

## STUDY 8

# Reversible but Not Reducible

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The title of this paper is a quote from *The New Bible Commentary* on Genesis 1:26, ‘This divine image is neither losable nor reducible, but its ethical direction is reversible’.<sup>1</sup> The author of the statement, Dr Meredith Kline,<sup>2</sup> passed away last year. In exploring the topic, some of the writings of Dr Kline will be reviewed in order to get to the underlying premise on which he made this statement.<sup>3</sup>

Often, the attempts to understand the *imago Dei* revolve around the exegesis of the text in Genesis and this is then coupled with philosophical speculation.<sup>4</sup> That understanding is then applied to Christian living. This has been the traditional approach. The New Testament has more to say about the image of God, as the *imago Dei* has been revealed in Jesus, and our attempts to understand this should start there. There is another reason for starting with the New Testament. With the traditional approach, the problem of the defiled image becomes central and the perfection in Christ is then seen as an antidote to that defilement.<sup>5</sup> In doing so, the understanding of ‘Christ in the image of God’ is subordinated to ‘man in the image of God’, that is, Christology subordinated to anthropology. It is anthropology that needs to be subordinated to Christology and not the other way round.

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<sup>1</sup> M. G. Kline, ‘Genesis’, in Guthrie and Motyer (eds), *The New Bible Commentary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (IVP, London, 1970), p. 83. The full comment on Gen. 1:26 reads, ‘Men and the celestial spirits alike are personal-religious creatures involved in responsible, historical relationship to God. This divine image is neither losable nor reducible, but its ethical direction is reversible. It assumes its proper form, of course, in conformity to God’s holy will.’

<sup>2</sup> For over half a century, Dr. Meredith G. Kline (1922–2007), an ordained minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, served as a professor of Old Testament at Westminster Theological Seminary (in Philadelphia), Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Westminster Seminary, California. He received his B.D. and Th.M. degrees from Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia) and his Ph.D. degree in Assyriology and Egyptology from Dropsie College.

<sup>3</sup> I do not have at my disposal all the writings of Dr Kline as they are voluminous and neither am I familiar with most of them, but I will try to unravel in some of his writing the way he understood the *imago Dei*.

<sup>4</sup> This is seen in the numerous ways in which the ‘image of God’ is understood in history. See footnote 6.

<sup>5</sup> Stanley J. Grenz (*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, vol. 47, issue 4, Dec 2004, Lynchbury, p. 626) says:

Foremost among these is the danger of producing an anthropocentric Christology that runs counter to the centrality of Christ for Christianity. When the nature of the human person is assumed to emerge solely from creation—that is, apart from Christ—and when Christ is cast as, above all, the divine antidote to human sin, not only is anthropology cut loose from any Christological grounding, but Christology is also made dependent on anthropology.

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### CHRIST—THE IMAGE OF GOD

Many approaches have tried to identify the *imago Dei* with certain human attributes. Various hypotheses have been put forward to explain the term. Some are interesting but largely speculative. To pursue this line of understanding would be to reduce the *imago Dei* to certain definable qualities in the human creation. Its starting point is anthropology. This will not be pursued and a summary of what has been proposed historically is appended in the footnote below.<sup>6</sup>

The attempts to understand humanity as being in the image of God will remain tentative because this term is not explained with certainty in scripture. However, what is certain is that humanity is the created and not the creator<sup>7</sup> and as such will remain dependent on the creator. This sense of dependence upon the creator is often neglected. The use of the term ‘image of God’ in reference to the creation of humanity implies that the origin and destiny of humanity is intricately bound with the creator God and the understanding of this term should go along this path. While it is interesting to speculate and philosophise on what this term means in terms of certain human attributes, and the scriptures do not really run along that pathway, it is more meaningful to understand it in terms of the creature–creator relationship—‘of the union of God with his image’.<sup>8</sup> The Son of God, in the Tri-unity of the Godhead, is the image of the invisible God (2 Cor. 4:4), and this should be read relationally. Paul wrote to the Colossians:

He is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn of all creation*; <sup>16</sup> for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. <sup>17</sup> He himself is before all things, and *in him all things hold together*. <sup>18</sup> He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the *firstborn from the dead*, so that he might come to have first place in everything. <sup>19</sup> For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, <sup>20</sup> and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Col. 1:15–20, italics mine).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> W. Sibley Towner (*Interpretation*, Richmond, Oct. 2005, 59.4.343) has this to say:

Among them are: 1) the fullness of the *eikōn* or image of God in humankind is seen in the person of Jesus Christ (Col 1:15; cf. 2 Cor 3:18, 4:4); 2) the two nouns in Gen 1:26 (‘image’ and ‘likeness’) are intended to distinguish the natural and the supernatural qualities of God in the human being (e.g., Irenaeus, Delitzsch); 3) the image of God consists in spiritual endowments such as memory, self-awareness, rationality, intelligence, spirituality, even an immortal soul (e.g., Wis 2:23, Philo, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Aquinas, Schleiermacher, Eichrodt, Fohrer); 4) the image of God is manifested in our ability to make moral decisions, which presupposes free will and a knowledge of good and evil (e.g., G. W. Bromiley, Michael Morrison); 5) the image of God may also be seen in the sometimes denigrated or ‘base’ human emotions, especially love, qualities not shared with animals (Augustine, a view rejected by Gregory of Nyssa); 6) the image of God is expressed in the unique human capacity for self-transcendence, from which, in turn, beauty and the recognition of beauty emerge (Farley); 7) the image of God can be seen in the external appearance of human beings (e.g., Gunkel, Humbert, von Rad, Zimmerli); 8) the image is displayed when the human being serves as God’s deputy on earth, an idea often expressed in royal ideology (e.g., Hehn, von Rad, Wildberger, W. H. Schmidt); 9) the human being is God’s counterpart or partner, the ‘thou’ which is addressed by the divine ‘I’ (e.g., Buber, Brunner, Westermann); 10) the image of God in the human being consists precisely in the division of humankind into female and male.

<sup>7</sup> Pardon me for stating the obvious.

<sup>8</sup> G. Bingham expressed this so simply in the song:

In the songs that are ever and endless  
Of the banquet of worship and praise,  
*Of the union of God with His image—*  
The Bride and her people—always.

(G. Bingham, *New Creation Hymn Book*, no. 286, NCPI, Blackwood, 2001, italics mine).

<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all scripture quotations in this study are from the New Revised Standard Version.

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All things were created in him, through him and for him. What this is saying is that Christ is the agent of creation (through him) and the creation is intricately bound with Christ (in and for him). Humanity's origin and destiny are tied to Christ, whatever else may have happened after the creation. Indeed the reconciliation through the cross was part of the creative process. Thus Paul in the same context refers to Christ as the 'firstborn of creation' and 'the firstborn from the dead'. And, as the firstborn from the dead, he effected the new creation:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.<sup>17</sup> So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! (2 Cor. 5:16–17).

He is both creator and re-creator. There is a fundamental dependence of the creation upon the creator. Creation has often been understood in terms of the material; that is, in terms of what can be seen, the human point of view. Tied into the creation of the material is also the creation of relationships and that is what cannot be seen.

Hebrews also affirms that Jesus is the reflection of God's glory and the *imago Dei*, 'the exact imprint of God's very being', and that the whole creation is sustained by him:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,<sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.<sup>3</sup> He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and *he sustains all things by his powerful word*. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,<sup>4</sup> having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs (Heb. 1:1–4, italics mine).

Should the two expressions, 'the reflection of God's glory' and 'the exact imprint of God's very being' be understood as a hendiadys or as two separate entities? This will be answered a little later.

### **NOT LOSABLE**

The *imago Dei* cannot be totally destroyed by sin, as it was once thought, since it constitutes the whole structure of human nature:

Protestant theology would have escaped much confusion and many needless and unconvincing doctrinal refinements, if it had not encumbered itself with the idea that it was bound to define sin as the loss of the image, or of something belonging to the image. If the image were lost man would cease to be man.<sup>10</sup>

And if the image is lost, then what does Paul mean when he says that humanity could be 'transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another' (2 Cor. 3:18)? Rather than being specific about the 'image', it should be noted again that the creation is not just about the material creation, but also the creation of the relational between God and man. In the disobedience of Adam and Eve, there is a disruption or a breach of the relational. It needs to be:

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1958), p. 206.

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... concluded that the 'image (likeness) of God' refers to a permanent aspect of our created nature, which was not affected by the fall. It is the special characteristic of the human race, which distinguishes us from other creatures and makes our salvation a matter of supreme concern to God.<sup>11</sup>

After the disobedience of Adam and Eve, scripture continues to refer to humanity as being in the image of God:

Whoever sheds the blood of a human,  
by a human shall that person's blood be shed;  
for in his own image  
God made humankind (Gen. 9:6).

With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God (James 3:9).

However, it is often said that the image was corrupted. Calvin noted, 'Therefore, even though we grant that God's image was not totally annihilated and destroyed in him, yet it was so corrupted that whatever remains is frightful deformity'.<sup>12</sup> It is then inferred from 2 Corinthians 4:4 that humanity is unable to see the true image which has appeared in Jesus Christ:

In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4).

But what Paul is saying here is that the unbelievers are unable to see 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ'. This is the point that Kline makes in his exposition of the image of God. He says that the two questions: 'What is man?' and 'What is the image of God?' have been confused.<sup>13</sup> They are not the same question. The former is anthropological and the latter theological. Central to his thought is the 'Glory-Spirit Archetype'.<sup>14</sup> Put briefly, Kline sees in the creation account in Genesis the statement, 'a wind from God swept (hovered) over the face of the waters' (Gen. 1:2) as interpreted by the equivalent in Deuteronomy, 'an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young' (Deut. 32:11). Deuteronomy 32 refers to God's work of redemption/ re-creation in the exodus event. This 'hovering' presence is the Shekinah cloud of glory. And Nehemiah made the connection thus:

... you in your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud that led them in the way did not leave them by day, nor the pillar of fire by night that gave them light on the way by which they should go.<sup>20</sup> You gave your good spirit to instruct them, and did not withhold your manna from their mouths, and gave them water for their thirst (Neh. 9:19-20).

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<sup>11</sup> G. L. Bray, 'Image of God' in T. D. Alexander and B. S. Rosner (eds), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, IVP, Leicester, 2000, p. 576.

<sup>12</sup> Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, tr. F. L. Battles, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1977, I.15.iv, p. 189.

<sup>13</sup> M. Kline, 'Creation in the Image of the Glory-Spirit' in *Westminster Theological Journal* 39 (1977), p. 250.

<sup>14</sup> M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Two Age Press, USA, 2000), pp. 30-32. This was discussed in greater detail in his 'Creation in the Image of the Glory-Spirit'.

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Kline concludes:

The usage in Genesis 1:2 is similar, though the Spirit here is probably best understood as the heavenly reality, the invisible cosmos-filling glory of the divine Presence, of which the Glory-cloud was a localized manifestation.<sup>15</sup>

This is the ‘divine power for the work of creation’ bringing about the fulfilment of the divine purpose. The way Kline argues his case is to make a distinction between the image and the glory:

One of the biblical figures for the bestowing of the divine image on man is that of covering him with a robe emblematic of God’s Glory. The outstanding instance of this symbolism in the Old Testament is found in the placing of the sacred vestments on the high priest of Israel. Now in the allegory of Ezekiel 16 such an act of investiture with the image of God is used as a symbol for an act of covenant ratification.<sup>16</sup>

And so, Geoffrey Bingham also wrote:

The Fall, as spoken of in Genesis 3 and referred to in Romans 5:12ff., shows that Man lost his intimate glory-relationship with God.<sup>17</sup>

It is not the image that was lost, but the glory-relationship with God. Kline sees God’s creation of humanity in His image as analogous to the father–son imagery made explicit in Genesis 5:3, ‘he became the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image’. This statement is juxtaposed to the creation of humanity in God’s image (Gen. 5:1–2).<sup>18</sup> So he concludes, ‘To be in the image of God is to be the son of God’.<sup>19</sup> He further supports his argument this way:

What Genesis 1:2 identifies as Spirit, Hebrews 1:2, 3 identifies as Son; God is one. Hebrews 1:2b attributes to the Son the creation of the world. Then, before the sustaining, directing role of the Son in divine providence is dealt with in Hebrews 1:3b, he is identified as the image and glory of God, ‘the effulgence of his glory and the very image (charakter) of his being’ (v. 3a).<sup>20</sup>

What he is saying here is this: the creation came into existence by the work of the Glory-Spirit who also made man in the image of God. This work is also attributed to the Son who is identified as the image and glory of God. Thus Adam, created in the image of God, is to live in this love-obedience relationship with his creator in whose image he is formed. This is the glory of Adam, but it is firstly the glory of God conferred on Adam as he remains in this love-obedience relationship.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> G. Bingham, *All Cry, ‘Glory!’: The Story of Glory*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1999, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, p. 46.

<sup>20</sup> M. Kline, ‘Creation in the Image of the Glory-Spirit’, pp. 250–72.

<sup>21</sup> ‘God’s glory, then, constitutes those manifestations of Himself, in multitudinous ways, which He is pleased to give to Man and other elements of His creation, both celestial and terrestrial’ (G. Bingham, *All Cry, ‘Glory!’*, p. 1).

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### NOT REDUCIBLE

In his comment in *The New Bible Commentary*, it is difficult to know precisely what Kline means when he says that the image is not reducible. I was not able to find any elaboration of this in the literature that I have looked at. This term can be understood in two ways. Firstly, it can mean that the image cannot be reduced or made less than what it is because of the transgression of Adam. Kline has made a distinction between the image and the glory. While the image remains the same and is not reduced, the glory has been reduced because of the Fall. This would be consistent with Paul's statement which affirms that humanity undergoes transformation from one degree of glory to another into the *same* image (2 Cor. 3:18).

The other way is with reference to the traditional approaches in understanding the image of God. It has been pointed out earlier that the traditional approaches have equated the image with created qualities such as morality, rationality and so on.<sup>22</sup> This is to reduce the image to some aspects of anthropology. This reductionism will be referred to again later in the paper.

### REVERSIBLE

The appearance of the serpent in the garden was not just the testing of Adam, but the setting up of the scene for the judgement of evil by one created in the image of God. Kline added:

From the vantage point of God's purpose, Satan's advent in Eden with lying wonders and all deceivableness of unrighteousness is seen to be nothing less than a delivering over of the devil to man for judgment. The destiny of man to judge angels (cf. 1 Cor. 6:2f.) is not a later addendum to the agenda but a primal assignment. Agreeably, authority to execute judgment is given to Jesus in his identity as the Son of Man, the second Adam. The first Adam was made in the image of God, a judge between good and evil, and when the devil entered the Edenic temple of God, in effect setting himself forth there as God, opposing and exalting himself above all, Adam was faced with the challenge to rise up in holy judicial wrath and cleanse God's temple.<sup>23</sup>

The scene in Eden was set for the judgement of evil and 'human history could then proceed in serene triumph to its eschaton of peace'.<sup>24</sup> However, this was not to be.

There is a special relationship between created humanity and the creator God, and a different relationship between created humanity and the rest of creation. There is the relationship of dependence and hence obedience between created humanity and the creator God. The relationship between created humanity and the rest of creation is that of responsibility and dominion, that is, caring for the created order. These are the relationships intended for created humanity. However, things have not worked out this way. In failing to exercise his authority over creation and acting on the suggestion from the serpent, Adam moved from obeying the creator to obeying the created.

The reversal of these relationships means that there is no longer that sense of dependence on the creator and this leads to disobedience. Instead of dominion over

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<sup>22</sup> See footnote 6.

<sup>23</sup> M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, p. 121.

<sup>24</sup> M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, p. 121.

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the created order, there is now dependence on the creation. Sin is often understood in terms of the actions or deeds of humanity. However, these actions result from the reversal of the creational relationships. The right deeds can be acted out in spite of the distortion in the relationships. *The Story of the Rice Cakes* highlights this predicament of humanity.<sup>25</sup> It is true that godliness needs to be expressed in deeds, but the foundation is in the relational.

Paul refers to the ungodliness of humanity in this way:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; <sup>21</sup> for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools; <sup>23</sup> and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles (Rom. 1:18–23).

What humanity has done is to ‘exchange’ the created order for an unnatural order. The tendency to reverse the creational relationship is inherent in humanity.

When there is a reversal of the creational relationship, there will be a seeking after that which is not of God. This is the departure from dependence on God.

When there is a reversal of the creational relationship, the emphasis will be on what humanity can accomplish rather than on what the creator has promised to accomplish. This is the loss of the sense of dependence.

When there is a reversal of the creational relationship, the focus will then be turned from the creator to the creation. The issues that present will become magnified and terrifying.

When there is a reversal of the relational, the vision of the *eschaton* will be lost and replaced with a vision of our preferred future.

When there is a reversal of the creational relationship, and there is no vision of the *eschaton*, then the present difficulties loom large. The tendency then is to turn to quick solutions instead of trying to understand the root cause, that is, to go back to the ‘manufacturer’s specification’. The answer to the difficulties is found in going back to the maker and in rediscovering the created relationship with him. This, humanity is unable to accomplish. With the loss of the sense of dependence on the creator, humanity has no other option but to turn to ‘principalities’ and ‘powers’, believing them to be the answer. It is the breach of the relational and a reversal of its ethical direction.

## REDUCTIONISM

Since the creational relationship was reversed, humanity has consistently turned to the worship of the material or the things visible, and on what the human mind can get a handle on, for example, philosophies. And when humanity cannot have ‘dominion’ in these areas, then confusion and depression ensue. This is what happens when there is

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<sup>25</sup> G. Bingham, *The Story of the Rice Cakes*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2006.

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loss of dependence upon the creator. This path of dependence is the path that humanity must tread because this is the way things are. As the creation is so intricately tied to the creator, it will not be let 'loose' without intervention by the creator. Thus the new creation. Paul is keen to maintain that this new creation is in Christ. The dependence of the creation upon the creator is central in Paul's thought.

Earlier, it was mentioned that the 'image' has been identified with rationality, intelligence and the ability to make moral decisions. In so doing, the image was reduced to certain human qualities. There is an appearance of wisdom with the movement away from the relationship of dependence upon the creator. Humanity is then driven to find means of justifying its position. Paul describes that as a captivity—the captivity to philosophy and human tradition (Col. 2:8). The discipline of philosophy now reigns supreme in our educational system. It is then taught that logic and reason cannot be over-ridden. But is that true?

A young priest once put a proposition to his bishop. This young priest was well trained in the sciences and philosophy. He reasoned logically without a flaw. The bishop listened quietly, nodding as he spoke. The young man could see from the countenance of the bishop that he was not in agreement, but he continued all the same because he felt very strongly that he had a good case. The bishop did not say a word until this young man had finished. Then the bishop simply replied, 'It is all very logical but not quite theological'. The young priest fell flat with those words. His logic crumbled right in front of him and it became very clear to him that he had subordinated the theological to the philosophical.

This is not an isolated event. There is a constraint within each person to do that. There is a need to construct a system in the mind so that there is a mechanism to get a handle on things. In that way, within the system of thought there is some kind of control over the understanding of events. In so doing, then, the future as it unfolds would be interpreted according to that system. There is a sense of security in knowing that there is an explanation as the future unfolds. That is wrong. The future can only be open when there is a preparedness to meet with what is unknown. In that way the system of thought is altered as events unfold so that one is able to 'comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth' (Eph. 3:18). Systems of thought are under construction all the time. Paul uses the terms 'renewal' and 'transformation' (Rom. 12:2). The moment the construction is closed, then the relevance to the present is lost.

In the account above, the system of thought by the young priest at that time was closed to the creator God. He had forgotten the dictum that theology is the queen of science and philosophy her handmaiden. He fell head over heels for the handmaiden. He did not have a case at all, right from the beginning, because he started from a wrong premise. He was captive to a philosophy, as Paul says.

Take, for example, the conversion to faith as it is taught in some circles. Writing in *Theology, News & Notes*, Richard Peace commented:

For one thing, we have taken a step back from our evangelistic invitations and have begun to look at just what we say to people who come forward to receive Jesus. The question is: have we so reduced the nature and content of the gospel that our so-called conversions are a mere shadow of what one finds in the New Testament (NT)?<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Peace, 'Promoting "Good Conversions"', in Fuller Theological Seminary, *Theology, News & Notes*,



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The saying of a prayer of acknowledgment is not the conversion. The prayer acknowledging Christ as the Saviour is the expression of the converted heart and spirit. Divine grace works first in the transformation from one degree of glory to another into the same image (2 Cor. 3:18). The prayer alone does nothing. It is mere words. It is the reduction of divine grace to anthropological toil.<sup>27</sup> It reduced the mystery of the gospel to the enlightenment of the intellect. Such is the reign of the handmaiden when the queen is exiled.

Many philosophies have come and gone. Some have great appeal to the fallen mind. Perhaps the over-rationalisation of theologies in the West has caused many to seek philosophies to the contrary. This perhaps explains the recent rise in the uptake of Buddhism in the West.

Religion is about ethics—the right and wrong of the actions. It underpins the human ego and justifies without an inner sanctity. It does not require a creator or redeemer and thus excludes dependence. This is reductionism. It reduces the image to a set plan and results from the reversal of the ethical direction of the image. It is the loss of the glory of the image. It wrenches ethics from its source. ‘The human person is a person in relation to Yahweh, who lives in intense mutuality with Yahweh.’<sup>28</sup> This is because he is created in the image of God.

### **LACK OF ‘WISDOM’ IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

This subtitle is not meant to be disrespectful, but it serves to bring out a point. The relationship with the Father is the essence of the image. Many have come to critique the gospel stories with the wisdom of what has earlier been referred to as ‘captive philosophies’ (Col. 2:8). I want to take two examples.<sup>29</sup> The first is the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16). After their having worked varying hours during the day, the owner chose to pay the workers by starting with those who had started last. Would he not have done better by first paying those who started earliest? He could still pay them the same amount. Those who had started later would consider the extra as a bonus. That would have been a better option in managing the public relations problem. But the point of the parable is not the problem of handling the varying payment. It is the grace of the owner and the freedom he has in bestowing that grace. So if the problem of sin becomes central, the whole thrust is to stage-manage the problem surrounding the case, so then the whole point of the relationship with the gracious God will be missed.

Take another one, the well-known parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). The father could have managed the older son better by waiting for him to come in from the field before being so exuberant with the celebration of the son who had

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Winter 2008 (available at <[http://www.fuller.edu/news/pubs/tnn/2008\\_Winter/5\\_promoting\\_good\\_conversions.asp](http://www.fuller.edu/news/pubs/tnn/2008_Winter/5_promoting_good_conversions.asp)>). He has written about this in a larger work, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> I might have heard this expression used somewhere else, and if so, I do not remember where.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in T. E. Fretheim, *God and the Word in the Old Testament* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2005), p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> This was mentioned in Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (Darton, Longman & Todd, London, 1994).

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returned. Because he ‘failed’ to manage the older son better, resentment ensued. However, the restoration of the father–son relationship is so paramount that all other issues are subsumed beneath it. Simply to manage the problem of the peripherals is to miss the point of the intense joy of the father in seeing the restoration of the all-important father–son relationship.

There is no lack of wisdom in the New Testament. What has been lacking is the comprehension of the thrust of the Father’s plan. That miscomprehension is embedded in the substitution of peripheral issues—for example, sin—as the central problem that God has to overcome. That is a philosophical construct in theology and this peripheral has become the main event. It is this construct that distorts the understanding of the main event in the incarnation of Jesus.

### THE FINAL REVERSAL

Salvation needs to be seen as the restoration to wholeness of the glory of this image which then participates more fully in the communion of the Triune fellowship through the grace of Jesus Christ and the indwelling Spirit. It is no longer self-realisation but transformation. This new creation takes on new ethical directions as it is being renewed according to the image of the creator:

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).<sup>6</sup> On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.<sup>7</sup> These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.<sup>8</sup> But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.<sup>9</sup> Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices<sup>10</sup> and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge *according to the image of its creator*.<sup>11</sup> In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! (Col. 3:5–11, italics mine).

This then is the reversal back to the creational relationships. This reversal is linked to Christ:

Thus it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.<sup>46</sup> But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual.<sup>47</sup> The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven.<sup>48</sup> As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven.<sup>49</sup> Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven (1 Cor. 15:45–49).

The creational relationship is founded on humanity’s linkage to Christ and there is nothing that humanity can do to restore this. Because humanity has stepped way from this relationship, and sought refuge in logic or reason, and so forth—qualities identified as the image in the past—this is ungodliness. To reduce this image to ethical imperatives is also the same. Our identification of this image with Christ is both our gift and our destiny:

## *Reversible but Not Reducible*

Christ of the Cross, of Resurrection morning,  
Christ of the Throne, God's mighty Lord of all,  
He has redeemed the lost of every nation,  
He has reversed the horror of the Fall.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> G. Bingham, *New Creation Hymn Book*, no. 209.