

Social Service and the *Imago Dei*: a Contemporary Analysis and Application of an Ancient Christian Doctrine

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KEY WORDS

| Image | Social | Human |
| Civil Rights | Bioethics | Poverty |

ABSTRACT

Despite all the diversity in the Christian tradition over exactly how the image of God ought to be defined, there has existed a broad consensus throughout the church's history that human beings are indeed divine image-bearers, as per the clear teaching of Scripture in the opening chapter of Genesis and elsewhere. Given the impact this doctrine has exerted on past generations of Christians in their social and cultural engagement—such as the abolitionist and civil rights movements, for example—this paper makes the case that contemporary Christians, particularly in the increasingly post-Christian West, would be well served to recover this ancient doctrine as a catalyst for biblically informed cultural engagement in the modern era. It will argue that this doctrine is well positioned to inform such matters as bioethics and poverty, and that even in a rapidly secularizing culture, it is a doctrine that allows the Christian church to offer a unique perspective on social and cultural issues grounded in the inherent dignity of every human being.

INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the *Imago Dei*—the image of God—holds profound implications for a theology of social service, arguably as much as any other doctrine of the Christian faith. The declaration of Gen. 1:27—“God created mankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them (NIV)—is one of the clearest statements in all of Scripture concerning the inherent dignity of every human being. Given the vital nature of this doctrine and its implications for how human beings interact with one another, it is well worth considering how the doctrine of the image of God is significant for constructing a theology of social service.

While one might be tempted to think that recognizing all of humanity as made in the image of God would inevitably lead to an

ethic of respect and goodwill toward all such image bearers, this has unfortunately not been the case throughout much of church history. This presents the contemporary church with the opportunity to correct this inconsistency and follow in the footsteps of those who have attempted to do so beforehand. This paper will make the case that, as much as any other doctrine of the Christian faith, the *Imago Dei* serves as an extraordinary catalyst for Christian engagement with such spheres as bioethics, poverty alleviation, and civil rights, and that the contemporary western church would be greatly enriched by rediscovering and reemphasizing all the historic Christian tradition has had to say on the matter in order to properly engage their post-Christian culture on this matter.

IMAGO DEI: VOICES FROM CHURCH HISTORY

In considering how the image of God may hold implications for a theology of social service, the first question is how believers ought to understand the image in the first place. As Allison and Grudem note, while believers throughout history have failed to come to a consensus concerning the precise meaning of the image of God, there has nevertheless been unanimity in asserting that human beings are indeed divine image-bearers.¹ Even among the Church Fathers, this doctrine was defined in a variety of ways. Irenaeus, for example, asserted that the image of God in all human persons consisted of a soul and body, the ability to rationalize, and the to make choices consistent with one's nature.² Though believers and unbelievers alike possessed God's image, Irenaeus proposed that while the former possessed a body, soul, and spirit, the latter possessed only the first two. Only the regenerate received the fullness of what it meant to be truly human. It is important to note that he did not in any way disparage the body by giving the soul and spirit a place in his definition of the *Imago Dei*, but rather appealed to the New Testament in declaring the body to be the temple of God, his very handiwork.³ Tertullian of Carthage

1 Gregg R. Allison and Wayne A. Grudem. *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine: A Companion to Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 2011), 320.

2 See Irenaeus, *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith: A Condensation of Against Heresies*, ed. James R. Payton (Cambridge, U.K.: James Clarke, 2012), 160.

3 Ibid. As to this distinction between the divine image and likeness, he declares that "The flesh which has been molded is not a complete human being in itself, but only part of one; neither is the soul itself, considered alone, the human being: it is part of one. Neither is the spirit a complete human being, for it is called the spirit, and not a human being. It is the commingling and union of all these which constitutes a complete human being.... Those alone are "complete" (i.e., "perfect") who have the Spirit of God remaining in them and

differed from Irenaeus in claiming all of humanity, lost and redeemed, were composed of two essential elements: the material and the immaterial, drawing no distinction between the soul and spirit.⁴ These two elements were inseparable from conception and stood in direct contrast to the widespread false teaching of his contemporaries such as Lactantius who declared the soul alone to bear the image of God and the body to be tainted by evil. Thirdly, Origen concurred with Irenaeus concerning the essential nature of humanity having three parts, while holding the view that such a soul was fallen due to rebellion against God in a prior universe.⁵ Differing in a somewhat bizarre fashion from his contemporaries, he surmised that one's behaviour in this prior universe could help explain the presence of suffering in the individual's life. Nevertheless, he did not go so far as to say that the body itself was evil, but simply capable of it. Finally, Augustine, writing in the fifth century, articulated a doctrine of the *Imago Dei* grounded in the Trinitarian nature of God himself.⁶ Essentially good before the Fall, the image fell through the transgression of Adam and Eve, only to be fully restored by redemption through Christ. Though body and soul/spirit

have preserved their souls and bodies blameless, holding fast faith in God and dealing righteously with their neighbours."

4 See Tertullian, *A Treatise on the Soul* (Boston, MA: Wyatt North Publishing, 2019), eBook, Ch. 10. In this work he explicitly rejects the distinction between soul and spirit made by those such as Irenaeus—labelling it "artificial" and even heretical—and appeals to the Greek philosopher Plato to support his position.

5 Origen, *First Principles*, 4.11 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*. Alexander Roberts et al., eds. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885), 4:359.

6 See Augustine, *The Trinity* 14.14:4, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding, 2nd ed., *The Works of Saint Augustine I/5* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012). Here, he argues at length how the soul is the location of the *Imago Dei*, asserting that "but that image of the Creator, that has been implanted immortally in its own immortality, must be found in the soul of man, that is, in the reasonable or intellectual soul."

are both an integral part of the image, its core is found in one's capacity to reason.⁷ While writing extensively on the topic, Augustine never came to a clear conclusion on the dichotomy-trichotomy debate as Irenaeus and Tertullian before him.⁸ While diversity appears the norm even in the early church concerning the precise meaning of the *Imago Dei*, it must be noted that all four of these church fathers were quick to assert that the image did not reside solely in the spiritual realm, nor was the body inherently evil or incapable of bearing that image.

In the Reformation era, John Calvin proposed that the image of God is primarily spiritual, as "the proper seat of the image is in the soul"⁹ This line of thinking falls squarely within the tradition not only of the church fathers but of medieval theologians; Thomas Aquinas had proposed a similar definition several centuries earlier.¹⁰ In Calvin's thought, this image refers to the reasoning capacity and intellect that separates human beings from animals, and that prior to Adam's fall this image kept his passions in subjection to his reason. While he does not deny that the human body was touched by such an image—claiming that every part of Adam was touched by this "glory"—it is clear that, for Calvin, the image remains primarily rational. Moreover, he asserts that the presence of the image of God in the human is the greatest evidence that the soul is eternal. This

argument may be one of Calvin's most notable contributions to the conversation, as he argues that, just as God himself is timeless and eternal, it follows that the human being, to which he imparts his image, must also be eternal upon receiving that divine likeness.¹¹

A contemporary collection of voices addressing this matter may be found in the 2013 volume, *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation*, edited by Richard Averbeck. While its contributors spend the bulk of their time discussing the merits of theistic evolution versus direct creationism versus other theories of creation, the meaning of the *Imago Dei* is granted a notable degree of attention as well. Averbeck's own view appears closest to the functional view, as he points to God's commands to imitate his behaviour, including keeping the Sabbath, during his discussion of the image of God.¹² He also makes note of the fact that the Hebrew of Gen. 1:26-27 describes an entirely new creation distinct from the rest of God's world, and implies that this image imparted to humanity involved stewardship over creation. Tremper Longman, while not explicitly advocating for a particular view, observes that image must not imply anything sexual, as both male and female are said to bear it equally.¹³ This is a radical departure from the gods of the Ancient Near East in that, while their gods were thought to be sexual in nature, the God of the Bible is clearly not. Sexuality, in the Hebrew Scriptures, is a characteristic of the created being, but not the creator himself.¹⁴

7 David T. Williams, "He is the Image and Glory of God, but Woman..." (1 Cor 11:7): 'Unveiling' the Understanding of the *Imago Dei*: General." *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa* 108, no. 1 (2011): 315. See also the above reference to Augustine's work on the Trinity in which he expounds how the capacity for reason is essential to the image.

8 Ibid.

9 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.15, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960).

10 Williams, "He is the Image," 315.

11 Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.15

12 Richard Averbeck, "A Literary Day, Inter-Textual, and Contextual Reading of Genesis 1-2," in Richard Averbeck, ed., *Reading Genesis 1-2: An Evangelical Conversation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013), Kindle Edition, Ch.1.

13 Tremper Longman, "What Genesis 1-2 Teaches (and What It Doesn't)," in *Reading Genesis 1-2*, Ch. 4.

14 Ibid.

Still another position is suggested by J. Daryl Charles in the foreword to the volume,¹⁵ where he suggests that the image of God consists of the human's rational ability to observe and study God's creation, and thus to understand the design and intended end of his world. One issue that all authors agree on, however, is that the image given to humanity before the Fall was not in any way marred by sin; this defect came only after the Fall, in which the image was marred, but not removed.

Yet, one of the contributions that, from a contemporary perspective, might prove most consequential is that of Australian theologian Michael Bird, who expounds on several historic conceptions of the image of God in his 2013 work, *Evangelical Theology*. The first two that he details are the substantive view, which sees God's image as a quality/characteristic integral to humanity that is like God, and the relational view, which points to the "human capacity for relationships" as the defining indicator of the *Imago Dei*.¹⁶ He points the Reformers Luther and Calvin as supporters of the former while pointing to Emil Brunner and Karl Barth as examples of the latter's proponents. He further explains the functional view, which sees the image in the human's dominion over the rest of creation; on this understanding, the image is not an inherent quality, but a role God assigns to humanity. Finally, the view that Bird himself espouses, the royal view, posits that the image of God as described in Genesis must be understood against the backdrop of the ancient Near East. This position seems to avoid many of the pitfalls of the other traditional views, and the way in which it depicts the human person positions

Bird's view to make a unique contribution to a theology of social service. In the context of the Ancient Near East, it was common for a society to view its particular ruler as a representation, or an image, of one of its Gods.¹⁷ Egyptian pharaohs, for example, were considered an incarnation of Ra, the sun god. Thus, Bird suggests, when the author of Genesis describes human beings as the image of God, this suggests that all of humanity shares in this royalty, and therefore as his representatives all men and women are to participate in ruling over, and caring for, God's creation. "God has set humanity," he claims, "in his creation as walking billboards of his own might and authority. Humans reflect the reign and goodness of God when they justly rule over the created order. The reign of humanity, at its best, is an advertisement for the sovereignty of God over the cosmos."¹⁸ In this view, all of humanity shares in God's reign. Bird advances his case even further by noting that monarchs in the ancient world would often place images of themselves all over the land which they ruled in order to reinforce to all its inhabitants, in a tangible, visible way, who was in charge in that territory. He proposes that, in creating humanity in his image and commanding them to fill the earth and multiply, God was acting as a ruler in the ancient Near East would, striving to fill his kingdom—his earth—with countless images of himself as an expression of his reign.¹⁹ Thus, bearing the image of God not only endows human beings with an immense amount of dignity and authority but also an incredible responsibility—to represent God's nature and likeness. Thus, Jesus can rightly be called the "image of God" because, through his sinless human life, he alone perfectly reflected

15 J. Daryl Charles, "Foreword," in *Reading Genesis 1-2*, Ch. 1.

16 Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), Kindle Edition, Ch. 7.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

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God’s nature. Bird concludes by charging that the *Imago Dei* thus endows humanity with the responsibility to steward creation, defend the oppressed, and protect fellow human lives. John Walton, expressing a similar position, notes that this view of humanity contrasts starkly with the widespread Near Eastern belief that the human relationship to the gods was merely that of a slave; the Genesis account, on the other hand, depicts male and female as participating in the reign of God as royalty themselves.²⁰

In briefly assessing church history, despite the fact Christians have proposed various definitions throughout two millennia, most include some mention of a rational as well as a physical component of God’s image. But perhaps one of the most important issues that must be remembered, no matter one’s definition, is that orthodox Christians have always rejected the view that the body is inherently evil.²¹ The body, and the physical realm on the whole, is not to be treated as irrelevant as the gnostic worldview would assert. The *Imago Dei* clearly has relevance to this present world, with serious implications for how we interact with God, his creation, and one another—especially when one considers Michael Bird’s rather convincing case that the image implies every human shares in God’s reign and is to act in such a way that his nature and character are represented through us. In light of this, the question of how the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* ought to inform a theology of social service may now be addressed.

²⁰ John H. Walton, “Reading Genesis 1 As Ancient Cosmology,” in *Reading Genesis 1-2*, Ch. 5.

²¹ Allison and Grudem. *Historical Theology*, 320. “Apart from a very few exceptions,” they note, “the church has always affirmed the reality of the human body, though it has also wrestled with views that disparage the body and treat it as being inherently evil. Also, the church has affirmed the reality of the human soul or the human spirit, though the specific identity of these elements has been a matter of debate.” While such statements may sound obvious to the contemporary reader, the vast theological diversity of the patristic era makes the broad consensus on this point worth highlighting.

A frequent criticism of the Christian church is that, throughout history, it has been guilty of overemphasizing orthodoxy—right belief—to the devaluing of orthopraxy—right action. Certainly, there is a case to be made that this is because many in the church have been concerned with being theologically correct even on the minutest details without giving enough thought to how such positions ought to be lived out. It is indeed a sobering thought, particularly for the evangelical who cherishes the doctrine of *Sola Fide*, that the question Jesus asks of those who come before him at the judgement of Matthew 25 concerns not what they believed, but what they did during their lives. In his commentary on Matthew’s gospel, Stanley Hauerwas notes that:

It is significant that the righteous have not known that when they ministered, provided hospitality, and visited that they did all of this to Jesus. They have done what God would have us to do and so doing have ministered to Christ himself. All people, whether they are Christians or not, know all they need to know to care for “the least of these.” The difference between followers of Jesus and those who do not know Jesus is that those who have seen Jesus no longer have any excuse to avoid “the least of these.”²²

Thus, given this clear emphasis Christ himself places on orthopraxy, it seems rather striking how often doctrinal precision has commanded more attention from his professed followers than compassionate service.

²² Stanley Hauerwas. *Matthew. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Brazos Press, 2006), 380.

On the other hand, part of the problem may have been that many individuals who have advocated for a robust theology of social service have not relied strongly enough on certain core doctrines of the faith—such as the *Imago Dei*—to make their case. If this is true, the problem is not that there has been too much emphasis on the importance of theology, but an insufficient understanding of biblical theology. It is indeed striking that in William Booth's landmark manifesto *In Darkest England and the Way Out*, one searches in vain for any more than a brief mention of the image of God in humanity, and then only in passing.²³ Though Booth was not a scholar and thus his writings should not be taken as an academic tome, the fact that the founder of the Salvation Army—a denomination famous for its service to those on the margins, and which has quite possibly accomplished more in the area of social services than any other Christian denomination—makes little of the *Imago Dei* in his theology of social service is indeed surprising. It also ought to make the church ask what untapped potential may lie in linking this doctrine to a theology of social service. How forceful would the church's conviction to develop a serious theology of social service be if it was to heed afresh Booth's plea for the church to care for the starving children, the women caught in sex trafficking, and the inhabitants of city slums on one hand while considering Michael Bird's reminder that each of these aforementioned groups of individuals were created by God to testify to his nature and character on the other hand?²⁴ If, as image-bearers of God, human beings bear the responsibility of acting as God's representatives to the rest of his creation, demonstrating to

it what he is like, what does it say when some image-bearers abuse, oppress, and marginalize other image-bearers while countless other supposed co-regents sit idly by and tolerate such inexcusable behaviour?

By the grace of God, there have been notable exceptions to this problem, leaving a deep and lasting legacy throughout the churches history that it would do well to recover. One example within relatively recent church history can be found among self-styled "Radical Christians" during the nineteenth-century United States.²⁵ Such groups were instrumental in the fight against slavery, in large part due to their conviction, which they worked tirelessly to promote, that social reform required identifying with the oppressed rather than merely sympathizing with them.²⁶ At the core of their movement was a form of Christianity that viewed the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* as essential to this reform; African American antislavery activist Maria Stewart, for example, frequently called on her community to recognize their inherent dignity as image-bearers.²⁷ For such Christian abolitionists, the core of their movement rested on the notion that slavery was not the natural condition of such individuals but a blatant violation of their identity. As social reformer and land speculator Gerrit Smith observed, the only form of Christianity that could achieve such an end was one which recognized "man's capacity for resembling his God".²⁸ In their view, the principles of their movement were, in fact, impressed on the consciences of every human, and thus needed simply to be awakened rather

23 William Booth, *In Darkest England and the Way Out*. (London, UK: The Salvation Army, 1890), 24.

24 *Ibid.*, 8-9.

25 Dan McKanan, *Identifying the Image of God: Radical Christians and Nonviolent Power in the Antebellum United States. Religion in America Series*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2002.

26 *Ibid.*, 4.

27 *Ibid.*, 49.

28 *Ibid.*

than taught. Such social reform did not just stem from Christianity in general but from this specific Christian doctrine.

Yet, the abolition of slavery was hardly the only nineteenth-century social reform advocated for by Christians who emphasized the image of God in every individual; opposition to alcohol abuse, corporal punishment, the subordination of women, and violence in general during this period were all the end result of Christian communities taking seriously the notion that their marginalized neighbours deserved just treatment as image-bearers of God.²⁹ The social reforms that came during that time period, as a result, demonstrate why the doctrine of the *Imago Dei*, and its necessary implications, are so vital to a Christian theology of social service. It also ought to remind the twenty-first-century church why it must not rely solely on right belief or right practice but to allow the former to inform the latter so that the body of Christ will attain its full potential.

THE *IMAGO DEI* AND CIVIL RIGHTS

In light of the success of nineteenth-century social reformers, particularly the abolitionist movement, it is perhaps unsurprising that many individuals active in the civil rights movement of the twentieth century also leaned heavily on the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* to make their case for justice in the public square. Here there is perhaps no better example than that of Martin Luther King Jr.³⁰ In his 2009 volume, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Image of God*, Richard Willis documents that King’s conviction that all of humanity bore the image of God “served as

the basis of his civil rights appeal”.³¹ In doing so, he drew not only on Scripture but the civil rights activists of the prior century. Because the *Imago Dei* was not a privilege granted by the state, King saw that the state, therefore, had no right to deprive any human being of their inherent dignity, which ought to be expressed through legislation mandating equal civil rights. Far from rebelling against the providence of God, the oppressed were right to insist on equality, King contended, as such rights were granted by God.³² King’s position was shaped in no small part by his mentor Samuel Dewitt Proctor, the former vice-president of Virginia Union University whom King invited to deliver a lecture series while pastoring Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The grandson of a former slave, Proctor pointed to the Scriptures to note that the oppressed African American community in the United States possessed the same *Imago Dei*, the same reasoning capacities and, therefore, the same inherent dignity even as the English monarch.³³ Proctor’s theology of the image of God clearly shaped his theology of social reform, as he once asserted that the local church should be “a social service agency as well as a vital religious center”.³⁴ Proctor, King, and their contemporaries in the fight for civil equality evidently viewed saw a clear connection between the Christian doctrine of the *Imago Dei* and the church’s call to social service.

Given this heritage, where may Christians focus their social service efforts today to protect and advance human rights? One example may be refugee relief efforts, which have come into the spotlight dramatically following the disastrous civil war in Syria. While there

31 Ibid., 54.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 42-43.

34 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 4.

30 Richard W. Willis, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Image of God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

is no shortage of political opinions among western Christians concerning how their governments ought to handle this situation, it seems an understanding that every refugee bears the image of God and is thus designed to participate in God's reign over creation should evoke the utmost compassion for their plight. Indeed, it ought to make believers grieve when their fellow image-bearers, who are intended to exercise dominion over the rest of creation, find themselves homeless, widowed, or orphaned by the violent actions of other image-bearers. The notion that the *Imago Dei* residing in both male and female may serve as a powerful motivator to serve women, who particularly have suffered as a result of this conflict due to sexual violence and exploitation. Once again, the egalitarian nature of the *Imago Dei* as expounded in Genesis reminds the Christian church that women, just as well as men, are designed to reflect the nature of God to the rest of creation. While a minority of voices throughout the church's history—with Augustine likely the most prominent—have proposed that women do not bear the image of God independently of their husbands,³⁵ a consistent reading of Gen. 1:27 requires the recognition of their identity as co-regents with God just as much as men.

Fortunately, some segments of the church have already pointed to the *Imago Dei* as a crucial doctrine in the development of a theology of social service. A small group discussion guide released by World Vision in 2016 to aid Christian leaders in addressing the refugee crisis reminds its readers that "God's heart is broken by oppression and poverty—and as beings made in His image, our hearts should break too. But it is not enough to be broken hearted. To offer hope, we must enter into people's suffering. Concern that does not lead

to compassionate action changes nothing."³⁶ This piece of pastoral advice reminds us that, while Christians may differ on exactly how and where refugee relief ought to take place, keeping in mind that each one reflects the *Imago Dei* would help the church keep in mind just how precious such a task is to the God who created such individuals.

THE *IMAGO DEI*, MEDICAL CARE, AND BIOETHICS

The field of healthcare, and by extension the area of bioethics, is one area where the image of God has the potential to play an pivotal role in Christian social service. As previously mentioned, Salvation Army founder William Booth did not lean too heavily on the concept of the *Imago Dei* in his writings concerning social service. However, he did invoke the concept while noting that the fatherly nature of God required that his image-bearers tend to the needs of the broken.³⁷ It was not enough to simply tend to one's physical needs, he proposed, apart from the empowerment of God; true concern for those in need must be grounded in the belief that all humans, as God's image-bearers, possess a level of inherent dignity. Perhaps, in light of this view, it is not difficult to see why Booth saw health care, particularly the prevention of diseases and addictions, as one area of social service where Christians ought to be involved. On one occasion, Booth went so far as to claim had even if he became a physician, he would not have accomplished more than the Salvation Army already had through its ministry of disease prevention, advocacy for abstinence from alcohol, and providing "tender nursing,

36 "Stand Alongside Syrian Refugees," July 17, 2016. <https://www.christchurch.us/attachments/RefugeeSmallGroupGuide71716.pdf>, 5, accessed May 15, 2019.

37 Booth, *In Darkest England*, 24.

35 Williams, "He is the Image," 323.

happiness, and love not only to prevent disease, but go far in the majority of cases to effecting its cure.”³⁸

In addressing how the church ought to engage in this field today, multiple questions arise that would not have posed a problem for Booth’s nineteenth century Salvation Army. First of all, many industrialized nations now boast a state-run healthcare system; thus, for Christians to engage in this area of social service in nations such as Canada or Britain, doing so will often mean participating in the context of a more secular environment rather than an explicitly Christian context. Moreover, the conviction that all human beings, even the unborn, bear the *Imago Dei* has profound implications for how Christians view matters such as abortion and stem cell research, issues that demand more debate in the public square now than they would have several generations ago.³⁹ Yet, these challenges should not act as a barrier to believers engaging with such public institutions; after all, though working within them may bring them face to face with complex ethical dilemmas, should it not be an opportunity for improving such a system from the inside? If followers of Christ will not advocate for the dignity of fellow image-bearers in such contexts, then certainly the chances of anyone else doing so are slim, to say the least.

The conviction that all people bear the

image of God from conception, as advocated in Christian thought as far back as the Church Fathers, has led the majority of confessing Christians in the modern age to oppose abortion, eugenics, euthanasia, and other actions which would entail the destruction of that image. Sharon M. Leon notes that during the Nazi regime in Germany, while numerous Catholic bishops, unfortunately, capitulated to the racist policies of the Third Reich that included eugenic sterilization and euthanasia, mainstream Catholic theologians in the country insisted such policies violated the rights of the individual.⁴⁰ Indeed, their legacy stands as one of the few prophetic witnesses of their era to which the contemporary church may look for inspiration. While the modern West is nowhere near the brutal Nazi regime in terms of its debasement of certain minority groups, the question of how believers ought to behave in a society quite tolerant of abortion and euthanasia is inevitably tied to the *Imago Dei*, and will affect how Christians engage the field of medicine. The bioethical implications of believing humanity to be created in the image of God are expressed concisely by Mark Cherry, who asserts that the recognition of this image demands that Christian healthcare recognize that the whole person—physical and spiritual—is to be treated with dignity.⁴¹ Physical care must not be neglected in favour of spiritual care or vice-versa, nor can a Christian view of the *Imago Dei* be sidelined in the name of pragmatism as a secular view of the human being may allow for.

Perhaps, in light of these contemporary debates that often leave Christians feeling as though they are out of line with their society on

38 William Booth, “Salvation for Both Worlds,” *All The World*, (January 1889), 4.

39 See Calum MacKellar, *The Image of God, Personhood and the Embryo* (London, UK: SCM Press, 2017). This is not to say that contemporary believers constitute the first few generations to grapple with this issue; for an overview of how abortion was addressed in the first four centuries of the church’s existence, see Michael J. Gorman *Abortion & the Early Church: Christian, Jewish & Pagan Attitudes in the Greco-Roman World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982). What has changed, however, is the extent to which the practice has become much more socially accepted in Western society, placing the debate over woman’s right to choose versus an unborn child’s right to life at the heart of the conservative-liberal political divide.

40 Sharon M. Leon, *Image of God: The Catholic Struggle with Eugenics* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 103-4.

41 Mark J. Cherry “Created in the Image of God: Bioethical Implications of the *Imago Dei*.” *Christian Bioethics* 23, no. 3 (2017): 219.

such issues, the church is uniquely positioned for the task of social services to such groups whose needs are not largely recognized by the wider population. Could the church emerge, in the era of western post-Christendom, as one of the few remaining communities where the unborn, the terminally ill, and the elderly are regarded as having as much inherent value as the perfectly healthy adult? As Cherry notes in his discussion of Christian bioethics, it is not uncommon in the field of secular bioethics to encourage a type of eugenics in regards to mentally or physically disabled children, as parents are encouraged to avoid expending significant energy, financial resources, and public goods by bringing such individuals into the world.⁴² Surely the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* demands better than this, and indicates that there is a golden opportunity in the realm of social service to advocate on behalf of, and care for, such persons who often have limited ability to do either on their own behalf.

While the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* inevitably makes the task of social service fraught with challenges due to the complex bioethical and, thus, political considerations involved, the doctrine may also help Christians maintain a proper perspective on why the task of medical care is so important to the Lord. Given that this area of social service involves caring for the being made in his image, there is a strong case to be made that those who participate in such services represent the nature of God by caring for the well-being of his image-bearers just as he himself does.⁴³

42 Cherry, "Created in the Image," 223.

43 See Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, Ch. 7. "In sum," he argues, "the *Imago Dei* is a function, a royal vocation for humanity to reflect the reign of God in their stewardship over creation. They pursue the royal task by protecting human life (Gen. 9:5), resisting ideologies of power where brutal monarchs try to monopolize the image for themselves (Matt. 20:25-28), and caring for the earth and the animal world (Gen. 1:28)". Thus, this responsibility to steward creation properly includes caring for one's fellow

THE *IMAGO DEI* AND POVERTY

A third area where the doctrine of the image of God could prove helpful in the development of a theology of social service relates to Christian concern for the impoverished in society. In the gospels, one of Jesus' most widely known pronouncements is that his kingdom would be good news for the poor;⁴⁴ tragically, the church's presentation of the gospel has all too often omitted this dimension of the gospel in favour of a message that is wholly oriented around the afterlife—and thus being of little benefit to the poor while on earth. In his volume *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service*, Stephen A. Seamands highlights the proclamation of Christ that his gospel would hold particular relevance for the marginalized. He speaks of bringing this good news to the poor and liberty to the oppressed, shortly after his baptism in which Luke records him being filled with the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵ This reinforces the

image-bearers, not only holding human life as worthy of utmost protection but also combatting the oppression of one image-bearer by another.

44 See, for example, Luke 4:18, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free" (NIV). There is certainly a sense in which this text refers to the poor in spirit; as Origen proposes, "The 'poor' stand for the Gentiles, for they are indeed poor. They possess nothing at all: neither God, nor the law, nor the prophets, nor justice and the rest of the virtues" (Arthur A. Just, *Luke. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament, 3* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 80). However, it is a serious mistake to view this proclamation in a strictly spiritual light. Chester notes that "time and time again Luke speaks of a reversal at the end of time, and he speaks of it in social and political categories" (See Tim Chester, *Good News to the Poor: Social Involvement and the Gospel* (North American Edition, 2013) Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 91). For this reason, the coming Kingdom of God, "is especially good news for those who do not experience this life as one of blessing".

45 Stephen A. Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 29.

concept that, as followers of Christ who are empowered by that same Spirit, service to fellow image-bearers is an absolute necessity. He also points to the Trinitarian nature of God as vital for grasping the nature of the *Imago Dei*; if the triune God himself is a community, embodying not only mutual submission but also equality, love, and joy, it follows that his image-bearers ought to live as a community embodying those very same attributes—including in its treatment of the poor.⁴⁶

Bird's royal view of the *Imago Dei* is instrumental here, once again, due to its assertion that all human beings—not just the strong and powerful—bear the image of God and thus are tasked with reflecting his nature.⁴⁷ This speaks powerfully to the issue of poverty in two ways; first of all, it informs believers that even the desperately poor have the potential—indeed, the responsibility—to share in God's reign and thus must be treated with the utmost dignity. Secondly, it serves as a reminder that when one image-bearer neglects the needs of another, humanity has failed to accurately reflect to the rest of creation the nature of its character—and thus failed in its ultimate responsibility. Further expounding on this concept is Tim Chester in his work, *Good News to the Poor: Social Involvement and the Gospel*, in which he charges that “the gospel is good news to the poor because the reign of God is a reign of justice and peace in which the last will be first and the first will be last.”⁴⁸ In other words, unlike the kingdoms of the world, the kingdom of God is a reign in which even the lowliest will occupy a place of dignity and honour—a higher one, in fact, than that of individuals considered to be “first” in an earthly sense.

46 Ibid., 35.

47 Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, Ch. 7.

48 Chester, *Good News to the Poor*, 91.

While Christians are unlikely to have trouble convincing their peers of other faiths or indeed, no faith at all—of the conviction that service to the poor is a moral endeavour, for the follower of Christ this action should be done not only out of a sense of pity for the poor but also a conviction that their condition is not a natural one. For the Christian who recognizes the impoverished individual as a co-regent in God's kingdom, the alleviation of poverty is not just a temporary relief but a restoration of that person's dignity as a bearer of the *Imago Dei*. This realization gives poverty relief an immeasurably deeper meaning than the secular view. Surely William Booth is correct in his assertion that salvation in the full biblical sense involves deliverance from earthly suffering as well as misery in the afterlife, rightly noting their similarities and their common root—human separation from God.⁴⁹ Consider once again the view of the image proposed by Irenaeus, who suggested that only the regenerate individual possessed the *Imago Dei* in all its pre-fall fullness: body, soul, and spirit.⁵⁰ Undoubtedly, there are glaring weaknesses to this position; few would want to argue that the larger portion of humanity does not fully bear the image of God. Yet, this view does point to a truth that is clear in Scripture; salvation includes the redemption of the whole person, soul and body, and thus Booth's position that caring for both the material and spiritual needs of the poor must be clearly consistent with their status as bearers of the image of God.

However, coming back to Booth's assertion that earthly social ills such as poverty and eternal misery have the same root, it appears that if this is the case the Christian worldview offers not just one more way to care for the poor but the only way to truly care for the

49 Booth, “Salvation for Both Worlds,” 2.

50 Irenaeus, *Irenaeus on the Christian*, 160.

impoverished individual's soul and body. Only a view of social service that flows out of the *Imago Dei*, which sees God's image in both the material and immaterial aspects of the human being, can account for such a position. For the twenty-first century church, poverty relief may be undertaken through a variety of means; even the Scriptures themselves are not crystal clear on how Christians ought to tend to the poor, hence the fact that the church contains both staunch libertarians who would prefer to accomplish this through private charity as well as avowed socialists who advocate for the redistribution of wealth at the state level.⁵¹ Thus, the extent to which the church cooperates with the government on this matter may depend on the particular congregation/denomination, the size of the church, or its political leanings. To be sure, even the nation in question will often be a major factor in how this is accomplished. Some believers may insist that coordinating with explicitly Christian organizations such as Compassion International or Samaritan's Purse in targeting poverty rather than relying on legal reform and government aid. Perhaps the most important question to answer is not precisely how Christians should carry out this task, but why—and the answer to the latter lies in the recognition of the *Imago Dei* in the poor.

51 On this point, see Timothy Keller, "How Do Christians Fit Into the Two-Party System? They Don't," September 29, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/29/opinion/sunday/christians-politics-belief.html>. He notes that "most political positions are not matters of biblical command but of practical wisdom. This does not mean that the church can never speak on social, economic and political realities, because the Bible often does.... However, there are many possible ways to help the poor. Should we shrink government and let private capital markets allocate resources, or should we expand the government and give the state more of the power to redistribute wealth?.... The Bible does not give exact answers to these questions for every time, place and culture".

CONCLUSION

All things considered, there is a strong case to be made that the doctrine of the *Imago Dei* may hold much deeper significance for a theology of social service than the church has given it credit for in the past. Whether the specific area is combatting poverty, reimagining healthcare and bioethics, or advocating for the rights of the marginalized, recognizing each human being as designed to partner with God in his reign over the universe puts the task of social service in an entirely new light from a theological perspective. Going forward, the church would do well to recapture the passion of iconic leaders such as Booth and King while infusing their justice-oriented spirituality with a fresh reimagining of the ancient doctrine of the *Imago Dei*. It is indeed difficult to imagine such a course of action holding anything but positive results for the body of Christ and its mission of reaching the world with the good news.

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