

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 7

Made in His Likeness

The Imago Dei Defined

“The Most Foundational Statement About Human Identity in All of Scripture”

Key Texts: Genesis 1:26–28; 5:1–3; 9:6; James 3:9; Psalm 8:4–8

“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness ...’ God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

Genesis 1:26–27, NASB 1995

Dr. Joshua Nichols

Pastor, Theologian, Author

faithfultotheword.com

Introduction

We stand now at the center of the entire doctrine of humanity. If Lesson 3 gave us the raw material of anthropology, the dust, the breath, the personal creative act of the living God, then Lesson 7 gives us its most defining theological content: the affirmation that the human creature was made in the image and according to the likeness of God. “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness’ ... God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:26–27, NASB 1995). These two verses are the most consequential anthropological statement in all of Scripture. They establish, in a single decisive declaration, what separates the human creature from every other creature that God has made: the human creature alone bears the image of its Creator. Every other creature in the created order is good, declared very good by the God who made it, but no other creature is made in His image and according to His likeness. That distinction is unique to humanity, and from it flows every other affirmation about the worth, the dignity, the accountability, and the destiny of the human creature that the Scriptures contain.

The doctrine of the *imago Dei*, the image of God in the human creature, has occupied the church’s theological attention from the earliest patristic commentaries to the most recent systematic theologies, and the debate about its precise meaning has generated a literature of extraordinary richness and complexity. What, exactly, does it mean to be made in the image of God? What in the human creature constitutes the image? Is it a structural property, a set of capacities or faculties that reflect the divine nature? Is it a functional reality, the calling to exercise dominion over the creation as God’s vice-regent? Is it a relational orientation, the capacity for and calling to genuine fellowship with God and with other persons? Is it the whole person, considered in the totality of her existence before God? And what has the fall done to the image: has it been destroyed, damaged, or left substantially intact? These questions have driven the most careful and most consequential theological reflection in the entire history of Christian anthropology.

This lesson, the first of four in Unit 3, which is devoted to the image of God, addresses the foundational questions. Lesson 7 defines the *imago Dei*: its Hebrew vocabulary, its Old Testament usage, the major interpretive traditions the church has developed for understanding it, the comprehensive Reformed account that this series will defend, and the crucial distinction between the image in the narrow sense and the image in the broad sense. Lessons 8, 9, and 10 will develop the specific dimensions of the image (structural, functional, relational, and eschatological), examine the image after the fall (marred but not destroyed), and treat the restoration of the image in Christ and the eschatological consummation of the image in glory. The purpose of this lesson is to establish the exegetical and theological foundation upon which those three subsequent lessons will build.

A preliminary observation about the stakes of this doctrine is warranted before we enter the exegesis. The *imago Dei* is not merely one doctrine among many; it is the anthropological doctrine upon which every other anthropological affirmation depends. What the human creature is, in terms of dignity, accountability, fallibility, redeemability, and destiny, is determined by what it means to be made in the image of God. The loss of the *imago Dei* doctrine is the loss of the only adequate foundation for universal human dignity. The distortion of the *imago Dei* doctrine is the distortion of the entire anthropological framework within which the gospel is proclaimed and received. And the recovery of the *imago Dei* doctrine, in its full biblical richness and theological complexity, is one of the most urgent theological tasks of the contemporary church, because the culture that surrounds us has dismantled every alternative foundation for human dignity and has found, in the rubble, nothing adequate to replace it.

I. The Hebrew Vocabulary: Tselem and Demut

What the Words of Genesis 1:26–27 Actually Mean and Why It Matters

A. *Tselem: Image as Representation*

The first word of the imago Dei declaration is tselem (צלם), conventionally translated “image.” Its usage throughout the Old Testament is consistent and illuminating. Tselem appears in contexts involving physical representations or likenesses: in Numbers 33:52, the Israelites are commanded to destroy the “cast images” of the Canaanite gods, the tsalmey (צלמי) that represented the gods in physical form. In Ezekiel 16:17 and 23:14, it is used for the idolatrous images that Israel fashioned from gold and silver. In 1 Samuel 6:5, the Philistines make tsalmey, likenesses, of their tumors and rats as guilt offerings. The word consistently denotes a concrete, visible representation of something, a statue, a figure, an image that makes visible what would otherwise be invisible or absent.

The theological significance of this usage for the doctrine of the imago Dei is considerable. When God declares that He will make man in His tselem, in His image, He is declaring that the human creature will function as His visible representative in the created order: the one whose existence makes the invisible God visible, the one who represents the Creator’s authority and character in the creation. This is not a static, photographic likeness, not a picture of God, as it were, fixed in human form. It is a dynamic, functional representation, the kind of representation that a statue of a king in an ancient Near Eastern context provided: not merely a visual record of the king’s appearance, but a symbol of his presence, his authority, and his claim over the territory in which the statue was placed. The human creature, made in the tselem of God, is God’s representative presence in the creation, the creature through whom the authority, the character, and the glory of the Creator are to be displayed in the creaturely realm. The tselem is not a passive attribute the creature possesses; it is an active commission the creature bears.

The Ancient Near Eastern background of the tselem concept illuminates its meaning in Genesis 1:26 in ways that the history of Western theological interpretation has sometimes obscured. In the ancient Near Eastern world, kings would place images (ḫalmu in Akkadian, the cognate of the Hebrew tselem) of themselves in territories they ruled as symbols of their sovereignty. The image represented the king’s authority in the territory, reminded the inhabitants of the territory who they were subject to, and served as the focus of loyalty oaths and tribute. When Genesis 1:26 describes humanity as made in the image of God, it is deploying this royal ideology in a radically democratizing way: not the king alone, but every human being, male and female, is designated as God’s image in the creation. Every human person, regardless of social status, ethnic identity, or sex, is the royal image-bearer of the Creator, appointed to exercise the dominion that belongs to the King over all creation. The democratization of the royal image in Genesis 1:26–27 is itself a theological statement of extraordinary importance: the dignity that ancient Near Eastern ideology reserved for kings, Genesis 1 extends to every human being without exception.

B. *Demut: Likeness as Qualification*

The second word, demut (דמות), translated “likeness”, has generated considerable interpretive debate, particularly in the patristic period, where the distinction between tselem and demut was sometimes read as a distinction between two different aspects or dimensions of the image: the image as a given structural property and the likeness as a moral or spiritual quality to be progressively developed. This reading, associated especially with Origen and the Alexandrian tradition, produced the distinction between the image (imago) and the likeness (similitudo) that shaped much of the patristic and medieval reflection on the imago Dei, and which was used to ground the theory that what was lost in the fall was the similitudo (the moral likeness) rather than the imago (the structural image). The Reformers, Calvin chief among them, rightly criticized this reading as an imposition on the text rather than an inference from it.

The word *demut* (דמוּת) is derived from the root *damah* (דמה), meaning “to be like” or “to resemble,” and it is used in the Old Testament in contexts involving comparison, resemblance, or correspondence. In Isaiah 40:18, it is used to ask: “To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?” The word thus denotes a relationship of resemblance or correspondence between two things, without specifying the precise nature of the resemblance. Its use alongside *tselem* in Genesis 1:26–27 is best understood not as a distinction between two different aspects of the image but as a qualifying complement: the *demut* functions to qualify the *tselem*, specifying that the representation is a genuine correspondence rather than an identity. The human creature is the image of God (*tselem*), but a creaturely image, a likeness (*demut*) that is genuinely like while remaining genuinely other. The two terms together establish both the closeness of the human creature’s relationship to God (it genuinely represents and reflects Him) and the irreducible distinction between Creator and creature (it is a likeness, not an identity).

The Reformed exegetical tradition, represented by Calvin, Turretin, Hodge, and Bavinck, has consistently held that *tselem* and *demut* in Genesis 1:26 are effectively synonymous, two different words expressing the same basic reality from slightly different angles, in the Hebrew poetic convention of parallelism, rather than two distinct aspects of the image that can be separated and differently treated. This reading is supported by the interchange of the two terms in the subsequent uses of *imago Dei* language in Genesis: Genesis 5:1 uses *demut* alone (“He made him in the likeness of God”); Genesis 5:3 uses both terms again in describing Seth made in the image and likeness of Adam; and Genesis 9:6 uses *tselem* alone (“for in the image of God He made man”). The alternation and interchange of the two terms across these texts supports the conclusion that they are functioning as virtual synonyms, together constituting a single rich affirmation: the human creature is God’s representative likeness in the creation, the creature who alone, of all creatures, genuinely corresponds to and reflects its Creator.

*“For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?
Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.”*

1 Corinthians 2:11, NASB 1995

II. The Old Testament Witness: How Genesis Uses *Imago Dei* Language

The Key Texts That Establish the Content and Scope of the Image

A. Genesis 1:26–28: The Charter Text

Genesis 1:26–28 is the charter text for the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, and its full theological content requires careful attention to each element of the passage. Verse 26 opens with the divine deliberation: “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.’” The deliberation, “Let Us make”, is itself theologically significant, distinguishing the creation of the human creature from the creation of every other creature in Genesis 1, where God speaks in the third person (“Let there be”) rather than the first-person plural. The plural “Us” has generated considerable discussion: patristic writers, including Irenaeus and Tertullian, read it as a Trinitarian consultation; rabbinic interpreters read it as God consulting with the angels; and modern interpreters have proposed the “plural of majesty” or the “plural of deliberation.” The Trinitarian reading, while not the only possible reading of the grammar, is the most theologically consistent with the New Testament’s identification of the Son and the Spirit as agents of creation (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Genesis 1:2), and it establishes the creation of the image-bearer within the Trinitarian life of God Himself, a point of considerable importance for the relational dimension of the image.

Verse 26 continues by specifying the immediate purpose of the creation of the image-bearer: “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 imago Dei and the dominion mandate are grammatically and theologically inseparable in the text: the “them” who are given dominion are the “man” who is made in the image, and the connection is not incidental but structural. The image-bearer is made to rule; the dominion is the function of the image. This connection between the imago Dei and the cultural mandate will be examined more fully in Lesson 8, but it must be noted here that the functional dimension of the image, the calling to exercise dominion as God’s vice-regent, is not an inference the interpreter draws from the text; it is built into the text itself by the syntactical connection between the imago Dei declaration and the dominion mandate.

Verse 27 repeats the creation of the human in the image of God three times in the space of three poetic half-lines, with a structural emphasis that the English translation cannot fully convey: “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” The threefold repetition is itself a theological statement: the image-bearing character of the human creature is so important, so definitive, so central to what the human creature is, that the text hammers it home three times before moving on. And the final element of the verse, “male and female He created them”, establishes that the image is not the exclusive property of the male but the shared dignity of both male and female, as was argued in Lesson 4. The image of God in humanity is not gendered in the sense that one sex bears it more fully than the other; it is the dignity of the human creature as such, borne equally and fully by every human being regardless of sex.

B. Genesis 5:1–3 and 9:6: The Post-Fall Persistence of the Image

Two subsequent uses of the imago Dei language in Genesis are particularly significant for the doctrine of the image after the fall: Genesis 5:1–3 and Genesis 9:6. Genesis 5:1–3 introduces the Sethite genealogy with a back-reference to the creation of Adam: “In the day when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and He blessed them and named them Man in the day when they were created. When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth” (NASB 1995). Two things are theologically significant here. First, the genealogy opens by affirming the original creation of Adam in the likeness of God, a back-reference that grounds the entire subsequent genealogy in the imago Dei established at creation. Second, the language used for Seth’s derivation from Adam mirrors the language used for Adam’s derivation from God: Adam is made in the likeness (demut) of God; Seth is made in the image (tselem) and likeness (demut) of Adam. The parallel is deliberate and theologically loaded: as Adam derives his personhood from the God whose image he bears, Seth derives his personhood from the Adam whose image he bears. The image-bearing character of humanity is transmitted from generation to generation in the very act of procreation.

Genesis 9:6 is the most theologically consequential post-fall use of the imago Dei language in the Old Testament, precisely because it comes after the fall and after the flood: “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man” (NASB 1995). This is the Noachic grounding of the prohibition of murder, and its theological structure is crucial: the reason murder is prohibited is that the human creature bears the image of God. The prohibition is not grounded in the social utility of human life, or in the victim’s personal merit, or in the offender’s cruelty, but in the ontological status of the human creature as image-bearer of the Creator. And this grounding is applied universally, not to a specific covenant community or a specific class of human beings, but to every human creature whose blood may be shed. This post-fall, post-flood application of the imago Dei as the ground of the prohibition of murder establishes with unmistakable clarity that the image of God has not been destroyed or forfeited by the fall: even after sin has entered the world and corrupted human nature, every human being retains the imago Dei in a sense sufficient to ground the absolute prohibition of murder and the requirement of capital punishment for those who violate it.

The New Testament reinforces this post-fall persistence of the image in two key texts. James 3:9 grounds the prohibition of cursing human beings in the fact that they are made in the likeness of God: “with it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God” (NASB 1995). The present perfect passive, “have been made”, indicates that the image-bearing status of the human creature is a permanent

characteristic, not a pre-fall condition that has since been revoked. And 1 Corinthians 11:7 refers to man as “the image and glory of God,” again in a post-fall context, affirming that image-bearing remains a characteristic of the human creature even in the fallen state. Together, these texts establish what the Reformed tradition has consistently affirmed: the fall damages and distorts the imago Dei but does not destroy or annihilate it. The fallen human creature remains an image-bearer, retains the dignity and the accountability that image-bearing implies, and remains the proper object of the respect and protection that Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 demand.

III. The Four Major Interpretive Traditions

How the Church Has Understood What It Means to Bear the Image of God

A. Structural and Functional Interpretations

The history of Christian interpretation of the imago Dei has produced four major theological traditions, each of which captures a genuine dimension of the biblical teaching, and each of which, when held in isolation from the others, produces a truncated account of what it means to bear the image of God. The first is the structural interpretation, which locates the image in the specific capacities or faculties that distinguish the human creature from other creatures: rationality, moral conscience, the capacity for language, self-consciousness, creativity, spiritual awareness, and the capacity for genuine ethical decision-making. The structural interpretation has deep roots in the patristic and medieval tradition: Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, and Aquinas all in different ways identified the rational soul as the primary locus of the imago Dei, the faculty or set of faculties through which the human creature most closely resembles its Creator. The strength of the structural interpretation is its attentiveness to the genuine cognitive, moral, and spiritual capacities that distinguish the human creature from the animal kingdom and that seem to constitute the “likeness” that Genesis 1:26 has in view.

The functional interpretation, associated particularly with the work of twentieth-century Old Testament scholars like Gerhard von Rad, Claus Westermann, and in the Reformed tradition, John Stek, locates the image not in specific human capacities but in the calling to exercise dominion over the creation as God’s vice-regent. On this account, the imago Dei is not a property the human creature possesses but a role the human creature occupies: the role of God’s royal representative in the creation, entrusted with the authority to govern the created order in accordance with the Creator’s will. The strength of the functional interpretation is its attentiveness to the direct grammatical and theological connection in Genesis 1:26–28 between the imago Dei declaration and the dominion mandate: the image and the dominion are syntactically linked in a way that suggests the image is at least partly constituted by or expressed in the dominion. The weakness of the functional interpretation, when held in isolation, is that it risks reducing the image to a task rather than a status, an assignment that could in principle be revoked without any diminishment of what the creature is in itself.

The structural and functional interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and the best Reformed interpreters have held both together: the human creature is made in the image of God in the sense that she possesses capacities (structural) that equip her for and are expressed in the calling to exercise dominion (functional). The structural and functional dimensions of the image are not two competing accounts of the same reality but two complementary perspectives on a single rich reality: the structural capacities are what make the functional calling possible, and the functional calling is what gives the structural capacities their telos and their direction. A doctrine of the imago Dei that holds both together will avoid both the over-intellectualism of a purely structural account (which risks locating the image in rationality alone and thereby excluding those whose rational capacities are diminished) and the over-pragmatism of a purely functional account (which risks making the image contingent on the performance of a task rather than grounding it in the ontological status of the creature).

B. Relational and Comprehensive Interpretations

The relational interpretation of the imago Dei, associated in the twentieth century with Emil Brunner and in the Reformed tradition with G. C. Berkouwer, locates the image not in a property the human creature possesses in

itself but in the relationship between the human creature and God, the capacity for and calling to genuine personal fellowship with the Creator. On this account, the image is not a “thing” in the human creature but a “direction” of the human creature, the orientation of the whole person toward God in responsive obedience, worship, and love. The strength of the relational interpretation is its attentiveness to the deeply personal and covenantal character of the *imago Dei*: Genesis 1:26–27 introduces the human creature not as a specimen to be anatomized but as a person to be related to, and the entire subsequent narrative of Scripture is the story of that relationship, its establishment in creation, its rupture in the fall, and its restoration in redemption. The weakness of the relational interpretation, when held in isolation, is that it can become so focused on the dynamic relational character of the image that it loses sight of the structural and functional dimensions that make the relationship possible: the human creature can enter into genuine fellowship with God because she has the structural capacities (rationality, moral agency, spiritual awareness) that such fellowship requires.

The comprehensive interpretation, which this series adopts and which represents the mature Reformed consensus, holds that the *imago Dei* cannot be adequately located in any single faculty, function, or relationship but must be understood as characterizing the whole person, mind, will, affections, body, relationships, and calling, in her total orientation toward God as His created representative and covenant partner. Anthony Hoekema’s formulation in *Created in God’s Image* captures this well: the image of God “is not just one aspect of man’s nature but describes man as a whole. Man in the totality of his being, body and soul, is the image of God.” Herman Bavinck’s account in the *Reformed Dogmatics* is equally comprehensive: “man does not bear or have the image of God, but he is the image of God.” The image is not something the human creature possesses as one attribute among many; it is what the human creature is, in the totality of her creaturely existence before God. This comprehensive view preserves the genuine insights of the structural, functional, and relational interpretations while refusing to reduce the image to any single dimension of it.

The comprehensive Reformed account of the *imago Dei* has important pastoral and ethical implications that distinguish it from narrower interpretations. Because the image is the whole person, not merely the rational soul, not merely the capacity for dominion, not merely the relational orientation toward God, the dignity that the image confers is not contingent on the exercise of any particular capacity. The severely cognitively disabled person who cannot exercise the rational capacities that the structural interpretation prizes, the person in a persistent vegetative state who cannot exercise the functional capacities that the dominion interpretation prizes, the person in spiritual rebellion who has disrupted the relational orientation that the relational interpretation prizes, all of them remain full image-bearers of the living God, because the image is what they are, not what they do or what they feel or what they can demonstrate. The comprehensive account thus provides the most adequate foundation for an ethic of universal human dignity that makes no exceptions and admits no gradations of worth based on capacity, condition, or behavior.

“With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God.”

James 3:9, NASB 1995

IV. The Narrow and Broad Distinction: Image Lost and Image Retained

The Reformed Account of What the Fall Did and Did Not Do to the Imago Dei

A. The Image in the Narrow Sense: Lost in the Fall

The distinction between the image of God in the narrow sense and the image of God in the broad sense is one of the most important conceptual tools in Reformed anthropology, and it is essential for understanding both what

the fall destroyed and what it did not destroy. Calvin introduces this distinction in the Institutes (II.2.12–17) and it is developed by subsequent Reformed theologians including Turretin, Hodge, and Berkhof into a standard feature of Reformed anthropological analysis. The image in the narrow sense refers to the original righteousness, holiness, and true knowledge in which Adam was created, the positive moral and spiritual orientation of the whole person toward God that characterized the pre-fall state and that the fall comprehensively corrupted and destroyed. The image in the narrow sense is what Ephesians 4:24 describes when it speaks of the “new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth” (NASB 1995), the restoration language of the new creation implying that what is being restored is what was originally given in the creation.

The scriptural basis for the narrow image, for the original righteousness and holiness in which the human creature was created, is the restoration language of the New Testament applied to the regenerate. Paul in Colossians 3:10 speaks of the new self “being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him”, the renewal in knowledge presupposing an original knowledge that was lost. Ephesians 4:24 speaks of the new self “created in righteousness and holiness of the truth”, the creation language applied to regeneration presupposing that righteousness and holiness were originally created into the human creature. And 2 Corinthians 3:18 speaks of the believer being “transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit”, a progressive transformation that is moving toward a consummation, and whose direction is the restoration of what the fall corrupted. Together, these texts establish that the fall has damaged and destroyed something real and specific in the human creature, not merely a peripheral quality but the core positive moral and spiritual orientation that constituted the image in its most excellent creaturely expression.

The Heidelberg Catechism’s Q&A 6 formulates the narrow image with characteristic theological precision and pastoral clarity: “God created man good and in His image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him.” Three elements are specified: right knowledge (the intellect rightly oriented toward God), heartfelt love (the affections rightly oriented toward God), and holy living (the will rightly oriented toward God). These three elements correspond to the three faculties that the scholastic tradition identified in the human soul, and their specification as constituting the narrow image shows that what the fall corrupted is not one faculty in isolation but the fundamental orientation of all three toward their proper object: the living God. The fall does not destroy the faculties; it perverts their orientation, so that the intellect is darkened, the affections are disordered, and the will is enslaved. And it is this perversion of orientation that the narrow image identifies and that the grace of God in regeneration and sanctification progressively reverses.

B. *The Image in the Broad Sense: Retained After the Fall*

The image of God in the broad sense refers to the structural properties of human personhood, rationality, moral agency, self-consciousness, language, creativity, the capacity for relationship, and the accountability before God that these capacities entail, that remain after the fall as the permanent characteristics of the human creature, damaged and distorted in their orientation but not destroyed in their existence. The biblical basis for the broad image is the post-fall persistence of *imago Dei* language that Sections II examined: Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 apply image-of-God language to fallen human beings without qualification, establishing that the image-bearing status of the human creature is not forfeited by sin but retained as a permanent ontological feature of what the human creature is.

Calvin’s treatment of the broad image in Institutes II.2.12–17 is among his most pastorally and intellectually illuminating passages. Calvin refuses to deny that fallen human beings retain “some sparks of the image”, the capacity for rational thought, civic virtue, aesthetic appreciation, and the moral awareness of the natural law. He insists that these remaining capacities are genuine, not illusions, not counterfeit virtues, but real expressions of what the human creature is as an image-bearer of God, even in the fallen state. But he equally insists that these remaining capacities are corrupted in their orientation: the unregenerate intellect reasons rightly about many things while suppressing the knowledge of God (Romans 1:18–23); the unregenerate conscience registers genuine

moral awareness while being systematically distorted in its application; the unregenerate will exercise genuine choices while being enslaved to the sinful nature in its fundamental orientation. The broad image is real but corrupted, retained but perverted, and this combination of retention and corruption is precisely what the doctrine of total depravity describes: not the annihilation of the human creature's image-bearing capacities, but the comprehensive corruption of their orientation away from God toward self and the creature.

The distinction between the narrow and broad image has two important practical consequences. The first is apologetic: the retained broad image is the basis for the common grace that enables unregenerate human beings to achieve genuine intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and civic goods, the goods that sustain human civilization, enable productive discourse between believers and unbelievers, and provide the "points of contact" for the Christian witness to the culture. Calvin's insistence on the genuine intellectual and civic achievements of the unregenerate is a model of the kind of generous theological engagement with culture that the Reformed tradition at its best has practiced. The second is ethical: the retained broad image is the ground of the universal human dignity that Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 protect. The fallen human being retains the dignity of an image-bearer, not because sin has not done real damage, but because the image in the broad sense is more deeply built into the structure of what the human creature is than sin can reach. This is the theological basis for the absolute prohibition of murder, the requirement of human rights, and the respect owed to every human being regardless of personal moral condition.

V. Psalm 8 and the Doxological Frame of the Imago Dei

The Question That Produces Worship Rather Than Pride

A. *What Is Man That You Take Thought of Him?*

The eighth Psalm is the Old Testament's most sustained doxological meditation on the doctrine of the imago Dei, and it provides the emotional and spiritual frame within which the doctrine must always be received if it is to produce its intended effect. The Psalmist opens and closes with the same confession of divine majesty, "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:1, 9, NASB 1995), establishing from the outset that the reflection on human dignity that the Psalm contains is not an exercise in anthropocentrism but an exercise in theocentrism. The starting point and the ending point of the meditation are the glory of God; the dignity of the human creature is discovered in the middle, and it is discovered precisely as a gift of the God whose glory frames the whole.

The movement of the Psalm from the majestic heavens (vv. 1–2) to the smallness of the human creature (v. 4) to the extraordinary dignity conferred upon that creature by God (vv. 5–8) is the movement that the doctrine of the imago Dei must always follow if it is to be received in the right spirit. The Psalmist does not begin by contemplating the greatness of the human creature; he begins by contemplating the greatness of God and the work of God's fingers in the heavens. Standing before the immensity of the cosmos, the Psalmist is overwhelmed by the disproportion: "What is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him?" (v. 4, NASB 1995). The question is not rhetorical; it is the genuine astonishment of a creature who has grasped both the infinite greatness of God and the infinite smallness of the human creature before the cosmos, and who cannot account for the attention that God gives to so small and so fragile a being.

The answer the Psalm provides is simultaneously humbling and astonishing: "Yet You have made him a little lower than God, and You crown him with glory and majesty! You make him to rule over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet" (vv. 5–6, NASB 1995). The dignity that the human creature possesses, the glory and majesty with which it is crowned, the dominion over the works of God's hands that it exercises, is not a self-generated dignity. It is a conferred dignity: "You have made him," "You crown him," "You make him to rule." Every verb of dignity in Psalm 8 has God as its subject and the human creature as its object. The imago Dei is not the creature's achievement or the creature's property in any sense that the creature can claim for itself apart from

the God who gave it. It is the gift of the One whose glory fills the heavens, given to a creature made from the dust, and it produces in the creature who receives it not pride but the worshipful astonishment that the Psalm models: “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!”

B. Psalm 8 and the Christological Horizon

The author of Hebrews reads Psalm 8 through the lens of its eschatological fulfillment in Jesus Christ, and his reading reveals the Christological horizon that was latent in the Psalm from the beginning. In Hebrews 2:5-9, the author quotes Psalm 8:4-6 in the context of an argument about the supremacy of Christ: “But one has testified somewhere, saying, ‘What is man, that You remember him? Or the son of man, that You are concerned about him? You have made him for a little while lower than the angels; You have crowned him with glory and honor, and have appointed him over the works of Your hands; You have put all things in subjection under his feet.’ For in subjecting all things to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him. But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor” (NASB 1995). The Psalm’s vision of human dominion over all things, which the author of Hebrews acknowledges is not yet fully realized in fallen humanity, is found to be fully realized in the risen, glorified, ascended Jesus Christ.

The Christological reading of Psalm 8 establishes a crucial hermeneutical principle for the doctrine of the *imago Dei*: the image of God in the human creature is ultimately understood not by looking at fallen humanity and abstracting from what we observe there, but by looking at Jesus Christ, in whom the image is fully and perfectly realized. Colossians 1:15 identifies Christ as “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (NASB 1995). He is not merely one image-bearer among many; He is the image, the original, the standard, the eschatological goal toward which all human image-bearing is directed. When Genesis 1:26 says that God will make man in His image, it is God the Son who is the primary referent of the image, the eternal Son in whose image the human creature is made, and to whose likeness the human creature is being conformed by the Spirit in sanctification and will be fully conformed at glorification. To see what the *imago Dei* looks like in its full creaturely expression, the student of biblical anthropology must look not at the brightest specimens of human achievement and virtue but at the man Jesus of Nazareth, the Last Adam in whom the image is not merely retained or restored but perfected and glorified.

The Christological horizon of the *imago Dei* transforms the entire doctrine from a doctrine about what humanity was at the beginning to a doctrine about what humanity is becoming in Christ. The image is not merely backward-looking, a description of the original state from which the fall departed, but forward-looking: the eschatological goal toward which the Spirit’s work of renewal is directing every believer. Romans 8:29 makes this eschatological dimension explicit: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren” (NASB 1995). The *telos* of redemption is not the restoration of the Adamic state but the conformity of the redeemed to the image of the Son, which is to say, a glory that surpasses what Adam possessed in the garden as the resurrection body surpasses the mortal body. The image of God in the human creature is not a past possession to be recovered but a future glory to be received, and that future glory is nothing less than the full conformity of the redeemed to the likeness of the One in whose image they were originally made.

VI. The Imago Dei and Human Dignity: The Ethical Imperative

Because Every Human Being Bears the Image of God, Every Human Life Is Sacred

The most immediately practical implication of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, and the one that connects most directly to the ethical demands of the contemporary moment, is the universal, unconditional, inviolable dignity of every human being. This dignity does not derive from human capacity, human achievement, human virtue, or human social status; it derives from the creative and conferring act of the God who made the human creature in

His own image and declared that image to be the permanent ground of the creature's worth and the permanent warrant for the creature's protection. Genesis 9:6 grounds the prohibition of murder in the imago Dei; James 3:9 grounds the prohibition of verbal abuse in the imago Dei; and the entire tradition of Christian social ethics, from the patristic opposition to infanticide and gladiatorial combat, to the medieval development of just war theory, to the Reformed tradition's defense of civil rights and the rule of law, has been grounded in the imago Dei as the theological foundation of human dignity.

The contemporary cultural moment makes this implication of the doctrine more urgent than ever. The culture that surrounds the church has dismantled virtually every alternative foundation for universal human dignity. The naturalistic account of human origins reduces the human creature to a sophisticated animal, and the dignity it attempts to construct on that foundation is unstable: if human dignity is grounded in cognitive capacity, then the cognitively impaired are less dignified; if it is grounded in rationality, then the irrational are less protected; if it is grounded in self-consciousness, then the fetus is less than human; if it is grounded in the capacity for meaningful relationships, then the profoundly isolated are of lesser worth. Each of these reductions has been drawn by serious thinkers from the secular premises they began with, and each of them has been used to justify the elimination of human lives that the reducing account regards as not fully human. The imago Dei cuts through every such reduction with a single, non-negotiable affirmation: every human being, without exception, at every stage of development, in every condition of capacity or incapacity, bears the image of the living God and is therefore entitled to the full protection and respect that image-bearing warrants.

The Psalm 8 doxological frame must remain in place as the doctrine of human dignity is applied in the ethical arena. The dignity of the human creature is not a ground for human pride or human self-assertion; it is a ground for human worship and human responsibility. To affirm human dignity in the name of the imago Dei is to affirm it in the name of the God whose image the creature bears, which means that the ethical demand to protect and respect human dignity is simultaneously a demand to honor the God whose image is at stake in every act of violence, abuse, or contempt directed at a human being. "Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man" (Genesis 9:6, NASB 1995). The prohibition of murder is grounded in the dignity of the image-bearer, and the dignity of the image-bearer is grounded in the glory of the God whose image is borne. Every act of respect for human dignity is ultimately an act of respect for the Creator, and every act of contempt for human dignity is ultimately an act of contempt for the God in whose image the contemned person is made. This is why the doctrine of the imago Dei is not merely a doctrine about human beings; it is, at its deepest level, a doctrine about God, about what it means that the Creator has so honored His creature as to stamp it with His own likeness and to ground its inviolability in the inviolability of His own name.

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth, who have displayed Your splendor above the heavens! ... What is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him?"

Psalm 8:1, 4, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Term	Definition
Imago Dei	Latin for “image of God.” The defining characteristic of the human creature established in Genesis 1:26–27, denoting the representational likeness between the human creature and its Creator. The imago Dei is what distinguishes humanity from every other creature in the created order and constitutes the permanent ontological ground of universal human dignity and universal human accountability. Reformed theology distinguishes between the image in the narrow sense (original righteousness, holiness, and true knowledge, lost in the fall) and the image in the broad sense (rationality, moral agency, personhood, damaged but retained after the fall).
Tselem (צלם)	Hebrew for “image,” used in Genesis 1:26–27 for the image of God in which the human creature was made. Tselem consistently denotes a concrete, visible representation in the Old Testament, a statue, a figure, a likeness that makes present what would otherwise be absent or invisible. Its use for the human creature in Genesis 1:26–27 designates the human being as God’s visible representative presence in the created order: the creature through whom the authority, character, and glory of the Creator are to be displayed in the creaturely realm. The Ancient Near Eastern royal ideology of image-placement illuminates the regal and representative function implied by the term.
Demut (דמות)	Hebrew for “likeness,” used alongside tselem in Genesis 1:26 for the image of God in the human creature. Derived from damah (דמה, to be like or resemble), demut denotes a relationship of correspondence or resemblance. The Reformed exegetical tradition (Calvin, Turretin, Hodge, Bavinck) holds that tselem and demut are effectively synonymous in the context of Genesis 1:26–27, functioning as two complementary expressions of a single reality rather than two distinct aspects of the image. The combination of the two terms establishes both the genuine correspondence between the human creature and its Creator (tselem) and the creaturely character of that correspondence (demut: a likeness, not an identity).
Image in the Narrow Sense	Calvin’s and the Reformed tradition’s term for the original righteousness, holiness, and true knowledge in which the human creature was created, the positive moral and spiritual orientation of the whole person toward God that characterized the pre-fall state. The narrow image is lost in the fall (Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10 imply its loss through their restoration language) and is progressively restored in sanctification through the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, with its complete restoration reserved for glorification. The Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 6 defines it as right knowledge of God, heartfelt love for God, and holy living before God.
Image in the Broad Sense	Calvin’s and the Reformed tradition’s term for the structural properties of human personhood, rationality, moral agency, self-consciousness, language, creativity, and accountability before God, that are retained after the fall as permanent characteristics of the human creature, damaged and distorted in their orientation but not destroyed in their existence. The broad image is the basis for the prohibition of murder in Genesis 9:6 and the prohibition of cursing in James 3:9, establishing that the image-bearing status of the human creature is not forfeited

	by sin and that fallen human beings retain the dignity and accountability that image-bearing implies.
Structural Interpretation (Imago Dei)	The interpretive tradition that locates the imago Dei in the specific capacities or faculties that distinguish the human creature from other creatures: rationality, moral conscience, creativity, language, self-awareness, and spiritual capacity. Associated with the patristic tradition (Irenaeus, Augustine, Aquinas) and some Reformed thinkers, this interpretation rightly identifies the cognitive, moral, and spiritual capacities through which the human creature most closely resembles its Creator, but risks reducing the image to one dimension of the person (usually the rational soul) rather than characterizing the whole person.
Functional Interpretation (Imago Dei)	The interpretive tradition that locates the imago Dei in the calling to exercise dominion over the creation as God’s vice-regent rather than in a structural property of the human creature. Associated with Old Testament scholars like Gerhard von Rad and, in the Reformed tradition, with John Stek, this interpretation rightly attends to the direct grammatical and theological connection in Genesis 1:26–28 between the imago Dei declaration and the dominion mandate, but risks reducing the image to a task (which could be revoked) rather than a status (which is permanent).
Relational Interpretation (Imago Dei)	The interpretive tradition that locates the imago Dei not in a structural property or a functional calling but in the relationship between the human creature and God, the capacity for and calling to genuine personal fellowship with the Creator. Associated with Emil Brunner in the twentieth century and with G. C. Berkouwer in the Reformed tradition, this interpretation rightly attends to the personal and covenantal character of the imago Dei, but risks so emphasizing the relational character of the image that it loses sight of the structural and functional dimensions that make the relationship possible.
Comprehensive Interpretation (Imago Dei)	The Reformed consensus view that the imago Dei characterizes the whole person, mind, will, affections, body, relationships, and calling, in her total orientation toward God as His created representative and covenant partner, rather than locating the image in any single faculty, function, or relationship. Formulated by Bavinck (“man is the image of God”), Hoekema (“man in the totality of his being—body and soul—is the image of God”), and the Westminster Standards, the comprehensive view preserves the genuine insights of the structural, functional, and relational interpretations while refusing to reduce the image to any one dimension of it.
Common Grace	The general, non-saving favor of God extended to all human beings regardless of their spiritual condition, by which God restrains sin, sustains civil order, and enables unregenerate human beings to achieve genuine intellectual, moral, aesthetic, and civic goods. Common grace is grounded in the broad image of God retained after the fall: because the unregenerate retain the structural capacities of image-bearing (rationality, moral agency, creativity), they are capable of genuine achievements in the intellectual, moral, and civic domains, achievements that the Christian can gratefully acknowledge as gifts of God’s common grace without regarding them as evidence of saving faith or spiritual regeneration.
Conformed to the Image of the Son	Paul’s formulation in Romans 8:29 for the eschatological goal of redemption: “predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son.” The telos of the Spirit’s sanctifying work is not the restoration of the Adamic state but the

conformity of the redeemed to the image of Christ, the true image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15) in whom the imago Dei is fully and perfectly realized. This conformity is progressive in sanctification (2 Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 3:10), present in principle in justification (Romans 8:30), and complete at glorification (1 John 3:2; Philippians 3:21).

Practical Application

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

We must believe that the imago Dei is not one doctrine among many in the church's theological inheritance but the anthropological foundation upon which every other anthropological affirmation depends. What the human creature is in terms of dignity, accountability, fallibility, redeemability, and destiny is determined by what it means to have been made in the image of God, and no adequate account of human identity, human ethics, or human hope can be constructed without it. The student who has worked through this lesson carefully should come away with a settled conviction that the comprehensive Reformed account of the imago Dei, the whole person, in her total orientation toward God, as His representative likeness in the creation, is more adequate than any of its competitors, not merely because it is more theologically sophisticated, but because it does more justice to the full range of the biblical testimony and provides a more stable and more genuinely universal foundation for human dignity than any narrower account can provide.

We must also believe that the distinction between the narrow and broad image is not a theological technicality but a pastoral necessity. Without it, the church cannot explain simultaneously why sin has done as much damage as the Scriptures say it has done (the narrow image is genuinely lost in the fall) and why fallen human beings retain the dignity and worth that Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9 affirm (the broad image is genuinely retained after the fall). The student who has internalized this distinction will be equipped to hold the full radicality of the doctrine of total depravity, the comprehensive corruption of human nature in every faculty, alongside the full dignity of fallen human image-bearers, without reducing either to accommodate the other.

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

Let the doxological frame of Psalm 8 govern the emotional register in which you receive the doctrine of the imago Dei. The appropriate response to the knowledge that you are made in the image of God is not pride, not the self-congratulatory satisfaction of a creature that has discovered how significant it is, but the astonished worship of a creature who has discovered how extraordinary the love of its Creator is. The question is not "How significant am I?" but "What is man, that You take thought of him?" And the answer is not the creature's own achievement but the Creator's inexplicable grace: You have made him, You have crowned him, You have put all things under his feet. The dignity of the image is a gift, not an achievement, and the proper response to a gift of this magnitude is not pride but doxology.

Desire the kind of attention to the image of God in other people that the doctrine demands. If every human being, without exception, without qualification, in every stage of development and every condition of capacity or incapacity, bears the image of the living God, then the practice of genuinely seeing the image in every person you encounter is not merely an ethical duty but a spiritual discipline: a daily exercise in recognizing, in the face of the person before you, the reflection of the God in whose image both of you are made. The practice of this recognition, in the nursing home as in the boardroom, in the refugee camp as in the cathedral, in the face of the person whose life and values you find most alien and most offensive as in the face of your closest friend, is the lived application of the imago Dei doctrine, and it is the application that the doctrine is designed to produce.

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

- Read Genesis 1:26–28 in the context of the whole of Genesis 1, attending to what distinguishes the creation of humanity from the creation of everything else. Note the divine deliberation ("Let Us make"), the specification of the image, the threefold repetition of the image language in verse 27, and the direct connection between the image and the dominion mandate. Then read Psalm 8 as a devotional response to Genesis 1:26–28, the Psalmist's worshipful meditation on what Genesis 1 declares about humanity. Ask

yourself: what is the emotional register of Psalm 8, and what does that register tell you about the spirit in which the doctrine of the imago Dei should be received?

- Reflect on two specific human beings in your life whose image-bearing dignity you are in danger of failing to honor: one person whose condition or capacity makes the imago Dei easy to overlook (a severely disabled person, an elderly person with dementia, an unborn child), and one person whose behavior or values makes the imago Dei easy to dismiss (someone whose choices you find morally repugnant, someone whose politics you find intolerable, someone whose treatment of you has been unjust). For each person, ask: what does the imago Dei demand of the way I think about this person and the way I treat this person? Write down one specific act of recognition, respect, or care that the doctrine of the imago Dei requires of you toward each person.
- **Read Anthony Hoekema's *Created in God's Image* (1986).** This is the finest modern Reformed treatment of the imago Dei available in English. Hoekema's engagement with the biblical texts, the history of interpretation, and the contemporary alternatives is both scholarly and pastorally accessible, and his comprehensive account of the image as characterizing the whole person, not merely one faculty or function, is the most persuasive available defense of the position this series adopts. For a more technically demanding treatment, Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, Part III ("The Image of God") remains unmatched in its exegetical depth and philosophical rigor.
- Identify one specific way in which the doctrine of the imago Dei should change the preaching or teaching of the congregation you serve. It may be a sermon series on the ethical implications of the imago Dei for one of the contested moral questions of the contemporary moment. It may be a teaching series for parents on the theological grounding of the sanctity of life at every stage. It may be a formation initiative for the congregation on what it means to see and honor the image of God in the vulnerable and the marginalized. Name the specific initiative, identify the specific resources from this lesson and from the broader Unit 3 that would inform it, and commit to a specific first step toward implementing it.
- Pray through Psalm 8 slowly, using its structure as the pattern for your prayer. Begin with the opening doxology: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!", adoring the God whose glory fills the heavens and whose name is excellent above all names. Move to the question of verse 4: "What is man that You take thought of him?", sitting with the astonishment of the creature who knows both its own smallness and the extraordinary care of the God who attends to it. Receive the answer of verses 5–8 as a gift rather than an achievement: You have made, You have crowned, You have put. And close with the closing doxology, which is the same as the opening one: the doctrine of humanity begins and ends in the worship of the God whose image the creature bears. This is the spirit in which the entire Unit 3 is designed to be studied.

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before working through this lesson, how would you have defined the image of God in the human creature? Would you have located it primarily in a specific human capacity (reason, moral conscience, spirituality), in the human calling to exercise dominion, in the human capacity for relationship with God, or in the whole person? Has the lesson changed your understanding of where the image is located and what it means to be an image-bearer? Share your initial and revised positions, and identify the exegetical or theological consideration that most significantly moved you.

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Genesis 1:26–28 carefully. What is the grammatical structure of verse 26, and how does the syntax connect the creation of the image-bearer to the dominion mandate? What does the threefold repetition of the image language in verse 27 suggest about the theological importance of the affirmation? What does the inclusion of “male and female” in verse 27 imply about the image-bearing status of women in relation to men?
- Compare Genesis 5:1–3 with Genesis 1:26–27. What is the theological significance of the genealogy’s opening back-reference to the creation of Adam in the likeness of God? What does the parallel language used for Seth’s derivation from Adam (in his image and likeness) and Adam’s derivation from God (in His likeness) suggest about the transmission of the image across generations? What does this transmission imply about the image-bearing status of the entire human race descended from Adam?
- Read Genesis 9:6 in its context (Genesis 9:1-7). What is the specific legal sanction that this verse establishes, and what theological ground does it give for that sanction? Does the verse imply that all human beings at the time of the Noahic covenant were image-bearers, including those outside the covenant family? What does the post-fall, post-flood application of imago Dei language imply about the effect of sin on the image?
- Read James 3:1–12. What ethical conclusion does James draw from the imago Dei in verse 9, and how does he state the apparent contradiction involved in blessing God and cursing image-bearers with the same tongue? What does the present perfect passive “have been made” (gegonotas, in the Greek) suggest about the permanent character of the image-bearing status of the human creature?
- Read Psalm 8 in full. What is the emotional register of the Psalm, and how does that register shape the way the doctrine of human dignity is presented? What specific verbs of divine action in verses 5–8 establish the conferred character of human dignity? How does the Psalm’s movement from the vastness of the cosmos (v. 3) to the smallness of the human creature (v. 4) to the extraordinary dignity conferred upon it (vv. 5–8) function as a model for the spirit in which the doctrine of the imago Dei should be received?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that *tselem* (image) and *demut* (likeness) in Genesis 1:26 are effectively synonymous rather than denoting two distinct aspects of the image. The patristic tradition, particularly the Alexandrian tradition, distinguished them as two different realities. Which reading do you find more persuasive on exegetical grounds? What specific evidence, from Genesis itself, from the subsequent uses of imago Dei language in the Old Testament, or from the pattern of Hebrew literary style, bears most directly on the question?
- The lesson identifies four major interpretive traditions for the imago Dei: structural, functional, relational, and comprehensive. Evaluate each tradition’s exegetical strengths and weaknesses. Which tradition has the strongest direct support from the text of Genesis 1:26–28 itself? Which tradition provides the most adequate foundation for the theological conclusions the series draws from the imago Dei, particularly the conclusion about universal human dignity? Is it possible to hold a comprehensive view without losing the specific insights of the structural, functional, and relational traditions?

- The lesson argues that the distinction between the narrow and broad image is essential for explaining both the radicality of the fall's damage to human nature and the persistence of universal human dignity. Is this distinction exegetically warranted, or is it a theological construction imposed on the text? What specific biblical texts support the narrow image (lost in the fall) and what specific biblical texts support the broad image (retained after the fall)? Are there texts that seem to support the complete destruction of the image in the fall?
- The author of Hebrews reads Psalm 8 as finding its full realization in the risen Christ rather than in humanity as currently constituted (Hebrews 2:5-9). How does this Christological reading of Psalm 8 reshape the doctrine of the imago Dei? If the image is fully realized only in Christ, what are the implications for the image as it currently exists in fallen humanity? Does the Christological reading of the imago Dei support or undermine the claim that every fallen human being is a full image-bearer entitled to the dignity and protection that image-bearing implies?
- The lesson argues that the democratization of royal image ideology in Genesis 1:26–27, extending to every human being the dignity that ancient Near Eastern cultures reserved for kings, is itself a theologically significant affirmation. Is this Ancient Near Eastern background relevant to the exegesis of Genesis 1:26–27, or does it risk importing extra-biblical categories into the interpretation of the text? How should the interpreter handle the use of Ancient Near Eastern background material in the exegesis of Genesis?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson argues that the imago Dei provides the only adequate foundation for universal and unconditional human dignity, and that every alternative foundation, grounded in capacity, rationality, self-consciousness, or relational ability, generates gradations of human worth that exclude the most vulnerable. Apply this argument to one specific ethical debate in your ministry context. What would a consistently imago Dei-grounded ethic require in the context of that debate, and how does it differ from what the alternative groundings of dignity require?
- The comprehensive Reformed account of the imago Dei locates the image in the whole person rather than in any single faculty or function. What are the specific pastoral implications of this comprehensive account for the ministry of the church to those whose cognitive, physical, or social capacities are significantly diminished? How should the congregation treat persons with severe cognitive disabilities, advanced dementia, terminal illness, or profound social isolation, in light of the comprehensive imago Dei?
- James 3:9 draws a direct ethical conclusion from the imago Dei: cursing human beings is incompatible with blessing God, because the human beings we curse are made in the likeness of God. Apply this principle to the specific forms of speech that are most common in your ministry context or personal life: the casual disparagement of political opponents, the gossip about neighbors or colleagues, the harsh criticism of family members, the dehumanizing language used about those with whom we disagree. What specific changes in the patterns of speech in your own life and in the congregation you serve does the imago Dei demand?
- The lesson closes with the affirmation that every act of contempt for human dignity is ultimately an act of contempt for the God in whose image the contemned person is made. Has this lesson produced any specific conviction about a particular person or group of people toward whom you have practiced contempt, indifference, or disrespect in ways that the imago Dei now reveals as theologically unacceptable? Name the person or group, name the attitude or behavior, and name the specific change that the doctrine of the imago Dei requires.
- Psalm 8 begins and ends with “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!” The doxological frame of the Psalm, the fact that the doctrine of human dignity is discovered and proclaimed within the context of the worship of God, is the model for the spirit in which the entire doctrine of the imago Dei is to be received and applied. Does the doxological character of Psalm 8 characterize the way your congregation engages the ethical demands of the imago Dei, or does the engagement tend toward the merely ethical, the affirmation of human dignity as a moral principle disconnected from the worship of the God whose image

grounds it? What would it look like to ground the congregation's ethical engagement in the doxological framework that Psalm 8 provides?

Prayer Focus

Open this seventh lesson of the Anthropology series, and the first lesson of Unit 3, with a slow and meditative reading of Psalm 8 in full. Read it not as a proof text for the doctrine of the imago Dei but as the prayer it is: the worshipful astonishment of a creature who has looked at the heavens and been overwhelmed by the disproportion between the vastness of the cosmos and the smallness of the human creature, and who then receives, with even greater astonishment, the extraordinary dignity that the Creator has conferred upon that small creature in spite of, or rather, precisely because of, its smallness before the cosmos. Let the question of verse 4, “What is man, that You take thought of him?”, function as your opening prayer: not an academic question to be answered by exegesis, but an existential question to be asked in the presence of the One who made you, who knows you, and whose answer to the question is not a doctrine but a Person, the Son of God who became the Son of Man so that the sons of men might be made the sons of God.

Spend time in Trinitarian adoration, allowing the doctrine of the imago Dei to deepen your worship of each person of the Trinity. Begin with the Father, who said “Let Us make man in Our image”, whose creative deliberation in the Trinitarian community of love produced the creature who alone, of all creatures, is designed to reflect and represent the divine character in the creaturely realm. Adore the Father who, when He made the creature in His image, made it for the fellowship and the glory that only a creature who genuinely corresponds to its Creator can receive and reflect. Move to the Son, who is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15), the eternal original in whose likeness the human creature was made, and who, in the fullness of time, became that creature in order to restore and surpass the image that sin had corrupted. Worship the Son who is both the standard by which the image is defined and the Savior by whom the image is restored, who alone can answer the Psalmist’s question with His own person: This is man, that I take thought of him, because in him I see the creature I became and the image I am restoring. Conclude with the Spirit, who is even now at work in the hearts and minds of believers, “transforming” them “into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Corinthians 3:18, NASB 1995), the Spirit whose sanctifying work is the progressive restoration of the narrow image (the original righteousness and holiness of the creation), whose indwelling presence is the first installment of the glorification that will complete what the creation began, and whose transforming power is the ground of the Christian’s hope that the image she now bears in its fallen and damaged form will one day be fully conformed to the image of the Son.

Pray together for Unit 3 of this series in three specific directions. First, for a right spirit of reception: that the study of the imago Dei across the four lessons of Unit 3 would produce not the pride of creatures who have discovered how significant they are, but the worshipful astonishment of the Psalmist who knows that every dignity the creature possesses is a gift from the Creator whose image the creature bears. The danger that always attends the doctrine of human dignity is the danger of anthropocentrism, of beginning and ending the reflection on the image with the creature rather than with the Creator, and the Psalmist’s doxological frame is the antidote. Second, for ethical courage in the application of the doctrine: that the theological conviction about the imago Dei, the universal, unconditional, inviolable dignity of every human being, would translate into specific acts of protection, advocacy, and care for those whose image-bearing dignity is most consistently denied and most urgently in need of defense in the contemporary moment. Third, for Christocentric focus in the development of the doctrine: that the four lessons of Unit 3 would consistently orient the student of the imago Dei toward the One in whose image the creature was made and toward whose likeness the Spirit is even now conforming the redeemed, so that the study of the image of God in the human creature would always be, at its heart, a study of the God whose image the creature bears, and above all of the Son who is that image in its fullest and most glorious creaturely expression.

“For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren.”

Romans 8:29, NASB 1995

Key Texts: *Genesis 1:26–28; 5:1–3; 9:6; Psalm 8; James 3:9; Colossians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 3:18; Romans 8:29; Ephesians 4:24; Colossians 3:10*

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Dr. Joshua Nichols

josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com