

Vocationalizing the *imago Dei*

Marc Cortez

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Many people make an intuitive link between the image of God (*imago Dei*) and vocation. The assumption seems to run something like this: First, we recognize that the *imago* is something about human persons that makes them unique in the world. After all, only humans are said to be made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-28). Then we define vocation as something that is unique to the individual person. Regardless of how we define vocation, most view it as something that the person is called to do as an expression of his or her particular talents and opportunities. With those two pieces in place, it becomes relatively easy to think about vocation as the particular way in which the individual person expresses the reality of being made in the image of God. So it shouldn't come as a surprise that authors seeking to develop explicitly theological accounts of vocation routinely draw on the *imago Dei* as part of that theological framework.¹ As Michael Novak states, "Each of us is as unique in our calling as we are in being made in the image of God."²

Despite the apparent obviousness of this connection, however, some important difficulties await those who draw these two ideas together without sufficient reflection. At the very least, we should remind ourselves that the *imago Dei* is one of the most notoriously debated concepts in theological anthropology. Biblical scholars and theologians have filled countless bookshelves attempting to define the image and unpack its implications.³ So we should recognize at the outset that any attempt to draw on the *imago* as a way of helping understand the concept of vocation will necessarily face significant difficulties. But the problems run even deeper. As Richard Weaver famously argued, "ideas have consequences,"⁴

¹ For example, Dorothy L. Sayers, *Why Work? An Address Delivered at Eastbourne, April 23rd, 1942* (London: Methuen & co., Ltd, 1942); Michael Novak, *Business as a Calling: Work and the Examined Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); Wayne A. Grudem, *Business for the Glory of God: The Bible's Teaching on the Moral Goodness of Business* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2003); Armand Larive, *After Sunday: A Theology of Work* (New York: Continuum, 2004); John Bolt, *Economic Shalom: A Reformed Primer on Faith, Work, and Human Flourishing* (Christian's Library Press, 2013); Chad Brand, *Flourishing Faith: A Baptist Primer on Work, Economics, and Civic Stewardship* (Christian's Library Press, 2013).

² Novak, *Business as a Calling*, 34.

³ For a good overview of the biblical discussion, see Gunnlaugur A. Jónsson, *The Image of God: Genesis 1:26-28 in a Century of Old Testament Research* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1988). For the history of the discussion in theology, see John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Pub. Company, 2014).

⁴ Richard M. Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

and many have associated the *imago Dei* with consequences that run the gamut of world problems: racism, classism, sexism, ableism, consumerism, and so on.⁵ If the image of God is central to a Christian perspective on the human person, it stands to reason that our understanding of the *imago* will significantly shape the ways in which we view and treat those around us. Thus, many fear that missteps in our theology of the *imago* has contributed to these devastating social consequences. Such concerns may be rather overblown, and they also face the difficulty of establishing that the problematic consequences were *caused* by the concept in question rather than merely *correlated* with these developments. Nonetheless, the fact that so many have worried about the negative consequences of certain conceptions of the *imago* should cause us to stop and reflect carefully about the nature of the image before relating it too quickly to something like vocation, a concept that is fraught with enough difficulties of its own.

The task before us, then, is to explore the relationship between the *imago Dei* and vocation, seeking to identify the places where our views of the former might cause difficulties for the ways in which we understand the latter. In other words, I am not going to attempt the impossible and offer a “solution” to the long-standing problem of the *imago Dei*. But neither do I think we should stop talking about the *imago* altogether. All of our most important concepts are similarly difficult to understand and dangerous to apply. Just think, for example, of things like *freedom*, *justice*, *beauty*, and *person*. If we stopped using all such concepts, we would soon fall silent on some of the most important issues of the day. So the solution to the challenge of the *imago* is not to stop speaking, but to speak more carefully.

I will also not attempt to survey all of the different ways in which one might relate the *imago Dei* and vocation. Given the sizeable number of interpretations people have offered for understanding the *imago Dei*, a comprehensive study would take far too long. Instead, I would like to focus our attention on what seems to me to be the most common way of understanding the image in the literature on vocation. According to such a view, actually a family of views, the image of God is something we *do*. This is commonly referred to as a *functional* view of the

⁵ See esp. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); Douglas J. Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1986); John F. Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 17-37.

image, and it includes such things as creating, ruling, communicating, and even relating.⁶ That people would commonly associate vocation with such a view of the image makes sense. After all, we intuitively think of vocation as something we are called to *do*, even speaking of our vocations as something we need to *live out*. If the image is also inherently functional, then, we would have strong reasons for thinking that the two should be related in some way. Indeed, for many, the image is *the* vocation of the human person, the one that gives meaning to all of our other vocations.

In the following section, then, we will look at several ways in which people have related vocation to the *imago Dei* using a functional understanding of the image. The following section will probe those views more closely, arguing that such an approach generates a number of important concerns, and offering some suggestions for strengthening the functional view in light of those concerns. In the third section, I will suggest that we can strengthen a functional account even further if we draw on current scholarship that relates the image of God to the idea of divine presence. The final section will shift our attention to the practical implications of this discussion, focusing on how this relates to understanding vocation at a liberal arts college like Wheaton.

Vocation and the Image

When I began this study, my intent was to offer a survey of ways in which people related vocation to the *imago Dei* in the literature on vocation. And I was rather unsurprised to discover right away that, although many authors refer to the image and offer some comment about the fact that being made in the image is importantly related to the concept of vocation, they frequently did so with relatively little explanation. Such authors typically failed to provide any clear definition of the image or an explanation of how the two concepts are related.

The more surprising discovery came from the fact that all of the authors who engaged the *imago* more substantially approached it as an essentially functional concept. In other

⁶ Although the *relational* view is a distinct way of understanding the image, people often confuse the two when they talk about *relating* as something humans do. The latter actually falls under the functional category since it describes a particular kind of activity. Properly understood, a relational view of the image focuses on some kind of relation that obtains irrespective of any particular function or activity of the human person.

words, the *imago* is primarily something that humans *do*. From one perspective, this should not have come as any big surprise. Among biblical scholars, a functional view of the image is by far the most prominent view. Indeed, after surveying all of the relevant biblical studies, Gunnlaugur Jónsson concluded, “Were it not for the fact that a few influential OT scholars such as Barr and Westermann do not agree with this dominant understanding, we would be able to speak of a complete consensus among OT scholars on this problem.”⁷ So functional views of the image clearly enjoy considerable support among biblical scholars. What was surprising about its almost complete dominance in the literature on vocation, however, is the fact that theologians have generally gravitated toward structural or relational views of the image.⁸ On the first account, the image is defined as a capacity or set of capacities human persons possess that makes them both different from other creatures and like God in some way. On the latter account, humans image the triune God in virtue of the fact that they are inherently relational beings. Despite the popularity of these views among systematic theologians, however, they make relatively few appearances in the literature on vocation.⁹

Consequently, we will focus our efforts on understanding the link between a functional view of the *imago Dei* and vocation. The most common approach, and the one with the greatest support from biblical scholars, finds the link in Genesis 1:26 itself: “Then God said, ‘Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures

⁷ Jónsson, *The Image of God*, 219.

⁸ See esp. Nathan MacDonald, “The Imago Dei and Election: Reading Genesis 1:26-28 and Old Testament Scholarship with Karl Barth,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10, no. 3 (2008): 303–27.

⁹ Not that they are entirely missing, of course. Udo Middleman, for example, defines the image in terms of our free will, which has traditionally been one of the more influential forms of the capacity view of the image (*God and Man at Work: Doing Well and Doing Good in the Bible’s View of Life* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013]). And William Pollard seems to have a more relational view in mind when he defines the image primarily as that which makes human persons uniquely valuable and requires that we relate to one another appropriately (*Serving Two Masters?* [New York: Collins, 2006]). Others have at least hinted at more relational views of the image, particularly those influenced by the relational anthropology of John Paul II (e.g. David Hadley Jensen, *Responsive Labor: A Theology of Work* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006] and John A. Bernbaum and Simon M. Steer, *Why Work?: Careers and Employment in Biblical Perspective* [Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker, 1986]). Interestingly, though, John Paul II himself actually draws on a much more functional view of the image in his own theology of work (*On Human Work: Encyclical Laborem Exercens* [Washington, D.C: Office for Publishing and Promotion Services, United States Catholic Conference, 1981]).

that move along the ground” (NIV). This verse thus appears to make a clear link between the *imago Dei* and the fact that God has given humanity **dominion** over all creation. John Paul II concludes from this that work and vocation are intrinsic to the human person, part of our creational design.¹⁰ As he explains, “Man has to subdue the earth and dominate it, because as the ‘image of God’ he is a person, that is to say, a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself and with a tendency to self-realization. As a person, man is therefore the subject of work.”¹¹

We see a similar conclusion in the work of Demetrios Kato, who offers an Eastern Orthodox perspective on the relationship between the *imago Dei* and vocation. According to Kato, “Genesis 1 grants humanity a pre-eminence over the rest of creation,” one that involves “a qualitative distinction between the human constitution and the rest of animal creation by asserting an intimate connection between God and humanity.”¹² Although this probably entails some kind of capacity view, which would not be unusual among Eastern Orthodox theologians, Kato takes it further and make the link with a functional view as well when he says that were also instructed “to have dominion, as a regent under God.”¹³ Thus, according to Kato, “The heart of the Christian doctrine of the image of God is an unquenchable optimism that promises us that we can improve matters and make a difference in the world by bringing them into God’s domain.”¹⁴

John Bolt offers a similar approach, contending that our calling as image bearers is to serve as God’s “vice-regents in creation.”¹⁵ He concludes from this that humans were created for “creative production,” which he defines as “using the manifold riches of creation to enhance

¹⁰ Catholic Church and John Paul, *On Human Work*, 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹² Demetrios S. Kato, “In the Image of God: Mystical Theology and Secular Vocations,” in *Christ At Work: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Vocation*, ed. Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides (Brookline, Mass: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), 130.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

¹⁵ Bolt, *Economic Shalom*, 28.

human flourishing.¹⁶ According to Chad Brand, although the image can mean many things, “one of the things it meant was that as God was Lord of all, so the humans would be lords (little l) over the earth.”¹⁷ Thus, our task is to “rule and subdue” the earth. For such scholars, the image of God is primarily about our calling to exercise dominion over creation.

A slightly different perspective arises with the work of Dorothy Sayers, who famously argued that the *imago Dei* is primarily about **creativity**.¹⁸ According to Sayers, when we read the *imago Dei* narrative in context, we see that the only thing God has done to that point in the story is create. That can be the only referent for saying that we are made to reflect God. To be in the image of God is to create, to make things. For Sayers, this means that the *imago Dei* is inherently related to work and vocation. Indeed, she contends that work is “a way of life in which the nature of man should find its proper exercise and delight and so fulfill itself to the glory of God. That it should, in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of the work itself; and that man, made in God’s image, should make things, as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing.”¹⁹ Others have followed a similar trajectory, with the language of “co-creator” becoming an increasingly common way of relating the image of God and vocation.²⁰

Such an account offers a clear explanation for relating the *imago Dei* and vocation. The *imago* is that which gives vocation its theological meaning. Work is theological because it is through our work that we imitate the God who created everything. Armand Larive helpfully argues that we do not need to restrict this concept only to those things traditionally associated with “work.”²¹ Indeed, he prefers to term “co-creator” specifically because it more easily

¹⁶ Ibid., 29.

¹⁷ Brand, *Flourishing Faith*, 3.

¹⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (London: Methuen, 1941).

¹⁹ Sayers, *Why Work?*, 2.

²⁰ E.g., Bernbaum and Steer, *Why Work?*, 3–4; Larive, *After Sunday*, 75; Darby Kathleen Ray, *Working*, Compass Series : Christian Explorations of Daily Living (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 44–45. See also Philip Hefner’s influential work on the idea of human persons as “created co-creators” (Philip Hefner and Ted Peters, “Biocultural Evolution and the Created Co-Creator,” in *Science and Theology: The New Consonance* [Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998], 174–88).

²¹ Larive, *After Sunday*, 75.

captures the whole range of human activity. Thus, viewing the image through the lens of humans as co-creator offers a clear connection to vocation understood broadly as everything humans do to draw forth the potentiality and beauty of creation.

Yet another approach arises with the possibility that the image is primarily about **imitation**. Although we have already seen that both of the prior views emphasized the fact that we are to imitate God either through our dominion or our creativity, Wayne Grudem explicitly contends that both of these are only smaller portions of a larger picture. Ultimately, for Grudem, the *imago Dei* is about “imitation of the attributes of God.”²² Thus, “To be in God’s image means to be like God and to represent God on the earth.”²³ This then becomes the guiding concept for all forms of human action, not least of which those that involve work and vocation. Indeed, Grudem contends that things like the production of capital, private property, entrepreneurship, and the employer/employee relationship are all reflections of God’s own characteristics (creativity, sovereignty, and authority).

If we were to pursue the literature further, I’m sure that we could proliferate ways of understanding the *function* that lies at the heart of the *imago Dei*. But these three concepts—dominion, creativity, and imitation—should be enough for now to help us understand the nature of a functional view of the image and how it relates to a theology of vocation. We can now proceed to identifying some important concerns about such an approach.

Five Worries about a Vocationalized Image

Despite the fact that the functional view of the image comes with strong support from a wide range of biblical scholars, and the fact that it clearly enjoys considerable support among those working on theologies of work and vocation, I would like to point out several important worries that should be addressed before moving relating the *imago Dei* and vocation in this way.

²² Grudem, *Business for the Glory of God*, 13.

²³ *Ibid.*, 14.

1. The Exclusion Worry

The most common concern about any view of the image comes from a tendency to define in the *imago Dei* in ways that raise questions about the status of certain groups of human persons. The worry comes from the following line of thought:

- (1) The *imago Dei* defines a central aspect of what it means to be truly human.
- (2) Not all *homo sapiens* possess whatever it is that constitutes the *imago Dei*.
- (3) Therefore, not all *homo sapiens* are truly human.

Take, for example, the idea that humans image God in virtue of some capacity or set of capacities, most famously the capacity for rational thought.²⁴ On this view, our rationality is both that which makes us distinct from other creatures and that which makes us like God, who himself is supremely wise, thus reflecting one of his divine attributes in the created realm. But what about those who do not exemplify the relevant capacity? Are infants, coma patients, and those with mental handicaps somehow less than fully human because they do not reflect God's rationality like the rest of us? Similar worries accompany virtually all capacity views of the image, since for any proposed capacity, we can envision circumstances in which certain groups of humans would not be able to manifest the relevant capacity (morality, free will, creativity, speech, etc.).

Functional views run into exactly the same difficulty. What about those who cannot perform the relevant function? If I suddenly lapse into a coma later this evening and can no longer carry out the function of ruling over creation, does that mean I am no longer an image bearer? And, if so, what does that say about the status of my humanity? Once again, we seem to have a problem with a view of the image that excludes certain groups.

As we will see in a moment, functional views of the image have resources for addressing at least some of these concerns. But it's worth pausing for a moment and recognizing at this stage that the *imago Dei* has a long history of contributing to just this kind of exclusion. As John

²⁴ For more on this, see the chapter on the image of God in Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York; London: T&T Clark International, 2009).

Kilner outlines, people have used the image of God to argue against the full humanity of the disabled, other races, women, the elderly, the unborn, and more.²⁵ As we consider the relationship between the *imago* and vocation, then, we need to be aware of this concern. If we are not careful, we might easily suggest that vocations are only for those who fit particular conceptions of what it means to be human. Only those with the right kinds of capacities, those who perform the relevant tasks in the world, or even those who engage in the right kinds of relationships are the ones who truly live out their God-given calling. The rest have no real vocation, no calling, no way of living faithfully before God.

Given these long-standing concerns, it is somewhat troubling that most of those who utilize a functional view of the image to inform their theologies of vocation do not give adequate attention to the exclusion worry. John Paul II stands as one exception in that he at least provides some space for the disabled in his account. According to him, the fact that work is intrinsic to human existence means that we should strive to bring everyone into work. Even the disabled actualize themselves as persons by doing whatever work is appropriate to them.²⁶ Similarly, John Paul II contends that we need to include the poor and other social groups who have often found work alienating and even oppressive. Rather than locating the problem with work, John Paul II contends that rightly understood, work is a personalizing force in the world. Both the disabled and the socially marginalized are thus intentionally included in this functional view of the image.

But I wonder if John Paul II's approach has gone far enough. Although he clearly wants to avoid the conclusion that his account excludes those with disabilities, it is not clear that he has fully resolved the problem. By contending that the disabled can participate in whatever work is appropriate to them, he is still operating under the presumption that they have at least some of the capacities and functionalities necessary to carry out meaningful work at some level. But surely that would not be the case for all human persons. What about the unborn, or even the newly born, and those completely incapacitated through the circumstances of birth or accident? It seems unlikely that we could envision scenarios in which they are still involved in

²⁵ Kilner, *Dignity and Destiny*, 19–36.

²⁶ Catholic Church and John Paul, *On Human Work*, 50.

some kind of meaningful work despite their rather obvious inability to function. So what room can we make for their participation in the person-making work that comprises the heart of John Paul II's functional vocation?

John Bolt offers a more robust engagement with these kinds of issues, offering at least two different resources for addressing the exclusion worry. First, he emphasizes that "being an image bearer is a status bestowed by God."²⁷ Thus, even those who cannot work for various reasons continue to be in God's image because the *imago* is first and foremost a gift to be received rather than a task to be accomplished. Thus, according to Bolt, "In a Christian worldview, being precedes doing."²⁸

As helpful as this response might be, however, it is not clear how Bolt can integrate this into his overall understanding of the image and its relationship to vocation. As we saw earlier, Bolt clearly defines the image terms of rulership and production. If this is the case, how can he turn around and emphasize the gift-based nature of the image as a solution to the problem of the disabled? Suppose, for example, that on my sixteenth birthday my parents gave me a new car, thus bestowing on me the function of "driver." Suppose further that (1) I immediately went out and wrecked the car and (2) my parents are smart enough not to do that again. With this new turn of events, I am no longer able to carry out the driving function. What sense would it make to say that I am somehow still a "driver" just because the car was a gift? Similarly, if a person is no longer able to function as a ruler, and if ruling is the meaning of the *imago*, it is not clear how the fact that God gave the status of ruler as a gift resolves the problem of non-functionality.

Bolt's second resource is somewhat more promising. In addition to emphasizing the gift-based nature of the *imago*, Bolt contends that the image "is properly oriented towards what Christ will do."²⁹ Here Bolt draws on the New Testament's emphasis that Christ alone is the true image of God (Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4). If this is the case, then he alone is the one who truly serves as God's vice regent on earth, imitating the divine attributes, and/or carrying out the task of

²⁷ Bolt, *Economic Shalom*, 29.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

being the created co-creator. The rest of us all fall short of Christ's perfection and can only wait in anticipation of being transformed into the likeness of God's Son (Rom. 8:29). This means that even those among us with the greatest abilities cannot hope to carry out our vocation as God's image bearers adequately. Instead, we can only look forward to the day when the rule of the Son will be fully realized. Thus, "those who are presently incapable of acting in rule are still divine image bearers called into Christ's work."³⁰

2. The Anthropocentrism Worry

Another common worry that has particular relevance to functional views like this has to do with the anthropocentric nature of the image and concerns about the corresponding denigration of the rest of creation.³¹ After all, only human persons are made in the image of God; we are the creatures who uniquely reflect the Creator in the world.

This worry tends to manifest itself in two distinct ways. First, some argue that the anthropocentric nature of the *imago* leads people to downplay the very real commonalities that humans have with the rest of creation. The logic of the *imago* has traditionally led theologians to focus on identifying something about human persons that makes them unique in creation: some capacity only humans have or function that only we can perform. But humans are not the only creatures that think, will, feel, communicate, or relate. We are not even the only creatures that reflect God's glory in creation. After all, "The heavens proclaim the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1). Consequently, to maintain the uniqueness of human persons as the divine image bearers, theologians have often downplayed, or even ignored, data highlighting the many ways in which these gifts, abilities, and functions are on display throughout creation.

The second concern is related to the first. By emphasizing the lofty status of the human person in creation, creation as a whole can easily come to be seen as something "lower" than humanity, that over which human persons stand in virtue of their unique capacities and/or function. This concern is particularly keen for those who define the image in terms of the

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ For a good summary of this argument, see H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

command to “rule” over the rest of creation (Gen. 1:26). Indeed, many think the language of “ruling,” “subduing,” or “having dominion over” is inherently problematic.³² Yet even the co-creator approach views creation primarily as an instrument that human persons use to accomplish their loftier purpose. In recent years, this utilitarian view of creation has come under increased attack for the ways in which it has contributed to environmental concerns and a dangerously consumerist mindset.³³

The most common way that theologies of vocation have for responding to this concern focuses on the second concern: instrumentalizing creation. And the typical response is simply to deny its basic validity. Instead, these theologians contend that humanity has been given its task for the well being of creation. Chad Brand thus argues that the mandate to “rule and subdue” carries with it two distinct responsibilities: one to humanity and one to creation itself.³⁴ Living faithfully as image bearers should lead to the flourishing of all creation. This is the explicit focus of those who emphasize the language of co-creation. On this view, creation has inherent capacities it cannot actualize apart from the nurturing activity of human agents. That is why Adam and Eve were given the task of *cultivating* a garden in Eden, a garden that they were supposed to expand throughout the surrounding wilderness. This vision of bringing forth order from chaos, bringing out the goodness inherent in the created order, lies at the heart of most attempts to respond to the anthropocentrism worry. Thus, rather than viewing creation as a mere instrument that humanity uses to accomplish some higher purpose, creation is an intrinsic part of humanity’s calling as image bearers.

A further response might question some of the assumptions that ground the worry. First, many assume that an instrumental view of creation entails a low view of creation. Yet this hardly follows. My laptop is merely an instrument that I use to accomplish a wide range of purposes, but it is not clear why this would require me to have a low view of my laptop. Indeed, whenever someone asks what object I would grab if my house was burning down, I always

³² See esp. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM, 1985).

³³ See esp. Douglas John Hall, *Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship*, Library of Christian Stewardship (Grand Rapids : New York: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. ; Friendship Press, 1986).

³⁴ Brand, *Flourishing Faith*, 3.

indicate my laptop. So it is entirely possible to view something as an instrument and still view it as having tremendous value. Of course, we might contend that the worry actually comes from the fact that such a view places greater value on the human person, just as I would hope that most would view me as more valuable than my laptop. Once again, though, a low view of creation does not necessarily follow from such a framework. I value coffee less than I value my children, but that doesn't mean I have a low view of coffee. Quite the opposite! A second common assumption is that an instrumental view of creation entails that creation does not have a purpose of its own. If creation is merely an instrument that humans use to fulfill their own purpose, there is no way for us to value creation in and of itself. Here we might ask whether it is really necessary for creation to have a distinct purpose of its own. Theologians have long argued that creation's purpose is intrinsically tied to that of human persons, an account that finds support from verses like Rom. 8:22, where all of creation awaits the consummation of human redemption. Even if we set this response aside, we could still argue that nothing in a functional view of the image requires us to maintain that creation's *only* purpose is to serve as the instrument of human self-fulfillment. It's entirely possible that creation has some further purpose of its own, maybe even a purpose that is not explicitly addressed in the biblical texts.³⁵

The second part of the anthropocentric worry thus does not seem to carry much weight. Interestingly, though, few theologies of vocation explicitly address the first concern: the tendency to emphasize human uniqueness in a way that downplays our commonality with the rest of creation. Indeed, many theologies of vocation exemplify precisely this, focusing primarily on the fact that humans alone have been given this particular task, often going so far as to highlight the unique capacities (rationality, freedom, etc.) that allow us to carry out this unique function. Indeed, as J. P. Moreland argues, functional views of the image seem to require some kind of capacity view as their underlying assumption.³⁶ After all, if it weren't for the unique capacities of humanity, how would we carry out the function of ruling the earth or drawing

³⁵ Paul Griffiths offers a recent version of this argument in *Decreation: The Last Things of All Creatures* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014).

³⁶ J. P. Moreland, *The Recalcitrant Imago Dei* (London: Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd, 2009).

forth its inherent capacities? Although I do not want to divert our discussion into an analysis of capacity views of the image, but it's worth pointing out here that such views have been widely rejected by both biblical scholars and theologians. To the extent that a functional view relies on this kind of capacity view, then, we have reasons for thinking that we might have a problem.

Instead of emphasizing the unique capacities of human persons as the ground for a functional view, then, a more adequate response would return to Bolt's emphasis on the gracious nature of our status as image bearers. Rather than suggesting that God chose us as his image bearers because of our unique capacities, thus making capacities integral to a functional view of the image, we might suggest instead that God chose humanity for his own inscrutable reasons. Our capacities are still *relevant* since they are the means by which we carry out this function, but they are no longer necessary to a functional view in the way suggested above. This would also allow us to place greater emphasis on the essential creatureliness of human persons, noting our continuity with the rest of creation, without worrying that such an emphasis might undermine the uniqueness of humanity's status as divine image bearers.

3. The Individualism Worry

A third worry arises from the fact that we often talk about the image in thoroughly individualist terms. This is most prevalent in capacity views of the image. Traditionally, capacity views are defined in terms of having the relevant sorts of capacities regardless of whether anyone else is around to see you use them. However, functional accounts raise the same concern when the function is defined as something that the individual can accomplish on his or her own. Some might object that this worry is easily addressed by defining the function as something that requires more than one person (e.g. ruling the world). But such a response misses the fact that this has more to do with the *scope* of the task rather than its essential nature. In other words, suppose that Adam was given the task of being God's created co-creator, cultivating creation so as to draw out its hidden potentialities. From one perspective, this is a task that Adam can carry out just fine on his own. My wife gardens by herself all the time and does a fine job with it. Adam could certainly cultivate a *larger* garden if he had help, but that is about extending the scope of the function, not its inherent meaning. On most functional accounts, then, it seems that Adam could have truly lived as an image bearer by

himself in the garden. The creation of Eve just enabled humanity to extend the scope of its work.

At first glance, it might seem rather odd that *any* view of the image could be developed in a way that would downplay the importance of relationality. After all, human persons were created in the image of the triune God, who is himself eternally relational. Many find at least a hint of this divine relationality in the plural pronouns God uses to refer to himself in Gen. 1:26. And then there is the famous scene in the following chapter when God declares that it is not good for Adam to be alone in the garden (2:17), thus declaring the fundamental importance of relationality to fulfill all that God deems to be “good” for humanity. For the purposes of understanding the *imago Dei*, however, two points need to be kept in mind. First, many question whether we should understand the plural pronouns in Genesis 1 as conveying the idea that there is some kind of relationality in the divine being. Even though we have good reasons to believe this from other texts, these scholars contend that we should not import those later theological notions into a text that has to be read within the monotheistic framework of Jewish beliefs. Second, however we understand the relationship between the creation narrative of Genesis 1 and that of Genesis 2, we should at least acknowledge that there is no explicit reference to the *imago Dei* in Genesis 2. This means we cannot simply presume that the “not good” of Genesis 2 was intended to be heard as conveying anything relevant to the image. Instead, the two narratives may well be teaching two distinct truths about what it means to be human—we are made in the image *and* we are relational beings—rather than thinking that the second truth necessarily unfolds the meaning of the first.

With that in mind, it becomes easier to see how people could understand the image of God in Genesis 1 as something that could be true about an individual human irrespective of particular relationships. What remains to be seen, however, is why exactly this should be viewed as a problem. The key again is to return to the notion that the *imago Dei* has typically been viewed as conveying something centrally important about what it means to be human. Defining the *imago* in individualist terms thus seems to contribute to worries about the rampant individualism of the western intellectual tradition. Since at least the early twentieth century, scholars in many disciplines have argued against this view of humanity, with the result

that it is now almost a truism that human persons are inherently relational beings. Thus, any individualistic view of the *imago* is viewed as returning to a view of humanity that is outdated, truncated, and tragic.

To my knowledge, this concern has gone largely unnoticed in theologies of vocation. Most seem to assume that they have addressed the relational by emphasizing the scope of the task, failing to recognize the lingering individualism inherent in their definition of the image. I think a more adequate response would be to acknowledge this implicit individualism but to deny that it creates a problem for a functional view. The individualist worry begins with the assumption that an individualist definition of the *imago Dei* entails an individualist view of humanity itself. This is grounded on a further assumption that the *imago Dei* conveys the whole truth of humanity such that anything not included in our view of the *imago* should be viewed as at least peripheral to our understanding of humanity. Although the *imago* has often served as this kind of all-encompassing anthropological concept, this is neither necessary nor helpful. It is entirely possible to view the *imago* as *centrally important* to our view of humanity, but not in such a way that it *exhausts the entirety* of what it means to be human. If this is the case, then it is entirely possible that the creation narratives are teaching two distinct but important truths about what it means to be human: (1) we are made in the image of God and (2) we are relational beings. If this is the case, we can easily contend that the *imago* has a definition that is inherently individualistic (e.g. cultivating creation) while still maintaining the necessity of having thoroughly relational anthropologies.

4. The Spiritualization Worry

At first glance, our fourth worry might seem to be one that should not trouble our functionalized visions of the *imago*. The concern here is that theologians have commonly defined the image in purely spiritual terms. The human body is not a part of the image itself. Arguments for this position have generally come in two forms. First, God himself is purely spiritual. Since the image has to do with reflecting God's own nature, the image must be spiritual as well. This does not mean, however, that we need to have a low view of the body. Indeed, many who held this position argued that the body plays an important mediatorial as the means by which we reflect this spiritual reality in the material world of creation. In other

words, although the image itself is spiritual, the image cannot actually be reflected in a material world unless it is reflected through some material object like the human body. Indeed, they often contended that the human body was specifically shaped for the purpose of carrying out this mediatorial role, referring to the body as the “image of the image.” Nonetheless, the image itself was defined in purely spiritual terms as a reflection of God’s own spiritual nature.

A second argument developed from the ways in which human capacities were traditionally understood. In the modern world, it has become common to think of capacities like rationality and volition as *embodied* capacities. In other words, I have the capacity for rationality simply because I have the right kinds of body parts (esp. the right kind of brain) organized in the right kinds of ways. Thus, we struggle even to envision what it would look like for human persons to have these kinds of capacities apart from the bodies that enable them. In more traditional ways of understanding human capacities, things like rationality and volition were capacities of the *soul*, not the *body*. From a theological perspective, since other beings can have the same kinds of capacities without requiring a body (e.g. God and angels), it follows that embodiment is not necessary to exemplify such capacities. Similarly, since most theologians have understood the human person as continuing to exist after the death of the physical body, along with the corresponding conviction that the person continues to exercise these capacities in this disembodied state, it must be the case that these capacities are capacities of the soul and not the body. Thus, for those who define the *imago Dei* according to some capacity or set of capacities, it follows that the image will be viewed as a spiritual rather than an embodied reality.

Although I have focused on human capacities as a way of helping us understand the logic behind viewing the image as purely spiritual, the basic framework extends to a functional view as well. If human persons serve to reflect a God who is purely spiritual, and if we remain human even in a disembodied state between our death and eventual resurrection, then it follows that the *imago Dei* must be a primarily spiritual reality.

Here we have another concern that has gone largely unaddressed in the literature on vocation. Most seem to assume that functional views have little to fear from this worry given that they necessarily emphasize the importance of the material world, including human

bodies.³⁷ After all, without creation we would have nothing to rule over, no potentialities to cultivate, no place in which to imitate God's attributes. And without our bodies we would have no way of carrying out these particular functions in the created world. Yet it is not entirely clear that this latter conclusion holds. Insofar as God himself rules, creates, and exhibits his attributes, these must be functions that a purely spiritual being can carry out. Why presume, then, that a functional account of the *imago* requires embodiment? Instead, it would seem to be much more consistent to maintain that the *imago* is inherently spiritual and that the human body is just the means by which human persons carry out this spiritual vocation in our current state.

A more promising response would be to recognize that when the biblical texts refer to human persons as being made in the image of God, they make no attempt to isolate this truth to just the "spiritual" aspects of humanity. Instead, the texts seem to have the whole human person in mind. Indeed, if we move slightly beyond the creation narratives, we see that Seth is also said to be "in the image" of his father Adam (Gen. 5:3). In this context, the image almost certainly includes Seth's body, suggesting that the same would probably be true of the earlier image texts. If this is the case, then the body is integral rather than merely instrumental to the *imago Dei*. Although God himself is a spiritual being, it thus seems to be the case that he has designed us to represent and/or imitate him as material beings in a material world. It is only as whole persons that we image God in the world as he intended.

If this is the case, then we might need to modify our earlier assumptions about humans continuing to image God in the intermediate state. If imaging God is something that humans are called to do in creation, then it is entirely possible that we do *not* image God in the state between our death and our resurrection. And indeed, none of the texts that suggest the possibility of such an intermediate state make any connection between this state and the *imago Dei* (e.g. Mt. 22:23-30; Luke 16:19-31; Php. 1:20-24; 2 Cor. 5:1-10). This would mean that although we can still think of the intermediate state as potentially superior to our current

³⁷ It is also possible that many fail to address this concern because they affirm some form of Christian physicalism, a view that rejects the idea that human persons comprise the union of two distinct substances: the *body* and the *soul*. Instead, physicalism maintains that human persons simply are physical beings. On such a view, the *imago Dei* must include our bodies since there is no additional substance to which it could refer.

existence in some ways (e.g. experiencing greater intimacy with God and increased victory over sin), we should also view it as a tragic condition in which we are no longer able to live out our purpose as those called to live as God's image bearers in creation. The true telos for the *imago Dei* lies does not arrive until the new creation and the resurrection of the body.

5. The Performance Worry

The final worry comes from the fact that a functional account of the image seems to require a performative understanding of humanity in which our identity is constituted fundamentally by what we *do*. We have already seen the challenges this creates for those who are not able to carry out the required function. Another concern has to do with how this affects the self-identity of even those who can. Such a view of the human person could easily contribute to a long-standing tendency for us to view being human as a project that we achieve through our own efforts. The continued proliferation of self-help literature demonstrates that this idea has not lost any of its appeal. Even in middle school, if not earlier, students struggle with the need to achieve success through performance, creating the conditions either for significant anxiety or the need to lower the bar of expectations in order to facilitate a greater sense of performative success. Without careful nuance, we may end up conveying to people the notion that their standing before God depends entirely on the extent to which we perform adequately, a framework that stands in stark contrast to the grace-based humanity that we see so clearly in the life of Jesus.

Some will certainly respond to this concern with precisely this emphasis on grace and the good news of Jesus Christ. As we have already seen, John Bolt deals with the exclusion worry by appealing to the fact that the *imago Dei* is both a gift that we receive graciously from God and a calling that will only be fully accomplished by Jesus in his eschatological kingdom. Both of these perspectives would seem to offer resources for addressing the performance worry as well. If the image is a gift, then it cannot be something that we earn through the adequacy of our performance. And if the image is something Jesus alone can achieve, then we cannot view it as a task that depends entirely, or even partly, on our efforts. Either way, the performative nature of the *imago* is undermined. Thus, although Bolt emphasizes the

importance of “performing work before God as his image bearer,”³⁸ he also contends that a grace-based understanding of vocation downplays the fundamental importance of human effort, even “leaving room for rest with an eternal perspective.”³⁹ Consequently, “it is important to remind ourselves and others that our identity, dignity, and worth as image bearers of God are not determined by our work, our productivity, or our achievements.”⁴⁰

As important as Bolt’s response might be, however, questions remain. First, we should repeat the question raised earlier. Can Bolt’s emphasis on a functional view of the image really sustain his grace-based response to either the exclusion or performance worries? Or is it the case that Bolt has simply layered an emphasis on grace over the top of an essentially performative vision of humanity. That brings us to a second concern. Bolt’s solution presents Jesus as the solution to the problems generated by a functional account of the image. But this creates a situation in which the performative understanding of humanity is actually more fundamental than the grace-based view that we find in Jesus. At the core, humanity really is defined in terms of its ability to perform, our standing before God determined by the extent to which we perform adequately. This was God’s original plan for human persons, and, since God does not abandon his plans, remains his intention for human persons. Thus, even if we emphasize the importance of grace later in the narrative of redemption, it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that even in Christ our relationship with God depends primarily on our ability to perform. Even if we do not explicitly affirm such a works based account of our relationship with God—and to be clear, none of the theologians I have surveyed in this essay would affirm any such thing—the implication remains. Indeed, I wonder if the fact that humans seem to face a continual temptation toward self-reliance and performance in their relationship with God isn’t somehow connected to a tendency to see those as inherent in the creation narratives themselves.

³⁸ Bolt, *Economic Shalom*, 30.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

The Presence View

We have thus seen that many scholars draw on a functional view of the image to fund their theologies of vocation. But we have also seen that this endeavor faces a number of important worries. Although I have already suggested a number of ways in which these scholars might address those problem, some lingering concerns remain, most importantly those related to the exclusion and performance worries. Before we move into the final part of our discussion, then, I would like to suggest one additional way of strengthening such accounts, albeit by offering a significantly revised definition of what actually constitutes the *imago Dei*.

To begin, it's important to recognize that the various functional views are not as closely tied to the meaning of the *imago Dei* as it first appears. Although I noted earlier that the functional view has the strongest support among biblical scholars, that is not entirely accurate. Instead, most biblical scholars recognize that the command to "rule" creation in Gen. 1:26 actually comes as a *consequence* of being made in the image of God. As the NIV translators render the verse, "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind if our image, in our likeness, *so that* they may rule....'" The italicized words offer one English translation of the Hebrew *waw* conjunction, a word that has the ability to convey a notoriously broad range of semantic options. Nonetheless, most contend that in this case, it likely expresses a causal relationship between the image and dominion. In other words, *because* we are made in the image we are to rule over creation. If this is the case, though, it would seem that dominion is the *consequence* rather than the *meaning* of creation.

To find the meaning of the image itself, biblical scholars routinely look instead to the concept of idolatry in the ancient world. There is thus a clear consensus among biblical scholars that "image" (*šelem*) and "likeness" (*dēmût*) need to be understood as part of the semantic domain of language used to refer to idols in the ancient Near East.⁴¹ According to Clines, *šelem* and its cognates "are used predominantly in a literal sense, of three-dimensional objects which represent gods, men, or other living beings."⁴² Middleton similarly concludes that *šelem*

⁴¹ See, for example Num 33:52; 2 Kgs 11:18; 2 Chron 23:17; Eze 7:20; 16:17; Amos 5:26.

⁴² David J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19 (1968): 73. Although Clines goes on to note that *šelem* and its cognates can be used metaphorically, even in those contexts the notion of physical form remains prominent (*ibid.*, 75.).

“primarily designates three-dimensional cult statues of various false gods,” going on to state that “any Old Testament scholar worth her salt will acknowledge that the semantic range of *šelem* ...includes idols.”⁴³ *Demut* is a somewhat less common term for idolatry, but it too functions in that same semantic domain.⁴⁴ Although *demut* has occasionally been read as weakening the meaning of *šelem* to reduce its associations with physical idols, most biblical scholars now view the two as largely synonymous in the context of Genesis 1.⁴⁵ Thus, James Barr concludes: “There is an antecedent probability that the term ‘image of God’ might suggest, and might therefore require some delimitation against, the then familiar use of images or idols of the divine.”⁴⁶

Although there are various lines of inquiry we might pursue in delimiting the image of God against the broader notion of idols, our purposes here require us to focus only on the idea of divine presence and how it relates to a physical idol. Here it may help if we push back on the common notion that idols were *mere* symbols of divine beings. According to common biblical rhetoric, idols are nothing but metal and wood, physical emblems with no true power.⁴⁷ An idol may “represent” a divine being in some abstract way, similar to the way a painting might be said to represent Peter Pan, but there is nothing intrinsically significant about these objects that human hands have created to worship their false gods.

Such rhetoric may be theologically justified, but it can also lead us to miss the true significance of idols in the broader theology of the ancient Near East. In that context, an idol was far more than a mere symbol; it was a real manifestation of divine presence.⁴⁸ Although the idol might appear to be of purely human origin, it became more through a ritual of

⁴³ J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2005), 25.

⁴⁴ 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; Edward Mason Curtis, “Man as the Image of God in Genesis in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Parallels” (Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania, 1984).

⁴⁵ The fact that *demut* itself is often used with reference to physical form also suggests that it is not used here to weaken that aspect of *šelem*’s meaning (John F. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel* [Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 2000]).

⁴⁶ Barr, “The Image of God,” 15. See also Curtis, “Man as the Image of God” and Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth*.

⁴⁷ E.g., Ps. 115:1-18; 135:15-18; Isa. 44:6-23; 45:20; 46:7; Jer. 10:3-16; Hab. 2:18.

⁴⁸ For a good discussion of this, see José Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 69, no. 1 (1978): 1–15.

consecration common throughout the region.⁴⁹ In this “washing” or “opening of the mouth” ceremony, the physical idol was imbued with the presence of a divine being such that it became a “living idol.”⁵⁰ By pouring himself or herself into the idol, the divine being became so closely associated with it that actions taken against the idol were considered blasphemous and whoever had possession of the idol in some way had possession of the god’s own presence.⁵¹ José Faur thus concludes, “The fundamental principle...was the identification of a god with his idol.”⁵² No mere symbol, the idol has become the physical medium through which that god manifests his or her own divine presence in creation.

This does not mean that such scholars reject the functional view of the image entirely. Indeed, they continue to emphasize the functional view as importantly related to understanding the image as manifesting divine presence. Because we are God’s chosen means for manifesting his presence in creation, we are to carry out the function of serving as his representatives. In other words, the function is a consequence of God’s prior action of establishing us as his idols in the world.

Although this might seem like a relatively minor adjustment given the fact that it continues to emphasize function as integral to the *imago Dei*. Yet it is an adjustment with significant implications for some of the worries outlined above. First, viewing the image as primarily about divine presence seems to eliminate the exclusion worry entirely. A divine being does not depend on the capacities of the idol for manifesting presence in the world. All beings have some set of capacities, of course, but it’s not as though the divine being determines to manifest his or her presence through a statue because it has a better set of capacities than some other statue. Instead, the divine being manifest presence through the idol irrespective of the fact that *all* of the statue’s capacities are irrelevant to divine presence. If the divine being is going to be present in that statue, it will only be as a consequence of the divine determination to do so. To make the implications for the *imago Dei* clear, this means that whether a human

⁴⁹ Michael B. Dick, *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth : The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 1999).

⁵⁰ Faur, “The Biblical Idea of Idolatry.”

⁵¹ Faur points out the significance this had in the ancient world for protecting your idols from being captured by your enemies (ibid., 8).

⁵² Ibid., 7.

person is in fact an image bearer depends entirely on God's action rather than whether he or she has any particular capacities (or incapacities) or is performing in any particular way. This still allows the possibility that some people could be entirely cut off from God's presence, bringing to an end their status as God's image bearers, but this would also be a consequence of God's activity rather than human capacities or performances.

This would also have clear implications for addressing the performance worry. Rather than defining humanity in essentially performative terms, only bringing in grace at a later stage as a response to our failure to perform properly, the divine presence view contends that our status as image bearers *always* depended first on God's gracious action. As important as our performance might be, it always comes as a response to God's prior initiative. This allows us to affirm greater continuity between creation and redemption, continuity that undercuts any temptation to understand our relationship with God at any stage as ultimately grounded on human performance while still affirming the significance of human action.