

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ANTHROPOLOGY

The Doctrine of Humanity

Created, Fallen, and Redeemable — What It Means to Be Human Before God

UNIT 3

The Image of God

Lesson 8

The Image of God

Structural, Functional, and Relational Dimensions

“Unpacking What It Means to Bear God’s Likeness”

Key Texts: Genesis 1:26–28; Colossians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 3:10; Romans 8:29

“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”

Colossians 1:15, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Lesson 7 established the foundation: the human creature alone, of all creatures, bears the image and likeness of its Creator; the Hebrew vocabulary of *tselem* and *demut* establishes the representative and relational character of the image; and the comprehensive Reformed account, the image as characterizing the whole person in her total orientation toward God, is more adequate than any narrower interpretation. Lesson 8 now opens the architecture of the *imago Dei* and examines its interior rooms. The image is not a simple, univocal property; it is a rich, multidimensional reality that illuminates the human creature from six distinct but mutually reinforcing angles: structural, functional, relational, moral, royal, and teleological. Each dimension captures something genuinely present in the biblical witness, and together they produce the most comprehensive and most theologically fruitful account of what it means to be made in the image of the living God.

The lesson makes no attempt to be merely academic in its treatment of these dimensions. Each dimension of the *imago Dei* carries immediate pastoral and ethical implications, and those implications will be drawn out alongside the exegetical and theological exposition. The structural dimension illuminates the cognitive and spiritual capacities that make genuinely human life possible. The functional dimension establishes the vocational dignity of every human being as God's appointed vice-regent in the creation. The relational dimension reveals the Trinitarian grounding of human sociality and the irreducible interpersonal character of human existence. The moral dimension establishes the accountability of every human being before the God whose moral nature is reflected in the creature He has made. The royal dimension provides the theological foundation for the cultural mandate and for the distinctly human calling to develop the potential of the created order. And the teleological dimension sets the whole doctrine in an eschatological frame, pointing the student toward the One in whom the image is fully realized and toward whose likeness every believer is being progressively conformed.

The organizing principle of this lesson is Colossians 1:15: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (NASB 1995). This verse stands at the center of the entire doctrine of the *imago Dei* and provides the Christological key that unlocks the theological significance of every dimension we will examine. The structural, functional, relational, moral, royal, and teleological dimensions of the image in the human creature are not self-standing attributes that can be understood in isolation from the God whose image the creature bears; they are dimensions of a representational relationship between the creature and the Creator that can only be properly understood when the original, the Son who is the perfect image of the invisible Father, is kept in view. To study the image of God in the human creature is, ultimately, to study the God whose image it is, and supremely to study the Son in whom that image is most fully and most gloriously displayed.

This lesson proceeds in six sections, one for each dimension of the *imago Dei*. The sixth section, on the teleological dimension and Christ as the perfect image, functions also as the doxological conclusion of the lesson, the point toward which the five preceding dimensions have been building. Together, the six sections provide a comprehensive account of what it means to bear the image of God that is at once rigorously exegetical, theologically integrative, pastorally applicable, and doxologically oriented. The student who has worked through both Lessons 7 and 8 will possess the exegetical and theological framework needed to engage Lesson 9, the image after the fall, and Lesson 10, the restoration of the image in Christ, with the depth and nuance that those doctrines require.

I. The Structural Dimension: Capacities That Reflect the Divine Nature

Rationality, Moral Conscience, Creativity, Language, Self-Awareness, and Spiritual Capacity

A. *The Endowment of Structural Capacities*

The structural dimension of the imago Dei is the dimension that the patristic and medieval tradition most consistently emphasized, and it remains the dimension most immediately evident to reflection on what distinguishes the human creature from every other creature in the created order. The structural dimension holds that the human creature possesses a set of capacities, cognitive, moral, aesthetic, linguistic, spiritual, that are reflections of, and participations in, the divine nature in ways that no other creature's properties are. These capacities are not identical to the divine nature; they are creaturely analogues of it, reflections of the infinite in the finite, expressions of the divine character in the medium of the created order. But they are genuine reflections, not arbitrary similarities, and the fact that the human creature possesses them is directly and causally connected to the fact that the human creature was made in the image of the God who possesses them in their infinite, uncreated form.

Rationality is the capacity most consistently identified by the tradition as the primary structural analogue of the divine nature in the human creature. The God of the Scriptures is a God who reasons, who plans, who speaks meaningful language, who executes purposes with wisdom and understanding; and the human creature made in His image is a creature who reasons, who plans, who speaks meaningful language, who executes purposes with wisdom and understanding, imperfectly and finitely, but genuinely. Romans 12:2's call to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind" and 2 Corinthians 10:5's call to "take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" presuppose that the mind is a genuine faculty of the image-bearer, capable of genuine transformation and genuine obedience, not merely a biological mechanism whose outputs are predetermined by neural chemistry. The Proverbs' sustained celebration of wisdom and understanding as the highest creaturely goods is grounded in the conviction that the human creature's rational capacities are a genuine participation in the wisdom of the God who laid the foundations of the earth by wisdom and established the heavens by understanding (Proverbs 3:19).

The structural dimension also encompasses the moral conscience, the aesthetic sense, the capacity for language and symbolic thought, the self-awareness that enables the human creature to know itself as a self, and the spiritual awareness that makes the human creature constitutionally incapable of being fully satisfied with anything less than the God in whose image it is made. Augustine's celebrated observation at the opening of the Confessions, "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in You", is a theological account of the structural spiritual capacity of the image-bearer: the creature whose constitution has been shaped in the image of the infinite God cannot be filled with anything finite, because it was made for a fellowship that only the infinite God can provide. This structural spiritual hunger is not a defect of the creature but a feature of its creation in the image of God, and it is perhaps the most powerful evidence in the creature's own experience that it was made for something, for Someone, beyond itself.

B. *Structural Capacities and the Problem of Gradations*

The greatest pastoral and ethical challenge of the structural interpretation, as noted in Lesson 7, is the problem of gradations: if the image consists in specific cognitive or spiritual capacities, then those whose cognitive or spiritual capacities are diminished appear to bear a diminished image, and the ethic of universal human dignity that the doctrine of the imago Dei is meant to ground is placed on unstable foundations. This challenge is real and must be addressed with theological seriousness rather than dismissed. The Reformed tradition's response to it is two-fold. First, the structural capacities that constitute the image are not to be identified with the exercise or the measurable expression of those capacities but with their possession as constitutive features of what the human creature is. The severely cognitively disabled person possesses the capacities of the image not in a lesser degree

but in a form that the fall, disease, or genetic disorder has prevented from full expression, and the possession, not the expression, is the ground of dignity.

Second, and more fundamentally, the Reformed comprehensive account of the imago Dei refuses to locate the image in any single structural capacity, however important that capacity may be. The image is the whole person in her total orientation toward God, and the structural capacities are one dimension of that whole-person reality rather than its entirety. The infant who has not yet developed full cognitive capacities, the person with severe intellectual disability who will never exercise them in the ways we typically recognize, the person in a vegetative state whose cognitive processes have been catastrophically impaired, all of them are image-bearers of the living God not because of what they can do cognitively but because of what they are ontologically: creatures made in the image of the God who formed them and breathed into them the breath of life, and whose image remains stamped upon them regardless of the condition of any particular faculty. The structural dimension illuminates the image; it does not exhaust it.

The theological significance of the structural dimension for the doctrine of the Trinity deserves particular attention. The God in whose image the human creature is made is not a solitary monad but the eternal community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the structural capacities of the image-bearer, particularly the capacity for rational self-reflection, knowledge, and love, bear the mark of this Trinitarian origin. Augustine's Trinitarian analogies in *De Trinitate* (Books IX–XIV), the triadic structures of mind / knowledge / love, memory / understanding / will, and lover / beloved / love that he finds in the human soul, are not merely playful intellectual exercises; they are attempts to read in the structural constitution of the image-bearer the Trinitarian character of the God whose image it bears. Whether or not Augustine's specific triadic analogies are exegetically demonstrable, the principle behind them is sound: the structural capacities of the human creature bear the shape of their Trinitarian origin, and the student who attends carefully to the inner life of the image-bearer will find there, however dimly and however distortedly, a reflection of the Trinitarian life of God.

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Romans 12:2, NASB 1995

II. The Functional Dimension: Vice-Regents of the Creator

The Cultural Mandate as the Expression of the Image in the Created Order

A. Dominion as the Function of the Image

The functional dimension of the imago Dei is established by the direct grammatical and theological connection in Genesis 1:26–28 between the declaration of the image and the commissioning of the dominion mandate. The text does not present these as two separate things; it presents them as one: “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’” The “let them rule” follows immediately and directly from the “in Our image,” establishing the exercise of dominion as the commissioned function of the image-bearing creature. The image is not the grounds from which dominion is separately inferred; the dominion is the commissioned expression of the image in the created order. To be made in the image of God is, at least in part, to be appointed as God's vice-regent in the creation, the creature through whom the Creator's sovereign lordship over the created order is to be expressed and exercised.

The theological background of the functional dimension in the Ancient Near Eastern royal ideology, the practice of placing images (tsalmey) of kings in territories to represent their authority, provides the cultural context within which the Genesis 1:26 declaration would have been heard by its original audience. The image-bearer is not merely a being who resembles God; he is God's appointed representative in the creation, charged with exercising the governance of the creation on behalf of the One whose image he bears and to whose authority he is accountable. This royal and representational function is what Psalm 8:5–8 celebrates: God has crowned the human creature with glory and majesty and put all things under his feet, not because the creature is intrinsically glorious, but because the Creator has conferred upon it the dignity and the authority of vice-regal governance. The dominion mandate is not a license for exploitation but a commission for stewardship: the vice-regent exercises the authority of the King and is accountable to the King for the manner of its exercise.

The cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (NASB 1995), is the concrete specification of the dominion mandate for the historical situation of the first human beings. The mandate has three components: the biological mandate (be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth), the cultural mandate (subdue it), and the governance mandate (rule over). Together, these three components establish the full scope of the human being's vocation as God's image-bearing vice-regent: to fill the earth with image-bearers, to develop the potential of the created order through culture-making labor, and to govern the created order in accordance with the Creator's purposes. The cultural mandate is not revoked by the fall (it is reaffirmed in Genesis 9:1–7 after the flood) and it is not superseded by the Great Commission (the Great Commission adds a new evangelistic dimension to the mandate without replacing the original cultural and governance dimensions). The human being's vocation as God's image-bearing vice-regent in the creation is as permanent as the image itself.

B. *The Vocational Dignity of Every Form of Human Work*

The functional dimension of the imago Dei establishes the theological dignity of human work as a vocation rather than merely a necessity. Because the human creature is made in the image of the Creator, the God who works, who creates, who governs, who orders chaos into cosmos, the human creature's own work is not a concession to creaturely limitation but a participation in the creative and governance activity of the God whose image it bears. The Reformation recovery of the doctrine of vocation, Luther's insistence that the farmer, the cobbler, and the mother are engaged in genuinely God-honoring callings no less than the monk or the priest, is ultimately grounded in the functional dimension of the imago Dei. Because every form of legitimate human work is an exercise of the vice-regal governance commission given in Genesis 1:28, every form of legitimate human work is theologically significant, not merely instrumentally (as a means of earning income or serving others) but ontologically (as an expression of what the image-bearing creature is made to do and be).

The vocational theology that flows from the functional imago Dei has implications for the way the church engages the full range of human cultural activity. Art, music, literature, architecture, agriculture, science, technology, law, medicine, and governance, all of these are forms of the culture-making and creation-developing activity that the cultural mandate commissions, and all of them carry the theological dignity of activities performed by image-bearers in fulfillment of their God-given vocation. The church that understands this will not treat the “secular” vocations of its members as theologically second-class activities that must be endured between Sunday services; it will equip its members to understand their daily work as a primary arena of the image-bearing vocation, and will celebrate the artist, the engineer, the farmer, and the nurse as image-bearers exercising their God-given vice-regal calling in the specific domains of the creation that have been entrusted to their stewardship.

The fall has not cancelled the cultural mandate, but it has profoundly complicated its exercise. Genesis 3:17–19's account of the cursed ground and the toil with which the image-bearer must now labor to fulfill the mandate establishes that the dominion is no longer exercised in the ease and harmony of the pre-fall state but in the resistance, frustration, and suffering of a creation that has been subjected to futility (Romans 8:20). The cultural mandate continues, but it continues in a creation that pushes back, in which the soil yields thorns alongside the

crops, in which the institutions designed to promote human flourishing are corrupted by the sin of the image-bearers who built them, and in which every cultural achievement is shadowed by the possibility of misuse, exploitation, and ultimately the death that will bring the image-bearer's particular exercise of the mandate to an end. The theology of the cultural mandate must hold simultaneously the genuine dignity and the genuine frustration of human cultural activity in the fallen world, and it can do so precisely because it understands the mandate as the exercise of a commission given to image-bearers who are simultaneously God's appointed vice-regents and fallen creatures in need of the redemption that the Last Adam has secured.

III. The Relational Dimension: Created for the Communion That Reflects the Trinity

Vertical, Horizontal, and Vocational Relationships as the Expression of the Image

A. *The Trinitarian Ground of Human Sociality*

The relational dimension of the imago Dei is perhaps the dimension that carries the most immediate and most comprehensive implications for the daily life of the believer, because it addresses not merely what the human creature is or what it is called to do but the network of relationships in which its existence as a creature is always and irreducibly embedded. The human creature was not made for isolation; it was made for relationship, with God, with other human beings, and with the created order over which it has been appointed as vice-regent. And the theological grounding of this relational constitution is not primarily sociological or psychological but Trinitarian: the God in whose image the human creature is made is Himself an eternal community of relationship, the fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit whose inner life is the model for every genuine creaturely community.

The declaration of Genesis 1:26, "Let Us make man in Our image", is addressed from within the divine community to the divine community. The human creature is made in the image of the triune God, and its relational constitution is the creaturely reflection of the Trinitarian relationality of its Creator. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in eternal, mutual, self-giving love, in the perichoretic fellowship of the three persons, in the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit, in the infinite mutual knowledge and love that constitute the divine inner life. The human creature made in the image of this triune God is constituted for a creaturely analogue of this Trinitarian fellowship: a community of knowing and being known, of loving and being loved, of giving and receiving, that reflects in creaturely form the infinite self-giving love that is the divine inner life. The lonely human being of Genesis 2:18 is an incomplete reflection of the image of the triune God, and the creation of Eve as the ezer kenegdo is the provision of the relational community that the image of the triune God requires.

The vertical dimension of the relational image, the relationship between the human creature and God, is the primary and most fundamental relationship for which the image-bearer is constituted. The human creature was not primarily made for human community; it was made for divine community, for the fellowship with God that Genesis 2's portrait of the pre-fall garden describes and that the fall's rupture makes so devastating. The whole of the biblical narrative is the story of the restoration of this vertical relationship: the covenants are the means by which God draws His people back into fellowship with Himself; the Incarnation is the supreme act of divine condescension to restore a fellowship that sin had broken; and the new creation is the final and permanent realization of the fellowship for which the image-bearer was constituted from the beginning. Revelation 21:3, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them" (NASB 1995), is the eschatological fulfillment of the relational image: the creature, restored and glorified, in permanent, unmediated, unbroken fellowship with the Creator whose image it bears.

B. *Horizontal and Vocational Relationships*

The horizontal dimension of the relational image, the relationships between human beings, is the dimension most immediately visible in the social fabric of human life, and the one whose theological grounding in the imago Dei has the most direct implications for the church's understanding of human community, family, and society. Because every human being bears the image of the same God, every relationship between human beings is a relationship between image-bearers, and this shared image-bearing status is the theological ground of the mutual respect, the genuine accountability, and the sacrificial love that the biblical ethic of human relationships consistently demands. The command to love the neighbor as oneself (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39) presupposes that the neighbor has the same dignity as the self, a presupposition grounded ultimately in the shared imago Dei of the self and the neighbor. The prohibition of murder (Genesis 9:6), the prohibition of cursing (James 3:9), and the command to honor all people (1 Peter 2:17) are all applications of the relational imago Dei: the obligation to treat every human being in accordance with the dignity of the Creator whose image that human being bears.

The marriage relationship, examined in Lesson 4, is the most intimate expression of the horizontal relational image: the one-flesh union of husband and wife is the creaturely analogue of the self-giving communion of the Trinitarian persons, and it is designed from the beginning to display the covenant union of Christ and His church (Ephesians 5:32). The family and the broader community of the church are extensions of this relational image-bearing in which the human creature participates in the community of knowing and loving that reflects the Trinitarian life. The church, as the community of the new creation, is the community in which the relational image is being most fully restored in the present age, the fellowship in which the vertical relationship (with God) and the horizontal relationship (with one another) are being renewed by the Spirit's work of sanctification and will be perfected in the eternal community of the new creation.

The vocational dimension of the relational image, the relationship between the human creature and the created order over which it has been appointed as vice-regent, adds a third axis to the relational structure. The human creature is not merely in relationship with God and with other human beings; it is in relationship with the creation itself, and the character of that relationship is shaped by the functional dimension of the image: the creature is the creation's appointed steward and cultivator, not its exploiter or its victim. The ecological theology that the biblical creation narrative supports, the theology of responsible dominion that neither worships the creation (the error of pantheism and animism) nor treats it with contempt (the error of a certain kind of Gnosticizing Christianity), is grounded in the vocational dimension of the relational image: the creature who bears the image of the Creator of the cosmos is accountable to that Creator for the manner in which it exercises its vice-regal governance of the creation. The care of the creation is not a secular political concern; it is a dimension of the image-bearer's vocation before God.

“Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them.”

Revelation 21:3, NASB 1995

IV. The Moral and Royal Dimensions: Conscience, Accountability, and Vice-Regal Dignity

The Image as the Ground of Moral Seriousness and Kingly Calling

A. The Moral Dimension: Image-Bearing and Ethical Accountability

The moral dimension of the imago Dei is the dimension that establishes the human creature as a being who is genuinely responsible for her choices, not merely subject to behavioral conditioning or genetic determination, but genuinely and freely choosing in ways for which she is held accountable by the God whose moral character her moral constitution reflects. The moral nature of the image-bearer has two inseparable components: the capacity

for moral knowledge (the ability to know what is right and what is wrong, grounded in the moral law inscribed in the human conscience by the Creator) and the accountability for moral choice (the fact that the image-bearer is answerable to the Creator for the use she makes of the moral freedom with which she has been endowed). Both components are essential to the moral dimension of the image: without the capacity for moral knowledge, accountability would be unjust; without accountability, the capacity for moral knowledge would have no ultimate significance.

Paul’s account of the moral conscience in Romans 2:14–16, the passage in which he describes the Gentiles who “do instinctively the things of the Law” and thereby show “the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them” (NASB 1995), is the primary New Testament text for the moral dimension of the imago Dei in the post-fall human creature. The conscience is not a social construct; it is the creaturely echo of the moral character of the God in whose image the creature is made. The unregenerate person who feels genuine remorse for genuine wrongdoing, who recognizes genuine injustice when it is committed against her, who admires genuine virtue when she encounters it, is responding to the moral reality inscribed in her constitution as a creature who, even in the fallen state, retains the broad image of the morally serious God whose image she bears. The noetic effects of sin distort the conscience’s operation, as Romans 1:18–23 makes clear; but they do not destroy it, as the universal human experience of moral awareness demonstrates.

The moral dimension of the imago Dei carries implications for the church’s engagement with the secular culture that deserve careful attention. The consistent appeal to the natural law tradition in the church’s public engagement, the argument from the moral conscience that all human beings share to the ethical conclusions that the Scriptures affirm, is grounded in the moral dimension of the imago Dei. Because every human being bears the image of the morally serious God, every human being has access to the moral law inscribed in the conscience, access that is imperfect, distorted, and insufficient for salvation, but genuine enough to make moral argument possible across the boundary of religious commitment. The Christian who argues for the dignity of unborn human life, the sanctity of marriage, the wrongness of torture, or the obligation of justice for the poor is not merely asserting private religious preferences; she is appealing to the moral constitution that every human being shares as an image-bearer of the morally serious God, and she has good reason to expect that appeal to resonate, however much the suppression of truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18) may distort its reception.

B. *The Royal Dimension: The King’s Image in the Creation*

The royal dimension of the imago Dei, briefly introduced in the discussion of the tselem concept in Lesson 7, deserves fuller development here because of its direct implications for the human creature’s understanding of its own dignity and calling. In the Ancient Near Eastern world, the image of the king, the statue or representation that the king placed in territories he ruled, was not merely a decorative object; it was a legal and political reality. The image represented the king’s presence, authority, and claim in the territory where it was placed. To honor the image was to honor the king; to desecrate the image was to commit treason against the king. When Genesis 1:26–27 describes the human creature as the tselem of God placed in the creation, it is deploying this royal ideology to make a breathtaking theological claim: every human being is the “statue” of the divine King placed in His creation to represent His authority, to bear witness to His claim over the territory, and to exercise governance on His behalf.

The royal dimension of the imago Dei has two direct implications. The first is the radical dignity of every human being: because every human being is the royal image of the divine King, every human being carries the authority and the sacred status that the king’s image carried in the ancient world. To treat a human being with contempt, to exploit or abuse or murder a human being, is not merely a social wrong; it is an act of lese-majesté, an offense against the King whose royal image the condemned person bears. Genesis 9:6’s grounding of the prohibition of murder in the image of God is the clearest expression of this royal logic: whoever sheds the blood of the divine King’s royal image commits an offense against the divine King Himself and must face the penalty that such an

offense demands. The second implication is the radical accountability of every human being: because every human being is the royal image of the divine King, every human being is accountable to that King for the manner in which she exercises the vice-regal governance commission. The image-bearer is not autonomous; she is a representative, and the quality of her representation, the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of her exercise of the dominion mandate, will be assessed by the King whose image she bears and whose authority she represents.

The royal dimension of the *imago Dei* also illuminates the eschatological promise of the reign of the saints. Revelation 5:10 describes the redeemed as a “kingdom and priests to our God,” and 22:5 declares that “they will reign forever and ever.” The eschatological reign of the redeemed is not a new vocation assigned at the consummation; it is the full and final realization of the royal vocation for which the image-bearer was created in Genesis 1:26–28. The vice-regal governance commission given to Adam and renewed in the Noahic covenant and the Abrahamic covenant reaches its eschatological fulfillment in the reign of the redeemed with Christ over the new creation, a reign in which the image-bearing vice-regents of God exercise the governance they were always designed to exercise, in the creation they were always designed to govern, in the presence of the King whose image they perpetually and perfectly bear. The royal dimension of the image is not a pre-fall feature that sin has permanently cancelled; it is an eschatological destiny that sin has delayed and redemption has secured.

V. The Teleological Dimension: The Image Is Forward-Looking

What We Were Created to Be Points to What We Are Being Conformed to Become

A. The Image as Eschatological Trajectory

The teleological dimension of the *imago Dei* is the dimension that most clearly distinguishes the Reformed account of the image from every static, backward-looking interpretation. The image is not merely a description of what the human creature was at the moment of creation, an original state from which the fall represented a departure and to which redemption seeks to return. It is a trajectory: a directedness of the human creature toward a *telos*, a goal, an eschatological consummation in which the image is not merely restored to its original excellence but elevated beyond it into the full conformity to the image of the Son that Romans 8:29 declares to be the predestined destiny of all who belong to Christ. The image of God in the human creature is inherently eschatological: it points, from the very moment of creation, not merely backward to the creating God but forward to the consummating God, to the full realization of the image in the glorified humanity of the risen Lord and in the redeemed who are being conformed to His likeness.

The teleological dimension is implicit in the language of the creation narrative itself. When God declares in Genesis 1:26 that He will make man in His image and according to His likeness, the declaration carries within it an orientation toward the fullness of that image and likeness that the creature, as creature, cannot yet possess. Adam in the garden possesses the image in its original creaturely integrity, but he does not yet possess the image in its eschatological fullness, the fullness that would have been his had he persevered in obedience through the covenant of works and passed through the probationary test into the confirmed and permanent righteousness of the eternal state. The fall represents not merely the loss of what Adam had but the foreclosure of what Adam was moving toward, and redemption in Christ is not merely the restoration of the Adamic state but the attainment, through the Last Adam’s obedience, of the eschatological state that the first Adam forfeited. The image in its eschatological fullness is greater than the image in its Adamic integrity, as the resurrection body is greater than the Edenic body, because the eschatological state involves not merely the integrity of creation but the confirmed and permanent righteousness of glorification.

The New Testament’s language of the progressive renewal of the image makes the teleological dimension explicit. Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:18 describes the present process of sanctification in terms of the image’s progressive restoration: “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (NASB 1995). The image is not a static

possession but a dynamic process, a progressive transformation from one degree of glory to another, accomplished by the Spirit, directed toward the full conformity to the image of the Son that will be realized at glorification. Colossians 3:10 speaks of “the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him”, the present tense participle “being renewed” (*anakainoumenon*) indicating an ongoing process rather than a completed event. And Romans 8:29–30 locates this progressive renewal within the sovereign and certain eschatological plan of God: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son ... and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.” The glorification that completes the image’s restoration is as certain as the predestination that ordained it, because the One who ordained it is the One who sovereignly accomplishes it.

B. Christ as the Perfect Image: The Telos of the Teleological Dimension

The teleological dimension of the *imago Dei* finds its defining content and its ultimate goal in the person of Jesus Christ. Colossians 1:15, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (NASB 1995), is the most important Christological text for the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, and its implications are far-reaching. The word translated “image” is the Greek *eikon* (εἰκών), the same word used in the Septuagint’s translation of Genesis 1:26–27, and its predication of Christ establishes that He is not merely an image-bearer among many but the image, the original, the standard, the eschatological fulfillment of what the human creature’s image-bearing was always designed to point toward. He is the image of the invisible God not in the sense that He resembles the Father in the way that a portrait resembles its subject, but in the sense that He is the perfect, adequate, and sufficient representation of the divine nature in creaturely form, the One in whom the Father is fully present and fully revealed, so that to see the Son is to see the Father (John 14:9).

The identification of Christ as the image of the invisible God establishes three crucial truths about the teleological dimension of the *imago Dei* in human beings. First, it establishes that the image for which humanity was originally created was always, in the eternal purpose of God, a Christological image: the human creature was made in the image of the Son before the Son became incarnate, and the full realization of that image was always destined to occur through the incarnation and glorification of the Son. The creation of humanity in the image of God is, from this perspective, the first act in the story that culminates in the Incarnation, the story of the Son taking on the very creaturely form that was made in His image in order to restore and glorify that form in His own resurrection. Second, it establishes Christ’s humanity as the true and complete expression of what the *imago Dei* is meant to be: to see what the image of God looks like in its full creaturely expression, the student of anthropology must look not at Adam in the garden but at the man Jesus of Nazareth, the One who perfectly reflects the Father’s character in every dimension of His human existence. Third, it establishes the conformity to Christ’s image as the telos toward which the Spirit’s work of renewal in believers is directed: the image that is being progressively restored in sanctification and will be completed in glorification is the image of the incarnate, risen, glorified Son.

The practical import of the Christological definition of the teleological image is considerable and deeply pastoral. The Christian who understands that the goal of the Spirit’s work in her life is not self-improvement or self-actualization but conformity to the image of the Son, who understands that sanctification is fundamentally a Christological process in which the character, the priorities, the loves, and the obedience of Jesus Christ are being progressively formed in her through the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, will approach the disciplines of the Christian life with a fundamentally different orientation than the one who understands it as moral effort or spiritual self-development. Conformity to the image of the Son is not what the Christian achieves; it is what the Spirit accomplishes in the Christian through the means of grace, through the Word, through prayer, through the fellowship of the church, through suffering, and through the slow and often painful process of being “transformed into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18, NASB 1995). The Christian’s vocation is not to produce the image but to behold the Lord, and in beholding, to be transformed into what she beholds.

VI. Christ as the Perfect Image: The Doxological Conclusion

To See What the Imago Dei Looks Like Fully Realized, Look at Jesus

The six dimensions of the imago Dei examined in this lesson, structural, functional, relational, moral, royal, and teleological, are not six separate attributes that the human creature possesses in isolation from one another. They are six perspectives on a single rich reality: the whole person, in her total orientation toward God as His created representative and covenant partner, bearing in every dimension of her existence the stamp of the One who made her and the trajectory of the One she is being conformed to become. And the unity of these six dimensions is found not in the creature but in the Creator, not in the image as it presently exists in the fallen and partially restored human creature, but in the image as it perfectly and permanently exists in the person of Jesus Christ, the image of the invisible God.

Look at the structural dimension in Christ: He is the perfect rationality of the divine Logos made flesh, the eternal Wisdom of God incarnate in the creature who thinks, speaks, reasons, and knows with the perfection of the divine mind expressed in the medium of the human mind. Look at the functional dimension in Christ: He is the perfect vice-regent of the creation, the One in whom all things hold together (Colossians 1:17), the Last Adam who fulfills the cultural mandate by his perfect obedience and exercises the governance commission in His resurrected and ascended lordship over all things (Matthew 28:18). Look at the relational dimension in Christ: He is the perfect communion of the triune God made present in the human creature, the One who is “in the Father” and in whom the Father is, whose whole human life is the creaturely expression of the eternal Trinitarian fellowship, and who draws His people into that fellowship through the union with Himself that faith establishes. Look at the moral dimension in Christ: He is the only human being in whom the moral law is perfectly embodied and perfectly fulfilled, the One whose righteousness is not merely admirable but imputable, not merely exemplary but salvific. Look at the royal dimension in Christ: He is the King of kings, the One to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given (Matthew 28:18), who sits at the right hand of the Father and will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

And look at the teleological dimension in Christ: He is the firstborn from the dead (Colossians 1:18), the firstfruits of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:20), the forerunner who has entered the glory that all who are in Him will enter (Hebrews 6:20). The conformity to the image of the Son that Romans 8:29 declares to be the predestined destiny of the redeemed is conformity to what is already fully realized in the risen, ascended, glorified Lord, who bears in His glorified humanity the fullness of what the image of God was always designed to become. “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2, NASB 1995). The eschatological vision of 1 John 3:2, “we will be like Him”, is the final destination of the teleological dimension of the imago Dei, the consummation toward which every other dimension of the image has been pointing. The human creature, made in the image of the Son, restored in the image of the Son, and ultimately glorified in the image of the Son, will stand before the Creator in the full realization of what the Creator always intended: “He is the image of the invisible God”, and in Him, so will we be.

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

2 Corinthians 3:18, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Structural Dimension (Imago Dei)	The dimension of the imago Dei that locates the image in the specific cognitive, moral, aesthetic, linguistic, and spiritual capacities that distinguish the human creature from every other creature and that reflect the character of the God in whose image the creature is made. The structural dimension is the dimension most emphasized by the patristic and medieval tradition (Irenaeus, Augustine, Aquinas) and remains the most immediately evident to philosophical reflection on what makes human existence distinctively human. It includes rationality, moral conscience, self-awareness, language, creativity, and spiritual capacity. In the comprehensive Reformed account, the structural dimension is one necessary dimension of the imago Dei but does not exhaust it.
Functional Dimension (Imago Dei)	The dimension of the imago Dei that locates the image in the calling to exercise dominion over the creation as God's appointed vice-regent. Grounded in the direct grammatical and theological connection in Genesis 1:26–28 between the imago Dei declaration and the dominion mandate, the functional dimension holds that the human creature's representative governance of the creation is not merely a consequence of the image but an expression of it. The cultural mandate, be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and rule over it, is the concrete specification of the functional image for the historical situation of the first human beings, and it remains in force throughout redemptive history as the permanent vocation of image-bearing creatures.
Relational Dimension (Imago Dei)	The dimension of the imago Dei that locates the image in the network of relationships for which the human creature is constituted: the vertical relationship with God (fellowship with the Creator), the horizontal relationship with other human beings (community and covenant), and the vocational relationship with the created order (stewardship and governance). The relational dimension is grounded in the Trinitarian character of the God in whose image the creature is made: the God who declares "Let Us make man in Our image" is Himself the eternal community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the creature made in His image is constituted for a creaturely analogue of that Trinitarian fellowship.
Moral Dimension (Imago Dei)	The dimension of the imago Dei that establishes the human creature as a being who possesses genuine moral knowledge (the capacity to know right from wrong, grounded in the moral law inscribed in the conscience by the Creator) and genuine moral accountability (the responsibility before the Creator for the choices made with that moral freedom). The moral dimension grounds the universal human experience of moral awareness (Romans 2:14–16) in the image of the morally serious God whose character the creature reflects, and it establishes the theological basis for the church's engagement with the culture through natural law argument.
Royal Dimension (Imago Dei)	The dimension of the imago Dei that draws on the Ancient Near Eastern background of the tselem concept: the king's image placed in conquered territories to represent his authority and presence. Applied to the human creature, the royal dimension holds that every human being is God's royal image placed in the creation to represent the divine King's authority and governance, a democratization of royal dignity that extends to every human being the sacred

	status that ancient Near Eastern ideology reserved for kings. The royal dimension grounds both the inviolable dignity of every human being (as bearer of the royal image) and the radical accountability of every human being (as the King's representative in the creation).
Teleological Dimension (Imago Dei)	The dimension of the imago Dei that understands the image not merely as a description of what the human creature was at the moment of creation but as a trajectory pointing toward the eschatological fullness of the image in the conformity of the redeemed to the image of the Son. The teleological dimension is established by the New Testament's language of progressive renewal (2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 3:10), predestined conformity (Romans 8:29), and eschatological likeness (1 John 3:2), and it is defined by Colossians 1:15's identification of Christ as the image of the invisible God, the original in whose likeness the human creature was made and toward whose likeness the Spirit is progressively conforming the redeemed.
Cultural Mandate	The commission given by God to humanity in Genesis 1:28: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth." The cultural mandate comprises the biological mandate (multiply and fill the earth), the developmental mandate (subdue it, develop the potential of the created order through culture-making labor), and the governance mandate (rule, exercise vice-regal authority over the creation). The cultural mandate is a permanent human vocation grounded in the functional dimension of the imago Dei, reaffirmed after the fall in Genesis 9:1–7, and fulfilled eschatologically in the reign of the redeemed with Christ over the new creation.
Eikon (εἰκών)	Greek for "image" or "likeness," the word used in the New Testament for the image of God in the human creature (1 Corinthians 11:7; 2 Corinthians 4:4) and, supremely, for Christ as the image of God (Colossians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 4:4). The use of eikon for both the human creature's image-bearing and for Christ's identity as the image of the invisible God establishes the Christological definition of the imago Dei: Christ is not merely one image-bearer among many but the original, the standard, and the eschatological fulfillment of what image-bearing was always designed to be. To be conformed to the image of the Son (Romans 8:29) is to be conformed to the eikon.
Perichoresis	Greek for "circumincession" or "mutual indwelling," the theological term for the dynamic mutual interpenetration of the three persons of the Trinity in the eternal divine life. The Father is in the Son, the Son is in the Father, and the Spirit is in both, not as three separate beings who happen to occupy the same space, but as three persons whose existence is constituted by their eternal mutual relations. Perichoresis is relevant to the relational dimension of the imago Dei because it establishes that the relational life of the triune God is the eternal original of which creaturely community is the finite reflection. The human creature's constitution for relationship, its incapacity for genuine existence in isolation, is the creaturely echo of the perichoretic life of the Trinity.
Vocation (Theology of)	The theological affirmation, developed particularly in the Lutheran and Reformed Reformation traditions, that every legitimate form of human work and service is a God-given calling (vocatio) in which the image-bearing creature exercises the stewardship and governance commission of the cultural mandate. The theology

of vocation was a major Reformation contribution against the medieval hierarchical view that reserved the highest callings for the clergy and monastic life; it affirmed that the farmer, the cobbler, the nurse, and the magistrate are exercising callings no less divine than the pastor or the theologian. The theology of vocation is grounded in the functional dimension of the imago Dei: because every human being is made in the image of the working, governing Creator, every legitimate form of human work bears the theological dignity of a vice-regal commission.

Practical Application

A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that the *imago Dei* is not a single, simple property that the human creature either has or does not have, but a rich, multidimensional reality that illuminates human existence from six mutually reinforcing angles. The structural dimension establishes the genuine cognitive and spiritual capacities through which the human creature reflects the divine nature. The functional dimension establishes the vocational dignity of every human being as God's appointed vice-regent. The relational dimension establishes the Trinitarian grounding of human sociality and the irreducible interpersonal character of human existence. The moral dimension establishes the genuine moral accountability of every human being before the Creator. The royal dimension establishes the sacred status and the radical accountability that belong to every bearer of the divine King's image. And the teleological dimension sets the whole doctrine in an eschatological frame that points the student toward Christ as the image's original, standard, and final goal. Together, these six dimensions provide the most adequate account of what it means to be human that the church possesses, and the student who has internalized them is equipped to engage the anthropological questions of the contemporary moment with both intellectual rigor and theological confidence.

We must particularly believe the teleological dimension with the full eschatological weight it carries. The conformity to the image of the Son is not a remote doctrinal abstraction; it is the specific goal toward which the Spirit's work in every believer's life is directed, and it is the horizon against which the disciplines of the Christian life, the Word, prayer, the sacraments, suffering, community, are to be understood and pursued. The Christian who holds the teleological dimension with conviction will approach sanctification not as moral self-improvement but as Christological formation: the progressive conformity to the image of the One who is the fullness of what image-bearing was always designed to be.

B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

Let the Christological definition of the teleological image produce in you a genuine and growing hunger to behold the Lord, the specific spiritual desire that 2 Corinthians 3:18 identifies as the means of the image's progressive restoration. We are transformed into the image of the Lord by beholding the Lord, which means that the most important practice in the Christian's pursuit of Christological formation is not moral effort but worshipful attention: the sustained, meditative, faith-filled beholding of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Scriptures, in prayer, in the breaking of bread, and in the fellowship of the community in which He is present. The desire to behold the Lord, not merely to know about Him or to admire His example but to fix the gaze of the whole person upon the person of Christ, is the desire that the teleological dimension of the *imago Dei* is designed to produce and that the Spirit's work of transformation requires.

Desire also the vocational joy that the functional dimension of the *imago Dei* establishes as the proper emotional register of human work. The image-bearing creature who understands that her daily labor, however ordinary, however frustrating, however far removed from the explicitly "religious", is an exercise of the vice-regal governance commission given in Genesis 1:28 will bring to her work a quality of purposefulness and dignity that the merely utilitarian understanding of work cannot produce. She is not merely earning a wage or performing a task; she is fulfilling a divine commission, exercising a sacred vocation, bearing the royal image of the Creator in the specific domain of the creation that has been entrusted to her stewardship. This is not self-aggrandizement; it is a proper theological understanding of what image-bearing human labor is and means.

C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read Colossians 1:15–20 carefully and in full, attending to the range of claims Paul makes about Christ as "the image of the invisible God." What specific capacities, functions, relationships, moral qualities, royal

attributes, and teleological roles does the passage attribute to Christ? How does each of these correspond to one of the six dimensions of the imago Dei examined in this lesson? Write out your findings as a brief meditation on the Christological definition of each dimension.

- Reflect on your own daily vocation, the specific work and responsibilities that occupy the majority of your time and energy outside of explicitly religious activities, in light of the functional dimension of the imago Dei. Is the work you do a form of the cultural mandate's commission to develop the potential of the created order and to exercise stewardship over the domain entrusted to you? If so, how does understanding your work as a vice-regal commission of the image-bearing creature change the way you approach it? If not, what would faithful exercise of the functional image in your specific circumstances look like?
- **Read G. C. Berkouwer's Man: The Image of God (1962), Part II.** Berkouwer's treatment of the specific dimensions of the imago Dei, particularly his account of the relational character of the image and the eschatological trajectory of the image's restoration, remains the most exegetically careful and theologically rigorous available in the Reformed tradition. His engagement with the alternative interpretive traditions (structural, functional, relational) is both fair and penetrating, and his insistence that the image must be understood in its totality rather than reduced to any single dimension is the model of the comprehensive approach that this series adopts.
- Identify one specific way in which the relational dimension of the imago Dei is being violated in your ministry context or personal community: a relationship characterized by contempt rather than honor, by exploitation rather than service, by isolation rather than community, or by the abuse rather than the care of the created order. Name the violation specifically, identify the dimension of the image that it transgresses, and commit to one concrete act of restoration that the relational image demands.
- Practice the beholding that 2 Corinthians 3:18 prescribes as the means of Christological formation. Set aside fifteen minutes each day this week to read slowly through John 13–17, the upper room discourse, in which the Lord Jesus displays in the most concentrated and the most intimate way the structural, functional, relational, moral, royal, and teleological dimensions of the imago Dei in their perfect creaturely expression. Read not to analyze but to behold: to fix the gaze of faith on the person of Christ as He speaks to His disciples in the shadow of the cross, and to allow the Spirit who inspired those words to use them as the mirror in which the image is progressively restored.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Of the six dimensions of the imago Dei examined in this lesson, structural, functional, relational, moral, royal, and teleological, which do you find most illuminating for your understanding of what it means to be human? Which do you find most challenging, either intellectually (because the argument is difficult to follow) or personally (because it demands something specific of you)? Share your response and explain the reasoning behind it.

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Genesis 1:26–28 with specific attention to the grammatical relationship between verse 26’s imago Dei declaration and its dominion mandate. How does the syntax of the Hebrew (particularly the sequence of “Let Us make ... and let them rule”) establish the functional dimension of the image? Is the dominion a consequence of the image, a component of the image, or both? What does the repetition of the dominion theme in verse 28 (“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule”) add to the picture of the functional image?
- Read Romans 2:12–16. What does Paul say about the moral knowledge available to the Gentiles who have not received the written law? How does he describe the conscience’s operation (v. 15)? What does the phrase “their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them” suggest about the conscience’s reliability as a guide? How does this passage support the moral dimension of the imago Dei while also establishing its distortion by the fall?
- Read Colossians 1:15–20. How many distinct claims does Paul make about Christ as “the image of the invisible God” in this passage? What is the relationship between Christ’s identity as the image of God and His role as the “firstborn of all creation” (v. 15) and the “firstborn from the dead” (v. 18)? How do the structural, functional, relational, moral, royal, and teleological dimensions of the imago Dei appear in this passage as attributes of the one who is the image par excellence?
- Read 2 Corinthians 3:12–18. What is the specific context of Paul’s statement about beholding and being transformed in verse 18? What does the contrast between the veil on Moses’ face and the unveiled face of the believer suggest about the mechanism of the image’s restoration? What is the role of the Spirit in the transformation described in verse 18, and how does this connect to the teleological dimension of the imago Dei?
- Read Revelation 5:9–10 and 22:3–5. What do these passages say about the vocation of the redeemed in the new creation? How does the language of “kingdom and priests” (5:10) and “they will reign forever and ever” (22:5) connect to the royal dimension of the imago Dei established in Genesis 1:26–28? What does the eschatological fulfillment of the royal mandate suggest about the permanence and the ultimate scope of the image-bearer’s God-given vocation?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the functional dimension of the imago Dei establishes the theological dignity of every legitimate form of human work as a participation in the vice-regal governance commission of Genesis 1:28. Does this argument hold equally for all forms of legitimate human work, or are some forms of work more directly expressive of the cultural mandate than others? How would you evaluate the relative theological dignity of, say, farming versus financial analysis, artistic creation versus janitorial service, academic research versus retail employment?
- The lesson grounds the relational dimension of the imago Dei in the perichoretic life of the Trinity: the human creature is constituted for community because the God in whose image it is made is Himself an eternal community of relationship. Is this Trinitarian grounding of human sociality exegetically defensible? What specific biblical texts, beyond the “Let Us make” of Genesis 1:26, support the connection between the

relational character of the imago Dei and the relational character of the triune God? Are there alternative groundings for human sociality that do not require the Trinitarian connection?

- The royal dimension of the imago Dei holds that every human being is the “royal image” of the divine King in the creation, and that acts of contempt or violence against human beings are therefore acts of lese-majesté against the divine King. Is this argument persuasive? Does the analogy between the Ancient Near Eastern king’s image and the human creature’s role in the creation hold under examination? What are the limits of the analogy, and where does it potentially break down?
- The teleological dimension holds that the image is “forward-looking”, pointing toward the eschatological fullness of conformity to the Son, rather than merely “backward-looking” to the Adamic state. How does this teleological dimension affect the understanding of the fall? If the image was always designed to be eschatological, does the fall represent merely the loss of what Adam had, or does it also represent the foreclosure of what Adam was moving toward? What does it mean for the gospel that redemption in Christ restores not merely the Adamic state but achieves through the Last Adam’s obedience the eschatological state that the first Adam forfeited?
- The lesson closes with the claim that Christ, as the image of the invisible God, displays in His person all six dimensions of the imago Dei in their perfect creaturely expression. Is this claim exegetically sustainable? For each of the six dimensions, identify the specific biblical evidence that Christ displays that dimension of the image perfectly. Which dimension do you find most clearly attested in the New Testament’s portrait of Jesus, and which do you find most difficult to demonstrate from the texts?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The functional dimension of the imago Dei establishes the theological dignity of human work as a God-given vocation. How adequately does the congregation you serve understand and inhabit this theology of vocation? What specific teaching, preaching, or pastoral formation would be required to help the members of the congregation understand their daily work, in the kitchen, the classroom, the office, the factory, the farm, as an exercise of the vice-regal governance commission? What would change in the life of the congregation if every member arrived at work on Monday morning with the settled conviction that what she was doing was a form of vice-regal image-bearing?
- The moral dimension of the imago Dei grounds the church’s engagement with the secular culture through natural law argument, the appeal to the moral conscience that all human beings share as image-bearers of the morally serious God. Identify one specific public ethical debate in your cultural context, abortion, euthanasia, criminal justice, economic inequality, or another, and develop a natural law argument from the moral dimension of the imago Dei that could be made to a secular audience without explicit appeal to biblical authority. What are the strengths and weaknesses of such an argument? Where does the moral conscience’s distortion by sin limit its effectiveness?
- The teleological dimension holds that we are “transformed into the same image from glory to glory” by “beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18). What specific practices of beholding the Lord are most formative for the congregation you serve? Are the practices of corporate worship, the preaching of the Word, the administration of the Lord’s Supper, and the fellowship of the community being used in ways that genuinely form the image of Christ in the congregation’s members, or are they being used primarily for other purposes (instruction, entertainment, social belonging)? What specific adjustments in the congregation’s practices of beholding would most directly serve the teleological goal of Christological formation?
- The royal dimension of the imago Dei establishes the radical accountability of every image-bearer before the divine King whose image she bears and whose authority she represents. How does this accountability affect the way you understand your own leadership responsibilities, in the family, the congregation, the workplace, or the civic community? Does the knowledge that you are exercising a vice-regal commission on

behalf of the divine King change the way you make decisions, the standards you hold yourself to, and the way you account for the use of authority you have been given?

- 1 John 3:2 declares: “We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.” The eschatological vision of the image’s completion, the full conformity of the redeemed to the image of the Son that glorification will bring, is the specific hope that the teleological dimension of the *imago Dei* establishes for every believer. How vividly and how specifically does this hope shape the way you think about your own future, about the suffering you experience in the present, and about the patience with which you hold the incompleteness and the frustration of the present image? What would it look like to allow 1 John 3:2’s specific eschatological hope to function as a genuinely motivating and genuinely comforting reality in the daily experience of the Christian life?

Prayer Focus

Open this eighth lesson of the Anthropology series with a slow and meditative reading of Colossians 1:15–20, the most concentrated and most theologically rich New Testament statement about the identity of Christ as the image of the invisible God. Read it not as a doctrinal proposition to be analyzed but as a doxological declaration to be received, the hymn or poem that the early church used to adore the One in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell and through whom all things were created and reconciled. Let each phrase sink in before moving to the next: “He is the image of the invisible God”, the perfect, adequate, and sufficient representation of the divine nature in creaturely form. “The firstborn of all creation”, the heir of all things, the One for whom and through whom all created reality exists. “For by Him all things were created ... all things have been created through Him and for Him”, the One in whose image the human creature was made is the One through and for whom the universe itself was brought into existence. “He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together”, the image of the invisible God is not a created property of the created order; He is the eternal Son who sustains the created order by the word of His power. “For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him”, and in this One, the fullness of God is pleased to dwell, and through His blood the world has been reconciled to the Father. This is the image. This is the One whose likeness we bear and toward whose likeness we are being conformed. Read it with adoration.

Spend time in Trinitarian adoration, allowing the six dimensions of the *imago Dei* to become the six dimensions of your worship. Adore the Father who designed the image, whose deliberative “Let Us make” brought the image-bearing creature into existence, and whose sovereign purpose in predestining the redeemed to conformity to the image of the Son ensures that the image will not be permanently marred by sin but will be fully and finally restored in the glory of the new creation. Adore the Son who is the image, who did not merely model what image-bearing looks like but became the creature in whose image all other creatures were made, so that by His perfect exercise of every dimension of the image (structural, functional, relational, moral, royal, and teleological) He might restore what sin had damaged and achieve what the first Adam forfeited. Adore the Spirit who is even now at work in the heart of every believer, renewing the mind, liberating the will, reordering the affections, restoring the relational orientation, and progressively conforming each believer to the image of the Son, the Spirit who transforms by beholding, who sanctifies by union with Christ, and who will one day complete His work in the resurrection and glorification of the redeemed.

Pray together for the congregation and for the development of Unit 3 in three specific directions. First, for a comprehensive and integrated understanding of the *imago Dei*: that the four lessons of Unit 3 would produce not a collection of isolated theological points but an integrated and living grasp of what it means to be made in the image of the living God, a grasp that shapes the way every member of the community understands herself, treats others, approaches her work, inhabits her relationships, and orients her hope toward the eschatological consummation of the image in the likeness of the Son. Second, for the courage of Christological conformity: that the knowledge of the teleological dimension of the image, the knowledge that the goal of the Spirit’s work is conformity to the image of Christ, and that conformity to Christ’s image costs the surrender of everything that is not of Christ, would produce in every believer not the comfortable self-congratulation of those who admire Christ from a distance, but the costly, daily, Spirit-enabled surrender of the self to the One whose image the self is being conformed to bear. Third, for the doxological integration that prevents the doctrine of the *imago Dei* from becoming a doctrine of human self-glorification: that every lesson in Unit 3 would begin and end where Psalm 8 begins and ends, in the worship of the God whose image the creature bears, whose Son has redeemed the creature from the ruin that sin made of the image, and whose Spirit is even now restoring in the creature the likeness of the One who is the image of the invisible God.

“Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.”

1 John 3:2, NASB 1995

Key Texts: *Genesis 1:26–28; Romans 2:14–16; 12:2; Colossians 1:15–20; 3:10; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Romans 8:29; 1 John 3:2; Revelation 5:9–10; 22:3–5*

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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