Notes on the Imago Dei and the Attributes of God: “Let us make”
Stephen T. Hague

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I.  Introduction and background

In the beginning of the book of Genesis, Moses described the creation of humans in the “image and likeness of” God. Many attempts over the centuries have been made to understand what this means, and what bearing this might have on the rest of human life. The following are some notes to define and suggest some possible ways of expanding our understanding that collates various themes from the Old and New Testaments, and therefore these reflections are not based solely on Gen 1:26.

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness;
יִנְפֹּר אַלְוֹהִים וְתַּעַשֶּׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְּמֵנוּ כִּדְמוּתֵנוּ
Gen 1:26

Some call this phrase, “Let us make . . . ,” the “the plural of majesty” (see also Gen 1:26-28; 3:22-24; Isa 6:8). Though this is disputed, and others propose the following:

- the angels present?
- the Trinity?

The Hebrew terms and definitions in this phrase:

- (selem l), statue, model, image (H7512).

- idols (H7512) H6754 6x
- image (H7512) H6754 5x
- models (H7512) H6754 2x

- (d'mūt), pattern, form, shape, image, likeness (Gen 1:26) 22x (H1952)
The image of God

II. The three main views of the image

Substantive:
- The image is some inherent moral and spiritual likeness to God.
- The predominant view of the church.

Relational:
- The image is about relationship, as between God and man, etc.
- The predominant view in Neoorthodox/existential theologians.

Functional:
- The image of God is about what humans do or perform, as in exercising dominion.
- The popular view among Reformed theologians who stress the "cultural mandate" to have dominion.

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1 The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis.
The debate on definitions is whether/what the substantive, functional, or relational views express as *intrinsic* (ontological?) elements or as *consequential* aspects of being made in the image of God. Some argue that aspects of the relational and functional convey *consequences* of being made in the image of God, not the *essence* of the image of God itself as it is substantively constituted in humans. For the purposes of discussion, it may be helpful to distinguish *consequent* from *intrinsic*, but in reality these categories seem to overlap. Indeed, there are substantive, relational, and functional aspects of the image that interrelate and work to define *image of God as it is expressed in human life*. The word *essence* may be what clouds the debate, since to say something is strictly functional or essential, consequential or essential, or relational or substantive, may exclude other options. To state that the image of God is *either* essential or consequential, may exclude the possibility that being made in God’s image means we are substantively, functionally, and relationally that image. I suggest it is better to state that the image has *aspects* (attributes) of being relational and functional, that are substantive or intrinsic to the nature of being made in the image of God. For example, some argue a distinction between being made in the image of God and God’s command to have dominion. Nevertheless, could it not be argued that being made in the image of God may *intrinsically* mean having dominion (among other aspects)? *To be made in God’s image is to be co-regent in royal dominion over creation.* A tool made for a particular purpose may not be distinguished from its intrinsic nature as a tool: a hammer is made to hammer, that is what it is/does, though we may talk about a hammer’s diverse uses as a hammer, its “essential” nature is functional, relational, and substantive.

The image of God in humans is in substance, essence, and function related to the so-called *communicable attributes* of God: will, life, intelligence (rationality), knowledge, emotions, love, benevolence, compassion, power, morality, spirituality, personality, self-consciousness, self-transcendence (independence), self-determination, faithfulness, righteousness, holiness, wisdom, goodness, truth, justice, mercy. It is important to note that only God is “infinite, eternal, and unchangeable” (Shorter Catechism) (in reference to all his attributes), and thus only God bears all of the attributes denoted as communicable/incommunicable in any absolute sense, and these all relate to his *glory*.3

God is not an abstraction, but his attributes are expressed in reality/history, and thus God is known through his expression of his attributes. Even though we may discuss in the abstract God’s attributes, we only can do so consistently by considering his expression of those attributes in generals and special revelation. Attributes unexpressed (functionally/relationally) are unknowable.

### III. The Creator/creature, Redeemer/redeemed distinctions

- The fundamental *differentiation of mankind from God*, mankind from animals and nature enables believer to know who and what he is. The modern world (particularly materialistic science) cannot determine if man is animal, machine, angel, or devil. This is the root problem of most world religions and philosophies: failure to make the proper distinctions between God and creation. To lack an *image of God* theology is to lack a foundation to all theology and to life in this world as humans. “The fact that man is the image of God distinguishes him from the animal and from every other creature.”4
- **God’s nature**: He exists, as one God, omnipotent creator, absolutely distinct from creation: personal/infinite, immanent/transcendent. Presence is absolute and immediate before the fall, absolute though mediate after. That is, God is immanent and transcendent.
- **Human nature**: exists as created, one person, body and soul, image of God and sinful nature (complex nature).
  - Some scholars propose that there are bodily aspects to the image of God: classified as “theomorphism” (Von Rad). Van Leeuwen comments:
    
    Early in the century, some scholars considered the image to refer to the human body as physically resembling God (cf. Isa 6:1, 5; Ezek 1:26; Dan 7:9-10), a form of “theomorphism” (von Rad, 145-46). Such a view is too simple. The image is properly understood as referring to

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3 Note: there has been much debate about the usefulness of the categories *incommunicable/ communicable* (or absolute/relative, transcendent/immanent, negative/positive, moral/natural, immanent (intransitive)/emanant(transitive), because they are only absolute when in reference to God and apply only analogously to humans: “no attribute of God is *completely* communicable, and there is no attribute of God that *completely* incommunicable” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 156).

the entire human, not a part or property. In recent research, Stendebach discerns two main lines of interpretation of the image. First, humankind is God’s representative upon earth, given the task of dominion over the nonhuman creation. The second model sees humankind as God’s counterpart (Gegenüber Gottes), so that a dialogical relation between God and humankind exists (Stendebach, 1051-52). Both models are valid, in that they express aspects of being “in the image of God.”

- Others, on the other hand, like J. Calvin understand the image of God as spiritual not physical: “the likeness of God extends to the whole excellence by which man’s nature towers over all the kinds of living creatures”; right understanding, affections within bounds of reason, senses tempered by right order (Institutes, 1. 15. 3).

- First Adam was the “crown of creation” in the image of God. The Last Adam is Jesus Christ who is The True Image (1 Cor 15:21-22).
- Nature in humanity: each person is a unified body and soul, whereas God is one Triunity.
- After the Fall of humanity, humans became “a glorious ruin” of divided body and soul, dividing God and humankind, etc.
- Redemption: is the restoration of the damaged image to the perfect image of God in Christ.
- Salvation is rooted in creation and always highlights the Creator/creation, Savior/redeemed distinctions.

IV. **The image of God in the Bible**

- Gen 1:27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.
- Gen 9:6 Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.
- 2 Cor 4:4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (ὁς ἐστιν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ).
- Col 3:10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.
- 1 Cor 11:7 A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man.

Further Hebrew words related to the image of God in the context of Gen 1:

- רָדָה -- rule
- כָּבָשׂ -- subdue
- עֶבֶד -- serve
- שֵׁם -- keep/guard
- מָלַא, רַבָּה -- be fruitful

The True image is Christ Jesus:

1. holiness
2. righteousness
3. knowledge (cognizant) (of God, etc. is proper.
4. will/volition
5. love and faithfulness

In Colossians, Paul presents a theological exposition of who Christ Jesus is:

- **The image** (ἐκών τοῦ θεοῦ) of God, not made “in the image of God” (1:15a) (contra Gnostics) (cf. 3:10).  
- **The firstborn** over all creation, begotten of God not created, as pre-eminent over all (3:15b).

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6 ἐκών, εἰκόνα, ἐκόνοι a likeness, image, portrait, Hdt., Aesch. 2. an image in a mirror, Eur., Plat. II. a semblance, phantom, Eur., Plat., etc. an image in the mind, id=Plat. III. a similitude, simile, Ar., Plat. (Liddell and Scot Lexicon).
The image of God applied to Christ means his consubstantiality with the Father, Christ’s equality, essence, and identity as the Son with the Father. The word “image” in our modern “image based” society tends to connote insubstantiality (copy/fake) in this English word. Note: the ancient church called all Christian pictorial representations icons (ἐικόνα).

Creation of humanity was the creation of humans in the image of God. Redemption is the restoration, the completion of the image of God in man through the one Man Jesus Christ. The goal of our redemption is to be conformed to the image of the Son. “Redemption is the re-creation of our humanity.” See also Col 3:10.

| Rom 8:29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. |
| 2 Cor 3:18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. |
| 2 Cor 5:17 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! |
| 1 Jn 3:2 Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. |

This promise in Romans 8 is intrinsic to the gospel of redemption and renewal of God’s image in us:

| Rom 8:19-21 The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. |

- See NT: Rom 8:29 conformed to his likeness (ἵλικος τὸς ἐικόνος); Eph 4:24; Col 3:10. Redemption is restoration to the image of God in Christ. See P. Hughes, The True Image, J. Calvin, Reasoning backwards from Eph 4:21-24 and Col 3:10, the image of God restored is that of original true righteousness, holiness, and true knowledge of God. As Raymond notes, in discussing C.Hodge’s views, that the renewed image virtues “are not religio/ethical abstractions, but rather are indicative of right relationships with God and neighbor.”

V. The image of God in humans summarized

- The image of God is universally present in all humans at all times. It is the defining quality and nature of what it means to be human. To be human is to reflect the glory of God himself. The image of God is therefore the fundamental “contact point” between all people, since we exist as creatures and we can only know each other through the reality of being made in his image.
- The image of God was not lost due to sin (not obliterated in the doctrine of “total depravity” which refers to moral status before God). Many begin all gospel presentations with the sinful nature of humans, so as to highlight the need for redemption. I propose this is a backwards approach, even if sometimes effective in making people sense their guilt before God. Rather, we should typically begin with creation (in God’s image) as the starting point, the place we begin to outline the history of redemption is where that story-line begins historically.
- The image of God is not simply a relational quality between man and God (as in Barth/Brunner), but rather substantive of each person’s very nature as a human. Thus, it does not vary in degree from person to person. As noted above, the issue is whether the substantive, functional, or relational views express intrinsic (ontological) elements or convey consequential aspects.

- However we resolve the relation between intrinsic and consequence (we might argue that the lines are not absolute), the image of God in humans enables them to have true knowledge of God, to show justice towards the neighbor, covenant-faithfulness, to be living beings in relationship (to God and to both animate and inanimate creation), to have real personality, will (choice, determination), communication (love, truth),

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8 Hughes, The True Image, p. 27.
9 Raymond, Systematic Theology, p. 428.
emotion (affections of the heart), spirituality (worship of communion with God), rationality (logos, mind, knowledge, logic, hermeneutics), morality (conscience), creativity (aesthetics, work, beauty), dignity (personality), goodness (thought and deed), value (intrinsic due to image of God), dominion (vice regents, ambassadors, representatives) and authority (derived). As we live for God through Jesus Christ, we come to experience the fullness of our humanity.

- In contrast to other ANE understandings, the image of God in humans does not primarily convey attributes that stress being created in order to serve the gods, but rather as a dominion of royal co-regency with God over/in the created order. Some suggest this conveys aspects of representation/agency of God himself, in which humans must fulfill God’s purposes on the earth.

- Importantly, humans can be dramatically distinguished from all other created material creatures, while also being clearly distinguished from the Creator. Considering all the qualities listed above, humans are not beasts, and thus contrary to the widespread assumptions of evolutionary theory, humans are not evolved from the order of beasts who do not bear the image of God.

- Idols, worshipping images of rocks and trees made in the image of man, become a travesty of cosmic magnitude, for such worship reduces humans to worshiping something even less than what they themselves possess, which is the very image of God itself.

  “To project God in man’s image is therefore a heinous form of idolatry confounding the Creator with the creaturely (Rom 1:23).”

- Understanding that all people bear God’s image (though they are lost in the darkness of sin and deception, bound to folly and destruction of all that is good), we are thus compelled to evangelize the entire human race. There are none outside the compassion of God for us to seek to reclaim with the gospel of restoration to God and the renewal of the image of God in them through becoming conformed to the true image of God in Christ.

VI. **Practical implications of the image of God**

A. **Creativity**

The aesthetic of the creation-order is the result of the creation of humans in the image of God. The Edenic “cultural commission” was to creatively build God’s kingdom on earth. Mankind’s creative abilities and knowledge were to be applied to having dominion over the created world. In some sense humans are co-creators with God (not ex nihilo, but out of what is there in creation). The dignity of work is thus affirmed. Jesus fulfills the Edenic mandate of work and creativity (Jn 5:17). Believing the colossal lies of Satan, Adam and Eve introduced destruction and decay, ugliness and grotesque perversions.

B. **Family and community (social)**

We were made for HOME and community. Home is the place for sexuality, love, community, learning, and the foundation of the church and society. Fathering/mothering of children in the home reflects God’s creation of Adam and Eve. The home and the church community are the place for the relay of truth and the gospel through language communication and demonstration (see E. Schaeffer’s, *What is a Family* and other categories). Neighborly love in the home and community is to be the rule. Believing the colossal lies of Satan led to division, alienation, death, and murder.

C. **Prophetic and priestly roles**

At creation, sinless humankind bowed before and worshipped God. They guarded the sanctuary-garden of the Lord’s presence (see M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, p 52-56). See Gen 2:15 – the imperative to WORK (לעבוד) is joined with the

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10 See words related to idols and other forms of “representation” (from NIDOTTE): נראות (statue, model, image, H7512); יראה (mar’eh), appearance (H5260); תבנית (tabnît), model or design for something built (H9322); בנית (tûmânâ), form (H9454) and בנית (H9322); אלילים (Angels, H496); אלילים (images, idols, H1658); אליל (wooden cult-object, pole, goddess, H895); איל (image, H6166); בנות (god-image, H6773); דמות (cultic image, statue of a god, H7181); דמות, cultic image, statue of a God, H7178; ים, carve, hew out of stone, dress, H7180); ים (statue, model, image, H7512); פסל (scarecrow, H9473); פיסול (figurines, mask, H9572).

imperative to GUARD, watch over, stand watch (שַׁמַּר). The question is: what is man guarding against? Satan? Outside forces? To guide creation in God’s way by faithfully administering God’s imperatives? In sum, to mediate God’s truth to God’s creation, properly interpreting and applying that truth to the created world. Believing the colossal lies of Satan, they failed in this role of conveying God’s truth. See also 1:28 – God’s imperatives to be fruitful, multiply, rule/govern. These were not options of “free”-will choice.

D. Dominion/work/labor/leisure
All creation is under Adam. The heaven’s are the Lord’s, the earth is the dominion of human hands. Work before the fall was intensive and extensive: they were keepers of the Garden. Freedom factor: before fall, after fall (Rom 8:21). Man was free within certain bounds; outside those boundaries he was forbidden to go. What we usually call the exercise of mankind’s “free will” was really the exercise of mankind’s rebellious will in bondage to sin. The act of rebellion (eating of the tree) followed the volition of rebellion. Free and enabled to work (שָׁמַר) the garden (2:15) involved being fruitful (three verbs involved: אֱלֹהִים אֲרוֹן אֶרֶץ: פָּרַח [1:28]). This involved having dominion by ruling and governing in the garden over all creation (דָּרֶךְ[1:28]) (see dominion, p. 441). No indolence. Royal connotations? Ruler of the earth under God. As the Lord tends to his creation his co-regents were to do likewise. “Fathering” and nurturing the creation. The imitation of God: love God and hate the evil one. Glorify God and enjoy him forever.. Thus they were to glorify God in all they did. Believing the colossal lies of Satan, joyous work became toil and sorrow.

E. The glory of God is his image
R.C. Newman correlates the image of God with the glory of God, and the glory of God with the moral excellency of God. As a person’s reputation is found in their image, their image is represented in whoever reflects their image. In this case, God’s image is his glory and is reflected in his creation morally.12

Rom 3:23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
2 Cor 3:18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.
Jn 17:4 I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.
1 Cor 6:20 you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.
Jn 21:19 Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”

F. The apologetic value of a biblical theology of the image of God
We have deep and true compassion for the lost and appreciation for their creativity (among other things), being made in God’s image. Man, alongside general revelation in creation, is the greatest proof and proclamation of God’s existence and nature (Ps 19; Rom 1). Every person we meet we already know to an incredible degree, since we know how they are constituted. The one primary thing that is new to us in meeting someone, and that encompasses their whole self, is their unique personhood (personality) as made in God’s image.

In terms of the image of God in those being sanctified, the fruit of the Spirit is goodness, virtue, and character, NOT “Worm Theology.” Rom 15:14, “I know that there is much good in you (full of goodness[NIV]), complete in knowledge, and competent to instruct one another.”

G. The impact of the fall on the image of God
“Before the Fall, we saw ourselves as under God, bearing God’s image and deriving a sense of identity and coherence from God. But now we identify ourselves with creation instead of our Creator. Our whole orientation is downward toward what is less than ourselves, rather than upward toward what is greater. This change of orientation has many psychological results.” D.Keyes, Beyond Identity, p. 61.

Since the Fall, our integration point has been misdirected, misaligned, for it now is not in God himself but in idols, ourselves, and other such futile points of reference. In God, we have an infinite and personal reference point for our own identity and souls, but without a proper relationship to him, we have none that is sufficient for anything. All of the characteristics listed above to define/describe the image of God could be listed here with the deleterious impact of the fall upon them, not obliteration of them but distortion and perversion.

H. The need for redemption to realign and restore the image of God

In God, as those who are redeemed, we have an infinite and personal reference point for our own identity and souls. But, without a proper relationship to him, we have no point of reference that is sufficient for anything. All of the characteristics listed above to define/describe the image of God could be listed here with the deleterious impact of the fall upon them, not obliteration of them but distortion and perversion. This has practical significance in giving significance to all of life; it also gives us a point of reference for every concern of our lives in this world. We do have in Christ an infinite reference point to final integration for our whole being, our whole world, our whole future, our whole eternity. The word integration (often used in Mathematics) is an inadequate attempt in human language to convey the antonym of disintegration (or alienation from self, body, society). For humans, that which makes us whole, complete, full, unified in mind, heart, and character, can only come from the One who made us complete in Eden. The restoration of redemption is to wholeness and shalom, since it is a restoration to the proper relationship to God himself. Yet, how do finite creatures relate to an infinite God? Only through the Incarnate Son. Holiness and wholeness: the telos of God’s purposes. To be holy is to be WHOLE, complete, perfect, unblemished, unmarred. We will be made whole in God’s holy presence. Jesus’ healings of the un-whole and unholy pre-shadowed this new creation reality: the blind see and the lame walk!
VII. Westminster Shorter Catechism and the image of God

Q10: How did God create man?
A10: God created man male and female, after his own image,[1] in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness,[2] with dominion over the creatures.[3]

Q35: What is sanctification?
A35: Sanctification is the work of God's free grace,[1] whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God,[2] and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.[3]

The Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter IV: Of Creation

II. After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female,[4] with reasonable and immortal souls,[5] endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after his own image,[6] having the law of God written in their hearts,[7] and power to fulfill it:[8] and yet under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject unto change.[9] Beside this law written in their hearts, they received a command, not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; which while they kept, they were happy in their communion with God,[10] and had dominion over the creatures.[11]

VIII. John Calvin’s comments on Jesus as the image of God:

15. Who is the image of the invisible God. He mounts up higher in discoursing as to the glory of Christ. He calls him the image of the invisible God, meaning by this, that it is in him alone that God, who is otherwise invisible, is manifested to us, in accordance with what is said in John 1:18,

— No man hath ever seen God: the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, hath himself manifested him to us.

I am well aware in what manner the ancients were accustomed to explain this; for having a contest to maintain with Arians, they insist upon the equality of the Son with the Father, and his ( ) identity of essence, F42 while in the mean time they make no mention of what is the chief point — in what manner the Father makes himself known to us in Christ. As to Chrysostom’s laying the whole stress of his defense on the term image, by contending that the creature cannot be said to be the image of the Creator, it is excessively weak; nay more, it is set aside by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:7, whose words are — The man is the image and glory of God. That, therefore, we may not receive anything but what is solid, let us take notice, that the term image is not made use of in reference to essence, but has a reference to us; for Christ is called the image of God on this ground — that he makes God in a manner visible to us. At the same time, we gather also from this his ( ) identity of essence, for Christ would not truly represent God, if he were not the essential Word of God, inasmuch as the question here is not as to those things which by communication are suitable also to creatures, but the question is as to the perfect wisdom, goodness, righteousness, and power of God, for the representing of which no creature were competent. We shall have, therefore, in this term, a powerful weapon in opposition to the Arians, but, notwithstanding, we must begin with that reference that I have mentioned; we must not insist upon the essence alone. The sum is this — that God in himself, that is, in his naked majesty, is invisible, and that not to the eyes of the body merely, but also to the understandings of men, and that he is revealed to us in Christ alone, that we may behold him as in a mirror. For in Christ he shews us his righteousness, goodness, wisdom, power, in short, his entire self. We must, therefore, beware of seeking him elsewhere, for everything that would set itself off as a representation of God, apart from Christ, will be an idol.13

IX. Some sources:

- M.Erickson, Christian Theology, pp. 498-517.
- P.E. Hughes, The True Image (passim).

- U. Middlemann, *Proexistence*.
- D. Keyes' lectures on work
- P. Marshall, *Heaven is not My Home*.
- F. A. Schaeffer, *Art and the Bible*. 