” and “soul” must be *things*, *entities*, distinct *subsistences*. Such reasoning seems reasonable until someone observes that the language of possession is used by *analogy* with possessing external physical objects. Such language does not necessarily imply a detailed theory of literal possessions. Moreover, the picture of loss or gain can apply to some *aspect* of life. A person can *lose* his memory, or portions of it. (People with partial dementia may retain early childhood memories, but still not remember what happened to them yesterday.) A person can *lose* his mind or his sanity, as Nebuchadnezzar did in Daniel 4. A person can gain or lose ability to play the violin. In and of itself, this kind of description does not necessarily imply that people are losing or gaining *parts*, distinct *things*.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Analogy with Housing or Covering**

Fourth, the Bible describes death and resurrection in terms of housing and covering. There are two main passages:<sup>6</sup>

For we know that if the *tent* that is our earthly *home* is destroyed, we have a *building* from God, a *house* not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this *tent* we groan, longing to *put on* our heavenly *dwelling*, if indeed by *putting it on* we may not be found *naked*. For while we are still in this *tent*, we groan, being burdened

5. And what do we mean by a *thing*? When we try to go beyond an ordinary level of using solid, physical objects as examples, it is not so easy to say.

6. In addition, there is a brief mention of a similar picture in 1 Corinthians 15:37–38: “And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a *bare kernel*, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God *gives it a body* as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.”

This passage has an ambiguity. What is supposed to be added to the “bare kernel”? Should we think of a picture in which we add to the “bareness” an outer covering or a husk that would enclose the kernel? That picture would be similar to the other biblical passages that picture the body as an outer layer of some kind. But the expression “the body that is to be” may describe a temporal process, according to which a seed grows into a mature plant. The mature plant has different features from the seed, which would be in harmony with the point that the passage is making about the distinctive newness of the new body. One of the main points here is that we do not know all the details.

—not that we would be *unclothed*, but that we would be further *clothed*, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.

So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at *home* in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at *home* with the Lord. So whether we are at *home* or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done *in the body*, whether good or evil. (2 Cor. 5:1–10)

I think it right, as long as I am *in this body*, to stir you up by way of reminder, since I know that the *putting off* of my body will be soon, as our Lord Jesus Christ made clear to me. And I will make every effort so that after my *departure* you may be able at any time to recall these things. (2 Peter 1:13–15)

In these passages, the body is like a house or a tent or clothing. If we like, we can say that there are three analogies here, rather than one. The body is analogous to a house, or analogous to a tent, or analogous to clothing. All three analogies are used within the scope of 2 Corinthians 5:1–3. In 2 Peter 1:13–14, the word translated “body” is *skēnōma* (σκήνωμα), “tent.” So 2 Peter 1:13–14 is using the analogy of a tent. For convenience, we group the three analogies together because the main point being made by all three is similar. A person puts off this house or tent or clothing at death. In the resurrection, one receives a new house or tent or clothing. The language involves a spatial orientation, consisting of an inside and an outside. Something, namely, the person himself, is inside a covering. On the outside is the covering, namely, a house or tent or clothing that can be put off or destroyed or replaced by another structure.

What is achieved through this analogy with housing? The analogy obviously shows the nonultimate character of what is seen (cf. 2 Cor.

4:18). It affirms the continuity of the individual through the changes in what is seen (one or another “tent”). But like all the other analogies, this one has limitations and could be overpressed. If someone were to treat the picture as though it were a complete theory, he would conclude that the soul and the body are both material objects in space, one inside the other. One would then conduct a medical search for the soul, say in the pineal gland! Unlike the analogy with sleep, this analogy does not underline the continuity between the body that dies and the body that is resurrected.

Note also that some of the language in the two main passages (2 Cor. 5:1–10; 2 Peter 1:13–15) comes close to the analogy with a journey to another world. Second Corinthians 5:6 speaks of being “at home in the body.” The expression “home in” suggests the picture of the body’s being a dwelling place. But while the person dwells there, he is “away from the Lord.” In verse 8, the situation is reversed. We may infer that the change takes place by means of a “journey.” Likewise, in 2 Peter 1:15, Peter speaks of his “departure,” right after he has described “the putting off of my body” (2 Peter 1:14). The two analogies naturally flow into one another because both use an analogy involving spatial relations.

### **Features of the Intermediate State**

All in all, the Bible provides considerable information about the intermediate state. People continue to exist after bodily death. The wicked experience conscious torment (Rev. 14:10–11), while the righteous go to be with Christ and have conscious enjoyment in his presence (Luke 23:43; Phil. 1:23). Meanwhile, the bodies of both the wicked and the righteous are nonfunctional until the time of the resurrection.<sup>7</sup>

7. People have many questions. How will the resurrection body have continuity with the body—radically disintegrated—of a person who died hundreds or thousands of years before the return of Christ? Or what about a body that has been cremated or otherwise consumed? How do people in the intermediate state act and react without functioning bodies? It is enough to believe what God promises, and leave the unknown details to him.



Here are some of the many wonderful realities that Christian believers can look forward to in the intermediate state:<sup>8</sup>

- We who have believed in Christ will be in the very presence of the triune God (Phil. 1:23; Heb. 12:22–24; Rev. 7:15–17).
- We will be in the presence of all the saints (Old Testament and New Testament) who have gone before us to be with the Lord, including all our family, friends, and loved ones (Heb. 12:22–24; Rev. 7:9–17).
- We will be in the presence of God’s angels (Rev. 7:9–12).
- We will be completely sinless and no longer able to sin. Our every thought, word, and action will be loving, righteous, and pleasing to the Lord (Heb. 12:23).
- We will keep the two Great Commandments perfectly (Heb. 12:23).
- We will be in a place of exquisite beauty and perfect righteousness, peace, joy, and love (Luke 23:43; Rev. 7:15–17).
- We will have unbroken fellowship with God and with one another (Heb. 12:22–24).
- We will maintain our personal identities, albeit transformed and no longer sinful (2 Cor. 5:6–9; Phil. 1:23).
- We will be able to recognize and identify others by name, and vice versa (Luke 16:24).
- We will retain our cognitive faculties (Luke 16:24–31).
- We will be able to talk with God and with one another (Rev. 6:10).
- We will maintain our gospel hope of the second coming of Christ and all that this entails (1 Cor. 15:20–28).
- And we will also maintain our gospel hope of having resurrected bodies, with all that this entails (1 Cor. 15:35–49).

The Bible provides this information through at least four major paradigms or pictures or analogies. No one of these analogies presents us

8. With some modifications, the list comes from John Hughes, personal communication, April 1, 2024.

with a scientifically detailed theory or totally nonmysterious photographic representation of the whole story. The analogies complement one another. If any one of them is overpressed, as though it represented a complete theory, people create difficulties for themselves.

### **The Intermediate State as Abnormal**

One other important point should be made about the intermediate state. It is abnormal, in comparison with creation. Human beings suffer death only because of the fall. Death is the enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). It is abolished with the coming of the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 20:14; 21:4). No intermediate state would have been necessary had not the fall of man occurred. And the intermediate state will no longer exist in the perfected world to come. It is thus an abnormality.

Granted the abnormality, it is questionable to reason backward from abnormality to normality. That is, it is questionable to use the abnormal situation of the intermediate state as a platform for inferences about man in his integrity, man before death, or man before the fall. Unless an interpreter is careful, he may unwittingly pull back an element of abnormality into his picture of creation.

In particular: in the intermediate state there is some kind of disconnection between the body and the person who goes to be “at home with the Lord,” “away from the body” (2 Cor. 5:8). In the analogy with another world, this disconnection is expressed in spatial terms, with the expression “away from.” This spatial separation (along with the analogy with possessions) is what leads naturally to interpreters’ speaking of two distinct *entities* or *parts*. Interpreters can see the two parts in their mind’s eye. The person’s body is *here*, left behind and then buried. The person himself is *there*, “away,” with Christ. The two things exist at two separate locations.

But the language about being “away” and “at home” functions *within* a particular analogy, the analogy with traveling to another world. By contrast, the analogy with sleep associates the person with the location of his body in the grave. Each analogy expresses the truth. But the two analogies cannot easily be combined into a single univocal, nonanalogical picture.

Moreover, in the analogy with another world (and the housing analogy), the spatial disconnection is abnormal, as 2 Corinthians 5:4 (“unclothed”) indicates. A dichotomy exists here, but it is a dichotomy that is in part a feature of abnormality. If an interpreter projects the dichotomy back into human beings living on earth after the fall, or Adam before the fall, he runs the risk of illicitly bringing abnormality backward into creation.<sup>9</sup>

Hence, none of the four analogies for the intermediate state can be “read back” into the present life in a simple, direct way. Rather, all four represent a *break* with the present order.

### ***Soul as a Technical Term***

Can the information about the intermediate state be used to arrive at a definition of *soul* as a technical term? This process is challenging, since the words in the Bible have a range of usage (guideline 1 in the previous chapter). If a theologian wants a technical term, its meaning will inevitably not match completely the range of usage in the Bible (guideline 2). That is one reason why technical terms can be defined in more than one way. It depends on what the theologian wants to do.

What he should not do is to import into the definition surreptitious assumptions from Plato or other doubtful philosophical sources. He cannot proceed naively as though he *already* knew for sure what he means by the word *soul* as a technical term. If he does that, Platonic views or some other views from our background may contaminate his thinking.

9. Second Corinthians 12:2–4 discusses another case, experienced by the apostle Paul while he was still in this life. He was “caught up to the third heaven” (v. 2). Paul did not know whether he was “in the body or out of the body” (vv. 2, 3). These verses at least open the possibility of visiting another world while temporarily “out of the body,” even before the time of bodily death and the transition to the intermediate state. We can also compare Paul’s experience to instances of prophets’ being caught up to heaven and seeing visions (Isa. 6:1; Ezek. 11:1; 37:1; 40:1–2; Rev. 4:1–2; 17:3; 21:10). In none of these cases do we get an explanation for just how the transport and the vision took place and where the prophet’s body was located. In every case, the point is that God gave a vision and a message, not how he did it. There is much mystery, and the experiences are not normal to human existence.

For the sake of illustration, let us imagine a Bible interpreter named Carol, who attempts to form a technical definition of *soul* for the sake of summarizing the teaching of the Bible about the composition of human individuals. One of the difficulties is that the Bible's teaching about the intermediate state is fairly extensive, and summarizing all of it in a few words is not easy. A summary has to be selective. And *what* Carol selects depends on her interests. In addition, as we observed, the intermediate state is abnormal, so there are remaining difficulties about how much theologians can infer about human beings before the fall.

Since the Bible itself uses words that have a range of usage, its use of "soul" (*psychē*) does not directly provide Carol with a technical meaning. Carol confronts the fact that several different technical definitions are possible in principle. It is up to *her* how she wants to define a technical term, if she is giving a fresh definition.

For example, she might say that the *soul* is the real life of an individual (close to the sense of *psychē* in some biblical passages). Or the *soul* is the personality or character. Or the *soul* is the real person. These definitions have some limited usefulness, but they are framed in ordinary language, with its flexibility. They do not provide us with a detailed philosophical theory. And they do not necessarily lead to a dichotomy of two distinct substances.

Can Carol get help by using the terminology of *substance*? What is a *substance*? Carol confronts the usual difficulty, that a technical term needs a definition in order to be clear. A substance, in some of its philosophical contexts, has a decisively *independent* existence.<sup>10</sup> But the philosophical idea of independence is inappropriate in the case of human beings. It is not right to say that in the original situation of unfallen creation, the body and the person are first created independently, and only afterward stuck together, as if by glue. That would seem to make the body into an

10. Merriam-Webster Dictionary provides as one of several definitions of *entity* "independent, separate, or self-contained existence." [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/entity](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/entity), accessed April 27, 2024. Howard Robinson, "Substance," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2021), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/substance/>, offers as one criterion "ii. being, at least compared to other things, relatively independent and durable, and, perhaps, *absolutely so*" (§ 1, italics added).

afterthought and would undercut the abnormality of the later separation of the body from the person during the time of the intermediate state.

As another option, Carol can define the *body* of an individual person as arms and legs and head and trunk, taken together, viewed in their physical aspect. Why add the last expression, “viewed in their physical aspect”? Because without that qualification, *body* could just be designating the whole person, who is present when someone sees his body. Could Carol then define *soul* as the *nonphysical* aspect? But what counts as *nonphysical*? Within this life, all our thinking, speaking, worshiping, buying, selling, and higher human activities are not activities that physical rocks and dust engage in. They are not “physical” in that sense. But they are physical in the sense that they *include* bodily physical and biological processes of motion as one aspect of a total whole. Note also that if Carol provides a list of activities such as thinking, speaking, and worshiping, she seems to be speaking of something like *aspects*, not parts.

As another option, Carol can try to define the soul as the *part* of a two-part person that is not the body. But she still has to deal with the question of what she would *mean* by “a part.” Or if she uses the word *substance* and says that a person consists of two substances, what does she *mean* by *substance*? Carol confronts difficulties with making herself clear.

As another option, Carol can try to form a technical concept, using the intermediate state as her point of leverage. Carol defines the *soul* as an individual human person at a time when his body is no longer living and functioning physiologically or when it has disintegrated. That is to say, a *soul* is a person in the intermediate state. But now the problem of the break with the present life reveals itself. Carol’s technical definition includes within it a restriction to the intermediate state. So she cannot apply this definition directly to the present life. It could be argued that the proper analogue within this present life is an individual human person in this present life. It would be the whole person. So Carol’s definition would not succeed in distinguishing some part of a two-part person.

One major difficulty here is that a technical definition, with its built-in narrowness, cannot encompass simultaneously all of God’s meaning in all the relevant passages.

## **The Soul as a *Part***

Could Carol achieve technical insight by using the terminology of *parts*? Carol could explain as follows:

One part of a person, namely, his body, stays behind on earth. Another part, namely, his soul, is “away from the body” (2 Cor. 5:8). The soul is in another world. For Christians, the soul is “at home with the Lord” (v. 8). For non-Christians, the soul is “in Hades, being in torment” (Luke 16:23; cf. Rev. 14:10–11).

Carol then says, “I define *soul* as the part that goes to another world at the time of bodily death.”

In one way, this spatial separation provides a clear picture. As we have seen, it is a picture given by the Bible itself, as one of four major analogies that the Bible provides. But there is still some challenge in trying to understand what Carol means by the word *part* in our English usage. (The word *part* does not occur in the key passages in the Bible that we have studied.) As we already saw, the word *part* is similar to the word *aspect*, but yet distinct from it. What is the difference? In many cases, *parts* are spatially distinct pieces that can be physically separated.

The use of the word *part* in fact suggests another analogy, namely, an analogy with our everyday experience with physically and spatially distinct pieces. Consider some examples. The pit and the flesh and the skin of a peach are physically and spatially distinct parts, which can be separated by cutting. The core and the surrounding flesh of an apple can be separated by cutting. The branches of a tree are parts of the tree that can be cut off and separated from the rest of the tree. The parts of a machine can be separated by taking the machine apart. Some knives can be separated into two parts, a blade and a handle, by unscrewing or ungluing. By analogy, Carol might be saying that an individual human being can be taken apart by separating his soul from his body.

This all makes sense as an analogy. It rests on our familiarity with taking material things apart and separating them into different spatial

locations. But Carol might say that the soul is *immaterial*. The analysis of the soul is not completely parallel to the case with two or more material parts. So the analogy is still an analogy with remaining mystery, and not a transparent theory that would make everything nonmysterious.

There are several remaining difficulties with the picture of two parts. The first we have already mentioned—there is still mystery. The four major analogies—and a fifth, if we count the picture with physically distinct parts as an analogy—are all analogies, which function as complementary viewpoints rather than complete theories.

A second difficulty arises as to how Carol conceives of the relation between the two parts. Ordinary human experience with physical parts suggests more than one possible picture. (And these are human pictures, so at what points are they actually analogous to the mystery of a human individual?)

(1) The parts could be only loosely strung together, like beads on a string. At any moment the whole thing could fall apart merely by cutting the string. The whole consisting of beads and string together is only a temporary and artificial combination. This picture does not do justice to the unity of each individual human being that the Bible presents.

(2) The parts could be designed to function as a single whole, like the blade and the handle of a knife, and yet be separable by some simple means such as unscrewing. Is the unity of a single human being a merely functional, utilitarian unity, but with underlying deep division between the two parts? Is there an analogue to the screw holding together the two parts of a knife? (Perhaps the screw is a third part, or else one of the two parts intrinsically includes a screwlike projection, and the other part has a hole into which the projection could be screwed.)

(3) The parts could be more difficult to get apart, but still separable by cutting. This cutting operation is illustrated with the example of the pit and the flesh of a peach.

(4) The parts could be parts of a single whole, with no clear boundary or separation in material composition. The branches of a tree join to the tree without any clear, precise boundary. Many table knives are single pieces of metal. It looks as though they were made in a single process of

solidification in a mold. The blade cannot be separated from the handle except by making a cut at an arbitrary point. A person could still say, if he chose to look at the knife in a particular way, that the knife has two parts, the blade and the handle. But he could also say that it has as many parts as he can cut it into with any number of successive cuts.

Ordinary experience shows many different ways in which parts combine into a whole. So when Carol says that the human individual is composed of two parts, she does not yet tell people very much. There are still too many unanswered questions about the details. Could she not also say that an individual is composed of three parts, namely, his two legs and then all the rest, from the trunk upward? Or could she say that an individual is composed of many *aspects*? Yes, she could. With any of these alternatives, she is saying something positive and helpful. But in none of these cases is she really providing a complete theory.

The third difficulty is that the analogy with parts does open the door to the temptation to speak of the two parts as *merely* piecemeal parts, which are conceived of impersonally. In some people's thinking, the soul becomes an "it." But as we have seen, many of the key passages in the Bible speak about a *person*, not an "it," who lives in the presence of Christ.

We can illustrate the difficulty with an example. Carol says that Abigail has two parts, a body and a soul. Her body then dies. Her soul goes to be with Christ. Does Carol say, "It is in another world"? The use of the word "it" means that Abigail as a *person*, with personal relations of communication with Christ, has disappeared. On the other hand, suppose that Carol says, "She is in another world." Then since by assumption Abigail includes two parts, not one, it sounds as though both parts are in the other world. The language about parts is actually awkward when it comes to speaking, as the Bible does, about "you" or "me," who go to another life. In normal English usage, the word *you* or *she* or another pronoun does not function as a designation for only a part of a human being.

The fourth difficulty is that the intermediate state is abnormal. Does the nonfunctioning of a person's body at death reveal something decisive about Adam and Eve as originally created by God? Or is it an abnormality?



And if it is an abnormality, should not interpreters be cautious about making inferences back into the state of normality, the state of integrity?

### **Body and Soul as *Material* and *Immaterial***

A difficulty also exists with the terms *material* and *immaterial*. Many theological formulations that build on traditional categories tell us that the body is material and that the soul is immaterial. In fact, this distinction functions as one of the main distinctions between body and soul.

Again, let us use Carol as our illustrative example. Carol says that the body is the material part and that the soul is the immaterial part of an individual human being.

We have the usual challenge in understanding what she means by her key words. What does she mean by *material*? We would have to ask her. But attempts to answer this question once again lead toward a critical analysis of metaphysical frameworks.

In the context of discussing body and soul, *material* as an adjective means “consisting of matter.”<sup>11</sup> And what is *matter*? One route that Carol might take is to appeal to Plato or Aristotle. In the context of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, it is the raw “stuff” that is shaped by a “form.” A particular metaphysics comes with the word—or two different kinds of metaphysics, one for Plato and one for Aristotle.

In the eyes of many modern people, that metaphysics is outmoded. Aristotle thought in terms of four “elements.” The four elements were earth, water, air, and fire. These elements were the precursors that supplied the matter for form-matter substances. “Aristotle established this list [of four elements] from fundamental principles.”<sup>12</sup> This kind of overconfident rationalism in analyzing the world has become suspect because of modern science. Modern scientists have found out that Aristotle was wrong. The

11. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/material](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/material), accessed April 26, 2024.

12. Michael Weisberg, Paul Needham, and Robin Hendry, “Philosophy of Chemistry,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2019), § 1.1, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/chemistry/>.

larger project of analyzing substances into form and matter also becomes suspect. This Aristotelian conception seems to have hindered rather than helped modern scientific chemical analysis.

So what is an alternative for Carol? At a naive level, Carol might say that *matter* denotes hard, solid stuff—things such as rocks, chairs, walls, concrete sidewalks, and soil. But water is liquid. Is it matter? Is air matter? Is fire matter? Is light matter, or rather a kind of energetic movement through space? There is no clear answer, as long as Carol confines herself to naive observation and to a vague, undefined use of the word *matter*.

Should Carol look to the deliverances of modern science? Science has uncovered many wonders, for which we may be grateful. But there are difficulties, not least in the area of presuppositions.

Nineteenth-century physics and chemistry pictured the world in terms of atoms in motion that were subject to precise, quantitative physical forces. People who hoped that science would provide “ultimate” answers naturally looked to physics and its successes. They interpreted physics as if it were metaphysics—a pronouncement about ultimate reality. This metaphysics was similar to the metaphysics of Democritus, who saw the world as composed of indivisible basic units of matter, the “atoms.” This framework, taken as virtually a complete picture, led to materialistic philosophies, which denied human survival beyond death and ignored God.

But the nineteenth-century picture has in its turn come to be seen as not being ultimate and as being flawed. What influence should Carol allow to twentieth-century quantum theory, which radically alters the previous mechanistic picture of matter from the nineteenth century? According to pictures derived from quantum field theory, even elementary particles do not “exist” apart from a continuous presence of a field of virtual particles, which are pictured as popping in and out of existence, and doing so only probabilistically. The naive pictures about hard, perfectly stable, self-sufficient, self-standing stuff, whether in the form of rocks or atoms, are disrupted at this level of analysis. So Carol seems no longer to know what matter *is*, at the level of an ultimate theoretical analysis.

Of course, Carol may still try to resort to ordinary language. At the level of ordinary observation and experience, Carol may still talk in an

ordinary way and say that rocks are “material” and ideas are not. Colors attach to material items such as rocks, but our psychic experience of color is not itself “matter” in an ordinary way of speaking. Cold and hot are not matter, but describe states of material things such as rocks. But the failures of Plato’s and Aristotle’s overconfidence in rationalistic analysis serve as a caution. Carol lacks the power to make a transition directly from ordinary observations about solid objects to a general theory of composition of all aspects of the created order. (What about fire? What about memory?)

Modern science has shown us that the world is a lot more complicated than ancient Greek philosophies postulated. Naive observation or rational reflection based on ordinary experience does not provide an ultimate, penetrating understanding of the essence of an object.

If human beings unaided by technical apparatus lack penetration when they look at ordinary visible objects, how much more do they lack penetration when they attempt to look at the soul (whatever they want that term to mean). They lack the power by mere rationalistic analysis to penetrate to the essence of an individual human being.

And if so, can Carol say what it would mean at the level of technical analysis for something to be *material*? Or to be *immaterial*? To be immaterial is not to consist of matter. If Carol has difficulty defining the one word (*matter*), she also has difficulty defining what is immaterial. It would still make sense for Carol to say that God is immaterial because, in ordinary use, *matter* implies creaturely existence. God is the Creator, and he is not dependent on anything that he created. Beyond that, what should Carol say? Carol could fall back on Plato or Aristotle, but their rationalism demonstrably makes mistakes about the nature of the world when it claims to have an exclusive deep analysis. Carol could fall back on ordinary language, but it is fluid and lacks the tight precision expected in technical analysis. Carol could fall back on our intuitions about “stuff.” But why should Carol think that her intuitions and her own rationalistic analysis will be more successful than Plato’s or Aristotle’s?

Carol could fall forward, so to speak, into the pronouncements of modern sciences. But there are many sciences, and they have different *kinds* of analysis. They are all in progress. Moreover, as we have indicated,

sciences with a focus on physical causation leave out much of what it means to be a person.

The intermediate state is mysterious. In the Bible, God has told us quite a bit. He has given people what they need to know. But he has not told them everything that they might *like* to know.

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on the Intermediate State**

Acts says nothing directly about the intermediate state. But it describes the existence of the new people of God, who are filled with the Holy Spirit and who have intimate fellowship with God. They participate in intimate spiritual life with God, in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. It is natural to anticipate that this life will continue beyond the grave. The *person* continues in fellowship with God.

### **Key Terms**

|                            |                        |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| abnormal                   | intermediate state     |
| analogy                    | material               |
| analogy with another world | matter                 |
| analogy with housing       | metaphysical framework |
| analogy with possessions   | part                   |
| analogy with sleep         | Plato                  |
| Aristotle                  | soul                   |
| body                       | substance              |
| fall of man                | technical term         |
| immaterial                 |                        |

### **Study Questions**

1. What is the *intermediate state*?
2. What four main analogies does the Bible use in describing the intermediate state? What are the main points made by each of the analogies?

3. What kind of separation takes place at death?
4. What is the main difficulty with inferring a theory of human composition from the information about the intermediate state?
5. What is the difficulty with the term *substance*? With the term *part*?
6. What is the difficulty with the term *immaterial*?
7. What comfort and hope do you receive from the Bible's teaching about the intermediate state?

### **For Further Reading**

Frame, John M. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013. Pp. 800, 1075–77.

### **Prayer**

Our God, thank you for your wisdom. Thank you that you have wisely given us a variety of analogies for understanding the hope for the future. Enable us to focus on trusting in what you tell us, not on what remains mysterious or puzzling.

## PRELIMINARY EVALUATION OF THEORIES

Consider now the results so far. These results are partly positive in character, but also partly negative. They may not satisfy those who wish that in the Bible God taught explicitly about matters other than what he in fact chooses to address.

In summary, some of the main positive results are as follows:

- There is an intermediate state for people who die before the second coming.
- The intermediate state is a state of torment for those who died without Christ, and a state of comfort and joy in the presence of Christ for those who died in Christ.
- The intermediate state is a state in which the individual person is separated from his body, awaiting the resurrection of the body.
- The intermediate state is abnormal, in comparison to the original state of human beings before the fall, because bodily death for human beings was introduced by the fall.

The negative results are as follows:

- The topic of distinct *substances* or *entities* or *parts* composing human individuals does not become an explicit, *extended* topic for discussion anywhere in the Bible.

- It is illegitimate to “read off” anthropological conclusions from Hebrew or Greek vocabulary stock of the Bible. The teaching of the Bible is found in whole sentences and paragraphs, not in single words.
- *Psychē* (“soul”), *pneuma* (“spirit”), and related terms have a range of usage, and not all these usages are to be loaded with exactly the same meaning or with a full package of philosophical metaphysical speculation. In addition to the New Testament use of Greek, the Old Testament uses Hebrew and Aramaic. The vocabulary stock of Hebrew and Aramaic words introduces further complexity.
- An interpreter should beware of introducing surreptitiously philosophical assumptions that go along with the history of the usage of the word *soul* in Western thought as a whole.
- There does exist an intermediate state. The intermediate state is described by using several paradigms or analogies, and none by itself offers a complete explanation.
- The properties of the intermediate state should not be simply projected backward into a whole list of features belonging to this present bodily existence.

It follows that the Bible does affirm the existence of the intermediate state, but does not teach a massively *detailed theory* of human composition involving a modern concept of substance or of parts. What the Bible affirms is all true because it is God’s Word. But it does not tell us everything that people might like to know.

These negative results, taken in their total, still leave open the theoretical possibility that there is a true detailed theory. It is simply that the Bible does not provide all the information needed to arrive at such a theory.

### **Evaluating the Traditional Theory of Dichotomy**

The traditional theory of dichotomy, in its common form, says that body and soul are separated at death. The Bible affirms this separation. In addition, the traditional theory says that each individual is composed of

two *substances*, a material body and an immaterial soul.<sup>1</sup> This additional claim is what makes theory more specific. But it also gives rise to further questions. As we have seen, one question to raise concerns the meaning of the key terms, especially *material*, *immaterial*, and *substance*. In addition, there is the question whether the Bible gives enough information to support the theory fully (see guideline 5 in chapter 14).

What do we say in evaluating this more specific claim from a biblical point of view? Any theory of this kind offers a picture or analogy that suggests an explanation for what is otherwise mysterious. We may then evaluate it in terms of both its strengths and its weaknesses, its advantages and its liabilities, in relation to what the Bible teaches.

### **The Benefits of Dichotomy**

The main benefits are several.

First, dichotomy, by using the word *soul*, draws attention to the depth in human nature. It warns us against materialism, behaviorism, and all approaches that reduce human beings to machines, animals, or moving atoms.<sup>2</sup>

Second, it builds on the analogy with possessions. According to the Bible's use of this analogy, human individuals own their bodies and other things besides. Dichotomy succeeds, like the biblical analogy of body and soul as possessions, in calling on people to reckon with future losses and gains in a world controlled by God.

Third, it gives a positive account of the intermediate state, which for some people may make it easier to believe that the intermediate state actually exists.

Fourth, it rightly affirms the separation that occurs at death between a person and his body.

The theory of dichotomy has continued in force through the centuries of systematic theology because it has these benefits, which harmonize with

1. There are variations, which we leave to one side.

2. Remember, however, that Aristotle used the word *soul* in explaining the nature of all animate beings, not just human beings.



biblical teaching. And by having these benefits, it preserves in summary form many of the main lines of biblical teaching about the intermediate state. Moreover, no alternative theory of equal explanatory power has offered itself.

### **The Potential Liabilities of Dichotomy**

What are the possible liabilities in this theory? It should be noted that many of these liabilities are only *possible* liabilities, which the best theologians have avoided.

First, the use of a technical term for *soul*, no matter how defined, tends to be read back into biblical texts where it does not belong. As we have observed, “soul” (Greek *psychē*) in the Bible has a range of meanings. Once a theologian uses the same word *soul* with a technical meaning, he can be tempted to import the technical meaning into all the texts in the Bible. He loses sight of the flexibility that belongs to the range of biblical usage of the key words.

Second, applying the theory of dichotomy to present bodily existence could easily lead to underrating the unity of human individuals and the abnormality of the intermediate state.

Third, the idea of a soul as a *substance* easily suggests something that has continued existence more or less in and of itself, that is, independent of personal relation to God and independent of God’s purposes, plans, and sustaining power. Such a conception undermines the truth that God is continually involved in sustaining the world through his providential control. Moreover, the idea of *substance* is itself not clear. People may try to clarify the term by using some philosophical system that would define it and set it in a larger metaphysical context.<sup>3</sup> But the philosophical system may itself be flawed.

Fourth, if people are not careful, the *soul* easily becomes an impersonal “it.” People may say of their souls, “It will be in heaven after I die.” In that

3. Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), chaps. 20–23.

case, they lose the biblical assurance that, as a Christian, if you die *you* go to be with Christ. It is *you*, not some organ or piece of you.

Fifth, building almost exclusively on the analogy with possessions, and “absolutizing” it, might reduce people’s ability to appreciate the analogies with another world and with sleep and with clothing.

Sixth, the theory may create problems for scientists if they speculate about the relation of the two parts, body and soul, in the context of modern neurophysiological and psychological research into the functioning of the brain. It may then tempt them to think that the Bible is irrelevant.

Seventh, one must carefully consider the benefit of making it easier for some people to believe in an intermediate state. Christians should believe in an intermediate state not because they can understand it or rationalize it or demonstrably harmonize it with science, but because the Bible teaches it. Biblical faith is fundamentally trust in the reliability of God, not an ability to see and check out everything for ourselves.

Dichotomy as a theory *could* become a temptation for its proponents to think that they have an explanation that relieves them of having to trust God. They think they can assure themselves that God can do something because they can guarantee it on grounds outside God—namely, the theory that body and soul are two parts, material and immaterial, each part being a distinct substance, and that these two parts are separable. The impression could be given that death just happens, and that these two parts naturally separate, as it were by “the laws of nature.” (Some pagan Greek conceptions of the soul are not so far away from this picture.) According to this kind of picture, God does not do anything. Things happen, of themselves. This picture in which God is not intimately involved with the world contradicts the Bible’s teaching about his continued involvement.

But what if interpreters of the Bible *do* affirm God’s providential presence? The faithfulness of God and the regularity of his rule over the world give them a foundation for solid knowledge. At the same time, their knowledge is subordinate to God’s complete knowledge. In the end, it means that absolutely everything contains an aspect of mystery, because God’s continual activity with respect to each thing and each aspect that he sustains and controls is mysterious. The soul is mysterious.

The body is mysterious. Human persons are mysterious. The Bible gives us much teaching, including teaching about the intermediate state. But mystery remains. God's presence in the world and in the other world of the intermediate state means that people cannot just calculate the nature of the world on the basis of allegedly impersonal laws. It forces them to draw back from overconfident rationalism, presumptuousness, and arrogant self-reliance.

Eighth, interpreters should beware of overestimating the nature of human knowledge within this world. The intermediate state is another *kind* of life, namely, a life in *another* world, not the life in this world. Nor is it the same as the life in the new heaven and the new earth, the life in the resurrection body. People who are in this life do not know about the other world by direct experience. They cannot travel there in the way that they would travel to a South Sea island. Science or philosophy, which studies *this* world, does not really have anything definitive to say. It is an arrogant form of rationalism to presume that a human analyst can infer what must be true for human beings in another created world merely on the basis of observations in *this* world. Yet theological discussions that depend on science or philosophy, when they come to discuss life after death, are tempted to do this very thing. Properly assessing the limitations of human knowledge means giving up this presumption. Even if an analyst thinks that he can define with technical precision what he wants to mean by a word such as *substance* or *matter*, he is forming that definition with respect to *this world*. That definition might not fit another world.<sup>4</sup>

What God communicates in the Bible, through the Holy Spirit, provides solid knowledge. We must listen carefully and confidently to what the Bible says because God in his speech in the Bible tells us about this other world. He tells us that people go to this other world at death. The persons who go there are the same persons who were once here. There are thus a multitude of continuities with respect to each person who travels. But God tells about it by way of *analogies*. The analogies

4. Lest someone misunderstand, let us make it clear that the classical affirmation that God is one substance or one essence is fully true, but also analogical and mysterious, not technically precise. A denial of mystery undermines the incomprehensibility of God.

are analogies *with this world*, analogies using ordinary language rather than special technical expressions with precise philosophical meanings. Because they are analogies, they involve both similarities and dissimilarities. The similarities are real, but in evoking these similarities the purpose of the Bible is never to undertake to give detailed answers to all the philosophical curiosities. This analogical teaching is what God has given to the world. And we must recognize this limitation. God is wiser than we are, and he has provided in these analogical descriptions what people need to know.

### **Key Terms**

|                            |                     |
|----------------------------|---------------------|
| abnormal                   | intermediate state  |
| analogy with another world | part                |
| analogy with housing       | rationalism         |
| analogy with possessions   | soul                |
| analogy with sleep         | spirit              |
| behaviorism                | substance           |
| body                       | systematic theology |
| dichotomy                  | technical term      |
| human composition          | vocabulary          |

### **Study Questions**

1. What are the main positive teachings of the Bible about the intermediate state?
2. What are the negative cautions that should be observed in dealing with our understanding of the Bible's teaching?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional theory of dichotomy?
4. What satisfactions or dissatisfactions might people find with the Bible's teaching on the intermediate state?
5. What is your hope for the future? What comfort is there in the Bible's teaching about the intermediate state?

### **For Further Reading**

Grudem, Wayne A. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020. Pp. 1005–17.

### **Prayer**

Dear Lord, enable us to rejoice in the promises and comfort that you give us in the Bible, and to be content not to know everything about the future. Thank you for giving us the assurance that we do not cease to exist when our bodies die, but that if we trust in Christ we enjoy his presence until the time of the resurrection of the dead.

## APPLYING THE THEMES OF SONSHIP, THEOPHANY, AND SPEECH TO THE INTERMEDIATE STATE

Dichotomy, in its most detailed form, is the theory that each human individual is composed of two parts, each of which has a distinct metaphysical substance, or each of which is a distinct metaphysical substance or *entity*. Many people do not see how, based on the Bible, they could look at the same issues in any other way. It is beneficial, then, to use other biblical analogies in order to show that these analogies can help to make sense of the intermediate state, without discussing two *substances* and confronting the difficulties of what *substance* means within some possible philosophical system.

### **Sonship as a Perspective on the Intermediate State**

As chapter 13 showed, sonship can be used as a perspective on Adam's original state. It can also be used as a perspective on the intermediate state. Let us see how.

Recall the motifs associated with sonship in Paul's writings: intimacy, inheritance, freedom, and likeness.

The relation of sonship to God is analogous to human sonship within a human family. Measures of intimacy, freedom, and family likeness characterize human families, both nuclear families and, to a lesser degree, extended families.

In addition to belonging to a particular human family, a redeemed person belongs to the “extended family” of human beings on earth, that is, the “family” or race of descendants of Adam. So in somewhat different senses, Christians are members of three families at the same time, namely, the family consisting in their nearest biological relatives, the family of the people of God, and the family of descendants of Adam. In addition to the immediate biological family, there are two extended families, the human family and the family of the people of God. Within this context of two extended family memberships, what is the meaning of *death*?

Death, as the Bible indicates, is both loss and gain (Phil. 1:23). Consider first the loss. At death, people lose intimacy with the human family. This loss is depicted especially in the analogy with another world. People also lose freedom and power with respect to action in this present world. The analogy with sleep especially depicts such loss. The sleeper is inactive in this world. People lose inheritance, that is, possessions in this world. The analogy with possessions emphasizes this loss. Finally, people lose likeness to the rest of the family, at least partially. The body ceases to function and begins to disintegrate. People lose their bodies as “possessions.” To those still on earth, the dead body looks less and less like one who is still living. And the dead person’s body no longer carries out the actions characteristic of human beings living in this world. The analogy with a tent at least partially represents this aspect. The tent is the aspect that presents itself to the world. The loss is a loss of similarity to all the other “tents”—other living human bodies.

For a Christian, death is also gain, and indeed the gain is much more important in the reckoning (Phil. 1:21). The Christian gains intimacy with Christ, as the journey of going “to be with Christ” emphasizes. The Christian who dies gains freedom and power with Christ, in reigning with him (Eph. 2:6; Rev. 3:21; Rev. 20:4 on one interpretation). He gains inheritance, as the word “gain” in Philippians 1:21 itself suggests. (Again, the analogy with possessions is also useful.) He gains in likeness to Christ, precisely in identifying with Christ in death, Philippians 1:20.

Christians remain sons of God in the midst of the transition from this life to the next. But there are shifts in the specific benefits and privileges as

they lose connection with the human family on earth and gain in intensity of connection with Christ and heavenly reality. (See table 17.1.)

**Table 17.1. Sonship in Adam and in Christ**

| Feature     | Sonship in the<br>Adamic Family Lost | Sonship in<br>Christ Now | Sonship in<br>Christ in Death |
|-------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| intimacy    | lose intimacy with<br>earth          | intimate already         | more intimate                 |
| freedom     | lose power on earth                  | free already             | free from sin                 |
| inheritance | lose earthly<br>possessions          | possessing<br>already    | possessing<br>Christ          |
| likeness    | lose likeness to<br>humans on earth  | like Christ<br>already   | gaining likeness              |

All in all, the main features of the intermediate state can be understood as integrated into the meaning of *sonship*, in its simultaneous application to membership in two families. The “dual” membership of Christians in this world and in the new world in Christ presents complexities that lead naturally to the application of all four major biblical analogies for the intermediate state. *Sonship* explains the main points made in all four analogies. And if so, what need is there for an explanation that becomes a complete, detailed theory, by including speculatively a theory of substance based on some philosophical system?

### **Theophany as a Perspective on Human Composition**

A second fruitful analogy is that of theophany.<sup>1</sup> God comes in a cloud at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:9). A cloud comes to fill the tabernacle after it has been erected, indicating that God has established his presence there (Ex. 40:34).

1. Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God’s Appearing* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022).



Likewise, the cloud of God's presence fills Solomon's temple when it is dedicated (1 Kings 8:10–11). The garments of the high priest reflect aspects of the tabernacle, indicating that the high priest is himself a replica of the tabernacle.<sup>2</sup> His garments are "for glory and for beauty" (Ex. 28:2). They reflect the glory and beauty of God, which Psalm 27:4 celebrates:

One thing have I asked of the LORD,  
that will I seek after:  
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD  
all the days of my life,  
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD  
and to inquire in his temple.

In the New Testament, the body of a Christian becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19). This picture of a temple comes close to the housing or "tent" analogy used in speaking of the intermediate state (2 Cor. 5:1). The analogy is fairly straightforward. The human person who is consecrated by the Holy Spirit dwells in his body in a manner analogous to the dwelling of God in the temple through the cloud. Of course, this picture of dwelling in one's body uses an analogy; it does not offer a complete theory about how a human person dwells in his body. Any analogy is partial. Nevertheless, it can be helpful.

Theophany in a cloud is an appearance of God that conceals as well as reveals him. "The LORD has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have indeed built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever" (1 Kings 8:12–13). The cloud, then, is a "dwelling" of which the temple or tabernacle is a replica. God reveals himself in physical manifestation—in the cloud of glory, and then in the permanent structure of the temple. At the same time, God is who he is, in a way that transcends the particularity of his manifestation in any one time and place.

The analogy between the human body and Solomon's temple is not a perfectly matched, exhaustive analogy that would enable us to form a

2. Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 42–47.

complete “theory” of human composition. Nevertheless, it is a suggestive starting point for a partial explanation for why human beings are as they are. God manifests himself in a physical way, in a cloud, but continues his existence after the cloud disappears. God continues in fellowship with human beings. A human being manifests himself in a physical way, but continues to exist, and to enjoy fellowship with God, when the physical manifestation ceases to enjoy its original dynamic unity of action.

But again, the analogy is not perfect. A human body has a stability and permanence to its structure that is lacking in a cloud. But Solomon’s temple had such permanence as well. Moreover, all the structures in the Old Testament (cloud, tabernacle, and temple) had only a relative permanence. All were looking forward to the permanent dwelling of God with man in the person of Christ. “And the Word became flesh and *dwelt* among us” (John 1:14). “But he was speaking about the *temple* of his body” (2:21). The final “temple” is a human body, namely, the body of Jesus Christ! The Bible here gives us reinforcing ideas. As the temple is a model helping people understand the human body, so the human body, in the person of Christ, is the foundation for the temple symbolism in the Old Testament.

Note a further disanalogy. God as Creator is not limited by his physical manifestations. But human beings, as creatures, are bound by limitations in their physical environment. They are made of the dust of the earth, and as such have ties and dependencies with respect to the earth. It is therefore not so clear how they could continue to function as full people when the dynamic functioning of these ties is dissolved at the time of physical death. Yet the relation of human beings to God the Creator is, in a fundamental way, more basic than their relation to fellow creatures. For Christians, union with the risen Christ, in his humanity as well as his deity, continues even in the face of physical death. The continuation of fellowship with God after death is conceivable if such fellowship is analogous to the continuation of God’s activity on behalf of Israel even when the temple is destroyed. God indwells the temple, but continues in activity when the outer physical structure, the physical temple, is destroyed. A human being indwells his body, but continues in activity when the outer physical structure is destroyed.

The deepest ground for the pattern of indwelling is to be found in God's Trinitarian nature. The Father dwells in the Son and the Son in the Father (John 17:21). Their mutual indwelling is in operation in the work of redemption. But it also manifests who God always is. The Word was always "with God" (1:1) and "is at the Father's side" (v. 18) from all eternity. The indwelling of God in himself is the ultimate basis for his ability to dwell in his creation. He fills heaven and earth (Jer. 23:24). The whole earth is full of his glory (Isa. 6:3). His glory fills the temple in a special sense (1 Kings 8:10–11). When God originally created Adam, Adam was the crown of creation. Did God indwell Adam in a way analogous to the way in which the Holy Spirit indwells Christians (John 14:23; Rom. 8:9)? The Bible does not say explicitly. But man is the original spot in which God's presence is focused and from which his plan unfolds. Man made in the image of God naturally replicates on the level of the creature some of the indwelling structure of God. Hence, it is not so surprising that man has a body in which he "dwells." The analogy with housing uses this very comparison when it pictures the body as a house or a tent or clothing. (See table 17.2.)

**Table 17.2. Inward and Outward in Theophany**

| Level              | Inward                                                                           | Outward                                                                 |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| God in the Trinity | the Father <i>in</i> the Son;<br>each person <i>in</i> each other                | the Son has the Father<br>in him; each person<br>encompasses the others |
| God in creation    | God dwells in himself                                                            | God fills the world                                                     |
| God in theophany   | <u>God</u> is the one who is<br>present "inside" a theophany,<br>when he appears | God appears <i>in</i><br>manifestation, an outer<br>appearance          |
| man in body        | man exists in God                                                                | man appears <i>in</i> the body                                          |

This manner of approaching the body-soul question preserves biblical teaching about the unity of the human individual and also the phenomena of the intermediate state. But it does so without having to claim to have a complete theory. If a modern analyst prefers, he can *also* use analogies such as the analogy of physical, spatially separate parts. In such a context, he *can* say that each person has two parts, body and soul. But he is using this language analogically.

The limitations of an analogy with parts become evident when one asks more specifically about the issue of *location*. Consider one instance of a whole made up of two parts, namely, a fastener consisting of a nut and a bolt. The nut and the bolt occupy two distinct spatial locations, even when they are screwed together. The same goes for other simple instances of parts: the pit and the flesh of a peach, or the inside and the outside of a baseball, or the blade and the handle of a knife, or the distinct mechanical parts of a machine. Each part is located at a distinct spatial location. That kind of locatability makes it comparatively easy to grasp what is meant in saying that one whole is composed of several parts.

Now, by comparison, consider what it means to be a person. While a person lives on earth, the person is in the same location as his body. Or if someone wants to label the inner person as *soul*, he says that the soul is in the same location as the body of the person. But that means that body and soul are not entirely comparable to the nut and the bolt of a fastener, which have distinct spatial locations. Typical instances of *aspects* of a person, such as mind and memory and emotions, all have the *same* location, namely, the location of the person himself—or, what amounts to an equivalent thing, the location of his body.

This whole situation is one aspect of the mystery of human persons. Human beings have bodies (to use the analogy with possessions), and they live in bodies (to use the housing analogy). But they are more than a mere mechanical sum of the locations of their physical body parts. There are many aspects to who a human being is.

In sum, the analogies that we have surveyed do not offer a complete theory. Any one analogy used in the Bible provides truth. But it is complemented by other analogies. Using multiple analogies enables people

to avoid having to deal with the extrabiblical assumptions about *parts* and *substances*, both of which introduce liabilities and open doors to the importation of pagan philosophical speculations.

### **But How?**

People influenced by the physicalistic picture offered by some parts of mainstream modern science can hardly resist the question, “But how? *How* can the person be active without an active body?” They want a *physicalistic* explanation. But the analogy of theophany may suggest that perhaps that is the wrong question. It is a question that tends to arise when people think that the limited, specialized, technical focus of investigation in modern physics must uncover what is *deepest* about the world. It does not.<sup>3</sup> It does uncover hitherto hidden dimensions. It uncovers wonders, which display the wisdom of God. But atoms, molecules, and physics are in the service of God in theophany, rather than God’s being trapped by the allegedly independent permanent properties of atoms. Likewise, by analogy, the atoms, molecules, and physics that operate within a human person’s body are in the service of the person—not the reverse.

### **Speech as a Perspective on Human Composition**

Finally, consider how the theme of *speech* can serve as a perspective, throwing light on the composition of the human individual.

Why speech? Speech has a structure that shows us an inward and an outward side. In this respect, it is analogous to theophany. The inward side of theophany is the reality of God himself. The outward side of theophany is the visible manifestation of God, which may be accompanied by sounds as well. There may be “rumblings” and “peals of thunder” (Rev. 4:5; 8:5).<sup>4</sup> A theophany may include intelligible speech issuing from God (as it did at Mount Sinai, Ex. 19).

3. Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), chaps. 15–16.

4. The ESV has a marginal note on “rumblings”: “Or *voices*, or *sounds*.”

The speech of God includes an inward and an outward side. The inward side is the truth in God's mind. The outward side is the outward expression in sound. This sound comes to the ear of the human recipient of a theophany. The appearance of God at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19–20 is an excellent example. In addition to the visible appearance of lightning and cloud, there is the sound of thunder and a trumpet blast (Ex. 19:16). Then God speaks in an audible voice and gives to the people the Ten Commandments (20:1–17). The audible voice is the outward expression of an inward reality, namely, the will and purpose of God, as found in the actual contents of the Ten Commandments.

The inward and the outward side are closely related. The outward side effectively and accurately expresses the inward. There is no real tension between them, but rather harmony. The outward side has meaning and makes sense only because there is first of all an inward source. Conversely, the inward side becomes known to human beings only through its expression in an outward fashion, a fashion that is accessible to human beings (Israel at Mount Sinai).

Now, human speech takes place in analogy with divine speech. Human beings can speak because they imitate God, who speaks. Human speech has two sides, an inward and an outward side. The inward side is the intention and the mental formulation of what a person wants to say. The outward side is the actual speech, which goes out from the person in the form of sound. For human beings in a fallen, sinful state, there may be discrepancies between the two. People may choose to lie. But even lies depend parasitically on the general expectation that people will tell the truth. In many cases, the outward expression does indeed faithfully represent the inward intention.

The outward expression uses as means various parts of the body—lungs, diaphragm, vocal cords, tongue, lips, nasal passages. People get the message out to others by means of their bodies. In this respect, the medium of speech in its special structure may represent analogically all kinds of relationships to the world through the body. Gestures, facial expressions, bodily posture, bodily activity all express human *meanings*. People communicate to others by means of words and also by means of gestures and facial expressions. So human communication in speech can

serve as a clue to the general topic of the relation of the soul to the body, or the inward person to the body as the outward manifestation of the person.

In a fallen situation, our bodies may not always be functioning perfectly. People can have speech impediments (Matt. 9:32–33; 12:22; Mark 7:32). The inward person is there, but intentions within the person do not get out to the outer world. When Jesus heals people, they are able to speak, and then all the bystanders have contact with the inner person, so to speak.

Of course, the technical twenty-first-century discussion of body and mind is concerned about brain function, not just speech impediments. But the issue is still analogous to speech impediments. The distinction between inward and outward in speech is *analogous* to the distinction between the inward person, who goes to another world at death, and the outward manifestation of that person, which ceases in this world when the person undergoes physical death. (See table 17.3.)

**Table 17.3. Inward and Outward in Speech**

| Level              | Inward                                                                     | Outward                                                  |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| God in the Trinity | the Father speaks                                                          | the Word is spoken by God                                |
| God in creation    | God says, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3)                                  | God’s word goes out; light appears                       |
| God in theophany   | <u>God</u> is the one who is present “inside” a theophany, when he appears | God appears <i>in</i> manifestation, an outer appearance |
| man in body        | man has ideas                                                              | man sends out thoughts in words traveling with breath    |

### **Roots in the Trinity**

This chapter has now used three themes altogether: the theme of sonship, the theme of theophany, and the theme of speech. Each of these

three themes has a root or an archetype in the Trinity. Consider first the theme of sonship. The human father-son relation has an archetype in the eternal relation between the Father and the Son in the Trinity. There is an eternal Son.

Second, consider the theme of theophany. The theophanic manifestation of God on earth is a kind of *image* of God, as Ezekiel 1:28 shows: “Such was the appearance of the *likeness* of the glory of the LORD.” The original or archetypal image is in the person of the Son: “He [the Son] is the *image* of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15).

Finally, the theme of human speech has its original in the eternal speech of God, as described in John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

These three forms of archetype correspond to the three principal analogies used in differentiating the persons of the Trinity: the analogy with a family, the analogy with reflections, and the analogy with communication.<sup>5</sup> All three analogies suggest that the differentiation between inward and outward sides in human nature is a reflection of the deeper differentiation between persons of the Trinity. It is in fact deeply rooted. (See table 17.4.)

**Table 17.4. Three Perspectives on Body and Soul**

| Analogies for the Trinity  | Reflected in Human Individual      |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------|
| analogy with communication | thought displayed in speech        |
| analogy with a family      | sonship displayed in relations     |
| analogy with reflections   | pattern displayed in manifestation |

In the original or archetypal relations among persons of the Trinity, the relations are eternal and ever-abiding. But God’s eternity is unique to him. The world that God created, and the human beings that God

5. Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chaps. 8–9.



created, are temporal, not eternal. Within the world, sonship relations can be established or broken; reflections or appearances of God may take place or may not take place; speeches of God to human beings may or may not take place. And so it is also with our human relations to one another. Death removes family intimacy with those left behind. It removes bodily interaction in visible appearances. It removes human communication with those left. But through the sustaining power of God, the capabilities remain in the person, who is the inward source for the outward manifestations. The Bible in its descriptions of the intermediate state indicates that the capabilities are exercised in relation to God, who in the Spirit maintains the union of Christians with their Savior.

The fact that human existence imitates the Trinity suggests that human existence *also* imitates, on the level of created existence, the mystery of the Trinity. The relation of the Father to the Son in the Spirit is incomprehensible. Derivatively, at the level of a created reflective imitation, the relation of the person to his body is incomprehensible. Or if the word *soul* is used to designate the real person, the core person, the relation of the soul to the body is incomprehensible.<sup>6</sup> (See table 17.5.)

**Table 17.5. Mystery in the Relation of Inward to Outward**

| Level              | Relation              | Our Knowledge    |
|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| God in the Trinity | the Father in the Son | incomprehensible |
| God in creation    | God in the world      | incomprehensible |

6. What is the meaning of the phraseology of “inner self” and “outer self” (or “inner man” and “outer man”) in 2 Corinthians 4:16? Since the next few verses in 2 Corinthians begin to discuss the intermediate state, it is possible that “inner self” is equivalent to the designation “we” (2 Cor. 5:1) for the person who continues into the intermediate state, and that “outer self” is equivalent to the designation “tent” and “earthly home” that is “destroyed”—namely, the present body. But other nuances may belong to these expressions. The larger context of Paul’s writings includes attention to the reality of spiritual renewal that belongs to “the age to come” (Heb. 6:5), contrasting with “the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). Christians are already “a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17) in Christ. They participate in the new age by union with Christ in his resurrection (Col. 3:1–4). So the “inner self” may mean the person who is spiritually renewed. The “outer self,” in the form of the body, is still subject to death.

Table 17.5 (continued)

| Level            | Relation                                                 | Our Knowledge    |
|------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|------------------|
| God in theophany | God displayed                                            | incomprehensible |
| man in body      | man displayed in the body;<br>soul displayed in the body | incomprehensible |

That would suggest that detailed *theories* concerning body and soul always have limitations. If they seem to eliminate mystery, they fail.

**Acts 2 as a Perspective on Views of the Intermediate State**

In Acts 2, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the members of the church are children of God. That shows the relevance of the theme of sonship. Pentecost begins with a theophany of the Holy Spirit, appearing as tongues of fire (Acts 2:3). The theophany as an extraordinary visible manifestation is temporary. The church remains. As a dwelling place of the Spirit, it is in a broad sense theophany-like. Its existence is analogous to the way in which God’s presence in the cloud covers the tabernacle or fills Solomon’s temple. Each individual, as a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19), is also theophany-like. This analogy shows the appropriateness of the use of theophany in thinking about the new-creation existence of the church. Finally, what about the theme of speech? Through the Holy Spirit, the people and Peter are “telling in our own tongues the mighty works of God” (Acts 2:11). They are recipients of the word of God, and then also become speakers of the word of God (2:42; 4:30–31).

**Key Terms**

- analogy
- analogy with another world
- analogy with housing
- analogy with possessions
- analogy with sleep
- archetype

|                    |             |
|--------------------|-------------|
| body               | likeness    |
| dichotomy          | outward     |
| dwelling           | perspective |
| freedom            | son of God  |
| glory              | soul        |
| human composition  | speech      |
| inheritance        | substance   |
| intermediate state | theophany   |
| intimacy           | Trinity     |
| inward             |             |

### Study Questions

1. What does the analogy of sonship show about the intermediate state?
2. What does the analogy of theophany show about the intermediate state?
3. What does the analogy of speech show about the intermediate state?
4. What about personal existence is illumined by thinking in terms of inward and outward sides?
5. What do you learn about yourself from the analogies of sonship, theophany, and speech?

### For Further Reading

- Poythress, Vern S. *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009. Chap. 1.
- . *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. Chap. 8.
- . *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022. Chaps. 12, 17, 45.

## **Prayer**

We pray that we would live, speak, and act in a manner worthy of our sonship, our reflection of the presence of God, and our being filled with the Word of God. Fill us with your Word and your Spirit, that our speech may reflect and express your wisdom.



## TRICHOTOMY

Consider now the topic of *trichotomy*. Trichotomy is the position that maintains that a human individual is composed of *three* parts, namely, body, soul, and spirit. Is this position true?

As chapter 14 indicated, a naive approach to dichotomy might try to read out a theory of human composition by inspecting the vocabulary stock of the Bible. But this approach is mistaken about how vocabulary works. It does not adequately reckon with the word/concept distinction. Trichotomy tends to do the same thing. Even more than the theory of dichotomy, the theory of trichotomy is beset by inadequate attention to the word/concept distinction. Just because English has three words, *body*, *soul*, and *spirit*, it does not imply that the human individual has three *parts*. The three terms can denote three aspects, rather than three parts.<sup>1</sup> And indeed, the situation is more complicated than that, because each of the three words in English has corresponding terms in two ancient languages, Hebrew and Greek, and each term in each language has a range of meaning, rather than being consistently used as a technical term to denote one *part* of a two-part or three-part individual.

The key text 1 Thessalonians 5:23 does indeed have three key terms: “Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole *spirit* and *soul* and *body* be kept blameless at the coming of

1. Wayne Grudem is helpful in providing a number of passages where “soul” and “spirit” are used in very similar ways (Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020], 602–6).

our Lord Jesus Christ.” But nothing in the verse or its context shows that it is using the terms with technical precision, and nothing shows that the terms designate parts rather than aspects. If the terms designate aspects, the three terms could be expanded to four or five or an indefinite number: mind, memory, heart, emotions, conscience, personality.

Consider Mark 12:30: “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The verse contains four key terms in a list: “heart,” “soul,” “mind,” and “strength.” But that does not prove tetrachotomy, the existence of four *parts*. First Thessalonians 5:23 no more “proves” trichotomy than Mark 12:30 “proves” tetrachotomy. The list of nine fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22–23 does not demonstrate that each individual is composed of nine parts.

Hebrews 4:12 needs attention because it is sometimes drawn into discussions in favor of trichotomy. Hebrews 4:12 says:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of *soul* and of *spirit*, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Trichotomists sometimes appeal to this verse to show that there is an important theological distinction between “soul” and “spirit.”

What does the verse actually say? Here as elsewhere, the question arises whether the key terms “soul” and “spirit” are used as technical terms. Or are they rather used as part of ordinary language, to denote aspects of our inner being?

Hebrews 4:12 fails to support trichotomy for several reasons. First, as we have already noted, it is a mistake to interpret the key words in this verse as if they were technical terms, rather than ordinary language.

Second, consider the word “division.” Trichotomist interpretation usually assumes that the passage asserts the ability of the Word of God to divide between soul and spirit, so that the result of the division is to put the soul on one side of the dividing line and the spirit on the other side. But the sense is actually to divide within the soul and to divide within the

spirit, so that “thoughts” and “intentions” within the soul are distinguished as good or bad or mixed. The Greek word *merismos* for “division” can be used to describe a division *within* a group, or a distribution of portions *within* a single whole.

Third, this sense of “dividing within” is confirmed by the parallel expressions “joints” and “marrow.” In practice, it is not difficult to *distinguish* joints from marrow. But it is difficult to divide *within* a joint, because joints are inward parts of the body, difficult to get at. The same is true of marrow. Similarly, the inward thoughts of the heart are difficult to get at. The Word of God shows its power to penetrate to the innermost aspect of human beings, and that innermost aspect is denoted by “soul,” “spirit,” and “heart,” without introducing a precise distinction between these three or any two of them.

Fourth, this very verse, Hebrews 4:12, contains other key terms, such as “thoughts,” “intentions,” and especially “heart.” The “discerning” in the last part of the verse lies in parallel with the “piercing” and “division” earlier, and helps to define it. The word “heart” in this connection is in partial parallel with “soul” and “spirit.” The fact that there is a parallel use undermines the idea of a sharp distinction between the two. If someone insists on interpreting the verse woodenly, the word “heart” demands still another part, the “heart,” distinct from both the “soul” and the “spirit,” leading to four parts, or even more if someone adds in other terms such as “mind.”

Another route that can undermine the typical thinking in trichotomy is to appeal to Proverbs 25:28, in the KJV: “He that *hath* no rule over his own spirit *is like* a city *that is* broken down, *and* without walls” (italics original). Trichotomist theory usually says that a human being is rightly ordered when his spirit rules over the soul and the body. But this verse says that a man must rule his spirit. The spirit does not rule the man—the man rules his spirit. As usual, the difficulty is related to the fact that words are not used in a technically precise way. “Spirit” in Proverbs 25:28 is not a technical term for a part of man, but a way of talking about one aspect of man, loosely designated. The ESV captures the sense: “A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.”<sup>2</sup>

2. For further discussion, see Grudem, chap. 23.



## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on Trichotomy**

Acts 2 shows the church and the individuals within it acting in unity. This unity is in tension with an attempt to make sharp distinctions of parts within individuals.

### **Summary**

Proper biblical interpretation shows that trichotomy does not have a biblical basis.

### **Key Terms**

|                                         |                |
|-----------------------------------------|----------------|
| body                                    | soul           |
| dichotomy                               | spirit         |
| distinction between word<br>and concept | technical term |
| part                                    | trichotomy     |

### **Study Questions**

1. What is *trichotomy*?
2. What is plausible about it?
3. In what ways is its support inadequate?
4. Have you met this teaching in your Christian experience? What is your response to its practical embodiment?

### **For Further Reading**

Grudem, Wayne A. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020. Pp. 606–11.  
Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970. Pp. 2:47–51.

## **Prayer**

Dear Lord, may you deliver your people from all kinds of false doctrine and confusion. Enable the next generation among your people to examine faithfully what teaching has biblical support, what your Word is saying to us.



## BODY AND SOUL WITHIN *LEX CHRISTI*

Can the *lex Christi* framework provide insight on the issue of body and soul?

### Limits of Analogies

*Lex Christi* is a framework with analogies built into it. With analogy comes mystery. With any analogy, it may be hard to say just how far the analogy should be pressed. One of the implications is that *lex Christi*, as a *general* framework, cannot dictate specific answers to some of our more specific questions. Rather, it provides a framework for exploring possible answers and seeing whether they harmonize with the overall teaching of Scripture.

### Unity of the Individual Person

With these qualifications, we can still apply the *lex Christi* framework.

Observe first that the unity of God is one aspect of the supremacy of God, which is manifested especially in the first commandment. There can be only one supreme, namely, God. There can be “no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3). The unity of God is a deep unity, closely related to the necessity of unified response to God in worship. The first commandment (and the second as well) forbids us from dividing our allegiances. By implication, they also forbid us from dividing up God himself. God must not be divided

up by trying to serve many gods. More subtly, people must not parcel out one kind of allegiance to God's holiness, and another kind of allegiance to his sovereignty, and another kind to his love.

Now, an individual human being imitates God. It follows that in some deep sense, an individual human being is one unified being, in imitation of the unity of God, who is one. So the first commandment, by implication, encourages holistic thinking about any one individual human being. Of course, that does not force us to think in terms of a totally undifferentiated holism. God's attributes are in some ways distinguishable from one another. By analogy, it is possible to distinguish different aspects in an individual human being, such as reason, memory, will, and conscience.<sup>1</sup>

### **Unity in Moral Responsibility**

More broadly, the *lex Christi* framework includes a broad affirmation of human moral responsibility. It is human beings who are responsible, not just the "soul" part of them. They do deeds in the body. What the body does is what the person does. (Of course, there may be exceptional cases such as sleepwalking, but they are indeed exceptional.) Each person is responsible for what he does. At the last judgment, God declares both rewards and punishments, based on deeds:

And the dead were judged by what was written in the books,  
according to *what they had done*. (Rev. 20:12)

1. It is another matter to distinguish three parts, as trichotomy does. Superficially, it might seem that a three-part human being would correspond analogically to the three persons of the Trinity. But the alleged reflection in three parts of man does not seem to work well in detail. For one thing, the persons of the Trinity are not *parts* of the Trinity. Each person is God, not a part of God. In addition, the supposed correlations between the persons of the Trinity and the parts of man do not work. The Holy Spirit as the *third* person of the Trinity would be correlated with the body, even though the Holy Spirit is *spirit*. Or if we correlate the Son with the body because he was incarnated, we correlate the Spirit with the soul. But this order does not match the normal order of persons in the Trinity, namely, Father, Son, and Spirit, in that order, with the Spirit's proceeding from the Father and the Son. In addition, we would still have to deal with the fact that the biblical use of terms suggests that we correlate the Holy Spirit with the spirit in man (1 Cor. 2:11).

And they were judged, each one of them, according to *what they had done*. (Rev. 20:13)

“What they had done” is what they had done *in the body*. They did those things as full, unified persons. And it is as full, unified persons that God judges them. Their judgment takes place in resurrection *bodies*, as John 5:28–29 confirms:

Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the *resurrection* of life, and those who have done evil to the *resurrection* of judgment.

A profound unity is important if God’s judgment is just. A punishment or reward that would be assigned to a body that did not commit the sin is not just. Neither is a punishment or reward that would be assigned to a soul that did not commit the sin—because, allegedly, it was the body and not the soul that did it. The resurrection body has fundamental continuity with the preresurrection body, as is confirmed by the resurrection body of Jesus, which still had the nail prints. The resurrection soul has fundamental continuity with the preresurrection soul, confirmed by the affirmations of personal continuity (Luke 16:19–31; 22:28–30; 23:43; Phil. 1:23). Even more significant, the body and the soul go together. The deeds are the deeds of the whole person, and the reward or punishment comes to the whole person.

All of this is implicit in the Ten Commandments. They command us to obey. They imply that people are responsible. And some of the commandments explicitly mention rewards or punishments (2C, 3C, 5C).

### **A Diversity of Attributes of God, with a Diversity of Ten Commandments**

In fact, though the attributes of God are like perspectives on one another, and though the Ten Commandments offer perspectives on the

whole of our obedience, they are still also distinct from one another. There is diversity as well as unity in the commandments. Likewise, there is diversity as well as unity in the human race as a whole. There is diversity and unity in any one human being, in a diversity in aspects—body, limbs, mind, soul, memory, conscience, personality, life, animation, heart, mind.

### **Affirming Sonship as a Perspective**

The diversity in the Ten Commandments leads to a diversity of perspectives on human nature. For example, consider the theme of sonship. Chapter 13 used sonship as a perspective on the original state of Adam. Sonship is a perspective closely related to the fifth commandment. Children should honor their fathers and mothers. By analogy, children should honor their *heavenly* Father. The family context of the fifth commandment invites us to see how a family analogy appropriately illuminates the intermediate state.

### **Affirming Theophany as a Perspective**

The seventh commandment displays the theme of intimacy. That theme is closely related to theophany, which is an event in which God “draws near” and is intimate with his people. So it makes sense that theophany can be a useful perspective on the intermediate state.

### **Each of the Commandments as a Perspective on the Intermediate State**

In fact, the commandments can function as perspectives, in order to assess the gains and losses that take place in the transition from this life to the intermediate state. Philippians 1:20–26 discusses gains and losses in this transition. Paul can serve as the example.

*1C (first commandment). Supremacy and unity.* When Paul dies, he gains unity in a more intense union with Christ. He loses some unities in friendships and personal relations within this present world. He loses

unity when he is “away from the body” (2 Cor. 5:8) and when the body disintegrates. He loses power in this world.

*2C. Holiness.* Paul gains in holiness, by being perfected in holiness in the presence of Christ. The reverse side of holiness is separation from the unholy. He is separated from the unholiness of this world.

The second commandment is also closely related to covenant, as chapter 8 showed. Covenant is the divinely given means for communion. There is continuity in covenantal fellowship in the transition in which Paul departs from this life to be with Christ. At the same time, there is a further stage of fulfillment of the promises of the covenant, in that Paul gains in holiness and in communion.

*3C. Blessing.* Paul gains blessing in communion with Christ. He loses the relative blessing of good things in this world (Acts 14:17).

*4C. Dynamicity.* Paul gains dynamic activity in personal interaction with Christ. He loses power to act any longer in this world.

*5C. Harmony.* Paul gains in spiritual and moral harmony because he no longer contends with the disharmony of indwelling sin. He has complete harmony in peace with God. He loses the richness of harmonious relations to people and things in this world.

*6C. Life.* Paul has eternal life in the presence of Christ, which is the heart of real life. He loses life in this world. His body is dead.

*7C. Intimacy.* Paul gains intimacy with Christ. He loses intimacy with this world.

*8C. Giving.* Paul receives and gives in union with Christ, more intensively than when he was in this world. He no longer receives and gives in relation to this world.

*9C. Truth.* Paul gains in truthfulness because he is free from the lies of this world. He loses ability to communicate with people who are left in this world, but gains in ability to be in communication with Christ.

*10C. Contentedness.* Paul gains in contentedness because he is content with the fullness of Christ's presence. In a certain way, he also gains in longing; he longs for something better, including the execution of God's full justice (Rev. 6:10). (See table 19.1.)



**Table 19.1. Ten Perspectives on the Intermediate State**

| Cmd. | Specific Commands | Attributes of God | Meaning for the Intermediate State                                     |
|------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1C   | no other gods     | supreme           | gain unity with Christ                                                 |
| 2C   | no idols          | holy              | gain holiness                                                          |
| 3C   | honor God's name  | blessed           | gain blessing in Christ                                                |
| 4C   | keep the Sabbath  | dynamic           | rest; activity in union with Christ                                    |
| 5C   | honor parents     | harmonious        | harmonious by leaving sin and having complete peace with God           |
| 6C   | no murder         | living            | having eternal life; dead in the body                                  |
| 7C   | no adultery       | intimate          | gain intimacy with Christ; lose the world                              |
| 8C   | no stealing       | giving            | giving and receiving with Christ; not with the world                   |
| 9C   | no lying          | truthful          | clear minds in the truth; loss of ability to communicate in this world |
| 10C  | no coveting       | contented         | contented; longing for God's full justice                              |

The use of the perspectives of *lex Christi* thus alerts us to some of the richness involved in the continuities and differences between this life and the intermediate state. It also underlines the fact that the intermediate state is not a blank. It has meaning in each of the ten facets of *lex Christi*.

## **The Analogy with Another World**

The analogy with another world is a useful analogy closely related to the theme of intimacy in 7C. People are “intimate” with this world while they are in it. When they are in the intermediate state, they are intimate not with this world, but with the other world of the intermediate state. It is also related to the theme of holiness in 2C. Until they die, people are in a world that is unholy (1 John 5:19). If they are in Christ, they go to a world that is holy.

## **The Analogy with Sleep**

The analogy with sleep is a pertinent analogy closely related to the theme of rest in 4C. The sleeper rests from his labors.

## **The Analogy with Possessions**

The analogy with retention or loss of possessions is a helpful analogy closely related to 8C. While people are in this world, they have certain things as possessions. They lose possessions when they die. If they are in fellowship with Christ, they also gain when they die.

## **The Analogy with Housing**

The analogy with housing is a useful analogy closely related to 7C. People are intimate with their own bodies. And sexual intercourse is the most intense expression of intimacy with another person. When Christians go to be with Christ, they lose this intimacy with others, including intimacy with their own bodies. It is as though the body were “discarded,” like a garment (2 Cor. 5:1, 8). They gain intimacy with Christ. And they do in a sense have intimacy with a body, namely, the physical body of Christ, by virtue of their union with him.

## **Life**

Note also the theme of life, closely associated with the sixth commandment (6C). We have not considered it in earlier discussion of the intermediate state because it is not so obvious that there is an analogy in it. At first glance, at a simple visual level, it seems that while people are alive in this world, they have life. Then they die. They lose life. It is a simple contrast.

But it is not quite so simple, because physical life connects itself analogically to real life, that is, spiritual life. Jesus assures Martha: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:25–26). Jesus implies that Lazarus is really dead: “though he die.” But mysteriously, he also affirms that “everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” He says “never die.” So which is it? Does Lazarus die, or does he not? The answer, of course, is that John 11 contains an analogical use of the word “life” and the antithetical word “death.” When physical death comes to a believer, spiritual life, that is, eternal life, nevertheless continues. The passage to the intermediate state involves continuous life in the believer. He has eternal life now, within this earthly life, and continues to have it when his life in this world ends. And yes, the transition does involve death in this world, physical death with respect to the body.

## **The Inwardness of Coveting and Desire**

As the *lex Christi* framework indicates (chapter 8), each commandment among the Ten Commandments can function as a *perspective* on God and his attributes, and then also on humanity, history, and Christ’s redemption. Among these perspectives is the perspective from the tenth commandment, “You shall not covet” (Ex. 20:17). This commandment can be a starting point for contemplating the inward and outward aspects of human living—which correlate with the traditional thinking about soul and body, respectively. The tenth commandment focuses on what is *inward*.

How does its inward focus compare with the other nine commandments? As Jesus indicates in the Sermon on the Mount, the other commandments have implications for evaluating our inward desires, not merely our outward actions (Matt. 5:21–32). For instance, that sixth commandment, not to murder, implies that people should not have inward sinful anger that can lead to murder (vv. 21–22).

But in the case of the nine commandments, the sinfulness of the inward desire has to be inferred. By contrast, the tenth commandment becomes explicit about the inward desires. Coveting is inward. Among other things, the tenth commandment functions as a reminder about the depth of meaning in the other nine commandments. “You shall not steal,” says the eighth commandment (Ex. 20:15). But the tenth commandment then says that you are not to have the inward *desire* to steal. You may not let such a desire lodge in your inner being. No one else can see it. It is inward. But God sees it. And God forbids it.

Jesus makes a related point when he discusses the role of outward ceremonies in Mark 7:1–23. At the end of a longer discussion, he comes to a decisive pronouncement:

And he said, “What *comes out of* a person is what defiles him. For *from within, out of the heart of man*, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, *coveting*, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things *come from within*, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:20–23)

The source is said to be “within” and “out of the *heart*.” Surely this language has some correlation with the idea of a person’s having an inner core that is not always immediately on display in bodily actions. Moreover, previous verses draw a contrast between this idea of defilement from within and defilement of the body by outward, symbolic uncleanness:

“There is nothing *outside* a person that by *going into* him can defile him, but the things that *come out of* a person are what defile him.”  
And when he had entered the house and left the people, his disciples

asked him about the parable. And he said to them, “Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes *into* a person from *outside* cannot defile him, since it enters not his *heart* but his *stomach*, and is expelled?” (Thus he declared *all foods clean*.) (Mark 7:15–19)

What contacts the body, and even what goes into the body as food, does not bring sin into the body; it does not corrupt the heart. Inward desires lead to sinful actions such as sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery. The inward desires are the root of sin.

The tenth commandment is distinct from the other commandments in its immediate focus on what is inward. It serves to *distinguish* the inward from the outward—though of course, in most cases of normal human action, the two are intimately related. In its intimate *relation* to outward actions, the tenth commandment serves as a perspective on the other nine commandments. Likewise, the other nine commandments serve as perspectives on the tenth, by bringing into the light how outward violations express an inward source.

What might be the implications for understanding the soul and the body and their relation to each other? The correlation between the inward and the outward side of a person touches on the mystery traditionally associated with the soul and the body. But the inward and the outward side are perspectives on each other—the first associated with the tenth commandment, and the second, outward side associated with the other nine commandments. Both perspectives alert us to the close correlation between the heart and outward actions. That is almost equivalent to the correlation between the soul and the body.

There is a real duality in the contrast between the tenth commandment and the other nine commandments. But the duality in this case is a perspectival duality, not a *substance* dualism that would generate a picture of two separated parts, each a distinct *self-standing* substance, which would in turn generate an explanatory problem as to how they relate to each other. The perspectival duality does not generate a problem because the perspectives are two complementary views on the same whole person. The unity of the person is preserved.

What about the intermediate state? It is as if the intermediate state preserves the inward desires (which, for the believer, are sanctified at the point of bodily death), while the intermediate state terminates the opportunity to bring those desires into bodily expression by direct obedience or disobedience to the other nine commandments (though the first commandment may be interpreted as directly forbidding inward thoughts as well).

### **Perspectives on the Body**

The multiplicity of perspectives in *lex Christi* may serve as an invitation to use multiple perspectives in considering bodily life within this world. Let us begin with a summary from Robert Strimple: a person's body "is indispensable to the integrity of man's personality, but it is not indispensable to the survival of the personality."<sup>2</sup> That conclusion follows from biblical descriptions of the intermediate state.

By analogy, similar things are true concerning some other kinds of loss of human abilities. (Note again that the language of "loss" is connected to the analogy with possessions.)

Does a person have to have arms? Arms are indispensable for the full integrity of an individual person, but not for his survival. The same goes for legs. Amputees and people born without arms or legs show us that a person is not his arms and legs.

Some internal organs are not indispensable (one can lose one kidney out of two, or one lung out of two).

Is consciousness indispensable? No. People sleep.

Is rationality indispensable? No. There are cases of mental illness and dementia.

Is a functioning conscience indispensable? No. Some people have a "seared" conscience (1 Tim. 4:2).

Is moral integrity indispensable? No, as demonstrated by Romans 1:29–32, 2 Timothy 3:1–5, and other passages about moral degeneration.

2. Robert Strimple, classroom lecture, Westminster Theological Seminary, c. 1973. I have this wording in my notes, but I cannot be sure that it is exact.

Among these instances, one of the most striking illustrations is sleep. People tend to take it for granted because it is “ordinary.” But in sleep, a person temporarily loses a great many active capabilities associated with being persons. That is one reason why the analogy of sleep is an apt analogy that the Bible itself chooses to use to describe the intermediate state.

Consider also the case of a coma. A coma is like an extended sleep. Some people in comas never awaken. Others do. Some recover almost completely. Are they the same people as they were before the coma? Of course they are.

Other passages from the Bible indicate that in the intermediate state, Christians have conscious communion with Christ. The Bible contradicts the idea of “soul-sleep,” according to which the soul has no active consciousness or communion with Christ in the intermediate state. The Bible does not use the analogy with sleep in that way. The analogy with sleep and the analogy with a coma are partial analogies, to illustrate some of the mysteries involved in the rich, multifaceted nature of human beings.

In fact, sleep and comas might be extended as analogies in another way. People sometimes dream in their sleep, displaying an active mind, even though no one else knows it. People sometimes have unusual experiences within a coma, which they tell about afterward. Some people can remember everything that was said in a conversation that took place in their room while they were in a coma and seemed to be totally unresponsive.

All these aspects in human experience can be seen as integrated into the *lex Christi* framework as a whole. Every aspect in human ability is a gift from God. As such, it is an expression of God’s attribute of giving (8C) and blessing (3C). The use of arms and legs is closely related to human power, which comes to the surface in the attribute of dynamicity and the work to which the fourth commandment refers. Consciousness gives us intimacy with the world around us, expressing 7C. Rationality reflects the rationality of God (1C) and the taste for truth (9C). Conscience at its best reflects knowledge of the law of God as holy (2C). Loss of moral integrity is loss across the board, loss with respect to all Ten Commandments. It is a manifestation of God’s curse (2C, 3C). The unity of mind is a reflection

of the unity of God (1C). Life (6C) is intertwined with all the functions in human action.

The point is that the loss of a particular ability, or its absence, is not the same as the annihilation of the person who does not have this particular ability. The *lex Christi* framework confirms this truth with respect to multiple aspects.

### **Additional Truths with Respect to the Body**

Strimple<sup>3</sup> adds some other important truths about the body:

- The body is intrinsically good. This follows from Genesis 1:31 and 2:7, and is confirmed by 7C.
- The body and the spirit are not antithetical. This is confirmed by the unity of Adam in Genesis 2:7 and by 1C.
- Man is not naturally mortal (subject to death). This follows from Genesis 2:9, 16–17. Human death is a curse for disobedience. The horror of death is confirmed in Genesis 9:6, which further expounds the sixth commandment. Death is antithetical to the life of God, a life reflected in the life of human beings (6C).

### **Connections with the Truths of Redemption**

Strimple<sup>4</sup> also notes some connections with truths of redemption. These connections have a natural expression in *lex Christi*. As chapter 8 showed, the Ten Commandments describe both the nature of sin and the righteousness of Christ that he brought to bear in working the remedy for sin. This righteousness is applied to us in justification, sanctification, and glorification.

- *The doctrine of sin.* The body is not the source of sin. The whole person sins. Sins come from the heart (Matt. 15:10–20).

3. Strimple, classroom lecture.

4. Strimple, classroom lecture.



- *The doctrine of salvation.* The body is saved (along with the whole person). The body becomes a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19).
- *The doctrine of final judgment.* Final judgment comes to people with bodies, both the righteous and the wicked.
- *The doctrine of the incarnation.* Christ came in the flesh, 1 John 4:2.
- *The doctrine of the resurrection of Christ.* His resurrection body had flesh and bones, Luke 24:39.

## **The Soul**

If people wish, they may construct technical terms that have special definitions. But according to the principles of semantics, such technical terms do not perfectly match the range of usages offered in ordinary language in English, Greek, or Hebrew.

Here are some possibilities:

*Body* is arms, legs, trunk, and head, taken together as a single physical whole.

*Soul* is that part of a two-part human being that is not his body. (But this presupposes that the theory of dichotomy is correct.)

*Soul* is the complex of those functions and aspects of a human individual that an animal is incapable of matching.

*Soul* is the real human person.

*Soul* is the heart, from which come inward desires, in accordance with Mark 7:1–23.

*Soul* is an individual human being whose body is not functioning as a living organism (the intermediate state).

The possibility of more than one definition illustrates a difficulty. Theology has the task of teaching what the Bible teaches. The Bible's main teachings on the subject of humanity are clear, including teaching on the intermediate state. But God does not choose to answer all the questions that our curiosity may produce. So strictly speaking, none of the attempts at technical definitions is absolutely necessary. They may be convenient for some purposes. Which one is convenient may depend on the purpose.

Whichever definition someone chooses to use, he should try to communicate the truth faithfully.

### Acts 2 as a Perspective on *Lex Christi*

Acts 2 shows the people of God acting in multiple dimensions that reflect and display the wonder of who God is. It is in harmony with the function of *lex Christi* in emphasizing both unity and diversity in the activities of human beings.

### Key Terms

|                            |                    |
|----------------------------|--------------------|
| analogy                    | <i>lex Christi</i> |
| analogy with another world | life               |
| analogy with housing       | outward            |
| analogy with possessions   | perspective        |
| analogy with sleep         | son of God         |
| body                       | soul               |
| covet                      | soul-sleep         |
| diversity                  | Ten Commandments   |
| dualism                    | theophany          |
| holistic                   | trichotomy         |
| intermediate state         | unity              |
| inward                     |                    |

### Study Questions

1. How do the four analogies for the intermediate state fit naturally into the *lex Christi* framework?
2. How is the *lex Christi* framework useful in expounding the continuities and discontinuities between the present life and the intermediate state?
3. What are some important truths about the body that are relevant to understanding redemption?

4. What are some possible definitions of *soul*? What do they achieve, and what are their limitations?
5. As a result of studying these issues, do you better see the role of your body in this life and the life to come?

### **For Further Reading**

Grudem, Wayne A. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020. Pp. 573–74.

### **Prayer**

Our Father, thank you for giving us bodies. We are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14). Thank you that we can anticipate being with Christ even beyond death. Thank you for Christ’s resurrection and for giving us the hope for our own future resurrection.

## THE ORIGIN OF THE SOUL

How do the souls of individuals originate? Charles Hodge helpfully summarizes the three main options:

Three theories have been advanced as to the origin of the soul. First, that of the Preëxistence of the soul; secondly, that of Traduction [traducianism], or the doctrine that the soul of the child is derived from the soul of the parent; thirdly, that of immediate Creation [creationism], or the doctrine that the soul is not derived as the body is, but owes its existence to the creative power of God.<sup>1</sup>

Hodge dismisses the theory of preexistence as having no scriptural basis.<sup>2</sup> That leaves two other theories, traducianism and creationism. How do we analyze these theories?

### Limits in Biblical Revelation

The Bible does not directly address the question. So if there is an answer, it would have to be by way of inference. Hodge is aware of mystery: “We may confess that generation, the production of a new individual of the human race, is an inscrutable mystery.”<sup>3</sup> It might seem best, then,

1. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 2:65.

2. Hodge, 2:67.

3. Hodge, 2:73.

simply to leave the issue unsolved. But it is still profitable to look at issues of method that underlie some of the arguments.

### **Incompletely Defined Terms**

One of the difficulties lies in the terminology. Three key terms need inspection: *soul*, *creation*, and *immediate*. Each of these three has a role in the debate between traducianism and creationism. Let us consider them one by one.

First, consider the word *soul*. Chapter 14 showed that the word *soul* has its difficulties. If someone wants to use it in a more technical discussion, it needs definition. But there is more than one possible definition that might attempt to make a connection with biblical texts. And the biblical texts, as we have seen, cannot rightly be assumed to use the word *soul* as a technical term that presupposes an entire theory of two distinct substances in human individuals. Without a clear definition of *soul*, the debate between traducianism and creationism fails to make the crux of the dispute clear.

Consider also the word *creation* (and the corresponding verb *create*). Within the Bible, the underlying Hebrew and Greek words are not technical terms but ordinary words, each with a range of meaning. From a theological point of view, a clear distinction is made in Genesis 2:1–3 between God's activities during the six days and his subsequent activities beyond the end of the sixth day. God "rested from all his work that he had done in creation" (Gen. 2:3). Did he then recommence further works of creation after the end of the seventh day? No. Genesis 2:1–2 indicates that his work was "finished." After God's work of creating, he has works of providence. These works are distinct from the earlier works of the six days.

In another context, Psalm 104:30 can use the key word *create* (Hebrew בָּרָא) to describe God's works in bringing forth a new generation of animals: "When you send forth your Spirit, they are *created*." In a narrow sense of the term *create* (with respect to Genesis 1:1–2:3), God is finished "creating" at the end of the sixth day. In a broad sense, he continues to "create" in bringing forth new animals. It is easy to infer that in a similar way, God "creates" when he brings forth new human beings.

Here we have to reckon with semantics, the meaning of words. The word *create* in English and the corresponding words in Hebrew and in Greek have flexibility in use, such as is characteristic of word meanings. People are free to use the English word *create* either narrowly or broadly, as long as the context makes it clear which they are doing. Unfortunately, debates between traducianism and creationism often do not discuss this problem, but simply move ahead. They assume that the meaning of the word *create* is clear to all participants in the discussion, when in fact it is not. And so the whole discussion becomes infected with the lack of clarity.

The discussion in Hodge's *Systematic Theology* may serve as an example. In some of his discussion about the origin of the soul, Hodge seems by his language to suggest that he senses a difficulty. He speaks of God's "creative energy," operative in providence.<sup>4</sup> This usage is quite broad. Hodge surely knows that it is broader than the sense used when creationism says that each soul is created by God. Yet Hodge never makes this difficulty an explicit topic of discussion. He never discusses the range of meaning of the key term *create*, or its possible ambiguity. Without such a discussion, the entire issue is unclear.

Third, there is still another key term: *immediate*. Creationism maintains that God creates a new soul by *immediate* action. Traducianism maintains that the soul of the child derives from the soul of the parent, so that God is active in the process of the derivation of the soul only *mediately*. The distinction between immediate and mediate actions of God has been common in theological discussion for centuries. But is it clear? It is not.<sup>5</sup> If the word *immediate* signifies that God uses no means at all, that sense is problematic: almost all actions of God after the initial act of creation from nothing (Gen. 1:1) use the "means" of what already exists. If God uses means, he is still present and not absent. As Job 1:21 and Acts 2:23 illustrate, God is still acting as the primary cause of an event, in addition to the secondary causes. So all events involve God's "immediate" action by his presence. He is present, intimately; he is not

4. Hodge, 2:74.

5. Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 107–8.

far away and uninvolved. If the two sides of the debate do not make clear what precisely they mean by *immediate*, the distinction between traducianism and creationism is left unclear.

### **Why the Motivation for an Explanation?**

If the whole dispute involves undefined terms, and if the Bible never speaks directly about the issue, why does the dispute exist at all? There may be at least two reasons. One is that it is tempting to come up with a detailed theory that would make transparent to our minds just how human beings originate. But Hodge rightly points out that this is impossible—not only the origin of each individual human but the origin of any life is “inscrutable.”<sup>6</sup>

A second reason is found in various analogies that the Bible presents as paradigms or sample cases for understanding the origin of living things. There is more than one such analogy with which to reckon. Could these analogies or paradigms serve as the starting point for a full-blown *theory* of origin?

### **Four Analogies**

In the Bible, there are four main paradigms or analogies pertaining to creating something new. For convenience, we supply a distinctive name for each paradigm: the paradigms (1) of *initially creating kinds*, (2) of *initially creating individuals*, (3) of *finished creation*, and (4) of *providential acts of creativity*.

The first two paradigms derive from the account of the unique, once-for-all acts of creation that God brings about during the six days of Genesis 1. The first paradigm, *initially creating kinds* of creatures, is found in the account in Genesis 1 concerning the creation of distinct “kinds” of plants and animals. The focus is on God’s creating distinct kinds, not on the creation of individual plants or animals. Human beings

6. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:73.

are unique among the list of created things in Genesis 1 because they are made “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27). But like the water creatures and the birds, they are supposed to “be fruitful and multiply” (v. 28; cf. v. 22). God creates mankind as a distinct kind, separate from the animals (2:20). The focus in the description in 1:26–27 is on the creation of human beings as a *kind*, as a whole race. This emphasis on the unity of God’s act of creation and the unity of his purposes with respect to mankind as a whole invites people to see the unity in the human race, and to focus on that unity when they think about creation.

The idea of creating a whole “kind” or animal species is like a paradigm to which to compare later instances in which God brings human beings into the world. This comparison is an analogy. The analogy offers an understanding of God’s creating Abraham or David by comparing his actions with the initial creation of kinds of animals.

This paradigm can be used for traducianism because traducianism lays stress on the unity of the human race. Individual human beings come into existence as participants in a humanity that already exists as a distinct “kind.” God does not need to create again the whole race of human beings.

The second paradigm also comes from Genesis 1–2. It is the paradigm of *initially creating individuals*. This paradigm focuses on the verses that describe God as creating or making *individual* human beings. This individual focus occurs in the account in Genesis 2. God creates Adam in verse 7, and later creates Eve in verses 21–22.<sup>7</sup> Adam and Eve become husband and wife in verses 24–25, confirming that each of them is an individual human being. The narrative in Genesis 2 and subsequent references to Adam and Eve in later Scriptures present them as two individuals, however much they may *also* be representative of the men and women who will later rise as their descendants.

The focus on the making of individuals has an affinity with creationism. Creationism says that God creates the soul of each individual. And thereby it focuses on the uniqueness of each individual, rather than first

7. Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 249–51.



of all focusing on his solidarity with a whole human race, which might be conceived as *collectively* created by God as a race, as a group—the creation of a “kind.”

Two more paradigms arise from considering the meaning of the activities of God *after* the six days of creation.

The third paradigm, the paradigm of *finished creation*, comes from the once-for-all character of God’s creative acts during the six days. It overlaps with the first paradigm. But the focus of attention is now not on the creation of “kinds,” but on the once-for-all character of the events in Genesis 1–2.

As we indicated earlier in focusing on the term *create*, there is a sense in which God’s acts of creation are finished at the end of the sixth day. By that point, God has created the human race. He does not need to recommence the *same* acts of creation on (let us say) an eighth or ninth day, in order to create the human race a second time. So when new human beings are born after the end of the sixth day, these instances of new existence must have a different character from what happened during the first six days. Instead of using the word *create*, a person could speak instead about the providential *origin* of new human beings, or the fact that they come newly into existence. This paradigm, focusing on the fact that God’s creative works during the six days are now finished, is akin to traducianism, which stresses the complex way in which later descendants of Adam and Eve come into being, through the normal processes of procreation. In the narrow sense of the word, the *creation* of mankind is finished. Human beings now come into existence through procreation, not *creation* in the narrow sense.

The fourth paradigm, the paradigm of *providential acts of creativity*, focuses on the creation of individual creatures after the end of the sixth day. It stresses the newness of each individual. For example, Psalm 104:30 describes the creation of the next generation of animals:

When you send forth your Spirit, they [the animals] are *created*,  
and you renew the face of the ground.

The preceding verse, Psalm 104:29, describes the death of a previous generation, when God takes “away their breath.” “They die and return to their dust.” Hence, verse 30 is not talking about the original act of God in Genesis 1:24–25, when God creates the various kinds of animals. Psalm 104:29 presupposes that the various kinds already exist. Instead, given the existence of these kinds, verse 30 is talking about God’s creating a new generation of animals. Since this “creation” takes place within the providential order, it refers to God’s creating individual animals, each animal one by one. God sends forth his Spirit. The Spirit is the source of animating life in the animals. Each individual animal has this life, and not merely the collective group or a whole species taken together. Hence, the focus in this verse is to some extent on God’s creating individuals, not “kinds.” The kinds already exist, and have existed ever since the end of the first six days. Likewise, Psalm 139:13–16 shows the intimate involvement of God in producing each new individual human being. This stress on God’s continuing involvement in producing what is new is akin to creationism, since creationism wants to affirm strongly the newness of each individual soul.

### **Distinct, Complementary Principles**

All in all, each of the four distinct paradigms focuses on something different with respect to the origin of living things.

- The paradigm of initially creating kinds (1) stresses the solidarity of the whole human race. It stresses the social, corporate nature of human existence. Each individual human being is not merely an individual, but a participant in a whole race.
- The paradigm of initially creating individuals (2), by contrast, stresses the uniqueness of each individual, by comparing the individual to the creation of Adam and the creation of Eve.
- The paradigm of finished creation (3) stresses the continuity of the present with the regular providential processes leading up to the present, such as conception, gestation, and birth, all of which involve parents.

- The paradigm of providential acts of creativity (4) stresses the newness of the present, a newness that can be compared to the newness that God brings about in Genesis 1–2 when he creates new creatures.

Any one of these paradigms, or a combination of two of them, can be seen as a potential support for a whole *theory*. The paradigms of initially creating kinds and of finished creation could be seen as supporting traducianism because of their emphasis on the corporate solidarity of the human race and the regularity of providential processes, which contrast with the miraculous work of God in creating new kinds. Conversely, the paradigms of initially creating individuals and of providential acts of creativity could be seen as supporting creationism because of their emphasis on the individual and on the newness involved in the new existence of a new creature.

If a theologian thinks that he needs a whole theory, it is tempting to use one or more paradigms in support of the theory. But the paradigms in their own original literary contexts offer less than a complete theory. They show us something broader, less precise. And that raises the question whether the paradigms really ought to compete with one another. In fact, the Bible shows us that mankind is both a race and a collection of individuals. Mankind enjoys corporate solidarity, especially through Adam as a representative, but also because people belong socially and biologically to one large human family, with Adam and Eve as our first parents. At the same time, this large family is composed of individuals, each of whom is distinct and different from everyone else, each of whom has his own individual responsibility, each of whom will stand before the judgment of God on the last day (Rev. 20:11–15).

Our individuality has come to be what it is partly through the social as well as biological influence of parents, and the social influence of relatives and friends and a community. Each individual human arises within a preexisting context of the society of the preceding generation. Our individuality is designed by God to include a social impulse and social interaction. So there definitely is a pronounced social dimension to human

existence. But an analyst can also see the meaning of the human race by using individuals as the starting point. The human race is nothing without individuals who belong to it.

Similarly, the paradigms of finished creation and of providential acts of creativity do not need to be seen as competing truths. The Bible affirms both the uniqueness of the first six days of God's creative activity and analogies with God's providential work ever after. The creative works of God during the first six days are God's designed way of forming a world that will then continue to develop ("be fruitful and multiply," Gen. 1:28) under his providential control and rule. No human beings come into existence without an ancestry that stretches back to Adam and Eve. In other words, providence presupposes creation as its background and foundation. Conversely, the meaning of creation during the six days is largely to lead forward to providential development, rather than just to be "there." When God created Adam and Eve, he was concerned not merely with them as individuals, but with a pattern that they were to follow in bringing into being later individuals. So creation in its meaning presupposes a purpose of God, and that purpose includes a subsequent providential unfolding in time. Creation and providence belong together.

When God creates new individuals in providence, his work is both creative and connected to the larger providential order. God uses the parents, who procreate.

### **Difficulties with a One-Dimensional Approach**

Difficulties remain if a theologian depends wholly on one paradigm, or wholly on a creationist approach, or wholly on a traducianist approach. Creationism stresses the newness and distinctiveness of each new individual soul. But if this stress is all that a theologian ever has in view, it becomes difficult to account for the transmission of sin and the sinful corruption of each new soul. If God directly creates each new soul, and if this act of creation has no significant connection with his parents or with Adam, there is a dilemma concerning the corruption of the new soul. Either God has created something corrupt or the new soul has no

corruption. If God creates something corrupt, it compromises his goodness. On the other hand, if there is no corruption in the soul initially, it appears to contradict Romans 5:12–21 as well as the experience of parents, who can see sinful tendencies in their babies from an early age (cf. Ps. 51:5). The difficulty exists only if the stress on newness is used in such a one-sided way to deny the solidarity of new human beings with the human race preceding them.

Traducianism, if used as a complete account, has the opposite difficulty. How can a traducianist affirm that Jesus was fully human and yet not corrupted by the transmission of sin and his solidarity with the rest of the human race? If each human soul is made by breaking off a piece from generic humanity or from the parents, will not the transmission of sin be involved for every human being, including Jesus? There is something new and distinct about Jesus' conception, as is illustrated by the absence of a human father as progenitor. If a traducianist insists on stressing only the continuities with the preceding human race, he does not have room to account adequately for the new and special character of Jesus' conception through Mary.

### **Theories versus Analogies**

In sum, each of the four paradigms for the origin of new individuals has weight. But the paradigms are partial analogies. No one of them, by itself, offers a complete theory. They are complementary to one another.

If either traducianism or creationism becomes a complete theory, it runs the risk of subtly introducing an imbalance. Creationism, used by itself, is slanted toward the side of the origin of the *individual* as an individual, and encourages individualistic thinking about our human condition. By contrast, traducianism, used by itself, is slanted toward the side of the origin of collective humanity and human collective solidarity. It encourages collectivistic thinking about our human condition. In the long run, neither tells the full story. God affirms both the individual and the collective, both the uniqueness of the six days of creation and their organic relation to subsequent providence.

Remember the principle mentioned earlier in the book (chapters 7, 9), namely, that in God there is an equal ultimacy to the one and the many, of unity and diversity. Likewise, derivatively, in humanity there is an equal ultimacy to the one and the many. Understanding humanity in a balanced way includes taking care to affirm both the corporate side (the one, the unity of the whole race) and the individual side (the many individuals, the diversity of humanity).

Both the individual theme and the collective theme apply to the conception of Jesus. Jesus' conception is unique, and it goes together with the fact that he is not corrupted by the transmission of sin. That uniqueness is an expression of the individual nature of his conception. On the other hand, Jesus is also fully human, and in his humanity he functions as our High Priest to represent his fellow human beings who are guilty of sin and need forgiveness and cleansing. His full participation in humanity is an expression of the theme of collectivity, of human solidarity in a single race.

In the light of these challenges, we may wonder whether the tendency to use an analogy as a complete theory sometimes conceals within it a tendency to *reductionism*. *Reductionism* is the process of using only one source or one theme to explain everything, when in fact the situation is richer and more complicated. Reductionism “reduces” everything to one source. It is a reduction or flattening of the richness of God's plan for creation. It presses forward and claims to have a single, one-dimensional account of the nature of things—in this case, the nature of the origin of the soul. A one-dimensional account is inadequate because of what it leaves out. But it is attractive because it seems less mysterious and less complex than the affirmation of multiple dimensions and multiple analogies.

Moreover, some people seem to care about arriving at a rock-bottom metaphysical explanation. They ask themselves, “What is the ultimate account of the origin of the soul, and what is the picture at the foundation of things?” They ask for something more “ultimate” metaphysically than the Bible's descriptions. The Bible often employs analogies and often provides what seems to have a more “ordinary” and therefore less ultimate texture. For some people, this cannot be enough. But why? Maybe this ordinary texture shows us something that in God's eyes is more “ultimate”

than the kind of philosophical account for which some people hunt. Is it enough to have what the Bible says, and not to worry? God designed the Bible so that people could live by what he says in it, not live by what might be underneath it as a more ultimate metaphysics. If people seek an ultimate metaphysics, they run the risk of implying that the kind of direction that the Bible gives is not what they need.

### **Applying the Theme of Sonship**

We can appreciate the mysteries if we once again use the theme of sonship. As chapter 7 showed, sonship is an eternal reality, existing in the eternal sonship of the second person of the Trinity. As the Nicene Creed indicates, the Son is “begotten, not made.” The Son is distinct from the Father. At the same time, he is of “one substance with the Father.” This reality within the Trinity is the archetype or original, which is imitated at a creational level with the creation of Adam as the son of God (Luke 3:38) and with the procreation of sons such as Seth (Gen. 5:3). Only the triune God can create. Adam procreates. But there is still some analogy between the two.

For divine sonship, the doctrine of the Trinity requires us to affirm both commonality and distinctness—commonality in the fact that the Son is fully God, and distinctness in the fact that the Son is not the Father but a distinct person from the Father. This commonality and distinctness is unique to the character of the Trinity. But in addition, the Trinity furnishes the archetype for understanding human sonship and the process of human fathers’ fathering human sons. So commonality exists between father and son, and distinctness between them as well. The commonality is emphasized by the theme of human solidarity and traducianism; the distinctness is emphasized by the theme of newness of each human being, individual responsibility, and creationism. Both sides, traducianism and creationism, offer us important insights. But neither is the full account; neither is a full “theory” that exhaustively explains both aspects of human nature. And by analogy, neither would be a “theory” that would account for the divine nature, expressed in the relation of the divine Father to the divine Son.

## **The Origin of the Soul from the Perspective of *Lex Christi***

We may also use *lex Christi* as a framework for inquiring about the origin of the soul. The *lex Christi* framework includes multiple perspectives, one for each of the Ten Commandments. So does it affirm insights from all four paradigms for the origin of the soul?

The unity of God, which is implicit in the first commandment (1C), is the basis for the unity of the human individual and for the unity of humanity as a race. The unity of the individual and the unity of the race do not compete with each other. In fact, the unity of the race is expressed in the whole suite of commandments because they all apply to all human beings everywhere. At the same time, the commandments imply human diversity. Each person is responsible before God for his own obedience (or disobedience). In particular, the second commandment exhibits both solidarity in humanity and individual responsibility. Exodus 20:5 speaks of “visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me,” indicating a kind of subordinate family solidarity (but not the same as the solidarity of all of us with Adam). But the offer of “steadfast love” in the next verse implies that there can be a break with the pattern of sin. When people turn to God in faith, they receive blessing and not curse (3C). In sum, it is natural within the *lex Christi* framework to affirm both an aspect of solidarity and an aspect of individual responsibility.

What about the distinction between creation and providence, which also plays a role in the four paradigms for the origin of the soul? The dynamism of God in 4C is demonstrated by his work of creation. His work of creation is unique, but it is also a pattern for human imitation. People work for six days and rest the seventh. Thus creation and later providence are distinct and also appropriately linked. The same conclusion follows from chapter 8 (“The History of Redemption” section), where the *lex Christi* framework applies to all the history of redemption and also to creation.

It is natural within the *lex Christi* framework to affirm both the distinctiveness of God’s work in creation and its connections with subsequent providential governance.



Each of the four paradigms offers us a perspective, and they are complementary. Creationism and traducianism both have grains of truth. Elements from both can be affirmed if they are converted into perspectives.

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on the Origin of the Soul**

Acts 2 shows us a church that is a collective group with human solidarity and that is also a collection of individuals. The two are complementary. It thus reinforces the complementarity of the four paradigms applied to creation.

### **Key Terms**

|                                               |                                |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| archetype                                     | paradigm of initially creating |
| create                                        | kinds                          |
| creationism                                   | paradigm of providential acts  |
| immediate                                     | of creativity                  |
| kind (in the plant and animal<br>kingdoms)    | preexistence of the soul       |
| <i>lex Christi</i>                            | reductionism                   |
| mediate                                       | solidarity                     |
| origin                                        | son of God                     |
| paradigm of finished creation                 | soul                           |
| paradigm of initially creating<br>individuals | traducianism                   |
|                                               | unity and diversity            |

### **Study Questions**

1. What is the issue about the origin of the soul?
2. What are *creationism* and *traducianism*?
3. What limitations are due to what the Bible does and does not say?
4. What is at stake in the dispute?
5. What four analogies are relevant to the dispute?

6. Which analogies, taken by themselves, would incline people to creationism? to traducianism? Why?
7. What are the difficulties of using creationism or traducianism as a complete theory?
8. What have you learned about yourself from thinking about the dispute between creationism and traducianism? Are you inclined to individualistic or collectivistic thinking?

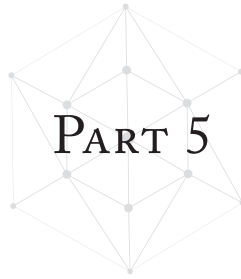
### **For Further Reading**

- Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8. Pp. 2:580–88.
- Grudem, Wayne A. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020. Pp. 613–15.
- Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 2, *Anthropology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970. Chap. 3.

### **Prayer**

Our Father, thank you for the reminder that you have made us both as individuals and as people with social relations. Thank you for our ancestors, whom you preserved before us. Enable us to live a life that acknowledges both sides of the truth.





## THE PREFALL COVENANT WITH ADAM

We now consider in more detail the original relation between God and man, before the fall. This relation is important because no human being exists apart from a positive or negative relation to God. The *history* of the relation also needs attention. The beginning in Genesis 1–2 depicts a positive relation of man to God, but it is destroyed by sin in Genesis 3. What does the Bible teach about the relation between God and Adam in the prefall situation? Is the original divine-human relation with Adam a *covenant*? If so, what kind of covenant is it?



## 21

# THE INITIAL COVENANT WITH ADAM

What relation does God have with Adam before the fall? Should this be characterized as a covenant relationship? If so, what kind of covenant is it?<sup>1</sup> And why does it matter?

To answer these questions, we need to consider all the main passages in Genesis 1–2 together: 1:26–30, 2:7–10, and 2:16–17. In addition, we need to consider the larger picture offered in Genesis 1–3, the covenant with Noah, and the larger history that includes the parallels between Adam and Israel as a son of God, and between Adam and Christ. The covenant with Adam is parallel in many respects to the later covenants that God makes. In addition, challenges arise because of differences in how people use the word *covenant*.

1. For a historical treatment, see Rowland S. Ward, *God & Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant* (Wantirna, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 2003); for discussion of the word for “covenant,” see especially William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker/Carlisle, England: Paternoster, 1984), especially 15–26. For recent treatments, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), chap. 6; Peter J. Gentry, “Humanity as the Divine Image in Genesis 1:26–28,” *Eikon* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 56–69, repr., Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, June 10, 2020, <https://cbmw.org/2020/06/10/humanity-as-the-divine-image-in-genesis-126-28/>, accessed August 11, 2020.

## **The Significance of the Issue of Covenant**

It might be supposed that the issue about God's prefall relation to Adam is mostly a semantic issue. What does it matter whether someone calls it a covenant? The thing itself remains the same. The word *covenant* can be used in either a broader or a narrower sense.<sup>2</sup>

The disputants have usually recognized that this issue is in part a semantic question. Yet they have continued to debate it for several reasons.

(1) The organization of vocabulary invites people to put certain analogies either in the foreground or in the background. If a theologian calls the arrangement with Adam a covenant, he invites people to assimilate it to other instances of covenants in the Bible. John Murray does not want to call it a covenant, for several reasons. Among them are the facts that it is not redemptive and that it is not secure, unlike the later redemptive covenants.<sup>3</sup> His decision results in highlighting features that distinguish the original situation with Adam from the later arrangements that the Bible calls covenants.

(2) As we have observed before, creation forms a kind of framework or background against which to understand redemption and re-creation. How a person construes the nature of the creation covenant influences all the rest, sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes in dramatic ways.

(3) Within Reformed theology lately, much of the dispute has revolved around the relation of law to grace. How a theologian sets up this relation in the Adamic situation can deeply influence his conception of the relation of law to grace, all the way down the line. This in turn has practical implications with regard to the nature of justification and its relation to sanctification, with regard to the applicability of Mosaic law today, with regard to the preaching of the law to drive people to Christ, and with regard to the continuity of the two Testaments (hence, issues of baptism, church government, and the Sabbath are affected).

2. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 16.

3. John Murray, "The Adamic Administration," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976-77), 2:49.

As usual, the principles from chapter 7 apply. The first principle concerns presuppositions. Interpreters who are interested in pointing out the similarities between the prefall and the postfall situations may want to label both situations as covenantal. Interpreters who are interested in pointing out the *distance* between the prefall and the postfall situations may want to label only the postfall situation (perhaps from Noah onward) as covenantal. In addition, what *kind* of covenant an analyst finds in the prefall situation can influence thinking about the later postfall covenants.

### **Semantics of *Covenant***

Let us move on to the second principle, the principle of semantics. The word *covenant* has a range of usage. There is a distinction between using the word as an ordinary word and using it as a technical term, expressing a specific concept.

Consider first the basic information about the use of words in the Bible. The word “covenant” in the English Bible normally translates the Hebrew word בְּרִית (*b<sup>e</sup>rith*) in the Old Testament and the Greek διαθήκη (*diathēkē*) in the New Testament. In addition, the Greek word διαθήκη (*diathēkē*) is the regular translation of the Hebrew בְּרִית (*b<sup>e</sup>rith*) in the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament.

The word for “covenant” does not occur at all in Genesis 1–3. It first occurs in the Bible with reference to the covenant with Noah before the flood (Gen. 6:18). So should the earlier situation in Genesis 1–2 be called a *covenant*?

One verse might be directly pertinent, namely, Hosea 6:7: “But like *Adam* they transgressed the *covenant*; there they dealt faithlessly with me.” The context in Hosea criticizes Israel for her faithlessness and mentions some specific locations, Gilead and Shechem (Hos. 6:8–9). Israel has a covenant with God, namely, the Mosaic covenant, which builds on covenant promises to the patriarchs. Does Hosea 6:7 imply that Israel’s behavior is “like” Adam’s transgression, thereby implying that Adam too was in a covenantal relation to God?



Unfortunately, the meaning of the verse is disputed.<sup>4</sup> Some interpreters suggest this translation: “But like mankind they transgressed the covenant.” The Hebrew word אָדָם (*ādām*), translated “Adam,” can function as a proper name for Adam, the first man, or as a generic term for humanity, as it does in Genesis 1:26–27. But a translation with “man” or “mankind” is awkward in Hosea 6:7 because Israel does not contrast with mankind; rather, Israel is a part of mankind. If the point of the verse is to compare Israel with something, it should be something distinct from Israel. One might expect “like the rest of mankind,” or “like the other nations.” But that is not what the verse says.

Other interpreters think that the Hebrew word *ādām* is a proper name for a geographical location, as it seems to be in Joshua 3:16. But if it is the name for a place, it is an obscure place, and it is difficult to see how that particular place is relevant to the point that Hosea 6:7 as a whole is making.

Our own view is that Hosea 6:7 refers to Adam, the first man. But in what respect is Israel like Adam? Does the likeness consist simply in the fact that both Adam and Israel were disobedient? Or does the likeness consist in the fact that both were in covenant with God?

### **Features of a Covenant**

It is more profitable to ask what features belong to the original relation between God and man. Do these features show that the original relation is parallel to or analogous to later relations that the Bible explicitly calls covenants? And to what degree? There are other alternatives, in addition to a simple decision between a massively detailed parallel or no parallel at all.

Suppose that someone proposes a fairly narrow definition of *covenant*: a covenant is a formally ratified pact with sanctions. According to the terminology common with Old Testament scholars, *sanctions* are specifications about rewards or punishments that will follow, depending on the obedience or disobedience of one of the parties to the pact. In addition,

4. Byron G. Curtis, “Hosea 6:7 and Covenant-Breaking like/at Adam,” in *The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, ed. Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 170–209.

the pact has some specific conditions applied to the parties involved. It has what some analysts have called *stipulations*. For example, the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 are part of “the Book of the Covenant” in 24:7, and the whole arrangement is specifically called a “covenant” in verse 8. The formal ratification takes place in the events described in 24:5–8, which stand within the context of the events of the entire chapter 24. The stipulations include the Ten Commandments. The sanctions include 20:5–6, 12, which indicate consequences of obedience and disobedience.

Now, how would this definition of a covenant apply to the original situation with Adam? At what point of time does it apply? There are several alternatives.

First, someone might focus on the point at which God creates Adam, in Genesis 2:7.

Second, someone might focus on the point in Genesis 2:9 at which God produces the two special trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The names of the trees already suggest that they have a special signification with respect to the relation of God and man.

Third, someone might focus on the point in time of Genesis 2:16–17 at which God gives man specific directions about which trees he may eat from.

Fourth, someone might focus on the directions in Genesis 1:28–30. Because the accounts in Genesis 1:26–30 and 2:7–25 describe events that may overlap in time, we are not quite sure what the temporal relation is between 1:28–30 and 2:16–17.

Which, if any of these, is a covenant? Or do they belong all together as a single whole? (See table 21.1.)

**Table 21.1. Developments in God’s Prefall Relation to Humanity**

| Passage      | Significance                             |
|--------------|------------------------------------------|
| Gen. 1:1–25  | creating an environment suitable for man |
| Gen. 1:26–27 | creating mankind in God’s image          |
| Gen. 1:28–30 | cultural mandate                         |

**Table 21.1 (continued)**

| Passage      | Significance                                                                                        |
|--------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gen. 2:7     | creating Adam                                                                                       |
| Gen. 2:8–9   | creating the garden and trees for man                                                               |
| Gen. 2:9     | two symbolical trees                                                                                |
| Gen. 2:16–17 | permission for eating from the trees; except prohibiting the tree of the knowledge of good and evil |
| Gen. 2:21–22 | creating Eve                                                                                        |

God's directions in Genesis 2:16–17 are the most specific. There is a positive stipulation, inviting Adam to eat, and a negative stipulation, forbidding the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. There is also a sanction: "in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:17).

So the situation in Genesis 2:16–17 has most of the features of a covenant. But there is no mention of a formal ratification ceremony, which would be parallel, for example, to Genesis 15:7–20, 31:44–54, or Exodus 24:3–8.<sup>5</sup> Whether someone chooses to call it a covenant, then, depends on whether he insists on there being a formal ratification ceremony. The covenant with Noah in Genesis 6:18 mentions no explicit ratification ceremony. The closest thing to a ratification occurs in verse 22: "Noah did this; he did all that God commanded him." Similarly, in the covenant that God makes with Noah after the flood (9:9), there is no explicit ratification. God makes the rainbow a sign, which perhaps substitutes for a ratification (vv. 12–17). The record of God's promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:5–16 does not speak about a ratification ceremony, and the word "covenant" is not used. But "covenant" occurs later, in Psalm 89:3, 28, 34, 39, in referring back to this promise made to David in 2 Samuel 7:5–16. This use of the word "covenant" with respect to David and with respect to Noah shows that sometimes "covenant" is

5. See also Dumbrell's discussion of Genesis 21:22–32 and 26:26–33 (Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 17–18).

used more broadly. In this broader sense, it applies to the prefall situation with Adam, which again has no explicit record of a ratification ceremony.

Note also further parallels between Adam and Noah. Genesis 1:28–30 is parallel to God’s speech to Noah in Genesis 9:1: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (also Gen. 9:7).<sup>6</sup> Then in verse 9, God declares, “Behold, I establish my *covenant* with you and your offspring after you.” So is the wording in the previous verses 1 and 7 included in the provisions of the covenant? The word “covenant” (בְּרִית) occurs several times in the passage (vv. 9, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17). In these cases, it is closely associated with God’s promise not to bring another flood. Specifically:

When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my *covenant* that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. (Gen. 9:14–15)

The word for “covenant” also occurs one earlier time, in Genesis 6:18. In that verse, it is associated with God’s commitment to preserve Noah and his family from being destroyed in the flood. In all these cases, the verbal commitment has to do with preservation. And in Genesis 9, the covenant is specifically said to be not only with Noah and his family, but with the animals, “every living creature of all flesh” (Gen. 9:15). By contrast, the instruction in Genesis 1:28 is directed to mankind *in distinction from* the animals:

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have *dominion over* the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.

The expression “dominion over” gives mankind a unique role, distinct from the things over which he has dominion. God does later discuss a benefit to the animals when he gives them plants for food in Genesis 1:30.

6. Ward, *God & Adam*, 20.

In a similar manner, the language “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” in Genesis 9:1 is specifically directed to humanity, namely, Noah and his sons. The continuation in verse 2 explicitly distinguishes mankind from the animals: “The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth.”

In short, Genesis 9:1–7 gives directions to mankind, and is thus parallel to Genesis 1:28–29. Genesis 9:8–17 gives a promise of preservation that extends to the animals. It is this latter passage that repeatedly contains the word “covenant.” Is Genesis 9:1–7 also a covenant? Genesis 9:1–7 does not say explicitly. Because of the two distinct kinds of language, the parallels between Genesis 1:28 and Genesis 9:1 and 7 do not suffice to show that the command to be fruitful and multiply in Genesis 1:28 is a covenant in the same way as God’s promise not to bring another flood, given in Genesis 9:9–17.

Can Romans 5 help? Romans 5:12–21 expounds an extended parallel—and differences—between Adam and Christ. According to Romans 5:12–21, Christ is analogous to Adam. In addition, Christ as the son of David is the fulfillment of the promise made to David concerning an eternal throne (2 Sam. 7:13). As we indicated earlier, God’s commitment to David is explicitly called a “covenant” in Psalm 89:3, 28, 34, 39. It makes sense to call God’s relation to each of the three people—David, Adam, and Christ—a covenant because of the analogies to which the Bible itself draws attention. This biblical material provides a firm basis for calling the situation with Adam a covenant.

An awareness of larger analogies also helps enrich the understanding of the situation with Noah. In a loose sense, Noah is parallel to Adam. He is the ruler over a new world (Gen. 9:1–7), just as Adam was ruler over the original world.<sup>7</sup> The new world of dry land emerges from water in Genesis 8. That is analogous to the creation of the first world, beginning with a watery covering in Genesis 1:2. The animals and Noah emerge from the ark in Genesis 8, parallel to the creation of the animals and mankind in Genesis 1. In both cases, both man and animals are supposed

7. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 27.

to be fruitful. Noah is an “Adamic” figure and is also a type of Christ. So the structure of God’s involvement and care for man and animals in Genesis 1 is analogous to the structure of God’s involvement and care in Genesis 9. Broadly speaking, it is a “covenantal” relation, parallel to the new covenant in Christ.

There is an additional detail about the particularities in Genesis 9:9. Rowland Ward makes the point that in Genesis 9:9, God says that he will “*establish* my covenant.”<sup>8</sup> The key word “establish” (in Hebrew, the hiphil stem of קָם) is customarily used to describe the confirmation and continuation of covenants already in force; by contrast, another key word, “make” (in Hebrew, קָרָה “cut”), is used for the *initiation* of a new covenant (see Gen. 31:44). The use of the word “establish” in Genesis 9:9 and 11 hints at a previously existing covenant. Could it perhaps be the covenant mentioned in 6:18? Verse 18 also uses the word “establish” rather than “make.” So both passages seem to hint that there is a previous relation between God and mankind, which is broadly “covenantal.” But Richard Averbeck points out that the language of “establishing” a covenant can be used broadly to include the initiation, as it seems to do in Exodus 6:4.<sup>9</sup> So Genesis 6:18 by itself does not provide decisive evidence of an earlier covenant with Adam. Analysts have to rely on the other evidence that we have discussed.

### **The Issue of a Technical Term *Covenant***

Remember our earlier discussion of semantics, the principle of the word/concept distinction, and the illustration with the expression “image

8. Ward, *God & Adam*, 19, which cites in support Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 25–26.

9. Richard E. Averbeck, *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church: Reading the Torah in the Light of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 32. For a defense of the narrower meaning of “establish” (hiphil of קָם), see Peter J. Gentry and Jason T. Parry, “hēqīm bērit in Gen 6:18—Make or Confirm a Covenant? A Response to Charles Lee Irons,” [https://www.academia.edu/36844287/h%C4%93q%C3%AEm\\_b%C4%95r%C3%AEt\\_in\\_Gen\\_6\\_18\\_Make\\_or\\_Confirm\\_a\\_Covenant\\_A\\_Response\\_to\\_Charles\\_Lee\\_Irons](https://www.academia.edu/36844287/h%C4%93q%C3%AEm_b%C4%95r%C3%AEt_in_Gen_6_18_Make_or_Confirm_a_Covenant_A_Response_to_Charles_Lee_Irons), accessed April 8, 2024.

of God.” Words are distinct from concepts that people have in their minds. And ordinary language, with its flexibility, is distinct from technical terms. The Bible usually uses ordinary language, not technical terms. That is true with the word *covenant* as well. As an example, consider Jeremiah 33:20–22:

Thus says the LORD: If you can break my *covenant* with the day and my *covenant* with the night, so that day and night will not come at their appointed time, then also my *covenant* with David my servant may be broken, so that he shall not have a son to reign on his throne, and my *covenant* with the Levitical priests my ministers. As the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be measured, so I will multiply the offspring of David my servant, and the Levitical priests who minister to me.

The passage compares the covenant with David with the covenant with the day and the night. In a similar way, Jeremiah 31:35–36 compares the unbreakability of the new covenant of verses 31–34 to the reliability of the “fixed order” of the heavens. In verse 37, the Lord says that he will “cast off all the offspring of Israel” only if the heavens can be measured or the foundations of the earth be explored. There are a number of different comparisons, each of which underlines the reliability of God’s promises. The comparison with the “covenant with the day” (Jer. 33:20) is one of them. It is called a “covenant” by analogy with the covenant with David. An analogy involves both similarities and dissimilarities.

Does God’s “covenant with the day” have an official ratification ceremony? It is not obvious that it does. Does it have sanctions? God called the arrangements for the heavenly lights “good” in Genesis 1:18. But a sanction is usually a specification about what rewards or punishments follow because of obedience or disobedience. It is not evident that sanctions are applied to the heavenly lights. It might be said that stipulations are laid down in verses 14–18. But the striking difference from normal covenants lies in the fact that the day and the night and the heavenly lights are not personal beings. They are not personally responsible to God in the way that human beings or angels are. Accordingly, the word “covenant”

is being used in Jeremiah 33:20–22 as an analogy. “Covenant” has the flexibility that belongs to ordinary language.

If someone wants to use the word *covenant* as a technical term in theology, its meaning must be specified. And if he specifies it, that meaning will not exactly match the ordinary words for “covenant” in Hebrew and Greek. It will have a more tightly controlled meaning. It is up to him if he wants to make that meaning broader or narrower, more inclusive or less inclusive. A more inclusive meaning has the advantage of drawing attention to a larger range of analogical cases. He may include the day and the night, if he wants. Or he may narrow his definition so that it includes only personal relations between God and personal beings. Or the definition might be narrowed further so that it includes only arrangements that God establishes after the fall, in a situation in which the barrier of sin and the need for forgiveness of sins have to be reckoned with. The arrangements after the fall of man will in some respects be different from the arrangements before the fall. A difference in terminology helps to underline the distinctions.

The larger contexts in Genesis 1, Genesis 9, and Jeremiah 33 underline the fact that God created mankind within a larger environment, the entire created order. Having brought the creation into existence, God has plans and commitments that he gradually makes known and gradually executes. The development of mankind and the development of created things by God’s hand of providence go together. The comprehensiveness of God’s plan could be used as a motive to focus on the entire plan in a holistic way. A theologian could then decide to use the word *covenant* broadly to describe God’s relation to *both* mankind and created things.

Modern communication also needs to take into account the fact that with the word *covenant* there is already a history of previous use in theology. Unless a theologian has strong reasons for doing something different, it is usually best in the case of a technical term to stick with previous use. Otherwise, it can produce confusion. It is wise to make clear what definition is being used, for the benefit of readers.

This book will mostly use the word *covenant* flexibly, to designate God’s relations with human beings that are similar to relations that the



Bible actually calls covenants. Other people may want to have a technical term, and they might want to use it more broadly or more narrowly.

The sanctions and the stipulations are often explicit in specific cases in which God meets with human beings, speaks with them, and tells them about a new or continuing relation that he has with them. But these specific cases are related by analogies to God's relations to human beings in general. The word "covenant" and its Hebrew and Greek equivalents are used in the Bible by analogy with covenants that human beings make with each other, such as Jacob's covenant with Laban (Gen. 31:44) and Abner's proposed covenant with David (2 Sam. 3:12). The Ten Commandments and the larger Mosaic covenant also have analogies with ancient Near Eastern treaties. A high king or suzerain would make a treaty of loyalty with a subordinate ruler or vassal, which would involve obligations (stipulations) and sanctions.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Stages in God's Relation to Human Beings before the Fall**

Note the stages involved in God's works in Genesis 1–2: (1) In the first stage, God creates the world as a whole. He engages in an initial act of creation in 1:1. Then he structures and furnishes the world so that it is a suitable habitation for mankind. It has lights and plants and animals, which display the goodness of God and which will be a blessing to mankind. The works of God leading up to the creation of human beings already anticipate the coming of human beings onto the scene. God's plan is unified.

So to some extent, a reader of Genesis can already anticipate the nature of mankind from the wisdom of God displayed in the earlier works of creation. God is already working in anticipation of having a personal relation between himself and mankind, once human beings exist. But they do not yet exist. God has plans for a relation and for covenants. But the covenants themselves do not yet exist because man does not yet exist.

10. Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), chap. 1.

God's eternal plan for history already exists. This plan includes the making of covenants with human beings. But the plan is not yet executed.

(2) Then God brings man into existence. Genesis 1:26–30 provides an overview. In addition, God provides more detail in the account in Genesis 2:7–25. He creates Adam first, and then Eve. When Adam is newly created, does he already have a “covenantal” relation to God? He is made in the image of God, according to 1:26–27. He is like God in the many ways that the Bible gradually unfolds in other passages. Genesis 1:26–27 does not spell them out, but they can be inferred. Adam is already a personal being. He is already a moral being. God is his Creator. So he owes to his Creator thanksgiving and praise and obedience as a personal creature. The language of “image” of God hints at the fact that human obedience will be a kind of imitation of God's character, on the creaturely level. None of the aspects of this obedience are necessarily spelled out immediately. Genesis 1:28–30 indicates some of them. God is not a sexual being and does not procreate offspring, but the command to “be fruitful and multiply” imitates the fruitfulness of God, which he has displayed in creating a fruitful world. God has multiplied the number of things in the world. So multiplication of mankind is a kind of imitation of God. And the exercise of dominion imitates God's prior comprehensive dominion over the world.

Several stages occur in the creation of mankind and the initial stages of human life. (2a) The first stage is Adam, newly created, before God addresses any specific speech to him. This act of creation is described in Genesis 2:7. There is *already* a personal relation, by virtue of Adam's being a personal creature made by God. (2b) The second stage occurs in 2:8–9. God plants a garden and causes trees to spring up. Verse 9 indicates that there are two trees with special meaning: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. These two trees symbolically indicate some aspects of the unfolding relation that God will have with mankind. In a broad sense, they suggest aspects of a covenantal relation, involving life and death. The literary order in verses 7–9 places the growth of trees after the creation of man in verse 7, but the order may be topical rather than strictly chronological. (2c) The third stage is the speech in Genesis 1:28–30. The first and second stages might be called broadly covenantal because

Adam has implicit obligations. The third stage is more obviously and more narrowly covenantal because God gives a speech that contains something similar to stipulations. He says, in effect, “Here is what I expect you to do.”

(2d) The fourth stage arrives with the specific speech to Adam in Genesis 2:16–17. Here God includes a negative stipulation, “you shall not eat,” and an explicit sanction, “for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” But even before God gave this explicit sanction, he had planted “the tree of life” in the garden (Gen. 2:9). This tree is not further explained until 3:22. This latter verse speaks of the now-lost possibility, to “eat, and live forever.” Eternal life is life in communion with God. It is fully personal. So it seems right to infer that the tree of life and its fruit is not a magical tree that produces eternal existence by a merely mechanical means. Rather, as some interpreters have suggested, it is *sacramental*. It is a visible sign of an invisible reality. It *signifies* personal communion with God. Eating from it would be a means, testifying to the communion in life between God and man. In this respect it is analogous to the Lord’s Supper. It is a kind of non-verbal sign, confirming and reinforcing the personal communion that is at the heart of life. Genesis 3:22 intimates that in the symbolism, God has in mind not only a short-range continuation of human life, but the promise of eternal life. Both ideas belong intrinsically to the symbolism of the tree.

The continuation of life in fellowship with God looks like a positive sanction. Does the tree of life communicate nonverbally that the fruit of obedience and faithfulness on the part of Adam is eternal life? Genesis 3:22 implies that it does. If so, there are implicit aspects that are broadly covenantal, even before God speaks in 2:16–17 about the specific arrangements.

What makes things still more complicated is that Genesis 1:26–31 and 2:5–25 overlap to some extent in time. It is not certain whether the speech of God in 1:28–30 comes before or after the speech that God directed to Adam in 2:16–17.

So which of the stages is the covenant with Adam? It is impossible to give an answer without deciding whether an analyst wants to use the word *covenant* more broadly or more narrowly. In either case, the principle of progressive revelation applies. God *gradually* reveals more of his purposes, and also *gradually* reveals more of what he wants Adam and Eve to do.

He has an ongoing relation with them. His plan is not simply to walk away permanently, once he has given them an initial set of instructions.

Moreover, the progress in revelation comes in harmony with progress in history, that is, progress in events. God has to create Adam first, and then he says something to him. He has to create Eve at some point, and then she too is included in the instructions.

### **Problems to Avoid**

Consider now problems about mankind that are at least vaguely metaphysical. They have to do with how to construe the relation of man as created, with a metaphysical nature, and man addressed by God in covenantal speech. Nature—man as initially created—is not to be isolated from God's purposes, which are made manifest in the events and the communication that subsequently unfold.

God's plan has organic unity. And therefore, organic unity belongs to progressive revelation and progressive events. This unity excludes two extremes.

The first extreme is artificially *separating* the detailed speeches of God in Genesis 1:28–30 and 2:16–17 from the creative acts that precede the speeches (Gen. 2:7; 1:26–27). What would happen if the two were separated? The speeches might be seen as an arbitrary, merely external imposition on Adam and on mankind. It would be as though God, having created human beings, were then to decide as an afterthought to impose on them a burden that had nothing to do with who they actually were. The covenant commands and the sanctions would be merely external. God might have commanded humans to live in the water or in the air, neither of which they were capable of. He might have commanded them to eat dirt. According to such a conception, the covenant would be merely a contract that God drew up because it suited him. Its contents would have nothing to do with who Adam actually was.

But such things are impossible because of who God is. God is the Creator of human beings as well as the one who speaks to them and makes a covenant with them. God is harmonious in himself. Therefore, he is also

harmonious in his plan and in his works. He makes human beings to be creatures that reflect his harmony. His covenants are in harmony with God himself and with who he has made human beings to be. So there is perfect harmony between who the human beings are and the covenantal directions that he provides for them. These directions are for his glory and for their good. They show human beings the path of life—life in communion with God.

The second extreme is completely *freezing* the various stages, as though each one were fatalistically determined by the preceding ones. This route would amount to a philosophical metaphysics of fatalism. In such a scheme, all stages except the first stage get evaporated of meaning because the later stages are nothing but the inevitable, fatalistic implications of the earlier stages.

There are two sides to this destructive fatalism. The one side concerns how people think about God. God gets constrained to do exactly what he does do because, allegedly, everything is implicit in what has already happened.

There is a half-truth here. It is true that everything is determined by God's plan (his decree). But the decree is the decree of a personal God. He was not forced by something outside himself to decide to create the world. And neither is his act of creation a direct deduction from his character. He is free either to create or not to create. And if he decides to create, he is free in deciding just what kind of world to create.

Because human beings are not God, they cannot know comprehensively the fullness of who God is. But the Bible does indicate that God cannot lie (Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2) or deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13). There are things that he cannot do because they are inconsistent with who he is. He cannot be inconsistent or out of harmony with himself in the way that he creates the world and in how he governs it after he creates it. But as a personal God, he does make decisions about the course of the world that could have been otherwise, had he decreed otherwise.

As a result, it is illegitimate to deduce the provisions about the tree of life or the tree of the knowledge of good and evil merely by looking at how God created the world as a whole or how he created mankind. The

speeches in Genesis 1:28–30 and in 2:16–17 are further personal acts. The detailed contents in these speeches do not fatalistically follow from the mere fact that God created mankind. On the other hand, in accord with the principle of harmony, these speeches are in harmony with how he created mankind. So also are the two special trees in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9). They build on the meaning of what mankind is, rather than being totally disconnected. The meaning for the two trees is not arbitrarily pasted on top of what mankind is by virtue of creation.

It is also the case that mankind is not left with no moorings. It is not as though God created mankind in Genesis 2:7 or in 2:21–22, and then everything else that came afterward involved no extra participation by God. Such a picture might leave mankind with *autonomy*, a freedom of total independence from God at a practical level. That independence would allegedly come because God had already accomplished everything new with his first acts of creating human beings.

The second side to destructive fatalism concerns how people think about mankind. A fatalistic view of automatic development in history might leave mankind with no personal responsibility at all because, it might be alleged, everything is fated for him.

These forbidden extremes, if they are actually adopted, have unfortunate implications for how people think about humanity. The first main forbidden view is *heteronomy*. The term etymologically means “other law.” It is the view that covenantal arrangements are merely external; they are an imposition on original human freedom. According to this mistaken view, the law of God, as expressed in covenantal speech or in the forbidding of the tree of knowledge, is merely an outside imposition. It does not connect intimately with who human beings actually are. And so it allegedly ruins their freedom.

The opposite extreme is *autonomy*. Etymologically, it means “self-law.” It alleges that human beings are most free and most fulfilled when they are on their own, when they obey only the internal law of their own desires and dreams. But this is a form of rebellion against God.

The final extreme is *fatalism*, according to which human beings are not really responsible moral agents because everything is fated. This view comes up again in the discussion of free agency in chapters 29–31.

The point to maintain is that the development in history is organic. In progressive revelation, later revelation builds on and is in harmony with the earlier. Likewise, in the progress of history, later events build on and are in harmony with the earlier. The principle of harmony, reflecting the harmonious nature of God, holds the stages together. At the same time, the principle of dynamicity, reflecting the dynamic of God, indicates that there are genuine development and genuine newness that come from God into the world.

### **Fellowship**

As a helpful analogy, consider the theme of fellowship. God is in fellowship with himself, among the persons of the Trinity. God makes man in the image of God. God has made man in such a way that he will have fellowship with God and fellowship with his fellow man. Yet the exact terms for and shape of such fellowship are not fully spelled out at the beginning. So it is a genuine advance when God speaks to man in Genesis 1:28–30 and 2:16–17.

### **Goal**

Consider also the theme of the goal for humanity. When God created mankind, he already had in mind the purpose of further development, such as he spells out in Genesis 1:28–30. God reached a goal when he “rested on the seventh day” “from all his work that he had done in creation” (Gen. 2:2–3). It is natural to infer that mankind will have a task of working and will reach a goal. Man imitates the sabbatical pattern, as indicated in Exodus 20:11. But the details of human work and human rest are not yet spelled out in Genesis 2:3.

There are hints in Genesis 1:1–2:3 of a final goal, an eschatological goal, that God has purposed for mankind. But it is further spelled out in the symbolism of the tree of life. This tree signifies life in communion with God. Since God is eternal, will this life of communion be unbroken and everlasting? It is natural to think that it should be. But God must also tell

us what he plans. Genesis 3:22 speaks more explicitly about his plans, with the expression “live forever.” Even from the beginning, God *does* create man with the goal of man’s experiencing a confirmed everlasting communion with God, a communion that is further described in Revelation 21:3, “God himself will be with them as their God.” Revelation 22:4 continues, “They will see his [God’s] face, and his name will be on their foreheads.” The tree of life is mentioned in Revelation 2:7 and 22:2 as an aspect of the final reward, which is eternal life. This goal implies a transition from living in a testing situation, such as Adam confronted in Genesis 2:16–17, to living in confirmed righteousness, which the saints experience in the new heaven and the new earth. It also involves a transformation of the body, such as is discussed in 1 Corinthians 15:44–49.

The same possibilities of extremes arise here as they did in thinking about the law of God. Heteronomy in the goal would amount to saying that God simply imposes an arbitrary goal, and a goal that has no necessary connection with what human beings are. Autonomy in the goal would amount to saying that God has no right to set a goal, once human beings are what they are, but that for the sake of innate freedom each person should choose his own goal. Fatalism in the goal would say that since the goal is inherent in the creation of human beings to be what they are, the goal is already determined without any participation by God.

All three of these approaches are one-sided and truncated. God’s harmony implies a harmonious relation between the stages of history and the stages in God’s speech. God’s dynamicity implies that what emerges in God’s speech and in the events contains surprises and newness.

### **Illustration from the Westminster Confession of Faith**

Further illustration is found in some of the description of the original covenant from the Westminster Confession of Faith:

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessed-



ness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant. (WCF 7.1)

The language of the Westminster Confession focuses on the newness involved in God's making a covenant with mankind. The confession indicates that something more than being created is needed for "fruition." In this covenant, God promises "fruition" in eternal life (WCF 7.2). God is not fatalistically constrained to provide this particular fruition. The inclusion of fruition takes place only "by some *voluntary* condescension on God's part."

But it is possible to misconstrue this paragraph because it does not directly address the fact that there is a unity in God's plan for mankind. The misconstrual would take the form of saying that covenant is an external imposition on humanity, an imposition for which humanity is not actually designed. This misconstrual amounts to a form of heteronomy in its understanding of the covenant.

This misconstrual, however, is at odds with the unity of God's plan, which the confession mentions at an earlier point (WCF 3). This plan of God includes the goal for each human being as well as each angel (WCF 3.3–4). It also includes all the means to the goal (WCF 3.6).

Human beings are not just creatures, and not just "reasonable creatures," but *human* creatures. They are in the image of God. They are so crafted by God that their nature is in harmony with their destiny. This truth excludes heteronomy, which would disconnect the covenant in Genesis 2:16–17 from who man is in verse 7. It also excludes a fatalism that would deny God's freedom in his later acts in the progress of history (the "voluntary" aspect in God's actions). The terms of God's covenant with mankind are up to God, in God's freedom.

### **Features of the Covenant**

We can now summarize the covenant with Adam on the basis of inferences from the whole Bible.

(1) There are two parties to the covenant, God and man.

(2) God issues a specific prohibition, forbidding Adam (and by implication Eve also) from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

(3) This specific prohibition is a focused test. It is one aspect of the larger responsibility of Adam and Eve to love God and serve him faithfully.

(4) God gives a larger body of instruction in Genesis 1:28–30. This instruction includes what is called the *cultural mandate*, to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). Filling the earth includes multiplying the number of human beings through procreation. For this purpose, God has a plan for marriage (2:23–25). Theologians rightly call marriage a *creation ordinance*. God’s task for man includes work (v. 15). Since man is made in the image of God, it includes imitating God’s pattern of six-and-one work and rest (vv. 1–3), as confirmed by the later practice of Israel as God’s son (Ex. 20:8–11). Israel is supposed to keep the Sabbath by resting on the seventh day. Work and Sabbath are also rightly called creation ordinances.

At the time of fulfillment, Jesus as the last Adam also carries out these three ordinances in his own way. The church is his bride (Eph. 5:26–27, 32; Rev. 19:7–8; 21:9), fulfilling the ordinance of marriage. He completes his work on earth (John 17:4; 19:28, 30). Having completed his work on earth, he enters into rest, which is simultaneous with his heavenly reign (Heb. 10:12–13).

(5) Adam is to be holy, as God as holy. This obligation is again confirmed by what happens in the case of Israel (Ex. 19:5–6; Lev. 19:2), and also what happens in the case of Christ (Luke 4:34; Acts 3:14). Since the second commandment serves as a perspective on all the commandments, this obligation to be holy implicitly includes obedience to all Ten Commandments. These commandments apply in a way that is appropriate to the situation before the fall.

(6) The symbolism of the tree of life implies that God will continue in living fellowship with Adam, as long as Adam continues in his obedience.

(7) The result of obedience would be confirmation in eternal life. This result is the opposite of the curse of death in Genesis 2:17 and 3:19. This confirmation in life is to be inferred from God’s own Sabbath rest

in Genesis 2:2–3, from Israel’s goal of possessing the promised land of Palestine (which is a type of eternal inheritance), and from Christ’s inheritance of resurrection life at the time of his resurrection (Phil. 2:9–11).

(8) The time preceding the time of confirmation is a temporary, limited period of probation. The test comes to focus in the prohibition of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

(9) Adam and Eve when first created are already religiously oriented, moral creatures, who stand in the presence of God. They are people created in such a way that they can suitably receive God’s moral instruction, and they have the moral ability to obey God. But in the end, they fail to do so.

(10) Like the tree of life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil has a symbolic meaning. It functions “sacramentally.” The symbolic meaning cannot be that Adam and Eve come to initial knowledge of morality through it. They already have knowledge of their obligation, though this knowledge is not yet fully matured. Genesis 3:22 notes, with some irony, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil.” Adam and Eve change experientially through experiencing in their own persons evil thoughts and an act of evil and its consequences. They come to “know” good and evil experientially. Unfortunately, they come to this knowledge the wrong way, through practicing evil. If they had resisted the temptation, they would have come to a knowledge of good and evil experientially, by doing good. They would have grown in experiential knowledge of evil as well, in the very act of resisting it.

Israel as a son of God does not experience the very same temptation in all its specific detail. But Israel is tempted to go astray and serve false gods. The people worship the golden calf in Exodus 32 and the Moabite gods in Numbers 25:2. The serpent’s voice in the garden of Eden functions as the first false god. So there is an impressive analogical relation between Adam and Israel.

Christ is also tempted, in the wilderness. But the outcome is the opposite: he resists and rejects every temptation (Matt. 4:1–11).

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on the Creational Covenant**

Acts 2, as an act of new creation of the Spirit-filled church, is analogous to the original act of creating mankind. The church is in communion with God through the new covenant. Adam was in communion with God through the creational covenant. The parallels reinforce the appropriateness of calling the original arrangement with Adam a covenant.

### **Summary**

It is appropriate to apply the concept of covenant to the original situation with Adam. It is useful in drawing our attention to the various parallels between divine-human relations at different stages of history.

### **Key Terms**

|                                         |                                           |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| autonomy                                | ordinary language                         |
| covenant                                | ratification ceremony                     |
| creational covenant                     | Reformed theology                         |
| creation ordinance                      | Sabbath                                   |
| cultural mandate                        | sanctions                                 |
| distinction between word and<br>concept | semantics                                 |
| fall of man                             | son of God                                |
| fatalism                                | stipulations                              |
| grace                                   | technical term                            |
| heteronomy                              | tree of life                              |
| law                                     | tree of the knowledge of good<br>and evil |

### **Study Questions**

1. What is a *covenant*?
2. What difficulties are there with the issue whether the original situation with Adam is a covenant?

3. To what later covenants does Adam's original situation show parallels?
4. What is the positive value of seeing Adam's original situation in relation to later covenants?
5. What is the *cultural mandate*?
6. What would have happened if Adam had not disobeyed?
7. How do you find that your understanding of God's relation to human beings has changed by thinking about the creational covenant with Adam?

### **For Further Reading**

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8. Pp. 2:564–71.

Frame, John M. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013. Chap. 4.

Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 2, *Anthropology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970. Chap. 6.

### **Prayer**

We thank you, Lord, that you have given us a better and more secure covenant in our new covenant relation to you through Christ.

## OTHER CONSTRUALS OF GOD'S RELATION WITH ADAM

The preceding chapter showed that the original condition with Adam could be construed as a covenant because it is analogous to later relations that are specifically called covenants. Sometimes giving a label to a particular passage in the Bible ends people's exploration of the passage. But it need not. Often the Bible offers us multiple analogies. In the case of Adam, are there other useful analogies for understanding the original condition? What additional perspectives can provide insight? This exploration is in accord with the principle in chapter 7 of paying attention to analogies. This chapter explores some of the other analogies.

### Sonship

Sonship can serve as a perspective on the original situation with Adam. Several lines of biblical evidence indicate that Adam was created as a son of God.

- (1) He is explicitly called a son of God in Luke 3:38.
- (2) Comparison between Genesis 1:26–27 and 5:3 shows that God's creation of Adam is analogous to Adam's fathering his son Seth. If so, it suggests that God fathered Adam in a way analogous to Adam's fathering Seth.
- (3) The language of imaging in Genesis 1:26–27 also suggests sonship, since the second person of the Trinity is both image and Son, according to Colossians 1:13, 15 and Hebrews 1:2–3.

(4) Romans 8:29 associates Christian sonship with being in the image of Christ.

(5) Redeemed Israel is called God's firstborn son in Exodus 4:22. Israel is a kind of Adamic figure. God redemptively "creates" Israel as a nation by bringing the people out of Egypt and forming them by his covenant through Moses. He tests them in the wilderness. He gives them a land "flowing with milk and honey," a kind of new Eden. He has intimate fellowship with them, unlike any other nation (Deut. 4:7). He gives them fatherly instruction, in contrast to other nations (v. 8). All these features suggest that Israel has a role parallel to Adam. Since Israel is called a son of God, so also Adam is a son.

Chapter 13 showed that the theme of sonship in Romans 8 includes four aspects: intimacy, inheritance, freedom, and family likeness. Let us consider these four, one at a time.

*Intimacy.* Adam has a relation of intimacy with God, in that God speaks freely to him. He has access to the tree of life, which symbolizes life in communion with God.

*Inheritance.* Adam inherits the garden of Eden and is instructed to exercise dominion in the world as a whole (Gen. 1:28–30).

*Freedom.* Adam has the power and the opportunity to serve God faithfully. As a son, he should follow the ways of his Father in heaven. But will he?

*Likeness.* As a son, Adam is like his Father. This truth is closely related to the point in Genesis 1:26–27, that man is made in the image of God. It follows that he should imitate God, on the level of a creature.

In particular, God is the living God. He is the source of all life in the created world. He is the source of human life, as indicated in the accounts of the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2:7 and 2:21–22. Adam is supposed to imitate God by his living. Since in God the persons of the Trinity are in communion with one another, Adam should live in communion with God. God symbolizes that truth about Adam's life with the tree of life (Gen. 2:9). Adam is to grow up in knowledge, imitating the perfect, complete knowledge of God. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil symbolizes this aspect of communion with God. If Adam had

obeyed God and resisted the temptation of Satan, he would have grown in ethical knowledge and ethical maturity through resisting temptation. He would have grown in knowledge of good by doing good. He would have grown in knowledge of evil by seeing evil for what it is and resisting it. Unfortunately, he did neither. But God designed the situation in the garden of Eden in harmony with what he designed humanity to be.

The imitation of God by Adam extends to imitating God's pattern of work and rest. God worked six days to create the world and rested on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2–3). Exodus 20:8–11, in the fourth commandment, makes explicit what was implicit in the original situation, that mankind is supposed to imitate God in a pattern of six days of work and one day of rest. Adam as a son would imitate his Father and be like his Father in the pattern of work and rest.

God in Genesis 1:28–30 and 2:15 gives a task to man. It is also an implicit implication that just as God finished his task of creating the world, mankind would eventually finish its task and enter into eschatological rest. Genesis 1–2 does not spell out these implications, but they are consistent with Hebrews 4:1–11, which links the pattern of work and rest to eschatological rest.

In fact, the analogy of sonship might offer even more insight than the analogy with covenant. Many covenants have formal ratification ceremonies. But if Adam is a son, no formal ceremony is necessary in order to make him a son. He is already that from the moment he is created. Covenant can easily be construed as an extra step, a legal specification placed on top of an earlier personal relationship that may have little structure to it. But the analogy of sonship invites people to see an organic relation between what Adam already is, as a special creature in the image of God, and what God says to him. If Adam is already a son, whom God has “fathered,” it is natural that God should have ongoing instances of conversations with him, and that some of these conversations should include orders or warnings. The orders or warnings are not arbitrary additions, but part of an already existing and continually developing relation of Father to son.

In addition, in the human sphere, human beings make covenants with other human beings so that, by an artificial, legal arrangement, they might



forge a bond of loyalty that is somewhat like family loyalty. Family loyalty is normally an integral part of family life, so normally family members do not make covenants with each other. Why should they? They already have a secure relation of loyalty by virtue of being in the same family.

The situation with Jacob and Laban is the exception that proves the rule. Jacob and Laban make a covenant with each other in Genesis 31:44. But they do so precisely because the normal bonds of trust between members of an extended family have broken down.

Now consider the relation between God and mankind. Before the fall of man, there is a natural bond of loyalty because God is spiritually the father of Adam. The comparison with a human father and son is appropriate. After the fall, the bonds of loyalty have been broken by Adam and Eve's disobedience. So covenant becomes a means of expressing how the bonds are restored.

All this does not mean that the analogy with covenant should be discarded. It too has its own strengths. It draws attention to the central role that the order and warning in Genesis 2:17 play in the developing narrative. It also invites people to consider analogical relations with later covenants between God and man.

### **Image of God**

Now consider mankind from the perspective of the theme of the image of God. This theme overlaps with sonship. Indeed, because *likeness* is one aspect of sonship, the idea of the image of God can be considered as one aspect of sonship. What we have said about the implications of likeness in the last few paragraphs could be worked out directly as an implication of the theme of image of God.

In fact, *image of God* can be used as a perspective on sonship. *Image of God* implies likeness to God. It also implies intimacy with God, inheritance, and freedom before God. Let us see how.

God is intimate with himself, since he knows himself completely. This intimacy is particularly on display in the relation of persons of the Trinity to one another. The Father is intimate with the Son, and the Son with the

Father, and both with the Holy Spirit. This intimacy is expressed in coinherence. The persons of the Trinity dwell in one another. The intimacy of human beings with God is therefore a reflection, on the level of created humanity, of the original intimacy of persons within God. Their intimacy with God is an effect of being in the likeness of God.

The thought of the image of God also implies inheritance. God owns the whole world. Derivatively, as a creature, man has stewardship over the world. This stewardship is an image of God's ultimate ownership.

Finally, what about the theme of freedom? God is free in his own thoughts, plans, and actions. Derivatively, on the level of a creature, mankind has a derivative expression of freedom.

Altogether, all four of the motifs of sonship in Romans 8 are closely related to the idea of image of God.

## **Marriage**

Can marriage serve as an analogy for the relation between God and Adam?

Marriage clearly becomes an analogy for the relation of God to his people in the context of redemption. Texts using the analogy of marriage occur in both the Old Testament (Ezek. 16, 23; Hos.) and the New Testament (Eph. 5:22–33; Rev. 19:7–9). God is not a sexual being, but the Bible does not hesitate to compare God to the husband or bridegroom, and his people are his wife or his bride.

Israel is the wife of the Lord. If Israel is an Adamic figure, then by analogy Adam and those whom he represents are corporately the wife of God. God loves his people, tenderly cares for them, and is devoted to them in an exclusive way, as a husband is supposed to be committed to his wife (Eph. 5:22–33). These things were all true in God's relation to Adam.

## **Kingship**

One of the more obvious themes in Genesis 1:26–30 is that of dominion. God the Great King gives a subordinate dominion to mankind. Adam

is appointed by God to be a kind of subordinate king, a vassal king, under the rule of God the Great King. The relation between God and Adam is the relation between the Great King and his vassal. Adam as a servant of God is supposed to be loyal to God the Great King, to carry out the will of the Great King, and to imitate and carry out God's wise rule. The theme of imitation carries us back to the meaning of the image of God.

## **Priesthood**

Adam's relation to God can also be viewed as the relation of a priest to the God he serves. Chapter 13 already introduced this idea of priesthood. Adam as priest serves God, guards the garden of Eden in its holiness, and reflects the holiness of God in himself.

## **The *Lex Christi* Framework**

As chapter 8 showed (in "The History of Redemption" section), expressions of *lex Christi* occur throughout redemptive history. Creation is the starting manifestation of the principles of *lex Christi*. The *lex Christi* framework provides not one perspective on creation, but ten. The perspectives can increase beyond the original ten if still more attributes of God are used as perspectives.

God manifests his attributes in his works of creation. He manifests them climactically in mankind as the capstone of creation. Mankind is intrinsically related to God by means of God's word, his rule, and his presence. And mankind reflects the attributes of God at a creaturely level. Instances of this reflection occur in the perspectives of each of the Ten Commandments.

*1C. Supremacy.* God is supreme and unique; human beings have a derivative kind of supremacy, in that God gives them dominion over the lower creation (Gen. 1:26, 28). Mankind is supposed to show loyalty to God as supreme. And such loyalty is central in the relation between God and man. The centrality of loyalty of God stands out in a number of perspectives that we have already mentioned: covenant, sonship, image (loyalty to the

original of which man is an image), marriage, kingship, and priesthood. Since God's supremacy is expressed in his dominion and rule, the theme of supremacy is especially related to the kingly relation of God to man.

*2C. Holiness.* God is supremely holy. Consequently, his priest, Adam, is to be derivatively holy. The second commandment leads naturally to seeing Adam as priest. It also leads to the theme of covenant. The covenant is the written direction on how to serve God acceptably, and not according to false idols.

*3C. Blessing.* God is supremely blessed. Genesis 1–2 shows the bounty that God gives to mankind. Genesis 1 focuses on the created order as a whole. Human beings are blessed by the light, blessed by the water above and below, blessed by the dry land, blessed by plants, blessed by heavenly lights, blessed by creatures in sea and air, blessed by animals on the land, blessed by fellow human beings, blessed by the fact that God made each one. Blessing is an implication of some of the other perspectives, such as sonship and marriage. The initial relation of God to man is a relation of intense favor.

The reverse side of blessing is curse. There is a curse on the person who takes the Lord's name in vain. The theme of curse occurs in Genesis 1–2 in the warning in Genesis 2:17, "in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

*4C. Dynamicity.* God is supremely dynamic, as he shows by creating the world and creating Adam and Eve.<sup>1</sup> In the relation between God and man, the dynamicity is especially evident in the responsibility given to human beings in Genesis 1:28–30 and 2:16–17. Human beings are supposed to act. They are supposed to act dynamically in being fruitful and multiplying and in subduing the earth. There are consequences, whether they obey or disobey. The instructions in the fourth commandment explicitly indicate that God's pattern of work and rest is to be imitated by mankind. Thus the theme of imaging God is prominent.

*5C. Harmony.* God is supremely harmonious. The relation between God and man should be a relation of harmony. This theme is especially

1. As discussed in table 8.8, under the fourth commandment, God always remains the same God. He does not change in his nature. At the same time, he is active in the world.

evident in using the perspective of covenant and of sonship. Both covenants and sonship should promote harmony. Harmonious human relations include relations between some people with authority over others, such as the case with parents in relation to children. The case of parents relating to their children leads to the theme of sonship. The theme of exercise of authority is also aptly expressed in the perspective of kingship.

6C. *Life*. God is supremely living. The tree of life symbolizes the sharing of life in fellowship with God. That is why it is warranted to infer that the original covenantal relation between God and man included a promise of life. The sixth commandment prohibits murder because man is made in the image of God. So the perspective of image is close at hand in the perspective of the sixth commandment, the perspective of life. In addition, some metaphors compare the God-man relation to the organic unity in a plant. Jesus compares his fellowship with the disciples to the relation between a vine and its branches (John 15:1–11). The life of the branches depends on their receiving life from the vine. In John 14:6, Jesus declares that he is the Life.

7C. *Intimacy*. God is intimate with himself. He establishes intimacy with human beings. The analogy with marriage is particularly appropriate to express this aspect of the divine-human relation.

8C. *Giving, beneficence*. God is abundantly generous in his giving. The whole creation order, and all that is in it, is a gift from God to human beings. In particular, he gives the gift of fellow human beings, including the gift of the two sexes. God also gives himself and his presence. The biblical language about receiving from God's wealth and bounty builds on this theme.

9C. *Truth*. God is truthful. Mankind is supposed to be derivatively truthful. This theme is closely related to the human capacity for knowledge and for communicating truth. Man's relation with God is a relation of *knowing* him personally (John 17:3). In addition, Adam is supposed to be a *prophet* of God. The attack by the serpent has a focus on attacking the truthfulness of God. But in attacking one attribute, he indirectly attacks them all.

10C. *Contentedness*. God is supremely contented. Human beings are to be contented as they rest in God's contentment and his all-sufficiency. The relation between God and man is to be characterized as a relation of mutual contentment—a relation of peace. This theme was not especially prominent

in the perspectives earlier in this chapter. But it is a suitable theme. Choosing one theme or one perspective is useful, but may not by itself bring to prominence all the aspects of the relation between God and man.

## **A Multifaceted Relation between God and Humanity**

God, as the principal party in the covenant, is always God with all his attributes. So all his attributes are on display and expressed in his relation to humanity. It is not so surprising that each one of the Ten Commandments, by displaying one attribute more preeminently, also leads us to reflect on the covenantal relation in a distinct way. (See table 22.1.)

**Table 22.1. Ten Perspectives on the Prefall Relation with God**

| <b>Cmd.</b> | <b>Specific Commands</b> | <b>Attributes of God</b> | <b>Meaning for Man's Relation to God</b>                                           |
|-------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1C          | no other gods            | supreme                  | loyalty                                                                            |
| 2C          | no idols                 | holy                     | maintain holiness of a priest                                                      |
| 3C          | honor God's name         | blessed                  | cursed if you despise God by eating from the tree of knowledge                     |
| 4C          | keep the Sabbath         | dynamic                  | responsible to serve God                                                           |
| 5C          | honor parents            | harmonious               | honor God as Father                                                                |
| 6C          | no murder                | living                   | hope of eternal life, symbolized by the tree of life                               |
| 7C          | no adultery              | intimate                 | humanity is a wife in relation to God as husband                                   |
| 8C          | no stealing              | giving                   | giving and receiving, generous, giving our lives as a living sacrifice (Rom. 12:1) |

Table 22.1 (continued)

| Cmd. | Specific Commands | Attributes of God | Meaning for Man's Relation to God     |
|------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 9C   | no lying          | truthful          | truthful; serve as prophet            |
| 10C  | no coveting       | contented         | contented with God; peaceful relation |

All these descriptions of the relation between God and humanity rely on analogies. Our initial focus in the previous chapter for understanding the relation between God and humanity was the idea of *covenant*. The use of the term *covenant* for the God-man relation depends on analogy. The original God-man relation is being treated as analogous to human covenants, such as Jacob's covenant with Laban (Gen. 31:44) and the covenant that Abner proposes to make with David (2 Sam. 3:12–13). But using the *lex Christi* framework alerts us to additional perspectives, which invite us to contemplate additional analogies. All the analogies have some value, yet none is exhaustive by itself. We can list the analogies in line with the attributes of God displayed in the Ten Commandments. (See table 22.2.)

Table 22.2. Analogies for the Relation between God and Humanity

| Cmd. | Attributes of God | An Analogy for the Relation of God to Humanity |
|------|-------------------|------------------------------------------------|
| 1C   | supreme           | King to servant (or vassal)                    |
| 2C   | holy              | God to his priest; covenant                    |
| 3C   | blessed           | personal favor, love                           |
| 4C   | dynamic           | image                                          |
| 5C   | harmonious        | Father to son                                  |
| 6C   | living            | organic life: vine to branches                 |

**Table 22.2 (continued)**

| <b>Cmd.</b> | <b>Attributes of God</b> | <b>An Analogy for the Relation of God to Humanity</b> |
|-------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| 7C          | intimate                 | marriage                                              |
| 8C          | giving                   | God sharing his wealth                                |
| 9C          | truthful                 | personal knowledge; prophet, communication            |
| 10C         | contented                | peace                                                 |

Each of these perspectives on communion with God corresponds to a human desire for God. God is the supreme good. Human beings were created to desire God and find satisfaction in him as they have communion with him. To desire God rightly is also to desire him with all his attributes. So human beings naturally desire his attributes. We can add another column indicating the desire. (See table 22.3.)

**Table 22.3. Human Desire for Communion with God**

| <b>Cmd.</b> | <b>Attributes of God</b> | <b>God to Humanity</b> | <b>Human Desire for Communion</b>               |
|-------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 1C          | supreme                  | King to servant        | to serve and to rule with God's power at work   |
| 2C          | holy                     | God to his priest      | for transcendent holiness of God                |
| 3C          | blessed                  | personal favor         | for the favor and love of God                   |
| 4C          | dynamic                  | imaging God            | to imitate God and be imitated                  |
| 5C          | harmonious               | Father to son          | for participating in the family of God and love |



**Table 22.3 (continued)**

| <b>Cmd.</b> | <b>Attributes of God</b> | <b>God to Humanity</b> | <b>Human Desire for Communion</b> |
|-------------|--------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 6C          | living                   | organic life           | for fruitful life from God        |
| 7C          | intimate                 | marriage               | for intimacy with God             |
| 8C          | giving                   | sharing wealth         | for the wealth of God             |
| 9C          | truthful                 | personal knowledge     | for knowing God                   |
| 10C         | contented                | peace                  | for peace with God                |

The relation of God to man is also reflected at a creaturely level in human relations toward humanity and the world. So we can add another column that expands on desires and joys with respect to horizontal relations within creation. (See table 22.4.)

There are many good things in this world, in human relations and in relations to the lower creation. They are a blessing, as long as people do not turn them into idolatrous substitutes for communion with God, which underlies them all.

### **Acts 2 as a Perspective on the Original Situation with Adam**

Acts 2 offers still another perspective on Adam, as earlier chapters have already showed. New creation, which takes place in Acts 2, is analogically related to the original creation. Redemption becomes necessary only because of sin. So some aspects of the work of God in Acts 2 are not obvious in Genesis 1–2. Yet when God created mankind, he already had in mind an eschatological goal. That goal would bring to light a richness in God’s relation to Adam that was not explicitly evident in the original setting of creation.

**Table 22.4. Human Desire for Relations with Created Beings**

| Attributes of God | God to Humanity    | Human Desire for Communion with God           | Human Desire for Relations to Created Beings                                                                |
|-------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1C: supreme       | King to servant    | to serve and to rule with God's power at work | to serve and rule in relation to other human beings                                                         |
| 2C: holy          | God to his priest  | for transcendent holiness of God              | to see the transcendence of God reflected in beauty and excellence                                          |
| 3C: blessed       | personal favor     | for favor and love of God                     | for favor and love from others and love to others                                                           |
| 4C: dynamic       | imaging God        | to imitate God and be imitated                | to imitate worthy human examples                                                                            |
| 5C: harmonious    | Father to son      | to participate in the family of God and love  | to participate in human families and groups                                                                 |
| 6C: living        | organic life       | for fruitful life from God                    | for fruitful life in this world                                                                             |
| 7C: intimate      | marriage           | for intimacy with God                         | for intimacy with spouse, friendship, and a kind of companionship with created things (think pets, for one) |
| 8C: giving        | sharing wealth     | for the fullness of God                       | to steward riches in this world                                                                             |
| 9C: truthful      | personal knowledge | for knowing God                               | for knowledge of humans and creation                                                                        |
| 10C: contented    | peace              | for peace with God                            | for peace with fellow humans and with the world                                                             |

## Summary

The journey through the Ten Commandments and the ten corresponding attributes of God has brought to light how the *lex Christi* framework offers richness. For example, covenant as a theme can be placed under the second commandment (2C). The covenant specifies the way to worship and serve God according to his commandments. Sonship falls under 5C. Image falls under 4C. Or, because it is closely related to sonship, it can fall under 5C. Marriage falls under 7C. Kingship falls under 1C and 5C. Priesthood falls under 2C. None of these correlations are exclusive. Each theme, as an attribute of God, offers a perspective on God. And God is one. In the end, each perspective is inclusive of the others and affirms the others. There is harmony, according to the harmonious nature of God himself. Since there is harmony in God, there is also harmony in these distinct perspectives on the relation between God and man.

## Key Terms

|              |                    |
|--------------|--------------------|
| analogy      | king               |
| covenant     | <i>lex Christi</i> |
| fall of man  | likeness           |
| freedom      | marriage           |
| image of God | priest             |
| inheritance  | son of God         |
| intimate     | Ten Commandments   |

## Study Questions

1. What other analogies, besides covenant, throw light on the original relation of Adam to God?
2. What do we learn from the other analogies that might have been in the background in considering the analogy with covenant?
3. What do you think about the use of other analogies in dealing with Adam?

### **For Further Reading**

Kline, Meredith G. *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview*. Overland Park, KS: Two Age, 2000. Pp. 14–61.

Poythress, Vern S. *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2022. Pp. 24–32.

### **Prayer**

Thank you for the rich relation that you had with Adam, and for the way in which your redemptive relation to us in Christ is also rich. Give us desires that are pure, and especially increase our desire for you.



## ADAM'S WORKS— LAW AND GRACE

Consider now the issue whether the original situation with Adam was a *covenant of works*.<sup>1</sup> Was it a matter of law or of grace or of both? If both, what is the relation between the two?

The questions can be approached by using the four special resources from chapter 7.

### Presuppositions

Consider first the influence of presuppositions. The issue of works, and of law and grace, is influenced by presuppositions. People may find themselves inclined to one position because of the way in which it sets the framework for understanding the role of works and grace in the accomplishment and application of redemption.

### Semantics: The Meaning of *Covenant of Works*

Next, consider the issue of semantics. The question about the *covenant of works* depends on what is meant by *covenant* and what is meant by *works*.

1. For various designations of the covenant, see Rowland S. Ward, *God & Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant* (Wantirna, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 2003), 95–98.

In Genesis 2:15, God specifically indicates that man is to “work it,” that is, work the garden. The directions that God gives to mankind in 1:28–30 involve a lot of activity. They describe human “work” in a broad sense.

The expression *covenant of works* usually has a much more specific meaning. It has become a technical term in the course of the history of the development of theology. Here is an explanation from the Westminster Confession of Faith:

The first covenant [in contrast to the second covenant, the covenant of grace, WCF 7.3–6] made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience. (WCF 7.2)

The work in question is “perfect and personal obedience.” The result, if Adam had obeyed, would have been “life.” The Westminster Confession does not explicitly say whether “life” is merely continuation in Adam’s present condition of bodily life, or whether it issues in the security of eternal life once Adam has passed the test. The context of Genesis 1–2, with God’s seventh-day rest in the background, includes the implication of an eschatological endpoint. There will come a point when human beings will complete the task of multiplying and subduing (Gen. 1:28). There will come fullness of life. Thus, the key word “life” implies life in its fullness in fellowship with God, which means eternal life (note also 3:22, “live forever”).

Does Genesis 2:16–17 speak of “perfect and personal obedience”? As usual, in keeping with the principle of progressive revelation, the text does not spell everything out in maximal detail. God tells man not to eat. He specifies personal obedience. Is it supposed to be “perfect” obedience? The whole Bible shows us that God is perfectly holy, supremely holy. The teaching about holiness in Exodus through Deuteronomy shows that holiness connotes perfection. For example, defective animals could not be brought to the Lord for most kinds of sacrifice. People with a bodily defect could not function as priests. All these regulations were symbolic. They showed that God’s perfect holiness had to be reflected in his people and in the sacrifices.

Genesis 2:16–17 does not contain an explicit promise of life. So why does the confession mention it? Life and death are opposites. The tree of life symbolizes the promise of life with God (see Gen. 3:22; Rev. 22:2), while the threat concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil makes explicit a result for disobedience, namely, death.

### Misunderstandings of Works

Some interpreters have wanted to avoid the expression *covenant of works*, even though it is a traditional label and has a basis in Genesis 2:15. They prefer *covenant of life* or *covenant of creation* or *Adamic administration* or some other expression. As usual, the choice of expression is secondary. What matters is the nature of the original situation with Adam.

Several concerns may make people hesitant about using the expression *covenant of works*. The New Testament, in explaining salvation, draws a contrast between human striving to save oneself by one's own works and human surrender to the way of God. God gives salvation by grace, through faith:

For by *grace* you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own *doing*; it is the gift of God, not a result of *works*, so that no one may boast. (Eph. 2:8–9)

The New Testament makes it clear that all people need God's grace because they are sinners:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Eph. 2:1–3)

This fallen situation is very different from the situation before the fall of Adam. In that situation, there was no need for salvation because there



was no sin. Now, however, people start in a situation of being “dead in . . . trespasses and sins.” Christ must rescue them by *his* work. His work runs parallel to Adam (Rom. 5:12–21). It is legitimate, then, to speak of the role of works in that earlier creational situation with Adam, even though works cannot play the same role *now*.

### **The Value of *Covenant of Works***

One of the advantages of the expression *covenant of works* lies precisely in the relation between Adam and Christ (Rom. 5:12–21). In the later covenant of grace, it is Christ who accomplishes his works of righteousness on our behalf. We are sinners. We are completely unable to offer to God perfect works of our own, in the context of which we would enjoy righteous communion with God. And we cannot wipe out the guilt of past sins by adding good works now. Christ must become our substitute:

All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned—every one—to his own way;  
and the LORD has *laid on him*  
the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53:6)

Jesus our Lord . . . was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification. (Rom. 4:24–25)

He himself [Christ] bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24)

Christ obeyed, while Adam did not. Negatively, Christ took the punishment for our sins. Positively, he acted with perfect righteousness, and that righteousness is reckoned to us when we are united to him by faith (Rom. 5:18–19; 2 Cor. 5:21). Christ’s works did earn his own reward:

And being found in human form, he [Christ] humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. *Therefore* God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:8–11)

The word “therefore” especially indicates the relation between Christ’s obedience in Philippians 2:8, his work, and the reward in verses 9–11. This pattern of works as the basis for reward is unlike the pattern in people who are sinners.

The pattern of works is like the pattern that God put in place with Adam before the fall. If Adam had obeyed, he would have received the reward of eternal life on the basis of his obedience. Why? Because God had implicitly given this promise in the symbolism of the tree of life. The distinction between the two patterns is underlined by the two labels, *covenant of works* and *covenant of grace*.

It is valuable to have two distinct words, *works* and *grace*, in order to contrast the conditions of the original prefall covenant with Adam and the conditions of the covenant of grace, a covenant for sinners. Had Adam passed the test of refraining from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam’s perfect obedience would have been the basis for the reward of eternal life. By contrast, Christian obedience in this life is always imperfect and contaminated by remaining sin; it could never be the basis for the reward of eternal life. And it could never overcome the guilt and liability before God that we have because of past as well as present sins. Only Christ’s perfect righteousness suffices. The contrast between works and grace also enables people to distinguish clearly between what Christ did for sinners and what redeemed sinners themselves do.

Consider some specific descriptions. It is true that Christ in his earthly life trusted in God and obeyed God. It is true that Christians are supposed to trust in God and obey. But these two affirmations do not yet

show what is different between the two cases. They do not show the key element of grace, namely, that Christians get the opposite of what they deserve because of their sin, whereas Christ received what he did deserve because of his righteousness. Specifically, Christians trust in Christ, their substitute, and in his perfection. Christ perfectly trusted in the Father, who was going to reward his obedience. Christ achieved works in order that we might receive grace, the opposite of what sins deserve.

Which exact words and expressions people use is a secondary issue. But understanding the difference between the prefall condition and the postfall condition of sin is necessary to understand the meaning of salvation in Christ and to give proper appreciation and weight to what Christ accomplished. The contrast between the expressions *covenant of works* and *covenant of grace* is meant to highlight the difference.

### **The Issue of Autonomy**

But still other concerns are expressed by people who dislike the expression *covenant of works*. It depends on how the works are understood. The picture of human striving to work one's way to salvation includes in it a picture of *autonomy*. A person pictures himself as being able to accomplish his goal in practical independence of God. He says, "I can do it; I don't need God." Or maybe he makes a small concession: "I need God's help to get me over a few of the toughest hurdles. But I am the one who is in charge, and most of the time I am doing fairly well." A person in that frame of mind shows that he has a heart of rebellion, a heart of independence, even in the process of telling himself that he genuinely wants to please God by successfully doing good works and walking along the path that he thinks will lead to final blessing.

But life with God, even before the fall of man, was never a life of independence. Rather, it was a life of fellowship, a life of intimacy with God (7C), a life of giving and receiving from God (8C). So if *works* actually means "works produced independently of God," the meaning falsifies the nature of the God-man relation before the fall and the nature of the prefall covenant. Some people avoid the terminology of *works* for this reason.

## The Issue of Merit

The picture of works may also include an idea of *merit*. In ordinary life, the person who performs according to the appropriate standard *merits* the reward that he gets. The student *merits* a grade of A because he answers all the test questions correctly. Likewise, a theologian might say that Adam merits the reward of eternal life if he refrains from eating of the tree.

But different understandings might go with the word *merit*. One concept might be a picture of an exact match between the achievement and the corresponding reward. The student's answers on the test exactly match the correct answers, and this correspondence means that he gets the reward of A, which exactly matches his performance. But this picture does not mesh well with the situation with Adam. The reward of eternal life seems out of proportion to the simple act of refraining from eating.

Another picture might involve relative ranking. One runner merits the prize because he outraced all the other runners. All the other runners might have been really slow; some might have dropped out of the race before the end. But as long as the one runner crosses the line first, he merits the reward of "first place." This analogy does not work well, however, because reward from God does not take place according to a floating standard of whether one person is better than someone else. Many people think in delusion that they will "get to heaven" because they are relatively "good" people. Someone says, "I'm not as bad as Joe there, so I think I will make it." They do not reckon with God's perfect holiness and his perfect justice.

A third picture of merit puts into prominence the idea of boasting. "Look, Ma, I got an A on my test. I'm really good!" People understand that kind of language coming from a young child. As he matures, the child learns the social grace of concealing his boasting. He learns not to say it out loud to his friends. But he may still be boasting in his attitude in his heart. That attitude is not appropriate with respect to God. It is God who gave the child everything, including the abilities and the diligence that enabled him to do well on a test. All praise is due to God; all glory is due to God. "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you

received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). Boasting on the part of Adam would have been inappropriate because God deserves the praise. If Adam had boasted, he would temporarily have stopped having God supreme (1C) and would have treated himself as supreme.

A fourth picture of merit puts into prominence the right to have the reward. One might picture a fairy tale in which the king offers his daughter in marriage to the warrior who will defeat the destroying dragon. Many prominent, noble warriors attempt it and fail. Then an obscure peasant boy kills the dragon. He has merited the reward. The king does not think much of a peasant boy. But he is bound by his word. So in spite of being reluctant, he consents to the marriage. The boy has earned the right to the reward.

Is God reluctant? Is he miserly? Does he have a distaste for us, and yet hold his nose and save us anyway? Of course not. In Christ, God is our loving Father (though we were totally undeserving, Rom. 5:8). We are not in a position of having to twist his arm, so to speak, in order to get him to save us as if he really did not want to. Merit is not a way of forcing God to give a reward. It is not a bribe that undermines justice. Likewise, merit is not a way for Adam to force God to give him a reward when God does not want to.

But the word *merit* does not need to have any of these bad connotations. For example, in the United States there is a program called the National Merit Scholarship. A merit scholarship is a monetary help given to a student on the basis of merit rather than financial need. The merit is determined by test performance and academic record. The merit is, of course, relative to other students. But a student who receives it does not need to see it as an occasion to boast. He need not think that he is twisting the arm of the donors. If he receives a large scholarship, he may sense that it is out of proportion to his actual achievements. He is grateful. But it is also true that he has been recognized for his merit. This instance is one positive example of the use of the word *merit*.

## Deserving

If the word *merit* causes difficulties for some people, other words can be used. One such word is *deserve*. This word can be used in both a positive and a negative sense. If Adam eats from the tree, he gets what he *deserves*. He deserves to die, and that is what happens. Right away, he dies spiritually and in his communion in life with God. Physical death is still to come, but it will come, as Genesis 3:19 indicates. If Adam does not eat from the tree, again he gets what he deserves. He deserves to remain in life.

But does Adam deserve eternal life, not just continuing life on the same level? That is a more difficult question. The analogy with the fairy-tale king is pertinent. If God has *promised* eternal life, Adam deserves to have it when he meets the conditions that God has laid down. What Adam deserves is not determined in a vacuum, but determined by God's conditions, the conditions of the covenant of works. Adam did not "deserve" to have God put the covenant of works in place at the beginning because Adam had not done anything yet. For God to establish the covenant of works is a gracious act, an act of goodness. In the nature of the case, because Adam has not yet done any work, the gift of the covenant does not have a basis in previous works by Adam. But once the covenant of works is in place, the covenant itself specifies what is the reward and what is the punishment for disobedience. *Within the structure of that covenant*, there is a solid kind of deserving.

Some theologians do not like either the word *merit* or the word *deserve*. Both terms might suggest a kind of cold distance between God and man. The picture might be that God from a distance is willing to evaluate mankind and give him an appropriate result for his work. But it all happens, allegedly, according to a kind of impersonal rule: "Do this, and get that." But underneath the external process of issuing rewards, the suggestion is made that God does not really care. He does not love. He just gives out rewards and punishments. He is like a king who gives out rewards in order to motivate his subjects, or to carry out his sense of justice, but does not really care for the people whom he rewards. This

king is a king of justice but not of love. Is God a God of justice but not of love? No, the Bible affirms both his justice and his love.

Theologians may also be reluctant because they want to emphasize the beneficence and graciousness of God. God is so surpassingly good. He is overflowing with goodness. When he gives to mankind, whether in the original acts of creation or later on, it displays his goodness. It is far removed from reluctance or a distant presiding over an uncaring distribution of rewards. Some people use the word *grace* to describe such goodness. Others want to reserve the word *grace* for a narrower use: it is *grace* when God reverses *demerit* and guilt, and provides the opposite of what sinners deserve.

So which is right? Both sides are making a legitimate point. But in both cases, clarity requires being alert to what people actually mean in using the term *grace*. Both sides could be misunderstood if they do not explain what they mean.

### **The Analogy of Sonship**

The analogy of sonship can be of value in addressing the issue of works. God is like a father to Adam the son of God (Luke 3:38). Like a good father, God would reward his son for a good work accomplished. But the reward comes in the context of fatherly love, not in a context of an impersonal contract, a contract that would treat the son in a cold manner and hold him at a distance.

The analogy is of special value when it applies to Christ, who is the last Adam and the true Son. Christ is obedient to the Father in all his life, and he accomplishes all his work. The climactic work is his “becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). The continuation in the next verse has the word “therefore,” indicating the close relation between his obedience and the reward of exaltation:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and

every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil. 2:9–11)

God displays his love in Christ, who is the Son. He displays his justice in rewarding him in his resurrection and exaltation. Christ does deserve the reward he got. The reward is a result of the operation of justice, but it is also a result of the love of the Father who gave it.

Christ and Adam have roles that are partly parallel. Each does a work. If he performs the work, each receives a reward that he deserves. But there are also differences. Adam failed to do the work. Christ succeeded. And Christ's work exceeds that of Adam. Adam had to accomplish his work in a situation of innocence. Christ not only had to serve God righteously, but had to suffer death as our Sin-Bearer. He had to suffer under God's wrath as the penalty for sin. Even before his death, all during his time on earth, he lived in a situation in which there was suffering and sin and death. He faced multiple temptations. He himself suffered not only in his death, but in the opposition that he received from Jewish leaders and other opponents. Adam was a creature and received the covenant conditions simply as a creature. Christ is God forever, who voluntarily undertook to take to himself human nature (Phil. 2:6–8). Theologians have rightly seen that because he is God, his work has infinite value.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Attributes of God**

Many of the difficulties here arise from partial analogies. When the analogies go astray, it is because of defective views of God. God is simultaneously a God of justice and a God of love. He is just and loving in relation to Christ and the work of Christ. He is a God of overflowing beneficence and a God of order who makes the results correspond to the achievements. He is a God of graciousness and a God of law. All his attributes are attributes applying to the whole of God. His love is a just love, and his justice is a loving justice. His goodness is a just goodness,

2. Carlton Wynne, "ST 211 [Doctrine of Man] Lec 9 . . . Merit," lecture notes, 2022.



and his justice is a good justice. It is a mistake to polarize the attributes and set one against another. Polarization misunderstands all of God's attributes. In the end, it misunderstands God himself.

### **Justice in Isolation from Goodness and Beneficence**

Think about what happens if someone isolates justice from God's goodness and love. He conceives of justice as if it were an isolated attribute, just by itself. Then he can give no explanation of why Christ came into the world. God in justice should have just punished Adam and Eve immediately and wiped out the human race.

Conversely, suppose that an analyst isolates God's goodness and grace from his justice. He conceives of grace by itself. Then he can give no explanation for the cross. God in grace should just let everyone off the hook for his sins. If people need transformation in order to be good people, God should just transform them because he is good. There is no longer a need for Christ's death.

Both these approaches are deficient because they do not understand who God is. His justice is not set aside in order to express his goodness and grace. His goodness and grace are not set aside when he executes his justice. His attributes belong together and harmonize with one another:

It was to show his [God's] righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:26)

### **The *Lex Christi* Framework**

The *lex Christi* framework with its multiple perspectives reminds people of the richness of God's attributes. So it is suitable as a reminder that in the original situation with Adam, God is simultaneously just and good and beneficent. He is there with all his attributes.

The whole law of God displays the righteousness of God. But the law of retribution is particularly evident in the eighth commandment. The

detailed prescriptions in the Mosaic law specify that a borrowed item must be restored or replaced. It is a one-for-one payment. (Other cases involve fourfold or fivefold payment.) In connection with the sixth commandment, the penalty for murder is the forfeiting of the life of the murderer (Gen. 9:6). It is a life in payment for a life. This reciprocal payment expresses justice.

The eighth commandment also displays the goodness of God. He is a God who gives. He gives lavishly. The third commandment, with its theme of blessing, also displays the goodness of God.

Because each of the Ten Commandments is a perspective on the *whole* of man's moral obligation, there is no tension between justice and goodness. There is harmony, according to the fifth commandment, which focally displays the harmony of God.

### **Goodness as a Perspective**

The harmony of God's plan can be displayed by using God's goodness as a perspective on the God-man relation. God has shown his goodness in creating a suitable environment, both in the world as a whole and in the garden of Eden. He has also been good in creating Adam himself. He has been good in creating Eve. He has been good in giving the promise of life in the form of the tree of life. He has been good in giving a test, through the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, through which Adam might advance in experiential knowledge and in holiness in repudiating evil. The list could go on.

But what of the theme of reward? It is good for God to bless man by laying out a program through which mankind may imitate God and advance toward the goal of rest. It is good that there is a harmonious connection, a "just" connection between achievement and reward. God delights in rewarding Adam his son, according to the good principle of deserving.

### **Justice as a Perspective**

Now let us use the theme of justice as a perspective on the original situation with Adam. One of the issues is whether justice is compatible

with the benefits that God gives to Adam and the conditions that he lays down. If an analyst starts with a humanly defined conception of justice, it may seem to him that the idea of justice does not fit with the generosity of God. Why should eternal life be the benefit for a simple act of refraining from eating of the tree of knowledge? Is not God's benefit out of all proportion to the nature of the obedience? But such a lack of harmony must have arisen because the analyst has separated the concept of justice from what justice really means as an attribute of God. Justice and goodness and generosity, as attributes of God, must be thoroughly compatible and in harmony. Everything that God does, not simply a few special instances, displays his justice.

To appreciate the harmony, start with some of the specific examples of the operation of justice in the Bible. One such example is found in the language about "just weights" in the specific commandment of Leviticus 19:35–36: "You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin." Just weights are weights conforming to a standard. They match the standard. And they match each other. A trader ought not to have two different weights, one to use when he is the buyer and the other to use when he is the seller. It also implies that the product matches in weight what the seller says it weighs.

A principle of justice is in operation in dealing with recompense. It is expressed in general terms in Obadiah 15: "As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head." The punishment corresponds to the crime. Justice means that the punishment fits the crime. You get back what you gave to someone else.

On the surface, this kind of principle seems to be in tension with the disproportion in Genesis 2 between the deed and the recompense. First, consider the punishment of death for eating the fruit. This punishment may seem to be excessive in its severity. But underneath the act of disobedience, mankind would be declaring himself to be god. He, not God, decides what is good and evil. That act is tantamount to trying to destroy God and replacing God with oneself. So the one who does it gets destroyed as a result. It is a fit recompense, a just recompense.

Now, what about the promise of eternal life? God's purposes include a goal. They include implicitly a plan for the end, a plan for eschatology. The last does exceed the first. But that excess is not a strange, inappropriate thing. It is in harmony with God's purpose for the whole world.

For example, plants and animals reproduce after their own kinds. An apple tree produces seeds that can produce more apple trees. The new apple trees correspond to the old ones. This correspondence is not a correspondence directly in the moral sphere, but it fits the character of God and the character of living things. God is the living God. He is abundant in life. In imitation of this abundance, the plants and the animals are supposed to multiply. The world as a whole is already "very good" when it is finished (Gen. 1:31). But it can become even better, in a sense, as there comes to be a multiplication of displays of God's wisdom and goodness. And so it is also with mankind. It is fitting that the reward be multiplied, corresponding to God's abundant life.

Consider another analogy. Jesus compares the moral sphere to biological growth:

So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. (Matt. 7:17–18)

Health or disease in a tree has multiplied consequences. It affects whether the tree bears fruit at all, and each fruit on the tree bears the marks of its origin in the tree. Likewise, people produce moral fruit in harmony with who they are as moral "trees." Over time, results and consequences multiply. The theme of justice is a theme about matching. The punishment or reward matches the deed. But in addition, the deeds match their source in the person. And over time, the deeds multiply. In fact, the person alienated from God may grow more alienated and more wicked. The person in fellowship with God may grow closer in fellowship and more holy. The process of growth is, in fact, in harmony with the theme of justice.

The *lex Christi* framework confirms the harmony of justice with the multiplication of goodness. Multiplied goodness is most preeminently

displayed in the third commandment, with its focus on blessing, and in the eighth commandment, with its focus on giving. Justice is displayed in all the commandments, since they all display the righteousness of God. But the theme of matched payment can be closely linked to the eighth commandment. What a person gives in terms of wrongdoing will be “paid back.”

The theme of harmony associated with the fifth commandment reminds us that all the attributes of God are in harmony. God displays both his attributes and himself. So no one attribute can be separated out. God is good and God is just. He is so in himself, and he displays it in his relation to Adam and the human race.

Remember that each of the ten themes associated with the Ten Commandments can serve as a perspective on God, and then also on the works of God in history. So each of the ten themes can also serve as a perspective on justice and goodness, or on works and reward on the one hand and overflowing bounty on the other hand. Let us use as examples the first three commandments.

*1C. God is supreme.* So he is, among other things, the supreme Judge. He is the supreme standard for justice, which includes the idea of getting what one deserves. God is the supreme evaluator of human deeds. God is the original worker, who works the work of bringing creation into existence. He evaluates it in the end as “very good.” Human beings likewise work, in a pattern of six days. They evaluate their own work, but supremely God evaluates it.

God is also supreme in goodness. He gives liberally to human beings because he is supremely rich, infinitely rich, and he reflects his goodness in giving.

*2C. God is holy.* Holiness is next door to justice, as a standard for human morality. In particular, the second commandment specifies consequences for idolatry and for holy service:

You shall not bow down to them [images] or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who

hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Ex. 20:5–6)

“Visiting the iniquity” is a negative punishment; “showing steadfast love” is a positive benefit. Both are in accord with the nature of the human behavior that they punish or reward. Both derive from the character of God: “for I the LORD your God am a jealous God.”

Is the bounty of God visible from the perspective of the theme of holiness? The bounty of God is displayed in the fact that he undertakes to spread his holiness by making his people holy. It is also a good and bountiful thing that God protects and preserves his holiness by destroying what is unholy. This principle is in operation especially in the picture of “the holy city Jerusalem” (Rev. 21:10; cf. v. 2) in Revelation 21:1–22:5. “But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false” (21:27). Exclusion of unholiness, as well as the positive presence of holiness, secures the peace of the eternal city. That peace and holiness and beauty and divine presence is a good thing, a bountiful thing.

3C. *God is blessed.* His justice is shown in rewards and punishments. The person who blasphemes the name of God is trying to destroy God and destroy the holiness of the people of God. The appropriate penalty is his own destruction (Lev. 24:10–16). (But the situation in the New Testament is radically different because holiness is fulfilled and redefined in terms of the holiness of Christ.)<sup>3</sup>

The bounty in God is displayed in his blessing toward his people in putting his name on them:

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall *bless* the people of Israel: you shall say to them,

The LORD bless you and keep you;  
the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious  
to you;

3. Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1991), chaps. 9–10.

the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

“So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.” (Num. 6:22–27)

In a similar way, each of the other ten perspectives from *lex Christi* can serve as a perspective on both the justice and the goodness of God.

### Acts 2 as a Perspective on Works and Grace

Does Acts 2 illumine the relation of works and grace? Acts 2:33 shows us how the finished work of Christ results in his exaltation, which is a reward for his work (Phil. 2:8–11). He pours out the Spirit as an act of grace toward his people. Through the Spirit, they perform good works, as described in Acts 2:42–47. These works are not perfect in themselves, and they do not merit salvation. The people do them because they have already been saved on the basis of Christ’s work.

### Key Terms

|                   |                    |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| analogy           | law                |
| autonomy          | <i>lex Christi</i> |
| covenant          | love               |
| covenant of works | merit              |
| deserve           | presupposition     |
| fall of man       | reward             |
| good              | semantics          |
| grace             | sin                |
| gracious          | son of God         |
| harmonious        | technical term     |
| justice           | works              |

## **Study Questions**

1. What problem do some people find with the label *covenant of works*?
2. What bad ideas could be associated with *works*? With *merit*? With the idea of deserving a reward or punishment?
3. How are God's love and justice compatible? What happens if people isolate one attribute of God in thinking about Adam's original covenantal situation?
4. How is God's justice displayed in the original covenantal situation with Adam?
5. How have you grown in thinking about God's goodness, justice, and grace?

## **For Further Reading**

Kline, Meredith G. *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview*. Overland Park, KS: Two Age, 2000. Pp. 107–17.

## **Prayer**

Dear God and Father, thank you that you are mysteriously a God of justice and goodness and grace and wonder—all of these together. Enable us to understand who you are, and not to act with a distorted view of you. Give us hearts of gratitude and trust for who you are.





## ADAM AS A REPRESENTATIVE

Now consider the topic of Adam as a representative. How, if at all, does Adam function as a representative for the human race in the original situation before the fall, and when he falls into sin? How does Adam's first sin affect the human race?

### **The Meaning of Romans 5:12–21**

It is clear from Romans 5:12–21 that there are parallels between Adam and Christ. Each of these two persons is the representative for a larger group. Adam represents all humanity. Technically, Christ himself, who is a descendant of Adam (Luke 3:23–38), is an exception to the pattern for all other descendants of Adam because of his divine nature and his special birth. Christ is the representative for all those who are joined to him spiritually, through the power of the Holy Spirit, through faith in Christ.

What happened to Adam, when he sinned, has effects on all those whom he represented. Likewise, what happened to Christ, in his obedience, death, and resurrection, has effects on all those whom he represents.

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For

the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom. 5:15–21)

What is the nature of the representation in the two cases? What ties Adam to those under him? Is Adam the head in exactly the same way that Christ is? Romans 5:12–21 does point out parallels, but it also points out differences. And one can see a difference when looking at the rest of the Bible. Adam is joined to his descendants by the fact that they are his descendants. They are joined with him biologically, by procreation. It is not the only way that they are joined, but it is the most obvious. Christ, by contrast, is joined to his people by the presence of the Holy Spirit and the work of the Holy Spirit. People become new creatures not by bodily birth but by birth from the Spirit (John 3:5–8).

Many passages speak about some aspect of believers' union with Christ. Romans 5:12–21 seems to be the only extended passage that speaks about Adam's union with his descendants. First Corinthians 15:20–23 and 44–49 are also pertinent, but in most ways they add little to Romans 5. Romans 5 indicates that Adam is a representative for all humanity and that his sin affected all humanity. But it does not get into the details of why. What kind of relation did Adam have to Eve and his descendants, such that his sin had these effects? It is tempting to get into speculation to try to fill in what remains unexplained about what Romans 5 says.

For a full exposition of Romans 5:12–21, readers may consult John Murray’s book *The Imputation of Adam’s Sin*.<sup>1</sup> The parallels with the work of Christ in 5:12–21 are a great help, but the passage also underlines the differences between Adam and Christ. These differences are primarily in the form of opposites. Adam brought sin and death. Christ brought righteousness and life.

The effects of Christ’s work include both justification and sanctification. God gives us the right standing, in the form of perfection in his presence, through the perfection of Christ that is imputed (reckoned) to us by virtue of our union with Christ (Rom. 5:1; 2 Cor. 5:21). This perfection is the meaning of *justification*. *Sanctification* denotes the gradual change in our holiness of character, mind, and behavior as Christians are progressively conformed to the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). Both justification and sanctification include both a positive aspect and a negative aspect. The negative aspect of justification is the forgiveness of sins. The positive aspect is the imputation of Christ’s perfect righteousness to those who believe in him and are united to him by faith. Christ’s righteousness counts for us, in the sight of God. The negative aspect of sanctification is the progressive cleansing from remaining indwelling sin and putting it to death (Col. 3:5). The positive aspect of sanctification is God’s making us more and more holy, more and more conformed to the likeness of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). The positive and negative sides are two sides to the same coin.

### **The Effects of Adam’s Sin**

The effects of Adam’s sin are the opposites of the effects of Christ’s work. As the opposite of justification, there is guilt and condemnation. The opposition appears especially in Romans 5:16: “For the judgment following one trespass brought *condemnation*, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification.” Verse 18 makes a similar point, and underlines the fact that effects pass to “all men.” The “one trespass” is Adam’s sin in eating

1. John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam’s Sin* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980); see also Hans Madueme, “Mea Culpa: An Apology for Original Guilt,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 32 (2021): 7–34.

of the fruit. It brought “condemnation,” which is the opposite of justification. It is important to note that verse 18 uses “condemnation,” a word about judicial *status*, instead of a word about sinful nature or sinful pollution (such as *sin*, or *sinfulness*, or *pollution*, or *defilement*, or *wickedness*, or *iniquity*). “All men” are condemned because they are guilty. Romans 3:21–5:1 and 8:1 further expound the meaning of justification. Nothing in the passage 5:12–19 suggests that Adam’s descendants are guilty *merely* because they engage in sins of their own. The focus is on only one sin, the sin of Adam.<sup>2</sup> All people are guilty in Adam. As 1 Corinthians 15:22 puts it, “As in Adam all die” (and death is the judicial penalty for guilt).

Romans 5:19 makes the same point: “For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.” “Made sinners” and “made righteous” mean that people were constituted sinners and constituted righteous by imputation.<sup>3</sup> Some interpreters have thought that verse 19 is more inclusive, encompassing the aspect of sanctification. Even if this aspect is included, the point still holds that Adam’s sin brought condemnation to all and that Christ’s obedience brings justification to those who are united to him.

In addition, Adam’s inward sinful corruption is reversed for the Christian in the process of sanctification, that is, growth in holiness. Romans 6–8 describes the process. In Romans 8, the “mind set on the flesh” in verses 5–8 is really the Adamic mind, the mind of all fallen human beings:

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom. 8:5–8)

2. Romans 5:20 indicates that sin multiplies. But the focus is on a different event, the coming of the law (the Mosaic law): “Now the law came in . . .”

3. Murray, *Imputation of Adam’s Sin*, 11; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 204–6.

“To set the mind on the flesh is *death*” (Rom. 8:6). The theme of death connects these verses with the reign of death mentioned in Romans 5:12–21. How did human beings come to be in the realm of death? How did they become incapable of submitting to God’s law? Because of Adam. Human beings became people “in the flesh,” sinful in heart and mind and action. It is the opposite of sanctification.

In sum, the sin of Adam results in both guilt and sinful corruption in the whole human race (Gen. 6:5; 1 Kings 8:46; Job 14:4; Pss. 130:3; 143:2; Prov. 20:9; Eccl. 7:20).<sup>4</sup> But why? What is there about the connection between Adam and his descendants that makes guilt and sin pass from him to them? Two opposite difficulties confront us.

On the one hand, how could such a transmission of guilt and sin be just? William G. T. Shedd comments that “difficulties . . . arise from the injustice of punishing a person for a sin in which he had no kind of participation.”<sup>5</sup> There must be a connection between Adam and his posterity such that the passage of sin is compatible with justice.

On the other hand, people may try to evade Romans 5:12–21 by reinterpretation. They may picture each person as responsible for his behavior in a way completely independent of any other human being. But that interpretation has difficulties with the specific wording in Romans 5:12–21. And it then becomes difficult to explain the universality of sin and the depth of its hold on human hearts.

Several theories have arisen to explain Adam’s connection to the human race.

### **The Theory of Bad Example**

The theory of *bad example* says that Adam set a bad example by his sin. Adam’s descendants see this bad example and imitate it. Bad examples do undoubtedly have an influence on people. But by itself, this theory is

4. The list of verses comes from Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Exeter, England: Paternoster, 1986), 142.

5. William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1950), 2:30 (pt. 4, “Anthropology,” chap. 1), quoted in Murray, *Imputation of Adam’s Sin*, 24.

not sufficient. It does not explain why sin is *universal*. If it is only a matter of bad example, why do not at least *some* people ignore the bad examples, or pay attention only to good examples? In addition, why do babies show selfishness and sinful rebellion against their parents from a very early age? Even an only child who has never seen another baby fuss knows how to fuss and insist on its way.

Sin is deep and difficult and intractably part of humanity. The idea of the influence of a bad example does not reach the depths of the problem.

### **Seminal Union**

Another, more plausible theory is *seminal union*. Human beings are biologically descended from Adam. Sin propagates physically and biologically. Just as human beings receive their genes from their parents, so they receive their sin and guilt from their parents. This theory uses the analogy of biological propagation. Clearly, there is a grain of truth here. Human beings *are* biologically related to Adam. If they were not related, it is not at all clear that there could be a passage of sin and guilt between Adam and the whole race. But the biological analogy is not enough by itself. There are two difficulties.

One is that a mere biological connection, and nothing more, would not seem to be adequate for explaining the *moral* and *religious* connection between Adam and his descendants. Sin and guilt are not biological defects, comparable to an unfortunate genetic mutation passed from the father or the mother to the child. They are *ethical* defects, *religious* defects. Whether or not there is a defect in someone's body does not determine whether he is sinful.

The second difficulty is that a person's relation to his immediate parents is not on the same level as his relation to Adam. God in the Mosaic law specifically instructs: "Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. Each one shall be put to death for his own sin" (Deut. 24:16). This principle is confirmed in Ezekiel 18:

Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die. (Ezek. 18:4)

He shall not die for his father's iniquity; he shall surely live. (Ezek. 18:17)

It is true that *another* text speaks about “visiting iniquity” on children (Ex. 20:5). But it should be interpreted as dealing with multigenerational *consequences* of sin. It should be noted that the visiting of iniquity is on “those who hate me,” not indiscriminately.<sup>6</sup> One consequence of parents’ sins may be that children imitate the sins of their parents. They learn to worship the same false gods as their parents did. But even if they do not, other indirect consequences of sin may follow. If the father is a drunkard, he may leave his children no inheritance.

Romans 5:12–21 indicates that human beings have a different relation to Adam than they do to their immediate fathers. And seminal union does not help at all to explain how people are united to Christ, because the relation is not one of biological descent. So seminal union is not an adequate explanation.

### **Realistic Union**

A third theory is *realistic union*. Shedd is a good representative.<sup>7</sup> Murray describes it succinctly:

In brief, the position is that human nature in its unindividualized unity existed in its entirety in Adam, that, when Adam sinned, not only did he sin but also the common nature which existed in its unity in him, and that, since each person who comes into the world is an individualization of this one human nature, each person as an

6. Kevin DeYoung, *Impossible Christianity: Why Following Jesus Does Not Mean You Have to Change the World, Be an Expert in Everything, Accept Spiritual Failure, and Feel Miserable Pretty Much All the Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 86.

7. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2:3–94.



“individualized portion” of that common nature is both culpable and punishable for the sin committed by that unity.<sup>8</sup>

Murray’s book provides the full explanation of similarities and differences between his own “representative” view and Shedd’s “realistic” view. Murray points out that both views affirm seminal union as one aspect, and that both affirm the unity of human nature.<sup>9</sup> The decisive difference, Murray thinks, is that the realistic view postulates “an entity [human nature] which existed in its totality in Adam and is individualized in the members of the race.”<sup>10</sup>

Murray has three objections to this distinctive postulate in the realistic view:<sup>11</sup>

- (1) There is no adequate scriptural basis for it.
- (2) It does not match the structure of imputation of Christ’s righteousness. In the case of this latter imputation, there is no common, undifferentiated “nature” from which individuals are split off.
- (3) It does not actually solve the problem that it is supposed to solve, the problem of unjust punishment. Murray comments:

For the real question is how the individual members of the race can bear the guilt of a sin in which they did not, *as individuals*, personally and voluntarily participate. . . . The sin of generic humanity is just as far removed from the individual sin of the members of posterity as is the sin of a representative head and that for the simple reason that *as individuals* posterity did not yet exist.<sup>12</sup>

8. Murray, *Imputation of Adam’s Sin*, 24. Murray cites Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2:43–44.

9. Murray, *Imputation of Adam’s Sin*, 26–27.

10. Murray, 27.

11. Murray, 32–36. Murray also includes a fourth point, namely, that representative solidarity can be construed in another way.

12. Murray, 32–33.

## Corporate Personality

The next theory is *corporate personality*. The idea of corporate personality seems to have primarily arisen from the influence of H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel*.<sup>13</sup> The idea is that ancient Israel sometimes treated groups as if they were a single person. There are difficulties with the term *corporate personality* as it came to be used more broadly in biblical studies and in theology. For one thing, some of the evidence cited in its favor moved directly from specific vocabulary or grammar to broad conceptual conclusions, violating the principles of semantics. In addition, it was sometimes not clear what exactly *corporate personality* meant.

Do the Israelites have an actual mental confusion between an individual and the group? Or is the theory of corporate personality merely a broad observation, to the effect that many cultures understand that cohesive social groups of various kinds have a determinate structure that impacts their members and outsiders with whom the group interacts? A family or a clan remains in some ways the same family or clan when one member dies or when a new member is added by birth or marriage or adoption. A government remains in some sense the same government when a king is succeeded by his son. The decrees and acts of the king have effects on his subjects. A decision by the father of a family has effects on his family. These commonplaces are not unique to Israel or to any one culture. Some cultures, indeed, may feel a stronger sense of group identity and loyalty than others. There may be many variations. What *kinds* of groups have what kinds of corporate unities and responsibilities may vary from culture to culture.

One member—typically a head—may represent a family or a club or a business. So is *corporate personality* merely an alternative description of *representation*?

There can also be instances of transmission of guilt. If your family or your gang engages in criminal activity, and you go along passively

13. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

without any protest, you have a measure of guilt. This effect is a kind of corporate responsibility.

If *corporate personality* is going to have a chance to serve as an effective separate explanation, its advocates have to clearly define what it means. For example, is it the same as corporate responsibility, or something else? The advocates also need to give solid evidence that such a meaning exists in the society that they are describing.

### **Legal Representation**

Another theory is that of *legal representation*. Legal representation is representation established by law. Individuals and groups can be made legally liable or have only limited liability on the basis of a contractual arrangement. For example, a modern corporation is a social entity that is recognized by law as having its own responsibilities, once it has gone through the process of legal “incorporation.” It is “a legal person.” The CEO and the board of directors represent the corporation in various ways. A labor union leader, elected according to law, represents the union that he leads. The coach or team captain represents his team.

The example of the team captain shows that the principle of representation extends out into areas with more informal arrangements. The team probably did not draw up a legal document to specify who was their captain. They just took a vote or did it by common consent. But there was some process by which the team captain came to be recognized as having a special role.

Is this analogy useful in dealing with Adam? God’s covenant with Adam has a legal aspect. But that is only one side to it. God’s relation with Adam was not merely a contract that held the two parties at a distance. There was intimacy, which is one reason why it can be compared to a father’s relation to his son. Adam was a son of God. The other disadvantage in using a legal comparison is that contracts can be drawn up in almost any way people wish. This potential for arbitrary conditions in a contract raises again the specter of *heteronomy*. Is a contract being imposed on Adam with no regard to who Adam is? People can imagine all kinds of possibilities. For example, a contract might specify that Adam’s descendants will suffer for

his disobedience. But that might be an arbitrary specification. Allegedly, a contract could just as easily specify that Adam's dog would suffer for Adam's disobedience, or that the angel Gabriel would suffer.

Hence, a narrowly legal interpretation of the covenant with Adam is insufficient as an explanation for the effects on Adam's posterity.

### **Broad Representation**

A final theory is what might be called *broad representation*. John Murray is a proponent. He describes his approach as "the representative view."<sup>14</sup> But he does not explain representation in a narrowly external, legal way. What he means is that descriptions applying to the representative figure also apply to those he represents. And benefits that the representative achieves through his work apply to those whom he represents.

So, for example, Christ our representative bore the guilt of our sins and was punished. Accordingly, believers united to him were punished in him. That is why they are freed from eternal punishment now. Christ died. Accordingly, believers died with him. Christ was raised in righteousness. Accordingly, believers are righteous, by virtue of their union with him. Christ has resurrection life. Accordingly, believers have resurrection life.

Murray sees that the same pattern occurs with Adam. Adam sinned. Therefore, those whom he represented sinned. Adam was guilty. Therefore, his descendants are guilty in Adam. Adam was polluted by sin. Therefore, his descendants are polluted. It is in this sense that Adam was our representative. Human beings have representative union with him.

What is the meaning of *broad representation*? It is less like an explanation than like a description. It describes the parallels between Adam and his posterity. It describes the parallels between Christ and his spiritual posterity. But does it "explain" why the parallels exist? It is closer to being the case that it simply *describes* the parallels. It accepts that there is a union between Adam and his posterity that makes the parallels appropriate. And likewise there is a union with Christ, for those who belong to him.

14. Murray, *Imputation of Adam's Sin*, 36.

In this respect, this representative view is vaguer than any of the preceding five theories. But its vagueness can be a kind of strength. It affirms what the Scripture affirms about the parallels in Romans 5:12–21. The five other theories also affirm the parallels, but then try to explain the parallels further. In doing so, they generate difficulties. The broad-representation view could be seen as a kind of common ground, safer and better supported biblically than any one of the other five theories. Indeed, Murray in his book affirms the reality of a seminal relation to Adam and the reality of common human nature.<sup>15</sup> He acknowledges a grain of truth in the seminal-union theory and the realistic-union theory. But he does not agree that they contain in themselves a full explanation.

A broad understanding of representation in Adam is connected with other, analogous kinds of representation in the Bible. David fights Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. David is the representative for the whole Israelite army, and indeed all of Israel. If he wins, Israel wins. If he is defeated, the people of Israel become slaves (1 Sam. 17:9). In other instances of battle, the king and his army represent the entire nation. Their victory or defeat counts for the nation. The heads of the twelve tribes are representatives for the tribes (Num. 7:12–83). The high priest represents the people and intercedes on their behalf (Lev. 16:17–21). In 1 Kings 12:1–15, Jeroboam appears to represent the people of Israel and to be their spokesman. The rulers of the synagogue are representatives of the synagogue (Acts 13:15). In Acts 24:1, Tertullus is the spokesman for the Jewish leaders at Paul's trial. Fathers are the representatives for their families.<sup>16</sup>

### **Limitations of the Various Views**

How, then, do we assess the various views about Adam's relation to the human race? The sixth view, the broad-representation view, is fully

15. Murray, 37.

16. Nathaniel Sutanto comments concerning Herman Bavinck's view: "This moral unity [of mankind] is found in many aspects of human society, from the family to the nations, in which the decisions of one leader or member can significantly affect others" (Sutanto, "Herman Bavinck on the Image of God and Original Sin," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18, no. 2 [April 2016]: 174–90 [187]).

biblical. Its only limitation is that it does not fully explain the details of *how* Adam represents us. Each of the other views has serious limitations.

(1) The bad-example view does not explain the universality of sin or its depth.

(2) The seminal-union view makes a valid point about there being a biological connection. But it fails to explain adequately how biological transmission leads to ethical and spiritual transmission of sin and guilt. In addition, it does not explain the unique role of Adam, in contrast to later parents.

(3) The realistic-union view makes a valid point about the unity of human nature. But it does not steer completely clear of an impersonalistic view of undifferentiated human nature.

(4) The corporate-personality view makes a valid point about human solidarity in groups. Some of the illustrations have to do with the unity of social institutions through generations of time. People are linked to their ancestors and to their posterity. Governments often have continuity through generations. But such things are broad cultural patterns, which do not provide explanations specifically for the transmission of sin. Many of the apt illustrations have to do with a group composed of people who are all alive at the same time. The solidarity experienced by people living together contemporaneously does not explain how sin could propagate to generations not yet alive. Moreover, the corporate-personality view tends to be too vague, or to have inadequate evidence, or to coalesce with a representative view.

(5) Legal representation, if used as a complete explanation, results in a legal fiction. Adam's posterity are treated as legally guilty even though they are not.

We can add insights by considering the issue of representation from new perspectives, as we will in the next chapter.

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on Adam as a Representative**

In Acts 2, Peter and the other apostles are leaders and representatives for the whole church. The corporate unity of the church is evident. And

the decisive and leading role of the apostles is also evident. This unified and representative structure is one of many analogies that involve social groups with an aspect of broad representation. It confirms that broad representation exists and makes sense. It suggests that this case is analogous to Adam. Consider also Jesus' exaltation, as mentioned in Acts 2:33. Jesus as our representative brings us benefits by virtue of his obedience in death, his resurrection, his exaltation, and his receiving the Spirit from the Father. This role is genuinely parallel with Adam, as Romans 5:12–21 indicates.

### **Key Terms**

|                       |                      |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| broad representation  | realistic union      |
| corporate personality | representative       |
| heteronomy            | representative union |
| imputation            | sanctification       |
| justification         | semantics            |
| legal representation  | seminal union        |
| Murray, John          | son of God           |

### **Study Questions**

1. What does it mean for Adam to be the representative for all humanity?
2. How are Adam and Christ parallel? How do they differ?
3. What are the many theories that try to explain how Adam's sin is propagated to us?
4. What are the objections to the theory of seminal union?
5. What are the objections to the theory of corporate personality?
6. What are the objections to the theory of propagation of sin by legal representation?
7. How do the theories about sin have relevance for how we understand our own sin?

### **For Further Reading**

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8. Pp. 3:100–117.

### **Prayer**

Our Father, thank you for giving us the benefits of salvation on the basis of Jesus, who represents us. We admit that it is mysterious. We praise you that it is possible, and that you have made it actual, through the work of Jesus in time and space. Thank you that Jesus is the perfect representative for us.





## OTHER CONSTRUALS OF ADAM'S REPRESENTATIVE ROLE

We can add to our discussion of Adam's representative role by considering the variety of analogies that can be used to describe Adam's role.

### **Principal Analogies**

Each of the views from the previous chapter employs a principal analogy.

(1) The bad-example view treats sin as analogous to one human being's imitating another. In many cases, the imitation may be a good kind of imitation. A student imitates the teacher in learning how to solve a problem in physics. A child imitates his parent in learning how to keep a garden free from weeds. Imitation of a bad example is treated as analogous to imitating a good example.

(2) The seminal-union view uses as its principal analogy the analogy with biological propagation. An apple tree produces apples, and the seeds in the apples produce more apple trees. Mice propagate more mice. The future generations of mice are still mice. They are like their parents. Many things that describe the parent mice also apply to the offspring. The same then applies to human beings by analogy. Sin is ethical, rather than biological. But still, by analogy, it makes some sense that if the parents are sinful, the children will be sinful.

(3) The realistic-union view uses the principal analogy of a common nature and the individuals who have that nature. Many descriptions about the mouse species apply to any individual mouse within the species. Likewise, descriptions concerning human nature apply to each individual having that nature. This analogy is useful. Again, it alerts people to patterns of unity and diversity in the created world. If human nature is sinful, it follows that if someone is human, he will be sinful. The weakness in this analogy is that human nature as created, that is, human nature in its original good form, is distinct from fallen human nature.

To this weakness, the realistic view says in response that there was a change in human nature when Adam fell. But the change, such as it was, was an ethical change. It did not convert human beings into tigers or into angels or demons. Human beings remain human. In that sense, human nature remains the same. So there is still not an explanation for why new individuals who come into the world have a human nature tainted by sin and guilt, rather than being able to start all over again with an untainted human nature.

The Westminster Larger Catechism says, “The covenant being made with Adam as a *public* person, not for himself only, but for his posterity, all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in that first transgression” (WLC 22, *italics added*). Romans 5:12–21 indicates that Adam’s first sin had wider effects. But Romans 5:12–21 does not tell us everything about *why* those effects happened. In particular, was the wider change due to a change in “human nature,” in general, as *distinct* from a change in Adam as an individual or as “a public person”? The Westminster Larger Catechism, in using the term *ordinary generation*, means to exclude Jesus Christ and the virgin conception. Jesus’ conception results in Jesus’ having a human nature, but *not* human nature that “sinned in him [Adam].” Human nature as such can still be distinguished from sinful human nature.

Moreover, at the time when Adam fell, Eve also fell. “Human nature” at the time was not completely undifferentiated. It was differentiated into two people. Eve was as fully human as Adam, and she embodied human nature just as much as Adam did. The presence of Eve shows us a weakness

in the realistic view. The realistic view depends on the idea that human nature as a whole sinned in Adam. Why Adam and not Eve? Why indeed does Scripture not focus wholly on Eve's sin, since it apparently precedes Adam's sin by a short time? Why does Romans 5:12–21 put the focus wholly on Adam and not on Eve?

By contrast, the legal-representation view avoids this dilemma by saying that Adam is legally the head of the human race—including Eve.

In addition, Christ's human nature presents a difficulty for the realistic theory. The realistic theory says that each of us is a guilty sinner because our human nature (according to the realistic definition) is somehow a break-off or differentiation from the original undifferentiated human nature in Adam. But if so, would it not imply that Christ is also a guilty sinner?

The realistic view produces at this point a logical and theological dilemma. Either Christ has a full, authentic human nature or he does not. If he does not, he is unable to serve as our representative and to save us. Hebrews 2:17 indicates the importance of his sharing in our nature: "Therefore he [Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people." On the other hand, if Christ *does* share in our nature, the realistic theory implies that he would share in Adam's sin and guilt, because his human nature, like ours, is broken off from Adam. And if he were to share in Adam's guilt, he would not be "a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Peter 1:19).<sup>1</sup> His own guilt would mean that he himself would need to be saved. He could not save us. The realistic view must therefore be rejected because it leads to unbiblical conclusions.

It is true that Christ was conceived in a special way, miraculously, in the womb of the virgin Mary. But within the framework of a realistic theory of human nature, such an exception does not solve the difficulty. Regardless of *how* he was conceived, either he shares our nature or he

1. Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *Anthropology*, ed. John R. De Witt, Daan van der Kraan, and Harry Boonstra, trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2014), 6.

does not.<sup>2</sup> The only way for him to share our nature, according to the realistic theory, would be for a portion of it to be broken off from Mary. But then it would be *sinful* human nature.

Geerhardus Vos points out that William G. T. Shedd, a principal representative of the realistic theory, affirms that Christ would have had to redeem his own human nature from guilt: “it is conceded that that portion of human nature which the Logos assumed into union with himself was redeemed.”<sup>3</sup> Vos repudiates the idea: “If Christ needed a justification for the human nature that He Himself possessed, then for us the consolation of His suretyship is gone. One should therefore be warned.”<sup>4</sup> Vos rightly rejects the view because it leads to an unbiblical conclusion about Christ.

(4) The corporate-personality view uses the principal analogy of a group’s being like a single individual. But it needs further definition. The description applying to a group or its spokesman often applies to the individuals in the group.

(5) The legal-representation view uses the principal analogy of a contract or legal document that specifies human relations.

2. William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1950), 2:295–306 (pt. 5, “Christology,” chap. 1, point 9), discusses the virgin conception at some length, endeavoring to avoid the dilemma. His solution postulates that the starting point for the generation of the human nature of Christ is “the substance of Mary” (2:303), which is sinful. “Hence [!] we must postulate a *renewing* and *sanctifying* operation of the Holy Spirit, in connection with his quickening energy” (2:304). In Shedd’s solution, the dilemma remains, at least in part. If the sanctifying occurs before a part of Mary’s substance is broken off, it results in cleansing Mary, not Christ, and is akin to the Roman Catholic dogma of Mary’s immaculate conception. This does not appear to be Shedd’s view. If the sanctifying occurs at the point of breaking off, or after it, then the starting point for Christ’s distinctive human nature is guilt and pollution. Christ’s human nature, as such, is being depicted as in need of redemption, rather than being the originally pure nature that can serve to redeem us. Shedd quotes in his favor John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.13.4: “he [Christ] was sanctified by the Spirit, so that his generation was pure and holy, such as it would have been before the fall of Adam.” But Calvin, unlike Shedd, avoids implying that there was an earlier polluted part of human nature with which the sanctification started. Calvin in the same passage affirms that Romans 8:3 “distinctively separates him from the common lot, as being true man, and yet without fault and corruption.”

3. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 2:82 (pt. 4, “Anthropology,” chap. 1), quoted in Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:6.

4. Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:6.

(6) The broad-representation view describes the way in which analogous descriptions apply to Adam and his posterity. It is capable of acknowledging all the analogies used in the other five views. But it does not regard any one of these analogies as more than an analogy. None of these by itself is the final explanation. The broad-representation view is fully biblical.

### **The Perspective of Sonship: Basic Features**

Let us continue to reflect on Adam's representative role by using other analogies from the Bible. Consider the analogy of sonship and family. A son is united with his family. Call it *familial union*. This approach self-consciously uses a perspective, the perspective that starts with the theme of sonship.

According to this approach, Adam is the father of the extended family that is humanity. All his posterity are his "children" in an extended sense. This family analogy can include an affirmation of the validity of other analogies.

Think first of an ordinary human family with parents and children. A single family shows an intertwining of legal, social, biological, and part-whole aspects. There are legal aspects because civil law recognizes that in normal cases, parents have authority to take charge of their children, while people outside the family do not. The social aspect includes providing shelter, protection, and nurture. It includes all kinds of social interactions, such as love, verbal communication, tangible gifts, hugs, eating together, working together, and playing together. In the typical case, children are the biological offspring of their parents. And there is a part-whole structure. Each person within the family is a part of the family, and the family is the whole of which he or she is a part.

The bad-example view correlates with the fact that children learn to imitate their parents. The seminal view correlates with the biological dimension of the family. The realistic view correlates with the part-whole dimension of the family. The corporate-personality view correlates with part-whole and also with the family's sense that it is a corporate whole. The legal-representation view correlates with the legal aspect in the family. The broad-representation view correlates with all the aspects

of the family analogy, since it is designed to affirm a broad pattern of descriptions being reflected in those who are represented.

### **The Perspective of Sonship: Some Subthemes**

Now consider some of the subthemes that Romans 8 associates with sonship: intimacy, inheritance, freedom, and likeness (see chapter 13).

*Intimacy.* Adam in the fall loses intimacy with God. Human beings are in Adam's family and are intimate with Adam. And so human beings in general, by their intimacy with Adam, lose intimacy with God. They also lose some of their intimacy with other human beings. There is quarreling, strife, hatred, and war.

This loss of intimacy is illustrated when Adam is cast out of the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:23–24). He and Eve have to leave physically. They are barred from coming back. Adam's descendants are born outside the garden. They are in the sphere of physical separation from the special presence of God in his holiness and intimacy. This physical separation symbolizes the deeper spiritual separation from God. It makes sense that human beings are there because that is where Adam and Eve are, and where their descendants have been ever since. It is different for Jesus, who comes "from above" (John 3:31; 8:23).

The later discussion in the New Testament focuses on Adam rather than Adam and Eve together, because as the husband, and later a father, Adam represents the whole family.

*Inheritance.* Sons inherit from the fathers. Adam our father lost his inheritance in the garden of Eden. So his descendants do not have it either.<sup>5</sup> He lost his inheritance in the tree of life. So his descendants do not have it either. This theme of inheritance also helps explain the New Testament focus on Adam and not Eve. This focus operates against the Old Testament background, according to which sons, and not daughters, ordinarily inherit the land belonging to their fathers. (In the New

5. Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Todd M. Rester (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 3.43, 1.4.1.XVIII: "when parents lose possession of a fief, the children also lose it."

Testament, through Christ, inheritance comes to both sons and daughters because all believers are united to Christ, who is the Son, Gal. 3:28–29.)

*Freedom.* Adam was a free son of God before the fall. When he fell, he became a slave to sin (John 8:34; Rom. 6:20; 2 Peter 2:19). In the ancient Near East, the children of slaves also belong to the master who owns the slaves. The children are born into slavery because of the slave status of their parents.<sup>6</sup> Sin owns us because it owns Adam our father.

*Likeness.* Sons are like their fathers. The father Adam is a sinner, so the sons are sinners like him. He is guilty, so they are guilty like him.

## **Difficulties**

Within the bounds of this analogy of sonship, is there an explanation for the uniqueness of Adam's *first* sin? No analogy will explain everything. There is always mystery, because an analogy is an analogy and not a perfect identity. It is not a perfect match. Nevertheless, a natural uniqueness belongs to Adam's first sin. It, and not subsequent sins, is the thing that makes him an archetypal sinner. It, and not the later sins, makes him an archetypal bearer of guilt. He is the father of the human family, and as father he is the head. He is the archetype for everyone in the family.

The idea of an archetype also helps explain why Adam is unique in comparison to our parents or our grandparents. It is true that intimacy, inheritance, freedom, and likeness do propagate in the short run, from parents to their children in the first generation. But Adam is the archetypal father and the archetypal parent. It is he to whom the pattern attaches in its original form.

## **Priesthood**

Consider also the biblical theme of priest as a helpful analogy. We have already seen that Adam can be viewed as a priest in the service of God

6. Ex. 21:4; Benjamin B. Warfield, "Imputation," in *Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 265.



(chapter 13). Is there a parallel between Adam and the later priesthood, such as would throw light on his representative role?

Aaron the high priest represents the people when he comes before God on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). The purpose of the ceremonies is that Israel would be renewed in holiness. Holiness moves from God to the sacrifices that he receives, to Aaron the high priest, and to the people. Holiness propagates. Holiness propagates from Aaron to the people because Aaron is appointed by God as their representative. Aaron is also a kinsman of the people (Heb. 7:5), so there is an element of natural bond in kinship. There is also a social bond—they are all part of one people, ruled by one law of God. The appointment of Aaron as high priest takes place by the word of God, which is his law. So there is a kind of legal dimension to Aaron's role.

Is there an undifferentiated human nature in Aaron that would then be broken off to pass to the Israelites? No. But in a broader sense, there is *one* people of Israel, who are knitted together not primarily by kinship alone but by the spiritual bond of being set apart as a unique people holy to the Lord, “a kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:5–6). There is one priestly “nature,” one might almost say, though it is important to note that Aaron alone is the high priest; the sons of Aaron alone are qualified to offer sacrifices. The general priesthood of the Israelite nation as a whole is on a lower level. Nevertheless, the Israelites are holy as a nation together. And that bond of nation and kingdom is one aspect that might make it appropriate for holiness to pass from Aaron to the people through the ceremonies, especially the ceremonies of the Day of Atonement.

Now, all this theme of holiness functions on a symbolic level, as Hebrews indicates: the tabernacle and its ordinances are “symbolic for the present age.” They “deal only with food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation” (Heb. 9:9–10). Though the symbolism is outward in its character, to those who have faith it could function in its own time to unite them to Christ and his benefits.<sup>7</sup>

7. The Westminster Confession of Faith succinctly summarizes the efficacy of the symbolic ordinances:

This covenant [of grace] was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies,

This symbolism functions as an analogy. The priesthood of Aaron and the sacrifices in the tabernacle symbolize by analogy the priesthood of Christ and his sacrifice. Believers receive the benefits of Christ's sacrifice. Christ's work transfers to his people because he is the head of his people and is united to them in the Holy Spirit. So the illustration of the Aaronic priesthood, partial though it is, contains genuinely illuminating analogies for understanding the union of Christ with his people.

It was fair and "just" and compatible with the perfect holiness of God that holiness should be transferred from Aaron to the people. It was, whether later interpreters understand it perfectly or not. It is God who has set up the whole arrangement for the tabernacle and the Day of Atonement. He is the one who tells people that it is the right way to obtain holiness. Those who are sinners need to receive holiness from someone else. And they *can* receive it. God makes provision for them.

If Israel is the new Adam figure, in some respects, then Aaron is also an Adam figure. Is he a priest in a manner parallel to Adam's priesthood? In some ways he is like Adam, because at least in a broad sense both are representatives for their kinsmen.

## **Tradition**

Why have theologians not used more vigorously the analogy of sonship or the analogy of priesthood in dealing with the mysteries involving Adam? It is hard to say. Perhaps one influence is that of tradition. The

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sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation. (WCF 7.5)

Although the work of redemption was not actually wrought by Christ till after his incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefits thereof were communicated unto the elect, in all ages successively from the beginning of the world, in and by those promises, types, and sacrifices, wherein he was revealed, and signified to be the seed of the woman which should bruise the serpent's head; and the Lamb slain from the beginning of the world; being yesterday and today the same, and forever. (WCF 8.6)

Bible alone is the infallible standard for Christian doctrine. But there is so much to learn from the theologians of later generations. It is natural for theologians to follow the patterns that their predecessors have historically laid down in their Christian wisdom. The patterns of covenant and covenantal headship, as well as the pattern of a single human nature, are already there and have already been discussed by previous generations. So it is natural to think that these patterns can provide all the answers.

The questions that arise within the framework of these patterns are important. But biblical theology, with its multiplicity of themes, may lead people to ask other questions as well—or rather, to ask questions from different perspectives, and to add more richness to answers from the past.

### **Metaphysical Search**

In addition to paying attention to the use of analogies, chapter 7 tells us to pay attention to the question of metaphysics. The six approaches to Adam's role are understandable as uses of analogies or perspectives. But in addition, some people might use one or more of the perspectives in a search for a kind of ultimate metaphysical framework for Adam's role.

For example, the seminal view might be attractive to someone who would already like to base everything on material forces. So biology would be viewed as the proper basis for understanding humanity. For instance, evolutionary naturalism says that human nature is biologically maintained through the processes of cell division and sexual propagation. *Sin*, if there is such a thing, is merely one aspect of human nature. But evolutionary naturalism cannot accept that there was an ethical and religious fall that permanently changed the descendants—beyond the immediate social influence of one person on another. According to naturalism, the salient causation for human nature itself is always biological.

Similarly, the realistic view might be attractive to someone who already has Aristotelian metaphysics in the back of his mind. This metaphysics encourages one to account for any one individual primarily as a member of the species to which he belongs. In Aristotle, the essence of any one

man is the essence of humanity, what makes humanity what it is.<sup>8</sup> What is characteristic of humanity as an essence belongs also to each individual human being. It belongs to him automatically because the “essence,” in Aristotle’s thinking, determines what is essential to each individual who possesses the essence. Now, such a view has a grain of truth because God has created the world with distinct “kinds” of animals and plants, and humanity also is a distinct kind. But it is God, not nature, that does the specifications. It is God who is the source for both unity and diversity.

The corporate-personality view might be attractive to someone who thinks that the Israelites have a special cultural metaphysics, according to which there was no clear distinction between the group and the individual. The modern attraction to corporate personality exists partly among interpreters of the Bible who do not believe it themselves, but who think that the Israelites believed it. It is an attractive view for people who are inclined to think that an approach through social anthropology offers the primary way to explain the textures of Israelite thinking and practice. But it ignores the central role that God himself has in giving his word to Israel.

The legal-representation view might be attractive to someone who wants to make the law the metaphysical basis for everything else.

In all these cases, some people might have the desire to go permanently beyond the realm of multiple analogies into the realm of exact theory. The theory would describe things exactly, rather than by an analogy. The theory promises to tell people for all time how a given thing or relation or structure holds together. By contrast, an analogy provides people with truth but also leaves mysteries.

### The Perspectives of *Lex Christi*

The ten perspectives of the *lex Christi* framework can also illumine Adam’s representative role. These perspectives, as we have seen, have relevance to all redemptive history and to creation. They have that relevance because they correlate the nature of God with the nature of man.

8. Christopher Shields, “Aristotle,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2022), § 5, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/aristotle/>.

*1C. Supreme.* In line with the first commandment, God is absolutely supreme. Human beings have a derivative supremacy, as expressed in the theme of human dominion in Genesis 1:26 and 28. Loss of supremacy on the part of Adam is like loss of kingship. If a king has lost his kingship, he cannot pass it on to his sons. Therefore, Adam's descendants have lost supremacy. (Though a remnant of it remains, as expressed in Genesis 9:2–3.)

*2C. Holy.* Adam was originally holy, as indicated by describing the garden of Eden as “the holy mountain of God” (Ezek. 28:14; cf. v. 13). In the fall, Adam lost his priestly holiness, as indicated by his expulsion from the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:22–24). And with that loss, holiness was forfeited for his line of descendants. Holiness is redemptively restored in Christ, foreshadowed by priests such as Melchizedek and Aaron. The priests in the line of Aaron illustrate by analogy how holiness can pass from father to son, but exclude the Israelites who are not sons of Aaron. Adam's fall put him outside the line of holiness.

*3C. Blessed.* Adam lost God's blessing. So he cannot pass a blessing on to his descendants, in the manner of Isaac (Gen. 27:28–29) or Jacob (48:15–16, 20; 49:2–27) or Aaron (Num. 6:22–27).

*4C. Dynamic.* According to the fourth commandment, Adam is supposed to act dynamically in line with the pattern of work and rest. But now, having become a sinner, the dynamism operates negatively to multiply sin. His sin and guilt propagates dynamically forward to his descendants.

*5C. Harmonious.* Adam lost harmony with God. His children live in harmony with the disharmony of sin that he introduced.

*6C. Life.* Adam lost life and entered the realm of spiritual death. He cannot pass spiritual life on to his descendants. As an aspect of the theme of life, an “organic” unity belongs to a single organism. An organism is one organism with many parts (1 Cor. 12:12–27). This display of unity in diversity belongs to many living things, each of which is an organism. So the theme of life also leads to the use of a particular analogy: the analogy between the human race and an organism.<sup>9</sup>

9. *Organism* is a key theme in the theology of Herman Bavinck and has a role in his explanation of Adam's representative role (Nathaniel Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck on the

7C. *Intimate*. Adam lost intimacy with God. His descendants, who are intimate with him, lose intimacy with God. This loss is illustrated in the fact that the children are born outside the garden of Eden.

8C. *Giving*. Adam lost the gift of fellowship with God. He does not have it to give as an inheritance to his descendants.

9C. *Truthful*. Adam repudiated the truth and accepted Satan's lie about God and the fruit. He is a living lie, and he does not have the truth to pass on to his children.

10C. *Contented*. Adam lost contentedness in God. He does not have the sufficiency of God to pass to his children.

The six views of Adam's headship pick up on some of the ways that Adam's loss propagates to his children:

(1) Children imitate their parents. The theme of imitation appears directly in 4C, where human beings imitate God's pattern of work and rest. It also appears indirectly in 6C, with its theme of life, because the descendants of living things are like the parents.

(2) The seminal view starts with the theme of the propagation of biological life, which is closely related to 6C.

(3) The realistic view starts with the theme of human solidarity, which is closely related to 5C.

(4) The corporate-personality view also starts with the theme of human solidarity, but particularly as it comes to expression in perceptions of intimacy within a unified group. So it is related to 5C and 7C.

(5) The legal-representation view starts with authoritative verbal specifications, which are closely related to the covenant theme associated with 2C.

(6) The broad-representation view observes multiple patterns belonging to representation. It is closely related to 5C.

All the views assume that there is a propagation of sin. The idea of propagation is related to 4C, dynamicity. Three of the views, namely, the bad-example view, the seminal view, and the broad-representation view,

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Image of God and Original Sin," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18, no. 2 [April 2016]: 174–90).

have a sustained focus on the dynamic of propagation. Propagation is less in focus in the realistic view (3) because the focus is on the permanent reality of human nature. The corporate-personality theory (4) builds most conspicuously on cases of groups with simultaneously living members. So it may easily seem that the description of the group applies as a description of each member, statically, at any one time. Or the description applies statically throughout all generations. The legal-representation view (5) is dominated by the idea of a fixed contract or legal text.

The perspective of sonship is closely related to 5C, with its theme of harmony, because the fifth commandment focuses on the relation of children to their parents. It has in the foreground the family, and other obligations to human authorities and peers are viewed through the perspective of the family.

The perspective of priesthood is closely related to 2C, with its theme of holiness. The example of Aaron shows how holiness transmits from the representative to the people.

All in all, the *lex Christi* framework offers a number of fruitful perspectives on Adam's representative role. (See table 25.1.)

**Table 25.1. Ten Perspectives on Adam's Representative Role**

| Cmd. | Specific Commands | Attributes of God | Meaning for Adam's Representation           |
|------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| 1C   | no other gods     | supreme           | kingship lost and not passed on             |
| 2C   | no idols          | holy              | holiness lost, forfeiting Adam's priesthood |
| 3C   | honor God's name  | blessed           | blessing lost and not passed on             |
| 4C   | keep the Sabbath  | dynamic           | sin propagates dynamically                  |

**Table 25.1 (continued)**

| <b>Cmd.</b> | <b>Specific Commands</b> | <b>Attributes of God</b> | <b>Meaning for Adam's Representation</b>                                                                                                     |
|-------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5C          | honor parents            | harmonious               | disharmony passed on, as seen in realistic union, corporate personality, and broad representation                                            |
| 6C          | no murder                | living                   | eternal life lost, and cannot be passed on, as seen in seminal union                                                                         |
| 7C          | no adultery              | intimate                 | intimacy with God is lost; children are born outside the garden of Eden                                                                      |
| 8C          | no stealing              | giving                   | Adam lost the gift of fellowship and cannot pass it on                                                                                       |
| 9C          | no lying                 | truthful                 | Adam accepted Satan's lie and is himself a living lie; he cannot pass truth to his children, as seen in legal representation, based on words |
| 10C         | no coveting              | contented                | Adam lost the sufficiency of contentment and cannot pass it on                                                                               |

### **Intimacy, in Man and in God**

The seventh commandment and its theme of intimacy is especially relevant to Adam's relation to the race. "No man is an island."<sup>10</sup> One of the most difficult challenges in dealing with the propagation of sin and guilt is that it seems unfair. An analyst might think: "Your acts are yours, and mine are mine. There is no transfer possible." But a picture of complete independence misrepresents the ties between persons, ties that are forged and expressed in intimacy. The appeal to intimacy does not provide people

10. John Donne, "No Man Is an Island," 1623.



with a complete, transparent solution. But it does suggest that human mistakes in reasoning about Adam as a representative fail to deal with intimacy as a deep aspect of human life.

The archetype for intimacy lies in the intimacy of the persons of the Trinity. Each person dwells in each of the other two persons. Each person knows each other person completely.<sup>11</sup>

Corresponding to this archetypal intimacy, there is a created intimacy between God and man; there is also a created intimacy between human beings. There are different *kinds* of intimacy. The intimacy between husband and wife is not the same as the intimacy between father and son. Intimacy between Adam and his descendants is not the same as intimacy between Christ and those in union with him. But both kinds of intimacy do exist.

It is notable that the language of one person's being "in" another is used in several respects. Among persons of the Trinity, the Father is "in" the Son and the Son is "in" the Father (John 17:21). This original intimacy is the basis for the intimacy that is then established between God and his people:

That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they [those who believe in me] also may be *in us* [in the Father and in the Son]. (John 17:21)

Both corporate unity ("all be one") and indwelling ("may be in us") are established by reflecting the original indwelling of the persons of the Trinity. The persons of the Trinity are not independent. So also, the persons belonging to the body of Christ are "one." Those united to Christ are "in" Christ. So likewise, those belonging to Adam are "in" Adam:

For as *in Adam* all die, so also *in Christ* shall all be made alive.  
(1 Cor. 15:22)

The reoccurrences of the key word "in" show that the unique representative role of Adam is analogous to the unique representative role of Christ.

11. Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 7 and app. J.

And that in turn, according to John 17:21, is analogous to the relation between the Father and the Son in mutual indwelling. The Spirit indwells believers, and in the Spirit the Father and the Son also indwell believers (John 14:17, 23).

The ultimate basis for understanding finite personal relations in human beings is to be found in the infinite personal relations in the Trinity. But this basis remains mysterious.

In addition, the Trinity offers an archetype for the idea of representation. Each person of the Trinity “represents” God by being God. In particular, the Son represents the Father to the world:

Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.” (John 14:9–11)

### **Unity and Diversity**

All the analogies used in dealing with the relation of Adam to his descendants have to deal with unity and diversity in the human race. If there were only diversity and no unity, each person would constitute a separate race. No possible connection would arise naturally from being human *together*. None of the analogies would really help. And the Pelagian idea that people sin only because they imitate sins of others before them does not itself help much, because imitation is still a minimal kind of connection, a minimal kind of unity. Why should human beings not imitate a jellyfish, if they have little unity with anything in particular?

Conversely, suppose that there were only unity and no diversity. Then there would in effect be only a single person in a single body. That person would allegedly be responsible for his own sins, but no one else could

come into the picture. There would be no race, but only a single person; there would be no mystery of transmission of sin and guilt, but only the “obvious” presence of sin in an indivisible mass.

At least a minimal diversity gets generated by means of sexual propagation. Someone could still envision a situation in which there is only one person whose one will operates in all the bodies, more or less like the will of an octopus operates in each of its eight arms. The arms are distinguishable, but the one octopus is responsible for what each of them does.

The Bible testifies that human beings have a unity together and at the same time have a diversity in the individuality of each one. There is both unity and diversity, and both of these run deep. The principle applies with respect to the original creation of humanity, according to the will of God. It also applies to the *new* humanity, the “one new man” in Christ, that is, the church (Eph. 2:15; cf. 4:13). This one new humanity can be compared with a single body, or organism, as in 1 Corinthians 12:12–31.<sup>12</sup>

The comparison with an organism has ties with the sixth commandment. The theme of life leads to thinking about an organism that has life. Humanity in its unity and diversity gets compared to the life of a single organism.

But that is one of several comparisons. Each of the ten perspectives in *lex Christi* is *one* perspective among *many*. There is unity and diversity at that level. In addition, each perspective has a correlation with a distinct attribute of God. The attributes of God are many attributes belonging to one God. As usual, the unity and diversity here have their ultimate root in the unity and diversity belonging to the persons of the Trinity, who are one God.

Each perspective in the *lex Christi* framework also has unity and diversity built into it because it offers us a perspective *on* everything, including all the other perspectives. Each perspective is implicit in each.

Adamic guilt can be expounded in terms of unity and diversity. The diversity in the human race is represented in the unity of the one man,

12. Note that Bavinck's use of the theme of organism rests on an appeal to unity and diversity (Sutanto, “Herman Bavinck on the Image of God and Original Sin,” 174–90).

Adam. Any one of the Ten Commandments can then be used as a perspective, showing the unity and diversity in the human race in Adam. We summarize briefly.

First, consider the theme of supremacy, associated with the first commandment (1C). God is absolutely supreme; man has derivative, limited supremacy. This supremacy belongs both to the whole of humanity and to each individual within it. Adam's loss of kingship implies the loss of kingship for his sons. The loss is implied because there is both unity and diversity in kingship, as a broad theme. The ultimate kingship belongs to God. God is one God who is the one supreme King. The Father is King; the Son is King; the Holy Spirit is King. And their joint kingship operates with differentiation in the mode of participation. The Father exercises his rule through the power of the Son, the Word, in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Now consider the theme of holiness, associated with the second commandment (2C). God is supremely holy. In his original created condition, Adam is derivatively holy. The holiness belongs to Adam, and in principle to all his descendants. Holiness belongs to their unity with Adam and to their diversity in relation to Adam and to one another. The loss of holiness is loss both to the individual and to the corporate body of humanity.

A striking illustration occurs in the case of Achan (Josh. 6–7). Achan's illicit appropriation of devoted objects contaminates both himself and the whole people of Israel:

*Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them; they have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings. Therefore the people of Israel cannot stand before their enemies. They turn their backs before their enemies, because they have become devoted for destruction. I will be with you no more, unless you destroy the devoted things from among you.* (Josh. 7:11–12)

Israel as a whole is contaminated and suffers. Holiness displays both unity and diversity.

Similarly, consider each of the other perspectives within *lex Christi*. Each expresses both unity and diversity. That is to be expected because each attribute of God, among the ten, is an attribute of *God*, who is three in one, with unity and diversity in himself.

Each of the ten perspectives may therefore serve to provide an analogy or an illustration for understanding the propagation of Adam's sin and guilt. Each perspective has unity and diversity built into it. And this unity comes to expression in humanity's connection with Adam's guilt. Humanity is *one* with Adam. The diversity affirms each person's individual responsibility, as distinct from all other human beings.

### **Multiple Perspectives on Adam's Representation**

No one perspective functions as a complete "theory" of the propagation of sin, a theory that would make transparent exactly how sin goes from Adam to all humanity. There remains mystery about Adam and the propagation of sin. The Bible contains all the themes that we have mentioned. They all display the wisdom of God. The *lex Christi* framework offers a framework in which to integrate the themes. It also integrates the positive insights belonging to each of the main theories.

### **Acts 2 as a Perspective on the Spread of Sin**

Acts 2 presents the church as a unified group, analogous to the unity of the human race in the original creation order in Genesis 1–2. As a unified group, it displays both unity and diversity. There is the unity of sharing in one Holy Spirit, who has been poured out (Acts 2:33). There is the diversity of many gifts (1 Cor. 12). Spiritual health or sickness propagates through the group, as through an organism (Acts 2:44–46; 4:32–37; 5:1–11).

### **Key Terms**

analogy  
archetype

biological propagation  
broad representation

|                       |                        |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| common nature         | metaphysical framework |
| contract              | organism               |
| corporate personality | perspective            |
| freedom               | priest                 |
| inheritance           | realistic union        |
| intimate              | representative         |
| legal representation  | seminal union          |
| <i>lex Christi</i>    | son of God             |
| likeness              | unity and diversity    |

### Study Questions

1. What analogies can be used in trying to understand the inheritance of Adam's sin?
2. How does the analogy of sonship work in understanding the transmission of Adam's sin?
3. How does the analogy of priesthood help in understanding the transmission of Adam's sin?
4. How does the *lex Christi* framework articulate the transmission of Adam's sin?
5. How does the polarity of unity and diversity illumine the transmission of Adam's sin?
6. What have you learned about your own humanity? What lessons are there for the church as a community, in its unity and diversity?

### For Further Reading

- Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8. P. 3:104.
- Poythress, Vern S. *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011. Chaps. 15, 24.

## **Prayer**

Our Father, thank you for freeing us from the sin of Adam and the realm of sin and death that he brought to humanity. May we as your community, as the body of Christ, have a spiritually healthy unity and diversity. Make us and keep us spiritually healthy. Guard us from the penetration of “the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil” (1 Cor. 5:8), that “no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled” (Heb. 12:15).

## DIFFICULTIES WITH ABANDONING IMPUTATION

The imputation of Adam's sin seems to be an idea that is particularly hard to swallow for people in modern Western culture. Why is there such resistance, and how might it be overcome?

### **Resistance to Imputation**

Previous chapters have already considered the basic difficulty: how can an individual be charged with guilt for a sin that he did not personally and individually commit? The basic answer in the preceding chapters has two sides to it. On the one side, there is mystery, as there is in all of God's dealings with human beings. The most unfathomable mystery of all is God himself, who is infinitely deep. His justice is infinitely deep. On the other side, the Bible provides a positive answer in the idea of solidarity. Among human beings, there are corporate unities. In some circumstances, and with some kinds of unity—but only *some*—properties and events belonging to one person within a unit belong to everyone in the unit because they are in the unit. This may take place either by some kind of “transfer” or just by virtue of belonging. This solidarity among human beings reflects the archetypal solidarity among the persons of the Trinity.

Adam and Christ, as representative heads of a large company of people, are each special cases. They are exceptional. They do not exactly match



or correspond with other, looser cases of solidarity. In fact, Adam and Christ are not completely parallel to each other, either, because union with Christ does not include genetic, biological unity as is the case with Adam. Rather, union with Christ is union in the Spirit. But the two representative heads do fit into a larger picture. The larger picture includes not only other instances of solidarity, but instances in which descriptions of a representative apply also to the larger group being represented. They include instances of substitution, wherein one person or representative substitutes for another person or for a group.

### **Individualism**

Substitution and corporate solidarity, which are real in the world that God created, are in tension with an important idea in the West, the idea of *individualism*. It is true that each human being is a unified person, distinct from other persons. But individualism says more. It says that in important matters, each person is basically independent. He is in charge of his own life—both what he does and what moral value he assigns to it. But such individualism is an ideal that is not actually realized in the world. People are, in fact, interdependent within this world. And each person is dependent on God, who is three persons. So a false individualism is one part of the difficulty that people find with the doctrine of imputation.

### **The General Issue of Foundations for Objections**

The critique of individualism is only one example of critical analysis that can be directed against objections and alternative theories. A critique of objections is one aspect that belongs integrally to presuppositional apologetics. Presuppositional apologetics advises Christians not merely positively to set forth the case for Christianity, but negatively to show that objections rely on untenable foundations. In fact, not only do opponents of Christianity not have sound foundations of their own, but they secretly rely on God and on truths from Christianity at the very moment when they mount their attacks.

Of course, objections to imputation may arise not only from non-Christian sources, but from Christians. Some Christians are concerned, as they should be, about God's justice. They do not think that imputation is compatible with justice. In this case, it is important to critically examine their idea of justice, and why they think it is incompatible with imputation.

So let us consider further the weaknesses of individualism and, with it, the weaknesses belonging to the rejection of imputation.

The most blatant weakness of individualism is that it contradicts the Bible. The Bible does teach the imputation of Adam's sin to his descendants and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers. These instances of imputation are incompatible with individualism. The Bible contains further, supporting instances of human solidarity, such as the high priest's representing Israel and David's representing the army of Israel in his combat with Goliath.

Other kinds of weakness cannot be ignored even by people who do not accept the authority of the Bible.

The first weakness we have already mentioned above. Individualism is an ideal that does not match the real world.

### **The Idea of Individualism Rose by Dependence on Others**

A second weakness is that political theories of individualism did not come out of nowhere. They have a long history in the West. And later theorists of individualism depend on earlier writers. This dependence contradicts the theory of individualistic independence. The fact that the theory originated through dependence on earlier thinkers is itself already a refutation of the theory, in its strict form.

### **Individualism Is Not Culturally Universal**

A third critique looks at other cultures. The theory of individualism characterizes the Western world more than some other cultures. Tribal cultures and the Asian cultures of China, Korea, and Japan, in

their traditional shape, were much more accustomed to think in terms of corporate solidarities. In Japan, when a family member was caught in a deep public disgrace, the traditional remedy was suicide for that family member, not because of his individual feelings, but because he had disgraced the family and the family name.

The result of studying many cultures is to show that individualism as a cultural idea has no proper foundation. It does not have a foundation in reality because, in fact, people are dependent on one another and belong together in groups. It does not have a foundation in knowledge because it is an idea that for most people is absorbed from culture rather than being rigorously and critically analyzed. Having absorbed the idea of individualism from childhood, people just “feel” that something is wrong about imputation. Such a feeling is actually harder to refute than a specific argument because it seems “obvious” and unassailable.

### **The Parallel between Adam and Christ**

A fourth critique points to the parallel between Adam and Christ. If someone objects to the imputation of Adam’s sin, should he not also, out of consistency, object to the imputation of Christ’s righteousness and the fact that Christ serves as Sin-Bearer for our sins? What reason, other than a selfish one, can a person give for affirming one case of imputation (the imputation in Christ, with good news) and not the other (the imputation in Adam, with bad news)?

If someone rejects the exchange of sin and righteousness between believers and Christ, the result is even worse. There is no way that anyone can be saved. People try to produce other ways of salvation, through meditation or mental purification or good works. Or they may search for some kind of compromise route that involves a little of Christ and a lot of our striving. But in the end, it always involves a compromise in God’s justice. In these schemes, God somehow lowers his standard of justice to accommodate our ability. But justice is an attribute of God. His standard cannot change unless he ceases to be God, which is impossible. Moreover, God is perfect. His justice is perfect. His holiness is perfect. The

symbolic message in the Old Testament, where people offer only nondefective (perfect) animals in sacrifice, is that of the necessity of perfection in approaching God. Even Moses cannot see God's face without dying (Ex. 33:20). So the choice is stark: either lower God's standard (which is impossible) or be condemned because you are not perfect. Salvation can come only through a substitution.

But were not imperfect people saved in Old Testament times? Yes, but the sacrificial system offered a symbolic remedy, which pointed forward to the perfect sacrifice of Christ, which alone is all-sufficient. His death substitutes for the death that others deserved. His resurrection proclaims the righteousness that believers receive by union with him. There is a transfer of guilt and punishment to Christ and a transfer of his righteousness to believers:

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21)

### **Substituting Yourself for God**

A fifth critique points out that anyone who claims to have an unclouded view of justice, and makes his concept of justice into the standard, is putting himself in the place of God. He is substituting for God. So in the very act of denying the substitutionary work of Christ, he himself uses substitution—but an illicit substitution.

### **The Need for Union with Christ for Proper Thinking**

A sixth critique observes one of the secret dependences on imputation. The person who denies imputation thinks that he is reasoning properly. But it is impossible to reason properly except in union with Christ, who is the wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 2:3). The person must rely on a hidden dependence on Christ at the very moment when he denies dependence in the denial of imputation.

## **The Cultural Breadth of the Concept of Substitution**

The leading rationalist thinkers of the West have for some centuries denied imputation because it seems “irrational.” It seems so, as we have observed, partly because of the false individualism that already exists in the atmosphere. But the use of substitution is actually quite common in cultures outside the West. It is true with respect to some of the cultures of Asia. In his study of tribal myths, Claude Lévi-Strauss came to believe that some general patterns of substitution and mediation occurred as a universal pattern of myth-making. This myth-making expressed the thinking of cultures about the deep issues of life.<sup>1</sup> One need not agree with Lévi-Strauss’s entire theory to acknowledge the existence of such patterns of substitution. If the patterns are absent in the West, it constitutes a cultural aberration, rather than a universal insight.

In fact, the patterns are present in the West. But intellectuals tend not to notice them. They have persuaded themselves that such things are primitive. The pattern is there in a brief way in all kinds of analogical thinking, because thinking by analogy depends on replacing one item by another that is similar to it. The pattern is even there in the rigorous logic of syllogisms. The general pattern of a syllogism invites the replacement of one instance of reasoning by another instance manifesting the same pattern. And this is a form of substitution.<sup>2</sup>

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on the Need for Imputation**

Acts 2 shows the outpouring of the Holy Spirit from the exalted Christ (Acts 2:33). The church does not deserve it. The church gets it in spite of demerit. This gift presupposes that God has been able to deal with sin according to his justice. It presupposes that the people in the church are reckoned as righteous for the sake of Christ.

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963).

2. Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 305–6.

## Summary

The rejection of imputation by Western intellectuals has no proper grounding. The proper ground for reasoning is the eternal God. In the eternal God, all three persons have the same eternal attributes. In this respect, they represent one another.<sup>3</sup>

## Key Terms

|                              |                   |
|------------------------------|-------------------|
| culturally universal         | rationalism       |
| imputation                   | representative    |
| individualism                | solidarity        |
| justice                      | substitution      |
| presupposition               | union with Christ |
| presuppositional apologetics |                   |

## Study Questions

1. What is *imputation*?
2. What is *individualism*?
3. What are the difficulties with individualism?
4. What happens to the conception of redemption if a person holds to individualism or denies imputation?
5. What is union with Christ, and what are its benefits?
6. What are the underlying roots of the kind of thinking that denies imputation?

## For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011. Chap. 14.

3. Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), chaps. 6, 8, 9, discussed in Lane G. Tipton, *The Trinitarian Theology of Cornelius Van Til* (Libertyville, IL: Reformed Forum, 2022), chap. 6.

## **Prayer**

Lord, may you increase our gratitude and our willingness to accept the reality of the imputation of Adam's sin and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to us.



## ASPECTS OF COVENANTAL LIFE

We look at two challenging aspects of human life: sexuality and human freedom.





## CREATED HUMAN SEXUALITY

What does the Bible teach about human sexuality? Under the topic of the doctrine of man, none of the works of classical Reformed theology before 1970 that I have checked has a separate chapter on human sexuality, male and female. Apparently it did not seem necessary. It was obvious to Christians that God created man male and female (Gen. 1:27). In former generations, within the arena of systematic theology, most of the discussion of sexuality used to take place under the topic of ethics.

But now the Western world needs whole books to address the topic of sexuality with any adequacy. Why? Because what was taken for granted for centuries has now come into dispute.

This book is not a book about sexuality. That topic belongs to other books, which can devote adequate space to it. This book provides only brief remarks on the meaning of sexuality.

### Truth and Compassion

First, consider the question of tone. In the Western world, these are confused times. Those who follow Christ need to speak the truth with compassion and love. That is not easy. To some people, *truth* is only the personal, relative “truth” of what a particular person believes. Implicitly, they reject the idea that God has clearly made known the truth in the Bible and in general revelation. And for many people, *compassion* means affirming the choices of other people, even when they are living contrary to God’s way.

Over against this confusion, believers need to honor God the Lord. The world needs to know God’s truth, for its own good as well as for the honor

of God's name. True compassion has three sides. It means (1) sympathizing with those who are caught in modern confusion and are in bondage in their minds and in their deeds; (2) gently and firmly telling them the way out, the way of Christ the Savior; and (3) praying that God would enliven their hearts and enlighten their minds, that they may come and receive salvation in Christ. The path to a solution is the path of Christ and his salvation. Salvation does not focus *first of all* on the detailed issues regarding human sexuality, whether these issues be social or political or medical or psychological. A person is supposed to trust in Christ and then start down the path of following him, knowing that changes and sanctification involve processes.

But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,  
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.  
The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;  
they do not know over what they stumble. (Prov. 4:18–19)

## **Western Rebellion**

The elite cultures in the West have been influenced by forms of Christianity in the past, but now are in open rebellion against Jesus Christ and his teaching. That is particularly obvious in the area of human sexuality. But the rebellion in sexual standards and practice is only a prominent instance of a wider and deeper difficulty. People are addicted to serving self and to self-fulfillment. Any challenge to the goal of self-fulfillment seems cruel, hateful, and intolerable. The pursuit of an individual's picture of self and a person's dreams of a goal for himself has become a cultural idol. ("Be whatever you can be.") To many people, attacking this idol is the cultural equivalent of blasphemy.

So the deep commitment to individualism is a form of false religion and a false worship of self, though for the most part it does not call itself religion. It comforts itself partly by concealing its own true nature and its selfish roots.

At the same time, the new false religion is a counterfeit of biblical Christianity as the true religion. It is *still* influenced by many Christian

motifs, such as love, respect, and care for people who differ from you. These Christian motifs get distorted by being combined with anti-Christian motifs that affirm immoral practices in the area of sexuality and in other areas as well (e.g., using lies or abusive language or even physical attacks on people or property in order to support what are seen as “righteous” social and political causes).

Modern rebellion against God is also a rebellion against his Messiah, the true Ruler of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ. The rebellion was prophetically described three thousand years ago in Psalm 2:1–3:

Why do the nations rage  
and the peoples plot in vain?  
The kings of the earth set themselves,  
and the rulers take counsel together,  
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,  
“Let us burst their bonds apart  
and cast away their cords from us.”

This psalm finds fulfillment in the events of the crucifixion, according to Acts 4:25–28. But the pattern of rebellion has other manifestations as well. It extends to this day.

God not only prophesied this plot of rebellion long ago, but also prophesied that the plot would not succeed. Indeed, it is hopeless:

He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
the Lord holds them in derision. (Ps. 2:4)

God’s response is to establish the rule of his Messiah:

Then he will speak to them in his wrath,  
and terrify them in his fury, saying,  
“As for me, I have *set my King*  
*on Zion*, my holy hill.”  
I will tell of the decree:

The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you.” (Ps. 2:5–7)

All who resist Messiah get broken to pieces:

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.  
You shall *break them* with a rod of iron  
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel. (Ps. 2:8–9)

God therefore issues a warning, which goes out to the Western world in its current state:

Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
be warned, O rulers of the earth.  
Serve the LORD with fear,  
and rejoice with trembling.  
Kiss the Son,  
lest he be angry, and you perish in the way,  
for his wrath is quickly kindled.  
Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Ps. 2:10–12)

The warning is for our own good, as well as for the honor of God. To fight against God is to fight against the Creator and who human beings are as creatures. Human beings are owned by God and crafted by him for communion with him. They destroy themselves when they rebel.

The results are evident in the area of sexuality as much as other areas. People are not fulfilled in happiness by their so-called sexual freedom. They are in bondage to desires that do not satisfy them. They mistreat others, and the misery propagates further.

### **The Central Issue**

People are going to continue to “rage” against the Bible’s teaching about sex because they have a more fundamental struggle underneath.

They are raging against God (Ps. 2:1). The fundamental issue is rage against God. The answer is straightforward: “Kiss the Son” (v. 12). And then: “Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (v. 12). That is the fundamental message: Come to Christ and be healed. The fruits in the area of sexuality follow only from a more fundamental change.

So the rest of this chapter, brief as it is, addresses those who have already surrendered, who have already kissed the Son. The four resources from chapter 7 apply to analyzing the issue of human sexuality.

### **Presuppositions**

The first resource is to pay attention to presuppositions. The Bible tells people to abandon the presupposition of autonomy, the idol of self, and the goal of self-fulfillment. Christians need to abandon this presupposition in the area of sexuality as in every other area. They also need to abandon every notion from the culture that shows itself as being at odds with the Bible, however precious that notion seems to be.

Those who follow Christ have a different set of presuppositions from the world. God is God. He made human beings. He knows what is good for them, and he has instructed in the path of life.

He made us male and female (Gen. 1:27). He designed marriage for a man and a woman (2:24). He designed sexual union for marriage.

The fall has resulted in a multitude of disorders in the world, including some instances of physical disorders in the area of sexuality (“intersex” physical abnormalities in sexual organs and hormonal systems). All kinds of people, with all kinds of physical disorders as well as with all kinds of sins, are welcomed by Jesus into the kingdom of God when they come in repentance and faith. But the existence of physical abnormalities in the area of sexuality should not become a pretext for denying the originally created normality of male and female, any more than the existence of a broken arm or a withered hand (Matt. 12:9–14) should become an occasion to deny that there is such a thing as a normal arm and a normal hand.<sup>1</sup>

1. I owe this idea to Alfred Poirier, who included it in a draft of a Westminster Theological Seminary statement.

## **Semantics**

What about semantics? Some people today are keen on changing the meanings of words and on banning certain kinds of language. Some language is an offense to other people's autonomous self-conception. But changing the language does not change the reality of God. He is still the same God. He made the world, including sexuality. He made language, every word in every language of the world.

He governs the world. Human beings are ungrateful. They are *not* creators who create the world by what they say. To the contrary, they need to be rescued by Christ from the sinful impulse to try to be autonomous creators of themselves and the world.

## **Analogy**

Next, consider the third resource, the resource of analogies. God has provided analogies to human sexuality in animal sexuality. These are instructive. Medical researchers can conduct experiments on mosquitoes, flies, ants, and mice that would be immoral if conducted on human beings. These include experiments that try to understand sexual functions. People can learn from such experiments. They learn also that, like higher animals, almost every cell in the human body has a nucleus with chromosomes. If it has a Y chromosome, the Y marks it as male.

Thus, human beings have biological similarities with animals. But human beings are unique in being made in the image of God.

Note also that there are loose analogies between sexual relations and other kinds of personal relations in human life. In order to explain marriage, God uses the analogy of a covenant. Malachi 2:14 indicates that marriage is a covenant. Marriage is a unique kind of bond, but it is also comparable to those covenants that bind people outside marriage. Likewise, the exhortations for submission and respect in Ephesians 5:22–6:9 and Colossians 3:18–4:1 show analogies between different kinds of personal relations. The relation of marriage is only one of them. Ephesians 5:22–33 compares the marriage between a man and a woman to the relation between

Christ and the church. Some people gripped by an abstract principle of “equality” have tried to picture marriage as having interchangeable roles. But they are bringing in an alien concept of equality. Christ and the church are not interchangeable. Neither are husband and wife interchangeable in Ephesians 5:22–33.

## **Metaphysics**

When we look at elite Western culture from within the framework of the Bible, it is not hard to see that Western culture is beset by a false metaphysical framework. It posits that in the social arena and the arena of personal self-conception and behavior, each person has the right to virtually create himself and define himself. Each person becomes an ultimate source. And each person creates his own world of sexual exploration. But this view is at odds with the reality of God and the reality of a world created by God. God sets the standards for the ethics of sex. And the biological realities of sex and procreation, which God has ordained, function as a permanent situation. An individual cannot redefine sex as if he were a sovereign creator.

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on Human Sexuality**

Acts 2 proclaims that the Holy Spirit is poured out on both men and women (Acts 2:17–18). It shows the result in a church and community that has harmony, including harmony between men and women (2:42–47; 4:31–35; 5:14).

## **Key Terms**

|                |                        |
|----------------|------------------------|
| analogy        | metaphysical framework |
| autonomy       | presupposition         |
| compassion     | semantics              |
| create         | sexuality              |
| false religion | systematic theology    |
| marriage       | truth                  |



## **Study Questions**

1. What is the most fundamental difficulty in the Western world?
2. How does this difficulty manifest itself in the area of sexuality?
3. How does this difficulty manifest itself in the treatment of people's choices for their own lives?
4. What are points of failure in the view of sexuality coming from elite culture in the West?
5. What is the underlying metaphysical framework presupposed in the elite culture of the West?
6. What does a robust Bible-based answer look like?

## **For Further Reading**

Clark, Stephen B. *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Men and Women in Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences*. Bloomington, IN: Warhorn Media, 2021.

DeYoung, Kevin. *What Does the Bible Really Teach about Homosexuality?* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015.

Harvest USA. *Alive: Gospel Sexuality for Students*. Greensboro, NC: New Growth, 2018.

## **Prayer**

Dear Lord, we thank you that you are the heavenly Father to your entire people throughout the world. Teach us and empower us, in order that we may live in harmony with one another, especially in sexuality. Give us repentance, forgiveness, and grace to resist impure temptations. Show us how to speak the truth in love. Change this world to submit to you as Lord.

## SEXUALITY AND *LEX CHRISTI*

Let us consider briefly how the *lex Christi* framework may illumine issues in human sexuality.

### ***Lex Christi* as a Test**

The *lex Christi* framework offers a useful test of genuine obedience and genuine Christianity. Are we who claim to believe in Christ following God's way, as expressed in the law of God and summarized in the *lex Christi* framework? Or are we not? Wherever we find ourselves disobeying God, we need to repent. We need to repent ourselves, not to be satisfied with just calling others to repent. *Lex Christi* also has usefulness in analyzing the modern West. Is the elite culture of the West conforming itself to the law of God or not? What does the *lex Christi* framework reveal about the West?

Everything in human life is mixed, good and bad, due to sin. It is mixed in any one person's life. It is mixed in the patterns of any one culture.

### **Failures in the West**

The citizens of the West show instances of an admirable concern for abuse of power and the suffering of minorities.

At the same time, there are manifest failures. People are not keeping the seventh commandment. That becomes clear especially when the seventh

commandment is considered with its more expansive implications. It has vast implications when it is considered in the light of other instructions in the Mosaic law that fill out its implications.<sup>1</sup> Violation of the seventh commandment takes place not only with adultery, but with homosexual acts, which the Bible forbids, and with rampant sexual immorality in many other forms. Moreover, the inward desire to sin is already itself sin, even when someone does not carry it out in action (Matt. 5:27–32).

Need it be said that a whole culture in massive rebellion against the seventh commandment is not a reliable atmosphere in which to meditate on sexual morality?

When the Ten Commandments are treated as perspectives on human service, they show that current sexual immorality violates all the commandments.

(1) People in the West put selfish sexual desire before God, violating the first commandment.

(2) They worship sex as a false god (2C).

(3) They dishonor the name of God by refusing to pay attention to his guidance about sexuality, or by claiming that he endorses life patterns that he condemns (3C).

(4) They violate the principle of resting in God by restlessly pursuing sexual fulfillment (4C).

(5) They dishonor and disrespect other human beings by exploiting them sexually for selfish fulfillment, and they dishonor other human beings by encouraging them to travel in paths of sexual wickedness (5C). This exploitation takes place even when people “freely consent” to sexual immorality.

(6) They dishonor life by killing preborn babies, partly in order to endorse sexual “freedom” (6C).

(7) They directly commit sexual immorality and condone immorality in others (7C).

(8) They violate the principle of giving generously, by taking selfishly in the area of sexual pleasure (8C).

1. Westminster Larger Catechism 138–39.

- (9) They tell themselves lies about the meaning of sex (9C).  
 (10) They are discontent, craving for illicit sex (10C). (See table 28.1.)

**Table 28.1 Ten Perspectives on Sexual Immorality**

| Cmd. | Specific Commands | Attributes of God | Meaning for Sexual Immorality                                       |
|------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1C   | no other gods     | supreme           | sex before God                                                      |
| 2C   | no idols          | holy              | sex as an idol                                                      |
| 3C   | honor God's name  | blessed           | using the name of God in claiming that he endorses what he condemns |
| 4C   | keep the Sabbath  | dynamic           | restlessly pursuing sex                                             |
| 5C   | honor parents     | harmonious        | exploiting other human beings for selfish sexual pleasure           |
| 6C   | no murder         | living            | killing preborn babies                                              |
| 7C   | no adultery       | intimate          | direct sexual immorality                                            |
| 8C   | no stealing       | giving            | taking sexual pleasure selfishly rather than giving                 |
| 9C   | no lying          | truthful          | lying about the meaning of sex                                      |
| 10C  | no coveting       | contented         | discontent, craving illicit sex                                     |

It is not a good record. However bad the record, there is hope.

But with you [God] there is *forgiveness*,  
 that you may be feared. (Ps. 130:4)

Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven.  
 (Luke 7:47)

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

### ***Lex Christi* as Instructive**

The *lex Christi* framework can serve not only to alert us to negative violations, but to give positive guidance about human sexuality by setting it within a larger framework of God's purposes.

What guidance is provided by the seventh commandment, "You shall not commit adultery" (Ex. 20:14)? The positive opposite to the prohibition of adultery is to maintain and protect proper intimacy in marriage. Intimacy in marriage reflects the archetypal intimacy in God himself. And proper intimacy in marriage has an effect in training human beings and in modeling for them the proper intimacies that they should have with God and with neighbor, namely, the intimacies of love:

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matt. 22:37–40)

The seventh commandment informs all the other commandments. Conversely, the instructions about love in other commandments help us understand what it means to love within the bond of marriage.

### **Each Commandment Used to View the Meaning of Sexuality**

Now let us briefly see how each of the Ten Commandments provides a perspective on the creation of man as male and female (Gen. 1:27). Because the differences between men and women are particularly in dispute in the West, we will focus especially on how the perspectives of the Ten Commandments highlight both similarities and differences.

## 1C: The First Commandment

The first commandment displays the *supremacy* of God. Human beings must delight in his supremacy and submit to his rules. They must be supremely loyal to him and not have other gods.

In contrast to this commandment, the Western world has drifted far from the path of God. Christians who live in the West have to go God's way. We are followers of Christ. We follow him, not the world. "Blessed are all who take refuge in him" (Ps. 2:12). This principle applies in the area of sexuality, as in all other areas.

According to the framework of *lex Christi*, human beings are supposed to reflect the attributes of God, not simply by admiring them and by praising God for them, but also by reflecting them appropriately in their own living. What does this imply in the case of the attribute of supremacy? Human beings have a *derivative*, creaturely supremacy. It is expressed in human dominion:

And let them *have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. (Gen. 1:26)

And fill the earth and *subdue it*, and *have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth. (Gen. 1:28)

God gives the gift of dominion to all human beings, made in the image of God, including "male and female" (Gen. 1:27). Men and women *both* exercise dominion. They both have this same gift and privilege. This dominion is an element of commonality, shared by men and women.

In addition, the narrative of creation displays an order that unfolds in time. The man Adam exercises dominion in its early steps when God explains his duty (Gen. 2:15–17), and then he names the animals (vv. 19–20). The creation of Eve follows this first exercise of dominion, according to the last part of Genesis 2:20: "The man gave names to all

livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. *But* for Adam there was not found a *helper* fit for him.” Eve appears *after* the task of dominion is already in motion.

Commentators have pointed out that in marriage and in the larger society, people help one another in all kinds of ways. This back-and-forth help is in accord with God’s overall design, that you should “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). The Bible itself contains many such illustrations. But in Genesis 2:20, the specific order is one-directional. God creates Eve as a helper to Adam, rather than the reverse. The apostle Paul makes a point of it:

For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but *woman for man*. (1 Cor. 11:8–9)

Woman is *from* man and also *for* man. There is a specific order of derivation and an order in terms of purpose (“for”). It is one order and *not* its opposite. What are the implications?

It is useful to refer to an article by D. J. A. Clines, even though he does not accept the divine authority and inerrancy of the Bible. His article concerns Genesis 2.<sup>2</sup> In the article, Clines indicates that for years he read Genesis 1–2 in line with the egalitarian presuppositions of many of his fellow Old Testament scholars. And so he found in Genesis 1–2 a confirmation of his presuppositions. But he woke up to the realization that this kind of reading was inconsistent with what historical-critical

2. D. J. A. Clines, “What Does Eve Do to Help? and Other Irredeemably Androcentric Orientations in Genesis 1–3,” in *What Does Eve Do to Help? and Other Readerly Questions to the Old Testament* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1990), 25–48.

Clines’s article is complex, and evaluating it is complex. One of the factors that may have enabled Clines to reach his “androcentric” interpretation of Genesis 1–2 is that he does not regard the Bible as having any “authority,” much less divine authority (§ 5, 45–48). So he does not have to make Genesis 1–2 conform to his own egalitarian principles. Later in his essay, he rejects for his own life the implications of the meanings that he finds in Genesis 1–2. His rejection of Scripture as authoritative divine Word also means that he does not regard the entirety of Scripture as harmoniously agreeing with itself in its teaching. Once Genesis 1–2 is not treated as inspired, the “androcentric” nature of Genesis 1–2 may even be exaggerated, because it is no longer interpreted in the light of progressive revelation, using supplementary and complementary instructions elsewhere in the Bible.

scholars do everywhere else with ancient texts. Scholars try to read them according to their ancient cultural context. And the ancient cultures are heavily patriarchal. He had to ask himself honestly what the text meant *within that cultural context*, when addressed to that earlier kind of listener.

Within the culture of ancient Israel, the most outstanding thing that a woman could do to help her husband fulfill the cultural mandate was to bear and raise children. In Genesis 2, Adam begins exercising dominion himself, by himself, by naming the animals. He can “work” the garden and “keep it” (Gen. 2:15). What he cannot do *at all* is to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (1:28). Eve has to help him.

Clines finds confirmation, after the fall, in the fact that God’s punishment on the man and on the woman affects precisely that aspect that is the focal concern in their two cases. Adam is punished by having “pain” with respect to working the ground (Gen. 3:17–19). Eve is punished by having “pain” in childbearing (v. 16). This differentiation resonates with ancient cultures. Men spend much effort in farming; for women, it is a reproach not to have children. The Bible mentions Rachel (30:1–3), Hannah (1 Sam. 1:6–8, 11), and Elizabeth (Luke 1:25). Psalm 113:9 generalizes:

He [God] gives *the barren woman* a home,  
making her the joyous mother of children.

The image is taken up in a redemptive context in Isaiah 54:1:

“Sing, O *barren one*, who did not bear;  
break forth into singing and cry aloud,  
you who have not been in labor!  
For the children of the desolate one will be more  
than the children of her who is married,” says the LORD.

Clines also addresses an objection raised by other critical scholars. The objection is that in many cases in the Old Testament, the helper is socially superior to the one helped. For example, God is the helper to his people (Pss. 10:14; 30:10; 54:4; 118:7; etc.). In reply, Clines explores the meaning of



helping. What characterizes a helper, as a helper, is not social superiority or inferiority or equality. What distinguishes the helper from the one helped is the orientation toward the task or responsibility with which both parties are engaged. The task starts as the task of one party. Then a second party comes along and helps the first. The task is the task of the first party. It is up to the first party whether he or she abandons the task, refuses help, accepts help, or tries to persuade the helper to take over the task completely and finish it by himself or herself. Clines notes that in the case of Genesis 2:18, 20, Eve is the helper. That implies that she is helping Adam with the task that belongs first of all to him, not to her. Adam, not Eve, is in the center of the picture.

Of course, it is true in marriages in general that the husband will sometimes help his wife, as well as the wife's helping her husband. In their ordinary affairs of life, Israelites have experience with multiple instances of helping. But Genesis 2:18, 20 is specific. It focuses on only one side. So then the reader must infer what task Adam has. The tasks in Genesis 1:28 are two: to multiply and to have dominion. The first task—to multiply—is the one that Adam cannot do by himself, for which he needs help. Genesis 2:18 and 20 present us with an irreversible order with respect to this task. It is Adam's task. Eve stands alongside him in order to help him with *his* task. One of the points of the narrative is that God creates Eve for a *purpose*: "Neither was man created *for* woman, but woman *for* man" (1 Cor. 11:9).

The particular point in Genesis 2:18 and 20 fits together with the larger narrative. Genesis 1:1–2:3 and Genesis 2:4–25 are two pieces of a larger continuous text and should be interpreted in that light. The two pieces are complementary. Genesis 1 has more focus on chronological development and large-scale structure of the creation order. Genesis 2 is *teleological*, rather than primarily chronological. It is oriented to issues of purpose. God has purposes, namely, to provide for mankind. God creates man early in the narrative, in 2:7. Then follows the account of the garden and its trees. Their *purpose* is to serve as an environment for man to live in. The animals are brought in as part of a search for a suitable helper (Gen. 2:18–20). God creates Eve with the *purpose* of being the helper. Adam focuses on the dominion, while Eve focuses on the multiplying. She focuses on that side partly because Adam absolutely needs her help.

The distinction between dominion and multiplying must not be pressed as though these two sides were separate. They are interlocked. This is another matter that would be obvious to Israelites. The full “subduing” of the earth mentioned in Genesis 1:28, and the rule over the full extent of the animal kingdom and the plant kingdom in 1:26 and 28–29, is not going to be accomplished by Adam without having a multiplicity of human beings to carry it out. Though Eve focuses on multiplying, she contributes to dominion partly by producing children who will exercise dominion and will multiply further. Conversely, Adam contributes to multiplying through his contribution to procreation, through his own role in raising children, and through sustaining Eve in the challenges that she confronts in bearing and raising children. Adam and his male descendants will toil and work the ground to obtain food not only for themselves but also for their wives and children.

In their situation, Israelites are going to read and understand Genesis 2 in the light of what the rest of the Bible says about women and children, and in the light of universal human experience with children.

On the average, men are stronger than women, and better equipped to deal with the physical labor involved in farming and herding. This need for physical strength was pronounced before the Industrial Revolution.

Women have concerns of their own. Women who are pregnant have their energy sapped by the growing child inside. They become physically weighed down by the growing weight of the child. Their balance in walking and bending is affected. They sometimes get nauseated and have other bodily difficulties.

The woman naturally bonds with the child in her womb, partly because after a while the child begins to move and kick and respond to noises (Gen. 25:22; Luke 1:44). The child is constantly with her. The child is *not* constantly with the father. After a child is born, the mother has to recover physically from the exhaustion and blood loss and physical damages from the birth process. The child has to be milk-fed (Gen. 21:8; 1 Sam. 1:22–23). The milk comes from the mother or, in unusual circumstances, from a mother-substitute. This provision of milk also saps the mother’s energy. In the early months, the child wakes up crying

in the night when he or she is hungry. The mother loses sleep—not just one night, but repeatedly.

And then what happens in the day? The husband typically has to go out to the field or out to the herd. There may be other young children who are not old enough to go far from the house. These children need the woman's attention during the day. The mother is socially oriented. Her husband is also socially involved, with other men and women working in the field (Ruth 2:8–9, 15, 21–22). It is proper that the fieldworkers respect one another before the Lord (v. 4). Yet the task at hand in the field is not primarily that of caring for the other workers, but of tending the field.

Mothers need support and understanding. They receive it partly through the help of other women in the neighborhood, partly through the help of children or servants in the mother's household, partly through the extended family and grandparents who may be too old for some of the other common tasks of the society.

In every culture where rearing children is a big factor, the culture has to adjust to these realities. Pregnant women and women with infants are simply not going to do the same jobs in the fields as men. The elite culture of the West has endeavored to forget all this in a quest for abstract "equality." It is trying to prove to itself that women are just like men and to measure the worth of women by their ability to do the same things as men for the same pay with the same energy in the workplace. In the process, the dignity and worth of women is being defined by male standards of work. The work of pregnancy and of nursing infants and of interacting with young children is shoved to one side.

In the modern West, no one tries to prove that men are just like women and to measure the worth of men by their ability to bear children and breastfeed them. The society has already defined what is important, starting with prominent men and telling us all to be like them. Women sense that they are slighted. They are right, but not necessarily for the reasons that the society tells them.

God has crafted the anatomy of women to be in harmony with their unique privilege of bearing children. Women have wombs that God has designed with the possibility that they will serve as protective and

nourishing homes where children grow. Women have breasts, which God has designed with the possibility that they will serve for nursing infants. These things are not arbitrary, not mere “plumbing,” as some people disrespectfully say. They are one aspect of a larger social, structural whole involving the family in relation to the whole society. God appoints human beings *together* to accomplish the cultural mandate. And in this accomplishment, men and women act *distinctly*.

Of course there is overlap (Prov. 31:10–31). Of course there are processes of helping back and forth in a whole society, when it is functioning in a healthy way. The Bible depicts it. Israelites know it, and so does every other traditional culture in the world. It is evident in the pages of the Bible when it touches on social details. Genesis 2 does not impose rigid, inflexible rules that would be heteronomous.

In addition, in progressive revelation God gives later words that build on Genesis 2. Genesis 2 is a narrative, not a didactic passage that lays out a series of prescriptions and commands with regard to male and female roles and activities. It hints at the differentiated meaning of male and female, rather than producing a whole essay.

The principle of the equal ultimacy of unity and diversity is relevant. At the level of the archetype, this principle holds for God himself. God is three in one. His oneness is not more ultimate than his threeness, nor is his threeness more ultimate than his oneness. Neither one is an ultimate foundation that would transparently “explain” the other.

At the level of the ectype, this principle holds for human beings. Human beings have diversity that is equally ultimate with their unity as one race. And the same is true for male human beings in particular. They are diverse. A stereotype for male tasks and behavior is just that—a stereotype, a simplification. It tends to ignore diversity. David played the lyre (1 Sam. 16:16–23) and invented instruments of music (Amos 6:5), but not everyone can. There are merchants who earn their living by trading and transporting goods (Neh. 13:20). There are wise men whom the king hires as his counselors (2 Sam. 16:23; 1 Kings 12:6). There was Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, who “went down and struck down a lion in a pit on a day when snow had fallen” (2 Sam. 23:20).

The same is true for women. Women are diverse. Some women are unable to bear children. Some never marry. Their lives are fully significant in the sight of God (1 Cor. 7:34–35). Here is a sketch from one life:

And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36–38)

One aspect of the glory of God in history is found in this diversity. In the whole history of the world, no one else ever lived the life of Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. Why Asher? God planned it. God sees it all. God values the devotion of Anna, whether or not anyone else ever does.

### **Diversity in Cultures**

In our multicultural world, distinct cultures practice distinct configurations with regard to men and women, sexual morality, and cultural expectations for men and women. Every culture has a complex mix of good and bad. The remedy is found not in mere uniformity, but in conformity to God's way. Only God, through his redemption in Christ and his instruction in the Bible, is able to straighten people out sexually and culturally. His path has both unity and diversity for each human being. It also has both unity and diversity among cultures. People from every culture come to worship God (Matt. 28:19; Rev. 7:9–10; 21:24). We must refer readers elsewhere for a more extensive discussion of cultures.<sup>3</sup>

3. Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Sociology: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

God's way is not the way of thorough uniformity. Christians should not search for increasingly specific rules and regulations and fads that flatten men and women into a unisex world, or that flatten men into a uniform pattern for men, or women into a uniform pattern for women. Christians should beware of the cultural pressures that push people all to wear the same clothing styles and purchase the same gadgets. Contentedness is relevant (10C). Stereotypes do not bind people. Only God's Word binds them.

The principle of diversity implies in particular that men and women who never marry may also fully follow God's call on their lives. Marriage is a pattern for men and women, but not *the* uniform pattern that would exclude diversity. First Corinthians 7 asserts this principle directly when it reminds both those who are single and those who are married of the distinct obligations and advantages of the two callings. A single man or a single woman, each according to his or her calling, may serve the goal of serving God first, while also serving fellow human beings and the world, through the cultural mandate and the evangelical mandate (Matt. 28:18–20).

In God's order, diversity combines with unity. So diversity must not be distorted in a way that undermines unity. God's way is not the way of lawless diversity. People should not destroy or abandon all rules and stereotypes and cultural patterns of the past, as though any existing structure were necessarily oppressive. God in his wisdom provides structures. He provides contexts. He provides customs in each culture of the world. He gives the gift of sexuality, male and female and no third alternative.

Human life is not about fulfilling isolated individual desire, but about serving God and serving others in love. Love combines unity and diversity, conformity and creativity, in harmony, the harmony of God. While he was on earth, Jesus broke some of the stereotypes and cultural expectations of his time as he ministered to the needy. The purpose was not lawlessness but love. He did not needlessly disrupt culture. For example, he paid the temple tax (Matt. 17:26–27).

## 2C: The Second Commandment

Consider now the second commandment. The second commandment displays the *holiness* of God. Human beings need to approach God in the proper way. It is the way defined by his holiness, not the way of human imagination and invention. This way is further specified in *covenant* speech.

What does the second commandment imply with respect to men and women? Both men and women are to be holy as God is holy (Lev. 19:2; 1 Peter 1:16). As we have seen, this obligation is implicit in the garden situation in Genesis 2. The garden is “the holy mountain of God” (Ezek. 28:14). The people in the garden have to be holy. Moreover, both men and women are to follow the commandments and obligations that God gives them in covenant speech. This joint obligation shows the similarity of men and women before God.

Is there a differentiation between men and women? As with the first commandment, there is a definite order. God makes Adam first. He is in the garden before Eve (Gen. 2:8). He is holy first. Eve is created next, from the rib of Adam, who is already holy. Where Adam is, Eve also is, implying that she too is holy.

An order is also observable with respect to God’s covenantal speech. God addresses Adam first with regard to the prohibition of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil:

And the LORD God commanded *the man*, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Gen. 2:16–17)

It is theoretically possible that Genesis 2:18 is not in chronological order, and that Eve was already created when God gave the special prohibition. But even if she was, God addresses Adam primarily: “the man.” The subsequent occurrences of “you” in the two verses are translations of grammatically *singular* forms in Hebrew, confirming that one individual is being addressed. If, as is more likely, Eve was created after God gave

the prohibition, Adam would have communicated it to Eve. Adam is first in order, and Eve second.

The covenant between God and man has other ties with human sexuality. Later passages in the Bible compare God's covenantal relation to Israel with a man's covenantal relation to his wife. She is "your wife by covenant" (Mal. 2:14). The husband and wife pledge themselves to each other when they marry. This pledge is a covenant commitment.

The second commandment specifically identifies God as "a *jealous* God" (Ex. 20:5; see 34:14; Deut. 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; 32:21). Exodus 34:15–16 uses the specific term "whore" for worshipping false gods when it explains God's name "Jealous" from verse 14. God compares himself to a jealous husband. The wife is to have exclusive sexual commitment to her husband, who is jealous for her undivided affection. God expects undivided affection from Israel, who metaphorically is his wife (Jer. 3:6–9; Ezek. 16; 23; Hos. 1–4; see chapter 13).

First of all, God is faithful to himself, in the pattern of the Father's love for the Son (John 3:34–35; 17:24). Human beings have the privilege of mirroring and reflecting this love in their love and loyalty to the one true God. And this love and loyalty get reflected in human relations when they love each other. There is a broad application, in the principle of loving one's neighbor. But there is also a more intense application, in the love between husband and wife. Ephesians 5:22–33 develops the comparison more extensively, by comparing Christ's love for the church to a husband's love for his wife. This love of Christ for his church is the fulfillment of the Old Testament passages where God speaks of himself as the husband to Israel.

The later passages in the Bible about marriage occur in the context of the fall and God's program for redemption from the fall. So, for example, Christ is the husband to the church in the context of redeeming her:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and *gave himself up for her*, that he might *sanctify her*, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any



such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. (Eph. 5:25–28)

This redemption includes restoration of the intimacy with God that mankind lost in the fall. So even before the fall, marriage mirrors the intimacy between God and his people, between God and humanity in Adam. And the intimacy between God and his people reflects the archetypal intimacy and love among the persons of the Trinity.

It follows that human sexuality is not just a matter of biology. Nor is it just a matter of biological capability of having children. Human design is meant to symbolize and express and display the character of God. That is a glorious privilege. And God's design extends to human sexuality. Sexuality goes deep. In the display of God in human sexuality, a husband symbolizes God and a wife symbolizes the church, God's people. The two meanings are distinct, not interchangeable.

The elite culture of the West has lost sight of divine meaning and purpose. And so nothing remains, in the end, but for modern people to project human purposes onto human sexuality. As in the days of the judges in Israel, "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 21:25). It is not a small change, but a monumental change, to shift the entire framework, the entire worldview of the West, to see meaning as God has planned it. Nevertheless, that is what has to be done. It has to be done because God is God, and there is no escape from his moral standards or his judgment.

In marriage, God calls both man and woman to love each other: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34). In this command, man and woman are similar to each other. There is also differentiation. In Ephesians 5:22–33, the husband loves his wife, and the wife submits to and respects her husband. This asymmetry derives from the pattern of asymmetry between Christ and the church. Christ cares for the church, but he does not "submit" to her. She submits to him. It is not reversible. And so it is with husbands and wives. Some interpreters claim that Ephesians 5:22–33 represents merely a temporary adaptation to

the surrounding patriarchal culture. But Ephesians 5 does not talk about the surrounding cultures or customs. It does talk about Christ and the church. To see merely cultural adaptation is to evaporate divine meaning in marriage and to degrade it.

There is unity in the pattern of love, applied both to men and to women. There is also diversity, in the way in which a husband and wife act toward each other and apply the principle of Christian love.

### **3C: The Third Commandment**

The third commandment displays the *blessing* of God. God blesses Adam and Eve and the entire human race by making them in the image of God, making them fruitful, and giving them dominion (Gen. 1:26–28). There is a unity in blessing that belongs to both men and women. Is there also a diversity?

A prime aspect of God's blessing to Israel is that he commissions Aaron and his sons to "put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them" (Num. 6:27). Adam, derivatively, puts names on Eve that are expressive of her blessed status:

Then the man said,

"... she shall be called Woman,  
because she was taken out of Man." (Gen. 2:23)

The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. (Gen. 3:20)

The differentiation in the texture of blessing is expounded in 1 Corinthians 11:7:

For a man ought not to cover his head, since he is the *image and glory of God*, but woman is *the glory of man*.

Like man, woman is made in the image of God, as Genesis 1:26 implies. That is a high status and a blessing. But *in addition*, man is the glory of God. He displays God's glory, which is closely related to his blessedness. Woman is the glory of man, which is an aspect of her splendor.

#### **4C: The Fourth Commandment**

The fourth commandment displays that God is *dynamic*. God worked six days and rested on the seventh day (Gen. 2:2–3). This dynamic pattern is the pattern that both man and woman imitate, according to the fourth commandment in Exodus 20:8–11. The rest pointedly includes both men and women: “On it [the Sabbath] you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant” (Ex. 20:10).

There is unity between man and woman in their work and rest. Is there also differentiation? The pattern of work and rest commences with Adam, not with Eve. He works in naming the animals in Genesis 2:19–20. Then God gives him a special rest, in the form of “a deep sleep” (Gen. 2:21). Out of this condition emerges another work of God: “the rib . . . he [God] *made* into a woman” (v. 22). Adam celebrates this new work in a poetic verse (v. 23). Once again there is an order: Adam works first; Eve is second.

We have also seen already that the work of man and the work of woman have differentiation in the way that the woman *helps*. Being fruitful and multiplying by having children is a central concern of the woman's work. But it is not the *only* concern. It is important to affirm diversity among women, including single women.

#### **5C: The Fifth Commandment**

The fifth commandment displays that God is *harmonious*. Men and women are both supposed to live in harmony with one another, in imitation of God. In this response and this duty, they are similar.

Is there differentiation? There are a huge variety of differentiations in human relations. The relation of children to parents is in immediate

focus in the wording of the fifth commandment. But it is an example that is generalizable for other relations. One of these relations is the relation of husband and wife. And as we have seen from Ephesians 5:22–33, the relation of the two people in marriage is differentiated and irreversible. The wife submits to her husband in the Lord. The husband has authority over his wife, in a manner analogous to the authority of Christ over the church. In a context in which husbands are sinful and prone to exercise authority selfishly, the situation can be abused and has been abused. But the main remedy is at hand in Ephesians 5, namely, that husbands should imitate Christ by loving their wives. Selfishness in the relationship is banned.

According to the principle of progressive revelation, not everything is spelled out in Genesis 2. Genesis 3 does mention a husband's "rule": "but he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16). This verse occurs in the context of God's spelling out punishment for Eve. The "rule" of the husband is not going to be pure, but is going to be contaminated by sin. And the woman will suffer because of it. The rest of the Bible is frank about sin, including the sufferings of women because of the sins of men.

The Bible affirms the authority of husbands. Normal land inheritance is through men. A husband can make "void" the vow of his wife (Num. 30:6–16). The elite Western world is ready to vent its rage on this "oppression" of women. And indeed, a sinful husband can oppress his wife. But the modern West is not ready to notice what the passage in Numbers says about "the thoughtless utterance of her lips by which she bound herself" (v. 8). Any human being can produce thoughtless utterances that can entangle him and bring damage on himself and others. The woman has an extra protection that the man does not, namely, that her husband can rescue her from a thoughtless utterance. (For a young unmarried woman, it is her father, vv. 3–5.)

This element in Numbers 30 illustrates the importance of sound interpretation. (1) Readers need to interpret the Bible with sensitivity to its context, and with sensitivity for the ways in which God actually designed his instruction to function in the times in which it was given, as well as for all ages. (2) Readers need to be realistic about sin and its

damages. There *was* sin in ancient times. The Bible makes that plain. There is also sin *now*. Modern people are not innately superior in morality to the ancients. All cultures hide their own fashionable forms of sin from scrutiny. (3) Specifically, in the area of sexuality, careful analysis includes removing oneself from the modern propaganda about sexual freedom, and asking hard questions, with eyes open to the Bible and the culture. In particular, are women today suffering? Are they exploited by men in sexual acts without long-term commitment? And does the promotion of selfish goals of personal happiness encourage people headed for divorce and its pain? (4) Before modern people become indignant, they need to inspect the foundations for their moral standards. There are none, apart from God. Is not God wiser than man?

Let us return to Genesis 3 and see one other feature. Adam represents the human race in a way that Eve does *not*. God addresses Adam with the prohibition in 2:17; he addresses Adam with his opening interrogation in 3:9–11. As usual, it is in the nature of narrative to provide indirect hints, rather than bluntly explain everything in a thorough exposition. It remains for the apostle Paul to explain Adam's representative role in Romans 5:12–21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, 44–49. What Adam does stands for those whom he represents. It is not parallel to Eve.

## **6C: The Sixth Commandment**

The sixth commandment displays that God is *living*. Both men and women are prohibited from murdering. This prohibition is a similarity for men and women. On the positive side, God gives both men and women a life that includes not only physical life, but life in fellowship with him. If they keep his covenant, this life issues in eternal life.

Are there differences? In the postfall situation, one of the differences is that men are, on the average, more aggressive, more violent, and more prone to murder. In addition, in the Old Testament, it is *men* who make up an army, who fight battles and wage war.

As we see from the focus on bearing children, women have as one focal task the bringing into being of new lives made in the image of God. Adam

names his wife appropriately: “The man called his wife’s name Eve, because she was the mother of *all living*” (Gen. 3:20). (The ESV footnote adds: “*Eve* sounds like the Hebrew for *life-giver* and resembles the word for *living*.”) Women have the blessing of being agents of life, more prominently and more directly than men. Men, too often, become agents of death. There is such a thing as a just war and a just penalty of death (Gen. 9:6). But in the context of ongoing sin, the abilities of men with respect to dominion can be sinfully turned into unjust violence (4:8, 23–24).

Once again, there is an order. All life originates with God. God is the *living* God (Deut. 5:26). In creating Adam, “the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the *breath of life*, and the man became a *living* creature” (Gen. 2:7). At a later point, as a second step, God took living flesh from the man and made a woman who was alive (Gen. 2:22; 1 Cor. 11:8). The order is from man to woman. And at the present time, as 1 Corinthians 11:12 points out, “so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God.”

All the commandments can serve as perspectives on the entire law. So the differentiated focus of any one commandment is *relative* to their universal harmony. Granted such interlocking of commandments, it is still true that dominion naturally correlates more closely with 1C and the derivative supremacy given to mankind. Life and fruitfulness more naturally correlate with 6C. Based on the relative prominence of dominion in the world of men and life in the world of women, the contrast between 1C (associated with dominion) and 6C (associated with life) is one way that God’s character is reflected in a differentiated way in man (1C) and woman (6C).

## 7C: The Seventh Commandment

The seventh commandment displays that God is *intimate*. God is intimate with himself. His intimacy is reflected in human intimacy with God, and then human intimacy with one another. This topic has already come up in dealing with marriage as a reflection of God’s covenant with his people. Men and women both receive the privilege of intimacy with

God. In their roles in marriage, they are both intimate with each other. It is a shared, common intimacy. In addition, their intimacy is differentiated, reflecting the intimacy of Christ and the church, respectively.

### **8C: The Eighth Commandment**

The eighth commandment displays that God is *giving*. In Genesis 1–2, God gives to both men and women their very existence. They are both in the image of God. They both enjoy the garden of Eden. God gives them both the promise of life and the warning of death.

Is there also a differentiation between men and women in the arena of giving? God gives them distinctive strengths, as we have seen in discussing childbearing. Adam is the first to whom God gives. Through God's act, Adam gives to Eve the rib. The outstanding thing that Eve will give to Adam is children. No other gift that any human being could give is better than the gift of a new physical life in the image of God.

### **9C: The Ninth Commandment**

The ninth commandment displays that God is *true*. God gives to both men and women true discourse in his covenantal speech. God requires truthfulness from both men and women. They are similar to each other.

Is there differentiation? There is an initial order. First, Adam receives truth from God about the prohibition of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Second, Adam passes on this truth to Eve. First Timothy 2:14 indicates that it was Eve who was *deceived*: “and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was *deceived* and became a transgressor.”

### **10C: The Tenth Commandment**

The tenth commandment displays that God is *contented*. As usual, this attribute of God has implications for both men and women. In fellowship with God, both are supposed to enjoy God's contentedness. They are supposed to be contented themselves.

Is there a differentiation? There is a perceptible order. “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife” (Ex. 20:17; Deut. 5:21). The commandment does not explicitly mention coveting your neighbor’s husband. That must be inferred. It is second in order, in terms of working out the implications of the verse. Moreover, it is obvious that at some specific points, temptations for a man differ from temptations for a woman. Some temptations are common; other temptations arise preeminently for one sex rather than both. As usual, there is further diversity among men. One man differs from another in what is most tempting. And so also with women. (See table 28.2.)

### **The Pattern of Order**

Each of the ten perspectives of *lex Christi* includes a manifestation of two sides of the truth. On the one hand, men and women *together* share in a common status, common benefits, and common responsibilities as people made in the image of God. They share in the unity of being one humanity. On the other hand, men differ from women. There is a kind of movement, logical or temporal or both, from man to woman, as 1 Corinthians 11:8–9 summarizes: “For man was not made from woman, but woman from man. Neither was man created for woman, but woman for man.” This order reflects the order in God’s covenant with his people. God is first. He initiates the covenant. The people respond, as a second step. And then there is mutual interaction in the subsequent life of the covenant. So likewise in marriage.

The passage in 1 Corinthians 11 points in tantalizing brevity to the analogies between God and human marriage: “But I want you to understand that the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor. 11:3). First Corinthians 11 balances the picture by pointing to dependence and reciprocity:

Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man nor man of woman; for as woman was made from man, so man is now born of woman. And all things are from God. (1 Cor. 11:11–12)



Table 28.2. Ten Perspectives on Similarities and Differentiation in Sexuality

| Cmd. | Specific Commands | Attributes of God | Meaning for Both Sexes                                        | Differentiation                                                    |
|------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1C   | no other gods     | supreme           | dominion                                                      | men focused on fields; women on children                           |
| 2C   | no idols          | holy              | holy; following covenant; love                                | Adam instructs Eve about the prohibition; marriage as covenant     |
| 3C   | honor God's name  | blessed           | blessed; receiving God's name on them, reflecting God's glory | Adam names Eve; the wife is the glory of her husband (1 Cor. 11:7) |
| 4C   | keep the Sabbath  | dynamic           | work and rest                                                 | Adam initiates work                                                |
| 5C   | honor parents     | harmonious        | live in peace                                                 | honor husband as head                                              |
| 6C   | no murder         | living            | eternal life                                                  | woman focuses on enhancing life (especially children)              |
| 7C   | no adultery       | intimate          | intimate in marriage; love                                    | husband loves wife; wife submits to her husband                    |
| 8C   | no stealing       | giving            | giving and receiving                                          | Adam gives Eve his rib; man as initial giver                       |
| 9C   | no lying          | truthful          | truthful                                                      | Adam instructs Eve                                                 |
| 10C  | no coveting       | contented         | contented                                                     | man to be content with his wife                                    |

## First and Second Things

The distinctions between first and second events in creating mankind, and first and second events in 1 Corinthians 11:3–12, bring us back to the larger context of time and history, discussed in chapter 9. In God's plan for history, planning issues in action, and action travels toward a goal.

That pattern exists in divine action first. And then it is imitated in human action, over and over again. The pattern gets displayed in the large-scale purpose of history as a whole, and in small-scale events with short-range goals. This pattern itself contains unity and diversity. The pattern of first man, then woman, found in Genesis 2, is never exactly repeated. It is one instance, distinct from and diverse from every other instance. But 1 Corinthians also shows us that there are correlative patterns throughout history. Human marriage is one of them. Christ as husband to the church is another. The marriage of the Lamb in Revelation 19:7–9 is another.

To both men and women, as imitators of God, belong dominion (supremacy) and life. Both dominion and life have unfolding manifestations in history. But the unfolding is differentiated. The creation of life in Adam issues in dominion. The fruit of dominion is life, in the multiplication of human beings to fill the earth (Gen. 1:28). In the consummation, the river of the water of life issues from the throne (Rev. 22:1). God's rule, signified by his throne, issues in consummate abundance of life, which includes abundance of glory (v. 5). The pattern of ruling issuing in life and glory can be reflected on the human level. Derivatively, on the level of human action, dominion, represented preeminently in men, may issue in life and glory and beauty, represented preeminently in women.<sup>4</sup>

Woman is the *glory* of man. (1 Cor. 11:7)

So that [through Christ's work] he might present the church to himself in *splendor*. (Eph. 5:27)

4. I am appreciative of Mark Garcia's unpublished notes on the doctrine of man for drawing my attention to this theme.

Do not let your *adorning* be external—the braiding of hair and the putting on of gold jewelry, or the clothing you wear—but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable *beauty* of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious. For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to *adorn* themselves, by submitting to their own husbands. (1 Peter 3:3–5)

It was granted her [the bride of the Lamb] to clothe herself with fine linen, *bright* and pure. (Rev. 19:8)

Man is preeminently the initiator; woman is preeminently the one who brings to completion. Adam has initiated the work of dominion by naming the animals. But he is incomplete while he is alone in Genesis 2:18. The creation of woman brings the process of creating mankind to completion. The sexual union of husband and wife is a kind of completion of the meaning of their intimacy. The perfection of the church in Ephesians 5:27 is the completion of the fruit of redemption, redemption initiated by Christ.

The word *preeminent* in our description of the unique roles of man and woman is significant. All the persons of the Trinity share in all the attributes of God. One person, however, may be preeminent in a particular mode of participation in the acts of God. Creation, for example, is creation from the Father, through the Son, in the presence of the Holy Spirit. All three persons are the one Creator. But there is differentiation of persons in the mode of action in creating the world. Likewise, the Father is preeminent in planning the course of history.

By analogy, men and women both act in ways that accomplish initiation and completion. But the two sexes are differentiated, often subtly, sometimes notably. Authority belongs preeminently to the initiation. Glory belongs preeminently to the completion. First Corinthians 11:7 shows this ordering at two levels, namely, in the relation of God to man, and in the relation of man to woman. In the relation of God to man, authority belongs to God, and the glory that reflects God belongs to man. In the relation of man to woman, authority belongs preeminently to man, glory to woman.

These two aspects, authority and glory, correlate naturally with two perspectives in *lex Christi*. Authority displays that God is supreme (1C); glory displays that God is intimate (7C). The two are equally ultimate, with respect to each other and with respect to the other eight perspectives belonging to *lex Christi*. Each aspect belongs to men and to women. But there is also differentiation.

How do different cultures perceive the two aspects, authority and glory? Which is superior? They are both gifts of God. And in a sinful world, both are objects of ungodly lust. Western feminism decries the fact that authority belongs unequally to men. But does that desire for authority manifest a male point of view concerning relative values? Let us draw back a little from any one culture, with its prejudices. Let us ask ourselves in general whether it is better to have authority or to have glory. There is not a clear answer. The two are incomparable and equally ultimate. They are equally ultimate in God; consequently, they are equally ultimate among human beings. Among sinners, will authority be misused? Certainly. Will beauty be misused? Certainly.

The remedy lies not in abolishing authority or abolishing beauty, and not in “equalizing” it, but in transforming the bearers of both. Jesus Christ delivers his people. He exercises all authority in heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18) for the glory of the Father. Believers gain in authority and in glory when they are united to him. Authority comes both now and in the future:

[God] *seated* us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.  
(Eph. 2:6)

The one who conquers, I will grant him to *sit with me on my throne*,  
as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.  
(Rev. 3:21)

Glory comes now and in the future:

And we all, 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)

[We are] heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be *glorified* with him. (Rom. 8:17; see vv. 8, 21)

Similar patterns occur in the relation between authority and life. We said earlier that Adam was preeminent in authority and Eve preeminent in the giving and nourishing and sustaining of life. Authority is a reflection of the supremacy of God, manifested in the first commandment (1C), and life is a reflection of the life of God, manifested in the sixth commandment (6C).

Life, eternal life, is the gift of God to those who belong to Christ. It is a gift for now and for the future:

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who *lives* and believes in me shall never die." (John 11:25–26)

And death shall be *no more*. (Rev. 21:4)

The tree of *life* with its twelve kinds of fruit [was in the city]. (Rev. 22:2)

Would you rather have authority or life? Probably life. Authority implies responsibility to the people or things that are under authority (John 10:10–15). Life gives joy. One illustration is of a mother's giving birth: "when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for *joy* that a human being has been born into the world" (16:21). Psalm 113:9 also pictures the joy of being a mother:

He [God] gives the barren woman a home,  
making her the *joyous* mother of children.

Yes, a mother has authority and responsibility with respect to her children. And yes, a man can find joy in the work of dominion, as illustrated by the joy in a harvest:

They rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest. (Isa. 9:3)

There is reciprocity between the two aspects, authority and joy. But once again, one wonders whether the priorities of some feminists are imposing a preeminently male point of view, and a fallen one at that.

### **Divine Meaning in Human Life**

Let us remind ourselves of some biblical principles. The differences between men and women are subtle, in Genesis 2–3 and elsewhere. The main point is that “all things are from God” (1 Cor. 11:12). Everyone owes everything to God. And everyone owes complete obedience to God, both in how he treats God and in how he treats his male and female neighbors. God’s love is preeminent, and it issues in human love for one another. God as our Creator has designed us for rich personal relations both with himself and with one another. Human sexuality is one aspect of this design. People should not evaporate the divine meaning. Sexuality has meaning imparted by the design and purpose and presence and communion of God, who is the almighty Ruler of all. Modern Western rebellion suppresses this meaning because it suppresses the knowledge of God and flees his presence.

The central difficulty of the West is not, as many would have it, sexual liberation and liberation from oppression. The central difficulty is sin, and the central answer is repentance and turning to God in personal communion, through Christ. This knowledge transforms human understanding of sexuality, just as it transforms the understanding of everything else. God transforms both knowledge and power. He gives us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the risen Christ, to provide the power for holy living.

### **Other Topics**

We have here provided a sketch. The *lex Christi* framework encourages people to see themes and connections that they might otherwise

overlook—particularly if they occur in the context of a narrative such as Genesis 1–3, rather than in the context of direct ethical instruction.

Greater detail on human sexuality is best worked out in books on ethics. And when it concerns the question whether women should be elders or deacons in the church, the discussion belongs in books on the topic of the church. Such topics belong to another book. Genesis 1–3 offers a beginning and a framework for thinking, but by itself it does not answer all the questions in detail. Indeed, because of the diversity among distinct men, the diversity among distinct women, and the diversity of cultures, no simple formula prescribes all human acts in detail. There is equal ultimacy of unity (as manifested in the Ten Commandments) and diversity (as manifested in the Bible in the diversity of applications and the diversity of ethnicities).

### Acts 2 as a Perspective on *Lex Christi*

Acts 2 shows the church as a new creation in Christ, which reflects the attributes of God and embodies the Ten Commandments. These operate in the lives of men and women in the church (Acts 5:14).

#### Key Terms

|           |                     |
|-----------|---------------------|
| authority | harmonious          |
| beauty    | holy                |
| blessed   | intimate            |
| contented | <i>lex Christi</i>  |
| covenant  | living              |
| create    | love                |
| culture   | male                |
| dominion  | marriage            |
| dynamic   | presupposition      |
| female    | sexuality           |
| forgive   | supreme             |
| giving    | truthful            |
| glory     | unity and diversity |

## Study Questions

1. What do you learn about the theme of supremacy in the early chapters of Genesis?
2. What do you learn from Genesis 1–3 by considering it through the perspective of each of the Ten Commandments?
3. In what ways do you see the commonality of men and women through Genesis 1–3 and Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians? In what ways do you see differences?
4. What is the central difficulty in the Western world at this time?
5. What have you learned about yourself as a man or a woman in considering the Bible's teaching?
6. What have you learned about men's and women's roles in marriage and in the church?

## For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. "The Church as Family: Why Male Leadership in the Family Requires Male Leadership in the Church." In *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, edited by John Piper and Wayne A. Grudem, 233–47. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991. <https://frame-poythress.org/the-church-as-family-why-male-leadership-in-the-family-requires-male-leadership-in-the-church-as-well/>.

## Prayer

Our Father, help us to be faithful to one another, particularly in marriage and in our relations as male and female. Enable us to live lives of freedom according to your way, and open the eyes of the world to true freedom.





## FREE AGENCY

What is the meaning of human choice?

### **God and Man**

Human beings do not live in independence of God. So the nature of their ability to choose is closely connected with the nature of their relation to God. And the nature of their relation to God is closely connected with who God is. Who is God, and what is his plan for the world? People can understand human choices properly when they have first understood God and his governance of the world.

Many books of systematic theology accordingly present the issues in a certain order. Early on, they discuss the nature of God. After discussing God himself, they discuss God's decree, his plan. At this point in the organization of topics, the topic of human freedom comes up. The books deal with how the determinate nature of God's decree relates to the freedom of human choices. Later on, when the books come to discuss human nature and the creation of Adam, they have already framed the basic issues about human choices in the earlier discussion about God's decree.

Since this is a book on the topic of human beings, and not a full systematic theology, it is not appropriate to fully develop the biblical teaching

about God. That task belongs to other books.<sup>1</sup> In addition, fuller discussion of free agency is to be found elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

## **Divine Sovereignty**

Since the topic of free agency is connected with the topic of the nature of God and his decrees, we should indicate what we are presupposing about God and his decrees.

The Bible indicates that God brings about everything that comes to pass:

Who has spoken and it came to pass,  
unless the Lord has commanded it?  
Is it not from the mouth of the Most High  
that *good and bad* come? (Lam. 3:37–38)

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works *all things* according to the counsel of his will. (Eph. 1:11)<sup>3</sup>

His sovereign control is comprehensive. He also controls human acts and human hearts. Here are a few sample texts:

The king's *heart* is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD;  
he turns it wherever he will. (Prov. 21:1)

1. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 57–108, especially 100–108; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

2. Vern S. Poythress, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God: A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), chap. 5; John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), chap. 8.

3. See also the books in the previous two footnotes for citation of many more Bible verses. Additional verses may also be found in Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936).

This Jesus, delivered up according to the *definite plan* and fore-knowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. (Acts 2:23)

For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever *your hand and your plan had predestined* to take place. (Acts 4:27–28)

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and *as many as were appointed* to eternal life believed. (Acts 13:48)

The Lord opened her [Lydia's] *heart* to pay attention to what was said by Paul. (Acts 16:14)

This view is the standard view in the tradition of Reformed theology, and it is the one followed in this book.

Biblical texts speak in several ways about God's governance of the world. They speak about his having a determinate *plan* or *counsel*. He has *predestined* events. The Bible also speaks about God's issuing *commands*. He sends forth his word, his utterances. The plan and the utterances are related. God has a plan from all eternity. The plan is comprehensive, covering every event throughout history. God issues commands that make events come to pass at the time at which he has planned for the events to happen:

For he [God] *spoke*, and it came to be;  
he *commanded*, and it stood firm [creating the world]. (Ps. 33:9)

Yet he *commanded* the skies above  
and opened the doors of heaven, [to rain manna]. (Ps. 78:23)

For he *commanded* and raised the stormy wind,  
which lifted up the waves of the sea. (Ps. 107:25)

It was my hands that stretched out the heavens,  
and I *commanded* all their host. (Isa. 45:12)

The decree or divine counsel or divine command in the Bible is analogous to the decrees that human kings issue (Pss. 29:10; 103:19; Dan. 4:34–35). Human kings do not look out into the world and then issue a decree that matches the world. Neither does God look out into the world of the future and then issue a decree that matches that future.<sup>4</sup> That would merely be a matter of knowing beforehand what will happen, and not really be a decree in the proper sense, a decree that intends to bring about events in accord with a plan already in the mind of God. But the topic of decrees is not the topic of this book. The Bible teaches it, but here we have to presuppose it. That is the framework within which we consider human choices.

The Bible also teaches that human beings make meaningful choices, and that they are morally and religiously responsible before God for their choices. The doctrine of *concurrence* says that God's activity and human activity both take place *together*. God controls the outcome, *and in addition* human beings make real decisions that affect the outcome (Josh. 24:14–18). Neither destroys the reality of the other.<sup>5</sup>

The basic issue that remains is how the two truths hold together—the truth about God's sovereign control and the truth about human choices and responsibility. How are they compatible? Reformed theologians have mostly thought that it is a permanent mystery.

What remains is to see whether the four principles for interpretation from chapter 7 may throw any further light on the issue of free agency. We look at these in this chapter and the next two.

4. Here arises the topic of *middle knowledge*. The discussions on this topic might be multiplied. This book offers only a minimal response: we reject the idea of middle knowledge as incompatible with biblical teaching.

5. D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002).

Note at this point that there are two distinct issues about free agency. The first concerns how human responsibility harmonizes with the fact that God has a comprehensive plan that includes all human choices. The second concerns the variations in human moral ability that unfold in the main epochs of history. Before the fall, man has the moral ability to act uprightly. After the fall, he loses that ability because his heart is corrupted with sin. In regeneration, through the work of the Holy Spirit, people have the ability to serve God faithfully, though they still fall into sin. Even their best works are contaminated by the presence of remaining sinful motives. In the consummation, they become completely free from the presence of sin, and they are no longer subject to the possibility of sin. Four classical Latin expressions distinguish the four stages. (See table 29.1.)

**Table 29.1. Stages in History with Respect to Human Ability and Sin**

| Stage in History                    | Latin Description                   | Translation                     |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Prefall innocence<br>(Adam and Eve) | posse non peccare,<br>posse peccare | able not to sin,<br>able to sin |
| Postfall, fallen people             | non posse non peccare               | not able not to sin             |
| Postfall, redeemed<br>people        | posse non peccare,<br>posse peccare | able not to sin,<br>able to sin |
| Consummation saints                 | non posse peccare                   | not able to sin                 |

This chapter considers only the first of the issues, the general issue of human choice and human moral responsibility. Chapter 35 will consider the second issue, focusing on the moral inability belonging to the fallen state of humanity.

## Presuppositions

First, consider the theme of presuppositions. In fact, it has already been considered. What a person presupposes about God and his sovereignty

will greatly influence how he conceives of free agency. How a person approaches the issue is also influenced by the methods he uses. Some theologians rely quite a bit on general philosophical reasoning. In the case of free agency, this reasoning would take the form of general reasoning about causes, determinism or indeterminism, and the meaning of freedom and human responsibility. As indicated in chapter 7, this book does not take the route of using general philosophical reasoning.

Note also Richard Muller's observation that the modern philosophical discussion tends to collapse distinctions between levels of causality:

The significant difference between the older [Reformed and medieval] language of freedom, in its compatibility with a divine determination of all things, and the modern language of compatibilism and libertarianism is that the older language consistently depends on an understanding of the concurrence of divine and human causality in an ontologically and causally two-tiered universe [God and creatures].<sup>6</sup>

Muller's analysis indicates that the modern philosophical discussion takes place within a different framework of presuppositions than before. The earlier discussion had a two-tiered framework; the modern discussion has a one-tiered framework. A two-tiered framework is necessary to take into account the unique role of God as Creator and providential controller. By contrast with this two-tiered framework, the modern philosophical debate between compatibilism and libertarianism uses a one-tiered system. Philosophers in the modern framework may indeed still discuss God as a cause. But the one-tiered framework has no way to treat God as a *distinct tier* of cause; rather, it collapses all causes onto a single tier.

Why do analysts not deal with two tiers? For modern philosophy, the main difficulty with having two tiers is that the top tier, consisting

6. Richard A. Muller, *Divine Will and Human Choice: Freedom, Contingency, and Necessity in Early Modern Reformed Thought* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 324.

in God as the unique Creator and divine actor, is related to the bottom tier by analogy. God does not *cause* events in exactly the same way and in the same sense that moving billiard balls *cause* events. Rather, the two are analogous. The analogy innately contains mystery; the top tier is mysterious. There is no way for human beings to control it tightly in a masterful argument. Modern analysts may choose to avoid this route because they cannot master it.

### Semantics: What Is Free Agency?

Now consider the second of the four methods from chapter 7. The second method is to inspect semantics or meaning. In the case of free agency, the key question is “What is the meaning of free agency?” The issue of how to define it is particularly acute in the case of free agency. So attention to semantics contributes to the discussion. On the one hand, Pelagians think that human freedom involves such an absolute self-command that every person can virtually save himself. On the other extreme, fatalists think that the human psychological sense of freedom and responsibility is simply a psychological feeling with no real basis in fact. They may say that people are physically determined by the motions of their molecules.

For simplicity, consider two books that represent two contrasting positions. John Miley<sup>7</sup> is an example of an Arminian approach to human freedom. Over against him is Jonathan Edwards,<sup>8</sup> who represents a Reformed approach.<sup>9</sup> Both these books are massive in their extent and complexity. We use them here as illustrations of how the four principles of interpretation can throw light on a difficult controversy.

7. John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (New York: Eaton & Mains/Cincinnati: Jennings & Pye, 1894).

8. Jonathan Edwards, *A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of That Freedom of Will, Which Is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Vertue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957).

9. Reformed tradition is more complicated, however, and Edwards represents only one substream. Muller, *Divine Will*, especially pp. 20, 22, 24, 322.



Miley has read Edwards's book, which some theologians have supposed to be the best defense of human agency within the framework of Reformed theology. But Miley is not convinced. Why not? Fairly early in his discussion, Miley complains that Edwards has defined *free agency* in a way that poses the question improperly.<sup>10</sup> So one of the issues to examine is the area of semantics. What does *free agency* mean, for Miley and also for Edwards?

### **Semantics: Definitions of *Free Agency***

John Frame<sup>11</sup> offers the following possible definitions of *free will*:

- a. Ability to will contrary to or independent of God's decree.
- b. Freedom as the power of contrary choice: the power to choose the moral opposite of what one in fact did choose. This power did exist in man prior to the fall.
- c. Freedom to establish one's own moral standards (Jean-Paul Sartre).
- d. Freedom as power to control the consequences of our actions, and to know the consequences.
- e. Physical ability to do something.
- f. Abilities distinguishing humans from animals. Moral praise and blame go only to human beings.
- g. Other kinds of abilities. For example, to be free to give to the poor, you must have economic ability (you must own something).
- h. A decision is free as a moral decision if it is genuinely *ours*. It must be based on standards that are ours. *We* must do it.
- i. Freedom means having some knowledge of standards, that is, of God's moral will.
- j. The possibility of doing either good or evil. Adam, and men in Adam, could have chosen good.
- k. Freedom means not being determined totally by heredity and environment.

10. Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2:272.

11. John Frame, classroom lectures, c. 1973.

1. Freedom means access to God. Any of us can be reached by God and his grace, if God determines to give it.<sup>12</sup>

Note that some people use *free will* and *free agency* to describe the same thing. But others do not. This book uses *free agency* as the main term to designate human choice that includes moral responsibility. It is the human-person *agent* who is the one who performs actions. In some of these acts, he acts “freely” (laying to one side muscle reflexes, sleepwalking, and acts done under external compulsion or duress). *Will* designates one aspect of this agent and introduces additional issues: (1) what does the word *will* mean; and (2) how is this will connected to and possibly dependent on other aspects in the individual human person?

Anthony Hoekema prefers to use two expressions: (1) “*the ability to choose*,” which human beings always have; and (2) “true freedom,” “the ability . . . to think, say, and do what is pleasing to God.”<sup>13</sup> The latter is lost in the fall and restored only by redeeming grace.

The variety of definitions illustrates that there is some need to try to communicate clearly. If someone wants to use a key term with technical precision, he needs to formulate a clear definition and then stick to it. In the discussion of Miley versus Edwards, Miley might deny that definition (a) was relevant, since Miley believes in decrees, though he thinks that they are not efficacious (they are based on foreknowledge of what human beings will do in freedom). Hence, (a) cannot be made the focus

12. One may compare Frame’s list with an earlier one from Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 8.1.4, 1:569:

Liberty is fourfold: (1) the liberty of independence which belongs to God as the first being; this is opposed to the necessity of dependence which belongs to all creatures. [Cf. Frame, (a).] (2) Liberty from coercion by which man acts spontaneously and with freedom; this is opposed to the necessity of coercion seen in those who act through force. (3) Rational liberty from brute and physical necessity by which man acts from choice (*ek proaireseōs*) and not by a brute instinct and blind impulse; this is opposed to the physical necessity of inanimates and brutes. [Cf. Frame, (f).] (4) Liberty from slavery by which man is subject to the yoke of no slavery, either of sin or of misery; this is opposed to the necessity of slavery in sinners. [Cf. Frame, (b), (j).]

13. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Exeter, England: Paternoster, 1986), 228.

of controversy unless a detour is made into an extensive discussion of the nature of divine decrees and foreknowledge.

Definitions (b), (f), (j), and (k) are the possible definitions that are most relevant. Miley's argument boils down to saying that lack of (b) or (j) implies the denial of (f) in any reasonable system.

But even if someone uses one of the definitions above, there is a problem in defining the kind of possibility or power in view. The Calvinist wants to say that there is sometimes a moral necessitation due to man's character and his inability to change his character. But a Calvinist also wants to make a distinction between the type of freedom available to Adam and what exists now. Definitions (f) and (k) still exist, but (b) and (j) do not, when it comes to the question of the fundamental direction of one's life. The Calvinist also wants to say, however, that in typical situations people "could" have done what is spiritually good, *if they had had* moral strength of character to do it. There was no compulsion from outside (such as electrodes planted in the brain).

Arminians sometimes picture a Calvinist view as commanding the person to leave the burning house when he is tied to his bed hand and foot. That is not an apt analogy because it suggests that the person desperately wants to leave, but is physically constrained. He is constrained against his will. The Calvinist thinks that his difficulty is not an external physical constraint, but his own corrupt character. The Calvinist wants to say that what is "morally" impossible (because of corrupt moral character) is "metaphysically" possible. But do these two terms adequately express the difference? If it were that easy, why is Miley not persuaded?

### **Edwards's Definition and Its Problems**

Other statements further illustrate the difficulty with definitions. In the crucial statement quoted by Miley, Edwards says:

The plain and obvious meaning of the words "freedom" and "liberty," in common speech, is power, opportunity, or advantage, that anyone has, to do as he pleases. Or in other words, his being free

from hindrance or impediment in the way of doing, or conducting in any respect, as he wills. And the contrary to liberty, whatever name we call that by, is a person's being hindered or unable to conduct as he will, or being necessitated to do otherwise.<sup>14</sup>

Miley objects that this focuses on external actions, which are not the heart of the matter.<sup>15</sup> Nor, according to Miley, is the heart of the matter the freedom of the *will*, but the freedom of the person himself as an agent.<sup>16</sup>

Even more significantly, Miley delineates true free agency as not "the mere power of self-action," such as animals have, but "a power of rational self-action."<sup>17</sup> Edwards maintains that "it is that motive, which, as it stands in the view of the mind, is the strongest, that determines the will."<sup>18</sup> To Miley, this seems to make man no more than an animal at best, who is passive under the impulses of instinct and desire. But Edwards is talking not about the behavior of beasts, but rather about the behavior of human beings with their hearts and minds in all their depth and complexity.

### Miley's Definition, or Lack of It

But Miley's own discussions do not even attempt to define words such as *motive*, *necessity*, and *freedom* with the care that Edwards attempts (in Edwards, the entire part 1 is devoted to discussing definitions of key terms).

Thus Miley states:

Nothing so deeply concerns us as the question of our free agency. Are we rationally and morally free, with power over our lives? or are we the passive subjects of some dominating force, just as an animal is subject to a law of instinct?<sup>19</sup>

14. Edwards, *Careful and Strict Enquiry*, § 1.5, 163.

15. Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2:271–72.

16. Miley, 2:272.

17. Miley, 2:273.

18. Edwards, *Careful and Strict Enquiry*, § 1.2, 141.

19. Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2:274.

This is putting it obscurely. Those like Edwards might well deny that these are the only alternatives, or insist that the alternatives are formulated prejudicially. Undoubtedly Edwards maintains that man is not an animal. Man has “power” of a certain kind.

On the other side, Miley has tucked away in a corner a curious admission:

Objections may be urged against the reality of this power in view of the blindness of ignorance, the perversion of error, the enervation of vice, the thralldom of evil habit; but these are incidental questions or side issues which in no sense antagonize our position. There are such instances, as many facts witness. Hence it is clear that rational agency may be greatly enfeebled, or, possibly, entirely overborne, by the force of evil habit and vicious tendency; but this does not affect our position, for it is affirmed of a true rational agency [this sounds like Adam before the fall], and not of a mind in such a state of thralldom from a wrong use of its powers that its proper agency no longer remains.<sup>20</sup>

This admission nearly concedes the whole debate. Miley has spoken about his conception of freedom of action as a fundamental, universal principle of morality. This principle is basic to his system. If it is universal, he cannot fairly exclude counterexamples as though they were “incidental questions.” If it is not universal, he has treated a special subclass as though it were universal, and his principle cannot bear the weight that it needs.

We may approach the issue in another way, by asking a key question. Is a person in “thralldom” still responsible? If Miley says no, then the devil is not responsible for the evil deeds that he is now doing. Nor are people in hell or people in advanced stages of depravity responsible for current deeds. But such an absence of responsibility is counterintuitive and does not seem to align with the fact that, by God’s standards, the deeds are morally evil.

20. Miley, 2:295–96.

For example, in the Old Testament, the punishment for murder is death (Gen. 9:6; Ex. 21:12–14). The texts do not add a qualification to the effect that particularly evil murderers, in thrall to their hatred and viciousness, need to be excluded. A similar treatment belongs to other crimes. In the New Testament, the pronouncement is that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). It does not say that the wages do not apply if the sinner is especially vicious and especially enslaved to his vices.

Particular cases of thrall in the Bible confirm this impression. The cases of deep evil include the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19; the pharaoh of the exodus, who hardened his heart; Sihon king of Heshbon, whose heart the Lord hardened (Deut. 2:30); the religious leaders in Jesus’ time who hardened themselves against the evidence of Jesus’ miracles; and the people under “strong delusion” in 2 Thessalonians 2:11–12. The hardness of these people did not result in their not being responsible, but rather resulted in their being fitting objects of judgment.

The alternative is for Miley to say yes: such people are still responsible. Then Miley’s kind of freedom is not necessary to avoid destroying moral responsibility.

So the question arises, “who is Miley talking about?” Evidently, not all human beings. But then isn’t this freedom an ideal rather than a reality? Is it an ideal to which only the redeemed approximate? Hypocrites only deceive themselves that they are free from thrall.

### Key Terms: *Cause* and *Necessity*

We may try to move forward by reflecting on the key terminology involved. Both Edwards and Miley use the key ideas of *necessity* and *cause*. The ideas can be present even when the words are not. For example, the word *must* or *cannot* can express the idea of necessity, and *determine* and *make* can express the idea of cause. But both these ideas are hard to pin down.

To ordinary readers, both the ideas might often seem to suggest the model of physical causation and necessity.<sup>21</sup> One billiard ball hits

21. Muller, *Divine Will*, 316, and elsewhere, distinguishes human freedom “from physical or brute necessity, natural necessity or constraint.”

another and *causes* it to move. The second ball moves by *necessity*, given the general principles of physics. Can this kind of cause become a model for human action?

Edwards says that people decide in accord with their strongest motive.<sup>22</sup> This claim makes sense. But does Edwards show clearly enough how the causal connection in the case of human beings differs fundamentally from that of animals? Do not animals also follow their “desires”? How does causation within a human being differ from causation with two billiard balls? Edwards distinguishes between “moral necessity” and “natural necessity,” based on the distinction between “moral causes” (in human beings) and “natural causes”<sup>23</sup> (which would include one billiard ball’s hitting another). But his opponents may still think that determinism in the one case is just as fatal to freedom as it is in the other.

How can people move beyond this dilemma? The next chapter brings to bear multiple perspectives.

## Acts 2 as a Perspective on Free Agency

Acts 2 shows the work of God in forming the church and the responses of human agents in the church as unfolding together. God accomplishes his plan for the church and for the spread of the gospel (Acts 1:8) through supernatural signs (2:2–13, 17–20), which empower rather than crush human energy and zeal in enlivening the church and increasing the numbers.

### Key Terms

|           |             |
|-----------|-------------|
| ability   | choice      |
| Arminian  | concurrence |
| Calvinist | decree      |
| cause     | determinism |

22. Edwards, *Careful and Strict Enquiry*, §§ 1.1, 1.2: “a prevailing inclination of the soul” (§ 1.1, 140); “it is that motive, which, as it stands in the view of the mind, is the strongest, that determines the will” (§ 1.2, 141).

23. Edwards, § 1.4, 156.

|                      |                     |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| Edwards, Jonathan    | moral cause         |
| fall of man          | natural cause       |
| fatalism             | necessity           |
| free agency          | Pelagian            |
| freedom              | presupposition      |
| free will            | Reformed theology   |
| human responsibility | semantics           |
| indeterminism        | sovereignty         |
| Miley, John          | systematic theology |

### Study Questions

1. How is the issue of human choice and responsibility related to the doctrine of God?
2. What does the Bible teach about the sovereignty of God?
3. Can we make transparent how the sovereignty of God is in harmony with human responsibility?
4. What are the main issues between Jonathan Edwards and John Miley?
5. What is the difficulty in appealing primarily to an analogy with physical causes in order to understand free agency?
6. What have you learned about the difficulties in understanding free agency?

### For Further Reading

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8. Pp. 2:343–61, 608–15.

### Prayer

Thank you, God of all creation, for making human beings in your image, with special moral agency. We thank you for the mystery of our initiative and choice-making. Please enable us to make our choices well, in a way that honors you. Let us live in love, as the early church did.





## ANALOGIES FOR FREE AGENCY

Now consider the influence of analogies on the understanding of free agency. Does using multiple analogies illumine the meaning of free agency?

The analogy of physical causation is an appropriate place to begin, because this analogy seems to be one of the background issues that evoke John Miley's concern and his rejection of Jonathan Edwards's view.

### **The Analogy with Physical Causation**

It is noteworthy that the Bible itself sometimes uses physical causation by way of analogy to show constraints on human action. Matthew 7:15–20 uses the analogy with trees bearing fruit:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

Biological causation takes place in the processes in which trees bear fruit. "Healthy" and "diseased" trees contrast; they are distinct as causes. The

one produces good fruit and the other does not. Different species of trees also represent distinct causes. Different kinds of bushes and trees produce different fruits. Fig trees produce figs, while olive trees do not produce figs but olives. “Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water” (James 3:12).

In Matthew 7, the false prophets act in a manner analogous to diseased trees. The false prophets produce bad spiritual fruit because they are spiritually diseased. But does that mean that the false prophets have no genuine agency? Do they produce what they produce by a mere physical causation, such as a salt pond yielding salt water?

Consider another passage. Romans 9:19–23 uses an analogy with clay pots and the causes that act on them:

You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?” But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?” Has the potter no right over the *clay*, to *make* out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory . . . ?

The clay is subject to the physical manipulation of the potter.

Consider another case. The king’s heart is under the Lord’s control:

The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD;  
he *turns* it wherever he will. (Prov. 21:1)

This picture in Proverbs is particularly strong. A human being can turn a stream of water in another direction by using his hands or, if need be, larger barriers. By analogy, the Lord can turn the king’s heart. The heart is in his hand, and he can use his hand to turn the heart “wherever he will.” In the

Hebrew language and culture, the “heart” signifies the inmost being, the source for everything else: “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life” (Prov. 4:23). To control the heart is by implication to control everything that flows from it. That is thorough control. It is confirmed by historical instances in which the Lord hardened people’s hearts, such as Pharaoh and Sihon (Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; etc.; Deut. 2:30).

Why does Proverbs 21:1 single out “the king” rather than anyone else? It is because the king, of all people in the society, is most able to conduct his affairs without constraint. People under him may have to obey commands from the king that would be contrary to their normal inclinations, even ones that they detest. But they find themselves under constraint. They are afraid not to obey, lest they suffer consequences from the king—even death. “A king’s wrath is a messenger of death, and a wise man will appease it” (Prov. 16:14). In contrast to the commoner, a king “does whatever he pleases” (Eccl. 8:3). It is true that there are some broad limits, even for earthly kings. But in comparison to most human beings, they are under the least constraint. The Lord’s act in turning their hearts illustrates in a key case what is true with respect to everyone else. All human hearts are in God’s hand.

These passages in Matthew 7, Romans 9, and Proverbs 21:1 use analogies with physical causation. They make an important point. God always accomplishes what he undertakes to accomplish. The effects that he brings about take place as certainly as in the case of physical causes. Just as physical objects do not “talk back” to thwart the causes that impinge on them, so in a fundamental sense no one can talk back to God:

For his dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;  
all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,  
and he does according to his will among the host of heaven  
and among the inhabitants of the earth;  
and none can stay his hand  
or *say to him*, “What have you done?” (Dan. 4:34–35)

It should also be underlined that these passages do not harmonize with the standard Arminian explanation, namely, that what God wills and what God wants is a product of knowing beforehand what a human being will do of his own free will. Proverbs 21:1 does *not* say, “The king’s heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he wants to protect it and assist it and affirm its freedom so that it flows wherever *it* wishes.” Rather, it says that the Lord directs the heart.

If someone wants to affirm ultimate human control over decision-making, he should pick comparisons that highlight human choice. Instead, Proverbs 21:1 uses a comparison with an inanimate thing, namely, a stream of water. If someone wants to make clear the ultimacy of human decisions, rather than divine sovereignty, he could explain that God is deferring to such human decisions. The author of Proverbs does no such thing, but rather its opposite: he provides a blunt and shocking picture of complete dominance by God. It is shocking, that is, to those who want to protect a certain conception of human freedom apart from God.

Every Bible reader has to take seriously these analogies, and not just ignore them. Some people, however, *do* ignore them, or refuse to think about them, or construct elaborate speculative explanations not based on the Bible, because they want to protect human freedom apart from God.

What is a better way? The physical analogies are genuine analogies, but they are limited. They do not mean to say that all causes are nothing other than physical causes. False prophets make decisions to speak their falsehoods; trees do not make decisions to bear fruit. Kings make decisions, while streams of water do not. What is the difference? What differentiates the meaning of human decision-making?

Miley lodges an objection to God’s total sovereignty because he thinks in terms of physical cause and physical necessity. He interprets the alleged consequences of Edwards’s position as follows:

If motives dominate our choices, there is for us no freedom of choice. The theory can admit no power of our personal agency over our motive states. If we would attempt to control or modify

these states we must choose so to do; but we cannot so choose, except as we are determined thereto by a motive. The motive must arise spontaneously. We have no power to cast about for reasons against a present impulse unless we are so determined by the power of a motive which must be on hand, if on hand at all, without any agency of our own. Necessity lies in such subjection to motive. It is the same, whatever the motive, or however it may be designated. A law of necessity has determined all human volitions. Not a single choice could have been avoided or in the least varied; not one could have been added to the actual number. We are the passive subjects of spontaneous impulses, and without any true personal agency, rational or moral.

There must be the same determining law for all finite intelligences, and even for God himself. In all the realm of mind a law of necessity reigns, has reigned, and must forever reign. Of all actual volitions, good and evil, none could have been avoided; nor could one have been added. It must be in the future as it has been in the past. Necessity is the universal and eternal law.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Physical Model**

It is appropriate to use the principle, from chapter 7, of paying attention to analogies. One possible key analogy is the analogy with physical or mechanical causes. A key reason (beyond simply human stubbornness and sin) why some of the arguments do not persuade is that the idea of cause may be assimilated to a physical or mechanical model.

Inside a mechanical model, where is there any real freedom? To find the real source of freedom, the temptation is to push back step by step. External action or inaction is determined by a choice. Choice is determined by will, will by strongest motive, strongest motive by character (the “heart”), character by what?

1. John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (New York: Eaton & Mains/Cincinnati: Jennings & Pye, 1894), 279–80.

In a sequence such as this one, difficulties confront both the Arminian and the Calvinist. For the Arminian, the difficulty is that a completely indeterminate act, without any prior influences, looks like an act arising from pure chance. If an act is completely arbitrary, an act of chance, it is not a moral choice. Human responsibility is not meaningful. On the other side, for the Calvinist, the difficulty is that acts determined by prior motives seem to leave human beings purely passive under the control of those motives. To this picture the Arminian objects, "If action is causally determined at every point, man is purely passive and there is no real freedom, but simply animal instinct." If action is rooted in the heart (as a Calvinist would say that it is), the heart must not simply be identical with animal nature or instinct; it must be somehow active (an Arminian concern).

This dilemma tempts people to press the debate further and further back. Thus Miley cannot rest with freedom of external action, but goes back to will. When it is shown that will is determined, he goes back to the agent who uses the will as an instrument.

Miley gets in back of motives by pointing out that motives are not always immediately acted upon, but that people have the power of rational reflection and suspension of decision.<sup>2</sup> "It is a fact that often under motive influence all volition toward the end is deferred and held under deliberation."<sup>3</sup> But the entrance of rational deliberation does not really refute Edwards. Edwards can point out that motives lie behind this deliberation (second-order motives).

At each stage, an Arminian fears that a deterministic explanation amounts virtually to physical determinism, which destroys responsibility. So he looks for an indeterministic decision in back of the causal chain. At each stage, a Calvinist fears that a totally indeterministic event means a violation of God's sovereignty and a reduction of human responsibility to meaningless chance. So he looks for deterministic explanation.

The central difficulty remains the same. Neither physical determinism nor chance can explain freedom. If a deterministic *physical* causal chain

2. Miley, 2:291.

3. Miley, 2:292.

explains human behavior, human beings apparently have no freedom, but are caught in fatalistic determinism. On the other hand, if a random event breaks the causal chain, the random intrusion is pure chance, not human responsibility.

The difficulty arises partly from using the word *cause*, or related words such as *necessity*, in a way that suggests physical or mechanical causation as the primary analogy. Perceptively, Edwards makes a distinction between *moral causes* and *natural causes*. But his opponents may still be unable to see any real “freedom” in moral causes. What in a moral cause differentiates it from a physical cause?

In recent decades, the philosophical discussion of these issues has been carried on with great sophistication. But it has not solved the dilemma.<sup>4</sup> It cannot, because in the end, all theories depend on analogies, and the analogy with physical causation cannot go far in illuminating moral responsibility. Billiard balls are not morally responsible for their responses when they are hit by other billiard balls. This is true even if a physicist could introduce an element of pure chance or randomness, so that at certain points in its path, the direction of the billiard ball’s motion could not be precisely predicted. Neither physical causes nor chance offers a plausible way forward to explain human choices and responsibility.

### **The Analogy of Sonship**

Can *other* analogies,<sup>5</sup> besides the analogy with physical causation, throw light on the nature of human agency? Consider the analogy of sonship. Adam is the son of God (Luke 3:38). If the fall had not intervened, all

4. Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 130: “it seems unlikely that the debate will be resolved any time soon.”

5. Richard A. Muller is instructive in taking us into the realm of post-Reformation Reformed theology, which had a richer framework in which to deal with the interaction of kinds of necessity and kinds of possibility. Though on the surface the use of analogy is not a primary tool, the whole system serves as an analogical framework because it is two-tiered, with God and man on distinct levels (Muller, *Divine Will and Human Choice: Freedom, Contingency, and Necessity in Early Modern Reformed Thought* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017], 324).



human beings, as children of Adam, would also be children of God. They would belong to God's family. The use of words such as *son*, *children*, and *family* depends on an analogy between a human family and the family of which God is the Father. So what does freedom mean in the context of participating in a human family?

Within a morally healthy human family, the love relationship in the family acts as a kind of moral restraint, potentially of a good kind. The bonds of love condition what sorts of actions family members contemplate. For a son to longingly entertain the possibility of betraying the family is already a violation of family trust (though not as serious a violation as if he actually carried out the betrayal). It is not a bad thing to be influenced by love in such a way that many of these vicious actions never come up for rational contemplation. In tension with Miley's rhetoric, rational weighing of moral alternatives is not the only contribution to freedom. The security and affection within a family depend on tacit trust as well. Freedom is freedom in communion with the family, and has constraints by means of love. Now compare this situation to the family in which God is the Father and Adam and Eve as unfallen human beings are the children. Free action takes place in an atmosphere of love, according to which some choices are already excluded. The choice of betrayal is not a "real" choice, psychologically, because it never comes up for discussion. (Of course, for Adam and Eve, the serpent's voice made it a topic of discussion.)

Now, what about the situation after the fall of man? The most obvious way of characterizing the state of sinful man is that he has lost his sonship and is now a slave. In John 8:34, Jesus says, "Everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin" (see Rom. 6:20; 2 Peter 2:19). The analogy with slavery, however, is a picture that is hardly likely to satisfy Arminians. The picture can easily suggest that the slave wants to be free, but that he is constrained from *outside*. He is an unwilling victim of circumstances outside his control. The element of personal responsibility and demerit for being the slave of sin does not come into the foreground. In John 8:34, the idea of a bondage that comes completely from outside a person is rejected when Jesus points out that it is the person who "practices sin" who is the slave.

But the fallen condition can also be described as being in the “family” of Satan. As Jesus declares:

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I tell the truth, you do not believe me. (John 8:44–45)

In effect, people born in sin belong to the family of the devil. The person who is a son of the devil is constrained by his character and his relations within the family of the devil. Disinterested, completely autonomous “rational deliberation” is a delusion because everyone already belongs to a family. One belongs either to the family of God or to the family of the devil: “We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). No one is in genuine isolation, as if to make decisions all by himself. Moreover, the devil puts people under delusions:

The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thess. 2:9–12)

Of course, 2 Thessalonians 2:9–12 describes an extreme case, namely, the delusions that come through “the lawless one” (2 Thess. 2:8), who is an antichrist figure. But the principles operative in this case cannot contradict the general principles with respect to free agency. As we have seen, Miley himself concedes that some people are in moral “thralldom.”<sup>6</sup>

6. Miley, *Systematic Theology*, 2:296.

## The Analogy of Translation

Now consider the analogy of translation.<sup>7</sup> Human action is like a kind of “translation” into action of the purposes of the actor. Could such an analogy help in understanding how a person’s actions are counted as responsible because they derive from his heart?

Actions are translations or expressions of who a person is and what he commits himself to. They may sometimes be faulty translations if there are organic problems in the nervous system. The actions need interpretation in an evaluative process. Each person is responsible as a “speaker” or a communicator of moral meanings. An analogical illustration occurs in Nehemiah 8:8:

They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they *gave the sense*, so that the people understood the reading.

This episode involves either translation or interpretation, or both. The speakers are constrained by the text, and by the *sense* of the text, even as they have choices in their words. Their words express the sense.

So far, so good. This might be acceptable to an Arminian. But how can the matter of human moral inability now be expressed?

Consider the truths articulated in Romans 8:5–8. Verse 7 states that “the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it *cannot*.” Could this use of “cannot” be compared to translation of motives into action? Romans 8:5–8, Matthew 7:15–20 and 12:33–35, and 1 Corinthians 2:14 are comparable to saying that the moral expressions of an evil “speaker” are evil. The passages tell us that it is impossible to break the link between the speaker and what he says. If he is of the flesh, what he “expresses” and how God evaluates him will be in conformity with his fleshiness.

7. This analogy is partly inspired by Colin Murray Turbayne, *The Myth of Metaphor*, rev. ed. (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), who uses the analogy of translation to explain the relation of conscious perception to physical events, such as light falling on the retina and nerve signals arising from it.

But this analogy still leaves open the question how the person himself changes. In a sense, he changes in every act of moral expression. But how can he change a whole semantic pattern of speech from being good to being evil, or vice versa? In Adam, how did human beings change from having a competence in good speech to be not competent?

There is still a mystery here about human change. But if a person is in rebellion against God, he does not *want* to speak or act according to the former patterns of righteousness that belong to unfallen humanity. He is confirmed in speaking in the patterns of unrighteousness. He has competence in those patterns and not competence in the patterns of righteousness that characterized Adam before the fall. Within this sphere of his competence in speech, he still has choices to do this or that. He chooses between words, and he chooses what sentences he speaks. But he does not go outside his “competence.” This picture is something like the inverse of the picture in which the son in a family does not contemplate betraying the family. The fallen heart does not contemplate *not* betraying God. Genesis 6:5 shows the result: “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

God can change a person by the work of the Holy Spirit and by the purification of the Word of God (Eph. 5:26). With some beings God has stopped speaking in this way (the devil). But the gospel still addresses the human race.

### **The Analogy of Different Levels of Causes**

Note also how there are different “levels” of causes. Not all causes operate on the same level. The different levels may be analogous, in some ways, but there is more than one level. In particular, not all kinds of causes are like physical causes in their necessity.<sup>8</sup>

8. The Westminster Confession of Faith says:

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is

Job 1–2 shows that analysis can distinguish at least four levels of causes.

(1) God's causing all events: "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21).

(2) Angelic beings' (including evil angels') causing events: "So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD and struck Job with loathsome sores from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head" (Job 2:7).

(3) Human agents' causing events: "The Sabeans fell upon them [oxen and donkeys] and took them and struck down the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you" (Job 1:15).

(4) Physical objects' causing events: "The edge of the sword" killed the servants (Job 1:15, 17). "A great wind came across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell upon the young people, and they are dead" (v. 19).

One level of cause does not exclude the others. The fact that swords killed Job's servants does not compete with the Sabeans' killing them. The verses describe both a personal cause (Sabeans with human choice and human responsibility) and a physical cause (a sword cutting through flesh).

In particular, causation by human agents must not be equated with physical causation.

### An Analogy with Divine Freedom

Consider now the analogy between divine freedom and human freedom. According to the Bible, God does whatever he pleases (Ps. 115:3). God has unlimited power. Human beings may in part do what they please. But they have limited power. They cannot fly in the air unaided, like birds,

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God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the *will* of the creatures; nor is the *liberty* or *contingency* of *second causes* taken away, but rather established. (WCF 3.1, italics added)

Although, in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the First Cause, all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly; yet, by the same providence, He ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of *second causes*, either *necessarily*, *freely*, or *contingently*. (WCF 5.2, italics added)

or travel into outer space unaided. So divine freedom and human freedom are not on the same level.

Nevertheless, there is an analogy between divine freedom and human freedom. God made man “in his own image” (Gen. 1:27). One aspect of the likeness is found in God and man’s both having moral responsibility and making morally related choices. Some of the choices might have been different from what they were. God did not have to create a world. Moses did not have to kill the Egyptian (Ex. 2:12). (He was not robotically constrained.) So mankind has a genuine “freedom.” But an analogy is not an identity. It remains mysterious how human freedom might be similar to and yet also different from divine freedom. It helps to observe that divine freedom is not “freedom” to do anything at all, even what is inconsistent with who God is. God cannot lie, and he cannot deny himself (Num. 23:19; 2 Tim. 2:13). He does what he pleases to do (Ps. 115:3), not whatever human beings might imagine him as doing. He is always consistent with himself. What he does is always good and never sinful, because he himself is unchangeably good. By analogy, human freedom is constrained both by who a person is and by who God is. It is not an infinite freedom to do anything at all.

A similar principle occurs in assessing the final state of humanity and the angels. The devil and his angels cannot change their character from evil to good. The saved saints in the new heaven and the new earth can no longer sin or turn to evil. All of them are morally responsible. There is still meaning in the human choice to continue to do good even when the temptation to do evil is completely gone and there is no longer any chance of falling away from good.<sup>9</sup> This is an analogue to the principle on the divine level that it is not possible for God to sin or do evil. To do so would be inconsistent with his character.

9. G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), chap. 9. Berkouwer makes the point that there is no such thing as an indifferent metaphysical choice between good and evil. Defining free moral agency in terms of power of contrary choice is therefore a perversion. His point touches on the issue of metaphysics, one of the four principles from chapter 7 above.

## The Analogy with a Novelist

Consider another analogy. A novelist can write a novel with characters in it. There are two levels of meaning: the level of the novelist and his purposes on the one hand, and the level of the characters and their purposes on the other hand. God is like a novelist. The world is the story that he writes. His complete determination of the entire story, from one end to the other, does not compete with the meaning of the characters and their decisions within the story.<sup>10</sup>

The Bible at one point comes near to this analogy by talking about God's "book":

Your eyes saw my unformed substance;  
in your *book* were written, every one of them,  
the days that were formed for me,  
when as yet there was none of them. (Ps. 139:16)

The psalmist's "days," "every one of them," were all written beforehand in the "book." This description compares God to a human author of a *book*. And the book in this case is a book describing each day of the psalmist's life. God has not written a fictional book, like a human author, but rather a book describing beforehand real life.

Let us return to what a human author does. There are alternative possibilities for how the story in the novel might have unfolded. If the author had chosen differently, and one or more of the characters had chosen differently, the outcome in the story would have been different. By analogy, there are different possibilities concerning God's plan for history. If God had planned differently, and if some of the human beings had chosen differently, in accordance with that difference in plan, the outcome would have been different. The Bible does not teach that human beings ever escape from God's plan or act contrary to his plan. But it does allow that

10. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 156–59; Vern S. Poythress, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God: A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), chap. 5.

there are other possibilities, because God could have chosen differently. Here are a number of texts that talk about some of these possibilities:

“Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O LORD, the God of Israel, please tell your servant.” And the LORD said, “He will come down.” Then David said, “Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?” And the LORD said, “They will surrender you.” Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition. (1 Sam. 23:11–13)

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For *if* the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. (Matt. 11:21)

And *if* those days had not been cut short, no human being would be saved. (Matt. 24:22)

Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so? (Matt. 26:53–54)

*Unless* these men [sailors] stay in the ship, you cannot be saved. (Acts 27:31)

These texts talk about meaningful possibilities that never became actualities. The possibilities are meaningful because God’s decrees *could* have been otherwise.

### **The Analogy of the Second Person of the Trinity**

Consider also personal relations within the Trinity. The eternal Son always acts in agreement with the Father and with the Spirit. There is no



possibility of disagreement because agreement belongs to the reality of the Trinity. This necessity is compatible with the freedom of the Son. Both stability and creativity have their origin in the Trinity.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, when the Son takes on human nature, he has full human agency. Because of the Son's perfect love for the Father, and because of the union of the natures in one person, the Son will not sin. This sinlessness is compatible with human free agency belonging to his human nature.

In sum, a number of analogies help illumine how there may be free human decision-making within a context of divine sovereignty. (See table 30.1.)

**Table 30.1. Analogies for Human Free Agency**

| Analogy                                        | Meaning of Human Agency                                                                                                |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| sonship                                        | Decision-making is constrained by relational bonds; a person is a son of God or a son of Satan.                        |
| translation                                    | Action is in accord with inward purpose—constrained by regularities of systematic thought and behavior.                |
| levels of causes<br>(primary and<br>secondary) | God as primary cause supports rather than negates angelic causation, human personal causation, and physical causation. |
| divine freedom                                 | God's acts are constrained by his character. He does only what is consistent with his character. Likewise for mankind. |
| writing a novel                                | The author of a novel is analogous to God; the characters in the novel are analogous to human beings in the world.     |
| second person<br>of the Trinity                | The Son is free and does only what the Father commands him (John 5:19; 12:49–50).                                      |

11. Poythress, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God*, 58–61.

## **The Metaphysical Frameworks for Causes**

Consider also what may be the metaphysical frameworks in the background when people discuss causes and the relation of causes to free agency. In Western philosophy and theology, there is a complicated history. But for simplicity, we focus on three primary metaphysical frameworks: biblical, Aristotelian, and modern scientific.

First, consider the biblical framework. As we have seen, especially with the first chapters of Job, several levels of causes operate because of the activity of several different kinds of agents: God, angels and demons, human agents, and physical causes. The Bible never provides a transparent complete theory about how these levels relate to one another. For every event, the primary cause is God (Eph. 1:11). But the Bible also indicates the reality of secondary causes—angelic, human, and physical. The relation between primary and secondary causes expresses the relation between the Creator and his creatures. There will always be mystery because the Creator’s work is analogous to, but not on the same level with, the work of creatures.<sup>12</sup>

Second, consider an Aristotelian framework. Aristotle distinguishes four kinds of causes: material cause, formal cause, efficient cause, and final cause. Andrea Falcon summarizes:

- The material cause: “that out of which”, e.g., the bronze of a statue.
- The formal cause: “the form”, “the account of what-it-is-to-be”, e.g., the shape of a statue.
- The efficient cause: “the primary source of the change or rest”, e.g., the artisan, the art of bronze-casting the statue, the man who gives advice, the father of the child.
- The final cause: “the end, that for the sake of which a thing is done”, e.g., health is the end of walking, losing weight, purging, drugs, and surgical tools.<sup>13</sup>

12. Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), chaps. 37–39.

13. Andrea Falcon, “Aristotle on Causality,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2022), § 2, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/aristotle-causality/>, based on Aristotle, *Physics*, 2.3, and *Metaphysics*, 5.2.

All four of these kinds of causes are meant to apply not only to human actions but to events in the natural world.<sup>14</sup> So Aristotle's system is a one-tiered rather than a two-tiered or many-tiered system. Aristotle mentions "God" (or "Mind" or "the Good" or the "Prime Mover") as a final cause. But it is one such cause alongside many others.<sup>15</sup> The one-tiered system endeavors to encompass human intentional causes and causes in nature within one general system. The result is that the framework does not provide a resource for *distinguishing* what might be the contrasts between human freedom on the one hand and the necessity of billiard-ball collisions on the other hand. Nor does it picture "the Good" (the substitute for God) as an efficient cause, but only as a final cause. Other things are set in motion by desiring the Good as their goal.

Third, the rise of modern science made people more and more dissatisfied with Aristotle's fourfold approach.<sup>16</sup> Modern science focused exclusively on the material and efficient causes. The efficient cause became all-important; the material cause was scarcely viewed as a "cause" at all, but only as the background situation in which efficient causes operated. Isaac Newton's mechanics suggested to many people a world picture in which all outcomes were determinate and physical causes alone determined the outcomes.

Perhaps this shift in metaphysics, or a shift in the dominant world picture in Western culture, has influenced theological discussions of free will. The older theologians discussed free will using some of Aristotle's vocabulary. They expanded Aristotle in order to include God on a second tier. As Aristotle became less attractive, the theological discussions might also shift to focus on the newer scientific world picture and the dominance of efficient causes. Did Jonathan Edwards, for example, develop a picture of a more deterministic kind, partly because of the determinism that seemed to arise in the new science?

14. "This theory [Aristotle's theory of causes] has in fact been developed primarily (but not exclusively) for the study of nature" (Falcon, "Aristotle on Causality," § 2).

15. Poythress, *Mystery of the Trinity*, chap. 25.

16. But objections to the usefulness of formal or final causes began much earlier (Falcon, "Aristotle on Causality," § 4).

The physical determinism in the newer scientific picture is not the end of the story. Nineteenth-century physics, growing out of Newtonian mechanics, seemed to tell us that every detail of the future was physically determined by the positions and velocities of material particles at an earlier point in time. The rise of quantum physics in the twentieth century undermined this picture because many quantum mechanical events could be predicted only according to probabilities, not with certainty.<sup>17</sup> This limitation was one built into the theory itself, not merely a limitation in the current level of technical ability to make refined measurements.

Physicists and philosophers who were presuppositionally inclined to determinism hoped that the uncertainties were the product of an incomplete theory. Once scientists arrived at a complete theory, it would restore determinism. Others, presuppositionally inclined to indeterminism, hoped that the uncertainties could not be made to vanish. In the second half of the twentieth century, theoretical and experimental results related to the work of John Stewart Bell (“Bell’s theorem”)<sup>18</sup> have seemed to confirm the unavoidability of a certain kind of indeterminacy. In the theory of quantum mechanics, indeterminacy has the last word. What might be the implications for human freedom?

It is true that this fine-grained indeterminacy is consistent with predictability in many events at the level of ordinary observation. The movement of a billiard ball is predictable—with reasonable precision, though not with absolutely perfect exactness. This predictability in ordinary life is nevertheless only a fortunate large-scale effect of the deeper unpredictabilities at the atomic level.

Note an additional qualification. Both the deterministic picture and the opposing indeterministic picture confine themselves to physical causes. Neither one has the richness to provide an account of human freedom or, for that matter, divine freedom. (See table 30.2.)

17. Poythress, *Chance and the Sovereignty of God*, chap. 8.

18. Wayne Myrvold, Marco Genovese, and Abner Shimony, “Bell’s Theorem,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Fall 2021), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/bell-theorem/>.

**Table 30.2. Metaphysical Frameworks for Understanding Causes**

| Metaphysical Framework                                    | Kinds of Causes and Their Meanings                                                                      | Implications for Human Action                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| biblical:<br>multilayer<br>causes                         | God as primary cause<br>angels<br>human beings<br>physical causes                                       | Human beings have distinct free agency on their own distinct level.                                      |
| Aristotle: one level, four kinds of cause                 | material cause (composition)<br>formal cause (shape)<br>efficient cause (impulse)<br>final cause (goal) | Human actions have purposes shaped by the person, but no separate level distinct from animals and rocks. |
| 19th-century physics as metaphysics: efficient cause only | physical forces                                                                                         | Human beings are fatalistically determined by physical forces on the atoms.                              |
| quantum indeterminacy                                     | only probabilistic outcomes                                                                             | Man is the product of physical forces and pure chance.                                                   |

There is nothing the matter with using a limited focus on physical causation as one part of the investigations of science. But it is illegitimate to regard the resulting picture from physics as providing a complete, ultimate metaphysics. It then displaces rather than complements other perspectives, which focus on divine choice or human choice. Moreover, it is not so helpful to try to follow the “obvious” path of somehow trying to fit human choice into the “gap” left by quantum indeterminacy. The trouble is that the dominating framework is then the physicalistic framework, which is easily construed to be *impersonal* at its roots. Persons are somehow going to be fitted into this overall framework, which is alien to

persons. Instead, all of physics is to be fitted—as one perspective—into the reality of God, who is personal, who rules the world personally. He is a God who gives and blesses and also curses personally in relation to human persons. The operations of physics are in his service.<sup>19</sup> He governs them.

The analogy with writing a novel is useful because it provides a picture with two levels of causes: the author of the novel and the characters. There is a third level as well, because the novel also involves physical causes that surround the characters of the novel in their particular circumstances. This analogy illumines the complexity and richness that belong to human choices.

### **Acts 2 as a Perspective on Analogies for Free Agency**

Acts 2 is itself an example of the joint operation of God as primary cause and human agents as secondary causes. Christ has ascended to the Father. Christ pours out the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is at work in the church. All these realities belong to the level of primary cause, the action of God.<sup>20</sup> Human beings who receive the Holy Spirit act with new vigor and moral uprightness (Acts 2:42–47). Their actions are instances of the operation of the level of human intentional causation.

### **Key Terms**

|                   |                        |
|-------------------|------------------------|
| analogy           | free agency            |
| Aristotle         | freedom                |
| Arminian          | indeterminism          |
| Calvinist         | metaphysical framework |
| cause             | Miley, John            |
| determinism       | Newtonian mechanics    |
| Edwards, Jonathan | novelist               |
| fall of man       | physical cause         |

19. Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006).

20. The actions of Christ are the actions of one person with two natures, divine and human.

possibility

primary cause

secondary causes

slave

son of God

translation (of a language)

### **Study Questions**

1. What analogies help illumine the mystery of the relation of divine agency to human agency?
2. How does Job 1–2 illustrate different levels of causes?
3. How do some background metaphysical frameworks influence thinking about causation?
4. What is the difference between physical determinism and divine control, and how is it relevant to the issue of free agency?

### **For Further Reading**

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002. Chaps. 4, 8.

Poythress, Vern S. *Chance and the Sovereignty of God: A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014. Chaps. 5, 8.

### **Prayer**

Our Lord, thank you that you rule over the world and direct all things for your wise purposes. Help us rest in your sovereignty and take seriously our responsibility. Thank you for assuring us that you are in control in your own goodness, and that our lives have significance (1 Cor. 15:58).

## NECESSITY AND FREE AGENCY

The language of possibility and necessity is tied in with the issue of human free agency. The terms *possibility* and *necessity* raise both an issue in semantics and an issue of metaphysical background. Let us briefly explore these issues concerning possibility, in order to throw light on the meaning of human choices.

### The Semantics of *Possibility* and *Necessity*

What do the words *possibility* and *necessity* mean when used in connection with the concept of free agency?

Jonathan Edwards develops a picture according to which the final decision of a human agent is in line with the strongest motive. So ordinarily, it is not *possible* that a human agent would make a decision in another way, given the presence of his motives. *Necessity* is the word that can be used when no alternative is possible. Edwards implies that it is “necessary” that the agent act in accord with his strongest motive. In contrast with Edwards, John Miley wants to say that it is *possible* for a free agent to do otherwise, whatever may be the background against which he makes his choice.

A similar issue arises in the context of more contemporary discussions. In modern philosophical discussion, *libertarian freedom* means the ability or power to make either of two or more contrary choices. It contrasts with *compatibilism*, which says that human responsibility is compatible with causal determinism. The determinism could take the form



of a divine determination (in God's decree) of all things that come to pass. Or, for nontheists, it could take other forms. Physical determinism says that the future is completely determined by the motions of the molecules and atoms and elementary particles that make up people's bodies, which interact with more molecules in the environment.

In all these philosophical theories, the issue of possibility and necessity comes to the surface. According to libertarianism, it is possible in free actions for the agent to do otherwise than what he actually did. According to compatibilism, it is not possible for the agent to do otherwise. It is necessary that he should have done what he did, given the background.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Meaning of *Possibility***

But because of the influence of presuppositions, semantics, analogies, and metaphysics, a discussion of possibility is more difficult than it may appear.

First, consider the issue of presuppositions. If someone presupposes that God exists, then there is a two-tiered situation. The two-tiered framework distinguishes what is possible for God and what is possible for a human being. These two are not the same.

Reformed theology presupposes that God governs all things according to the counsel of his will (Eph. 1:11), while some other theologies qualify the nature of God's counsel in order to make room for human freedom.

Second, consider the challenges that are due to semantics. The word *possible* is a single English word. But what *kind* of possibility is in view depends on the context.<sup>2</sup> People discuss what is *logically* possible, that is, what can be conceived as happening without producing a logical contradiction. Or they may talk about what is *physically* possible, within the constraints of the normal processes in physical motion. It is logically possible for a human being to fly into the air merely by flapping his arms.

1. For further discussion, see in particular James N. Anderson and Paul Manata, "Determined to Come Most Freely," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 11, no. 3 (2017): 272–97.

2. See Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), chaps. 65–67.

But it is not physically possible. It is not physically possible to leap off the Empire State Building without falling to the ground.

More tellingly, people may talk about what is *morally* possible, given what even Miley recognizes about the moral “thralldom” of some human beings.<sup>3</sup> Consider the situation with Peter’s denials of Christ, as recorded in the Gospels (Matt. 26:69–75 and parallels). Was it *possible* for Peter not to deny Christ? It was physically possible. No physical apparatus compelled Peter to produce words out of his mouth that were contrary to his will and his inclinations. People may nevertheless think that Peter did not have the moral fortitude to resist the temptations. In that case, it was not *morally* possible for him to have triumphed over the temptations. Moreover, there is also a kind of possibility connected with God’s decree and with prophetic predictions. Was it possible that Christ’s prediction of Peter’s denials (Matt. 26:34) would be invalidated by the subsequent events? Given that Christ’s prediction was the prediction of Christ as a true prophet and as the Son of God, the prediction had to come to pass. It was *prophetically* impossible that Peter would not deny Christ.

A further kind of possibility has to do with God’s decree. Given God’s divine plan for all things, it was *decretally* impossible for Peter to act contrary to the decree and to have refused to deny Christ. (But as usual, God *could* have decreed otherwise.)

Each of these impossibilities has a distinct texture. The prophetic impossibility is a particularly interesting exhibit. Peter heard Jesus’ prediction before the events of his denials. So what did he do after the denials? Did he say: “My denials were fated, and therefore I am not responsible. It is God’s fault”? He knew better. He knew that he had responsibility. He knew about his own cowardice and his sin. Jesus’ prediction did not result in a *fatalistic* necessity, a necessity that removed Peter’s responsibility. This responsibility would indeed have disappeared if Peter was caught as if in a physical straitjacket, so that he was completely helpless to do the right thing even if he wholeheartedly wanted to, that is, if he willed it. (See table 31.1.)

3. John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (New York: Eaton & Mains/Cincinnati: Jennings & Pye, 1894), 296.

**Table 31.1. Kinds of Possibility**

| Kind of Possibility | Meaning of the Possibility                              | Illustration                                                                |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| logical             | people can imagine it without producing a contradiction | Peter's body might suddenly change into a bronze statue.                    |
| metaphysical        | compatible with normal physical forces                  | Peter might walk out of the courtyard or refuse to answer questions.        |
| moral               | compatible with a person's moral character              | Peter's character made him unable not to deny Christ at the crucial moment. |
| decretal            | compatible with a particular divine decree              | God decreed Peter's denials, making them necessary events.                  |
| prophetic           | compatible with known prophecy                          | Jesus prophesied Peter's denials, making them necessary events.             |

The issue of what is possible also involves, third, the use of analogies. For example, the analogy with physical causes and with billiard balls that hit one another suggests that *all* events, including the events of human decision-making, might be fatalistically determined by prior physical conditions. Within such a picture, there is no such thing as the possibility of different outcomes. But to draw such a conclusion is to fall victim to the physicalistic picture and to treat *all* causes as though they were physical causes. It is to convert an analogy between causal levels into an identity, according to which all causes would be on the same level.

## Metaphysical Backgrounds for Possibility

Finally, consider what metaphysical backgrounds influence the treatment of possibility. Aristotle's metaphysics is one possible influence. Aristotle makes a distinction between what is potential and what is actual.<sup>4</sup> According to this framework, when confronted with a choice, a human being has the *potential* for choosing more than one outcome. Likewise, clay has the *potential* for being formed into a pot or a tablet or a vase. The potentials are "there" in the human and in the clay. According to Aristotle, an efficient cause is needed in order to move something from its state of potentiality to a state of actuality. For example, if a ball rests on a table, a bump or hit on the ball is an efficient cause needed to convert into an actuality the already existing potential for the ball to fall off the table.

Does this framework help people conceptualize human freedom? It treats the human sphere and the sphere of nature within a single broad system of categories. Moreover, it does not seem to avoid an ultimate determinism through efficient causes of a physical kind.

As long as Aristotle's world-picture remained comfortably popular in intellectual circles, it assured those who spoke about potentials that their discussions were penetrating, because potentials were one aspect belonging to the genuine nature of things. They were, in fact, a fairly deep aspect, because they were integral and basic to Aristotle's whole picture. Within that kind of context, a statement that human beings could *potentially* make opposite moral choices made sense and seemed to describe something "real" about human beings. The "potential" was the technical potential of generic human nature. It was actually "there" in human beings; it was not merely a figment of the imagination, not merely a way of speaking. Such a statement about potential could be compatible

4. Christopher Shields, "Aristotle," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2022), § 8, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/aristotle/>. Note, however, that potentiality is narrower than bare possibility: a thing "has actual features in virtue of which it might be made to be" the new actual object by imposing "form upon it" (§ 8).

with the additional observation that in some cases of fallen humanity, onlookers can confidently predict that the *actual* result will be bad.

But then in the West, Aristotle's larger framework faded in plausibility, to be replaced by modern physics. In this new cultural atmosphere, potentials were more likely to be regarded as merely subjective hypotheticals—as conceptual inventions deriving from speculation about alternatives that human onlookers could envision in alternative world histories. From the point of view of modern materialistic philosophy, nothing happens without an efficient cause acting, and everything that does not actually happen is hypothetical, not “real.” *Potentials* are not real. They exist only in people's subjective conception, in their imagination. And so within this modern materialistic framework, using the label *potential* feels more like a mere manner of speaking. It does not help to remove fatalism—the implication of materialistic philosophy that all events are determined beforehand by physical causes.

The prevailing physicalistic picture deriving from modern science offers a second possible metaphysical framework. It does not remove fatalism, since only physical necessity or physical indeterminacy (pure chance) is in view.

Modern modal symbolic logic provides another framework. Here, the discussion of possibility takes the form of possible worlds.<sup>5</sup> This framework provides a clear, rigorous platform on which to discuss possibility. Unfortunately, the clarity and rigor come with a cost. The framework is a one-tier framework. Though in some models the possibilities might vary, depending on which world is chosen as one's base, yet all possibilities are still on a single level. And the framework unrealistically presupposes that human beings can plot out in principle the complete list of possible worlds.

The Bible provides a way of thinking that is distinct from all these alternatives. Human action has its own tier of causation. (See table 31.2.)

5. Poythress, *Logic*, chaps. 65–67; James Garson, “Modal Logic,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2021), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/logic-modal/>, especially § 2.

**Table 31.2. Metaphysical Frameworks for Possibility and Necessity**

| Metaphysical Framework                                 | Meaning of Possibility                                         | Application to Human Agency                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Aristotle                                              | potential can become actual                                    | You have potential to become a fully developed person, but it might or might not happen.                                                                             |
| physics as metaphysics                                 | physical determinism or indeterminism                          | You are the motions of your molecules—no real agency.                                                                                                                |
| modal symbolic logic (with possible worlds as a model) | what could be in some possible world                           | There is a version of you for some possible worlds, and there are other worlds in which you do not exist at all. You make different choices within different worlds. |
| biblical view, with levels and mysteries               | human possibilities within the framework of divine sovereignty | Human agency is analogous to divine agency—with irreducible mystery.                                                                                                 |

### God as Source

In a biblical worldview, God is the source of both possibility and necessity. It is important to avoid producing a metaphysical source for possibility behind God. Logical possibility, defined according to *human* standards of logic, could become such a source. Instead, human speculations about possibility are confronted with mysteries because human beings are not God.

According to God's plan, there are different levels or tiers of possibilities, analogous to the tiers produced by the author of a novel. The author of the novel *could* have written the story differently. For example, a character in the novel *could* have forgiven some past injury rather than killing the perpetrator. The decision of the author and the decision of

the character exist on two distinct levels. The levels are in harmony. So, for example, it is not possible that the author could have decided to write the story with the character forgiving his adversary and also, in the very same story, the character himself deciding not to forgive him but to kill him. But it *is* possible that both the author and the character could have acted differently. The freedom of the characters within the story is derivative from and dependent on the primal freedom of the author of the story. God is like an author. Human freedom is imitative of and derivative from the primary and archetypal freedom among the persons of the Trinity.

Once again, the theme of intimacy, associated with the seventh commandment, is pertinent. Human beings as fallen persons are alienated from God. But they cannot escape the intimacy with God that is due to the presence of God in all the world. They cannot escape God as the author. He is the author of history and the author of each individual. C. S. Lewis has an insightful passage in *The Pilgrim's Regress* in which the pilgrim wakes up with the realization that God is intensively present everywhere:

With his first waking thought the full-grown horror leaped upon him. The blue sky above the cliffs was watching him: the cliffs themselves were imprisoning him: the rocks behind were cutting off his retreat: the path ahead was ordering him on. In one night the Landlord—call him by what name you would—had come back to the world, and filled the world, quite full without a cranny. His eyes stared and His hand pointed and His voice commanded in everything that could be heard or seen, even from this place where John sat, to the end of the world: and if you passed the end of the world He would be there too. All things were indeed one—more truly one than Mr. Wisdom dreamed—and all things said one word: CAUGHT—Caught into slavery again, to walk warily and on sufferance all his days, never to be alone; never the master of his own soul, to have no privacy, no corner whereof you could say to the whole universe: This is my own, here I can do as I please. Under that universal and inspecting gaze, John

cowered like some small animal caught up in a giant's hands and held beneath a magnifying-glass.<sup>6</sup>

To the pilgrim, in his desire for autonomy, it is a terrifying realization. His ideal of "freedom," such as it was, has been crushed out of existence.

A human being cannot escape an intimacy with God that even goes inside the heart, since God searches the thoughts of the heart (Heb. 4:12–13). As for the heart, God "turns it wherever he will" (Prov. 21:1). False views of human free agency go together with mistaken assumptions that put God at a distance in order to create an illusory space for "independent," unipersonal human agency.<sup>7</sup> So the picture that Lewis paints sounds incredibly grim and oppressive to the taste of a rebel. But paradoxically, in Lewis's allegory, before the end of the page, the pilgrim is experiencing change and starts to sing. True freedom is about to dawn. It dawns precisely because autonomy has been crushed. But that is only the *negative* side of a comprehensive work of Christ, through the Spirit, through which we have new birth (John 3:5–8). We are raised to new life (Rom. 6:11; Eph. 2:6; Col. 3:1). We acquire a love for God and an ability to begin to serve God from our heart (though we are still hampered by remaining sin).

### **Free Agency within the Framework of *Lex Christi***

How might the framework of *lex Christi* help in thinking about free agency?

The framework of *lex Christi* provides multiple analogies in understanding humanity. And these analogies can illumine the topic of free agency. Let us consider a number of perspectives related to the Ten Commandments.

6. C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason, and Romanticism*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), chap. 6, p. 147. The page has the heading "The terror of the Lord."

7. On "unipersonal" agency as a false category, see Cornelius Van Til, *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977), 78.



Human beings are responsible to serve God in trust and obedience, as expressed in the Ten Commandments. This response presupposes human responsibility and some kind of free agency. But what more can be said?

The framework includes attention to the character of God. His attributes are displayed in the Ten Commandments. In addition, the attributes of God are supposed to be reflected in human beings, through obedience to the commandments. So the framework naturally includes within it divine necessity and divine freedom, and then also the reflection of divine necessity and freedom in human necessity and freedom. This pattern holds through all history.

### **Divine Freedom**

Let us begin by focusing on the divine level. Divine necessity is displayed especially in the first commandment. God as the supreme God is who he is, and remains consistent with who he is throughout history. The necessity of God is the necessity of his own character. He necessarily exists. He is, in fact, the foundation for subordinate kinds of necessities that human beings experience.

The second commandment points indirectly to the necessity of God's character because it draws a sharp contrast between God and the idols. God has a unique nature and is not to be identified with whatever anyone would like him to be.

The fourth commandment highlights divine freedom, in connection with God's dynamic ability. Exodus 20:11 explicitly mentions that "the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them." He did not have to create anything. He did not have to create exactly the regions and the creatures that he did create. He was free to do otherwise.

### **Human Necessity and Freedom**

Now consider how human beings reflect God. Since the attributes of God are reflected in human beings made in the image of God, human

beings show both necessity and freedom. The obvious necessity is the necessity of the fact that God is supreme. No human being can escape that God is God. Nor can he escape that God made each human being as a derivative, created “supreme” and morally responsible to God as supreme.

The first commandment also expresses the unity of God. There is only one supreme being and only one ultimate loyalty. Man, made in the image of God, reflects the unity of God in the unity of the human individual. With possible exceptions due to human finiteness and biological corruptions from the effects of sin, human individuals act with a kind of unity and express in their actions their moral commitments and choices. Each person, as a unified person, is responsible for his acts. The same goes also for thoughts and attitudes. The unity of the person undergirds the unity of human responsibility of the person over time.

God has a necessity belonging to him, namely, that he cannot act contrary to his own nature. Similarly, derivatively, human beings experience the necessity of acting within the constraints both of God’s nature and of created human nature. The constraint of God’s nature is the constraint of his comprehensive sovereignty. But there is also the constraint of human nature. Human beings cannot run as fast as cheetahs. They cannot dive as deep as sperm whales. They cannot squeeze through a hole as small as an ant can squeeze through. They might want or “will” to do any of these things, but they cannot.

Human freedom is displayed especially in connection with the fourth commandment. Human beings have the task of working for six days. Their work is further explained in Genesis 1:26–30. It involves the task of dominion, of filling the earth and subduing it. In the process, they use much creativity. Adam exercised creativity when he gave names to the animals (Gen. 2:19), which was one aspect of the task of dominion. He also showed a creative response to Eve, in a poetic celebration in which he names her (v. 23). There is genuine freedom, imitating the freedom of God, but always compatible with the divine sovereignty implied by the first commandment.

## The Ten Commandments as Perspectives on Necessity and Freedom

In the *lex Christi* framework, each of the Ten Commandments serves as a *perspective* on God, on man, and on their relation to each other. Each is a perspective on the whole law. It follows that *each* of the commandments displays divine necessity and divine freedom. Each also displays human necessity and human freedom. What follows is a brief, suggestive sketch of what this might mean for each of the Ten Commandments, applied to God and then to man.

*1C. God is supreme.* It is necessary that he is supreme, and he always acts in accordance with his supremacy. According to his supreme power, he has supreme freedom to do whatever he wishes. Man is necessarily subordinate to this supremacy. Even when he rebels, he does not escape imitating God. He now imitates God perversely, by aspiring to *be* a god. Fallen human beings suffer under the curse implications of the Ten Commandments. They do not escape the moral standards of God, but experience them in negative judgment, as indicated especially in the second and third commandments. These are constraints on human action. They are constraints even on the interior of man, because he does not entirely escape the accusations of conscience and the internal toll taken by some kinds of sin.

Man finds true freedom in serving God, as Adam did before the fall, and as Christ did in his true humanity. “So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36).

*2C. God is holy.* He is necessarily holy. All his works are necessarily in accord with his holiness. This is one “constraint,” a constraint necessitated by his character. In addition, God is free to select special places (Jerusalem) or persons (the priests) or structures (the tabernacle and later the temple) and to make them holy. The selection displays his freedom.

Man is constrained by the holiness of God. If he is going to approach the presence of God, he must be holy. If he is unholy through sin, he will suffer for it. These are necessities imposed on mankind. Man when consecrated to God is free to approach God, as he was not able to do before. God, not man, specifies the right way to approach God, and this right

way contrasts with the wrong ways of serving idols. This narrow right way is a constraint on man. It is not arbitrary, but it is in accord with God's character as holy.

*3C. God is full of blessing and gives blessings.* God's blessedness is a necessity about who he is. God's gift of blessing is free. Mankind is constrained by the necessity that he is either under God's blessing or under his curse. The way of salvation opens the way to a restoration of God's blessing, and with it the freedom of flourishing life, the life of blessing.

*4C. God is dynamic.* God's dynamicity, as we have seen, can be most obviously associated with his freedom. He can create according to his wishes, and might have created differently from what he actually did. But God's dynamicity is also inherent in who he is. God the Father eternally loves the Son, in an eternal dynamic. The Father speaks the Word eternally, in the dynamic of speaking. The Father's love and speech are necessary acts.

Man imitates God. There is the moral necessity that man should imitate God by loving God and loving neighbor. When he does these things, he is acting out of a heart of love, with genuine responsibility. He acts in freedom.

*5C. God is harmonious.* He is necessarily harmonious. It is impossible that he could contradict himself or act out of harmony with his character. God acted freely to create a world in harmony. And he created mankind in an original harmony, though this harmony was subsequently disrupted by sin. God freely expresses his inner harmony. Even his acts of negative judgments are free expressions of his harmony with his righteousness, which condemns the wicked.

Human beings have the moral necessity of being in harmony with God and with fellow human beings. To act within this harmony is freedom. To violate it is bondage to sin.

*6C. God lives.* He lives necessarily. But his life can also be reflected outside himself, freely, when he creates a world with living things, plants, animals, and finally mankind. Mankind has the necessity of being alive. And within this world, this necessity has many constraints. People need food and shelter and health. They need protection from bodily wounds. Also, mankind lives forever into the future, whether in the state of salvation or in the state of damnation.

Human life is the foundation for human choice and human creativity in the mandate to fill the earth and subdue it. Human beings fill the earth by having children, who in turn have children. The process of having children has many necessities built into it, which are constraints of human nature. But each child is a new creature. Human creativity is expressed in the blessing of having children.

7C. *God is intimate.* He is intimate with himself, among the persons of the Trinity. This inward intimacy is necessary. It could not be otherwise. God is free to establish intimacy with the created world and with human beings within it.

Human beings in their original created state enjoyed intimacy with God. This intimacy was a kind of necessity, in the sense that human beings did not choose it and did not establish it. It was already there, established by the work of God. As we have seen, intimacy as a theme helps in appreciating that human choices take place in communion with the presence of God, not by the allegedly *isolated*, unipersonal action of a human being independent of God.

8C. *God is giving.* There is necessarily eternal giving among the persons of the Trinity. There is free giving when God creates the world and sustains it. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). Human beings are constrained by whatever gifts God gives them. Some people are stronger; some are more intelligent; some are more socially sensitive; some have rich parents, some do not. Some have lost their parents from an early age. These are certain necessities that surround the lives of all people. But within these constraints, people are giving and receiving gifts, according to human freedom.

9C. *God is true.* God is necessarily truthful. He speaks truth. But he also speaks truth freely in the pronouncements that create the world ("Let there be light," Gen. 1:3). Man is constrained by truth that is already there. People might like to invent their own truths by which they pretend to create their own private world and master it. But it is illusory. On the other hand, when people live by the truth, they are free: "and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).

*10C. God is contented.* He is necessarily contented. It is impossible that he would have a need. Precisely because he has no needs, he is perfectly free. And he undertakes to create and sustain the world. Mankind lives as a finite creature in a state of limitation, within which he has needs. The limited state is a necessity of human nature. It is in this way a constraint. But within that constraint, God calls on man to be thankful and to be contented. Adam was thankful and contented, his free response, as long as he continued to be free from sin.

In sum, God is in harmony with himself (5C). So all his works are in harmony. Human beings exist within this harmony, which includes divine control (1C) and divine freedom (4C), implying human moral responsibility as a unified person (1C), a measure of power (1C), and responsible choice (4C), in harmony with complete divine sovereignty. God is present intimately (7C) with each human being in his decision-making as well as in other aspects of his life (6C). (See table 31.3.)

The harmony of necessity and freedom belongs to God. Because we are creatures, we cannot make this harmony transparent to our minds by an act of complete mastery.

### **Objections to Using Analogies**

One main objection would apply to everything set forth above. Suppose that there is an objector named Susan. She says: "Your treatment of free agency rests on analogies. And an analogy is never an exact, complete match. Every analogy breaks down at some point."

For example, consider the analogy with a novelist. Susan objects that the characters in the novel are unreal; they are fictional. The characters do not have any freedom at all because they do not even exist. A reply to Susan might use more analogical language:

The characters *do* "exist" within the story; they exist in the imagination of the novelist and the readers. Within the boundaries of the story "universe," they could have done otherwise. They acted freely, not under constraint.

**Table 31.3. Ten Perspectives on Necessity and Freedom**

| Cmd. | Attribute  | Divine Necessity                  | Divine Freedom                                           | Human Necessity                                                      | Human Freedom                          |
|------|------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| 1C   | supreme    | necessarily supreme, independent  | absolutely free                                          | subordinate to God                                                   | freedom in serving God                 |
| 2C   | holy       | necessarily holy in his work      | selects holy places and people                           | holiness determines man's approach to God                            | free fellowship with God in holiness   |
| 3C   | blessed    | necessarily blessed               | selects blessings                                        | under blessing or curse                                              | blessing opens free living             |
| 4C   | dynamic    | necessarily loving                | free to create                                           | necessarily initiating God in action                                 | initiating God leads to freedom        |
| 5C   | harmonious | necessarily consistent            | free to act outside himself, consistent with himself     | obliged to live in harmony with God and neighbor                     | harmony is freeing                     |
| 6C   | living     | necessarily alive                 | free to create life outside himself, in the world        | living has moral and biological constraints, from God                | creating offspring                     |
| 7C   | intimate   | necessarily intimate with himself | freely establishes intimacy with a world outside himself | moral necessity of intimacy with God; inescapability of his presence | choose intimacy with others            |
| 8C   | giving     | eternal giving in the Trinity     | free giving to the world                                 | constrained by what gifts God gives                                  | freely giving gifts                    |
| 9C   | truthful   | necessarily speaking truth        | freely speaking to create and govern the world by truth  | constrained by truths put in place by God                            | living freely in the truth (John 8:32) |
| 10C  | contented  | necessarily without needs         | without needs, he is supremely free                      | having needs, to be supplied by God                                  | called to be freely thankful           |

But in the end, such a reply will probably not make any progress with Susan. She is right that the comparison between God and an author works with an analogy, and that there are deep differences between the real world and a fictional world.

A more probing reply to Susan may be to ask her some questions. What kind of explanation does she expect to have, and what kind of alternative does she propose to the analogical pictures? If she is not satisfied with analogies, what *would* satisfy her? Susan's answer, perhaps, is that what might work would be a model or an explanation *without* analogies. But a *model* is one kind of analogy. The model is analogous to the thing in the world that it serves to model. More broadly, if Susan proposes an explanation of some kind, her explanation uses words. If she tries to avoid using analogies out of ordinary life, what often remains are key words from philosophy. Maybe she uses words from Aristotelian metaphysics or from the materialistic model of the world that is often associated with nineteenth-century physics. But behind the words lies a network of analogies. Maybe they are analogies that Susan has ceased to think of as analogies because she has forgotten their origin.

Words such as *cause*, *possibility*, *ability*, *power*, and *necessity* rest on analogies. Every word in every human language has ties, directly or indirectly, with the world in which people live, partly through its interaction with *other* words that have meanings. Otherwise, it would have no meaning at all.<sup>8</sup> When people discuss God's relation to the world, God is not on the same level as they are. So they use language analogically. The main difference with Susan is that she is unaware that she is doing the same thing. She hopes to use words *univocally*, not analogically.

### **Inspecting the Idea of Libertarian Freedom**

In wrapping up the discussion, consider again the modern philosophical discussion of compatibilism and libertarianism in views of human

8. Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), pts. 4–5.



freedom. Does the analysis using analogies and the *lex Christi* framework provide any insight into limitations in the modern discussion?

One of the limitations is the obvious one. Philosophical discussions tend too often to be focused on a single narrow question, and not to consider a variety of analogies in the way that the *lex Christi* framework does.

To explore further, consider one definition of libertarian freedom, offered by Hugh J. McCann and Daniel M. Johnson in a standard reference work in philosophy:

We exercise libertarian freedom in forming or executing an intention only if our deciding or willing is not the product of deterministic causation—that is, provided there is no set of conditions independent of our exercise of will which, together with scientific law, make it certain that we shall decide or will as we do.<sup>9</sup>

In the interpretation of this sentence, a lot depends on semantics, analogy, and metaphysical frameworks. What is meant by “deterministic”? Does it mean “physically determined”? What is “causation”? What *kind* of causation? What would make a result “certain”? In the minds of the human participants in the discussion, is the principal analogy with physical causes, such as one billiard ball’s hitting another? Is the metaphysical framework one-tiered or two-tiered?

According to biblical teaching, God’s plan is definite and *determinate*. God’s plan does not change, and it *determines* all outcomes. God’s commands *cause* each event. This is true within the tier of divine causation, which is not the same as human causation or physical causation or causation by angelic or demonic action. The same words, *cause* and *determine*, can be used with respect to both tiers. But the relation between the two is analogical. One tier does not reduce to the other.

What is “scientific law”? Is it the best formulation that current mainstream scientists can give? But science changes over time. If the current

9. Hugh J. McCann and Daniel M. Johnson, “Divine Providence,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2017), § 2, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/providence-divine/>.

view is not ultimate, the real law is God's commands. But human beings do not know his commands as thoroughly as God knows them. What is the meaning of "conditions"? Are they conditions in God's mind, on the top tier? God's plan is a condition of sorts. Or are they conditions within this world, conditions due to the movement of molecules? Is the question whether events are being determined wholly by prior physical motions?

It is not possible to make a fundamental advance without getting rid of the confusion that is due to not having biblical guidance.

Here is another definition of libertarian freedom, offered by William Hasker in a book on open theism:

An agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent's power to perform the action and also in the agent's power to refrain from the action. To say that the action is "within one's power" means that nothing whatever exists that would make it impossible for the power in question to be exercised.<sup>10</sup>

This definition shows the same difficulties. What kind of power is the "agent's power"? Physical ability? Moral ability? Power to act independent of any decree of God? The expression "nothing whatever exists" is probably meant in a fairly sweeping sense. But then does it include the existence of a divine decree or not? Or does it include the person's own inclinations, including what Edwards calls the "strongest motive"?<sup>11</sup> And what kind of "impossible" is this? As with the earlier definition by McCann and Johnson, the same questions arise about multiple possible meanings and contexts for the words, and the same questions arise about a one-tiered or two-tiered system.

10. William Hasker, "A Philosophical Perspective," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 136–37 (*italics original*), cited by Carlton Wynne, "ST 211 [Doctrine of Man] Lec 12 Free Moral Agency," lecture notes, 2022, p. 3.

11. Jonathan Edwards, *A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of That Freedom of Will, Which Is Supposed to Be Essential to Moral Agency, Vertue and Vice, Reward and Punishment, Praise and Blame*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), § 1.4, 156.

The proponents appear to sincerely think that they are providing clear and definite meanings. But they may already have incorporated assumptions that might close off the truth.

Perhaps the proponents are clear in their own minds. But the actual wording in quotes such as those above can be interpreted in more than one way, and any particular interpretation of the words comes along with underlying assumptions. Discussion of possibilities cannot move us forward very far if the terminology concerning possibilities contains mysteries. The ultimate mystery is God himself, who is the source and crafter of all possibilities. So the meaning of human choice will never become transparent and nonmysterious. The Bible teaches both (1) the sovereignty and control of God over events involving human choice and (2) the genuine reality of the choices. In response, we may grow in trust in God and admiration for God.

### **Acts 2 as a Perspective on Possibility and Necessity**

Acts 2 illustrates the presence of more than one form of possibility. Many things were logically possible and physically possible on the day of Pentecost. What actually happened was prophetically necessary because of the prophecy in Joel 2:28–32, quoted by Peter in Acts 2:17–21. It was also decretally necessary because God had planned it beforehand. But no one on earth could have known it beforehand if God had not revealed it in prophecy in Joel 2:28–32. Moreover, Joel 2:28–32 is a poetic passage, and poetic prophecies do not necessarily contain a fully detailed picture of the future before it takes place. Acts 2 also contains a record of the responsible acts of free agents, such as Peter, the people who speak in tongues, and the people in the crowd who respond in verses 37 and 41.

### **Key Terms**

ability  
actual  
analogy

Aristotle  
autonomy  
cause

|                        |                          |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| compatibilism          | morally possible         |
| decretally impossible  | necessity                |
| Edwards, Jonathan      | one tier                 |
| fatalism               | Peter's denials          |
| free agency            | physically possible      |
| freedom                | possibility              |
| human responsibility   | possible worlds          |
| intimate               | potential                |
| <i>lex Christi</i>     | presupposition           |
| libertarianism         | prophetically impossible |
| logically possible     | Reformed theology        |
| metaphysical framework | semantics                |
| Miley, John            | two tier                 |
| modal symbolic logic   | univocal                 |

### Study Questions

1. What are some of the influences of presuppositions on the concept of *free agency*?
2. What are the main distinct kinds of possibilities in the discussion of free agency?
3. How are Peter's denials an illustration of the issue of different kinds of possibilities?
4. How do metaphysical frameworks have an influence on conceptions of possibility?
5. What is the role in Aristotle of the contrast between potential and actual?
6. How do possibility and necessity function within the context of modern modal symbolic logic?
7. How does the *lex Christi* framework illumine the meaning of *possibility* and *necessity*?
8. Do you think you have any more clarity about possibility and necessity than when you started? Why or why not? Why is clarity difficult?

### **For Further Reading**

Poythress, Vern S. *Chance and the Sovereignty of God: A God-Centered Approach to Probability and Random Events*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014. Chaps. 2, 3, 9.

### **Prayer**

We thank you, our God and Father, that you have made a rich world with layers of possibility. Thank you for hedging our ways with your goodness and giving us the privilege of freely serving you.



## MAN AS FALLEN

What is the fall of man, and what are its effects?



## THE NATURE OF THE FALL

What features characterize the fall of Adam? Why is the fall important for understanding humanity and Christ's redemption?

### Positive News

The fall of Adam was a fall downward, not upward. He rebelled and denied his own nature as one who was a son of God and an imitator of God in the image of God. Nevertheless, a positive message comes out of it. Sins are not innate to the way in which human beings were created. The present state of humanity is abnormal.

Since the present state is abnormal, there is hope that God might pull people out of it. He can save people from sin without "saving" them from being human. There is nothing the matter with being human as such. There is no innate defect in the original constitution of humanity. If there were, escape would be impossible. The fall of man is ethical, not metaphysical. It is rebellion, not a failure on the part of the Creator when he created humanity.

The ethical nature of the fall is bound up with the fact that God is intimately present in all the world that he has made. He is *especially* intimate with Adam (part 5 above). The fall is not a mechanical mistake, but a personal violation of God and of God's relation to man. It is personal alienation and personal hatred of another personal being, the personal God.

Eliminating the fall not only threatens the hope for a remedy; it threatens to undermine the fact that God is good. If God created humanity with innate conflicts or evil already within it, how could anyone have confidence



that he is good? And if he were not good, all human hopes would be in vain. (All of this is relevant in considering the implications of following a strictly naturalist Darwinian account of the origin of humanity.)

### **Effects of the Fall**

The heart of the fall is ethical. It is also religious. Adam turned against God and tried to make himself a god. But though the heart of the fall is religious, the effects include many dimensions.

The fall disrupts man's communion with God. God's relation to man changes, in that God in his holiness and righteousness judges human beings for their sins. Man's relation to God changes, in that he ceases to trust God and actually hates God.

The fall disrupts human communion one with another. Adam accuses Eve. Cain kills Abel.

The fall disrupts nature and humanity's relation to nature. Childbirth becomes painful. Thorns and thistles grow up. Labor becomes hard (Gen. 3:16–19). The sparse account in Genesis 3 indicates that there is a decisive change. But what exactly are the details? It is hard to say. Surely physical defects in human beings are one result. Not that a defect is a sign of some particular sin in the past (John 9:2–3), but it is a sign that the world order as a whole is not as it was created to be. But the biggest defect is not physical. It is our sin, and the death that comes as a result.

The struggles in this world, including the curse of death, hang over human life. They are a reminder that all is not right with this world. And all is not right with this world because all is not right with human beings. Disasters are a warning to repent (Luke 13:1–5).

### **How Did Sin Originate?**

If God is wholly good, and if he created a world that was “very good” (Gen. 1:31), how did sin ever come into the world? If Adam started as a holy creature, how did he ever turn against God and against himself and fall into sin?

The Bible says that the serpent tempted him. And behind the serpent as an animal lies the great tempter, Satan (Rev. 12:9; 20:2). But that observation just pushes the question back one stage. Though the Bible provides little direct information about the origin of Satan, it does indicate that God is the universal Creator. It follows that he created all the angelic beings (Col. 1:16). They were all good when they were created (Gen. 1:31). But Satan fell. The Bible does not provide a transparent reason.

G. C. Berkouwer observes<sup>1</sup> that to give a reason for sin is to begin to excuse it. Surely he is right. Sin is irrational in the person who does it. It was irrational for Adam to sin. Even though he was tempted by outside words, he had no reason to trust Satan and distrust God. He had every reason to trust God. But he did not.

The theme of sonship can be used to express the same truth. Adam was a son of God, which included a loving relation with God. He had every reason to continue in that love. But he did not. He betrayed his own sonship.

### **Bringing Good out of Evil**

Can the principle of bringing good out of evil explain the origin of sin? The Bible provides small-scale examples of how God brings good out of evil. The greatest of these instances is the crucifixion of Christ. The events took place “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23). The human motives of those who killed Jesus were evil: “you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (v. 23). God brought about salvation. Likewise, Joseph declared to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen. 50:20). But there remains much mystery. There is much that the Bible does not explain. We have to trust God and his goodness, on the basis of what he has shown us in Christ and his salvation. In the history of salvation, the fall sets the stage for the meaning of redemption. Because human beings are fallen, they need redemption.

1. G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), chap. 5.

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on the Fall**

Acts 2 serves as a perspective on the fall, indirectly, in that it shows one picture of recovering from the fall and its effects. Belief in Christ and the reception of the Holy Spirit result in peace with God and fellowship with him and with one another.

### **Key Terms**

abnormal

ethical

fall of man

metaphysical

sin

son of God

### **Study Questions**

1. What is the difference between a metaphysical and an ethical defect? Why is it important in the discussion of the fall of man?
2. What are the bad consequences of confusing an ethical fall with a metaphysical defect?
3. How did evil originate?
4. What do you learn about yourself by thinking about the fall?

### **For Further Reading**

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8. Pp. 3:49–70.

### **Prayer**

Our Father, thank you for creating a good world, out of your goodness. Thank you for redemption to restore that goodness and to advance it. We pray for the coming of Jesus and the completion of your redemption.

## THE NATURE OF SIN

What is the nature of sin? Could a special definition capture all the meaning of *sin*?

### The Principle of Semantics

As usual, the word-concept distinction (see chapter 7) is pertinent. There are a number of words designating the idea of *sin*, both in Hebrew and in Greek. They are ordinary words, with ranges of meaning. A precise technical definition could not match any one of them, nor all of them together.

If someone wishes to use a precise technical term, it will draw attention to some aspects of scriptural teaching, but not all aspects equally. It is up to the analyst how he chooses his focus. And such a focus will come close to offering a *perspective* on sin. More than one perspective may be useful in drawing attention to the full range of biblical teaching on the topic of sin.

### Sin and the Law of God

Let us begin with one specific definition given in the Bible itself:

Sin is lawlessness. (1 John 3:4)

The larger context in 1 John 3:2–6 helps in understanding the point of this declaration:

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; *sin is lawlessness*. You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.

The first part of 1 John 3:4 states, "Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness." This larger explanation says that sin amounts to lawlessness, or that it produces lawlessness. Part of the significance of sin is that it breaks God's law. The larger context in 1 John 3 shows that this point about sin serves to inform what God has rescued us from by the work of Christ ("he appeared in order to take away sins," 1 John 3:5). The passage provides information about the purposes of God in dealing with the whole pit of sin in which the human race sits.

### **Sin as Transgression of the Law**

Based on 1 John 3:4, the Westminster Shorter Catechism offers an expanded definition: "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God" (WSC 14).<sup>1</sup> In this definition, the Westminster Shorter Catechism is in line with the larger tradition of Reformed theology. Traditionally, Reformed theology is *covenant theology*, which uses the concept of *covenant* as a unifying theme in understanding God's plan of redemption through the centuries and the execution of the plan.<sup>2</sup> Covenant and law go closely together. Law is God's specification of guidance for the human parties in the covenant.

1. The Westminster Shorter Catechism has a system of notes in order to show some of its basis in the Bible. The note accompanying WSC 14 refers to 1 John 3:4.

2. On covenants, see Westminster Confession of Faith 7; WSC 12, 20; Westminster Larger Catechism 20, 22, 30–36.

## **The Strengths of Defining Sin by Means of Law**

Consider the strengths and advantages of defining sin in terms of law:

(1) *Focusing on personal affront to God.* Sin is personal. Sin rejects God's instruction in his law. In doing so, it rejects God personally.<sup>3</sup> It is not just a mistake or a flaw or a defect. Since the law is an expression of God's character (Ps. 119:137; see chapter 8), to reject the law is also to reject God himself.

(2) *Using analogies from the Bible.* The definition in terms of law builds on analogies found in the Bible itself. There is an analogical relation between God's Word guiding his people and the laws that human kings lay down for their subjects. Chapter 21 showed that the covenants between God and his people are analogous to covenants that a suzerain king makes with a vassal, or that two human beings make with each other (such as Jacob and Laban in Genesis 31:44–54).

(3) *Being for our good.* Because God is good, his laws are intended for our good. This usefulness of the law is analogous to the usefulness of good laws made by human authorities. Many human laws are put in place by human authorities with the purpose of protecting people from disasters, restraining sins, and encouraging people to live their lives well. Of course, human laws have imperfections, and some of them may actually interfere with well-doing. But the analogy with human law is one reminder of the goodness and blessing of God's law:

Moreover, by them [God's rules] is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is *great reward*. (Ps. 19:11)

For we know that the law is *spiritual*. (Rom. 7:14)

(4) *Showing God's glory.* God's laws display his glory by showing his righteousness and his wisdom and his goodness toward humanity:

3. Carlton Wynne, "ST 211 [Doctrine of Man] Lec 10 . . . Fall," lecture notes, 2022.

Open my eyes, that I may behold  
wondrous things out of your law. (Ps. 119:18)

Your testimonies are *wonderful*;  
therefore my soul keeps them. (Ps. 119:129)

(5) *Integrating with the theme of the king.* The theme of law integrates well with a major analogy in the Bible concerning God's relation to the world and to humanity. God is a King issuing decrees. Moral law consists in the utterances of God that specify moral standards with respect to human behavior and attitudes.

(6) *Being wide in scope.* Law can specify what is moral and good with respect to human beings as whole persons, with respect to human dispositions and attitudes, and with respect to behavior. It is not intrinsically confined to external behavior. The phrase "want of conformity unto" in WSC 14 indicates that sin includes not only specific *behaviors* that break the law, but all situations in which people are out of conformity with the law, even before they do any specific action. This wide scope of the law contrasts with some treatments in Arminian circles, according to which sin is seen almost exclusively as behavior.

(7) *Having specificity.* The definition in terms of law has the benefit of directing people's attention to the specific divine laws in Scripture, in all their particularity. *Sin* can also be defined as "lack of love." And the two Great Commandments, according to Jesus, are both commandments to love—love God and love one's neighbor (Matt. 22:37–40). But it is also important to note that Jesus cites these commandments as a summary of the law, rather than as commandments that are independent of the law or that replace the law. Without the specificity of the particularities of the law, the general directive to "love" can be reinterpreted in an antibiblical way to become a license to do anything that one feels like doing because it "feels" loving. One then deceives oneself about the true nature of obedience to God.

(8) *Stressing continuity.* It is natural to conceive of *law* as primarily the same from age to age. Defining sin in terms of law provides a fixed, external standard and reminds us of the continuity of the problem of sin throughout

all the epochs after the fall. Righteous human behavior is fundamentally the same. Sin is the same, from age to age. The need of humanity is fundamentally the same. The nature of redemption is therefore fundamentally the same. So there is only one Redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ. Before his coming into the world and accomplishing his work, people in the Old Testament were always saved by virtue of his work that was still to come. They had faith in God's promises, which pointed to Christ and his work.

### **Potential Liabilities of Defining Sin in Terms of Law**

Are there potential liabilities to defining sin in terms of law? There are, if an analyst insists on ignoring every other perspective on sin. Many of the challenges are "potential" liabilities, not actual liabilities. People who read and study their Bibles carefully can still receive God's instruction about sin in its full richness. But if someone *only* ever uses a single perspective, he runs the risk of missing some aspects of sin, or at least of putting these aspects in the background.

(1) *Rule-based ethics*. If sin is transgression of the law, obedience is obedience to the law. This orientation naturally leads to rule-based ethics, with emphasis on the *normative perspective* on the Christian life. Life is supposed to be lived in conformity with God's norms. God's norms express and reflect God's own character. He is holy and righteous. And God's norms are spelled out especially in his law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments.

This account of the Christian life is valid *as a perspective*. John Frame, however, shows in his discussions of ethics that there are three complementary perspectives on the Christian life. These three are the *normative perspective*, the *situational perspective*, and the *existential perspective*, also called the *personal perspective*.<sup>4</sup> Each perspective applies to *the whole* of the

4. John M. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism (Revised 2008)," <https://frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism-revised-2008/>; John M. Frame, *Perspectives on the Word of God: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999); John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008).



Christian life. So in a way, it can function to cover the whole field of ethics. But that is because each perspective, rightly understood, encompasses the others. One cannot think robustly about ethics without all three. For example, the norms tell us to love our neighbor. But that commandment, which is a norm, implies changes in *attitude*, which are in focus with the existential perspective. And the commandment implies that people should pay attention to their neighbor's situation in order to discern how best to love him. Paying attention to the situation is what is involved in the situational perspective.

If someone tries to use only one perspective *exclusively*, he runs the risk of truncating that perspective—he may not, in fact, pay attention to the insights from the two other included perspectives. And then the understanding of the Christian life becomes one-sided, or even distorted. If someone has *only* norms, he may be tempted to treat the norms woodenly, without attention to either the situation or attitudes. If he has *only* attitudes, he may be governed by feelings that are corrupted by hidden sinful desires. He may stop paying attention to the specific boundaries that God provides in the Ten Commandments.

(2) *Law as merely external.* A second potential liability is that the law could be misunderstood as merely an external imposition on humanity. It is viewed as stiff, unsuitable rules that artificially restrict what a person would otherwise be free to do. Unwise human laws can indeed become an onerous burden to the people on whom they are imposed. This kind of conception then creates a tension between the norms, which are external, and the persons and the situations, which are already there before the norms are imposed. This danger in misunderstanding is similar to *heteronomy*. In heteronomy, the “law” is pictured as “other law,” outside humanity, disconnected from humanity with no real relation to what human beings are as creatures.

But God as the universal Ruler has made human beings as well as specifying in his law the way that is right for them to follow. The two sides, the law and human nature in its unfallen state, are in complete harmony because God is in harmony with himself, and all that he made is in harmony with him.

Similarly, the total inability of human beings to turn back to God, once they have fallen, can be misconstrued in a wooden legal framework. When the law declares that people are hopelessly lost and unable to turn themselves back to God, it may be misconstrued, as if it forbade human beings from doing what they might supposedly be otherwise able to do, namely, to turn themselves back to God.

(3) *Suppression of intimate, familial relation to God.* Closely related to liability 2 is a third potential liability. Construing people's relation to God in legal terms can be misunderstood and interpreted as undermining the personal nature of the relation of God to man. "Law" becomes an allegedly impersonal intermediary that keeps human beings at a distance from knowing God personally. People think of themselves as working to obey a law, but never actually encountering the Lawgiver. It is as though God delivered the Mosaic law without the fellowship meal in Exodus 24:11, and without the Mosaic feasts that remind people of their fellowship with God at a more intense level. By contrast, declaring that God's people are *children* of God emphasizes the personal, intimate character of their relation to God.

(4) *Neglecting the progression and dynamic change in history in relation to God.* Earlier in this chapter, point 8 under "The Strengths of Defining Sin by Means of Law" observed that law easily draws attention to the continuity in God's work over the ages. But the potential liability is that interpreters of the Bible would then neglect to notice progress in redemption and changes brought about by God's work, especially his climactic work in Christ. For example, the Ten Commandments could be treated merely as constant principles, without our noticing that they are all fulfilled in Christ, in his perfect obedience. And then they are applied to New Testament believers through our union with Christ. Believers are intended to obey the commandments not merely in their own strength, but through the strength of Christ working in them through the Holy Spirit (Col. 1:29–2:1).

(5) *Effects on construal of redemption.* Construing sin in terms of law easily leads to construing redemption in terms of law. And this construal is there in the Bible. Christ's work frees from the guilt of having

transgressed the law. But there is a potential liability if someone uses *only* the legal perspective. He might not notice other aspects of redemption, such as freedom from the power of Satan and power in the Holy Spirit to live in obedience to God instead of sin. In addition, suppose that someone construes the new obedience of Christians as an obedience to the law of God. It is that, but does he notice also that Christian obedience means progressive, increasing conformity to the image of Christ as people behold his glory (2 Cor. 3:18)?

### **Sin in Reformed Theology**

The tradition of Reformed theology has recognized that sin is multifaceted. The dominant note, over the centuries, may well be the one in which sin is defined as lack of conformity to or transgression of the law. But complementary emphases also appear. John Calvin mentions ingratitude. The Heidelberg Catechism says that you learn of your misery “out of the law of God” (Q&A 3). But in the next question, it sums up the law in the two Great Commandments, to love God and to love neighbor (Q&A 4). So one could claim that *sin* is in effect defined as “failure to love.” Jonathan Edwards sees love as central. Cornelius Van Til emphasizes sin as would-be autonomy. Each of these offers insights and has a use.

### **Possible Perspectives on Sin**

So let us list briefly a number of possible definitions of sin, each of which might offer a perspective.

*Transgression of the law.* “Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (WSC 14). This is the definition that we have already considered, based on 1 John 3:4.

*Lack of imitation.* Sin is lack of imitating God. (This is an implication of man’s being made in the image of God, and of Ephesians 4:22–24 and Colossians 3:9–10 about renewal in the image of Christ.)

*Slavery to evil.* Sin is slavery to evil doing, in contrast to freedom.

Everyone who practices sin is a *slave* to sin. (John 8:34)

But thanks be to God, that you who were once *slaves* of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed. (Rom. 6:17)

*Lack of fellowship with God.* Sin is separation from or breach of fellowship with God. It is alienation from God. “For . . . while we were *enemies* we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son” (Rom. 5:10).

*Lovelessness.* Sin is lack of love. The two Great Commandments are to love God and to love one’s neighbor (Matt. 22:36–40).

*Would-be autonomy.* Sin is the striving to be autonomous. Autonomy is the temptation of Satan in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:5).

*Pride.* Sin is pride, an inflated devotion to self. (This emphasis is closely related to autonomy. Pride leads to focus on the self as the source of direction and wisdom.)<sup>5</sup> “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18).

*Unbelief.* Sin is failure to have faith in God. “For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). (Unbelief is the reverse side of pride.)<sup>6</sup>

*Ingratitude.* Sin is ingratitude. Giving thanks to God or not giving thanks is a prominent theme in Calvin. “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thess. 5:18).

*Rebellion against God.* Rebellion emphasizes the element of refusal and rejection. Sin is opposition to God and his plan. “For the mind that is set on the flesh is *hostile* to God, for it does not *submit* to God’s law; indeed, it cannot” (Rom. 8:7).

*Hatred toward God.* Sin is hating God. People do not want to admit that they hate God. They may love their picture of God, but it is a false picture, a counterfeit picture. They display hatred when they treat themselves as a god. “No one can serve two masters, for either he will *hate* the one and

5. Marguerite Shuster, *The Fall and Sin: What We Have Become as Sinners* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 52–55.

6. Shuster, 52–55.

love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matt. 6:24).

*Friendship with the world.* “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).<sup>7</sup>

*Unfaithfulness.* To sin is to be unfaithful to the commitment in covenant. God will punish “if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant” (Lev. 26:15).

*Improper commitment.* To sin is to be committed to something other than God as an ultimate commitment. “No one can serve two masters, for either he will *hate* the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Matt. 6:24).

*Breaking harmony.* Sin is egocentricity, breaking harmony with God and one’s fellow man.<sup>8</sup> “For people will be lovers of *self*” (2 Tim. 3:2).

### Perspectives from the *Lex Christi* Framework

Since each of the Ten Commandments can function as a perspective on the entire law and on the entirety of our obligation to God, each commandment can also serve as a definition of sin. These definitions overlap with some of those already given above. Table 8.17 has already in effect given a definition of sin corresponding to each of the Ten Commandments. Here they are:

- 1C: counterfeit supreme (self as supreme)
- 2C: counterfeit holy (false gods)
- 3C: counterfeit blessing (seeking blessing, but receiving curse)
- 4C: counterfeit dynamic (seeking self-exaltation)

7. Joel B. Green, *Body, Soul, and Human Life: The Nature of Humanity in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker/Milton Keynes, England: Paternoster, 2008), 94; Luke Timothy Johnson, *Brother of Jesus, Friend of God: Studies in the Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 202–20.

8. Nathaniel Gray Sutado, “Egocentricity, Organism, and Metaphysics: Sin and Renewal in Bavinck’s *Ethics*,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 34, no. 2 (2021): 223–40.

- 5C: counterfeit harmonious (seeking self-harmony; egocentricity)
- 6C: counterfeit living (the way of death, Prov. 9:18)
- 7C: counterfeit intimate (intimacy with false gods, including forbidden sexual intimacy)
- 8C: counterfeit giving (giving self the supremacy)
- 9C: counterfeit truthful (the lie of autonomy)
- 10C: counterfeit contented (seeking satisfaction in a false god)

We may comment further on ten definitions of sin, corresponding to the commandments.

*1C. Sin is making oneself supreme instead of God supreme.* (Related to autonomy.) This sin is a counterfeit of the truth, namely, that God has given to human beings a genuine dominion, reflecting his dominion on a creaturely level. Human beings *should* want to exercise dominion. But sin perverts this desire into autonomy, which is desire for unlimited, godlike power.

*2C. Sin is unholiness or violation of holiness.* Because the way of holiness is defined in covenant, which is lawlike, this emphasis is close to the principle of sin's being defined as transgression of the law and sin's being improper commitment—commitment to idols. Human beings have a desire for the holy—for that which is transcendent. That desire is innate in them as creatures. But in sin, the desire is perverted into desire for counterfeit images of holiness. These include physical idols or statues that people use to seek the spirit world, and mediums and fortune-tellers that claim to give access to a transcendent spiritual world, and people who find ultimate meaning or “transcendence” for themselves by devoting themselves to some cause or larger purpose, or trying to make themselves famous so that they receive a kind of false worship.

*3C. Sin is taking the Lord's name in vain.* This sin takes place in an obvious way when people use the Lord's name frivolously or in a vow that they do not keep. But since all of God's creatures belong to him, they all bear his name. Human beings bear his name more intensely, since they are made in his image. All sin dishonors God's name by misrepresenting him and his character. Human beings are created in such a way that they desire

God's favor—God's blessing. But sin perverts this original desire, and it becomes desire for favor from whoever or whatever promises to give it.

4C. *Sin is lack of imitating the dynamicity of God, or improperly imitating it in the attempt to be autonomous.* Sin as autonomy and sin as lack of imitation are related to this perspective. It is natural that human beings imitate God. Sin replaces this kind of imitation with imitation of counterfeits—other human beings who draw admiration, or bad examples that people imitate, or programs that promise “salvation.” And people perversely imitate God by trying to *be* God (autonomy).

5C. *Sin is disharmony with God.* Disharmony with God also leads to disharmony with fellow human beings. This perspective is closely related to sin as rebellion and sin as disorder or disintegration.<sup>9</sup> Sin replaces the love of God the Father for his children and the love of his children for God the Father with false loves.

6C. *Sin is spiritual death, or leads to spiritual death when not repented of.* Sin perverts the love for the life of God into forms in which people seek counterfeit sources of life. Sinners seek life, but perversely, sometimes at the cost of other lives. It is always at the cost of the sinner's own life: “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

7C. *Sin is failure in intimacy with God.* This perspective is closely related to the idea of sin as alienation, sin as unfaithfulness, and sin as lovelessness. Counterfeit forms of sexuality seek intimacy that is a distortion of the original desire for intimacy with God.

8C. *Sin is not giving to God what he deserves.* This perspective is closely related to sin as ingratitude. In sin, people cease to be free owners. They become slaves to sin. The original desire to receive God's wealth is twisted by sin into a perverse desire to use wealth—or some other apparent benefit—within this world alone.

9C. *Sin is misrepresenting the truth about God.* The desire for knowing God is perverted into desire for knowledge of a corrupt kind.

9. Sutanto, 230–32, argues that the idea of sin as a disintegrating force is a major concern in Herman Bavinck's ethical thought and that this idea is closely related to his conception of humanity as an organic whole, an idea that underlines the harmony that should exist among human beings.

10C. Sin is discontentment, especially discontentment with God. Instead of peace with God, sinners seek false forms of peace.

Augustine in commenting on the first sin of Adam sees in it aspects belonging to several of the Ten Commandments:

For there is in it [the one sin of Adam] pride, because man chose to be under his own dominion, rather than under the dominion of God [1C]; and blasphemy, because he did not believe God [3C]; and murder, for he brought death upon himself [6C]; and spiritual fornication, for the purity of the human soul was corrupted by the seducing blandishments of the serpent [7C]; and theft, for man turned to his own use the food he had been forbidden to touch [8C]; and avarice, for he had a craving for more than should have been sufficient for him [10C]; and whatever other sin can be discovered on careful reflection to be involved in this one admitted sin.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Usefulness of *Lex Christi***

Finally, note again the usefulness of *lex Christi*. It might seem that because of the key role of the Ten Commandments in *lex Christi*, it implies a narrowly *legal* treatment of sin and redemption. But the law reflects the attributes of God, and Christ perfectly fulfills the law in all its aspects and implications. So the multiple perspectives that derive from the attributes of God provide a way of thinking about sin and about redemption that encourages Christians not to be reductionistic in the treatment either of sin or of redemption. Each commandment out of the ten produces a distinct perspective on how sin distorts the creational desire for communion with God. (See table 33.1.)

10. Augustine, *Enchiridion: or on Faith, Hope, and Love*, ed. Philip Schaff, chap. 45, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, 1st ser., 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), quoted in Shuster, *Fall and Sin*, 49n2.



**Table 33.1. Sin as a Distortion of Desire for Communion with God**

| Cmd. | Attributes of God | Creational Desire     | Sinful Distortion of Desire                                         |
|------|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1C   | supreme           | be ruled and rule     | desire for autonomous rule; or idolatrous submission to a false god |
| 2C   | holy              | transcendent holiness | seeking false forms of transcendence                                |
| 3C   | blessed           | personal favor        | lustful seeking of favor                                            |
| 4C   | dynamic           | imitate God           | imitating bad examples                                              |
| 5C   | harmonious        | to be a son of God    | seeking false love                                                  |
| 6C   | living            | life                  | seeking life in vaporous forms                                      |
| 7C   | intimate          | intimacy              | seeking counterfeit intimacy                                        |
| 8C   | giving            | sharing wealth        | seeking wealth as a god                                             |
| 9C   | truthful          | personal knowledge    | seeking knowledge in autonomy                                       |
| 10C  | contented         | peace                 | seeking false peace                                                 |

This table builds on table 22.3, which explores the nature of the original created human desire for communion with God.

### **Using the Legal Perspective in Dealing with Topics Related to Sin**

Note briefly how helpful the legal perspective is in dealing with the whole spectrum of topics associated with sin.

(1) *The definition of sin.* The legal perspective does well with the definition of sin because the law of God defines sin comprehensively.

(2) *The imputation of Adam's sin.* The legal perspective may suggest that the imputation of Adam's sin is a product of the covenant with God. The covenant, as a law, specifies that Adam's guilt and pollution pass to his posterity. But as we observed earlier in discussing the imputation of guilt, the potential liability of the analogy with law is that the law can be viewed as merely an external imposition. If the law were merely an external imposition, Adam's posterity gets guilt, according to the law. But it does not make sense, in reality.

(3) *Total depravity.* The law can detect total depravity, if it is there in human beings, in the motives of the heart as well as external actions. But it does not easily explain *why* total depravity has taken hold of the human race. If the law were merely an arbitrary, external imposition, the resulting depravity may seem to be an arbitrary imposition.

(4) *Free agency.* The law as an external commandment presupposes free agency and human responsibility. But does it explain it?

(5) *Punishment for sin.* The law can specify punishments for sin. Indeed, three of the commandments provide explicit specifications: the second, third, and fifth commandments. But again, there is the danger of thinking of punishments as arbitrary, and not really related to the sins that they punish. Over against this danger, people need to reckon with the "fitness" of punishments. The punishment fits the crime (Obad. 15; see chapter 23).

## **Using the Analogy of Sonship**

How can the analogy of sonship aid in understanding sin? (This analogy was introduced in chapters 6, 7, and 13.) Chapter 13 noted four themes associated with sonship: intimacy, inheritance, freedom, and family likeness. Adam as a son of God had all four of these in the context of his created relation to God. All four are corrupted by sin.

### *(1) Understanding sin*

- *Intimacy.* Sin is the opposite of intimacy with God. It is alienation from God and hatred of God. It is breaking fellowship with God and breaking trust.

- *Inheritance*. Sin is the opposite of inheritance. It is being deprived of the goodness of God.
- *Freedom*. Sin is the opposite of freedom. It is slavery to evil.
- *Family likeness, reflecting God*. Sin is the opposite of reflecting God. It is breaking the reflection. Or, from another point of view, it is trying to reflect God's autonomy by being autonomous.

(2) *Understanding the imputation of Adam's sin*. As chapter 25 showed, the theme of sonship suggests that the imputation of Adam's sin can be compared to loss of sonship, not only for Adam, but for his posterity. So Adam's children (1) are outside the garden (lost intimacy); (2) have no inheritance that he can pass on (inheritance); (3) are born slaves (lost freedom); and (4) reflect their father (guilt and depravity; theme of reflection).

(3) *Understanding depravity*. Adam's children are depraved in the sense of being slaves to sin.

(4) *Punishment for sin*. Adam's children are driven out because they have lost sonship.

Thus, the analogy of sonship has value in giving insight into why the situation of fallen humanity is what it is.

### Usefulness of *Lex Christi* with Sonship

It may be noted that *lex Christi* can be a starting point not only for the legal analogy, which we considered earlier in this chapter, but also for the analogy of sonship. The responsibilities of sons are explicitly articulated in the fifth commandment. So the analogy of sonship can be seen as deriving from the fifth commandment within the total picture of all the commandments.

Sin can be defined by using any one of the ten perspectives from *lex Christi*—or still other perspectives that the Bible supplies. Each perspective illumines the nature of sin. No perspective puts every aspect of sin equally in prominence.

## Acts 2 as a Perspective on Sin

Acts 2 provides a perspective on sin by showing what God's people look like when they are not following the way of sin. Sin is the moral opposite of service to God and service to neighbor, such as verses 41–47 exemplify. The triumph over sin comes from the gift of Christ through the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33).

### Key Terms

|                                         |                         |
|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| analogy                                 | law                     |
| Arminian                                | legal perspective       |
| Calvin, John                            | <i>lex Christi</i>      |
| covenant                                | love                    |
| covenant theology                       | normative perspective   |
| distinction between word and<br>concept | perspective             |
| dynamic                                 | Reformed theology       |
| Edwards, Jonathan                       | semantics               |
| ethics                                  | sin                     |
| existential perspective                 | situational perspective |
| heteronomy                              | son of God              |
| king                                    | transgress              |
|                                         | Van Til, Cornelius      |

### Study Questions

1. What is *sin*?
2. Can you provide several ways of defining sin? What advantages, if any, are there in having several definitions?
3. What is the primary definition of sin in the history of Reformed theology?
4. What are the strengths and weaknesses of defining sin in terms of law?

5. What three perspectives on ethics are useful in understanding the role of law in ethics?
6. What are the strengths and weaknesses of a legal perspective on redemption?
7. How have you been helped to understand sin and to guard against it by the perspectives developed in this chapter? Do you find one or more perspectives to be particularly valuable?

### **For Further Reading**

Frame, John M. *Perspectives on the Word of God: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999.

———. “A Primer on Perspectivalism (Revised 2008).” <https://frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism-revised-2008/>.

### **Prayer**

Lord, help us to serve you as Lord and to walk in your way rather than the way of sin and unrighteousness and rebellion and transgression. Conform us more fully to the image of Christ each day.

## TOTAL DEPRAVITY

What is the situation for fallen human beings with respect to their innate sinfulness? This is the issue of *depravity*.

### Statement of the Doctrine

Let us begin with a summary statement of what the Bible teaches. Depravity is total in its extent and in its intensiveness. *All* human beings are sinners (total extent). And the *whole* person is sinful (total in intensiveness). Few people within the Christian faith have denied the first of these, in the light of Romans 3:9–20, 23. An exception occurs for Jesus Christ, who has a full human nature but also a divine nature. The second area, the intensiveness of sin, needs more careful discussion.

In particular, if the whole person is sinful, it means that there is no platform or aspect within a human being that may serve as a fulcrum or lever that he may use to begin motions to save himself or even cooperate with God in bringing salvation to himself. (This consideration has a bearing on the topic of total inability, to be discussed in the next chapter.)

Total depravity does not mean that each person is as bad as he could be, or that each person is as bad as every other person. Each person is corrupt in heart, in nature. The root of personality is oriented against God. And a bad tree (bad root) cannot bring forth good fruit:

And he [Jesus] said, “What comes out of a person is what defiles him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts,

sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.” (Mark 7:20–23)

For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks. (Luke 6:43–45; see Matt. 7:17–20)

Even deeds in external conformity with God’s law are corrupted by evil motives. Hence, some theologians have preferred the term *radical depravity*, that is, depraved at the root (avoiding the suggestion that every person is already as bad as he could be).

### **Biblical Basis for the Doctrine**

The *extent* of depravity is taught in Romans 3:9–23, 1 Kings 8:46, Psalm 143:2, and 1 John 1:8, 10, among other passages.

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;  
no one understands;  
no one seeks for God.

All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;  
no one does good,  
not even one.”

“Their throat is an open grave;  
they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

“Their feet are swift to shed blood;

in their paths are ruin and misery,

and the way of peace they have not known.”

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. (Rom. 3:9–20)

They sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin.  
(1 Kings 8:46)

Enter not into judgment with your servant,  
for no one living is righteous before you. (Ps. 143:2)

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (1 John 1:8)

If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:10)

All human beings, with the exception of Christ (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15), come into the world with a sinful nature.

The concept of *intensiveness* in depravity is usually derived from Genesis 6:5 and 8:21:

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Gen. 6:5)



I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. (Gen. 8:21)

These texts do show the intensiveness of depravity, but only after some reflection. First note the strong language in Genesis 6:5: totality ("every intention"), inwardness ("of his heart"), exclusiveness ("only evil"), constantness ("continually"), innateness ("from his youth," 8:21).

Genesis 6:5 comes as the culmination of growth in wickedness. There is a record of historical development here. Man is more wicked in the time just before the flood than he was earlier. But this does not really qualify the conclusions. The situation before the flood is a demonstration of the potential that is always there in man. At the same time, there is recognition of the historical and corporate character of outworking of those tendencies. Genesis 8:21, unlike 6:5, seems to be a general statement, confirming that the historically worked-out horror of Genesis 6:5 is paradigmatic for our understanding of the inward tendency of human beings in all times and situations.

The relation between heart and deed is further worked out in Mark 7:14–23. In the light of the origin of evil in the human heart, it is most devastating to find the human heart characterized as "desperately wicked" (KJV), "desperately sick" (ESV), "beyond cure" (NIV) (Jer. 17:9). The human heart is not just neutral. It is wicked. People's inmost beings, their deepest selves, are set in determination to defy God, to rebel against him. Wickedness can also manifest itself in a second-order motion, in which a person hides the heart's wickedness from himself. Thus Proverbs 30:20 pictures the adulteress, "I have done no wrong"; 1 Timothy 4:2, "consciences are seared"; Matthew 23:13, "hypocrites." The last of these texts may well include a third-order motion: the heart hides from itself its ability to deceive with respect to righteousness.

The apparently universal implications of Genesis 8:21 do not extend to those whose hearts are changed by God. Note the positive chord struck in Ezekiel 36:25–27, Romans 6:1–23 and 8:5–17, and 1 John 3:9 and 5:18. Genesis 8:21, then, must be seen as linked to the historical context of the outworkings of the fall leading to the flood, and reflections on the question of what will happen after the flood.

How is the teaching of total depravity to be reconciled with the observed facts that fallen human beings are not as bad as they could be? This question leads to the topic of common grace.

## Common Grace

The phrase *common grace* can be used in a broad or a narrow sense. In the broad sense, it includes all of God's benefits to fallen creation, short of eternal salvation. John Murray observes that it is "every favour of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God."<sup>1</sup> In the narrow sense, it describes the fact that God restrains sin and works good within the human mind and in human behavior.

Murray notes that common grace includes restraining evil: the restraining of physical evil, of the consequences of sin, and of sin itself (Gen. 20:6). On the positive side, he notes the bestowal of good within nature or the subhuman world (Pss. 65:5–13; 104:13–23; 136:25; 145:9, 15–16), the bestowal of good on man (Gen. 39:5; Matt. 5:44–45; Luke 6:35–36; 16:25; Acts 14:16–17), and human government (Rom. 13:3–4; 1 Peter 2:14). The most controversial effect of common grace occurs in the good deeds of unregenerate men:<sup>2</sup>

But Jehu did not turn aside from the *sins* of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin—that is, the golden calves that were in Bethel and in Dan. And the LORD said to Jehu, "Because you have done *well* in carrying out what is right in my eyes, and have done to the house of Ahab according to all that was in my heart, your sons of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel." (2 Kings 10:29–30)

1. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976–77), 2:96.

2. Murray, 2:93–119.

And Jehoash did what was *right* in the eyes of the LORD all his days, because Jehoiada the priest instructed him. *Nevertheless*, the high places were not taken away. (2 Kings 12:2–3)

For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (Matt. 5:46)

And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. (Luke 6:33)

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them. (Rom. 2:14–15; but the meaning of these verses is disputed)

What is the nature of these good deeds? First, deeds contaminated with sin do not bring anyone closer to salvation. They are of no use to earn salvation from God. Yet they can be relatively good, in external terms. There are gradations of wickedness. Second, the overriding tendency to rebellion against God does not work itself out fully in fallen human beings because God in his goodness produces in them works that are externally good: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” (James 1:17).

There can be a tendency to think of common grace as whatever a human being is and can do, over and above what he would be apart from God. But there is then a difficulty in defining what one means by “apart from God.” Even the devil cannot act without powers and abilities that proceed from God and are providentially sustained by God. According to the biblical doctrine of providence, there is in the end no such thing as “man in himself,” which would be autonomous man.

## The Necessary Analogies and Disanalogies

The discussion on the subject of depravity must try to do justice to analogies and disanalogies between several aspects and experiences of the human race and of individuals within the race.

- *Initial condition at creation.* In the integrity of creation, man is in unbroken and unproblematic fellowship with God. As a son of God (not “in himself”), his heart and his disposition are directed toward service to God.
- *Dynamic development of sin.* Interpreters must reckon with the historical dynamic introduced by the fall of man. The fall results in a radical break of fellowship. Man is cast out of the family of God, and this must necessarily affect all of him. As God is one, so man is one. Every aspect is twisted when a person twists in relationship to God.
- *The example of the flood.* The flood is a demonstration of what *did* happen, and also what would happen again apart from God’s promise of restraint based on animal sacrifice that Noah makes in Genesis 8:20–22. Genesis 6 provides a demonstration of what will break out from man when God “gives men over” to sin (cf. Rom. 1:18–32). What happens when the relation of God to man is one of severity, or God’s “giving up,” is multiplication of evil to unspeakable heights and depths. Hell is the endpoint here.
- *The promise to Noah* (Gen. 8:21–22). The promise to Noah involves God’s commitment to be with human beings corporately, and hence also individually, in doing good and blessing. God sends blessings to humanity as a whole even though “the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth” (v. 21).
- *Uneven distribution of benefits.* God’s distribution of benefits to different human beings varies enormously. In some cases, the benefits include being members of the visible church (Heb. 6:4–8; 10:26–29; 2 Peter 2:20–22), yet still not having experienced the new birth as an inward reality (John 3:3, 5; 1 John 4:7).

- *Corporate implications.* Sin and righteousness have corporate implications. Even though the behavior of others is not the standard by which individuals are judged, whole societies have profound influence on their members. Parents have influence on their children. And so on. This influence can be for good as well as evil.
- *Influence of Christians.* Christians as light and heaven influence others for good even when those others are not converted. And those within the visible church are even more profoundly affected (Heb. 6:4–8; 10:26–29; 2 Peter 2:20–22).

God's relationship in doing good to a person is not to be thought of as something mechanical that a person can simply take for granted. Each person ought to give thanks. He ought to fear for the loss of what has been given. It can be taken away. The trouble with the denial or even nonassertion of total depravity and common grace lies right here. Denial of total depravity results in lack of thanksgiving for the good that still exists among human beings. Denial of common grace results in underevaluation of those gifts that God has given, and hence also lack of thanksgiving (usually lack of thanksgiving for good in others).

In analyzing depravity, theologians should take all these aspects into account, in their historical and concrete complexities. And they must take into account what God might have done but did not. All this is so if they refuse to talk about what a person is "in himself." An older approach might have said, "He brings forth only evil in himself." But a person is never "in himself." Even in hell, though in a sense a person is abandoned, God is present in judgment. Hell is not a place of *genuine* autonomy; rather, it is nonautonomous frustration and suffering.

### **The Value of the Label *Common Grace***

There is some positive value in each of the two words making up the expression *common grace*. (1) The word *common* draws attention to the universal bearing of God's ways under the Noachic covenant. (2) The word *grace* draws attention to the analogy but also nonidentity with saving grace.

But some Bible interpreters would want to stress the disanalogy more strongly and talk of general beneficence when it is a question of benefits to unbelievers. The word *grace* also suggests the undeserving character, in fact ill-deserving character, of the recipients. The ill-desert is unlike the situation before the fall. What is shared in the situation before the fall and the fallen situation is God's goodness, his *beneficence*.

There can be some value in changing the terminology and using a label such as *general beneficence* in order to draw attention to a particular point that one wants to make. But there is also a danger of a one-sided formulation. For example, a rejection of the term *common grace* can mean denying any analogy between good deeds of the regenerate and the unregenerate. This denial is illegitimate, as shown in Luke 11:13: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give *good* gifts to your children . . ." Or it can be denial of the richness of historical development. The reprobate experience genuine bounty from God. Its proper purpose is good. This must be so in order for it to make sense that their continuing in sin makes them more guilty than ever. The situation is like that of the law in Romans 7:7, 12.

Cornelius Van Til's emphasis on the absolute antithesis between regenerate and unregenerate, if understood one-sidedly or used carelessly, can lead to pride and unteachability on the part of the regenerate. Some people may forget common grace and think that unbelievers produce no externally good things at all. Then they can no longer learn anything from unbelievers. Van Til teaches analysts to see the bad presuppositions of unbelievers. And Van Til observes that if they followed their bad presuppositions consistently, they would have no knowledge and no fruit at all. But the other side of Van Til is his doctrine of common grace. The idea of antithesis and the idea of common grace must be applied together. The applications include the academic areas of physical sciences, social sciences, counseling, and education. The applications extend to every aspect of human life.

### **The Perspective of Sonship**

Consider again whether the perspective of sonship may help in understanding total depravity. The opposite of sonship is slavery (Rom. 8:15).

*Slavery* is a radical way of describing the burden of sin. So it does help to emphasize the radical takeover by sin. But as chapter 30 observed, it has the potential disadvantage of leaving open the question whether the slave wants to be free. Is the difficulty with slavery to sin merely external? Does sin hold people as slaves in spite of a thoroughgoing, sincere desire on their part to be free from sin? No. The difficulty is in fact internal. Their inward desires and their hearts are slaves. Sin has captured the desires; it is not merely an outward force hindering people from carrying out their desires. If an analyst takes account of the inward captivity, the analogy with slavery is a good one.

### **The Perspectives of *Lex Christi***

Can the perspectives of *lex Christi* provide help in understanding total depravity? The first commandment is especially relevant. It reflects the supremacy of God. There is only one supreme Lord. So it also expresses the unity of God. Each individual human being reflects on a creaturely level the unity of God in his own unity as a person. The person as a whole person acts. The whole person is responsible. Sonship belongs to Adam as a whole, unified being when he is created. The corruption of sonship extends then to the unity of the whole person that Adam is. So there is some logic in the fact that sin spreads extensively and intensively when Adam abandons his sonship.

The fourth commandment is also relevant, with its theme that God is dynamic. God acts by bringing the world into existence and by developing it. Man made in the image of God is supposed to imitate God by developing the world according to the cultural mandate (Gen. 1:28–30). The developments that God brings about take place in accordance with the unity of his plan. Likewise, the developments that mankind is supposed to undertake take place according to the unity of the plan that God has laid out in the cultural mandate. When Adam and Eve rebel and fall into sin, they still have a counterfeit reflection of God in the purposes that they carry out. Except now they serve the self (selfishness); they are enslaved to sin; they serve counterfeit gods. There is still a measure of unity in the service.

There is unity among the aspects of the individual person, and unity among heart, will, and action in behavior. But all of it is now in counterfeit service.

Recall that the *lex Christi* framework affirms that each of the Ten Commandments can serve as a perspective on the entire requirement of the law (see chapter 8 [“The Ten Commandments as Perspectives” section]). To break one commandment is to break all of them, as James 2:10–11 warns:

For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it. For he who said, “Do not commit adultery,” also said, “Do not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.

James may not have the same thing in mind as our treatment of the commandments as perspectives. But the point is similar. James argues that “there is only one lawgiver and judge” (James 4:12). To violate any one law is to offend the person who gave the law, and that kind of offense is at the heart of each of the Ten Commandments.

So sin is like an infection that spreads from one commandment to all of them. Likewise, it spreads to all aspects of the individual person.

### **The Holistic Implications of the Ten Commandments**

The analogies offered by each of the Ten Commandments may help in understanding the reality of the spread of sin to all aspects, which is one aspect of total depravity.

*1C. There is only one supreme God.* To turn away from him is to turn to another, a counterfeit that is treated as supreme. There is unity in this counterfeit service. The fundamental theme in the Old Testament of being loyal to God and not dividing loyalty with other gods is an expression of the necessity of unity in service. To divide service is not to offer genuine service to God at all, but only a counterfeit, a hypocritical service.

*2C. Uncleaness in Leviticus is the opposite of symbolic holiness.* Uncleaness spreads. One may consider, for example, the laws discussing



the spread of uncleanness from dead bodies: Leviticus 11:24–43 and Numbers 19:11–22. This spread is a symbolic representation of the spread of sin.

*3C. The person who sins falls under the curse of God.* The curse falls on the *whole* person. This analogy again emphasizes the unity of the person. A person is either cursed or blessed, and not a third thing. In Deuteronomy 28:15–68, the curse falls on every aspect of human living. The most intense form of curse occurs with “devoted things” that are devoted to destruction, as illustrated with the destruction of Jericho (Josh. 6–7).

*4C. Sin grows and spreads.* The spread of sin and the multiplication of sin that take place in Genesis 4 and 6 express in a counterfeit form the principle of the dynamic growth in creation. Dynamic growth and multiplication within creation express a dynamicity that reflects within creation the original dynamicity of God.

*5C. Children are to honor their parents.* This commandment is therefore closely related to the theme of sonship. Adam as a son is to honor God his Father. The opposite of sonship, as we observed earlier, is slavery. So the idea of sin as slavery finds its natural place under the fifth commandment.

*6C. Death is the opposite of life.* Sin is spiritual death (Eph. 2:1–3). And death belongs to the whole person.

*7C. The opposite of intimacy is alienation.* The opposite of love, which is an expression of intimacy, is hate. An individual who is alienated is alienated as a whole person. And a person who hates, hates as a whole person. The exclusiveness of love and hate are expressed in passages such as Deuteronomy 4:15–31, rejecting the idolatrous practices of surrounding nations.

*8C. In sin, people reject God, the original giver* (James 1:17). Logically, they also reject his gifts. The logic is that these people are totally bereft. As we indicated earlier, common grace mitigates the effects of this fundamental rejection.

*9C. Sin rejects truth for a lie.* The fundamental lie that God is not needed contaminates all truth, since all truth comes from God. Truth contaminated by the lie is at best a half-truth. And a half-truth masquerading as the whole truth is an untruth. This corruption extends not only to what people say that they believe, but to all aspects of humanity, since all aspects are mute witnesses either to the truth or to lies.

10C. *Sin is discontentedness.* It is first of all discontentedness with God. And since it is discontented with God, it is discontented with everything, because any one thing in the world is properly enjoyed only in the context of contentment with God.

Table 34.1 provides a summary of the results.

**Table 34.1. Ten Perspectives on Total Depravity**

| Cmd. | Attribute  | Implications for Holistic Depravity                                     |
|------|------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1C   | supreme    | substitute supreme is served by the whole person                        |
| 2C   | holy       | unholiness spreads to the whole (Lev. 11:24–43)                         |
| 3C   | blessed    | curse on the whole person                                               |
| 4C   | dynamic    | sin dynamically multiplies                                              |
| 5C   | harmonious | son honoring father is replaced by slavery to sin                       |
| 6C   | living     | sin is spiritual death                                                  |
| 7C   | intimate   | the whole person is alienated from God                                  |
| 8C   | giving     | rejecting God means rejecting his gifts                                 |
| 9C   | truthful   | the lie or rejecting God implies rejecting all truth, which is from God |
| 10C  | contented  | discontented with everything, which is from God                         |

Each of the ten perspectives from *lex Christi* provides a perspective on the depth and extent or the corruption of sin. Sin pervades human life, both at the individual level and at the social level.

### **Acts 2 as a Perspective on Total Depravity**

Acts 2 provides a perspective on total depravity by showing its opposite. The life of the church in verses 41–47 shows how far away fallen

human nature is from the life of fellowship with God that is in accord with God's moral design.

### **Key Terms**

|                  |                    |
|------------------|--------------------|
| analogy          | <i>lex Christi</i> |
| antithesis       | sin                |
| common grace     | slave              |
| corporate        | son of God         |
| cultural mandate | total depravity    |
| depravity        | total inability    |
| fall of man      |                    |

### **Study Questions**

1. What is the meaning of *total depravity*?
2. What is the biblical basis for the doctrine of total depravity?
3. How is the doctrine of total depravity important in practice?
4. If you believe in total depravity, how do you avoid fatalism?
5. How does the doctrine of total depravity affect your view of yourself?  
Of the grace of God?

### **For Further Reading**

Bavinck, Herman. *Reformed Dogmatics*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8. Pp. 3:98–100.

### **Prayer**

Lord, please teach us how to be grateful from the heart for the marvel of your redemption from depravity. Help us to rely on your power and the power of the gospel as we bring good news to those in bondage to sin. Give us grace to appreciate your hand of common grace in unbelievers.

## TOTAL INABILITY

The final topic is total inability.

### Definition

*Total inability* means that fallen human beings, in a state of sin and with a sinful nature, are *morally* unable to turn themselves to God or to do any spiritual good. It must be noted that this does not mean inability to do good in any sense (Luke 11:13; see the previous chapter on total depravity). Nor does it mean that there is a metaphysical inability, or physical inability, comparable to our inability to sprout wings or perform a million arithmetic computations in a second. Human beings are not responsible for being unable to do things that they are metaphysically unable to do (nor, naturally, does God call on human beings to do them).

The classical proof texts for total inability are Matthew 7:17–18, John 6:44, 65, and Romans 8:5–8:

So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. (Matt. 7:17–18)

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. (John 6:44)

And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” (John 6:65)

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom. 8:5–8)

To these Geerhardus Vos adds John 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 2:14:<sup>1</sup>

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch *cannot* bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither *can* you, unless you abide in me. (John 15:4)

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is *not able* to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Cor. 2:14)

### **The Nature of Inability**

Previous discussions about free agency in chapters 29–31 have already revealed some of the difficulty in defining what theologians have in view in the idea of moral disability. It is not inability to do what someone genuinely wants to do. It is a moral unwillingness to do it. And the problems of possibility and power are tangled up with two other principles. First, as a matter of general providence, God is involved in every human action. Second, in the preaching of the gospel, the possibility is opened for repentance brought about by the power of God.

Recall the discussion in chapter 31 of unrealized possibilities in connection with the doctrine of God. God could have willed otherwise in some

1. Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *Anthropology*, ed. John R. De Witt, Daan van der Kraan, and Harry Boonstra, trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2014), 61. See also Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), § 15, 2:257–77.

cases. This conclusion follows from the fact that God is not dependent on the world and that he is free in his decisions. It is confirmed when the Bible talks about events that could have happened but did not. For example, Jesus says, “For if the mighty works done in you [Capernaum] had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day” (Matt. 11:23). Miraculous works like those of Jesus were not in fact done in Sodom. But Jesus indicates that it is meaningful to think about what *would have happened*, had such works been done. It is an unrealized possibility. Other passages talk about what would have happened in Keilah (1 Sam. 23:11–12), what could happen if Jesus summoned angels to his aid (Matt. 26:53), and what would happen if the days of tribulation were not “cut short” (24:22, 24).

God could have willed to save some people who are not saved. If it is logically regarded as *given* that the decree of God specifies that a particular person is saved or lost, it is philosophically impossible for it to turn out otherwise (even an Arminian might admit as much). But it is also true that God could have *decreed* otherwise. There are unrealized possibilities. Possibilities that do not happen must be taken into account in assessing human responsibility and freedom.

What holds true in situations in which people are hearing the gospel? People who hear the gospel and reject it are not innocent, on the supposed basis that they could not do otherwise. Other people, in the same situation, would have responded favorably and would have been saved. That these people did not respond favorably is their fault. But if someone asks, “Are the favorable responders more virtuous?” the answer is no. The Holy Spirit working through the gospel is to be praised for the favorable result. First Corinthians 4:7 is a key verse in understanding the importance of praising God:

For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

Again, consider a possibility statement: if the Holy Spirit had not worked, these people would not have responded favorably, even if the same

message of the gospel had been delivered. In addition, it is important to affirm the possibility of the Holy Spirit's working otherwise than he did. It is not simply the case that the Holy Spirit works "as hard as he can," uniformly, in every case when the gospel is preached. That would mean that the difference in response would again be ultimately attributable only to the differences among human beings. They would get the praise at that point. And such a result would be contrary to the principle that God gets the praise for salvation (1 Cor. 4:7).

Geerhardus Vos appeals also to the language of being spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1), to the necessity of regeneration (John 3:3, 5, 7), and to the reality of the wrath of God on sinners. Only with God's favor could anyone do works that are truly good.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Perspective of Sonship on Inability**

What light does the perspective of sonship throw on moral inability?

As we have observed, the opposite of sonship is slavery. A slave does not have the *ability* to act freely. But as usual, there are limitations with this analogy. It is easy to picture the slave as genuinely wanting to do something, and yet being restrained by external forces. The inability of depravity is a moral inability that does not and cannot want to be and do opposite to what it is.

Loss of sonship means loss of the characteristics that chapter 13 associated with sonship: loss of intimacy, inheritance, freedom, and likeness to the father. Loss of intimacy with God also means the loss of the motivation of love of God that empowers obedience and that maintains intimacy. Loss of inheritance is permanent on the part of the one who loses. One cannot restore what he does not possess. Loss of freedom means the status of slavery, which we have already talked about. Loss of likeness to the father means that one reflects something else. The pattern of reflection works contrary to what it was in the original unfallen state.

2. Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:61.

## The Perspectives of *Lex Christi*

Each of the ten main perspectives in the *lex Christi* framework could serve as a perspective on inability.

1C. *Supremacy*. If one makes oneself supreme, one is unable to move away from the prime commitment to self, because it demands just that—commitment to self.

2C. *Holiness*. One of the opposites of holiness is uncleanness. Uncleanness spreads, rather than dying out. One is not able as a person contaminated with uncleanness to remove uncleanness.

3C. *Blessedness*. Sin leads to curse. One is unable to remove the curse because the curse is the product of God, not oneself.

This and the other *lex Christi* perspectives on inability can distinguish between a surface level of action and the motives of the heart. For the third commandment, the theme is blessing and curse. It may seem to people that the curse is imposed merely in an external manner. People might be tempted to think that a sinner is under curse *only* externally and has inward desires in an entirely different direction. They picture the sinner as longing to be reconciled to God, and praying and seeking it, and yet not being able to achieve it because of external constraints. And it is true that sinners do not escape God. After a fashion, they long for restoration, and false religions are the result. They long for satisfaction and blessing, but do they long for it in God's way? False religions are exhibitions of the way in which the dominion of sin and Satan distorts the earlier desires before the fall. That distortion makes people unable to return to God in God's way.

The analogies for inability produced by using the Ten Commandments as perspectives are subject to limitations because they are analogies. No analogy provides comprehensive insight. And many of the analogies have as their starting point for comparison something more external, more easily accessible and understandable. It is easier to observe a curse that is external. Bystanders do not in a direct way see how God's curse might operate on the heart itself. So it needs to be explicitly said that the external patterns are outward manifestations of the same patterns that operate internally, all the way down to the heart. The tenth commandment, about



coveting, makes the issue of the heart more explicit because it directly discusses coveting. Coveting is an inward desire to act outwardly in ways that would violate the other commandments.

*4C. Dynamicity.* The theme of dynamicity expresses especially well the implication of inability. A person dynamically develops along the path that he has already chosen in his heart.

*5C. Harmony.* The theme of harmony implies a basic harmony between one's actions and one's heart commitment. When the heart commitment is wrong, bad results come as natural products. Human beings are unable to make it otherwise.

*6C. Life.* Dead people are unable to restore themselves to life. This principle is true concerning physical life. By analogy, it is also true of spiritual life. People in the fallen condition are "dead in . . . trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1).

*7C. Intimacy.* People whose hearts are alienated from God, and not intimate with God, do not undo their alienation, because they do not want God.

*8C. Giving.* People who do not receive a special blessing from God cannot give what they did not receive.

*9C. Truth.* People who fill themselves with lies cannot find the truth. The lies obscure truth.

*10C. Contentedness.* People who are discontented are unable to be contented.

Table 35.1 gives a summary of these ten perspectives on total inability.

**Table 35.1. Ten Perspectives on Total Inability**

| Cmd. | Attribute | Implications for Total Inability                                       |
|------|-----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1C   | supreme   | what one has made supreme (the self) remains supreme                   |
| 2C   | holy      | the unholy cannot make itself holy                                     |
| 3C   | blessed   | one cannot remove the curse of God                                     |
| 4C   | dynamic   | the course of life dynamically develops in the direction already fixed |

Table 35.1 (continued)

| Cmd. | Attribute  | Implications for Total Inability                                                         |
|------|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 5C   | harmonious | actions harmonize with the bad heart                                                     |
| 6C   | living     | dead people cannot make themselves alive                                                 |
| 7C   | intimate   | people alienated from God do not want God and do not spontaneously stop their alienation |
| 8C   | giving     | people cannot give what they have not received from God                                  |
| 9C   | truthful   | lies block the truth                                                                     |
| 10C  | contented  | people who are discontented are not able to be contented                                 |

### Ways of Construing Inability

The use of *lex Christi* does not dissolve the mysteries in human nature. But the perspectives on the commandments show a kind of limited rationale for why human beings do not spontaneously change into the opposite of themselves. They cannot. They are morally and religiously unable. They need God to come and bring about the change by his own sovereign power, through the work of Christ and the renewal of the Holy Spirit.

### Preparationism

Consider now more closely a problem that arises right within the Reformed community: preparationism. Preparationism is basically a practical movement within the church, in attempting to counsel people who are in some way in contact with the Christian faith. These people may be interested in salvation; they may say that they “want” salvation. But they are not saved or are not sure whether they are saved.

The question is what advice to give to these people on how to be saved. One may say to them, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). But suppose that the subject of inability comes up. The faithful preacher will pay attention to Matthew 7:6: "Do not give dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs, lest they trample them underfoot and turn to attack you." The doctrine of human inability may be seen as a "pearl," which is fittingly explained only to people who already believe in Christ and have had their hearts softened. But the pastor may also on occasion tell outsiders that they are unable to turn themselves to God in faith. He may, as Thomas Boston<sup>3</sup> observes, even use this point deliberately in order to give people a sense of their helplessness and thereby encourage them to depend on a salvation entirely from God. But then the question arises from such a person, "What in practice do I do, since you have told me that I cannot believe by my own power?" The answer given in preparationism is then to unfold duties that *may* serve and often do serve as circumstances or instruments of salvation. The advice is to read the Bible, hear it preached and taught, reflect on your sins and guilt, and so on. These works are alleged to "prepare" the sinner to be saved.

Reading the Bible and hearing it preached are good in themselves. Moreover, they are central means that God uses in bringing people to salvation and a saving knowledge of Christ. In addition, on a subordinate level, many kinds of human behavior are morally good from an external point of view: parents should show love to their children, magistrates should judge justly, workers should work honestly, and so on. God's commandments in the Bible encourage people to do all of these.

What more is to be said? In a typical situation of an *uninformed* inquirer, Christians should certainly encourage further inquiry. A Christian might say: "Please come to church with me. Do you have a Bible? Let me get one for you, and you can start by reading the Gospel of Mark. Would you be willing to meet with me once a week, and we can study a passage together during each meeting?" Or a Christian may invite someone to a Bible study where there are already other inquirers.

3. I have not been able to track down the source within Boston's writings. But I want to give him credit.

An informed Christian can also try to make sure that the person understands basic truths about who God is, about the creation of the world, and about the story of the fall, of sin, of Christ, of his redemption. The Bible says that faith comes by hearing. A Christian tries to ensure that the person is hearing. In a situation of dialogue, the Christian may always ask more questions about what an inquirer has understood. Has he in fact understood who God is—his holiness, his mercy, his goodness? Has he understood what the Bible teaches about Christ and his redemption? It is always appropriate to proclaim the gospel again.

But preparationism, in a strict sense, goes beyond these appropriate aspects of evangelism. It is a response to a very specific question from an inquirer who realizes that he cannot believe by his own power.

Giving the preparationist answer is confusing because it easily deflects inquirers from the central issue of faith in Christ. It is better to return to the central proclamation, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.” If, instead, one turns the focus to other actions—which are good in themselves—it will easily be misunderstood as a retreat from the position that Calvinists have tried to maintain concerning the fact that the inability in question is a *moral* inability. Such inability does not remove guilt or responsibility for nonperformance. Neither does it remove the relevance of commands. The command is, “You *must* believe.” Calvinists insist that moral inability does not make commands of God meaningless. Is a command concerning good meaningless to the devil, since he cannot do good? No, it is a reminder of the standard that he hates, and it increases his guilt.

Hence, the correct answer to the inquiry about salvation must be, “Believe in the Lord Jesus” (Acts 16:31). To the objection, “I can’t do that,” the answer can be:

You misunderstand inability. Your own lack of desire is no excuse. That you see it as an excuse shows that you do not understand God’s relation to man or the nature of sin. Call on Jesus to save you. You need the Lord to save you from your sins so that you will have a godly understanding.

The excusing mentality must be attacked, and that is virtually the only practical context in which the objection arises. At its base, preparationism is misguided because it refuses to attack this excusing mentality *consistently* and thoroughly.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, bear in mind that when *Christians* speak to an unbeliever, to a covenant-breaker, they have the opportunity of presenting the gospel, which is the *power* of salvation for all who believe (Rom. 1:16–17). The inability in question is an inability that is itself limited. It is limited by a possibility that can be created by God (Luke 18:27). Or, to put it another way, it is limited by the possibility that by divine action through the hearing of the gospel, God can change a hard heart into a heart that believes the gospel. Or, to use the language of John, the exception is “*unless* the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). The key word *unless* means that an analyst cannot say in an unqualified way to the covenant-breaker, “You are unable to believe.” He should rather say, “You are unable to believe *of yourself, by your own power*.” But in the presence of the preaching of the gospel, the covenant-breaker is not being “left to himself.” He is confronted by the presence of God. He can and will believe if God works in power to enable him. And one aspect of the way in which God works is to command him to believe!

## Acts 2 as a Perspective on Inability

The necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in the church, in Acts 2:2–3, 33, confirms by contrast the inability of human beings to change themselves, out of themselves.

### Key Terms

analogy

Arminian

Calvinist

false religion

free agency

freedom

4. See Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:63.

|                    |                 |
|--------------------|-----------------|
| inheritance        | preparationism  |
| intimate           | sin             |
| <i>lex Christi</i> | slave           |
| likeness           | son of God      |
| metaphysical       | total depravity |
| possibility        | total inability |

### Study Questions

1. What is *total inability*?
2. What are the verses in the Bible that support the doctrine of total inability?
3. Why does the doctrine of total inability not imply fatalism?
4. How does the doctrine of total inability affect our evangelism?
5. What is preparationism? What is its danger?
6. How does the *lex Christi* framework throw light on total inability?
7. How do you think you have grown in appreciating the grace of God by studying total inability?

### For Further Reading

Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970. Pp. 2:257–77.

### Prayer

Our Lord, enable us more consistently to proclaim the gospel in dependence on your power to enable people to believe. Thank you for rescuing us from sin and unbelief by your power. Send your Spirit as we proclaim the gospel to others, in order that they may come to faith.



# CONCLUSION

This book has endeavored to follow the teaching of the Bible and to summarize its teaching on the main topics belonging to the doctrine of man. The result is that, in detail, this book's teachings are mainly a fresh expression of the teachings that the tradition of Reformed theology has expounded for several hundred years. But the use of the special methods discussed in chapter 7 has resulted in some new contributions.

Let us summarize what is old (Reformed theology) and what is new (the methods).

## **Coherence in Major Theological Traditions**

What is old? The teaching in this book is in harmony with the tradition of Reformed theology. This result is in accord with the theme concerning the influence of presuppositions (chapter 7). A certain amount of inward coherence belongs to each of the main traditional options in Western theology—Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Arminianism, and Reformed theology. Eastern Orthodoxy has been largely outside the scope of discussion, but the same is true for it.<sup>1</sup> If you believe in many of the pieces that belong to one particular theological framework, you will probably believe the whole of the framework, or almost all of it. The framework includes not only key summaries of doctrine, but liturgy, life practices, and a view of the church.

1. Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1937), 127–29.



This influence from the framework holds true within the tradition of Reformed theology as well. There are several major influential convictions in Reformed theology. In the doctrine of salvation, one main conviction is that each individual is helpless to save himself. The initiative must come from God. Moreover, that initiative actually brings people to new life and to faith in Christ. It does not merely open a possibility of being saved. The decisive act that brings salvation is the discriminating love of God—he chose us before we chose him:

And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were *appointed* to eternal life believed. (Acts 13:48)<sup>2</sup>

If the decisive decision remained with the individual human being, one would have expected to see something like this:

and as many as believed were appointed to eternal life.

But that is not what God says.

The principle of 1 Corinthians 4:7 holds true:

For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

All praise, at every point in salvation, is due to God, not allegedly to something “different in you.” There is nothing different in you that would make you or me superior and give a little credit to any one of us. It is all of God’s grace that he has shown favor to any of us. This principle of grace includes the initial human choice to respond in faith to the message of the gospel. The choice is a gift of God to each one who believes; it is “received.” Ephesians 2:8–9 expresses this point:

2. Credit goes to C. John Miller for first drawing my attention to the importance of this key text.

For by *grace* you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the *gift* of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

This conviction about the power of God in salvation goes naturally together with an analogous conviction about the power of God in creation, in providence, and in each person's ordinary life. God is masterfully in control. He it is "who works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11).

Within Reformed theology, the doctrine of God, the doctrine of salvation, and the doctrine of man fit together. Under the topic of the doctrine of God, Reformed theology affirms the sovereignty of God. Accordingly, God is also sovereign in bringing salvation to each individual, and he is sovereign in overcoming human inability due to the fall. The three aspects of sovereignty fit together. Specific texts in the Bible affirm divine sovereignty in all three arenas. But it is easier to accept the implications in one of the three arenas if the other two topics in doctrine reinforce them.

This book focuses on the doctrine of man, not the doctrine of God (creation, providence, decrees), not the doctrine of salvation (including not only Christ's work, but God's choice of individuals to be saved and his calling them to faith). It would take *other* books to establish and defend the position of Reformed theology on the doctrine of God and the doctrine of salvation. The point here is that the larger context, the larger framework for understanding God and his works, does matter. It does have an influence.

Individual verses in the Bible are supposed to be read in the context in which God has given them. The immediate literary and historical context is relevant. In addition, the larger context ultimately includes the message of all the other verses on all the topics that they address. Each of the major theological traditions claims to summarize the message of the Bible as a whole. So each theological tradition is going to influence the interpretation of individual passages. It is therefore not a surprise that the conclusions of this book with respect to the doctrine of man cohere with Reformed theology.

Does that mean that the Bible has no clear doctrinal position, but rather that the doctrines are *imposed* on the Bible by human theological systems? No. The Bible's teaching on the major issues of salvation is clear (2 Tim. 3:16–17). But the presence of sin produces human *resistance* to that teaching. And that resistance can take the form not merely of resistance to individual verses in isolation, but of resistance by means of a whole *system* of theology that systematically distorts the truth. One part of a system supports another part of the system. The parts include things such as a doctrine of God, a doctrine of providence, a doctrine of human freedom, a doctrine of sin, and a doctrine of the meaning of Christ's work.

As we have observed, there are coherences between doctrines in any one major theological system. These coherences can be good coherences, in which truth at one point reinforces and confirms truth at another point. They can also be delusive coherences, in which error at one point apparently reinforces error at another point. Any one system is vulnerable to corruption from sin. And the corruption can be subtle. A theological system can contain many truths, while at the same time distorting the truth at other points. These distortions can be reinforcing distortions, which have burrowed into various parts of the system. This possibility of distortion ought to lead each of us to cry, "Lord, have mercy on us, destroy the sins of the mind, and lead us into the truth."

This book maintains that the entire system of Reformed theology is true. The major competing systems have defects and include errors, not merely at one point, but systematically. Nevertheless, the various major systems still contain some truths, and there is overlap of truth between systems, such as with the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>3</sup>

Reformed theology too is subject to improvement and refinement on the basis of Scripture. Christians are supposed to believe a claim not because Reformed theology teaches it, but because Scripture teaches it. Any system of theology can get in the way of the truth when it starts to confirm error rather than guiding people into richer grasp of the truth.

3. For an attempt at a balanced assessment, see Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (Avinger, TX: Simpson, 1997).

It is always necessary for the Holy Spirit to guide Christians into the truth (John 16:13).

### **The Distinctive Texture of This Book**

Now consider what is newly offered in this book. How does the treatment enlarge on the tradition of Reformed theology? The difference is not primarily in the results, but in the path taken in order to arrive at the results. This book has paid attention to *method*. It has endeavored to enhance the methods of classical theology by using more robustly the resources provided by presuppositions, semantics, analogies, and critical attention to metaphysical frameworks. The hope is that these enhancements result in greater clarity in understanding.

In what follows, we summarize the contributions of each of the four methods. (The discussion of analogies comes last because it is most complex.)

### **The Help from Presuppositions**

First, attention to presuppositions helps. It clarifies that presuppositions—good or bad—contribute to the interpretation of biblical texts. It explicitly opens an opportunity to reinspect the soundness of one's own presuppositions and worldviews, as well as to inspect the presuppositions of competing interpretations of the Bible.

### **The Help from Semantics**

Next, attention to semantics helps. For one thing, it reminds people that the proper basis for theological conclusions is not found in a particular special term such as *image of God* or *free agency* or *body and soul*. Part of the difficulty is that theologians may easily fail to reckon adequately with the word/concept distinction. Ordinary language in the Bible (*word*) is not identical with later theological conceptions that express the technical theological views (*concepts*) of biblical interpreters. Moreover, some of

these special technical terms may have more than one meaning. Despite the use of a specific technical definition of a special term, the meaning may not be clear. Depending on the modern meaning, the ideas that are summarized in technical terms may or may not harmonize with what is actually in the Bible.

### **The Help from Attending to Metaphysical Frameworks**

Next, attention to metaphysical frameworks helps. The basis of theological conclusions should not be found in some metaphysical system that has already been adopted or imported from secular philosophy. One of the benefits arising from attention to metaphysical frameworks is to protect people against unconsciously importing nonbiblical or even antibiblical assumptions. Too easily, these sneak in from alien metaphysics deriving from philosophy or modern natural sciences or social sciences.

### **The Help from Analogies**

Finally, attention to the use of multiple analogies helps. In many cases, the Bible provides resources that suggest more than one analogy by which to understand further some of the topics on which there is controversy. Using any one analogy, or using many analogies together, does not result in a complete “theory” that makes the truth completely transparent to human analysis and human understanding. Because human beings are in the image of God, all human thinking is in the end analogical.<sup>4</sup> And all human knowledge confronts mystery—ultimately the mystery of God’s comprehensive knowledge. Human knowledge remains partial, and it interlocks with mystery. It can still be genuine knowledge, because God has spoken. His spoken word, reflecting the eternal Word (John 1:1), is clear in its teachings. At the same time, it remains mysterious in its depths.

4. Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Reason: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023).

Interpreters of the Bible should endeavor to respect both clarity and mystery in meditating on the Bible's teaching. That leads to employing various analogies that the Bible itself offers in understanding mankind, in order to further clarify and deepen the understanding of the Bible. Interpreters should affirm everything that the Bible teaches using its analogies. But they should not commit themselves fully to a theory or model that does not have a foundation provided in the Bible itself.

### **Three Views on the Meaning of Humanity**

As an example of multiple perspectives, recall the discussion in chapter 9 on human nature. At one point, chapter 9 used three perspectives—the static, dynamic, and relational perspectives—to examine the nature of humanity. The static (or particle) perspective focuses on the stability of each individual human being and the stability of humanity as a whole—the whole human race. The dynamic (or wave) perspective focuses on the development and changes in human individuals and also in the race. The timeline of development includes both an origin at the beginning and a goal at the end. The relational (or field) perspective focuses on the fact that each human being lives in relation to others—to God, to the three persons of the Trinity, to fellow human beings, and to the larger world.

Each perspective can become a perspective on the whole, encompassing the other perspectives. Using all three perspectives avoids the traps that can catch people if they think in a truncated way only in terms of what is the same and common (static perspective), or only in terms of change and of individuals' "making" and "defining" themselves (dynamic perspective), or only in terms of relations that allegedly define humanity (relational perspective).

The use of all three perspectives affirms the richness of knowledge of humanity that God gives us in the Bible. The three perspectives are rooted in the one-and-three in the persons of the Trinity. The perspectives interpenetrate. This use of perspectives contrasts with an attempt to reach a single vision of the nature of humanity, in a single allegedly masterful position, which would provide a final unitarian metaphysics.

## The Attraction of Having a Single Complete Theory

An approach through multiple perspectives may frustrate some readers. It results in less than a full commitment to a single-stranded theory that some people already endorse. It contrasts with the attempt to find a theory that provides a full answer by means of only one analogy, apart from the use of extra analogies. According to this viewpoint, the single theory is supposed to be sufficient. In many cases, people treat such a theory as monoperspectival, nonanalogical, and univocal. It is supposed to give a direct vision of the true state of things.

In its methods, this book has adopted a different approach. Theories that claim to be complete typically combine insights with limitations. At best, each one offers a perspective. Complementary perspectives enrich them.

The attraction of a monoperspectival theory is powerful for some people. It is powerful partly because people are made in the image of God. God has implanted in each human being a desire to grow in knowledge, including knowledge of God. The dynamicity of an individual's growing in knowledge imitates the divine dynamicity expressed in history, a dynamicity that leads to the consummation.

But the attraction of a univocal theory is also powerful because in sin people would like to have autonomous mastery in knowledge. They would like to abolish mystery. They may still admit that there will always be mystery in the background somewhere, because human beings are not God. But they may say, "In the foreground, surely, we may achieve mastery within our focus on a specific area of knowledge." They may propose, for example, that human beings can master the nature of the image of God, or the nature of the body, or the covenant with Adam, or free agency.

The view presented in this book is that no, human beings may not achieve such mastery. Human knowledge is always, everywhere, confronted with God's knowledge, in mystery. There is mystery *at every point*, because God is present at every point in human knowledge. What people know, they do know truly. But there are depths in God's knowledge. God the Creator is eternally *distinct* from every creature. But he is also overwhelmingly *present* to every creature. His presence penetrates all human knowledge.

Because God speaks clearly in the Bible, believers can grow in confidence in their knowledge of him and their knowledge of what he says about mankind. Analogies based on the Bible can contribute to this growth. The future of theology lies in growth, not in a skeptical overthrow of past tradition. Thus, theologians should continue to learn from tradition. But the Bible alone instructs God's people with the infallible voice of God. So the task of theology is to continue to sort through the traditions and to try to discriminate between good and bad and mixed and confused. The methods introduced in this book may contribute to this sorting process. And the methods themselves must be subjected to scrutiny, in the light of Scripture.

The authoritative writings in the Bible provide sure instruction. On the basis of that instruction, believers are supposed to grow into Christ:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, *to equip* the saints for the work of ministry, for *building up* the body of Christ, until we all *attain* to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to *grow up* in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body *grow* so that it *builds itself up* in love. (Eph. 4:11–16)

The attention to method in this book aims at promoting this growth.

### **Acts 2 as a Perspective on Growth**

Acts 2 confirms the broad principle that the church is supposed to grow, both in numbers and in absorption of the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42, 47).



## Key Terms

|                        |                    |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| analogy                | Orthodoxy, Eastern |
| Arminian               | presupposition     |
| coherence              | Reformed theology  |
| Lutheran               | Roman Catholic     |
| metaphysical framework | semantics          |
| method                 | technical term     |

## Study Questions

1. What is the role in theology of the coherence belonging to specific theological systems and theological traditions?
2. What are some of the principal traditions in the history of systematic theology? How do they differ from one another?
3. Which tradition does this book represent, and why?
4. What four distinctive methods has this book added to the theological discussion?
5. What have you learned from the use of the four distinctive methods?

## For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987. Pp. 165–346.

## Prayer

Our Father, may you continue to bless your people with spiritual and numerical growth, and in the process use your Word and sound methods for studying it. May your church grow in sound doctrine and in the unity of doctrine.

# APPENDIX A:

## THE DOCTRINE OF MAN IN THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS

It is worthwhile to compare the ideas articulated in this book with the Westminster Standards, the most thorough confessional documents within the Reformed tradition. In its basic outlines, the material in this book agrees with the Standards. The Westminster Standards include the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), the Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC), and the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC).<sup>1</sup>

The larger framework for this book on the doctrine of man is Reformed theology, which is articulated in the Westminster Standards. The framework has an influence on the particulars belonging to the doctrine of man. For this reason, it should not be surprising that the ideas in this book match the Westminster Standards. The main difference lies in the new methods. For example, this book is sensitive to the issue of the meaning of technical terms, and the explanation of ideas often uses several analogies rather than one.<sup>2</sup>

1. Note that we refer to the Westminster Standards with American revisions (“with minor revisions”). The original documents from 1643 to 1649 also include the Solemn League and Covenant, the Directory for the Publick Worship of God, the Directory for Private (Family) Worship, and the Form of Church Government.

2. On the compatibility of the Westminster Standards with biblical theology, see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards,” in *The Practical Calvinist: An Introduction to the Presbyterian and Reformed Heritage*, ed. Peter A. Lillback (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2002), 425–42, reprinted in Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *Word & Spirit: Selected Writings in Biblical and Systematic Theology*, ed. David B. Garner and Guy Prentiss Waters (Philadelphia: Westminster Seminary Press, 2023), 71–86.

This appendix considers only the topics addressed in the Westminster Standards where it might be thought that there is a difference between the Westminster Standards and the ideas in this book.

## Body and Soul

What do the Westminster Standards say about body and soul?

After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female, *with reasonable and immortal souls*. (WCF 4.2)

God . . . endued them [Adam and Eve] *with living, reasonable, and immortal souls*. (WLC 17)

*Comment.* The Westminster Standards offer no specific definition of *soul*. They rely on the common understanding in the theological tradition. This tradition holds that body and soul are two distinct parts, with distinct natures (material and immaterial, respectively).<sup>3</sup> Theologians at the time were familiar with Aristotle's view that the soul is the form of the body, and Thomas Aquinas's adaptation of that view. Aristotle denies that the soul is a *substance*. Rather, he thinks that it is the *form* of a substance. The substance itself is the complete human being.<sup>4</sup> The Westminster Standards do not address the difference between views of the soul; they

3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 1.15.2:

Furthermore, that man consists [*constare*] of a soul and a body ought to be beyond controversy. Now I understand by the term "soul" an immortal yet created essence [*essentiam*], which is his nobler part [*pars*].

4. Hendrik Lorenz, "Ancient Theories of Soul," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2009), § 4, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/ancient-soul/>; Christopher Shields, "Aristotle's Psychology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Winter 2020), § 3, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/aristotle-psychology/>; Ralph McInerny and John O'Callaghan, "Saint Thomas Aquinas," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2018), § 8, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/aquinas/>.

do not elaborate. They do not explicitly provide any particular theory of composition.

What is said in the Westminster Standards fits with the biblical teaching that human beings continue in existence forever (“immortal”). This continuation includes the continuation forever of an inner side or aspect, the core of the human person, often designated with the word *soul*. After the death of the body, this continuation of the life of the human person takes the form of the intermediate state. Christians live in the presence of Christ (“be with Christ,” Phil. 1:23). Though a person’s body begins to disintegrate at the time of physical death, it is raised and transformed at the time of the resurrection of the dead. The body continues forever (WCF 32.2–3; WLC 87; WSC 38).

The two future stages, the intermediate state and the final state including the resurrection of the body, are both affirmed in Scripture. It is not surprising that most Christians who believe the Bible affirm them both.

By this sin [eating the forbidden fruit] they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in *all the parts and faculties of soul and body*. (WCF 6.2)

*Comment.* The word *part* is here used more loosely.

## **The Intermediate State**

What do the Westminster Standards say about the intermediate state?

The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain

in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Beside these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none. (WCF 32.1)

The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death, is, in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united to their souls. Whereas the souls of the wicked are at their death cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, and their bodies kept in their graves, as in their prisons, till the resurrection and judgment of the great day. (WLC 86)

The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united to Christ, do rest in their graves, till the resurrection. (WSC 37)

*Comment.* Here the Westminster Standards use the spatial language belonging to the picture of another world, and they use the sleep analogy when they speak of “rest.” The term *souls* refers to persons separated from their bodies, disembodied persons. This book adds that a number of analogies are used in the Bible.

Attention to analogies has as one effect an awareness of the incompleteness of any one analogy, when used by itself. The authors of the Westminster Standards were, of course, tacitly aware of the variety of ways that Scripture itself describes human beings in the present life and in the intermediate state. They also believed in the primacy of Scripture as the sole infallible basis for Christian doctrine (WCF 1.6). They affirmed the presence of mystery in biblical teaching (WCF 1.7). But at the time when the Westminster Standards were drawn up, the analogy of two parts was probably the most commonly used analogy in theoretical discussions of

human composition and the intermediate state. That dominance meant that sometimes the analogical background of key words such as *part* and *substance* was not in view. The explanation in the Westminster Standards could be construed by some readers today as an endorsement of a univocal theoretical explanation that supplies a single coherent metaphysical basis for the history of each human individual. Such an explanation could be used to displace all the analogies in the Bible with a more ultimate metaphysical account. This book is in tension with the picture of an ultimate metaphysical account, if such an account claims to be *exclusive* or to be the *only* true perspective. But it is not in tension with the practical purpose of the Westminster Standards, to provide a concise summary of biblical teaching. As chapter 17 indicates, the analogy of two parts represents much of the biblical teaching about human nature and the intermediate state.

### **The Covenant of Works**

What do the Westminster Standards say about the covenant of works?

The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of *covenant*. (WCF 7.1)

The *first covenant* made with man was a *covenant of works*, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience. (WCF 7.2)

The providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created, was the . . . entering into a *covenant of life* with him, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience. (WLC 20)

When God had created man, he entered into a *covenant of life* with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him

to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon pain of death. (WSC 12)

*Comment.* This book is in agreement. In addition, this book observes that the appropriateness of using the word *covenant* depends on its definition, and that the original bond with Adam can be construed using other analogies. The affirmations in the Westminster Standards do not address either of these questions directly. Since the Westminster Standards do not claim that theirs is the *only* appropriate way to use the word *covenant*, and since they do not claim that the idea of covenant is *exclusively* the appropriate way in which to construe the relation between God and man, the Westminster Standards are in harmony with this book.

## Sin

What do the Westminster Standards say about the nature of sin?

*Sin* is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, any law of God, given as a rule to the reasonable creature. (WLC 24)

*Sin* is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God. (WSC 14)

*Comment.* This book affirms this definition of *sin*, but in addition offers other perspectives.

## Summary

This book is in harmony with the affirmations in the Westminster Standards. But it makes additional contributions. These are usually related to the issues of semantics or analogies or both. It is important to consider the question of the meaning of key technical terms, and to consider the usefulness of multiple analogies in meditating on biblical teaching.

## Key Terms

|                    |                       |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| analogy            | perspective           |
| Aquinas, Thomas    | Reformed theology     |
| Aristotle          | resurrection          |
| body               | sin                   |
| covenant of works  | soul                  |
| intermediate state | substance             |
| method             | technical term        |
| part               | Westminster Standards |

## Study Questions

1. What is the relation of the teaching of the Westminster Standards to the present book?
2. In what ways does this book agree with the Westminster Standards and contribute to further understanding of the Bible?
3. Have you learned more about the Westminster Standards as you have studied these topics?

## For Further Reading

- Gaffin, Richard B., Jr. "Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards." In *The Practical Calvinist: An Introduction to the Presbyterian and Reformed Heritage*, edited by Peter A. Lillback, 425–42. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2002. Reprinted in Gaffin, *Word & Spirit: Selected Writings in Biblical and Systematic Theology*, edited by David B. Garner and Guy Prentiss Waters, 71–86. Philadelphia: Westminster Seminary Press, 2023.
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- "What Are the Westminster Standards?" <https://thewestminsterstandards.com/what-are-the-westminster-standards/>. Accessed April 11, 2024.



## **Prayer**

We thank you, Lord, for the contributions of previous generations to theology—especially the production of the Westminster Standards. Help us grow in understanding your Word.

## APPENDIX B:

# DIFFICULTIES WITH OPPOSING VIEWS

Now consider one more contribution from presuppositional apologetics. It can expose the lack of foundations and lack of viability in non-Christian views.

### **The Double Strategy in Presuppositional Apologetics**

Presuppositional apologetics invites Christians to become more *aware* of both Christian presuppositions and the presuppositions of competing views. But in addition, it advises Christians on how to explain Christianity in a manner that honors the universal lordship of Christ and the guilt of sinful humanity. In particular, presuppositional apologetics has two complementary strategies. First, set forth a Christian view in a form that is fully Christian and biblically based. Do not compromise the distinct presuppositions or foundational assumptions that go along with this view. Do not try to make it more attractive by incorporating ideas that at root are anti-Christian or compromised. Second, inquire about the presuppositions of an opponent or critic of Christianity. What is he presupposing? And does his system of assumptions offer an adequate foundation? It never does, because he must secretly (usually without recognizing it) depend on God in the very process of mounting a criticism of Christianity.

One easy example is the criticism that God's sovereignty represents bullying, or that some of God's commands in the Old Testament are immoral. A defender of Christianity can give some positive answers by explaining the purposes of God within a biblically informed worldview. But he can also provide a negative criticism of the critic. To make a criticism, the critic himself must have a moral standard. And no ultimate standard can be found except in God and his infinite goodness.

A similar pair of strategies applies in dealing with particular doctrines, including the doctrine of man. The first strategy is to set forth the positive biblical basis for the doctrine. The second strategy is to analyze critically the presuppositions of alternatives. The body of this book has focused on the first of the two strategies, namely, the strategy of giving positive answers, based on the Bible. The book has given some attention to a spectrum of other views, especially when those views make a serious effort to base themselves on the Bible. In addressing a particular issue, any one view has both strengths and weaknesses. It would take a good deal of extra space to inspect each view in detail and to assess more fully its strengths and weaknesses.

But now consider briefly the second strategy, the strategy of critically inspecting the foundations underneath opposing views. Of course, it depends on the view. Many views advocated by Christians do try to base themselves on Scripture. These views may have weaknesses, but it is not appropriate to deal with these views as if they were non-Christian views that directly oppose Scripture.

On each of the topics covered in this book, we may nevertheless explore in a general way whether major opposing views have an adequate foundation. We consider one by one the topics already treated in the body of this book.

### **Interpreting Genesis 1–3**

First, consider the topic of how to interpret Genesis 1–3. If an interpreter does not interpret Genesis 1–3 using the framework of a biblical worldview, how *does* he engage in interpretation? Every interpreter must

have some framework or other.<sup>1</sup> The Enlightenment framework of the historical-critical method is still widely used. It presupposes that the Bible is not the actual Word of God, but a human production (which may have been somehow influenced by human ideas about the divine and by inchoate experience of special encounters with what is thought to be transcendent). The Enlightenment atmosphere presupposes the right of human reason to sit in judgment on the Bible. It assumes that miracles do not occur. But these assumptions about the Bible, about reason, about miracles, and about standards for judgment are not grounded. Each person in fact secretly relies on God as the source of morality, the source of the authority of rationality, and the source of the world itself, which comes from a miracle when God created it.

### **The Origin of Humanity**

The next topic is the origin of humanity. The most prominent alternative to the biblical account is the mainstream account in neo-Darwinian theory. This account says that the human race originated by a purely gradual, purely naturalistic, random process over millennia, during which the human species gradually differentiated itself from ape ancestors. Supposedly, the processes were unguided. If there is a God, he was not involved in any decided way that influenced the course of events.

Charles Darwin himself already saw the problem with his own view. He expressed doubts about whether he could trust his own reasoning if in fact his own brain actually derived from ape ancestry:

With me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?<sup>2</sup>

1. See also the critique in Vern S. Poythress, *Interpreting Eden: A Guide to Faithfully Reading and Understanding Genesis 1–3* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), chaps. 1–4.

2. Kenneth Samples, "Darwin's Doubt" (blog), Reasons to Believe, February 12, 2013,

More recently, Alvin Plantinga has mounted a thorough argument trying to show that evolutionary naturalism is an inadequate basis for believing that human minds are in good working order to find truth.<sup>3</sup> And if human minds are not in good order, human beings do not have a rational basis for believing evolutionary naturalism itself. It undermines itself by devouring confidence in human rationality.

## The Image of God

Next, consider the topic of the image of God. What difficulties arise with some of the newer views? The traditional view of the image of God said that the image was “structural”: it consisted in certain constant features or abilities in human nature. This view usually included reason as an aspect of the image—either the chief aspect or at least one aspect. So it is usually newer functional or relational views of the image that deny that reason is one aspect of the image. It is possible to deny that reason is part of the image of God without denying that reason is, in a broader sense, a point of similarity between God and man. But if reason is a point of similarity, how is it rational to deny that it images God and belongs to the image of God? Moreover, in supporting a functional or relational view, the advocates have to *reason*. Not only do they have to have a constant, static *ability* to reason, but they have to *engage* in reasoning. In other words, they have to *function* rationally. But this means that it is difficult to find good grounds for excluding reason from a functional view. Moreover, in functioning rationally, people function in the presence of God. All reasoning is reasoning in *relation* to God. All reasoning is an expression of relationality. So the relational view cannot find grounds to exclude reason.

Another alternative that creates difficulties for itself is to deny the similarity between human reasoning and its archetype in divine rationality.

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[https://reasons.org/explore/blogs/blog\\_channel/darwins-doubt](https://reasons.org/explore/blogs/blog_channel/darwins-doubt), accessed April 11, 2024, citing Charles Darwin to W. Graham, July 3, 1881, in *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, ed. Francis Darwin (1897; repr., Boston: Elibron, 2005), 1:285.

3. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

That type of move destroys all confidence in human reason, including confidence in reasoning about the image of God. Human reason is sound only insofar as it agrees with and meshes with divine reason. If one breaks this connection, one breaks the connection with God's rationality as the ultimate standard. There is then no anchor to provide confidence in human reason.

So the image of God must include human reason (at least if a person uses *image of God* expansively to include all the ways in which human beings reflect God).

Now consider what difficulties arise if someone says that the image of God is completely untouched by the fall. If reason belongs to the image, it means that reason is untouched by the fall. This result is contrary to actual experience and to biblical testimony about damage to reason (Eph. 4:17–19). Moreover, denial of the corruption of reason leaves people vulnerable to accepting bad arguments because on the surface they sound “reasonable.” People who believe in unfallen reason easily become naive about the subtle ways in which human reason can be corrupted. They leave themselves with inadequate resources to be suspicious of plausible but corrupt arguments—both arguments from other people and their own. They lose ability to discuss the doctrine of man in a sound way.

### **Human Beings within Time: Perspectives**

The chapter on human beings in time (chapter 9) considers the topic of humanity from a number of diverse perspectives—*lex Christi*; particle, wave, and field perspectives; unity and diversity, including unity and diversity in time. If a person denies the availability of multiple perspectives, he does not have an adequate overview, and his own treatment will be flawed.

### **The Original Condition of Human Beings**

Adam and Eve at the beginning were righteous and innocent. They were not created already sinful. If someone denies original innocence, sin threatens to contaminate human reasoning, and there is no original

upright reasoning from which sin makes human beings deviate. So all human reasoning does not have an adequate pattern within humanity. A person may still claim that Christ in his humanity is righteous. But the claim rings hollow because the lack of original innocence means that human nature is innately sinful.

Or suppose that an opposing view pictures the original situation of human beings as morally neutral, rather than as positively righteous. Then human rationality, as neutral, has no stability and cannot serve solidly in reflections on the doctrine of man.

### **Body and Soul**

If human beings are merely bodies, human reasoning powers are an illusion or an epiphenomenon, like the foam on the waves of the sea. In either case, human theological reasoning about humanity has no adequate foundation.

If human beings are merely souls, they cannot experience the world and cannot use their eyes to read their Bibles.

### **The Prefall Covenant with Adam**

If there is no prefall covenant with Adam, there is no adequate explanation for the depth and universality of sin in the present time. The covenant of grace can still be appealed to as a framework for understanding the relation of saved people to God. But what about the unsaved? Are they in relation to God? And if so, what kind of relation? Does it have obligations? Theologians cannot really dispense with the idea of covenant-like obligations in explaining humanity, even if they choose not to use the word.

### **Adam as Representative**

Chapter 26 explored the difficulties of denying imputation and substitution. It is sufficient to refer to it in this appendix.

## **Human Sexuality**

Without guidance from God's infallible instruction, each person is left with his own opinion and his own self-expression. Even the self-expression becomes ultimately meaningless because it is merely produced by self-will. In this meaningless world of sexuality, there cannot be meaning in the decision to oppose the biblical teaching on sexuality.

## **Free Agency**

Free agency in a biblical sense is juxtaposed to two opposite views: fatalism and autonomy. Fatalism evaporates the meaning not only of human life in general, but of the human life of theological reasoning. If everything in human action is fated according to some impersonal principle of fate, then all theological reasoning is fated, and there is no guarantee that any of it is sound. So fatalism does not provide a basis for human engagement in the theology of the doctrine of man.

The other opposite, autonomy, evaporates human meaning by treating humans at a deep level in isolation from God. "Choices"—whatever that term means—are choices in a vacuum. And autonomy has no proper standards. Each person must establish his own standards. However much people may wish to be God, human beings run up against their own finiteness.

Consider also the difficulties with the theory of libertarian freedom. It runs up against two obstacles: (1) It undermines the comprehensiveness of God's sovereignty, in order to make room for its particular conception of freedom. (2) It threatens to make free human choices meaningless and arbitrary, because their ultimate background is chance (indeterminacy).

An argument against libertarian freedom can also be produced from the nature of God. God is morally good. He is *necessarily* good. He cannot sin or make a choice opposite to goodness. Therefore, God himself does not have libertarian freedom. Since God is the archetype for freedom and is the foundation for human freedom, the concept of libertarian freedom is destroyed at the root.



Suppose, on the other hand, that hypothetically, libertarian freedom could describe God himself. Then it would be possible for God to change his nature as necessarily good. And then there is no guarantee for a consistent standard for morality. Morality itself is impossible.

### **The Fall**

Denial of the fall, like denial of the original innocence of Adam and Eve, leads to undermining the foundation of reasoning in the present. There is no longer any uncorrupted human nature against which deviations may be properly seen as deviations. There is no normal humanity, but only twisted humanity.

### **The Nature of Sin**

Denial of sin and false notions of sin lead to denials of redemption and false notions of redemption.

### **Total Depravity**

Denial of total depravity leaves the impression that people may find some aspect or some point in human nature that is uncontaminated and that people might be able to build on it in order to rescue themselves. This hope for an uncontaminated aspect encourages self-reliance, which is innately rebellious and the opposite of what people need in their relation to God. Self-reliance is incompatible with reliance on Christ, both initially, for salvation as a whole, and in progress, in the Christian process of growth in righteousness of heart and righteousness in living.

Self-reliance also corrupts reasoning, which is designed to take place in union with Christ, empowered by the Spirit. The corruption of reasoning leaves people with inadequate resources for discussing the doctrine of man.

## **Total Inability**

A Christian's knowledge of previous total inability encourages praising God for every aspect of how God provided new birth and brought conversion. So a Christian is stimulated by the doctrine of total inability to praise God. The alternative is for a Christian to praise himself or something else in him, however small he may try to make it. Denying total inability, by inhibiting praise at one point, inhibits Christian life at every point. In particular, it inhibits the life of the mind. So it leaves Christians without proper resources for examining human ability in a faithful way.

## **Summary**

The foundations for opposing points of view have weaknesses. Views opposed to the teaching of the Bible have no proper foundation, but secretly depend on the truth that they oppose.

## **Key Terms**

|                   |                              |
|-------------------|------------------------------|
| autonomy          | origin                       |
| body              | perspective                  |
| covenant          | presupposition               |
| covenant of grace | presuppositional apologetics |
| fatalism          | reason                       |
| free agency       | sin                          |
| image of God      | soul                         |
| imputation        | total depravity              |
| indeterminism     | total inability              |
| libertarianism    |                              |

## **Study Questions**

1. What are the two complementary paths that presuppositional apologetics uses in dealing with objections?

2. How are objections to doctrine by Christians different from objections coming from non-Christians?
3. In the various subjects of discussion about the doctrine of man, which objections undermine themselves, and how?
4. What have you learned from presuppositional apologetics about the analysis of doctrine?

### **For Further Reading**

Pratt, Richard L. *Every Thought Captive: A Study Manual for the Defense of Christian Truth*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979.

### **Prayer**

Lord, show us how to speak the truth in love. Reveal blind spots and errors that may still remain in our own thinking, and enable us by speaking the truth in love to guide others into the truth.

# APPENDIX C:

## THE DOCTRINE OF MAN

## ROOTED IN THE TRINITY

Can the doctrine of the Trinity throw further light on the doctrine of man? From time to time, portions of the doctrine of the Trinity have appeared in the chapters of this book. But more frequently, the *lex Christi* framework has served as an organizing framework.

Yet it is also true that the various subtopics find a root in the Trinity. For the sake of brevity, we offer only a general sketch.

### **The Trinity in Relation to *Lex Christi***

Observe first that the *lex Christi* framework itself is perspectivally related to the Trinity. The Trinitarian roots for *lex Christi* are discussed in “Introducing the Law of Christ (*Lex Christi*),” § 22, especially § 22.3–4, an appendix that includes information that is omitted in the discussion of *lex Christi* in chapter 8 above.<sup>1</sup> Here is a summary table, showing correlations between the Ten Commandments and triads of perspectives that derive from the Trinity. (See table C.1.)

1. Vern S. Poythress, “Introducing the Law of Christ (*Lex Christi*): A Fruitful Framework for Theology and Life,” 2024, § 22, <https://frame-poythress.org/introducing-the-law-of-christ-lex-christi-a-fruitful-framework-for-theology-and-life/>.

**Table C.1. The Ten Commandments Grouped according to Triads of Perspectives<sup>2</sup>**

| Triad for<br>Covenantal<br>Speech         | Triad for<br>Lordship | Second-<br>Level<br>Distinction  | Third-Level<br>Distinction              | Specific<br>Commandments                                     |
|-------------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| God the<br>speaker                        | authority             | authority<br>control<br>presence |                                         | 1C: no other gods<br>2C: no idols<br>3C: honor God's<br>name |
| covenant<br>as bond                       | control               |                                  |                                         | 4C: keep the<br>Sabbath                                      |
| Israel as<br>hearers<br>and<br>recipients | presence              | toward<br>humans                 | authority<br>control<br>presence        | 5C: honor parents<br>6C: no murder<br>7C: no adultery        |
|                                           |                       | toward<br>subhuman<br>world      | normative<br>situational<br>existential | 8C: no theft<br>9C: tell truth<br>10C: no coveting           |

As usual, overlap and interpenetration take place in the use of the categories. The highest level of division is between three groups of commandments: commandments 1C–3C under “authority”; commandment 4C under “control”; and commandments 5C–10C under “presence.”

The triad consisting in authority, control, and presence is the well-known triad for lordship introduced by John Frame.<sup>3</sup> Its three perspectives are together reflective of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The Father as the preeminent planner is preeminent in presenting us with the *authority*

2. The table C.1 is reproduced from Poythress, § 22, table 22.4.2.

3. John M. Frame, “A Primer on Perspectivalism (Revised 2008),” <https://frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism-revised-2008/>; Vern S. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018), chap. 14.

of God. The Son, as the one who carries out the plan of the Father, is pre-eminent when the topic is the *control* of God. The Holy Spirit, as the one who applies the work of the Son in his intimate presence, is the one who preeminently represents the *presence* of God. But as in all such cases in dealing with perspectives, there is interpenetration. Authority, control, and presence belong to all three persons of the Trinity.

The first three out of the Ten Commandments, 1C–3C, have more explicit focus on honoring God, who is the supreme authority. The fourth commandment, 4C, focuses on God’s control over the world, exhibited in the six days of God’s work in creating the world, followed by God’s rest. Human beings imitate that control in their own cycle of working six days, followed by rest. Commandments 5C–10C have more focus on obligations of human beings toward one another. These obligations come from God the authority, who is *present* to human beings in bringing to bear his moral standards. And at a derivative level, human beings are present to each other.

Next, consider the distinction between the world of humanity and the subhuman world, which is used to divide 5C–7C from 8C–10C. The distinction between human and subhuman is a fairly obvious and significant distinction within the created order. Since human beings are appointed in some ways to “mediate” the rule of God with respect to the subhuman world, the pattern of God/covenant-as-mediation/Israel is analogous to the pattern of God/humanity/subhuman world.

In one sense, all the commandments 5C–10C have to do with the human level of the created order. All these commandments indicate things that human beings are supposed to do. But the group consisting of the first three, 5C–7C, more directly focuses on obligations with respect to human beings—to respect the authority, life, and intimacy of other human beings. By contrast, commandments 8C–10C have close ties with how human beings conduct themselves in relation to the subhuman world. 8C concerns property, things such as houses and donkeys and sheep. 9C concerns telling the truth about the *world*, including the subhuman world. And 10C concerns coveting things in the world, including the subhuman world.

Finally, the triad of normative, situational, and existential perspectives, used in distinguishing 8C, 9C, and 10C, is the triad for ethics, also introduced by John Frame by analogy with the triad of persons in the Trinity.<sup>4</sup>

Further explanation is found in the article “Introducing the Law of Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

## Subtopics

Now consider the subtopics covered in the course of this book. Each subtopic can be seen as perspectively rooted in the Trinity.

We begin first with a more general principle. God is supreme. As the one supreme God, he has all sufficiency in himself (8C and 10C). He needs no *outside* ideas from other places in order to create the world, to govern it, and to bring it to its consummation. Each idea in this book, not only the *lex Christi* framework, does not originate from an idea or concept outside or behind God. It must originate from God. It is somehow rooted in the Trinity.

## Introduction: The Challenge

How does the Trinity provide the root for ideas presented in the introductory chapter of this book? The introduction observed that the topic of mankind is challenging and important because human beings are trying to figure out who they are and the meaning of their lives. They have this longing because, unlike the animals, they have the ability to stand back and think about themselves. They are exercising a kind of “mini-transcendence.” God alone, as the one true God and Creator and Lord, transcends every created thing. But man as a creature reflects on his own creaturely level the supremacy of God, by his longing for an imitation of the divine understanding and vision of the whole.

4. Frame, “Primer”; Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chap. 13.

5. Poythress, “Introducing the Law of Christ,” § 22.

God's understanding is the unified, holistic understanding of the one true God. It is also the understanding of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Specifically, Scripture states that the Father knows the Son and the Son knows the Father:

All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matt. 11:27)

The meaning of the infinite persons of the Trinity is reflected in human meaning, which Christians receive through the Son's revealing the Father (Matt. 11:27). This deep personal knowledge belongs only to "anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." But Romans 1:18–25 indicates that non-Christians also have a knowledge of God, though it is suppressed in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). This knowledge derives from Trinitarian revelation. It is revelation of the Father through the Son, made firm by a common-grace work of the Holy Spirit:

But it is the spirit in man,  
the breath of the Almighty, that makes him understand.  
(Job 32:8)

This imprint of the work of the Trinity is what makes unbelievers restless to understand themselves.

## **Part 1: Sample Topics about Humanity**

### **Chapter 1: Interpreting Genesis 1–3**

Interpreting Genesis 1–3 is a process of seeking understanding. Understanding is a result of the Father's speaking the particular words of Genesis 1–3, through the eternal Word, and impressing understanding on our hearts through the Spirit:



Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. (1 Cor. 2:12)<sup>6</sup>

### **Chapter 2: The Origin of Humanity**

Every act of creation, including the creation of Adam and Eve, is a Trinitarian act. The Father works through the Son (John 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16), in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit (Gen. 1:2). Included in the doctrine of the Trinity is the affirmation that the Father has begotten the Son from all eternity. This eternal reality is the foundation for God's producing Adam as a created son. The origin of humanity reflects the activity of the Trinity.

### **Chapter 3: The Original Condition of Humanity**

Humanity as originally created has personal fellowship with God, who is Father, Son, and Spirit. Genesis 1–2 does not yet fully reveal the doctrine of the Trinity. But humanity has fellowship with the Trinity. One aspect of this fellowship is verbal communication. The speeches of God are reflections of the Trinitarian God. God the Father is the speaker; God the Son is the Word; and God the Holy Spirit is like the breath of God carrying the speech to its destination (see Ezek. 37). This triad in divine communication is reflected when God communicates with man in Genesis 1–2.

### **Chapter 4: The Nature of Humanity**

Human beings are made in the image of God, and so reflect God, who is Trinity. See below our discussion of the image of God.

### **Chapter 5: The Image of God: Basic Issues; and**

### **Chapter 10: Interpretations of the Image of God: Critical Analysis**

According to Colossians 1:15, the Son is "the image of the invisible God." That is, there is an eternal imaging relation between the Father

6. The verse in its original context probably refers primarily to the understanding that God gives to the apostles and their ministerial assistants. But subordinately, the principle applies to all believers (1 Cor. 2:15–16).

and the Son. The Father is the original pattern, and the Son is his image. That eternal imaging is the starting point or archetype for God's creating mankind in the image of God. Human beings, however, are creatures, while the Son as the image is himself God the Creator.

## **Chapter 6: Interpreting Genesis 1:26–28**

Chapter 6 indicates that the plural “us” in Genesis 1:26 anticipates the progressive revelation of the doctrine of the Trinity in later Scriptures. The Holy Spirit has already been mentioned in Genesis 1:2, and the Son as the eternal Word of God (John 1:1) is the archetype for God's speeches in Genesis 1, such as “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3).

## **Part 2: Principles and Framework for Interpretation**

### **Chapter 7: Principles for Interpretation**

How does the Trinity provide the roots for the four special principles of interpretation? Chapter 7 introduces four principles: (1) presuppositions; (2) semantics; (3) analogies; and (4) attention to metaphysical frameworks. Metaphysical frameworks tend to be presupposed by those who use them. So principle 4 about metaphysical frameworks is a special application of principle 1 about presuppositions (see chapter 7). Consider, then, the first three of the four principles. These three have a subtle relation to the Trinity when considered in the light of the three perspectives introduced in chapter 7: the static (particle) perspective, the dynamic (wave) perspective, and the relational (field) perspective. Presuppositions come into focus primarily when people use a relational perspective and consider the *relation* of reasoning to a surrounding field of assumptions and precommitments. Semantics comes into focus primarily when people use a static perspective and consider as a single central point a particular word or concept. Analogies come into focus primarily when people use a dynamic perspective and consider how analysis moves toward further insights using analogies.

The three perspectives—static, dynamic, and relational—are reflective of and derivative from the Trinity. Within the Trinity, the Father is

preeminently the source of the unchanging plan for history. The unchangeable nature of the plan corresponds to the fixity of the static perspective. The Son is the executor who carries out the plan. The dynamic of the Son's activity corresponds to the dynamic perspective. The Holy Spirit is preeminently the one who brings us and created things into relation to the activity of God. The relational role of the Holy Spirit corresponds to the relational perspective.<sup>7</sup>

### **Chapter 8: The Framework of *Lex Christi***

We discussed the Trinitarian basis for *lex Christi* near the beginning of this chapter.

## **Part 3: Some Fundamental Aspects of Human Nature**

### **Chapter 9: Perspectives on the Meaning of Human Beings in Time**

Chapter 9 considers humanity from the point of view of two distinct triads of perspectives. The first is the differentiation into past, present, and future. This differentiation has roots in the Trinity.<sup>8</sup> God's plan in the past is the plan preeminently of God the Father. God acts in the present to execute his plan through the Son. And the consummation in the future is the time when God preeminently displays his dwelling with human beings, through the Holy Spirit's fullness. (God's dwelling with his people at earlier times anticipates this final dwelling.)

The second triad is the triad of the static perspective, the dynamic perspective, and the relational perspective. We already discussed this triad of perspectives in this appendix, under the section heading for chapter 7 above.

### **Chapter 11: The Unity of Diverse Truths in *Lex Christi***

Unity and diversity in the truth are based on the original unity and diversity in the Trinity.

7. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, app. D.

8. Poythress, app. H.

## **Chapter 12: Original Righteousness; and**

## **Chapter 13: Analogies Applied to the Original State**

How is the Trinity at the root of the doctrine concerning the original condition of human beings? Chapter 13 uses three main analogies for understanding the original state of human beings: sonship, priesthood, and *lex Christi*. The last of these contains within it ten perspectives on the original state. It shows that the original state reflects God's character. God's character is expressed in his attributes. Each attribute belongs to the one God, and therefore also to each of the persons of the Trinity. It is also the case that each attribute is expressed in the relations between persons.<sup>9</sup>

For example, love is an attribute of God. It is expressed in the Father's love for the Son, mentioned in John 3:34–35 and 17:24. Corresponding to this Trinitarian love, human beings are to love God and love their neighbors (Matt. 22:34–40). This love was there in the hearts of Adam and Eve, as first created in the image of God. It is one aspect of their original condition.

## **Part 4: Body and Soul: The Composition of the Human Individual**

How is the Trinity at the root of the issue of human composition, as body and soul? Chapter 17 applies to the issue of human composition the themes of sonship, theophany, and speech. These three each have roots in the Trinity.<sup>10</sup> The theme of sonship is reflective of the analogy with the family, which the Bible uses as one of its three primary analogies for Trinitarian person relations. God the Father is Father in relation to the Son. This relation within God is the archetype or original for the human created relation between a human father and a human son. Next, the theme of theophany is reflective of the analogy with reflections. According to this analogy, the Son is the image of God (Col. 1:15), who reflects God the Father. The theme of speech is reflective of the analogy with communication. According to this analogy, the second person of the Trinity is the Word (John 1:1).

9. Vern S. Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), chaps. 44–47.

10. Poythress, *Knowing and the Trinity*, chap. 8.

## **Part 5: The Prefall Covenant with Adam**

How does the Trinity provide the root for covenants in the Bible? The divine covenants are verbal specifications of personal bonding between God and his people. The covenants are initiated according to the plan of God, which is preeminently the plan of the Father. The second person of the Trinity, as the Word, mediates between God and man, through his sacrificial work (1 Tim. 2:5–6). The Holy Spirit comes and applies the word of the covenant to the human recipient. Thus, covenant structure reflects the persons of the Trinity.<sup>11</sup>

## **Part 6: Aspects of Covenantal Life**

### **Chapter 27: Created Human Sexuality; and**

### **Chapter 28: Sexuality and *Lex Christi***

How does the Trinity supply a root for human sexuality? It might seem at first that sexuality has no Trinitarian root because God is not a sexual being. But marriage (Mal. 2:14) reflects the intimacy of the covenantal bond between God and Israel (Ex. 34:14–16; Hos. 2:2–7) and between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:22–33). The original, archetypal intimacy is the intimacy among the persons of the Trinity.

### **Chapter 29: Free Agency; and**

### **Chapter 30: Analogies for Free Agency; and**

### **Chapter 31: Necessity and Free Agency**

How does the Trinity provide the root for human free agency? Chapter 30 used as an analogy the freedom of the Son in relation to the Father. The freedom of the Son goes together with the consistency of the character of God and the harmony between the Father and the Son, in the fellowship of the Spirit.

11. Poythress, 136, app. B.

## **Part 7: Man as Fallen**

### **Chapter 32: The Nature of the Fall; and**

### **Chapter 33: The Nature of Sin**

Sin is an intrusion, an ethical rebellion against God and all that he stands for. So it cannot have roots in the Trinity. But there is more to be said, because even in rebellion, mankind cannot escape the presence of God. People do not cease to “imitate” God in a broad sense. But now in sin they imitate him perversely, by trying to *be* God. They make themselves the ultimate standard. They pretend to know good and evil as masters, to be the source of morality. Their attempts are dismal and destructive failures. But even in these attempts, they reflect God, from whom they cannot escape.

So do they reflect the Trinity? The second person of the Trinity is the eternal image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), as indicated earlier. The human imitation of God reflects the original “imitation,” in which the second person reflects the first person.

Consider this process of reflection from the standpoint of the *lex Christi* theme of supremacy, expressed in the first commandment. God is supreme. Human beings have a derivative, reflective supremacy, as an aspect of being made in the image of God. They are given the privilege of dominion (Gen. 1:26, 28).

Human dominion is a differentiated activity, in imitation of God’s dominion. God’s dominion is the dominion of the one God who is three persons. It is the dominion of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. God the Father is preeminently the planner. God the Son is preeminently the executor of the plan of the Father. The Holy Spirit is preeminently the one who applies the work to created things, through his presence upon and in all things (Gen. 1:2).<sup>12</sup>

Human activities imitate God in displaying all three phases. Human beings plan; they act in power on the basis of their plan; they change other people and things in the world by applying their power. These things are true even when humans act sinfully. They do not escape the presence of

12. Poythress, 83–90.

God. They do not escape the power of God. He is there, empowering them without approving them. Otherwise, they could not think or plan. They could not move their arms or legs or hands to exert power. They could not change and touch anything in the world. They could not even exist.

Human action, even when it is sinful action, reflects God as the archetype, the original actor.

### **Chapter 34: Total Depravity**

How does the Trinity provide insights for total depravity? Here, as in chapter 33, there is a caution. Sin is contrary to God. It fights against God. But human beings in their sin still do not escape God. God is totally good. He is unified in his commitment to goodness. This goodness penetrates all his attributes and belongs with full intensity to each of the persons of the Trinity. The Father, who is good, dwells in the Son, who is good. The Holy Spirit, who is good, dwells in them both.

When Adam turns from God and aspires to be God by his obedience to himself, his whole being is indwelt by his turning away, his reversal, his sin. He is totally sinful, in perverse reflection of God, who is totally good.

### **Chapter 35: Total Inability**

How does the Trinity provide insights for total inability? As before, sin is a perversion. God is totally powerful. His power harmonizes with his character. The power of the Son in executing the plan of God preeminently displays the power of God in the world. The Holy Spirit applies the work of God with the power of God.

Human beings have a derivative, reflected power. They too exercise power. They do so in harmony with their character. Since, after the fall, the character is evil and sinful, the exercise of power is sinful. The unbeliever has no power to do what is spiritually good, because power is constrained by character. Hence, they are unable to do what is spiritually good.

## **Acts 2 as a Perspective on Trinitarian Roots for Doctrine**

How does Acts 2 illumine the Trinitarian roots for doctrine? Acts 2:33 says:

Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the *Father* the promise of the *Holy Spirit*, *he* [Jesus Christ] has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.

The gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost takes place by *Trinitarian* action. The Spirit comes from the Father through the Son, on the basis of the Son's completed work on earth and his exaltation. It is through the work of the Spirit that the church and its members grow in the truth: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). The apostles were filled with the Spirit, empowering them to teach (v. 4). The people were enabled by the Spirit to receive the teaching with understanding, and then to act on it (4:31).

Now, these observations focus on *how* individuals and the church as a whole grow in doctrinal understanding. The *content* of the doctrine is a distinct issue. That content is naturally Trinitarian as well, because human knowledge imitates divine knowledge, which is Trinitarian (Matt. 11:27; 1 Cor. 2:10–11).<sup>13</sup>

## Summary

Each of the major subpoints of doctrine has an ultimate foundation in the Trinity. Man made in the image of God naturally reflects the Trinity.

## Key Terms

|             |                        |
|-------------|------------------------|
| analogy     | field perspective      |
| authority   | Frame, John M.         |
| body        | free agency            |
| control     | image of God           |
| covenant    | <i>lex Christi</i>     |
| create      | metaphysical framework |
| fall of man | particle perspective   |

13. Poythress, *Mystery of the Trinity*, chap. 47.



|                |                  |
|----------------|------------------|
| presence       | son of God       |
| presupposition | soul             |
| priest         | total depravity  |
| revelation     | total inability  |
| semantics      | Trinity          |
| sexuality      | wave perspective |
| sin            |                  |

### Study Questions

1. How does the absoluteness and self-sufficiency of God encourage us to reflect on possible Trinitarian roots for features in the doctrine of man?
2. How does the Trinity provide roots for the various subtopics in the doctrine of man?
3. How does understanding the Trinity in relation to man increase our awe and praise?
4. How have you changed by considering the Trinity in relation to man?

### For Further Reading

Frame, John M. "A Primer on Perspectivalism (Revised 2008)." <https://frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism-revised-2008/>.

Poythress, Vern S. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018.

### Prayer

We praise you, Father, Son, and Spirit, one eternal God. Thank you that you display your greatness, majesty, and goodness in the very nature of mankind. Thank you for ways in which you confirm in the various doctrines in the Bible your existence as the Trinity. Thank you that, in your mercy and love, you have given us hearts to understand.

## APPENDIX D:

# *LEX CHRISTI* AS A FRAMEWORK FOR METHODS

The four special methods described in chapter 7 (presuppositions, semantics, analogy, and metaphysical frameworks) can be seen as specific implications of the *lex Christi* framework. So *lex Christi* can serve as the umbrella framework for the whole book.

### Unified Method

In a unified way, the *lex Christi* framework affirms the significance of proper methods. In its general form, it does not, of course, provide us with ready-made answers concerning the interpretation of any one passage in the Bible. But the law of God is a summary of *all* righteousness. Hence, it implicitly includes the principles for how to interpret biblical texts righteously. For example, the fifth commandment, as seen through the principle of God's being harmonious, implies that each individual verse of the Bible is to be interpreted in harmony with its immediate context and with the rest of Scripture.

How does *lex Christi* lead to the four guiding principles introduced in chapter 7?

## Presuppositions

The first commandment, together with the rejection of false gods in the second commandment, implies that people must be consistently loyal to God. They must have presuppositions in accord with who he is.

*Lex Christi* has a fruitful use in helping people become aware of deficiencies and errors in doctrinal proposals and in claims for knowledge from the world at large. Anything that does not harmonize with the Ten Commandments, as revelations of the character of God, is to be rejected. Since *lex Christi* uses the Ten Commandments as perspectives on the whole of the Bible's teaching, it is also true that *lex Christi* in principle excludes anything out of harmony with who God is, or what humanity is, or the nature of redemption, according to biblical teaching.

## Semantics

*Lex Christi* implies responsible use of *semantics*. The third commandment indicates that people must not misuse God's name. Since God's name is attached to the words that he utters, the principle can be broadened, implying that people must not misuse the meaning of any word in Scripture. The ninth commandment is also directly relevant. Human interpreters must tell the truth about what Scripture says.

## Analogy

*Lex Christi* implies the wise use of analogies in the Bible. The central analogy between God and man comes to the surface in the fourth commandment, according to which man imitates God and so is analogous to God. The second commandment is also relevant. It shows improper uses of analogy in the worship of idols, which are supposed to represent the realm of the divine by analogy (e.g., an idol statue of a bull says that the bull god is analogous to a bull). A contrasting positive picture of obedience is provided in the last part of the second commandment: "showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Ex. 20:6).

Keeping the commandments in a discerning way involves analogy. And indeed, when any commandment becomes a perspective on the whole of God's law, it is used analogically. So the entire *lex Christi* framework uses analogy. In addition, remember that the second commandment expresses the holiness of God. The tabernacle and many other elements in God's administration under Moses use analogies to show the nature of his holiness.

### **Metaphysical Frameworks**

The first commandment, proclaiming the ultimacy of God, provides the fundamental starting point for a proper view of the nature of reality. The *lex Christi* framework itself provides a metaphysical framework, because it is a framework for assessing all aspects of reality. The metaphysical framework of *lex Christi* is in harmony with the fact that no single human perspective captures reality without mystery. God gives people knowledge, but only God knows comprehensively.

### ***Lex Christi* as Including Itself**

*Lex Christi* includes itself. Chapter 8 introduced the *lex Christi* framework as a system of analogies, which means that it falls within the larger category 3, the use of analogy. But it can also be viewed as a fifth resource. As a summary of the righteousness of God, and as an expression of his commandments, it fits within the last part of the second commandment: "keep my commandments" (Ex. 20:6).

### **The *Lex Christi* Framework as Illustrating the Four Methods**

The *lex Christi* framework also displays all four methods in action.<sup>1</sup> Consider the methods one by one.

1. I am grateful to Tim Yates for his insights regarding the harmony between the four methods and *lex Christi* (expressed in an email to me, December 2, 2022).

### ***Lex Christi* as Displaying Presuppositions**

As a summary framework for the topics of systematic theology, *lex Christi* reaffirms that Christians should commit themselves to biblical teaching and its distinctive presuppositions.

### ***Lex Christi* as Displaying Attention to Semantics**

*Lex Christi* provides its own new terms, particularly illustrated by the ten attributes of God associated with the Ten Commandments. The terms are deliberately flexible, which allows Scripture itself, as the formative influence behind them, to continue to direct people's thinking.

### ***Lex Christi* as Displaying Use of Analogy**

Each of the ten perspectives offers an analogy. For example, consider the first perspective, based on the first commandment. God is supreme. Human beings are to honor him as supreme. This honoring of God is a perspective on obedience to all the commandments. To keep any commandment of God means honoring God; to break any commandment means dishonoring him. So keeping any commandment of God is analogous to making sure that one is placing God first and not replacing him with other gods.

### ***Lex Christi* as Displaying Attention to Metaphysical Frameworks**

*Lex Christi* itself offers a metaphysical framework that is biblically based and multiperspectival. It encourages people to avoid the traps that easily spring up when they employ a metaphysical framework with non-Christian origins (Plato, Aristotle, Kant, philosophical materialism) or a framework that offers a single perspective as if it were the final, definitive analysis.

## **Summary**

*Lex Christi* supports each of the four extra resources used in this book in deepening theological methods and deepening the understanding of the truth.

## Key Terms

analogy

*lex Christi*

metaphysical framework

presupposition

semantics

systematic theology

## Study Questions

1. In what way does *lex Christi*, directly or indirectly, provide guidelines for biblical interpretation?
2. In what way does *lex Christi* provide guidelines for application of the Bible to life?
3. How does the *lex Christi* framework further ground the use of each of the four special methods (presuppositions, semantics, analogy, and metaphysical frameworks)?
4. How does the overall framework help to protect against misuse of particular methods?
5. What do you think about the methods, now that you have seen something about their relation to *lex Christi*?

## For Further Reading

Frame, John M. "A Primer on Perspectivalism (Revised 2008)." <https://frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism-revised-2008/>.

## Prayer

Thank you, our Lord and God, for the resources provided fundamentally in the Bible, and also for those who have helped us to see its implications, in the principles for interpreting the Bible as well as elsewhere. Thank you for the Holy Spirit's giving us eyes to see and hearts to understand.



# GLOSSARY

**ability.** Power and skill needed to accomplish something. In the context of the topic of **free agency**, one of the key issues is moral ability (or lack of it). See **freedom; free will; reason**.

**abnormal.** Deviating from the norm. In the context of the topic of **human composition**, the **intermediate state** is abnormal in comparison to the **original** created order and the consummation order of the resurrected body. This abnormality cautions analysts about attempts to infer human composition within this **life** by reading back from the intermediate state. See **normal; resurrection**.

**absolute.** See **supreme**.

**actual.** In **Aristotle's** philosophy, describing something in present existence, in contrast to **potential**.

**adoption.** The way that an outsider becomes a child in a family. The term is used especially in Paul's writings as one way of describing the privileges that believers receive in being united to Christ the Son. Believers are adopted as **sons of God**. See **union with Christ**.

**analogy.** A comparison based on some similarity between two items. See **biological propagation; contract; method; organism; speech; univocal**.

**analogy with another world.** Comparing death with going to another world. See **analogy; analogy with housing; analogy with possessions; analogy with sleep**.

**analogy with housing.** Comparing death with getting another house or tent or clothing. See **analogy; analogy with another world; analogy with possessions; analogy with sleep**.



**analogy with possessions.** Comparing death with getting or losing possessions. See **analogy**; **analogy with another world**; **analogy with housing**; **analogy with sleep**.

**analogy with sleep.** Comparing death with going to sleep. See **analogy**; **analogy with another world**; **analogy with housing**; **analogy with possessions**.

**Anaximander.** An early Greek philosopher (c. 610–546 B.C.) who said that the original stuff of the universe was indeterminate.

**Anaximenes.** An early Greek philosopher (c. 586–426 B.C.) who said that the original stuff of the universe was air.

**ancestor worship.** The practice in some **cultures** of making spiritual offerings to fathers, mothers, grandfathers, grandmothers, and other dead people of previous generations.

**antithesis.** The contrast between the thinking and lives of believers (disciples of Christ) and unbelievers (those who follow some other master). This contrast runs through all of **life** and through all academic disciplines. See **common grace**; **Kuyper**, **Abraham**.

**apologetics.** The defense of the Christian faith against objections and contrary beliefs. See **presuppositional apologetics**.

**Aquinas, Thomas.** An influential theologian (1225–74) whom **Roman Catholic** adherents see as a main source for their teaching.

**archetype.** An original pattern, often compared to a derivative of the pattern, called an **ectype**.

**Aristotle.** An influential ancient Greek philosopher (384–322 B.C.), a student of **Plato**, who said that ordinary things were **substances** composed of **form** and **matter**. Aristotle maintained that the **soul** was the form and the **body** was the matter in each individual human being and each animal. See **actual**; **potential**.

**Arminian.** A follower of Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609), whose doctrine emphasized human **freedom**. See **Miley**, **John**.

**aspect.** A feature of some larger whole. In the context of the topic of **human composition**, analysts may distinguish any number of aspects of a human being, such as intelligence, will, emotions, **conscience**, memory, personality, lifestyle, and character. The

concept of *aspect* is distinct from **entity** or **part**, of which there are a fixed number.

**attribute.** In the context of the doctrine of God, a characteristic describing who God is. See **beauty**; **blessed**; **contented**; **dynamic**; **eternal**; **giving**; **good**; **gracious**; **harmonious**; **holy**; **indivisible**; **infinite**; **intimate**; **justice**; **living**; **love**; **omnipotent**; **omnipresent**; **omniscient**; **revelation**; **righteous**; **supreme**; **truthful**; **unchangeable**.

**authority.** The moral right to govern. In the context of God's governing the world, *authority* is one of three **attributes** of lordship, designating God's moral right to govern and to make moral standards. The other two are **control** and **presence**. See **sovereignty**.

**autonomy.** The fallen human desire to act independently of God and to make oneself the source of truth and values. **autonomous**, adj.

**Barth, Karl.** A chief **representative** in the neoorthodox movement (1886–1968). In the context of the **doctrine of man**, he maintained that the **image of God** consists in human capacity for personal relationships.

**beauty.** Splendid, attractive appearance. It is an **attribute** of God that is to be reflected in human beings. **Timothy P. Yates** uses *beautiful* in preference to **intimate** as the attribute associated with the seventh commandment.

**behaviorism.** A view that human beings are constituted by their behavior, and not by mysterious **inward** feelings or thoughts.

**Berkouwer, G. C.** A Dutch Reformed theologian (1903–96) who taught at the Free University of Amsterdam. In the context of the **doctrine of man**, he emphasized the idea of man as dynamically imaging God in righteousness and holiness. He critiqued the traditional Reformed conception, which affirms both an **image in the broader sense** and an **image in the narrower sense**. See **holy**; **image**, **dynamic**; **righteous**.

**biblical theology.** As defined by Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949), the study of the progressive unfolding of revelation over time. Note that this definition is distinct and narrower than simply describing any theology that is based on the teaching of the Bible.

**biological propagation.** The process whereby one generation of plants or animals gives birth to the next generation. This is one **analogy** for the propagation of **sin**. See **seminal union**.

**blessed.** An **attribute** of God, describing his **supreme** worth and happiness. It is displayed especially in the third commandment. God is the source of all blessing that comes to the world.

**body.** In the context of the topic of **human composition**, the visible, tangible organism of the individual. See **dichotomy**; **entity**; **holistic**; **immaterial**; **organism**; **outward**; **part**; **spirit**; **trichotomy**.

**broad representation.** Adam's **representative** role with respect to humanity. It says that Adam is the representative for the human race, but does not specify in detail some underlying mechanism through which he is the representative.

**Calvin, John.** A Reformation theologian (1509–64), considered one of the founders of **Reformed theology**. See **Calvinist**.

**Calvinist.** A follower of **John Calvin**. Usually it denotes someone who agrees with Calvin in affirming comprehensive divine **control**, including control of the particularities of who will be saved. See **sovereignty**.

**cause.** An earlier **entity** or event that brings about some other event. In the context of the topic of divine **sovereignty** and **human responsibility**, one of the issues is with regard to different levels of causes. See **determinism**; **moral cause**; **natural cause**; **one tier**; **physical cause**; **primary cause**; **secondary causes**; **two tier**.

**child of God.** A description of how one is like a child in relation to God the Father. It is a common expression in John's writings. John indicates that believers become children of God by **new birth** (John 3:5–8; 1 John 5:1, 18). See **keep God's commandments**; **knowledge of God**; **son of God**.

**choice.** Divine or angelic or human decision-making between options. The nature of human choice has a close relation to important theological issues: divine **sovereignty**, **human responsibility**, and human **free agency**. See **free will**.

**coherence.** In the context of theological systems, the harmony between the specific teachings of one system about the many topics that it addresses.

**commitment.** See **presupposition**.

**common descent.** The theory that all living things on earth have descended by natural birthing processes from a single common ancestor (usually, the first cell or proto-cell).

**common grace.** The spectrum of **good** gifts that God in his goodness distributes to unbelievers as well as believers. See **antithesis**; **grace**.

**common nature.** In the context of the issue of **inheritance** of **sin**, the fact that each human person shares in a common humanity.

**compassion.** Sympathetic feeling and action toward a fellow human being. In the Western world currently, elite **culture** has redefined *compassion* as including affirmation of an individual's self-conception and his **choice** of manner of living. But that is a distortion of Christian compassion, which includes godly **speech** and behavior that redirect people who are caught in **sin**.

**compatibilism.** The view that complete divine **control** of events, and an unchanging divine plan for all events, is compatible with genuine human **choice** and **human responsibility**. See **sovereignty**; **unchangeable**.

**concupiscence.** In **Roman Catholic** theory, a tension in the **original** created condition of humanity between lower desires and **reason**. It is not itself **sin**, but can be an occasion for the entrance of sin.

**concurrence.** The working together of God (as **primary cause**) and **secondary causes** in bringing about any particular event.

**conscience.** The human sense of right and wrong, convicting people and making them feel guilty when they have done wrong.

**contented.** An **attribute** of God, describing his sufficiency and happiness in himself. God has no needs. That God is contented is displayed especially in the tenth commandment.

**contract.** A legal document by which parties commit themselves to obligations and conditions before the **law**. In the context of the issue of **inheritance** of **sin**, one **analogy** is a legal contract between Adam and God. See **covenant**; **legal representation**.

**control.** The process of bringing about an event that one wants. In the context of God's governing the world, *control* is one of three

- attributes** of lordship, designating God's bringing to pass all events in history. The other two are **authority** and **presence**.
- corporate**. Having to do with the **unity** of a human group.
- corporate personality**. The theory that ancient Israelites considered some social groups to be a single personality. The theory is sometimes invoked in trying to understand the propagation of Adam's **sin**.
- counsel, God's**. The special consultation of God with himself, especially with respect to preparing to **create** man (Gen. 1:26).
- counterfeit**. The pattern according to which **sin** has fake forms of **original good** patterns in God's order. See **false religion**.
- covenant**. An agreement, between man and man or between God and man, forging a bond of commitment, with obligations, and involving consequences for obedience or disobedience. God's covenants are sovereignly initiated by him, not negotiated. The **Ten Commandments** are a central **part** of the Mosaic covenant, given by God through Moses to the people of Israel. See **contract; covenant theology; legal representation; marriage; ratification ceremony; sanctions; sovereignty; stipulations**.
- covenant of grace**. The covenantal arrangement between God and the people whom he saves, mediated by Jesus Christ. This arrangement has several specific forms through the course of history. But what is common is the one way of salvation through Christ. It contrasts with the **covenant of works**. See **covenant; covenant theology; grace**.
- covenant of life**. See **covenant of works**.
- covenant of works**. The **original** covenantal arrangement between God and Adam before the **fall of man**. This **covenant** continues to bind all of Adam's posterity who do not enter into the **covenant of grace**. Also called *creational covenant; covenant of life*. See **covenant theology; works**.
- covenant theology**. An approach to the interpretation of the Bible that sees the unfolding of the plan of redemption in terms of two overarching **covenants**: the **covenant of works** and the **covenant of grace**. This approach is commonly associated with **Reformed theology** and its articulations in the **Westminster Standards**: the Westminster

- Confession of Faith (1646), the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647), and the Westminster Larger Catechism (1647).
- covet.** To sinfully desire to have what belongs to God or to another human being. This desire is forbidden in the tenth commandment. It throws light on the other commandments by showing that the desires that lead to **outward** violations of the commandments are already sinful.
- create.** Make something new. In the context of the **work** of God, it designates radically new acts that only God can accomplish.
- creational covenant.** See **covenant of works**.
- creationism.** The theory that God **creates** human **souls** one by one through **immediate** action. See **origin**; **paradigm of initially creating individuals**; **paradigm of providential acts of creativity**.
- creation ordinance.** A moral and social structure established at the time of the creation of mankind. Included are **marriage**, **work** (including **dominion**), and **Sabbath** rest.
- creatureliness.** Being a creature.
- cross-cultural.** Having the capability of being used in many **cultures** of the world. It is one feature of the *lex Christi* framework.
- culturally universal.** Relating to what is a common feature in all human **cultures** in the world.
- cultural mandate.** The program that God gives to mankind in Genesis 1:28–30. It includes the multiplying of the human race (“fill”) and exercising **dominion** over the world.
- culture.** The distinctive social practices of a particular society or ethnic group. See **cross-cultural**; **culturally universal**; **multiculturalism**.
- decree.** The decision in God’s mind to do some particular thing, at a particular time in history, as part of his overall plan. The word *decree* can occur in the singular (*decree*) and the plural (*decrees*), and sometimes the singular designates the entire plan of God rather than one particular **aspect** of it. See **decretally impossible**.
- decretally impossible.** Describing an event not included within God’s **eternal decree**. Given that a person assumes a knowledge of God’s decrees for a particular event at a particular moment, it is impossible that the event should be other than what is decreed. See **knowledge of God**.

**Democritus.** An early Greek philosopher (c. 460–370 B.C.) who said that the world was made up of atoms, which were the ultimate constituents of **matter**.

**depravity.** Sinfulness; wickedness. It includes an abiding condition, as well as specific acts. See **sin**; **total depravity**.

**deserve.** To be in a position in which there is an appropriate, fitting **reward** or punishment, which a person ought to rightly receive (i.e., which he deserves). See **grace**.

**determinism.** The view that all events are causally determined by something earlier. These earlier determining things could be either God or things in the world or both. See **cause**; **fatalism**; **indeterminism**; **libertarianism**.

**dichotomy.** The theory that each human being consists of two **parts**, a **body** and a **soul**.

**displaced controversy.** A controversy over doctrine that pertains primarily to one area of doctrine, but that is fought out in another area. One example is a controversy over redemption that is fought out by discussing the creation of man.

**distinction between word and concept.** The idea that a *word* in a **language** is an item that one would find in a dictionary and that a *concept* is someone's view about a topic. Words are used to express concepts. But the two are not identical. They are distinct. See **vocabulary**.

**diversity.** Having plurality. See **plurality in God**; **unity**; **unity and diversity**.

**DNA.** Deoxyribonucleic acid. DNA is a complex molecule that is one of the main storage repositories for the information needed to construct proteins and regulate a living cell. See “**junk**” **DNA**.

**doctrine of man.** The setting forth of the Bible's teaching about humanity. Also called *theological anthropology*. See **Barth, Karl**; **Berkouwer, G. C.**; **Murray, John**.

**dominion.** The **authority** to rule. It is one special privilege and task that God gives to mankind when he **creates** (Gen. 1:26, 28). See **creation ordinance**; **cultural mandate**; **functional approach**; **represent**.

**dualism.** The view that reality decomposes into two contrasting **parts** or elements or **aspects**. In the context of the discussion of the **image of God**, it refers to the potential for polarity between **image in the narrower sense** and **image in the broader sense**.

**dwelling.** Inhabiting. In the context of the **Trinity**, the Bible teaches that each person of the Trinity dwells in the other two.

**dynamic.** An **attribute** of God, describing his powerful activity. God is active in himself in loving. His activity toward the world **creates** all things and brings about all events, leading toward the consummation in the new heaven and the new earth. That God is dynamic is displayed especially in the fourth commandment. See **life**; **love**.

**dynamic perspective.** See **wave perspective**.

**earthiness.** The state of belonging to the earth. As a feature of humanity, *earthiness* is a label for the fact that human beings are made of dust and have many physical connections with the environment of earth.

**ectype.** A derivative from an original pattern. The original is called an **archetype**.

**Edwards, Jonathan.** An American Reformed theologian (1703–58), famous for his philosophical penetration, his convicting sermons, and his involvement in the Great Awakening. He wrote a classical book on **free agency**.

**entity.** A distinct thing or object. The term *entity* is sometimes used in the context of the topic of **human composition**, in asserting that the **body** and the **soul** are distinct entities. See **aspect**.

**Epicurean.** A philosophical tradition in ancient Greece, originating with Epicurus (341–270 B.C.). It focused on practical living.

**eternal.** An **attribute** of God, describing the fact that he transcends time. He always exists. See **transcendence**.

**ethical.** Having to do with moral conformity to the moral standard of God's righteousness. In the discussion of the **fall of man**, it contrasts with **metaphysical**. The fall is an ethical defect, not a metaphysical defect. See **ethics**; **existential perspective**; **normative perspective**; **righteous**; **situational perspective**.



**ethics.** The study of **ethical** issues, issues of moral valuation. See **existential perspective**; **normative perspective**; **situational perspective**; **transgress**.

**evolutionary naturalism.** The framework of assumptions that says that all living things today came to exist by gradual processes of impersonal **law** and chance, with no role for God or a supernatural being.

**existential perspective.** A **perspective** on **ethics** and **ethical** evaluation that begins with an initial focus on human agents and their attitudes and motives. This perspective, developed by **John M. Frame**, is complementary to the **normative perspective** and the **situational perspective**. Also called *personal perspective*.

**fall of man.** The event in which Adam rebelled against God and took the forbidden fruit. See **covenant of works**; **ethical**; **image in the broader sense**; **image in the narrower sense**; **metaphysical**; **reversal**.

**false religion.** A **counterfeit** form of religion, a fake imitation of true service to God. There is only one true religion, prescribed by God in the Bible. See **religiosity**; **transcendence**.

**fatalism.** The view that all events are mechanically determined beforehand, so that nothing that human beings do makes any difference. See **determinism**; **indeterminism**.

**fellowship, personal.** The full-orbed communion between human persons or between God and human persons, possible because of the richness of how human beings were created. See **create**.

**female.** Having to do with women, created and defined by God as the opposite sex from Adam; with analogous **aspects** in the plant and animal worlds. See **create**; **male**; **sexuality**.

**field perspective.** A **perspective** for analysis that focuses on *relations*. It is complementary to the **particle perspective** and the **wave perspective**. Also called *relational perspective*. See **Pike, Kenneth L.**

**forgive.** To wipe away the alienation from **sin**. God forgives sin on the basis of the **work** of Christ, who took the punishment for sins and whose righteousness is imputed to those who are in **union with Christ** through faith. Christians who have received forgiveness for sins should forgive those who sin against them (Matt. 6:12). See **imputation**; **righteous**.

- form.** In Platonic philosophy, an eternal abstract idea, such as truth, justice, and beauty, that is the model for things in the world. In Aristotelian philosophy, the forms correlate with **matter**, so that form and matter together make up any particular object in the world. See **Aristotle; Plato; substance**.
- formation** (of man). The process described in Genesis 2:7, 21–22, in which God makes Adam and then Eve.
- Frame, John M.** A Reformed theologian (1939–) who interprets Genesis 1:26–27 as an **open-ended** affirmation that man was created like God. See **create; existential perspective; Grudem, Wayne A.; multiperspectivalism; normative perspective; presupposition; situational perspective**.
- free agency.** Human activity in making meaningful **choices**, with **human responsibility** before God. See **ability; Edwards, Jonathan; freedom; free will**.
- freedom.** **Ability** to do something. The difficulty is that in technical discussions, there are several more specific definitions, incompatible with one another. See **Arminian; free agency; free will; libertarianism; technical term**.
- free will.** **Ability** of the human will to choose. *Free will* can be understood as synonymous with **free agency**. But it can also be used to designate human moral ability to do **good**. See **choice; freedom; natural gifts**.
- functional approach** (to the **image of God**). An approach that searches for some **dynamic** activities or “functions” of human beings (such as **dominion**) that would constitute the image of God. It contrasts with **relational approach** and **structural approach**.
- genre.** A classification of literature or communication on the basis of style and form.
- giving.** An **attribute** of God, describing his overflowing beneficence. It is especially displayed in the eighth commandment.
- glory.** A display of magnificence. The starting point is God, who is innately glorious. He displays his glory in the world and in mankind. And human beings are supposed to serve his glory (1 Cor. 10:31). See **situational perspective**.

**good.** An **attribute** of God, in harmony with **justice**. Also, God's evaluation of his **works** of creation, saying that "it was good." See **common grace**; **grace**; **gracious**.

**grace.** God's surprising goodness in giving sinful people the opposite of the punishment that they **deserve**, by saving them in Christ. Some people use the word *grace* more broadly, to describe God's abundant beneficence and graciousness. See **common grace**; **covenant of grace**; **giving**; **good**; **gracious**; **law**.

**gracious.** An **attribute** of God, whereby he is overflowing in goodness and shows **good** to his creatures. See **grace**.

**Great Commission.** The charge that Jesus gives in Matthew 28:18–20, defining the task of the church. The central task is to "make disciples of all nations." Its "teaching" **aspect** includes teaching the **Ten Commandments**.

**Grudem, Wayne A.** A baptistic Reformed theologian (1948–) who interprets Genesis 1:26–27 as an **open-ended** affirmation that man was created like God. See **create**; **Frame**, **John M.**

**Hades.** A common label in Greek for the realm of the dead.

**harmonious.** An **attribute** of God, describing God's peacefulness, his consistency, and the peaceful personal relations among the persons of the **Trinity**. That God is harmonious is especially displayed in the fifth commandment. See **love**.

**heteronomy.** The view that **law** is imposed from outside, in a way that does not match the situation. For example, people's seeing the law as burdensome and in tension with the needs of the situation is a form of heteronomy.

**historical science.** Scientific investigation that tries to reconstruct what happened in the past.

**history of redemption.** The events unfolding through time through which God works out the salvation of his people, with a climax in the **work** of Christ.

**holistic.** Relating to treating a particular item as a single unified whole. A holistic approach to **human composition** affirms the **unity** of a

- single human being, and usually denies that a human individual can be separated into **body** and **soul**. See **abnormal**.
- holy**. An **attribute** of God, describing his **supreme** moral purity and his separation from all evil. It is displayed especially in the second commandment. See **image**, **dynamic**.
- Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe**. A Reformed biblical theologian (1915–90) who maintained that Christ was the true **image of God** (Col. 1:15) and that man was a copy of that image.
- human composition**. The topic of the makeup of an individual human being. The two main theories among Bible-believing Christians are **dichotomy** (two **parts**, **body** and **soul**) and **trichotomy** (three parts). A third route is a **holistic** approach, which emphasizes the **unity** of the whole person and denies or downplays a division into body and soul. See **aspect**; **entity**; **inward**; **outward**; **speech**.
- human responsibility**. Moral liability before God for human thoughts, actions, and attitudes. Also called *moral responsibility*. See **cause**; **choice**; **compatibilism**; **free agency**; **sovereignty**.
- I-it**. A designation for the realm of impersonal relations, and the realm of subpersonal objects to which human beings relate. Scientific investigation uses an *I-it* relation. It contrasts with **I-Thou**. The contrast is often used in a larger context of Kantian philosophy, which strongly distinguishes between the competence of science to investigate external objects and the incompetence of science to penetrate to the mystery of personal action. See **Kant**, **Immanuel**.
- image**. A reflection or representation of an original pattern. See **image of God**.
- image, dynamic**. In **G. C. Berkouwer**, the designation for the **image of God**, which he thought always takes the form of dynamically imitating God in righteousness and holiness. See **dynamic**; **holy**; **righteous**.
- image in the broader sense**. In **Reformed theology**, the designation for ways in which man is like God, including ways in which he continues to be like God, even after the **fall of man**. It includes personality,

**reason, language ability**, and in addition everything in the **image in the narrower sense**. See **dualism**.

**image in the narrower sense**. In **Reformed theology**, the designation for man's **original righteousness** and holiness, now lost because of the **fall of man**, but restored in Christ (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). It contrasts with **image in the broader sense**, many **aspects** of which continue to describe man in his fallen condition. See **dualism**.

**image of God**. The pattern in which mankind is made, according to Genesis 1:26–27. Bible interpreters debate just what in man constitutes the image of God. The term means that man is systematically like God and is similar in meaning to **likeness of God**. See **dualism**; **functional approach**; **image**; **image, dynamic**; *imago Dei*; **relational approach**; **represent**; **structural approach**; **theophany**.

*imago Dei*. A Latin expression that means “**image of God**.” It is sometimes used in English discourse, and indicates that a technical concept is in view. See **technical term**.

**imitation**. The pattern displayed in the **Ten Commandments**, whereby man imitates God and the **attributes** of God, on the level of the creature.

**immaterial**. Not composed of **matter**. The term *immaterial* is often used to characterize the **soul**, in distinction from the **body**, which is **material**.

**immediate**. Direct, without means. It contrasts with **mediate**. The two terms come up in the discussion whether **souls** originate by immediate or mediate divine action. See **creationism**; **origin**.

**imputation**. The judicial act of reckoning **sin** or righteousness to someone else. See **forgive**.

**indeterminism**. The view that at least some events are not determined by anything earlier. See **determinism**; **fatalism**.

**individualism**. An ideology according to which each person is treated in isolation from the larger social groups and social connections that he enjoys.

**indivisible**. An **attribute** of God, designating the fact that he cannot be divided or decomposed into **parts**. It implies also that God cannot be conceptually decomposed into a concept or idea that is more ultimate than he. Also called *simple*. See **supreme**.

**infinite.** An **attribute** of God, describing the fact that he is limitless in his attributes and character.

**influence of context.** The phenomenon in **language** that the meaning of a particular expression is influenced by the context of communication—the surrounding words and the surrounding human situation. See **range of meaning**.

**inheritance.** What belongs to an heir (usually a son) as a benefit passed from a father (often God the Father). See **common nature**; **contract**.

**innocence.** The **original** condition of mankind, with no **sin** and with positive uprightness, ready for the tasks and growth assigned by God. See **upright**.

**intelligent design.** The view that **life** and the universe as a whole show the marks of having been designed by an intelligent source (usually God).

**interdependence.** The **necessity** of mutual reliance and support among created things.

**intermediate state.** The state of a human being in between the time when his **body** dies and the time when he undergoes bodily **resurrection**. Some theories deny that there is an intermediate state, but the Bible affirms it. See **abnormal**.

**intimate.** An **attribute** of God, designating both his personal closeness among the persons of the **Trinity** and then subordinately his **presence** among created things. God is immanent in the created world, but also utterly distinct from it. The theme of intimacy is especially prominent in the seventh commandment. See **beauty**; **create**.

**inward.** Inside. In the context of the topic of **human composition**, what is inward is the deep characteristics and thoughts of a person, the thoughts of the heart, which may or may not come to immediate expression in what is **outward**. What is inward is closely related to what people have traditionally had in mind with the term **soul**. See **speech**; **unity**.

**I-Thou.** A designation for the realm of personal relations, conceived philosophically as contrasting with the realm of impersonal relations designated **I-it**.

**“junk” DNA.** DNA found during the human genome project, which was thought to have no function but to be evidence of the messiness of Darwinian evolution. Scientists have since found that it has a number of functions.

**justice.** An **attribute** of God, such that he always does what is right. What is right is right according to his standards, because he is the absolute God. See **good; love; supreme.**

**justification.** God’s act of pardoning believers’ **sins** and pronouncing them to be perfect in righteousness on the basis of Christ’s righteousness. See **righteous; sanctification.**

**Kant, Immanuel.** A major philosopher of the Enlightenment (1724–1804). Kant is famous for his distinction between the **phenomenal** (what sciences study) and the **noumenal** (what people have to postulate as existing behind the phenomenal, but which they cannot reach by pure **reason**). Kant tried to establish the competence of human reason and its limitations.

**keep God’s commandments.** To obey what God tells a person to do. One of the benefits of being a **child of God** is to be motivated to keep God’s commandments.

**kind** (in the plant and animal kingdoms). The same type. The category *kind* is not a technical scientific classification, but the later scientific taxonomy of plants and animals builds on the reality of how God created the world, with plants and animals that propagate “each according to its kind” (Gen. 1:11–12, 21, 24–25). See **create; paradigm of initially creating kinds.**

**king.** A ruler over a realm. *King* is one of the three offices of Christ, the other two being **prophet** and **priest**. Christ fulfills the prefigurations in the Israelite kings in the Old Testament.

**Kline, Meredith G.** A Reformed biblical theologian (1922–2007) who studied and wrote on **theophany**, and saw it as related to the meaning of the **image of God**.

**knowing God.** The inescapable understanding of God present even in unbelievers, according to Romans 1:18–23. Also, in other contexts,

- the special privilege in **knowledge of God** by believers. See **sufficiency of Scripture**.
- knowledge of God.** Having an understanding of God and who he is—one of the benefits of being a **child of God**. See **knowing God**; **revelation**.
- Kuyper, Abraham.** A Reformed theologian (1837–1920) who made explicit the concepts of **antithesis** and **common grace**. Kuyper was a predecessor of **Cornelius Van Til**.
- language.** The means of verbal communication. Human beings have the capability of language. See **distinction between word and concept**; **image in the broader sense**; **influence of context**; **ordinary language**; **range of meaning**; **referential view of language**; **semantics**; **translation**; **vocabulary**.
- law.** A particular rule or a system of rules laid down by an authority. In the context of theology, the topic is most commonly the law of God. In the context of a discussion of **works** and **grace**, *law* can designate the principle of **reward** on the basis of works.
- legal perspective.** Viewing redemption or viewing some subject from the point of view of **law**.
- legal representation.** A legal situation in which one person or one **entity** or institution **represents** others by virtue of a legal **contract** or legal specification. A lawyer, for example, represents his client. The theory of legal representation is one form of the theory of **representative union**. It says that human beings are guilty in Adam because God's **covenant** with Adam legally specified that he represented them.
- lex Christi.** A Latin phrase meaning “the **law** of Christ.” It is a **cross-cultural**, biblically based framework developed by **Timothy P. Yates**. It uses the **Ten Commandments** as **perspectives** on all moral obligations, and then also as perspectives on the character of God, on the nature of man, on the **work** of Christ, and on the application of salvation to individuals and the church.
- liberal theology.** The approach to theology, arising from the Enlightenment, that denies that the Bible's affirmations have divine **authority**. Included in this category are neoorthodoxy as well as classical liberal



theology and other modern theologies. Also called *modernism*; *modernist theology*.

**libertarianism.** One of several views that say that genuine human **freedom** must not be constrained by prior **causes**. The causes might take the form either of divine determination or of previous events in the world. See **determinism**.

**life.** Having the **dynamic** features analogous to creatures that grow and reproduce.

**likeness.** Similarity to something else. See **likeness of God**.

**likeness of God.** An expression similar to that in Genesis 1:26–27, with meaning similar to **image of God**. See **likeness**.

**living.** An **attribute** of God, describing the fact that he is alive. He imparts **life** to created things. That God is living is especially displayed in the sixth commandment. See **create**.

**logically possible.** Not leading to a logical contradiction.

**love.** An **attribute** of God, designating his kindly affection. Some people think of love as being in opposition to **justice**, but that is a misconception. All the attributes of God are **harmonious**. See **dynamic**.

**Lutheran.** An adherent to the doctrines of the Lutheran church, which owes its origin to the teaching of Martin Luther (1483–1546).

**male.** Having to do with men, created and defined by God, the sex opposite to women, descending from Adam; with analogous **aspects** in the plant and animal worlds. See **create**; **female**; **sexuality**.

**marriage.** The lifelong covenantal sexual union of a man and a woman, according to God's **creation ordinance** (Gen. 2:24; Mal. 2:14; Matt. 19:3–9). See **covenant**; **relational approach**; **sexuality**.

**material.** Made out of **matter**. See **immaterial**.

**materialistic philosophy.** The view that reality is just **matter** in motion.

**matter.** Basic stuff. The exact meaning depends on who is using it. See **Aristotle**; **Democritus**; **form**; **immaterial**; **material**; **materialistic philosophy**; **substance**.

**mediate.** Through means. It contrasts with **immediate**. The two terms come up in the discussion whether **souls** originate by immediate or mediate divine action. See **origin**; **traducianism**.

**merit.** Deserving **reward** on the basis of achievement. Some theologians prefer to avoid the term *merit* completely because it could be associated with the human attitude of **autonomy**.

**metaphysical.** Having to do with the innate constitution of things, or the ultimate nature of things. In the context of the **fall of man**, it contrasts with **ethical**. The fall is an ethical defect, not a metaphysical defect. The fall does not show that there was any innate defect in man as he came from the hand of his Creator.

**metaphysical framework.** A framework or cluster of tacit or explicit beliefs about the nature of ultimate reality and the ways of accessing it. See **method**.

**metaphysics.** The study of the nature of ultimate reality; or the study of “being.”

**method.** A way of studying some subject. This book uses the additional methods consisting in attention to **presuppositions**, **semantics**, **analogies**, and **metaphysical frameworks**.

**methodological naturalism.** The view that scientific investigation should always proceed on the basis of the assumption that the world is naturalistic, that is, there are no extra spiritual beings, such as God, angels, and demons. There can be no exceptions to the **normal** flow of **physical causes**.

**Miley, John.** A **representative** theologian (1813–95) in the classical **Arminian** tradition.

**miracle.** An extraordinary act of God, outside **normal** human expectations. See **special creation**.

**modal symbolic logic.** A rigorous technical system of logic for expressing the idea of **possibility** and **necessity**. In a model for modal symbolic logic, what is possible is what is true in some **possible world**. What is necessary is what is true in all possible worlds.

**modernism; modernist theology.** See **liberal theology**.

**moral cause.** A **cause** of an event coming from moral inclination or moral decision. It contrasts with **natural cause**. See **physical cause**.

**morally possible.** Relating to something that could happen within the constraints of the **normal** moral inclinations of a particular individual.

**moral responsibility.** See **human responsibility.**

**multiculturalism.** In a **good** sense, the program of trying to appreciate what is good in each **culture**. In a bad sense, the program of affirming the equal goodness of every culture, and denying that there are transcendent moral values that can sit in judgment over any culture.

**multiperspectivalism.** The approach of **John M. Frame**, Vern Poythress, and others, involving the use of multiple **perspectives** for the **purposes** of growing in the **truth** and repudiating error.

**Murray, John.** A Reformed theologian (1898–1975), known for his exegetical care and precision. He wrote *The Imputation of Adam's Sin*, an exegesis of Romans 5:12–21 and an important contribution to the **doctrine of man**.

**natural cause.** A **cause** of an event due to physical connections in the world. It contrasts with **moral cause**. See **physical cause**.

**natural gifts.** Gifts to man by virtue of his being human, such as **reason** and **free will**. In **Roman Catholic** theology, these are distinguished from **supernatural gifts** of righteousness and holiness.

**necessity.** Something that has to happen. See **interdependence**; **modal symbolic logic**; **possibility**.

**Nee, Watchman.** An influential Chinese church leader (1903–72). He used **trichotomy** as the basis for a deviant approach to growing in holiness.

**new birth.** Regeneration, being given spiritual birth to become a **child of God**. It is an expression especially used in John's writings to describe the **work** of God in transforming believers and bringing them into his family. See **son of God**.

**Newtonian mechanics.** A system originating with Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727) for analyzing and predicting physical motions by calculating changes in motion due to quantitatively calculated physical forces.

**normal.** Conforming to a norm or evaluative principle. In the context of a discussion of humanity, the normal humanity before the **fall of man** into **sin** contrasts with the **abnormal** humanity and the disturbance in the created order due to sin (Gen. 3:17–19).

**normative perspective.** A **perspective** on **ethics** and **ethical** evaluation that begins with an initial focus on God's commands, and norms for human action and evaluation. This perspective, developed by **John M. Frame**, is complementary to the **existential perspective** and the **situational perspective**.

**noumenal.** In Kantian philosophy, the realm of projected ideas about what must be behind the **phenomenal**. See **Kant**, **Immanuel**.

**novelist.** Someone who writes a fictional story of substantial length.

**omnipotent.** An **attribute** of God, describing the fact that he has **infinite** power and controls all things, past, present, and future. See **control**.

**omnipresent.** An **attribute** of God, describing the fact that he is present everywhere and fills all things.

**omniscient.** An **attribute** of God, describing the fact that he knows all things, past, present, and future.

**one tier.** Any picture of **cause** and effect that places all causes on the same level or the same "tier," in contrast to a **two tier** picture, with the creator and the creature on distinct tiers.

**open-ended.** Describing the idea that Genesis 1:26–27 indicates that man is made to be like God, but that the ways in which he is like God are not yet specified. They are to be discovered by reading the rest of the Bible.

**ordinary language.** **Language** used by common people in a wide variety of **life** circumstances. It is in contrast to **technical term**.

**organism.** A single, unified living thing. In the context of human **unity and diversity**, the **unity** of one organism or **body** with diverse organs is one useful **analogy** (1 Cor. 12).

**origin.** The source of something when it first came to be. There are three main theories about the origin of humanity: **special creation**, unguided gradual evolution, and divinely guided gradual evolution (theistic evolution or "evolutionary creationism"). There are two main theories about the origin of individual **souls**: **creationism** (**immediate** creation of each soul by God) and **traducianism** (mediated creation of each soul by God, through the parents). See **mediate**.

**original.** Belonging to the order of creation before the **fall of man**.

**original righteousness.** The status of Adam when he was first created. He was not morally neutral, but created by God already with an orientation of heart to have communion with God and to serve him from the heart. He still needed to grow in moral maturity. See **create**.

**Orthodoxy, Eastern.** The theological tradition carried on by churches with the label *Orthodox*, such as the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Coptic Orthodox Church.

**outward.** Outside. In the context of the topic of **human composition**, what is outward for a person is what is visible and audible to those around him; it contrasts with what is **inward**. What is outward is closely related to what people have traditionally had in mind with the term **body**, when contrasted with **soul**. See **speech; unity**.

**paradigm of finished creation.** The **truth** emphasized in Genesis 2:1–3, that God finished creating new things at the end of the sixth day. This paradigm has an affinity with **traducianism**.

**paradigm of initially creating individuals.** The **truth** emphasized in Genesis 2:7, 21–22, that God specifically crafted individual human beings. This paradigm has an affinity with **creationism**.

**paradigm of initially creating kinds.** The **truth** emphasized in Genesis 1, that God created new types or **kinds** of creatures. This paradigm has an affinity with **traducianism**. See **create**.

**paradigm of providential acts of creativity.** The **truth** emphasized in Psalm 104:30, that God **creates** each new generation of animals. This paradigm has an affinity with **creationism**.

**part.** A piece of a larger whole. In the context of the topic of **human composition**, some theories assert that **body** and **soul** are two distinct parts. See **aspect; dichotomy**.

**particle perspective.** A **perspective** for analysis that focuses on distinct, stable “chunks,” which are viewed as particle-like. It is complementary to the **wave perspective** and the **field perspective**. Also called *static perspective*. See **Pike, Kenneth L.**

**Pelagian.** A follower of Pelagius (c. A.D. 390–418), a heretic who emphasized human **ability** to do **good**.

**personal perspective.** See **existential perspective**.

**perspective.** A way of looking at a particular topic. It is a view of something from somewhere by someone. See **existential perspective**; **field perspective**; *lex Christi*; **multiperspectivalism**; **normative perspective**; **particle perspective**; **situational perspective**; **wave perspective**.

**Peter's denials.** As recorded in the Gospels, the three times that Peter denied knowing Jesus, after Jesus had predicted that he would deny him. These events are relevant to understanding various kinds of **possibility**.

**phenomenal.** In Kantian philosophy, the realm of sense experience open to scientific investigation. It contrasts with **noumenal**. See **Kant, Immanuel**.

**physical cause.** A **cause** from physical forces. See **methodological naturalism**; **moral cause**; **natural cause**; **physically possible**.

**physically possible.** Describing something that could happen within the **normal** bounds of the operation of familiar **physical causes**.

**Pike, Kenneth L.** A Christian linguist (1912–2000) who developed a multiperspectival approach to linguistic analysis, and who saw the **perspectives** as deriving from the **Trinity**. He created the terminology for the **particle perspective**, the **wave perspective**, and the **field perspective**. See **multiperspectivalism**.

**Plato.** An influential ancient Greek philosopher (c. 428–347 B.C.) who thought that the world derived from eternal abstract **forms**. Plato maintained that a human being was composed of **body** and **soul**, and that the soul preexisted the body. The body was inferior to the soul, and in some ways a hindrance to full knowledge. See **Aristotle**.

**plurality in God.** The reality that there is a numerical differentiation in God. This plurality is more fully explained as **revelation** unfolds and the New Testament teaches the doctrine of the **Trinity**.

**possibility.** Something that could happen. See **modal symbolic logic**; **necessity**; **Peter's denials**.

**possible worlds.** In the context of **modal symbolic logic**, distinct systems, in each of which various propositions can be true or false—but not necessarily the same propositions in different worlds.

**postmodernism.** A diverse movement, often characterized by sensitivity to the limits on human knowledge imposed by **language** and **culture**. Many forms of postmodernism are forms of **relativism**.

**potential.** In **Aristotle's** philosophy, the innate tendency, due to the nature of a thing, to develop into an actual state that goes beyond its present state. It contrasts with **actual**.

**preexistence of the soul.** The false theory that human **souls** exist long before they become attached to human **bodies**.

**preparationism.** An unbiblical pastoral strategy in the **life** of the church in the context of evangelism. This strategy is intended for a situation in which unbelievers have heard that they are spiritually unable to believe and come to Christ by their own power. Then they ask what they should do, since they do not have power to believe. Preparationism says that they are to be told to prepare themselves, by putting themselves in a path that might lead to belief, by attending church, hearing the preaching of the Word, reading the Bible, examining their **sins**, and praying.

**presence.** Being in the immediate vicinity. In the context of God's governing the world, *presence* is one of three **attributes** of lordship, designating God's being everywhere in the world. The other two are **authority** and **control**. See **intimate**; **theophany**.

**presupposition.** An idea assumed to be right, and functioning as a background for a person's thought and work. Presuppositions may be either explicit or implicit. **John M. Frame** uses the expression "basic commitment," in order to highlight the fact that presuppositions may be implicit, and that they have personal involvement (commitment). See **method**; **presuppositional apologetics**.

**presuppositional apologetics.** The form of **apologetics** developed by **Cornelius Van Til**. It emphasizes that Christians must be faithful to Christ and to their belief commitments (**presuppositions**) in the context of defending the faith (1 Peter 3:15). On the basis of Romans 1:18–25, it emphasizes that unbelievers already know God, but suppress this knowledge. They have no solid foundation for their own commitments and objections. See **knowing God**.

**priest.** A mediator between God and man, who **represents** the **presence** and blessing of God to people, and represents the people before God. *Priest* is one of the three offices of Christ, the other two being **king** and **prophet**. Christ fulfills the prefigurations in the priests in the Old Testament.

**primary cause.** God, as the one who causes all events to come to pass “according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11). See **cause**; **concurrency**; **secondary causes**.

**prophet.** A person who speaks the word of God. *Prophet* is one of the three offices of Christ, the other two being **king** and **priest**. Christ fulfills the prefigurations in the prophets in the Old Testament.

**prophetically impossible.** Describing what is impossible given that a true prophecy from God has announced the opposite.

**purpose.** A planned goal.

**quarrel about words.** A dispute in which participants do not use a word with the same meaning as other participants, and consequently there may be a degree of misunderstanding.

**radical depravity.** See **total depravity**.

**range of meaning.** The phenomenon in **language** expression that a given expression can have meanings that are spread out over a spectrum, and that the particular meaning of the expression depends on its larger context in communication. See **influence of context**.

**ratification ceremony.** A formalized action by which one or both of the parties to a **covenant** symbolically show, at the time of the inauguration of the covenant, that they are committing themselves to its conditions.

**rationalism.** The use of **reason** autonomously, with the conviction that human beings can figure out the nature of the world by thinking it through. See **autonomy**.

**realistic union.** The theory that Adam’s **sin** comes to his descendants because they participate in generic human nature that was his. (It is called *realistic* because the generic human nature is *real*, rather than just conceptual [in people’s minds].) See **representative union**; **seminal union**.



**reason.** The **ability** to think rationally. The temptation of fallen man is to use reason autonomously, to dictate what God and reality must be. See **autonomy**; **natural gifts**.

**reductionism.** An analytical approach that tries to explain a whole field using a single theme or a single starting point. Often, the result is to leave out important pieces that do not fit.

**referent.** The thing in the world to which a linguistic expression refers. See **referential view of language**; **sense**.

**referential view of language.** The view that the meaning of a piece of **language** is to be found in its **referent**.

**Reformed theology.** A theological tradition with roots in Augustine, blossoming in the Reformation with Ulrich Zwingli, Johannes Oecolampadius, Martin Bucer, and **John Calvin**. It has continued in a long line until today, and became widespread in the Netherlands and in the British Isles, especially Scotland. See **covenant theology**.

**reincarnation.** The theory (characteristic of Hinduism) that when people die, they are put back into this world in another form—perhaps human, perhaps animal.

**relational approach** (to the **image of God**). An approach that finds the image of God to be in capacities of human beings for personal relations (such as the **male-female** relation in **marriage**). It contrasts with **functional approach** and **structural approach**.

**relational perspective.** See **field perspective**.

**relativism.** The false view that truth varies from person to person or from society to society, so that what is “true” for one person may be false for another. See **postmodernism**.

**religiosity.** Innate inclination to involvement in religion. See **false religion**.

**religious neutrality.** The false idea that some areas of **life** (many?) are religiously neutral, and that everyone can explore them with virtually no effect coming from religious commitments.

**represent.** To stand for and present to view someone or something else. In the context of the discussion of man in the **image of God**, it affirms that man represents God, by **authority** or **dominion** or other ways. In the context of Adam as **representative** of the human race,

- it affirms that Adam's acts have unique implications for all those whom he represents.
- representative.** A person who stands for one or more other people. Adam is the representative for the human race. See **broad representation; represent; representative union.**
- representative union.** The theory that human beings are sinful in Adam because he was their legal or covenantal **representative**. See **legal representation; realistic union; seminal union.**
- responsibility.** See **human responsibility.**
- resurrection.** The raising of dead bodies to new, continuing **life**. The Bible teaches the resurrection of the just and the unjust (John 5:28–29). See **intermediate state.**
- revelation.** God's displaying to creatures his own character. Sometimes the word *revelation* is used more broadly to include any information that God makes known, not only about himself but about the world. See **attribute; biblical theology; knowledge of God; plurality in God.**
- reversal.** The pattern according to which **sin** reverses the **original** order that God instituted. See **fall of man.**
- reward.** A benefit given, often as a blessing for a job well done. In the context of Adam, Adam would have received the reward of eternal **life** if he had obeyed God and refrained from eating of the **tree of the knowledge of good and evil**. See **deserve; law; merit; sanctions; works.**
- righteous.** An **attribute** of God. It describes God's moral rectitude, which is especially manifested in his **law**, in his judgments, and supremely in the person of Christ. See **ethical; image, dynamic; justification; upright.**
- Roman Catholic.** Pertaining to the Roman Catholic Church. In the context of the **doctrine of man**, the Roman Catholic Church has a view of the **fall of man** and of redemption that the Reformation leaders saw as defective and as compromising the biblical teaching of salvation by **grace** alone.
- Sabbath.** The day of rest. In Genesis 1:1–2:3, God **works** for six days and rests on the seventh. This pattern is to be imitated in human work and rest (Ex. 20:8–11). It is a **creation ordinance**.

**sanctification.** God's **work** of cleansing believers from sinful pollutions and making them more and more **holy** over time, conforming them more and more to Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). See **justification**.

**sanctions.** Specifications of **rewards** and penalties for keeping or violating the terms of a **covenant**.

**Schilder, Klaas.** A Dutch Reformed theologian (1890–1952) who interpreted the **image of God** as a **dynamic** imaging of God's righteousness. See **righteous**.

**secondary causes.** **Causes** in the form of created things or events that result in effects. See **primary cause**.

**semantics.** The study of meanings of words and other structures in **language** and communication. See **method**.

**seminal union.** The theory that Adam's sin is passed on by **biological propagation**. The biological connection with Adam is certainly one **aspect** of the complete picture, but inadequate by itself. See **realistic union; representative union**.

**sense.** The specific meaning that a word or other linguistic expression has in its immediate linguistic context of communication. A dictionary may list several senses, indicating that the same word can have more than one meaning, depending on the context of its use. See **referent**.

**sexuality.** The quality or state of a living thing as being either **male** or **female**.

**simple.** See **indivisible**.

**sin.** Violation of God's moral standards. See **depravity**.

**situational perspective.** A **perspective** on **ethics** and **ethical** evaluation that begins with an initial focus on the situation in which an ethical decision or evaluation takes place. It is oriented toward goals, and asks what promotes the **glory** of God in the situation. This perspective, developed by **John M. Frame**, is complementary to the **existential perspective** and the **normative perspective**.

**slave.** Someone in bondage to another person or thing. In the context of the doctrine of **sin**, being a slave to sin is the opposite of being a slave to righteousness and being a **son of God** (Rom. 6:17–22; 8:15).

- Socinian.** A follower of Faustus Socinus (1539–1604), a heretic who denied divine foreknowledge of human free decisions.
- solidarity.** Belonging together in a larger whole. With respect to humanity, *solidarity* means the reality of groups of people belonging together and not merely being isolated individuals.
- son of God.** One possible description of how man is related to God when originally created (Luke 3:38). In the New Testament, believers become sons of God by **adoption** (Gal. 4:5–7) and by **new birth** (1 John 4:7; 5:1). This adopted sonship is not to be confused with the unique status of Jesus as the *divine* Son of God. See **child of God**; **create**.
- soul.** In the context of the topic of **human composition**, often designates the invisible, **immaterial** part of that individual. There are difficulties, because there is a range of usage of key words in the Bible, and a range of usage among people offering various theories of the soul. See **Aristotle**; **creationism**; **dichotomy**; **entity**; **holistic**; **immediate**; **inward**; **mediate**; **origin**; **traducianism**; **trichotomy**.
- soul-sleep.** Any of a number of theories that claim that, immediately after bodily death, the person either is nonexistent (and will later be reconstituted) or is in an unconscious state (his **soul** is as if asleep).
- sovereignty.** God's comprehensive **authority** and **control** over the world. See **Calvinist**; **cause**; **choice**; **compatibilism**; **covenant**; **human responsibility**; **spirit**; **spirituality**; **trichotomy**.
- special creation.** A special act of God in creating something new, typically involving a **miracle** and not the ordinary course by which new things come into being. See **origin**.
- speech.** A verbal utterance. In the context of the question of **human composition**, speech is one **analogy** that is helpful in drawing attention to **inward** and **outward** aspects of a human individual. See **compassion**.
- spirit.** A word sometimes used to designate an inner **aspect** of a human being, overlapping in meaning with **soul**. According to the theory of **trichotomy**, the spirit is a third part of a human being, alongside the **body** and the soul. This human spirit is not to be confused with the Holy Spirit, who is divine and is a distinct person of the **Trinity**.

**spirituality.** Having a spirit—characteristic of persons. See **structural approach**.

**static perspective.** See **particle perspective**.

**stipulate meaning.** To specify that, in a limited discourse context, a term will function with a specific meaning, different from its ordinary meaning.

**stipulations.** Specifications of the obligations imposed on the parties to a **covenant**.

**Stoic.** A philosophical tradition in ancient Greece, originating with Zeno of Citium (c. 334–262 B.C.). It focused on virtuous living and self-control.

**structural approach** (to the **image of God**). An approach that searches for some permanent features of human beings (such as rationality or **spirituality**) that would constitute the image of God. It contrasts with **functional approach** and **relational approach**.

**substance.** A self-standing thing. In Aristotelian philosophy, substances are one of ten basic categories. Substances are made up of **form** and **matter**. See **Aristotle**.

**substitution.** Putting one thing in the place of another. In the context of the **fall of man** and redemption, in the time before the coming of Christ, an innocent animal symbolically substitutes for a guilty person or persons, in order that the guilt and punishment of that person should be removed. This animal substitution prefigures the substitution of Christ. Christ bears people's **sins**, and takes their punishment, in order that believers may be forgiven. Christ's righteousness substitutes for believers' unrighteousness when they stand before God's judgment (2 Cor. 5:21). See **forgive**; **righteous**.

**sufficiency of Scripture.** The claim that the Bible provides sufficient instruction for **knowing God**, for being saved, and for living the Christian **life**.

**supernatural gifts.** The special additional gifts to Adam and Eve, beyond the level of human nature. **Roman Catholic** theology distinguishes these from the **natural gifts**.

**supreme.** An **attribute** of God, designating his absolute, unique superiority to everything he has made. It is displayed especially in the first commandment. Also called *absolute*.

**systematic theology.** The study of the teaching of the Bible, organized by topics.

**technical term.** A term that is assigned a special, precise meaning in order to summarize a large amount of information. It is in contrast with **ordinary language**. See **freedom**; *imago Dei*.

**Ten Commandments.** The ten “words” in the instructions in Exodus 20:1–17, repeated in Deuteronomy 5:6–21. See **covenant**; **Great Commission**; **imitation**; *lex Christi*; Yates, Timothy P.

**Thales.** An early Greek philosopher (c. 624–545 B.C.) who said that all is water.

**theological anthropology.** See **doctrine of man**.

**theophany.** A visible manifestation of God and his **presence**. Meredith G. Kline thought that theophany is closely associated with the **image of God**.

**tier.** See **one tier**; **two tier**.

**total depravity.** The biblical teaching that, since the **fall of man**, **depravity** extends to all human beings, apart from Christ, and to every **aspect** of each human person. Since the term *total depravity* is often misunderstood to mean that everyone is as bad as he could be, some people prefer the term *radical depravity*. See **total inability**.

**total inability.** The incapability of fallen human beings to change their hearts and turn to God. See **total depravity**.

**traducianism.** The theory that **souls** originate from their parents and that God’s involvement in their **origin** is **mediate**. See **paradigm of finished creation**; **paradigm of initially creating kinds**.

**transcendence.** The quality of something that is beyond human beings and makes a claim on them. Many **false religions** claim to have some transcendent source. The one true God is the only one who is truly transcendent. See **eternal**.

**transgress.** To break a boundary. In the context of **ethics**, the focus is on transgressing the **law** of God.

**translation.** Rendering a message in one **language** into another language.

**tree of life.** One of two special trees that God planted in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9; 3:22). It symbolically **represented** the communion

in **life** that God offered to Adam and Eve. The tree reappears in the time of the consummation, in Revelation 22:2. See **tree of the knowledge of good and evil**.

**tree of the knowledge of good and evil.** One of two special trees that God planted in the garden of Eden (Gen. 2:9, 17). God prohibited Adam from eating of it, as a test of whether Adam would obey God's word in preference to his own reasoning and the voices of others (especially Eve and the serpent). See **reward**; **tree of life**.

**trichotomy.** The theory that each human being consists of three **parts**: a **body**, a **soul**, and a **spirit**. See **human composition**; **Nee**, **Watchman**.

**Trinity.** The doctrine that God is one God in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Spirit is God. The persons are distinct from each other, but there is only one God. See **dwelling**; **harmonious**; **intimate**; **plurality in God**.

**truth.** What God knows. Jesus is the truth (John 14:6). See **truthful**.

**truthful.** An **attribute** of God, according to which he always speaks **truth** and is zealous for truth. It is especially displayed in the ninth commandment.

**two tier.** A picture of **cause** and effect that distinguishes two levels or tiers, one for God and one for creatures. It contrasts with a **one tier** picture that places all causes on the same level.

**unchangeable.** An **attribute** of God, describing the fact that he does not and cannot change in his character.

**union with Christ.** The spiritual bond established by the Holy Spirit between Christ and those who believe in him. All the benefits from Christ's **work** of redemption come to believers through union with Christ. See **adoption**; **forgive**.

**unity.** Being one. In the context of the topic of **human composition**, the unity of the human individual is one important affirmation. **Inward** and **outward aspects** of a human being go together. See **corporate**; **diversity**; **holistic**; **organism**; **unity and diversity**.

**unity and diversity.** One and many. **Cornelius Van Til** emphasizes that God is three in one, and consequently that **unity** and **diversity** are

- equally ultimate in God. God is the source for unity and diversity in the world. See **organism**.
- univocal**. Having a single, fixed, clear, controllable meaning, in contrast to using **analogies**. See **control**.
- upright**. Morally **righteous**. See **innocence**.
- Van Til, Cornelius**. A Reformed theologian and apologist (1895–1987), the principal founder of **presuppositional apologetics**.
- vocabulary**. The stock of words available within a particular **language**. See **distinction between word and concept**.
- wave perspective**. A **perspective** for analysis that focuses on the dynamic movement within the area under investigation. It is complementary to the **particle perspective** and the **field perspective**. Also called *dynamic perspective*. See **Pike, Kenneth L.**
- Westminster Standards**. Documents produced by the Westminster Assembly (1643–49). They include the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646), the Westminster Shorter Catechism (1647), the Westminster Larger Catechism (1647), the Directory for Publick Worship, and the Form of Church Government. The first three function as doctrinal standards. See **covenant theology**.
- word and concept**. See **distinction between word and concept**.
- works**. Deeds done in service or with **purpose** by personal actors. God's works in creation, providence, and salvation set the pattern and context for human works. In the context of Adam, obedience to God would have led to God's giving a **reward**. See **covenant of works; create; giving; law**.
- Yates, Timothy P.** The professor of counseling at China Reformed Theological Seminary who first crafted the *lex Christi* framework, based on the **Ten Commandments**. See **beauty**.





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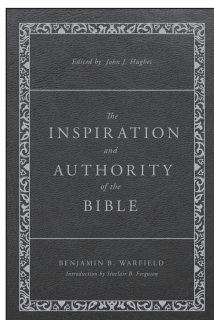
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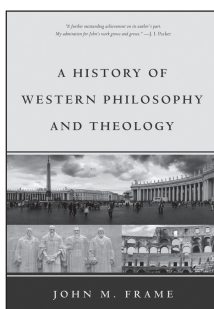
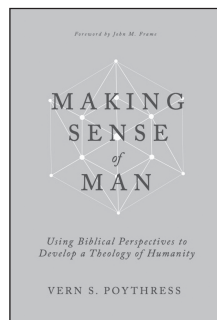
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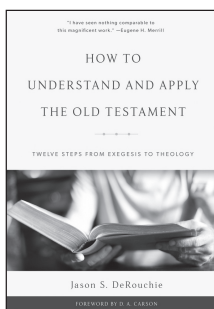
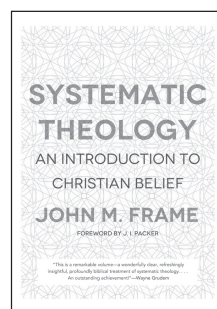
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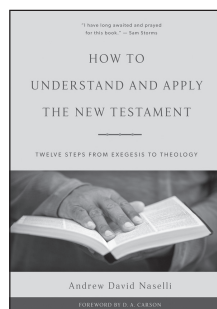
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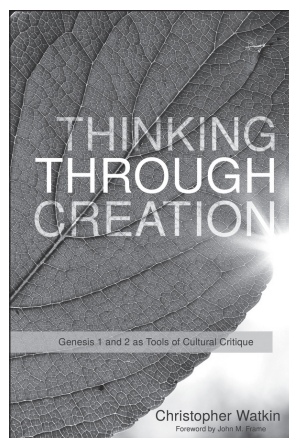


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