

The Goal of All of God's Ways:

Man as the Image of God

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The Striving

My algorithm knows I'm broken. I know that because every ad that pops up while I'm scrolling on my phone is trying to fix me. Or at least it's trying to get me on a better track; on a plan for improvement; on a path that will make me better today than I was yesterday, and even better tomorrow than I am today.

First, it's my brain. *Lumosity*, *Elevate*, *Impulse*, *Peak*. They're all apps that will "train my brain," they say, through fun little brain games. "It'll improve your memory," they say. "It'll enhance your focus." "It'll increase your cognitive speed." All of it, of course, implying that my memory and my focus and my cognitive speed aren't quite where they're supposed to be.

And then there's my fitness. *Boostcamp*, *Fitbod*, *BetterMe*, *EssentricsTV*. All promise me better health, and, by extension, a better life. And then there's the running apps, the walking apps, the swimming apps, the stretching apps. They'll improve my balance, my endurance, my flexibility, my coordination. If I download them all, I'll be unstoppable.

And then there are the ads for my aches and pains; for this problem I seem to have of aging and of dying; and, even more important than dying, it seems, for what I look like in the mirror – a back brace that will improve my posture; a gel that will whiten my teeth; and (because my wife must have gotten a hold of my phone one night) some organic Norwegian cream made out of beeswax and marigolds that promises to soothe, hydrate, and rejuvenate my skin.

And then there are the supplements – creatine, protein, collagen, probiotics. And the diets – Whole30, Paleo, Keto, Intermittent Fasting. And the therapies – music therapy; breathwork therapy; cryotherapy; mindfulness therapy.¹ And the drugs – *Rinvoq* for arthritis; *Skyrizi* for autoimmune disorders; *Wegovy* for weight loss; *Cialis* for... "better blood flow." And don't even get me started on the oils – chamomile to calm irritability; lavender to ease anxiety; peppermint to soothe a headache; ginger for an upset tummy. Noises and colors are even teaming up to try and fix me – white noise to help me focus; green noise to help me sleep; purple noise to stop the ringing in my ears. And on, and on, and on, and on, and on, and on "the striving" goes.

Do you get the point? More pointedly, can you relate? Does your algorithm know you're broken, too? And is it trying to fix you? Or at least is it trying to get you on a better track; on a plan for improvement; on a path that will make you better today than you were yesterday, and even better tomorrow than you are today?²

¹ Visit www.wimhofmethod.com/benefits for all the "life-changing" benefits you can receive from a simple routine of cold showers and mindful breathing exercises – more energy, boosted immunity, improved metabolism, better skin, lower stress, and increased emotional resilience, just to name a few! I tried it for a while, and I think it kind of works...though it could just be in my head.

² An illustration: I receive a weekly email blog called *Think with me...Reflections on Life and Leadership* by author Don McMinn. An article he wrote called "Adopt the Kaizen Strategy; pursue continuous improvement" provoked the thoughts shared in this essay's introduction. The article highlights how 21 of Japan's most important business leaders embraced the *Kaizen Strategy* ("kaizen" means "continuous betterment" in Japanese) in 1950 to help rebuild the Japanese economy post-WWII. The idea was to pursue continuous improvement of all products and services through small, incremental changes along the way (rather than through large, major changes after products failed). After two decades of employing the strategy, Japanese products, previously known as "Jap scrap," became synonymous with quality and super-engineering. Japan rose to the number two economic power in the world just one generation after the destruction caused by the war. McMinn then encourages us all to adopt the *Kaizen Strategy*, never being content with the status quo; continually striving to make things better; adopting a mindset that everything – even mundane tasks like brushing your teeth or grinding your coffee – *everything* is a work in progress that can be improved with small, incremental changes along the way. "Kaizen is continuous," McMinn concludes, "don't ever stop searching for ways to make something better." You can find the article here: <https://us9.campaign-archive.com/?e=5a738cec9a&u=3f07362b362ca4c8e59506ff8&id=dc3f8e83f4>

We sell it as a good thing, we human beings. All this striving and achieving and advancing and progressing. We're even satisfied to make that *journey* the *goal* – “The true traveler never arrives,”³ we say – because we have convinced ourselves that the *τέλος*⁴ of all our travels through time and space is that there really is no true *τέλος*. We're just here to keep exploring, keep learning, keep studying, keep discovering – striving, achieving, advancing, progressing – along the way. After all, maybe we are better today than we were yesterday. And maybe we will be better tomorrow than we are today.

But deep down we know that's not true. Because it's not really our algorithm that knows we're broken. We know it. We human beings who programmed the algorithms and who invented all the stuff that supposed to fix us – we know it, and we know it innately: *We were meant for something more*. And so, the hidden heartbeat behind all the striving, the achieving, the advancing, the progressing? *We're trying to get it back*. We're trying to get back to *whatever it is* that we no longer are, but that we innately know we're *supposed to be*. Will we ever get there – wherever this “there” is – since it's *not* truly satisfying to us that “the true traveler never arrives”? So fixated are we on answering this question, we're even going to the moon and back to try to figure it out. And then maybe to Mars. Perhaps one day we'll even strive and achieve and advance and progress to the stars.⁵ (And if not us, maybe the machines we're inventing to replace us on this aimless journey through time and space will).

It's sad when you really think about it. All this striving to get back to something we *no longer are* but that we know we're *supposed to be*. But here's the saddest part. We human beings don't even know what it is we're striving to achieve. “We're all just guessing here!” humanity has to admit in our most humble moments, even as we take so much pride in our advancing. All our “anxious striving” is just a “chasing after the wind,”⁶ we eventually realize (at least if we're as wise as Solomon), because we have no idea what we're trying to “get back to” and to “progress towards” and to “arrive at.” It's almost as if we are “ever hearing but never understanding” and “ever seeing but never perceiving.”⁷ It's almost as if we've been “darkened in [our] understanding”⁸ of things, and that some sort of “god of this age has blinded [our] minds.”⁹ And in that total blindness, we cannot see what's truly broken; what's really lost; what we no longer are but that we know – but don't *really* know – we're supposed to be.

It creates this terrible paradox, then, doesn't it? That in the midst of all the striving and achieving and advancing and progressing, what humanity really is, is stuck and trapped and enslaved. We are stuck in our striving; we are trapped in our achieving; we are enslaved in our advancing because, if you don't know what's broken, how can you ever fix it? And if you don't know what you've lost, how can you ever find it? How can we ever “arrive” at *whatever it is* that we *don't even know* we're *supposed to be*?

³ This quote is most often attributed to the 19th century French Impressionist painter, Edgar Degas, though many iterations of it from many different sources can be found. Degas had a reputation for never truly finishing a painting but to instead “begin a hundred things and not finish one of them.” “Edgar Degas,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, updated 3 July 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Degas

⁴ Greek word meaning “the goal toward which a movement is being directed; end, goal, outcome.” BDAG, s.v. “τέλος”

⁵ Elon Musk gives voice to the striving: “You want to wake up in the morning and think the future is going to be great – and that's what being a spacefaring civilization is all about. It's about believing in the future and thinking that the future will be better than the past. And I can't think of anything more exciting than going out there and being among the stars.” – Elon Musk, as stated on the SpaceX mission statement page: www.spacex.com/mission

⁶ Ecclesiastes 2:17-23 (all Bible passages taken from the NIV11 unless otherwise noted.)

⁷ Isaiah 6:9; quoted by Jesus in Matthew 13:14

⁸ Ephesians 4:18

⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:4

So, what are we to make of it all? The apps, the exercises, the diets, the drugs. The therapies, the oils, “We landed on the moon!” What are we to make of the striving, since our striving is so blind? What are we to make of the advancing, since our advancing is enslaving? What are we to make of this journey we’re on called progress, since our journey has no true *τέλος*, and on it we never “arrive”?

You know what I make of it all?

I think it’s *the image of God* at work.

At least it’s the working of the broken-down rubble remnants of it that remain.

And it might just be the *common ground* we need upon which we can rebuild what’s been torn down and free what’s been enslaved and fix what’s been broken and find what’s been lost.

All we need is for someone to *speak up* with some answers in the midst of the striving, the achieving, the advancing, the progressing. A voice to trust, that is, in the midst of all the guessing.

We Have a God Who Speaks

I’m not looking to get into a debate here about the most powerful words ever recorded, but if I were, I would contend for these:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים

Can you think of more powerful words than the words, “*And God said...*”? That is a world-changing, life-changing, heart-changing, *τέλος*-changing truth – that we have a *God who speaks*. And it isn’t just because his words have the power to *create*. They do, of course, and that’s evident as soon as our God starts speaking in Genesis 1. “*And God said,*” the refrain begins. And after six days of speaking, everything was created out of nothing, just as the “*God*” who speaks “*said.*”¹⁰

But it’s not just their power to *create* that makes the words of God so powerful. They also have the power to *inform*.¹¹

“We’re all just guessing here!” remember? At least when it comes to “the things of God.” And so, without a God to inform us of the *truth* about what *is* in the midst of all the guesses?

The Guesses of the Ancient Near East

The religious world of the Ancient Near East was just guessing. “*Who exactly is God? Who are we in relation to him? What are his goals, and what is his purpose for us?*” All they could do was guess about those “things of God,” and their guesses took on all sorts of different forms.

¹⁰ See Genesis 1:3-24. Here are some selected verses to remind us of the refrain: “*And God said, ‘Let there be light.’*” And then simply by the power of that word, “*There was light.*” “*And God said, ‘Let there be a vault between the waters.’*” And by the power of his word, there was. “*And God said, ‘Let dry ground appear.’*” And by the power of his word, it did. “*And God said, ‘Let the land produce vegetation...’*” and “*Let there be lights in the sky...*” and “*Let the water teem with living creatures...*” and “*Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds.*” And then all of it happened just as the “*God*” who speaks “*said.*”

¹¹ And as God’s words inform, they’re also still creating! For his “living and active” Word is not only *informative*, but *formative*, creating faith and forming us to be what we are.

First, they guessed that “god” wasn’t just one, but that they were many. There may have been a “chief god” in those pantheons of gods (like Amun-Ra in Egypt; like El and Asherah in Canaan; and like Marduk in ancient Babylon). But all those gods were *local* (local to Egypt, or to Canaan, or to Babylon, etc.), and they were all in charge of different things (like the sea, or the crops, or the weather, or fertility).

But since none of those gods ever *spoke up* and said anything (because they were all just the made-up guesses of the humans), the humans were also left to guess at what their made-up gods were thinking. “Family life isn’t good right now? Our local gods of the home must feel neglected. Let’s organize a festival to honor them.” Or, “A drought is threatening the harvest? Our local weather gods must be angry. Better offer a sacrifice to appease them.” Or, “That nation over there is better off than we are? Their local gods of conflict and war must be more powerful than ours. Better not pick a fight with them.”

And here’s another thing the Ancient Near Easterners did for their local gods as they guessed at how to keep them happy and appeased and always on their best behavior. They built them “houses” so their local gods could dwell in the location over which they had their dominion. It was a temple, most often. And then, within that temple, they would place an “image” of their gods, often carved out of wood or stone.

That graven image wasn’t *actually* the god, of course (because the gods, they guessed, were actually dwelling in the heavens, or in the underworld, or in the sea, or in the sun, or in some other local place *unseen*), but these images that they made of their gods would *represent* their gods in a way that *could* be seen. It gave the humans a physical place to visit and a visible thing to worship. They could pray to this image that represented their god; they could offer sacrifices to this image that represented their god; they could interact with this image that represented their god. And maybe, just maybe, if they did it all in a way that pleased them, the gods would be on their side.¹²

Do you see how we’re just left to guess when “the gods” don’t speak up with *the truth* about what *is*? (And do you see how we usually guess that “the gods” must be fickle and emotional and sinful *just like we are*, as if *we* created *them* in *our* image?)

And one more thing about the guesses of man. Even the best ones we think we’ve got...

All Blind Mankind Can Do is *Guess Wrong*

“There is a way that seems right to a man,
but in the end it is the road to death.”¹³

When it comes to “the things of God,” all blind mankind can do is *guess wrong*. And, no matter where the wrong guesses may lead on this journey of life we call progress, the road of wrong guesses is a “road to death.”¹⁴ Physically. Spiritually. Eternally. Every time.

¹² Many of the thoughts shared in this section were discussed on a podcast called *Let the Bird Fly*. In “Episode 279: The Image of God,” Wisconsin Lutheran College Professors Michael Berg and Wade Johnston, along with Campus Pastor Gregory Lyon, begin their discussion of the image of God by discussing the religious context of the Ancient Near East. You can listen to the full podcast episode here: www.letthebirdfly.com/?powerpress_pinw=4690-podcast

¹³ Proverbs 14:12 (EHV)

¹⁴ An illustration: The greatest movie in the history of cinema is *The Princess Bride* (and that is an objective fact!). And the greatest scene from that greatest movie of all time is when the hero Westley challenges Prince Humperdinck’s mercenary mastermind

The Power of a God Who Speaks

Do you see now why it's so powerful? That as we open up the *Word of God* to its very first page, that we are introduced to a God who speaks?

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים

Suddenly, we're not left to guess anymore. No more guesses about how this all got here, because the God who speaks told us in his Word. No more guesses about who's in charge of us here, because the God who speaks told us in his Word. And what he speaks is *the truth* about what *is* so that we no longer have to guess.

No More Guesses About Mankind

And he doesn't leave us guessing about *mankind*, either. For, after he created everything else with the power of his Word, the God who speaks also said this (also printed in the Hebrew, with my own English translation above):

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the sky, and over the livestock, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that crawls on the earth.'¹⁵

(that is,) according
to our likeness in our image man(kind) let us make And God said

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ

and over and over over so that they may
the livestock the birds of the air the fish of the sea have dominion

וַיִּרְדּוּ בְּדִגַּת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה

upon the earth that crawl and over all
the crawling things and over all
the earth

וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ וּבְכָל-הָרֶמֶשׂ הָרֹמֵשׂ עַל-הָאָרֶץ

Vizzini to "a battle of wits" in an attempt to get his beloved Princess Buttercup back from her kidnapping. Two goblets filled with wine. One, safe to drink. The other, laced with iocane powder, the most deadly poison known to man. "Where is the poison?" Westley asks as he presented the goblets to his foe. "The battle of wits has begun. It ends when you decide and we both drink, and find out who is right...and who is dead." Finally, after a dazzling display of dizzying intellect (alongside a secret switcheroo of the goblets), Vizzini thinks he has Westley fooled and the battle of wits won. He tells Westley to drink from the wine in front of him. And then Vizzini drinks from his own. And then Westley says the words: "*You guessed wrong.*" "*You only think I guessed wrong!*" the confident Vizzini replies, then revealing how he had switched the glasses when Westley wasn't watching. But, then, in the midst of celebrating his victory with pride-filled cackles of laughter...it was Vizzini that keeled over and died. Because both glasses had been poisoned. Westley had just spent the last few years developing an immunity to the poison inside. The point: No matter how confident Vizzini was in his guess (blinded as he was in the arrogance of his supposed superior intellect), *all he could do was guess wrong*. And, because the stakes were life and death, his wrong guess was fatal. So it is with "the things of God." All blind mankind can do is guess wrong. And with "the things of God," wrong guesses are fatal, too. Physically. Spiritually. Eternally. Every time.

¹⁵ Genesis 1:26, taken from the EHV for its translation of וּבְכָל-הָאָרֶץ as "and over all the earth" (which is taken from the wording of the Masoretic text). The NIV11 says "and all the wild animals," as the NIV11 took their wording from the Syriac Peshitta translation.

Suddenly, we're not left to guess about who we are as human beings anymore, either. And the truth about us – revealed by none other than the God who speaks truth in the midst of all the guesses – is nothing short of stunning: Our Triune God¹⁶ decided in eternity to “make¹⁷ man *in our image*” and “according to *our likeness*.”

“Let Us Make Man *In Our Image*”

“These are not words thought up on the spur of the moment,” noted J.P. Meyer, as he spoke of God’s own *τέλος* in creating mankind. “God did not suddenly blurt them out...This is a thought that moved God’s heart from eternity and filled it with a blessed joy...These words, ‘in our image, in our likeness,’ express *the goal of all of God’s ways*. And he makes this goal unchangeable: *man is to be God’s image*.”¹⁸

They are thoughts that moved God’s heart from eternity. They are words that express the goal of all of God’s ways. And hearing them would have rocked the religious world of the Ancient Near East to its core.

The idea of a *tselem* (תְּצַלֵּם) – an image; a *seen* object shaped to represent something *unseen*¹⁹ – was nothing new, remember. Humans had been fashioning them all over the place to represent their gods in the locations over which they guessed they had their dominion, and they would place those *tselems* in temples so they could interact with their gods in a tangible way.

But this???

To hear *this* from a God who was actually *speaking up* in the midst of their guesses? To hear that this God of Scripture did not need a *tselem* carved of him because the *tselem* that represents him...is *man*?

“Let us make *man* in our image.”

“You don’t have to build me a temple,” in other words, God declared to the world when he created mankind. “You don’t have to build me a temple, first of all, because I’ve already built one. And it’s not *local*, either. It’s *everywhere*. Because *everywhere* is where *I* have dominion.²⁰ On Day Two I built the ceiling,

¹⁶ I recognize that the first-person plural verb תְּצַלֵּם does not explicitly teach the *triune* nature of our God. But it does clearly teach a *plurality* within God’s *unity* that sets the stage for Scripture’s explicit teaching of God’s triune nature later on. I also recognize that there is a debate about who the “us” is in this verse. A popular assumption is that God is holding a heavenly council meeting with his angels, rather than our Triune God having a divine conversation within himself. However, the fact that this plural council decided to create mankind “in *our image*” (בְּצִלְמֵנוּ) and “according to *our likeness*” (כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ) – both plural nouns – and then that same creative decision is communicated in the singular in verse 27 – “*He created*” (not *they* created), and “in *his image*” (not in *their image*) points to our Triune God referring only to himself when he says “Let us make man in our image.” For a succinct, yet thorough exposition of this, see Pastor Timothy Nass’s essay entitled “וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם”, which he presented at the April 2026 Pastors’ Conference of the Central Conference of the WELS’ Western Wisconsin District.

¹⁷ The verb תְּצַלֵּם is cohortative, expressing the subject’s *intent*. “Let us make man” with this intent in mind: “Let us make [him] *in our image, according to our likeness*.”

¹⁸ Meyer, J.P. “The Image of God, Genesis 1.” Translated by Paul Prange and William Tackmier. Pages 176-191 in *Our Great Heritage*. Vol. 2 (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991), 177. The emphasis is mine in this quotation. **The title of this essay is taken from these words of J.P. Meyer.**

¹⁹ The Brown-Driver-Briggs *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* notes that צֶלֶם is most often used to describe idols fashioned to represent false gods, both in Scripture and in other Hebrew, Aramaic, and Akkadian secular sources.

²⁰ Paul himself used this thought in Athens: “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands” (Acts 17:24ff)

and I called it 'sky.' On Day Three I built the floor, and I called it 'dry land.' On Day Four I installed the lights, and they now govern the days and the nights.²¹

"But, most importantly," God declared, "you don't have to fashion an image of me out of wood or stone or gold²² and then place that graven image in my temple, either. *Because I've already done that myself, too.* And it's *man*. *Man* is my image. *Man* will be the *tselem* that represents me where I have dominion. And they will be my *tselems* for this purpose: 'so that they may have dominion' (יָרְדוּ)²³ in my stead."²⁴

It adds yet another element to God's *τέλος* for man. God created man as his image bearer *so that* man would be able to have *dominion* in all the places where God has dominion.²⁵

And because God's dominion is not *local*, but *everywhere*, God's image bearers would have dominion *everywhere*, too – "over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the livestock, and *over all the earth*, and over every creeping thing that crawls on the earth."

Man was created to rule, that is. He was created to rule just *like God* would rule, equipped with God's "image" and "likeness" to empower him.

This is the goal of all of God's ways: Man was created in the image of God so that he could rule all of God's creation just *like God* would rule it; so that he could rule it under the rule of his God.

Man as Male and Female

But how could that be? How could it be that God's finite image bearers would be able to represent an infinite God *everywhere* he has dominion? God had a design for that, too. He displayed that design in verse 27 of Genesis 1, as the God who speaks now *did* what he *said* he would do in verse 26. And it was so

²¹ Kenneth A. Cherney, Jr., "Distinctively Human: An Anthropology of Genesis 1 and 2," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 119, no. 1 (2022): 16.

²² In fact, not only did God say "you don't have to," he forbade it outright in his follow up to the first commandment: "You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (Exodus 20:4-5a). When the Israelites handed their gold earrings to Aaron twelve chapters later, and then Aaron "made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf," you wonder if the Israelites actually believed that calf was the god "who brought [them] up out of Egypt" (Exodus 32:4). (More likely, the calf represented God's footstool, as calves were commonly used in religious imagery not as an image of the deity itself but "as a throne-support for the invisible deity." See HALOT, s.v. כֶּסֶל). The Israelites desired something *they could see* to represent what *they could not see*, since God himself was unseen and God's representative "Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain....'Come, make us gods,'" they said to Aaron, "who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don't know what has happened to him" (Exodus 32:1). The way the Israelites behaved as they fashioned this image made it clear why God was so opposed to his people doing such a thing: "When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, 'Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD.' So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry" (Exodus 32:5-6). "The people were running wild" and "Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughingstock to their enemies" (Exodus 32:25).

²³ When a cohortative follows another cohortative, it can be taken as a jussive expressing purpose. Lawrenz and Jeske, *Commentary on Genesis 1-11*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House (2016): 73-74.

²⁴ "Genesis 1:26 connects humanity's creation according to the image and likeness of God with dominion over creation. Humans are in God's image and likeness *so that* they can rule over other creatures" Samuel H. Nafziger, ed. *Confessing the Gospel: A Lutheran Approach to Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (2017): 131.

²⁵ "Man is to rule and is to enjoy his dominion, finding satisfaction in his dominion together with those dominated...This capability to rule and govern puts man in direct proximity to God, in God's class...Man finds blessedness in ruling with God, and the capability to do so and the worthiness to do so comes from God granting him his image" (Meyer 178,179).

beautiful, he communicated it with a poem (also printed in the Hebrew, with my own English translation above):

“God created the man in his own image.
In the image of God he created him.
Male and female he created them.”²⁶

<i>in his image</i>	<i>the man(kind)</i>	<i>So God created</i>
וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת-הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ		
<i>him</i>	<i>he created</i>	<i>of God</i>
<i>in the image</i>	בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ	
<i>them</i>	<i>he created</i>	<i>and female</i>
<i>male</i>	זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם	

So much more could be said about God’s eternal decision to create mankind *as male and female* in his image²⁷, but for our purposes, we will move on to verse 28 of Genesis 1. For here we see how God’s

²⁶ Genesis 1:27, also EHV, as the NIV11 loses the idea of the singular pronoun “him” in the second line by translating אֹתוֹ as “them.” As with any translation weakness, there will always be a need to teach.

²⁷ Note especially the *unity*, as well as the *duality*, of man as male and female that is expressed in the poem. Mankind is referred to as “man” (אָדָם, general word for mankind), and also as “him” (אֹתוֹ, singular masculine pronoun), yet also as “male and female” (זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה), and finally as “them” (אֹתָם, plural pronoun). Concordia Mequon professor, Nathan Jastram, notes: “The poem teaches both the unity and plurality of man, showing that male and female are a unity even though they are distinct sexes... [and] the poem teaches that the ‘man’ or ‘him’ whom God created in His image is actually ‘male and female’ and ‘them,’ so that even though the Bible never explicitly uses the words, ‘woman was made in the image of God,’ a proper interpretation of this passage makes it certain that woman was indeed made in the image of God.” Nathan Jastram, “Man as Male and Female: Created in the Image of God,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (2004): 26-27. So also Horace Hummel: “Verse 27 repeats and underscores the creation in the image, but now we also meet the interesting and significant bifurcation of *adam* (humanity) into males and females. There is unity in this duality – let us make *him* male and female. He creates *them*.” Horace Hummel, “The Image of God,” *Concordia Journal* (May 1984): 86. And J. Rodman Williams: “The fact that God created man as man and woman means that only in the differentiation and functioning of the two is God fully imaged on earth. Any blurring of the difference between man and woman is a blurring of the divine image.” J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology: Systematic Theology from a Charismatic Perspective*. Vol 1. Grand Rapids: Zondervan (1996):207. Jastram also wrote of the relationship between male and female as God’s image bearers: “Although the unity of male and female is evident in how they relate to God and nature, or what is outside themselves (*opera ad extra*, so to speak), it is especially in the relationship between male and female, in the operations within their own unity (*opera ad intra*, so to speak), that the God-created distinctions between the sexes become apparent. Just as it is wrong to deny the distinctions between the three persons of the Trinity and merge them into one (Unitarianism), so it is wrong to deny the distinctions between the two sexes and merge them into one (androgyny). It would be as wrong to deny the distinction between the sexes as it would be to deny the unity that they form according to the Scriptures. Sexual distinctions, then, are not foreign to the image of God or contrary to it...Notice how Luther understands the relationship of man and wife as embracing both the unity of one body in relation to others, and yet differentiation of order or leadership in relation to each other: ‘When the man and the woman are joined together in physical marriage, one body is formed, the goods are in common, the children and everything are common property. The wife is just as much mistress over the goods of her husband as the husband himself, and *in nothing is she differentiated from her husband, except that the husband is lord of the wife. In other respects that do not pertain to the husband, the wife is mistress of everything, just as much as the man*’” (Jastram 69). Cherney also highlights the unity of male and female through Adam’s song in Genesis 2: “[Adam’s] song does not suggest anything like ‘Finally I have a mate, just like the animals.’ In fact, it emphasizes exactly the opposite: the *difference* between humanity and the animals, and the likeness of the man and woman to each other. In a flash of insight, the man perceives that the woman had to have been created in a way completely different from anything else, and the implications for their relationship are clear. She is ‘from’ him; in a real sense, she *is* him. In their essential humanness they are the same” (Cherney 26). Sainted Professor Deutschlander highlights how each could reflect God’s image as they carried out their distinctive roles: “Adam could reflect [the]

creation of his image bearers *as male and female* was critical for the *function* and *purpose* that God had (and continues to have!) for his image bearers in his world.

Yet another layer to God's *τέλος* for man?

Man's Purpose Under God's Goal

"God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'"²⁸

and God said to them *and God blessed them*
וַיִּבְרַךְ אֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם אֱלֹהִים
and subdue it *and fill the earth* *Be*
and multiply *fruitful*
פָּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת-הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹּשְׁתֶּהּ
and have
and over the birds of the air *over the fish of the sea* *dominion*
וַיְרֹדוּ בְּדִגַּת הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם
upon the earth *that moves* *and over every*
living thing
וּבְכָל-חַיָּה הֹרֵמֶשֶׁת עַל-הָאָרֶץ

The God who speaks – וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים – spoke up again, this time with a blessing (וַיִּבְרַךְ) that he communicates through five commands. All five blessed commands are given to man as male and female, whom he had just created “in his image” for the purpose of representing him in the world.

The first blessed command is “to be fruitful” (פָּרוּ). God had created and designed man as “male and female” specifically so they would be able to do this (and, in Genesis 2, God’s first image bearer noticed with a poem that “imaged” his God’s²⁹).

The second blessed command is “to multiply” (רְבוּ). This would be the natural result of Adam and Eve carrying out the first command. When they would “be fruitful,” they would “multiply.”

And when they would “multiply”? Genesis 5:3 shares a significant truth about God’s design for man – that when man would multiply, he would pass along his “image” as an inheritance:

image of God in his rule over creation and in his headship over and love for his own family. Eve could reflect her bearing of that image by willingly accepting her role as the helper suitable for him. And both of them together could conform emotion, will and reason to God’s law.” Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds: The Splendor of Christian Doctrine* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2015): 170.

²⁸ Genesis 1:28

²⁹ Genesis 2:23-24

“When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.”³⁰

We often read this as a verse that proves inherited sin, as original sin is passed along from one sinner to another at conception. That is, indeed, what happened in procreation post-fall. However, the verse can be taken more neutrally than that. It simply states that Adam “had a son in his own likeness (דמות), in his own image (צלם).”³¹

Taken more neutrally, then, the implication is that God designed mankind to pass along their image and likeness to their children. That means, whatever Adam’s “image” was at the time he would conceive a child, that was the “image” his child would inherit.³² If he would have conceived Seth while he still bore the image of *God*, then he would have passed along the image of *God*. But since Seth was conceived after Adam fell, Adam passed along a fallen and corrupted image, instead.

This further communicates God’s design and desire for his image bearers. Adam and Eve were not meant to be the only ones. Instead, as male and female, they would “be fruitful.” And then they would “multiply,” with the intent that *God’s* image would be passed along through procreation. God’s image bearers, then, would increase in number with each successive generation. And all would rule as his representatives.

And they wouldn’t just represent him in *one location* either...

“Fill the earth (מלאו את-הָאָרֶץ),” God said in his third blessed command. Recall that God had already stated his goal for his image bearers in verse 26. They were to “have dominion” in all the places where God himself has dominion.³³ And since our infinite God’s dominion is *everywhere*, his finite image bearers would also have dominion *everywhere* by being “fruitful,” and then “multiplying,” and then “filling the earth.”³⁴

³⁰ Genesis 5:3

³¹ These are the same words that are used in Genesis 1:26, only with the order reversed and the prepositions switched so that they are governing the opposite word that they do in 1:26. It is evidence that God intends these two words to be seen as synonyms.

³² “The image that Adam passed on to Seth was his own *at the time he passed it on*, that is, after the fall. That means that the image could not have been the pure, unadulterated image of God in which he had been created, since the corruption of sin now stained him. On the other hand, the image that Adam passed on could not have been unrelated to the image in which he had been created. The text itself relates the two images, since Seth was born in the image of Adam, who was created in the image of God. The English translation adds the word “own” when talking of the image and likeness of Adam, and so emphasizes the distinction between Adam’s image and God’s image, but the Hebrew text includes no such distinguishing word. The text simply says that Adam was made ‘in the likeness of God’ and then that he ‘had a son in his likeness, in his image’” (Jastram 26-27).

³³ “Human beings are set in the midst of creation as God’s representatives through whom and by whom God exerts his own dominion” (Nafziger 131).

³⁴ “The image of God [is] analogous in a finite way to the infinite power, authority, wisdom, and goodness that God manifested in creating the world...God made man to be a limited, temporal revelation of his infinite, eternal attributes, particularly the attributes of God’s power, wisdom, and goodness, which the creation account highlights” Joel R. Beeke and Paul Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*. Vol 2 (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020): 163, 194. Also Frame: “Man’s relationship to the creation cannot be exactly the same as God’s, because man himself is only a creature. The analogy between God and ourselves will always have disanalogy with it. So we are looking for qualities in man that constitute finite replicas of God’s infinite qualities” John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013: 785. And Cherney: “Humanity’s ‘rule’ also takes a lot of us, if there is to be dominion over the entire creation and all the fish, birds, animals wild and domestic, and crawling things in it (Gen 1:26). For this reason, before repeating in their hearing the intention God had formed in his mind in 1:26 to grant them dominion, he gives humanity the same blessing he gave to the birds and marine creatures in Gen 1:22: ‘Be fertile, and be many, and fill the

“Fill the earth *with my image bearers!*” is the implied command. And as they would, they would keep God’s fourth and fifth blessed commands – to “subdue” the earth and to “have dominion over” (וְכָבְדוּ וְרָדוּ) everything in it, just as our Triune God had decided man would do in eternity (verse 26).

God’s finite image bearers would, in a sense, be everywhere all at once, *just like* our infinite God is everywhere all at once. Collectively, they would serve as his blessed representatives with each male and female fulfilling his or her vocation in his or her specific place and time.³⁵

That was God’s *τέλος* for man.

And all with God’s *ultimate τέλος* in mind:

A Rule of Rest

“By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done.”³⁶

Rest. Peace. All creation living under the eternal blessing of an all-powerful and all-loving God, with God finding nothing but joy and delight in his creation, and his creation finding nothing but joy and delight in him. Everything was as God intended it to be on this seventh day. It was a rule of rest that was meant to last beyond the seventh day and on into eternity. Because when God is the one who is ruling, his rule is always a rule of rest. And that *remains true* even when he rules through representatives whom he created to rule *like him*.

In fact, not only does it remain true, it is God’s *ultimate τέλος* for man:

“Who exactly is God? Who are we in relation to him? What are his goals, and what is his purpose for us?”

No more guessing needed, mankind. For God himself has spoken:

earth.’...Fertility is granted so that humanity may increase, so that they may fill the earth, so that they may subjugate it, so that they may rule it as vice-regents for God” (Cherney 21).

³⁵ Note how this vocational concept of God’s finite image bearers representing the infinite God parallels the concept of the body of Christ, with each member being a part of it (1 Corinthians 12-13). James W. Voelz, in his *Concordia Commentary* on the gospel of Mark, makes a fascinating vocational connection to Jesus’ words in Mark 12, as well. When asked by the Pharisees and Herodians about whether “to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not,” Jesus asked to see a coin that bore Caesar’s “image” and “inscription.” When Jesus then responded to their trap question by saying, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s,” Voelz interprets his response to mean, “Give back to Caesar *what bears the image and inscription of Caesar*, and give to God *what bears the image and inscription of God*.” For, when something bears your image and inscription, it belongs to you. Those who bear the image and inscription of God, then, (think baptism!) belong to God. We give our lives in service to him, carrying out our vocations as his image-bearing representatives on earth. (James W. Voelz, *Concordia Commentary: Mark 8:27-16:20*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2019: 910-912). While Voelz’ thoughts are certainly supported in the rest of Scripture, and they give us beautiful “identity” and “vocation” concepts from Jesus upon which to meditate, we also don’t want to go too far and say for certain that this is what was in Jesus’ mind when he spoke these words. The Greek uses a neuter plural pronoun when speaking of “the things of Caesar” and “the things of God,” which most likely leaves Jesus’ point more open ended – *all* that belongs to God should be given to him. One might expect a singular pronoun if Jesus were speaking of a singular thing – “the thing [that bears the image and inscription] of God” – and perhaps even a feminine pronoun to refer back to “image” and “inscription.” Yet, even as Jesus is most likely speaking of giving to God *all* that belongs to him, the hearts and lives of his restored image bearers would certainly be included!

³⁶ Genesis 2:2-3

God created man as male and female in his image so that his image bearers would be fruitful, multiply, and then fill the earth with more image bearers, with all of them ruling under his rule and as his representatives. And all with this *τέλος* in mind: to bring his whole creation under his blessing and into his eternal rest.³⁷

Some have called this purpose for which God created man “the cultural mandate.”³⁸ To borrow a phrase we tend to use elsewhere, “The Great Commission” has a nice ring to it, too: “Go into all the world, my image bearers! Fill the earth and rule it as my representatives. Bring it all under my blessing and into my eternal rest.”

It is a “Great Commission,” indeed. It is God’s ultimate *τέλος* for man.

It is the goal of all of God’s ways.

Telos Terminated?

But let’s put a pin in that “Great Commission” thought for now and tackle another vital question:

What has happened now that man has fallen?

Does he still bear the image of God? Does he still rule in God’s stead? Is the goal of all of God’s ways now terminated and dead?

If Genesis 1 and 2 serve as God’s stated goal for man and for his entire creation, then Genesis 3 is where God’s goals were shattered. For, before God’s first image bearers became fruitful so that they could multiply, fill the earth, and rule it under the rule of their God, God’s first image bearers fell into sin. In doing so, they fell away from everything God created them to do and everything he created them to be.

But what exactly went wrong in the fall?

Specifically, what happened to the image of God in man? Did it survive untouched? Did a shadow, a remnant, a shell of it endure? Was it lost completely so that not even a trace of it remained? To answer those questions, we need to ask another one:

What exactly *is* the image of God?

³⁷ “It was Adam’s calling to lead the whole creation into God’s everlasting *shalom*...Only with the Bible does there arise a genuine eschatology that orients human existence toward the future – toward a goal to be realized within history yet from the powers that lie beyond it” Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011): 380-381. Also Gerhard: “Since man was created to be the most quiet dwelling-place of the holy Trinity, God rested from his work after creating man. Therefore let man seek in God the true rest of his heart, for there he will find it. Let him make use of the creatures, and yet not abuse them. Let him make use of the creatures not as the ultimate end of his desire, but as means to render homage and service to the Creator. Let the brooks lead to the source, and the road to its destination” Johann Gerhard, “The Image of God.” Pages 1-66 in *The Doctrine of Man in the Writings of Martin Chemnitz and Johann Gerhard*. Edited by Herman A. Preus and Edmund Smits. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005): 29-30.

³⁸ “Man’s responsibility to fill and subdue the earth is sometimes called the *cultural mandate*...As God transcends the world by his control and authority, but becomes immanent in the world by his covenant presence, so Adam, God’s vassal king and prophet, is to fill the world over which he rules. Since he is not omnipresent as God is, he can fill it only by marrying and having children. So the cultural mandate is a historical, gradual process in which man progressively blesses every part of the earth with his presence” (Frame 787, 790).

What Exactly is the Image of God?

Theologians have been wrestling with that question for millennia, and the reason why is because God himself never comprehensively defines it in his Word. Instead, in Genesis 1 he simply *says* it – “Let us create man in our image” (verse 26) – and then he *does* it – “So God created man in his image” (verse 27) – and then he speaks of the *purpose* and *function* his image bearers would have in the world – “Be fruitful,” “multiply,” “fill the earth,” “subdue it,” “rule.” (verse 28).³⁹

Can we possibly understand what that meant pre-fall, now that we live in a post-fall world? Does it even apply to us anymore, now that we live in a post-fall world? What exactly did it mean – *or does it still mean??* – that mankind bore – *or still bears??* – the image of God?

While God doesn’t give us a comprehensive definition of the word picture⁴⁰ “image” (צֶלֶם) in Genesis 1:26, he does give us a synonym.⁴¹ Here again is the phrasing:

(that is,) according
to our likeness in our image man(kind) let us make And God said

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצִלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ

“Let us make man in our image (בְּצִלְמֵנוּ),” God said. “And here’s what I mean by *that*,” God continues with the appositional phrase כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ – “Man will be *our likeness*.”⁴²

³⁹ “Whatever else ‘image’ may imply, about all one can demonstrate *exegetically* from this verse is that ‘rule’ is the most immediate result of man’s creation in God’s image...To theoretically-minded Westerners it tends to be disconcerting that (as is common in Biblical idiom) the text’s interest is almost totally in the image’s result, not its content, in its function, not in its nature...But if we proceed holistically and let ‘Scripture interpret Scripture,’ it simply means that we have to turn to other, parallel passages for the answers to those specific questions” (Hummel 86).

⁴⁰ Meyer calls God’s use of the word “image” in Genesis 1:26 “a trope, a figurative expression, used to help us understand the inexpressible blessing of God.” (Leave it to the God who speaks “to help us understand” an “*inexpressible* blessing” by expressing it with one simple word!)

⁴¹ The words צֶלֶם and דְּמוּת are best taken as synonyms, as דְּמוּת stands in apposition to צֶלֶם. “Our theologians take the terms occurring in Genesis 1:26, צֶלֶם equals image and דְּמוּת equals likeness, not as two different concepts but as one strengthened concept...For the correctness of this view, Balthasar Meisner cites the following reasons: (1) In God’s decree (Ge 1:26), both terms צֶלֶם and דְּמוּת, occur, but in the fulfillment (Ge 1:27), only the one occurs, צֶלֶם. But since the fulfillment corresponds to the decree, it is clear that they cannot mean something different. (2) Scripture sometimes uses both terms and in the same incident, and it sometimes uses only one word (Ge 9:6), thus showing that the terms are synonymous. (3) The terms cannot mean something different when applied to Adam’s son Seth, who already belonged to the fallen race, and so they also do not mean something different in Genesis 1:26” Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*. Vol. 2. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2009): 317-318.

⁴² Understanding that צֶלֶם and דְּמוּת are synonyms is also relevant because many early church fathers, beginning with Irenaeus, tried to make a distinction between the meaning of the two words in an attempt to differentiate between what was lost in the fall (mankind’s spiritual capacities) and what was *not* lost in the fall (namely, characteristics common to man that differentiate man from animals). While that is a valid goal, since we do have to wrestle with what *was* lost in the fall and what *was not*, the grammar does not support making that distinction by trying to find distinctions between these two words. This becomes especially critical farther down the church history timeline, as the Scholastics grabbed onto the distinction in terms to promote the Semi-Pelagian false teaching of work righteousness. They taught that God’s *image*, צֶלֶם, (which they defined as man’s inherent natural faculties which had the capability of doing good in God’s sight) remained after the fall, while God’s *likeness*, דְּמוּת, (which they defined as the spiritual characteristics that were able to perfect the image) was lost in the fall. Thus, with divine help from Christ and the sacraments, humans who still bore God’s *image* (and, thus, who still had the capability to do good) could work toward restoring God’s *likeness* in themselves through meritorious works once again. These false teachings, of course, minimized the devastating impact of the fall, they downplayed the total depravity of original sin by turning it into nothing more than a wound that could be healed, and they minimized the need for Christ by allowing our retained capacity for good to play a role in our salvation. Because these teachings about the image of God were used to promote work-righteous theology in the Roman Catholic Church at the

Using the most common meaning of *דמויות*,⁴³ we can state it even more simply:

God created man to be *like him*.

But What Exactly Does *That* Mean?

But what exactly does *that* mean?

...Like God?

What can it possibly mean for *man* to be *like God*?

Professor Cherney offers a helpful reminder. In commenting on the Bible's very first words, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," Cherney notes, "Holy Scripture begins with a statement of God's utter transcendence. 'On one side of the ledger is God the creator. On the other side of the ledger is everything else. That means we have more in common with each other (Christian or not) and with the nonhuman creation than we have in common with God.'"⁴⁴

God on one side of the ledger. Everything else – including man! – on the other.⁴⁵

So, if man is *more like* a created monkey than *like* the Creator God; *more like* a created wildflower than *like* the Creator God; *more like* a created rock than *like* the Creator God, in what way is it true that man is *like* God?

Confessional Lutherans have traditionally explored the answer to that question by doing what Confessional Lutherans always do – by letting Scripture interpret Scripture. Two New Testament passages that speak directly to the "image of God" concept are cited most frequently:

expense of justification by grace alone through faith in Christ alone, they also impacted the way the Reformers – and the Confessional Lutheran theologians that followed them – would approach the concept of God's image and likeness. Luther's commentary on the topic (as quoted in a footnote in Pieper's dogmatics): "The Scholastics argue that the righteousness in which Adam was created did not form a part of Adam's nature, but was, as it were, an ornament or gift which was bestowed on him in his first estate; just as a garland is placed on the head of a beautiful maiden, which garland does not belong to the nature, but is something added from without and might be taken away again without harming the nature. They argue therefore that although men and devils have lost the righteousness in which they were created, yet their natural powers remained pure, in their original state. Since this doctrine detracts from the magnitude of original sin, it is to be shunned as deadly poison. We must rather conclude that original righteousness was not a superadded gift, separate from the nature of man, but belonged to the nature of man, so that it was natural for Adam to love God, to believe in God, to know God. These things were as natural for Adam as it is natural for the eye to behold the light. When the eye is injured and hurt, you may well say that the nature is harmed and injured....For as it is the nature of the eye to see, it was natural for Adam's reason and will to know God, to trust in God, and to fear God" Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950-1957): 1:520-521.

⁴³ The most common meaning of the verb root *דָּמָה*, from which the noun *דמויות* is taken, is "to be like." BDB 197-198.

⁴⁴ Cherney 8. Cherney takes the enclosed quote inside from Charles P. Arand and Erik H. Herrmann, "Living in the Promises and Places of God: A Theology of the World," *Concordia Journal* 41 (2015): 101-10. He also footnotes Norman Habel, "Playing God or Playing Earth? An Ecological Reading of Genesis 1:26-28," *Word and World Supplement Series* 5 (2006): 34.

⁴⁵ Cherney continued his quote by adding, "God's utter transcendence is opposed to the tendency in the worldview of the West to put humanity together with God on one side of the 'ledger,' and everything else on the other." Meyer emphasizes the same distinction: "As a creature, there's also an infinite distance between man and God" (Meyer 179).

Ephesians 4:22-24 – You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, *created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness*.

Colossians 3:9-10 – Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being *renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator*.

The Image of God: The Narrow View

These passages have led Confessional Lutheran theologians throughout the centuries to narrow down a definition of “the image” to this: Being created in the image of God means to possess a true “knowledge” of God and of his will, and to possess God’s characteristics of “true righteousness and holiness.”⁴⁶

Gifted by God with these attributes, God’s image bearers would be able to carry out his τέλος in a perfectly God-pleasing way: to represent him in the world, to rule it under his rule *just like he* would rule it, bringing it all under his blessing and into his rest as they did.

This narrowed-down view not only honors the two New Testament passages cited above, it’s also necessary to our understanding of how the Genesis narrative (and the story of man) continues. Simply put, you cannot tell the story of salvation without it. Recall our questions from before:

What exactly went wrong in the fall? Specifically, what happened to the image of God in man? Did it survive untouched? Did a shadow, a remnant, a shell of it endure? Was it lost completely so that not even a trace of it remained?

To let Gerhard summarize the answer:

“If the image of God is taken in accord with the explanation and definition of Scripture for the true righteousness and holiness after which man was created...*then we must surely say that the divine image has been lost through the fall* (emphasis mine).”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Examples. **The Apology**: “In Eph 5:9 and Col 3:10 Paul shows that the image of God is the knowledge of God, righteousness, and truth” (Apol II, 16-22). **Pieper**: “Of special importance is the creation of man in God’s own image. Man was endowed with the knowledge of God and perfect righteousness and holiness” (Pieper I-475). **Gerhard**: “The image of God consists of true righteousness and holiness, of the true knowledge of God” (Johann Gerhard, *On the Image of God in Man before the Fall*. Translated by Richard J. Dinda. Edited by Benjamin T.G. Mayes Theological Commonplaces (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013): 323. **Hoenecke**: “Wisdom, righteousness, and holiness – original righteousness – are properly the likeness of God” (Hoenecke 320). **Koehler**: “[The image of God] consisted in blissful knowledge of God (Col 3:10), and in perfect righteousness and true holiness of life (Eph 4:24)” Edward W.A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1952): 50. **Lange**: “The image of God in which man was created consisted of a blissful knowledge of God and his will, holiness (Adam’s and Eve’s will conformed perfectly to God’s will, and they desired only what God desired) and righteousness (Adam and Eve had the ability to carry out God’s will perfectly)” Lyle W. Lange, *God So Loved the World: A Study of Christian Doctrine* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005):154. **Nafzger**: “The Lutheran Confessions understand the image of God as knowing, fearing, and loving God, or, put most simply and comprehensively, as righteousness” (Nafzger 275). **Deutschlander**: “The most important component of the image of God, its very heart and core, was the holiness and righteousness. Their holiness was a total separation from sin. Their righteousness was a state of being right with God, with nothing in them for God to forgive. We might think of it this way: The living shell of the image of God in Adam and Eve consisted of emotion, will, and reason, the organs of the soul; it is in their emotions, will and reason that they can most easily be seen as ‘like God.’ But the heart and core inside of that shell and indeed that which permeated the shell and made it so beautiful was God’s gift of righteousness and holiness” (Deutschlander 169).

⁴⁷ Gerhard, *On the Image of God in Man before the Fall*, 322

This, then, is what went wrong in the fall. God's gift to man of righteousness was lost completely; replaced by a nature of sin. Then, when man as male and female got to work in carrying out God's great commission – to be fruitful, multiply, and fill the earth with God's image bearers so that they could rule it *like he* would rule it – righteousness was nowhere to be found in the image they passed along. Now, man's descendants inherited the totally depraved and corrupted image of their parents, void of any trace of God's original gift. Original righteousness had been completely replaced by original sin.

To return to a variation of the "temple analogy" from before, now comparing human beings themselves to the "temple" in which God had placed his "image,"⁴⁸ the fall into sin was like that beautiful temple being completely reduced to rubble and destroyed.⁴⁹ And the evidence of the destruction has been on display ever since.

Righteousness and holiness?

Now it's corruption and depravity on display.

Dominion over creation?

Now the creation lives in rebellion, refusing to be subdued.⁵⁰

Ruling under the rule of God?

Now humanity seeks autonomy and independence, no longer desiring to be *like* God and to rule *under* his rule, but to be "gods" ourselves, setting *our own* standards of morality, *our own* rules for right and wrong, *our own* definitions for man and for male and female, *our own* goals for life and for the future of humanity (just as Adam and Eve strove for such autonomy and independence when they fell into sin – "you'll be *like God*" the tempter said⁵¹ as he twisted God's intentions and seduced Adam and Eve with false fantasies about a life on *the other side* of the ledger). And, finally...

Bringing all things under God's blessing and into his eternal rest?

Now it's "the striving" in the place of the rest. Now it's hoping to fix *whatever it is* that is broken and to find *whatever it is* that we lost. Now it's trying to convince ourselves that it's okay to always be "traveling" and never "arriving," lying to ourselves that that the striving is freeing, when it's really enslaving. Now it's being blinded from seeing that all of the striving and achieving and advancing and progressing to get back to *whatever it is* that we *don't even know* we're *supposed to be*...can now only move us in the *opposite* direction:

⁴⁸ "Before the fall, Adam was certainly a beautiful temple of the Holy Spirit and a dwelling place of the entire Holy Trinity" (Gerhard, *On the Image of God in Man before the Fall*, 282).

⁴⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:16-17: "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple."

⁵⁰ "After the Fall, man retained only a caricature of his original dominion; he must now employ cunning and force to assert some kind of mastery over the animals. With man's innocence also the dominion over the creatures, as described Gen. 1: 28, was lost. All that is left of this dominion, Luther calls a "mock sovereignty" (*speciem domini* and *nudum titulum dominii*). It is true that man succeeds by cunning and coercion in subduing the creatures partially. But in spite of all the creature remains in revolt against its sinful master. The beasts harass, harm, kill, and eat their former lord; in the air he breaks his neck; the water drowns him; the earth becomes his tomb" (Pieper 522).

⁵¹ Genesis 3:5

“The mind governed by the flesh is death...[It] is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.”⁵²

“Death” is a far cry from *life* with God.⁵³

“Hostile to God” is a far cry from *rest* under God.⁵⁴

“Cannot please God,” is far cry from being righteous and holy *like God* so that we can carry out the goal of his ways.⁵⁵

We’re like a beautiful temple, completely reduced to rubble and destroyed. That’s what happened when man fell into sin.

But can a temple that has been destroyed be rebuilt?

A Temple Rebuilt; His Image Restored

Mankind’s fall into sin and the void of righteousness that has filled the earth ever since – it did not change God’s *τέλος*. “The goal of all of God’s ways” was *still* that mankind would bear his image and represent him everywhere he had dominion in a righteous and holy way. So, our Triune God developed a plan for that, too (also in eternity, just as he decided to “make man in our image” in eternity⁵⁶). It was a “rebuilding project,” if you will; a plan that would restore his image to a mankind that had lost it.

And the God who speaks didn’t leave us to guess at what that plan was, either. For, that, too he revealed in his Word. In an act of love that we would have also never guessed, except that he revealed it, the very same “Word” that spoke all things into existence in the beginning, and who was a part of all those divine

⁵² Romans 8:6-8

⁵³ “And lest any doubt remain, we should compare the first man as he is described before the fall and as he is set before us after the fall. Likewise, compare how the descendants of Adam are described. Here it will appear quite clearly that man became wicked and unrighteousness from being righteous and holy, poverty-stricken from being wealthy, sick from being healthy, dead from being alive, captive from being free, an enemy from being a child of God, guilty of damnation from being an heir of eternal life; he has taken off the most beautiful image of God and put on the foul mask of the devil” (Gerhard, *On the Image of God in Man before the Fall*, 323).

⁵⁴ “The native character of man before the fall was to love God and to follow him, whereas his native character after the fall is to hate him and to flee from him” (Gerhard, *The Doctrine of Man in the Writings of Martin Chemnitz and Johann Gerhard*, 40).

⁵⁵ “Cultural activity in itself, if divorced from God, is not pleasing to God and thus could not be considered an end in itself. To love the world and worldly culture as an end is to misplace it as an idol. To have the right order of loves means that God must come first” N. Gray Sutanto, “Cultural Mandate and the Image of God: Human Vocation under Creation, Fall, and Redemption” *Themelios* 48:3 (2023):601.

⁵⁶ “In that council of infinite wisdom of the three divine Persons, i.e., the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a great counsel indeed was set forth on behalf of us sinners. Actually, it was the outcome of a divine soliloquy rather than of a senatorial deliberation. Do you think that any of the things which had to be done for us were missed? There, in the midst of that divine council, the whole cause concerning us was set down. There our coming perdition and death were foreseen, and the whole matter concerning man was planned in such a way that each divine Person would contribute to it. There it was decided that what the Father would create, the Son afterwards, in the fullness of time, would redeem from perdition, and the Holy Spirit would bring about the remission of sins and the resurrection of the flesh. Hence, with a counsel of all the three Persons the things lost since the beginning of the ages would be restored in man and the foundations of generation and regeneration established” (Gerhard, *The Doctrine of Man in the Writings of Martin Chemnitz and Johann Gerhard*, 28-29).

conversations in eternity (because this “Word *was* God”) – he “became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”⁵⁷

This “Word made flesh” was God’s Son. And he was “*the exact representation* of [God’s] being.”⁵⁸

Or, as Colossians 1 describes him:

“The Son *is the image of the invisible God*,⁵⁹ the firstborn over all creation.”⁶⁰

And then, after a hymn filled with reminders of the Son’s divinity, and of his authority, and of his essential role in creation⁶¹, Paul continues in Colossians:

“For God was pleased to have *all his fullness dwell in him*.”⁶²

You want to *see* an *unseen* God? You want him to be *represented* in righteous and holy ways so you can understand what he’s truly *like*? Then see the one who was, and who is, and who will always be “the image of the invisible God.” See his Son.

And then see what he did as he made his dwelling among us:

“[He] *reconcile[d] to himself* all things,” Colossians continues, “whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making *peace* through his blood, shed on the cross.”⁶³

And all with this *goal* in mind:

“...to present you *holy* in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.”⁶⁴

Do you see the rebuilding project at work in Christ? Do you see *holiness* restored to a world that had lost it through the substitutionary work of the one who “*is the image*” of our holy God and “the exact representation of his being”? Do you see God’s rule of *rest* (“peace,” Paul says!) reinstated? And do you see all of it *finished* “through his blood, shed on the cross”?

⁵⁷ John 1:14

⁵⁸ Hebrews 1:18. See also John 1:18: “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.”

⁵⁹ There is an important distinction to make between what it means for mankind to bear the image of God and for Christ himself to *be* the image of God. We can rightly speak of the image of God as an accidental characteristic of human beings. To lose it does not make us less human. To speak of Christ as the image of God means that, as the second person of the Triune God, he always perfectly represents the first person of the Triune God. To put it another way, humans who bear the image of God are still on “the other side” of the ledger. Christ, who “is the image of God” and who “is the exact representation of his being,” remains always on the “God” side.

⁶⁰ Colossians 1:15

⁶¹ Colossians 1 continues, “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy” (Colossians 1:17-18). Note how similar Paul’s words are to John’s in John 1.

⁶² Colossians 1:19

⁶³ Colossians 1:20

⁶⁴ Colossians 1:22

Perhaps there is a more powerful word than the words “And God said...” If there is, it’s the word that the God who speaks spoke as died:

Τετέλεσται⁶⁵

Christ had a *τέλος*, too. It was to “reconcile to himself all things...by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” so that a humanity that had lost our holiness could be presented as “holy in [God’s] sight” once again; so that all who receive Christ’s work in faith might be “renewed in *knowledge* in the *image* of its Creator” once again; so we could “be *like God* in true *righteousness and holiness*” once again.

We, God’s destroyed temples, have been rebuilt. We, God’s fallen image bearers, have been restored. In Christ, that is a *status*. Not a striving. Not an advancing. Not a work in progress, but a “finished” product.⁶⁶

“We have arrived!” to frame it in the terms of man’s “travels.” No need to strive anymore. Just *rest*. Because what’s been broken, lost, enslaved, destroyed...In Christ, it’s been fixed, found, freed, restored.

And so, God’s *τέλος* remains: that his restored image bearers would represent him everywhere he has dominion once again; that his reconciled image bearers would fill the earth and rule it under his rule once again; that his rebuilt image bearers would bring all of his creation under his blessing and into his eternal rest once again. Now, and ultimately in the age to come.⁶⁷

Just as he always intended it when he decided in eternity to “*make man in our image.*”

For this was, and is, and will forever be the goal of all of God’s ways.

The Need for the Narrow

You can see why Confessional Lutherans have emphasized this “narrow view” of the image of God so emphatically throughout history.

First, it honors the words that Scripture itself uses to describe God’s image in Ephesians 4 and Colossians 3 – righteousness, holiness, a perfect knowledge of God and his will.

Secondly, it provides opportunity for the story of salvation (which is the very thing that was under attack at the time of the Reformation) to be told in the most beautiful of ways – righteousness (gifted to man at creation) lost in the fall; righteousness restored fully through Christ (now re-gifted to man through faith

⁶⁵ John 19:30

⁶⁶ “You are already finished.” These are the first words of the first devotion in “The First 40 Days” devotional series written by *Conquerors Through Christ*, which exists to help people “Resist, Reject, Recover” from porn use or addiction. The devotion goes on to say, “It’s hard to believe when you’re starting a journey away from something that feels like it still has its claws in you, or you at least have the scabs where those claws used to be. But go back to line one. You are already finished. When God sees you, he doesn’t see a project or a work in progress. He sees a perfect person because his Son did everything perfectly and gave you credit for it. That eternity-altering truth will be the foundation of every single day of this journey, and it will be part of every single day after you close this book.” See <https://conquerorsthroughchrist.net>. (Said another way, our ongoing Christian living will always find both its power and its peace in Christ’s declaration of our justification.)

⁶⁷ See Epilogue. “Now *we are* children of God, and what *we will be* has *not yet* been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, *we shall be like him*, for we shall see him as he is.” – 1 John 3:2

in Christ⁶⁸); all of it a status that believers enjoy right now, even as the ultimate restoration of God's goals for us will only be fully realized in the age to come.⁶⁹

This is why, when it comes to defining the image of God, there will always be "a need for the narrow," so to speak. You can't tell the story of salvation without it.

So, What's With All The *Broad* Talk?

That said, modern Christianity – including many Confessional Lutherans – consistently settle on a much wider, broader, more holistic view of the concept of God's image in man.

Does the God who speaks leave room for this broader view in his Word?

Righteousness and holiness, after all, are only *some* of God's many characteristics. Finally, no lexicon defines the words צֶלֶם and דְּמוּת as "righteousness and holiness," either.

So, are there other characteristics that God shared with humanity so that his image bearers could represent him on earth? Are there other ways in which God created man to "image" him as man would carry out the goal of all of his ways? And, if so, did any of those likenesses remain in man post-fall?

These are questions worth exploring, too. Because the God who speaks *does* seem to leave room for a broader view in his Word.

But exactly how broad should we go?

Here's what I say: If you want to go broad, then let's go *broad*:

"Like God"

"Like God."

That is about as broad as you can get.

Are you comfortable going that broad? Especially recalling how vital the narrow view is to the story of salvation? And recalling Professor Cherney's reminder that no matter how "*like God*" we might be, it is still God on one side of the ledger; everything else – including man – on the other?

But consider this: While no Hebrew lexicon defines צֶלֶם and דְּמוּת as "righteousness and holiness," they do define דְּמוּת's verb root as "to be like"⁷⁰ (and in Genesis 1 צֶלֶם is דְּמוּת's synonym⁷¹).

⁶⁸ Which is also a gift! See Ephesians 2:8. This is important to stress, as Arminians would also acknowledge that we need righteousness to come from a source outside of ourselves to be saved. However, Arminians would also say that we can use the natural powers that remain in us after the fall (remnants of God's image that enable us to move toward God, if you will) to accept the righteousness that God gifts to us in Christ.

⁶⁹ See Epilogue. "Now *we* are children of God, and what *we will be* has *not yet* been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, *we shall be like him*, for we shall see him as he is." – 1 John 3:2

⁷⁰ See footnote 43

⁷¹ See footnote 41

And then there is the research of Concordia Mequon Professor Nathan Jastram, who substituted the phrase “like God” into every passage where the image of God concept is presented in Scripture, noting that it fits *every single time*.⁷²

Finally, there’s the simple (and yet forever complex) matter of studying what humanity is still *like* after the fall. Is man still *like God* at all?

Think, first, of what humanity was still capable of after the fall. *Spiritual* capabilities? Those were gone; righteousness and holiness lost *completely*, and no faithful scriptural argument can be made to the contrary.

Yet, man was still endowed with all kinds of capabilities that could reflect our God, at least in some shadow of a way.

Man was still rational. Man was still intellectual. Man was still creative, still relational, still capable of establishing culture. Man was still endowed with speech, still able to plan, still a moral creature.⁷³ Man still had a grasp of the natural sciences and could still manipulate the created world in all sorts of inventive ways. Man was farming, marrying, raising children, building cities (and towers!), establishing communities, performing musical arts, working with metal.⁷⁴

⁷² Jastram introduces this point by citing several theologians who equate “likeness” to mean “to be like,” including Luther, Gerhard, and Irenaeus. He then states, “To be made in the image of God is to be made in the likeness of God, which is to be made like God. Objections to this basic insight have little validity. Unless language is to lose all meaning, ‘likeness’ must mean ‘to be like,’ just as ‘righteousness’ means ‘to be righteous,’ or ‘powerfulness’ means ‘to be powerful.’ If ‘likeness to God’ does not mean ‘to be like God,’ then what can it mean? There is no valid reason to say it means ‘to be like God’ in only a few ways (e.g. in righteousness and spiritual knowledge), but not in others (e.g. in dominion and fertility). Nothing in Scripture requires such a limited meaning of ‘the likeness of God.’” He follows these statements by his exercise of replacing the “image of God” concept with the phrase “to be like God” in all of the following passages: Gen 1:26-27; Gen 5:1-3; Gen 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7; James 3:9; Col 1:15; 2 Cor 4:4; Heb 1:3; Phil 2:5-6; Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; Phil 3:20-21; 2 Cor 3:18 (Jastram 50-52).

⁷³ “Moral” as opposed to “amoral.” As moral creatures, humans are wired to think about things in moral categories, having the capacity to engage in a kind of reasoning and acting that has a moral character to it. And, as moral creatures, humans can then make good moral choices or bad moral choices (that is, moral, as opposed to immoral, choices). This is different from the animals, who are amoral creatures, and who do not act in moral/immoral ways.

⁷⁴ “The fall of man brought devastating consequences upon our race. The reader of Genesis naturally wonders what effect the fall had upon the image of God. As he reads on, he learns that mankind became murderers and polygamists, so that some men took whatever women pleased them and filled the earth with violence. God saw ‘that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually’ (6:5). Can such people be said to exist in the image of God? However, Genesis also testifies that man did not degenerate into a mere animal, but practiced farming, married, raised children, built cities, performed the musical arts, and worked with metal (4:2, 17, 20-22). What then should we think of the image of God in fallen man?” (Beeke and Smalley 168). “Even though sinful and bereft of innate holiness and righteousness, the shell of God’s image remains. And that shell is no small blessing. We are still human, still have reason, will, and emotions, so that outwardly people are capable of producing works that are good in the eyes of humanity. Outwardly, one can choose to steal or not steal, to lie or not to lie, to commit adultery or to lead an outwardly chaste and decent life. With the remaining shell we can create works of art and beauty, useful medicines and machines, and the like. All of these abilities and their exercise imply a certain limited freedom even for fallen humanity, and that in spite of the fact that by nature we are enslaved by sin. Our remaining natural freedom is the freedom to make choices in those things that are subject to reason” (Deutschlander 197). “Because human beings are made in the image of God, fallen image bearers will continue unwittingly to represent him as they form families, farm and develop technology, raise shelter and inhabit cities, and so on. But we now misuse and misunderstand our place in the created order” (Sutanto 597). Sutanto calls the fact that God left remnants of his image behind “common grace.” That is, it is grace to everyone – the believer and the unbeliever alike – that culture is sustained. He distinguishes “common grace” from “special grace”, which, as a Calvinist, he would define as saving grace that is exclusively for the elect. Cherney comments on this idea of common grace: “There is probably a logical straight line from the Reformed approach to ‘the image of God’ to the Reformed doctrine of ‘common’ (as opposed to ‘special’) grace, and from there to the Reformed doctrines of predestination and a limited atonement” (Cherney 19, footnote 58).

In short, man after the fall was still capable of a lot! To borrow our phrases from earlier, he was still striving and achieving and advancing and progressing. Were those capabilities – and *are* those capabilities as they are put on display still today – are they evidence that man still bears the image of God?

And then there's this from Genesis 9. In a text loaded with allusions back to creation, the Lord seems to affirm to post-flood Noah that man still bore the image of God, even post-fall. After repeating God's creation mandate to "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth,"⁷⁵ and after broadening man's creation diet beyond just "the green plants" so that "everything that lives and moves about will be food for you,"⁷⁶ God then made sure that man's killing of animals would not extend to the killing of other humans – "for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting" God said.⁷⁷

And then he gave his reason why:

"Whoever sheds human blood,
by humans shall their blood be shed;
for in the image of God
has God made mankind."⁷⁸

It's possible that God was just talking about the *potential* for his image to be restored in man in this verse.⁷⁹ But such interpretations often seem geared towards preserving the narrow view of God's image (for all the good "salvation story" reasons cited before). Yet, the text can stand on its own. In speaking about man in his present condition, God says it plainly: "For in the image of God has God made mankind."⁸⁰

The evidence seems clear: Scripture itself allows for a broader view of the image of God,⁸¹ even going so broad as to connect God's image to being "like God."

⁷⁵ Genesis 9:1

⁷⁶ Genesis 9:3

⁷⁷ Genesis 9:5

⁷⁸ Genesis 9:6

⁷⁹ And many faithful theologians have interpreted it that way, too: "The Bible tells us that the image of God, lost through the fall, can be renewed in those whom God brings to faith. The best interpretation of these two passages (referring to Genesis 9:6 and James 3:9) is that they describe man as the noble creature who once possessed the image of God and in whom the image again can be renewed through faith in Christ. Concerning Genesis 9:6, Luther wrote, 'This is the outstanding reason why He does not want a human being killed on the strength of individual discretion: man is the noblest creature, not created like the rest of the animals but according to God's image. Even though man has lost this image through sin...his condition is nevertheless such that it can be restored through the Word and the Holy Spirit.' (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 2, p. 141)" (Lange 190).

⁸⁰ A similar passage exists in the New Testament, as well. James 3:9: "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness."

⁸¹ Hoenecke speaks of Scripture itself making a distinction between the "narrower sense" and the "wider sense": "When the likeness of God is understood to be the spiritual nature of man with his spiritual powers – thus the likeness of God in the wider sense – then it was not lost in the fall as Scripture confirms (Ge 9:6; Jas 3:9) by ascribing the likeness to fallen man. These are also the passages that show that Scripture itself has a distinction between the likeness in the narrower sense, which according to the statements of Scripture was totally lost, and the likeness in the wider sense, which was not lost" (Hoenecke 322). So also Erickson: "While the passage (referring to Genesis 9:6) does not explicitly say that humans still bore the image of God, it is clear that what God had earlier done still has some bearing or effect, even at this post-fall point. Beyond this, we find no other explicit references in the OT to the image of God" Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013): 459. And Dunning: "When we turn to the biblical material, we find an ambiguous representation. After the account of the Fall, the Old Testament suggests rather clearly that man is still a creature in God's image. Following the Deluge, God's command prohibiting murder is based upon

In What Ways is Man *Like* God?

In what ways, then, is man still *like God*?

Theologians throughout Christendom (including the Reformers and Confessional Lutherans that have followed) have wrestled with that question at length. What follows is a long (yet still non-comprehensive) list of some of the wider, broader, more holistic definitions of “the image of God” that have been put forth (and not just recently, but) throughout church history. Such definitions broaden the concept of God’s image to include components like:

- *Our wisdom
- *Our intellect
- *Our emotions
- *Our ability to reason/have rational thoughts
- *Our ability to make moral⁸² choices (in the realm of civic righteousness)⁸³
- *Our will, and our ability to make free choices (in non-spiritual matters)
- *Our ability to love⁸⁴
- *Our personalities
- *Our ability to establish culture and to be cultured ourselves (that is, our ability to create art, and to make music, and to enjoy beauty for beauty’s sake)
- *Our ability to grasp the natural sciences and to manipulate them in inventive ways

the fact that “in the image of God made he man” (Gen 9:6, KJV). But in the New Testament, the total process of salvation is seen to be the restoring of mankind to the image of God (cf. 2 Cor 3:18, et al.), which assumes that mankind has fallen away from it. The Bible itself does not address this apparent contradiction but leaves it (not consciously, of course) for subsequent theological reflection. The best solution appears to be that both claims must be taken seriously and to acknowledge the paradoxical situation that humanity has both lost and retained the *imago* at one and the same time, in its present state” H. Ray Dunning, *Grace, Faith, and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1988) 151. Cherney also weighs in on the debate, saying, “Has the image of God been lost? Scripture neither asserts nor denies that it has in so many words, and the richness of the “image of God” concept means that either a simple “yes” or “no” answer to the question will probably be misleading...Then there are Gen 9:6 and James 3:9, passages that are most naturally understood as applying “the image of God” to all humanity, even post-Fall. The explanations that these passages invoke the “image of God” only insofar as it was the original human ideal, or insofar as all persons, even unregenerate, are *potential* bearers of the image of God, are ingenious but unnecessary” (Cherney 18).

⁸² See footnote 73

⁸³ This ability flows from God’s law still being written on human hearts, and our consciences still bearing witness to it (Romans 2:14-15).

⁸⁴ “When man truly loves, he reflects the central aspect of God’s character; for God is love. Hence, a person is to be measured not so much by creative genius and intellectual accomplishments but by the degree to which he or she embodies the love of God, ‘for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God’ (1 John 4:7)” (Williams 207). As 1 Corinthians 13 states, “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging symbol. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor 13:1-3).

- *Our ability to plan, to think about the future (even past this life); to have eternity in our hearts⁸⁵
- *Our consciousness
- *Being endowed with speech and with the ability to create language⁸⁶
- *Having upright physical bodies (unlike the animals)
- *Having an immortal soul (unlike the animals)
- *Any characteristics that set humans apart from the animals⁸⁷; that make us uniquely human⁸⁸
- *Having superior physical traits⁸⁹
- *Structural/substantive definitions (meaning, the “image of God” is something man *is*)
- *Functional definitions (meaning, the “image of God” is something man *does*)
- *Relational definitions (meaning, the “image of God” is something man *experiences* as he relates with God, with other humans, and with the rest of creation)⁹⁰
- *A combination of any and all of the above
- *Plus more...⁹¹

⁸⁵ Ecclesiastes 3:11

⁸⁶ “God’s language, his word, is one with himself, an attribute essential to his nature. God is a *speaking* God...Language is also fundamental to human nature in the image of God. In Genesis 1, man’s first experience is linguistic: hearing God’s words (Gen 1:28-31). In Genesis 2:18-20, when God first gives Adam a specific task under the general mandate to take dominion of the earth, he gives him a linguistic task: that of naming the animals” (Frame 788).

⁸⁷ Though our growing knowledge of biology and the development of AI seems to be increasingly blurring the lines between human and animal (and between human and machine) enough to make this approach to defining the image of God in man more and more difficult. As Cherney notes, “According to Jessica Pierce, professor of bioethics at the University of Colorado, several animal species appear to bury, mourn, and commemorate their dead. In an experiment reminiscent of one of Aesop’s fables, rooks not only figured out how to get at a floating worm by using stones to raise the water level in a jar; they also knew it was better to use large stones than small ones, and they knew without trying that the tactic would work in water, but not in sawdust. To those with any experience with animals, it always seemed counterintuitive to claim that they don’t have emotions, can’t reason, and can’t plan. Now research shows that the claims are simply not true” (Cherney 15). (And I’ll add to Cherney’s observations that one only needs to watch a few minutes of Mark Rober’s “squirrel maze” videos to see evidence of an animal’s ability to reason and plan.) Cherney goes on to note examples of the increasingly blurred lines between humans and machines with the advancement of AI and its (perceived) ability to “learn” as it goes (Cherney 15-16).

⁸⁸ “In many Christian circles, ‘the image of God’ seems to become *the* term to express what it means to be human” Roland F. Ziegler, “Defining Humanity in the Lutheran Confessions” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 78:1-2 (2014): 126. “A key expression is that God made the human in God’s own image and likeness. This distinguished people from all the other creatures, for only of humans is this expression used. While there has been a great amount of discussion on the subject, the concept is critical because the image of God is what makes humans human” (Erickson 458-459).

⁸⁹ “I am fully convinced that before Adam’s sin his eyes were so sharp and clear that they surpassed those of the lynx and eagle. He was stronger than the lions and the bears, whose strength is very great; and he handled them the way we handle puppies” Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535), in *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 55 vols. Ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg and Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-1986) 1:62.

⁹⁰ Faith, love, and trust as we relate to God; equality, fraternity, compassion, love and sexual differentiation as we relate to others; dominion (power, rulership, co-regency, judgeship) as we relate to the rest of creation.

Why the Variety?

The variety comes because, in addition to all the challenges to defining “the image” expressed earlier, *we lost it* (at least in the narrow sense). That means we are trying to define something that is no longer there (at least in the narrow sense). And even whatever remains in any sort of wider sense has been utterly corrupted by sin.

Can you accurately define what is no longer there? Can you truly understand what something was intended to be by only examining it after it was corrupted and destroyed?⁹²

The Rubble Remnants that Remain

To return once again to the analogy of man as God’s temple, trying to comprehend what it meant for man to bear God’s image pre-fall is like trying to piece together exactly what a majestic temple would have looked like, if all you had access to were the rubble remnants of it that remained after it had been razed to the ground and destroyed. Those remains don’t just disappear. They *remain*. They are crumbled, broken, shattered, *nothing at all like they were intended to be when they were built*, but the rubble remains, nonetheless.⁹³

⁹¹ Concordia St. Louis Professor, Dr. Leopoldo Sanchez experimentally organizes the “senses of the image” into five categories: **Moral** (humans image God’s life, which has an anthropological focus on human dignity), **Substantial** (humans image divine qualities such as reason or intellect, will, wisdom, which has an anthropological focus on human uniqueness, giftedness), **Relational** (humans image divine personality, personhood, communion, which has an anthropological focus on human personhood), **Representative** (humans image God’s dominion or rule over creation, which has an anthropological focus on humans as God’s representatives, instruments, “masks”), and **Righteousness** (humans image a right relation before God – faith – and neighbor – love, which has an anthropological focus on human identity before God and others). (Dr. Sanchez organizes these characterizations in a chart he currently uses “for class discussion only.”) WLS Professor Aaron Jensen, in a presentation on the image of God that he gave to the Southwestern Conference of the Michigan District in April 2026, defined the image in the categories of image as *status*, image as *ability*, and image as *task*. Later, he had conference attendees evaluate the following models that have been put forth for understanding the broad sense of the image: **Postural** (human beings imitate God by standing upright); **Ontological** (human beings imitate God by having divine attributes); **Relative** (human beings are designed for a relationship with God); **Honorific** (human beings have been bestowed with divine honor); **Volitional** (human beings imitate God by having a moral will); **Relational** (human beings imitate God by a capacity for interpersonal relationship); **Creational** (human beings imitate God by a capacity for creativity); **Functional** (human beings imitate God by carrying out the divine work of ruling creation).

⁹² Luther speaks of the difficulty: “I am afraid that since the loss of the image through sin we cannot understand it to any extent...When we speak of the image, we are speaking about something unknown. Not only have we had no experience of it, but we continually experience the opposite; and so we hear nothing except bare words” (LW 1:60, 62-63). Also the church father Gregory: “What is the definition of the image of God? The true answer to this question, indeed perhaps only the very truth God himself knows” (Beeke and Smalley 176, quoting Gregory). And Gerhard: “All the divine things by which we were made in God’s image were so lost that scarcely any little remnants of them are left. Yeah, scarcely a shadow of a great name remains. No wonder, then, that our intellect cannot grasp the full knowledge of him, for that knowledge is lost. In such darkness we shall follow the torch of the Holy Scriptures” (Gerhard, *The Doctrine of Man in the Writings of Martin Chemnitz and Johann Gerhard*, 31). Pieper also spoke of the image of God in the wider sense, even as he preferred to deny the wider sense (Jastram 10, referencing Pieper I:515-517). This was a common theme, particularly among Confessional Lutheran theologians. Even those that speak strongly about the narrow sense acknowledge the broader sense.

⁹³ Deutschlander speaks of this in a helpful way, as well. He speaks of “righteousness, holiness, and the knowledge of God” as the heart and core of the image of God, and all our other human faculties as the living shell permeated by that core. The core of God’s image, then, was lost in the fall, while the outer shell remained: “The fall of Adam and Eve was most devastating in the change that it worked in human nature. From the moment of their sin, Adam and Eve lost for themselves and for the whole human race that most beautiful and sublime attribute: the image of God. To be sure, there were still traces of God’s likeness left, its shell, so to speak. Adam and Eve continued to have a soul. They still retained what we referred to earlier as the organs of the soul: their emotions, their will, and their reasoning capacity. But the heart and core of the image of God, his holiness and righteousness, those were totally and altogether lost” (Deutschlander 187). And later on he writes: “In spite of the total devastation of the spiritual abilities

Can you tell what the temple would have looked like from the remains? Can you tell what *God is like*, that is, by looking at the rubble remnants of his image that remain in man post-fall?

It makes me think of those “like Mike” Gatorade commercials I grew up watching in the 90s.⁹⁴ We all wanted to be “like Mike.” But just how much “like Mike” am I really? Well, Mike has hands and feet. I’ve got hands and feet. I’m like Mike! Mike has eyes and ears. I’ve got eyes and ears. I’m like Mike! Mike has legs and a brain. So do I!

But Mike also has supreme athletic ability and unparalleled mental fortitude. I *don’t* have those. And without *those* characteristics to *inform* my hands and feet and eyes and ears and legs and brain as I try to be “like Mike” on a basketball court, it turns out I’m a very poor representation of Mike, to say the least. Some might even say I don’t look or act “like Mike” at all.

So it is with mankind’s ability be “like God” in our fallen state. Without God’s gifts of righteousness and holiness to *inform* any broader “likenesses” to God that have remained in man post-fall – it’s like a temple reduced to rubble.⁹⁵ There are trace remains, sure, but it is nothing at all like God intended it to be when he built it; nothing at all like he intended *man* to be when he *created* him.⁹⁶ Fallen man, then, is a very poor representation of God, to say the least. Some might even say he doesn’t look or act “like God” at all.⁹⁷

Not *Like* Him? Can’t *Live* With Him

And it’s even more than that, of course. Not only does lost righteousness and holiness mean we can’t truly be *like God* anymore, it means we cannot *live* with him, either. For, righteousness is a requirement for such life:

“Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.”⁹⁸

There’s a reason why God doesn’t emphasize a “likeness” to him like our ability to reason, or to plan, or to grasp the natural sciences in Leviticus 19. It’s because holiness is the “likeness” that informs all the rest, and it’s the “likeness” that is needed if we are to *live* with him.

Jesus himself emphasized the same in Matthew 5: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”⁹⁹ No mention of any other “likenesses” to God. Just the one that informs all the rest.

that accompanied the image of God at creation, the shell or traces of God’s image are still to be found in our nature. We are still human, endowed with a soul that has intellect and reasoning ability, a will, and emotions. If the heart and core of God’s image, his holiness and righteousness, are totally lost as a result of original sin, what about this shell of humanity? What effect has the fall and original sin had on the human intellect, will, and emotions? These too have been thoroughly corrupted by the fall, though not entirely destroyed by it. Their corruption is so deep and so thorough that the emotions, the will, and the reason are by nature incapable of any spiritual good, that is, good in the eyes of God. St. Paul certainly makes that abundantly clear in...Romans 5 and Ephesians 2” (Deutschlander 194). So also Horton: “A broken watch is still a watch, but not a good one” (Horton 389).

⁹⁴ For those of you who didn’t grow up in the 90s, “Mike” is 6-time NBA Finals MVP, Michael Jordan.

⁹⁵ Pieper calls the reason and will of fallen man “an idling motor” (Pieper I:520).

⁹⁶ Examples: Only one who is righteous *like God* is righteous will use his wisdom and intellect in ways that line up with God’s will. Only one who is holy *like God* is holy will use his reason, establish culture, and put his inventive grasp of the natural sciences to use in ways that advance God’s purposes. Only one who is righteous and holy *like God* is righteous and holy and who has a perfect knowledge of his will, will exercise dominion over creation with *God’s* goals in mind. And the same is true for any “likeness” to God we wish to include in our most wider, broader, more holistic “image of God” lists.

⁹⁷ “Man became unlike God when he became unrighteous” (Jastram 58).

⁹⁸ Leviticus 19:2

Finally, Hebrews and Revelation state it outright:

“Without holiness, no one will see the Lord.”¹⁰⁰ And,

“Nothing impure will ever enter [the Holy City, the New Jerusalem], nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful.”¹⁰¹

No one will see the Lord without holiness. Nothing impure will ever enter his presence. Even as man still bears the rubble remnants of God’s image; even as he puts those remains on display (and even as we are evermore impressed with our “striving” as we display them!); none of it will matter in the age to come. Nothing impure will ever *live* with God.

So, we say it again: There will always be “a need for the narrow.” For, we cannot tell the story of salvation without it.¹⁰²

And if that’s true...

...then why even speak of the broad at all?

Why Even Speak of the Broad At All?

“We’re fighting a different battle today.”

This is often the sentiment shared when one champions a wider view of the image of God. “We’re fighting a different battle today than our Reformation forefathers did.”

And that statement is true.

The battle of the Reformation age was *soteriological* at its core. Justification by grace alone through faith in Christ alone was under attack. How, then, could the faithful Reformers who waged that war (as well as the faithful Confessional Lutherans that followed them) not emphasize righteousness and holiness as they spoke of the image of God? They were fighting to preserve the only version of the salvation story that is actually true and that truly saves.

“But today’s battle is more *anthropological*,” the modern sentiment continues. “Never before has man questioned on such a fundamental level what man actually *is*, and so, what it actually *means* to be human.”

And that statement is true, too.

⁹⁹ Matthew 5:48

¹⁰⁰ Hebrews 12:14

¹⁰¹ Revelation 21:27

¹⁰² Failure to acknowledge this is the greatest danger of speaking of the image of God in any sort of broader, wider, more holistic sense. If man as the image of God is emphasized as if little to nothing meaningful was lost in the fall, the story of salvation will once again be under attack. For, wherever the total depravity of man and the devastating effects of the fall are minimized, Christ will be minimized, man’s ability to participate in his salvation will be heightened, and the story of salvation will be ruined.

The identity of man is under attack, perhaps, more fiercely than ever: Are we mere animals, for example (who are, then, justified in acting like it)? Or maybe we are all just highly-developed machines (programmed with specific genes; coded with a set of chromosomes; manufactured with adjustable parts;¹⁰³ and who will soon rightly be upgraded to better versions). Or maybe this journey we're on through time and space is completely meaningless and none of us have any real value or worth as we travel upon it because the idea of inherent dignity and a purposeful existence is just a sentimental assertion with no foundation in a godless, survival-of-the-fittest, kill-or-be-killed evolutionary reality.¹⁰⁴ Or – on the flip side of the ledger – maybe man is so important that he is *himself* “god” and, as such, is the author of whatever version of the truth he desires?

What is man, really? Who are we as human beings?

Understanding that man was created in the image of God, and that he still bears this image, at least in some shadow of a way, even in our fallen state – it provides us with an unchanging anthropological truth to contribute to an ever-changing anthropological conversation.¹⁰⁵

Are we mere animals (who are, then, justified in acting like it)? We're human beings who bear the image of God. And that means we were designed for – and are accountable for! – behavior that is governed by a moral code specifically designed by the One who made us to be *like him*, and who wrote that code on the hearts of us all.¹⁰⁶ “So let's view each other and treat each other according to the high and beautiful standards we know we have as human beings,” we can appeal to our fellow image bearers, “Let us not be what is beneath us.”¹⁰⁷

Are we just machines on our way to being replaced by better versions? We're human beings who bear the image of God. “So, any view of our bodies or any tech-driven movement¹⁰⁸ that says otherwise,” we can

¹⁰³ See Dr. Moldenhauer's essay

¹⁰⁴ Concordia St. Louis Professor Joel Biermann shares strong thoughts about this: “As held in popular culture, the ideal [of inherent dignity and universal human rights] is, in fact, nothing more than a sentimental assertion with no foundation in reality. To declare humanity's inherent dignity and to create ever-expanding lists of universal human rights does not make it so. The glaring absence of any attempt to justify or ground the popular claim betrays the hard truth that the notion of human rights and dignity is just that: nothing but a notion. It is the hollow shell of a residual idea left over from the era of Christian influence, but without basis apart from Christian confession or some other religious assertion related to man's origin and purpose. Beyond warm sentiment or wishful thinking and emotion, there is simply no reason any pure secularist can support a concept of inherent human dignity. In fact, as the world has witnessed firsthand, with examples numbering into the millions, the unflinching, hard realities of evolutionary theory and nihilistic philosophy actually demand exactly the opposite conclusion. It is ironic that such dehumanizing concepts that are rooted in and nurtured by the ideals of human worth, rights, and honor have ruthlessly undermined and subverted those very ideals themselves” Joel Biermann, “How Much Dignity Does a Maggot-sack Have”? Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 14:2023. <https://concordiatheology.org/2024/01/how-much-dignity-does-a-maggot-sack-have>, 102.

¹⁰⁵ “Whether one prefers the metaphor of ruins, fragments, husks, tracings, etc. the Fall left behind *something* meaningful of the ‘image of God’ in humanity, and the fact has First Article, if not Second or Third Article implications” (Cherney 19).

¹⁰⁶ Romans 2:14-15

¹⁰⁷ Paul also speaks this way in Romans 1 and 2, that sin's corruption leads us to live in ways that are beneath us, especially when the natural knowledge of God that he has implanted in our hearts is ignored.

¹⁰⁸ See Cherney's commentary on “The Transhumanist Movement,” which he weaves in and out of his essay. He describes the goal of the movement this way: “Humans will transcend the need for (and bother of) a body altogether...Humanity as it exists today represents only a preliminary and unimpressive stage in our evolution. According to the 1998 ‘Transhumanist Declaration,’ ‘We envision the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth.’...By means of technology, humanity will give way to ‘post-humanity.’...Death is the ultimate human malady that posthumans will supposedly transcend” (Cherney 6). To put it in terms that connect this movement to the thoughts in this essay's introduction, the transhumanist movement epitomizes fallen man's desire to unknowingly strive, advance, achieve, and progress towards getting us back to whatever it is that we don't even know we're supposed to be. Yet, the movement

appeal to our fellow image bearers, “is misguided, even when we *feel* like our bodies need updates, or even as technology now ‘outperforms’ us in so many areas of life.”

And what about this matter of dignity and worth and meaning and purpose? We can look any human being in the eye and tell them that they have it – and that it comes from a source *outside of ourselves*!¹⁰⁹ – because the God who made us in his image has gifted it to us. “Your experiences may be telling you that you don’t have value,” we can appeal to our fellow image bearers, “Society may be telling you that your life doesn’t have any meaning or purpose. *You* might be telling *yourself* that you don’t have worth. But all those voices are liars if they contradict the voice of God.¹¹⁰ For he speaks from *outside of it all* with the truth: ‘Your value, worth, meaning, and purpose come from me!’” Could a human being be clothed with any greater honor than that?¹¹¹

And it clothes us with humility, too. Because bearing the *image* of God also means that we are not *God* ourselves. It’s still just *him* on one side of the ledger and everything else – including man – on the other. And that means (no matter how much our corrupted natures might desire to jump sides), *God* is the independent one; *we* are forever dependent on him. *God* is the autonomous one; *we* are forever subservient to him. *God* sets the standards; *God* defines morality; *God* makes us male or female; *God* gives us purpose; *God* sets the goals; *God* rules. *Man’s* place as his *image bearers* is always *under* him; always on *the other side* of the ledger. Oh, how many of man’s current debates, frustrations, arguments, divisions, and wars stem from this simple misunderstanding of identities and roles. “But there’s so much peace,” we can appeal to our fellow image bearers, “on our side of the ledger. So much *rest* when we let God remain the only one on his side.”

So, yes, the image of God in a broader sense *does* have a place in our conversations today, especially when those conversations are centered around who we are as human beings.¹¹²

is another example of fallen man only moving itself in the *opposite direction* of God’s goals for man. Cherney connects the twisted *τέλος* of the transhumanist movement to the Tree of Life post-fall. The movement’s goal of mankind “living forever in [our] fallenness” is exactly the “incomprehensible horror” that God was preventing when he “deployed an armed angel” barring Adam and Eve from returning to the Tree of Life (Cherney 23). Cherney connects the movement to the Tower of Babel, as well, as it is certainly “possible to rally all humanity around a project that is enthusiastically pro-human, but anti-God – and therefore damaging to humanity in the long run (Gen 11:1-9)” (Cherney 12). The transhumanist movement’s goals stand in direct opposition to the goal of all of God’s ways, indeed. Yet, marvel at the grace of God once again. Even as fallen man desires to transcend the need for a body altogether to achieve the incomprehensible horror of living forever in our fallenness, we have a God who was willing to take on a body himself so that we could live forever in restored paradise.

¹⁰⁹ “When humans claim inherent dignity, it is man trying to love himself by finding in himself that which is pleasing and lovable and worthy. Human dignity comes not from inside, but from outside the man...It is not inherent dignity, but dependent dignity” (Biermann 6-7).

¹¹⁰ The aforementioned *Let the Bird Fly* podcast episode on the image of God discusses this beautifully.

¹¹¹ There does seem to be significant theological baggage, however, that comes along with this idea of connecting human dignity to the doctrine of the image of God. Why is it being emphasized so much more strongly in modern Christianity today? Confessional Lutherans can rightly point to the universal nature of justification and to God’s desire to save all people as reasons why human beings have value in God’s sight and in the sight of each other. Teachings that get justification wrong (particularly Calvinists who limit Christ’s atonement only to the elect, and who teach that God also elected some to be damned) need to lean on the doctrine of the image of God more heavily (perhaps even solely) if they want to teach the value and dignity of man. This does not negate the connection between human dignity and the doctrine of the image of God, but it is important to be aware of reasons why it is getting so much emphasis in modern Christianity today. We need to be wary if it is emphasized at the expense of justification. This is the point Joel Biermann was stressing in his essay, “How Much Dignity Does a Maggot-sack Have?”

¹¹² And especially when those conversations delve into specific anthropological issues like civic ethics, natural law, standards of morality, sanctify of life, the right to life, human dignity, human rights, biological sex, gender identity, the value of the body, man’s relationship to technology, bioethics, etc., etc., etc., only some of which are discussed in this essay. Man as God’s image bearer can be a theological thread that is woven into all such anthropological conversations. And, perhaps even more so, when those conversations are with those who may not want to reason with us on the basis of Scripture because they do not currently accept the

What is man, really?

We have the answer:

"We are human beings who bear the image of God."

And yet...

Is the Battle *Really* Different?

And yet, as we arm ourselves for these *anthropological* battles that we wage more today than ever before, we must also never lose sight of this – that man's greatest battle ever since the fall into sin will always be *soteriological*.

After all, even if you can convince a man that he's not an animal, that he's not a mere machine, that he has dignity and value simply because he's human, that he's *not* "god" himself, but that he bears the (reduced to rubble remnants of the) *image* of God – even if you convince a man of all that, but he does not know Christ...

Is it even worth pondering if the condemned will still bear the (reduced to rubble remnants of the) image of God in hell?¹¹³

Man's greatest battle will always be *soteriological*. And that battle?

It Isn't Really *A Battle* At All

It isn't really a *battle* at all.

As if those *on the other side* are *enemies* that must be *defeated*.

Could you fathom a world where God viewed those who were *not like him* anymore because of sin as *enemies*? We'd have *all* been defeated and destroyed long ago! But God does not view fallen man that way (though defeat and destruction are what we *all* deserve). And that's because God still has a goal for all who are on *the other side* of the ledger from him. And it is not to *battle* him and then *defeat* him. It's to rescue him, free him, restore him, rebuild him – use whatever salvation illustration you want – God's goal is to seek him and to save him, so that what once was lost can be eternally found.

authority of Scripture. Even then, we are appealing to one who still bears the image of God (reduced to rubble as it may be). And so, we are appealing to a knowledge all humans innately have (suppressed and exchanged for a lie as it may often be [see Romans 1:18,24,28]).

¹¹³ The condemned will, after all, still be human in hell. And if humans bear the image of God simply because we're human... This thought struck me so deeply as I contemplated Christianity's growing emphasis on a broader, wider, more holistic view of the image of God, it almost became the very first line of this essay – "Will the condemned still bear the image of God in hell?" The mere thought of the fate should lead us to remember the limitations of emphasizing God's image in the broad sense, even as we see the benefits of it, and also to never minimize the "need for the narrow," even as we speak of the broad. Ultimately, pondering the question above should lead us to abandon the question altogether and instead ask with the jailor, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30).

Isn't that, after all, what the God who speaks was *saying* to all those weary pagans in the midst of all of their aimless travels, and who were *just guessing* at "the things of God"?

Just guessing and guessing and guessing, but never getting it right. Just traveling and traveling and traveling, but never arriving at a destination. Striving, yet stuck. Achieving, yet trapped. Advancing, yet hopelessly enslaved.

"So let me tell you something that you *would have never guessed* unless I reveal it," the God who speaks said in Genesis 1, "You don't need to guess anymore. No more guesses about 'Who is God?' No more guesses about 'Who is man in relation to him?' No more guesses about 'How do we ease him?' or 'How do we please him?' or 'What do we have to strive for to finally appease him?' No more striving, achieving, advancing, progressing. No more guessing. No more, dear weary traveler," God said as he broke the silence of history with the voice of his Word. "For, let me tell you the story of who I am. Let me tell you the story of who you are, and of who *you* are to *me*. And let me tell you my goal – it's that you and I together, dear weary traveler, have *rest*. And I want it to be that way forever. Let me tell you with a story that begins with, "And God said..."

And God said, "Let us make man in our image..."

And God said, "Let them rule..."

And God said, "Who told you that you were naked..."

And God said, "I will put enmity between..."

And God said, "I will take on flesh..."

And God said, "Come to me all you who are weary..."

And God said, "Τετέλεσται."

God wasn't waging a war with the weary pagans who were guessing about "the things of God" as he spoke up in Genesis 1 and in all of Scripture that followed. He was speaking truth in the midst of the guesses; he was offering rest to weary travelers;¹¹⁴ he was seeking and saving the lost.

And now?

Now we speak *like him*.

We Speak *Like Him*

Do you recall what the God who speaks commissioned his restored image bearers to do as he spoke up again in the days after the temple of his body was destroyed and then rebuilt¹¹⁵?

¹¹⁴ This thought of viewing God's inspiration of Genesis 1 and 2 through an evangelistic lens stemmed from an email exchange with Pastor Tyler Peil (serving at Prince of Peace, in Salt Lake City, Utah), who initially wrote simply to check in on me and see how my writing was going. Thank you for checking in on me, Tyler.

¹¹⁵ John 2:19

“Go and make disciples of all nations,” he said, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.”¹¹⁶

If those words sound familiar, it’s because they are. They’re familiar because the God who speaks has not changed his goal. And so, he has not changed his commission. He still wants the earth to be filled with his image bearers. And so, the same God who said “Be fruitful” to his first image bearers; “‘Fill the earth’ with my image bearers; ‘have dominion’ over it as you rule it under my rule, and as you bring it under my blessing and into my rest” – the same God who expressed that in the beginning as the goal of all of his ways – he now expressed it again after he died and rose to restore us, and right before he ascended back to his ruling throne.

Only this time he restated his “Great Commission” in a way that would fit a fallen world. For, how do you fill the earth with God’s image bearers in a fallen world? Now it’s *his gospel* that needs to fill the earth. Now it’s *his gospel* that needs to have dominion over creation (and not through force, but by grace, for this is how our King always establishes his reign¹¹⁷). Because his gospel is how “God’s temples” get “rebuilt.” It’s how God’s image gets restored, that is, in human beings who had lost it. Because his gospel is how a human being gets connected to Christ, our Redeemer, our Rebuilder, our Rest-Giver, our Restorer.

So, “Go and baptize them!” the God who speaks said as he restated the goal of all of his ways. “Put my name on them – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – as you do. *Restore my image* in them, that is (for those who bear the name of God bear the image of God¹¹⁸). And then ‘teach them.’ Teach them *my Word* because I am still a God who speaks. Teach them my Word so I can replace their *guessing* with *knowing*; so I can replace their *guessing* with *trusting*¹¹⁹ – *Who exactly is God?* “I’m their Creator.” *Who are we in relation to him?* “You’re my Creation.¹²⁰ In Christ, you bear my image once again.” *What are his goals, and what is his purpose for us?*

If God’s goal – his ultimate *τέλος* – in creation was to fill the earth with those who bear his image so that his image bearers would bring all creation under his blessing and into his eternal rest, then the Great Commission is how he now meets that goal in a fallen world.¹²¹ God’s goal is accomplished when his

¹¹⁶ Matthew 28:18-20

¹¹⁷ “Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. *I will take away the chariots from Ephraim and the warhorses from Jerusalem, and the battle bow will be broken.* He will *proclaim peace* to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zechariah 9:9-10).

¹¹⁸ “To be Christ’s brother, to be God’s child, is essentially the same thing as bearing God’s image” (Meyer 189).

¹¹⁹ What a powerful truth as we carry out our work as his witnesses. You can imagine a weary traveler, ready to battle, responding to our witness by saying, “Yeah, well, you’re just guessing, too!” even as he concedes that all of fallen humanity is standing together on this striving, achieving, advancing, progressing – “We’re all just guessing!” – common ground. “What makes your guesses any better than mine?” “But that’s the beauty of having a God who speaks,” we can respond, as we put down our weapons and pick up his *Word*. “It’s not *guessing* when God actually speaks. Now, he replaces our *guessing* with *trusting*. He calls us to trust that he’s actually speaking the *truth* to us about what *is* so that we no longer have to guess.” Because we have a God who speaks, we have something to offer the world that no other religion or worldview can offer. Only in Scripture is our guessing replaced with trusting. And the God who speaks in Scripture has proven worthy of our trust.

¹²⁰ And not just because we are created human beings, but because “if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

¹²¹ “The great commission is the means by which the narrow image of God is restored to humanity, as sinners receive renewed knowledge, righteousness, and holiness...Before the fall, the multiplying and dispersal of the image of God was a natural process

restored image bearers “Go” and “fill the earth” with the gospel of a God who speaks; when we “fill the earth” with *the Word* of his death, of his resurrection, and of the restoration that all who believe in him now have through it.

For, man in the image of God – it is still the goal of all of God’s ways.

Common Ground

And if you need some common ground to stand on as you speak *like him* to the weary travelers around you in need of *rest*?

How about this for common ground?

Man as the image of God.

After all, remember “the striving”? I think it’s *the image of God* at work. For, what other creature of God can strive like we strive? And achieve like we achieve? And advance like we advance? And progress like we progress? The apps, the exercises, the diets, the drugs? The therapies, the oils; we landed on the moon!

And not just the *ability* to strive like we do – what other creature *senses the need* to? “What is it that we are *not* but that we know – but don’t *really* know – we’re supposed to be?”¹²² No other creature of God contemplates such deep and meaningful “things of God,” because no other creature bears the image of God.

Yet, it’s not *really* the image of God at work in man’s striving, at least not as God intended it to be. It’s the broken-down rubble remnants of it that remain. The remains are striving to fix what man knows – but doesn’t *really* know – is broken, and to find what he knows – but doesn’t *really* know – is lost. In other words...

The remains are trying to rebuild themselves.

But they can’t, of course. No matter how relentlessly humanity strives (*in the wrong direction!*) to do so. For, we have no blueprints to follow, nor do we have any true ability to build. Dry bones on a desert floor would have a better chance of coming together to live!¹²³

So, “The Great Commission” of our God: “*You go and speak to them, my restored image bearers. For what destroyed image bearers do not know, restored image bearers do. ‘Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!’*¹²⁴ *You go and break the silence of the guesses and speak to them like me.*”

by way of procreation and culture-making. After the fall, pro-creation multiplies the image of God in the broad sense, but the preaching of the gospel is necessary to multiply the image of God in the narrow sense – and that narrow sense is precisely the qualities of right knowledge, righteousness, and holiness necessary for God-glorifying cultures to exist: cultures exhibited by godliness and submission to the kingship of Christ, love of neighbor, and proper cultivation of creation” (Sutanto 602).

¹²² Romans 1:18ff

¹²³ Ezekiel 37

¹²⁴ Ezekiel 37:4

So, we speak *like him*: “I know what it is that you’re striving to find, dear weary traveler. It’s *the image of God*. And though we all lost it in our sin, I know the story of how it’s been found. And I’d love to share it with you, if you’d like to take a break from your travels for a moment to hear it. It’s a story of freedom and restoration and rebuilding and rest. It’s a story of how we don’t need to travel anymore – striving, achieving, advancing, progressing – on a journey that has no true goal, because in this story, you’ve already arrived. It’s a story of the goal of all of God’s ways – for all of mankind! And *for you*. It’s a story of how God has already met all of his goals for you in Christ,¹²⁵ even as he still has so much more in store for you in the age to come.¹²⁶ Let’s *trust* that story together,” we can say, “as we stand together on this common ground. And as we trust it together, we can share it together, too.”

And maybe they won’t trust what you have to say as you now speak *like him* in his name.¹²⁷ Many won’t. But some will. Because some always do, God promises. One by one by one. And, in God’s time, it becomes “a vast army”!¹²⁸ And when they do listen, and when they do trust, yet another child of God will be filling God’s earth; yet another representative voice will be sharing the gospel of Christ; yet another restored image bearer will be carrying out our God’s Great Commission to rule under his rule and to bring all of his creation under his blessing and into his eternal rest. Now, and ultimately in the age to come.¹²⁹

For, man in the image of God – it was, and is, and will forever be the goal of all of God’s ways.

¹²⁵ Τετέλεσται

¹²⁶ See Epilogue. “Now *we are* children of God, and what *we will be* has *not yet* been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, *we shall be like him*, for we shall see him as he is.” – 1 John 3:2

¹²⁷ But that’s not your job, since turning a heart from unbelief to trust is also the work of the One on *the other side* of the ledger.

¹²⁸ Ezekiel 37:10

¹²⁹ See Epilogue. “Now *we are* children of God, and what *we will be* has *not yet* been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, *we shall be like him*, for we shall see him as he is.” – 1 John 3:2

EPILOGUE

We Have Arrived!! So... *Are We There Yet??*

We have arrived!!

But it sure doesn't feel like it.

Why not?

Do you recall what happened after Solomon's temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586BC, and Zerubbabel led its rebuilding project upon Israel's return from exile 70 years later? Ezra tells us:

"But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away."¹³⁰

It was a jumbled mess of weeping and joy. Joy because the temple was rebuilt! Weeping because it was nowhere near the glory and splendor of the original. So messy was the mixture, you couldn't even distinguish the sounds.

The scene resonates because I shed similar tears for a similar mess of jumbled up reasons when I reflect on God's "rebuilding project" in my own heart and life.

"By God's grace, I've been rebuilt! A finished product in God's sight for the sake of Christ! Yet, I am nothing like the 'original temple,' so to speak; nothing like Adam, pre-fall; still nothing at all like God intends me to be. *Why?*" I cry, in a jumbled mess of weeping and joy.¹³¹

Perhaps Paul was shedding similar tears for a similar mess of jumbled up reasons when he wrote Romans 7. He captures the struggle to which every restored image bearer on this side of paradise can relate:

"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do..."¹³²

Even though he had "the desire to do what is good," he continued; even though "[his] inner being delight[ed] in God's law," he saw "another law at work," too – "evil" was "right there with" him because "sin" was "living in" him. It "wag[ed] war" against him, he said, and made him a "prisoner." "What a wretched man I am!" he concluded, "Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"

¹³⁰ Ezra 3:12-13

¹³¹ "[Ezra] tells us that the elders who had seen the beauty of the first temple built by Solomon were moved to tears when they saw the new temple as it was restored by Zerubbabel after the Babylonian captivity. How much more reason for sorrow and tears should we have when we call to mind the first man as he was created in the image of God – as the most beautiful temple and dwelling of the most holy Trinity – and then look at him as he was horribly ravaged by the infernal Chaldeans and robbed of all the divine gifts with which he had been first endowed" (Gerhard, *The Doctrine of Man in the Writings of Martin Chemnitz and Johann Gerhard*, 65-66).

¹³² Romans 7:15ff

Can you relate to the weeping alongside the joy as you live as God's rebuilt image bearer on this side of paradise? Why do we still so badly struggle in our restored state if, in Christ, "it is finished" and we have already "arrived"?

It's because, while the work of Christ changed our *status* before God, nothing has yet happened to the sinful nature that we inherited from our first parents. It wasn't suddenly removed when God made us his child in baptism; it wasn't even weakened when God put his name on us and restored his image in us on that day. Instead, it remains as strong, and as corrupted, and as depraved, and as void of righteousness and holiness as ever *even as we enjoy our status* as rebuilt bearers of the image of God.¹³³

This is why we still struggle. This is why I still "do what I do not want to do." Forget Paul, what a wretched man *I* am. He's not the chief of sinners, *I* am. It causes me to weep. And I bet it causes you to weep, too. And yet all of that weeping...

...alongside the joy. Because the *struggle* does not change our *status*. "It is finished" still means "It is finished"! And so, in Christ we *already are* what God *intends us to be*. For,

"Now *we are* children of God," the one who heard him say "It is finished," assures us in 1 John 3.

And yet, John continues:

"And what we *will be* has *not yet* been made known."

We live simultaneously with an *already are* status in God's sight while still living a *not fully yet* present existence.¹³⁴ This is our current reality as rebuilt bearers of the image of God who still live in this "old order of things."¹³⁵

So, what do we do as we await the day our Savior will keep his promise to "mak[e] everything new"¹³⁶? During this time of "*being renewed*,"¹³⁷ he invites us to a *different kind of striving*.

A Different Kind of Striving

Here's how sainted Professor Deutschlander described it. He said, "[We] strive to become in life what we already are by faith, (i.e., holy and righteous), [trusting] in the grace of God and the merits of Christ for our forgiveness and salvation."¹³⁸

¹³³ "While the most important damage of original sin is entirely undone by this *imputed* restoration (emphasis his) of holiness and righteousness through the forgiveness of sins, we still live in our sinful flesh. With St. Paul and all the saints on earth we daily stand in need of forgiveness. For our renewed nature, our Christian emotions, will, and reason must struggle against the old emotions, will, and reason inherited from Adam and Eve until we finally reach our goal of heaven" (Deutschlander 205).

¹³⁴ Meyer calls the restored image of God in Christians on this side of paradise as "the meager beginnings of restoration" (Meyer 177). Luther: "This restoration of the image of God begins in this life, but will not be finished in this life. When it is finished in the kingdom of the Father, the will will be truly free and good, the mind truly enlightened, and the memory persistent. Other creatures will be under our rule to a greater degree than they were in Adam's Paradise. Until this is accomplished in us, we cannot have an adequate knowledge of what that image of God was which was lost through sin in Paradise" (LW 1:64).

¹³⁵ Revelation 21:4

¹³⁶ Revelation 21:5

¹³⁷ Colossians 3:10

¹³⁸ Deutschlander 208

We *strive to become in life* what we *already are by faith*. Or, as Paul states it in Philippians 3, we become *like Christ* in his suffering.¹³⁹ What else is it other than suffering when children of God on this side of paradise engage in real and active struggles against our still real and active sinful natures?¹⁴⁰ For, our sinful natures are still totally corrupt and depraved (still capable of *any* sin!). Yet, no longer does sin have free reign in our lives. Instead, we are empowered in our restored state to *strive against it*; to drown it through daily contrition and repentance; to become in life what we already are by faith; all the while finding our true peace and rest in that “already are” status and identity – a restored bearer of the image of God, already holy and already righteous in his sight for the sake of Christ.

And this *different kind of striving* has a *τέλος*, too.

“We Shall Be Like Him” Forever

“Dear friends, now *we are* children of God, and *what we will be* has *not yet* been made fully known. But we know that *when Christ appears, we shall be like him*, for we shall see him as he is.”¹⁴¹

A day is coming when what we already are by faith will also be what we are in life. For, in the life to come...

...“we shall be *like him*” forever.

It will happen on the day “when Christ appears.”

On that day, our Creator will welcome us into “a new heaven and a new earth,”¹⁴² For, on that day, this “old order of things” – this first, reduced-to-rubble heaven and earth, that is – will have “passed away.”¹⁴³

On that day, there will be no more weeping¹⁴⁴ alongside the joy, for his restored gifts of righteousness and holiness will no longer dwell alongside the inherited corruption of sin.

And so, on that day, we will finally be able to carry out God’s ultimate *τέλος* for us just as he created us to in the beginning. We will rule this new heaven and earth. We will rule it under his rule and as his representatives. We will rule it in true righteousness and in sincere holiness and with a perfect

¹³⁹ In Philippians 3:10, Paul states, “I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and *participation in his sufferings*, becoming *like him* in his death (emphasis mine), and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.” Paul says this immediately after rejoicing in his “already are” status as a child of God through faith in Christ. Philippians 3:9: “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.”

¹⁴⁰ “The image of God, consisting in a blissful knowledge of God and in righteousness and true holiness of life, was lost when man fell into sin. But a beginning of its restoration is made, when man is justified by faith in Christ. For the new knowledge, which the believer gained from the Gospel, fills the heart with joy and happiness, and this, in turn, moves him to forsake the ways of sin and to walk in the paths of righteousness. Because of the old Adam, this restoration of the image of God will never be perfect in this life. For this reason Paul admonishes us: ‘Put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him’ (Col 3:10), and: ‘Put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness’ (Eph 4:24). (Koehler 154-155).

¹⁴¹ 1 John 3:2

¹⁴² Revelation 21:1

¹⁴³ Revelation 21:1, 4

¹⁴⁴ The full text of Revelation 21:1-4: “*He will wipe every tear from their eyes*. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, ‘I am making everything new!’ Then he said, ‘Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.’”

knowledge of God and his will, and with all our other “likenesses” to God on perfect display as they are perfectly informed by them. And so, we will bring this “new creation” under his blessing. We will bring it into his rest. We will “reign forever and ever.”¹⁴⁵ We will do it all as he always intended it to be – man as the image of God.¹⁴⁶

For, this was, and is, and will forever be the goal of all of God’s ways.¹⁴⁷

SOLI DEO GLORIA

¹⁴⁵ Revelation 22:5

¹⁴⁶ The doctrine of the image of God, then, can be a great basis upon which to teach what heaven will be like, especially when misconceptions about it arise. While Scripture is largely silent on the specifics, we can say with certainty that we will be living in a new creation; we will have relationships with God, with other humans, and with the rest of creation as perfect bearers of the image of God; and every “likeness” to God that he created us to have will be perfectly informed by his gifts of righteousness and holiness as we rule his creation under his rule and as we bring it into his eternal rest. No sin will get in the way of that rule, or in the way of any of those relationships, ever again.

¹⁴⁷ In the same essay that gave this paper its title, J. P. Meyer concluded: “Man in God’s image is the one great thought of God. It is *the beginning, middle, and end of all his ways*” (Meyer 191, emphasis mine). This is also a beautiful way to frame the doctrine of man in God’s image: *The beginning, middle, and end of all his ways*. God created man in his image in “*the beginning*.” We live as “right now, yet not fully yet” image bearers during this time in “*the middle*.” “*The end*” will come when what we will be is finally made fully known. The doctrine of the image of God, then, is a doctrine of the past, the present, and the future. At its core, it is a doctrine of hope. As Beeke and Smalley conclude: “Therefore, the image of God spans history from creation to new creation and sums up the destiny of man in Christ. It is a glorious image, an image of sonship, the image of Christ. Therefore, the biblical theme of God’s image draws our hearts upward to Christ, seated at the right hand of God. It is not merely about our past and present, but about the future of believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. *It is a doctrine of hope*” (Beeke and Smalley 174, emphasis mine). Gerhard emphasizes the hope by returning to the temple analogy one final time: “The first temple of Jerusalem was not left devastated forever, but was rebuilt and restored; yea, at the coming of Christ it was made more glorious than ever before. In like manner, by the grace of God and the efficacy of the Holy Spirit, the former image of God, into which we begin to be transformed in this present life, will someday shine in us far more brightly and gloriously than it shone once in Adam. For he could die, but we shall not die” (Gerhard, *The Doctrine of Man in the Writings of Martin Chemnitz and Johann Gerhard*, 66).

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