

The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God

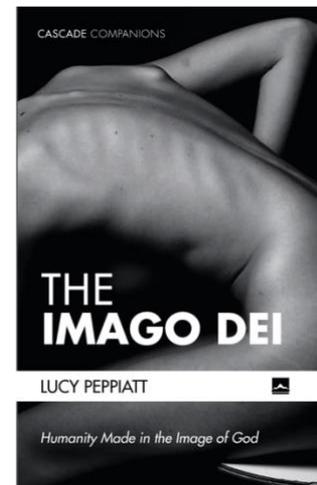
by Lucy Peppiatt

Lucy Peppiatt's *The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God* is my go-to text for an introduction to this mysterious but important doctrine. I've greatly admired her [previous work](#), so it is no surprise to find this contribution so helpful. She carefully categorizes and clearly summarizes the vast and varied views offering readers important insights and challenges to consider. Compared to the scant biblical testimony on the imago Dei, the amount of ink spilled through the centuries is large and weighty. Peppiatt has managed to give us a palatable sampling from the most significant views while maintaining a fair and convincing handling of the few relevant inspired texts.

She is clear in the beginning—and throughout—that more questions will be raised than answers given. I find this a strength in that her goal is not so much to convince as it is to inform readers of the variety of positions proposed. I never had the sense of being persuaded toward a particular view, but instead found an even-handed treatment of each presented. Whether a cursory reader or a keen one (it's nicely documented with plenty of sources for a deeper dive), all will come away with a better understanding of what has been written on a doctrine that seemingly touches every aspect of Christian belief.

After the introduction the book contains six chapters and a conclusion. Chapters 1-3 explore and explain various models of the imago Dei. Chapter 4 identifies issues that raise concerns with some of the models, and chapters 5-6 address modern perspectives. Each chapter ends with questions for group discussion or personal reflection. In the conclusion she drives home the import of this topic to our lives, insisting that this subject is not merely academic but profoundly ethical. It touches every aspect of being human and living in a world in need of “redemptive theology.” What follows are some highlights that especially struck me. (Since I only received a soft copy from the publisher, page numbers will not be included.)

In the **Introduction**, she discusses terms used in studies on the imago Dei, including differences between “*tselem* (image) and *demuth* (likeness)” based on the locus classicus, [Genesis 1:26-27](#). As all good introductions go, she piques reader interest by raising significant questions and discussing them in subsequent chapters. I was glad to see her referring, both early on and frequently throughout, to one of the most thorough treatments on the subject, *The Liberating Image* by J. Richard Middleton.



One question, which she unpacks later in the book, was especially intriguing:

“What part does the body play, if any, in our understanding of the imago Dei when the God in question is both triune and spirit and thus disembodied and without gender? Concerning this latter point of embodied existence are questions related to gender, sex, sexuality, desire, health, and disability.”

Chapter 1 tackles models she categorizes as “substantialist” and “noetic.” Substantialist views identify the imago Dei as something unique to and inherent in humans, even “concrete,” to them. Although Scripture may be vague on details, there is some particular substance or faculty (or faculties) that humans possess which is true of God and which other non-human life forms do not share. Irenaeus, Athanasius, Augustine, and Aquinas are among the views that fall into these categories.

I found the view by Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395) especially intriguing. Peppiatt explains “Gregory’s perspective on sex and gender in the prelapsarian world (in the world before the fall).” Read carefully:

Gregory makes the point that human beings are made in the image of the Trinitarian God with Jesus Christ as the prototype of the perfect human image. For Gregory, although Jesus Christ is the prototype

The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God

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of humanity, we should still acknowledge that human beings are made in the image of the Triune God on the basis of the inseparability of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, he even refutes as heresy the idea that human beings are made in the likeness of only one person of the Trinity on the grounds that the Trinity is not composed of three distinct people. These two foundational beliefs (1) in Christ as the prototype and (2) in humanity as made in the image of the Trinity lead Gregory to say that neither sex difference nor sexual union is essential to our image-bearing. With regard to sex difference, he makes the point that male and female are “alien to our conceptions of God,” and thus are “peculiar attributes of human nature” rather than the definitive locus of godlike qualities. Further, if we see Christ as the prototype of humanity, then we must follow Paul in his claim that in Christ there is neither male nor female. Here Gregory cites [Gal 3:26-28](#). And with regard to sex and procreation, Gregory’s view is that this was introduced because of the fear of death, which had entered through the first couple’s sin. In other words, procreation through sex was not essential to the first humans, but only a result of the fall.

What struck me about this view is how many questions it raises. For example, theologically why does so much of the discussion around the imago Dei center on Christ at the expense of the Father and especially the Spirit? What’s more, if by the term “God” we mean not three distinctive beings, but one being in three persons whose will is one and the same (see further, Adonis Vidu’s [The Same God Who Works All Things](#)), what might it mean for humans to be made after the imago Pater (image of Father) or imago Spiritus (image of Spirit)?

Moreover, if differences in biological sex are of little import with regards to the imago Dei, then will there be the need for procreation in the eschaton? After all, Jesus did seem rather clear that there will be no marriage in heaven (see [Matthew 22:30](#) and [my post here](#)). Does that mean marriage is primarily for procreation and vice versa? Put differently, is procreation, and presumably sexual union between male and female, temporary as God’s stopgap measure until the mortal dons the immortal in the eschaton? Finally, will I retain my sex as male in the eschaton if it is not a necessary but contingent attribute of humanity?

Chapter 2 highlights models that fall into the rubric of kingship, priesthood, and stewardship. As these categories suggest, these are primarily hands-on or practical views dealing with function, vocation, mission. “The main point of these views is that they focus on the *purpose* of humanity’s presence here on earth in the sense of what we have been called to do” (italics original).

Drawing from Carmen Imes’s important book, [Bearing God’s Name](#), Peppiatt points out the significance of the difference between all humans created in God’s image versus those recreated to bear God’s name through covenant. Peppiatt notes that the calling to honor the name of God as faithful covenant people involves every ethical aspect, including stewarding the environment (see [my review](#) of Sandra Richter’s powerful book, [Stewarding Eden](#)).

Incentives that emerge from functional models of the imago Dei include the high value placed on human life, an emphasis on human potential, and human agency – (“co-creating?” or participants with God) – in bringing justice, mercy, and compassion through kingdom, mission, vocation, and ethical living.

Chapter 3 speaks to relational models. She explains:

The fundamental paradigm is that the image of God in humanity resides in the fittingness and capacity of a human being to be in a relationship with God, or in the nature of the relationship itself, or in both. In other words, these views can be worked out either with reference to the potential within humanity or with reference to an actualized relationship both here and in the eschaton, or with reference to both the potential for relationship and an actual relationship. A relational understanding of the imago Dei can also be extended to include a thoroughgoing relational ontology ... the claim that human beings are only

The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God

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who they are as *beings in relation* to one another as well as to God. The restoration of the image, therefore, is the restoration of a relationship with God that forms the foundation for a fully human existence that takes shape through reconciled and loving relationships. (*italics original*)

One question raised is whether the imago Dei remains in fallen humans, whether it is partial or complete, or entirely destroyed altogether until regeneration and renewal. She astutely maps the Reformation period onto this discussion showing that “what unites the thinkers of the Protestant Reformation is ... a fundamentally pessimistic perspective on the fallen state of humanity,” whereas “Roman Catholic thinking ... represents a more optimistic understanding of the natural, albeit fallen, state of humanity.” In addition, Karl Barth’s highly influential stance is introduced here, noting his “insistence that male and female together constitute the image.”

Other views are also introduced such as the carefully nuanced view of Oliver Crisp who maintains an “eternal christological view of the image” and Craig Blomberg (my beloved Greek professor!) maintaining all humans retain a “vestige of the image of God.” Catherine McDowell’s view, kind and kin, is noted as well, which I find compelling (see [my post here](#) regarding).

Of the relational models presented, a major contribution is the solidarity of need that exists across them. Whether all humans have some, none, or all of the imago Dei, everyone is in need of having God’s image either restored or continually renewed. What’s more, by my lights everyone lives in some kind of relation to others. No one lives entirely isolated and some awareness of reciprocity necessarily exists in the human psyche. I-Thou, You-Me, Us-Them are connections that cannot be ignored and can always increase in intimacy. In some sense it is always true that it is “not good for the man to be alone” ([Genesis 2:18](#)), so the relational models are not to be ignored.

Chapter 4 presents areas that are contested across the views of the imago Dei. I can only highlight a few disputations, but the entire chapter should be read with a keen eye so as to evaluate adequately each view. First, after noting that Scripture does not define precisely how the imago Dei was affected by the fall into sin, the trajectory of tradition suggests that sin somehow means *separation* from God. But this has serious problems. What Scripture does speak to is *alienation*, which is a relational term, whereas separation is a spatial one.

Second, and similarly, while there is some loss involved in the fall, it is not a loss of God’s presence, but the introduction of hostility in relationship. With this hostility comes the consequence of mortality. Consequently, what is lost is immortality.

Third, on substantialists accounts of the imago Dei and, given some Reformers’ views that the imago Dei is utterly absent from sinful humans who are unable to connect with God, then a deep divide exists between nature and grace. This goes away, or at least is minimized, on a Catholic view of nature and grace (as well as on a Christian physicalism where it is argued we are an integrated, single being; see Paula Gooder and my comments [here](#)).

In addition to these insights, a significant strength of Chapter 4 lies in Peppiatt’s treatment of the imago Dei being depicted as male and the implications for female. Her brief remarks on sex, gender, and sexuality are provocative and deserve to be read carefully. She states in unequivocal terms, that “there are no descriptions of essentialized masculinity or femininity in the Scriptures.” I expect [Amy Peeler](#)’s upcoming release *Women and the Gender of God* will speak further in this arena.

Chapters 5 gets at “modern perspectives” and raises significant concerns, many of which are at the forefront of culture wars in the West. She begins with extolling the importance of the physical body. She writes, “the

The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God

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image of God should be defined in relation to life as it is lived now, taking into account the conditions of existence, and not solely a doctrine that applies to a future, heavenly sphere.” Listen carefully and feel the import as she introduces these chapters:

Theologians are beginning with the images we have in front of us in ourselves and in one another and reasoning towards a theology of the image from there. There is a move, therefore, away from teleological, perfectionist, flawless, static, homogeneous, and overly cerebral accounts of the imago toward the idea that the doctrine should also account for our reality, our diversity, and our bodily existence. This move signals a shift away from universals to particulars, and a recognition of the diversity of human nature. It is also, I suggest, associated with a general trend in academia whereby experience is now admitted as a valid epistemological category. In other words, if how we experience life is judged to be a valid measure of what is true and real, then experience must be taken into account in formulating existential questions and answers. This admits new concepts to the conversation.

On the radical importance of the body she claims,

Firstly, it is only in our embodied existence that we are ever confronted by the reality that I and another might be the image of God. Secondly, it is only in our bodies that we are able to image God one to another in any concrete fashion. Thirdly, through the incarnation, we see that when God chooses to reveal himself through the perfect image of God and humanity, he comes as a man in the flesh ... Moreover, our bodies will not be expunged, but renewed. It is these same bodies that we have lived with that will be resurrected to eternal life ([1 Cor 15:53–54](#); [Phil 3:21](#)). So, it seems appropriate to speak of how the image is expressed through and in bodily terms in some way.

These things be true, this affects all areas of our bodily existence, from beauty and disablement, to diversity and racism, all of which are broached in these final chapters. Paraphrasing others and, I might add, in full concert with the vision of [Rev 5:9](#), Peppiatt beautifully opines

that a human being is the person they are in their own body with its own color, shape, sex, and so forth: it is in this body that this person represents the image of God. Such a focus on embodiment allows us to celebrate the diversity of the human race ... [and] the image is instantiated in human beings as they are, and furthermore this specificity and diversity will endure in the eschaton rather than be erased by a sea of uniformity.

After (rightly) dismissing the notion of hierarchy and submission based on order of creation, she states that the two accounts of creation in [Genesis 1-2](#) together give us a complex picture of the imago Dei. The first two humans are differentiated by sex, but are also of the same substance. And the texts simply do *not* unambiguously promote that the imago Dei is found in the complementarity of the male and female (a popular view in some circles). How [1 Cor 11:7-9](#) bears on a view of the imago Dei is also discussed and Peppiatt argues Paul is recounting a Corinthian distortion of the creation story rather than stating his own position (see especially her [Women and Worship at Corinth](#)). Citing opponents' views is a tactic regularly deployed by Paul in his writing to the Corinthians.

Finally, **chapter 6** directly confronts gender, sex, and sexuality and how our views influence our understanding of the imago Dei, rather than the other way round. Instead of seeing gender, sex, and sexuality as an immanent trait or some fixed attribute of what it means to be human, she notes the transcendent view in line with Gregory of Nyssa is worthy of consideration. In other words, it is not essential to being human to be sexed (or gendered).

The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God

by Lucy Peppiatt

A person's sex, gender, and sexuality does not need to determine everything about their existence but can be risen above or sublimated through a new identity in Christ, this being the most dominant determinative factor of an individual's personhood and behavior. The transcendent view is seen most clearly in the celibate tradition, which dates back to the early church.

In this chapter she warns against an idealized view of embodiment arguing that we participate in the imago Dei not in spite of but through our impairments and physical challenges (paraphrasing Deland). Indeed, even the Eucharist celebrates the brokenness of Christ's body and, importantly I might add, his scars were retained in the resurrection. She wisely comments,

Given the inevitability of some kind of intellectual or physical disability that most of the human population will face in their lifetime, it is important that our understanding of the imago Dei is capacious enough to accommodate all states of life.

In her **conclusion**, she puts forth the notion of a two-tiered approach to understanding the imago Dei for followers of Christ. We interpret being made in God's image through the lens of being conformed to Christ's image through the Spirit. The one is filtered through the other. And, given a generous view of the atonement whereby Christ's death is potentially efficacious to all, then this two-tiered approach, with any modest amount of imagination and hope, can be applied to everyone regardless of faith commitment. One thing that is clear, anyone made in the image of God and everyone being conformed to the image of Christ are in process and the amount of change varies. Most importantly, no one is fully realized (so to speak) and the spectrum is broad. But rest assured, as long as human breath remains, all have potential to move in the direction of God-like status (while respecting the ontological distinction between Creator and creature).

Just as sin is universal, so too is the imago Dei. This, says Peppiatt, should give great pause in our approach toward everyone, regardless of sex, age, skin color, background, belief, or appearance.

The posture of the church, therefore, can never be one of superiority over the world, but only one of humility and welcome towards the world, for this is what we see in the incarnation.

Absolutely vital to all this, we learn that the imago Dei is the "great leveling doctrine." It puts everyone everywhere at all times on the same playing field, proclaiming, "You are loved!" Peppiatt again:

To have been created intentionally, imagined in the mind of God, and then brought into being communicates something profound about a person's intrinsic worth. It speaks—you are loved; you are wanted; you are valued. Further to this, to have been created as some kind of reflection or embodiment of the divine serves only to strengthen the idea that human beings are of infinite worth and beauty.

The importance of this doctrine is unmistakable. The "what" and the "who" are inextricably linked to our identity. If all humans are in fact made in or after the imago Dei (the "what"), then living as image bearers in the world becomes vitally important to our identity (the "who"). Not only are we a reflection of our Maker but we are to reflect his character in the world. Moreover, our beliefs about the imago Dei will say as much about our understanding of humanity as they do about our understanding of God. So, the nature of the linkage between us and our Creator is vital to understanding ourselves and God. What we are essentially is connected to who we are functionally. Everything else flows from this relationship. Everything. Peppiatt's book wonderfully and masterfully brings out the import of this relationship and helps us "get at" our identity.

This is why the imago Dei is important!

The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God

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Two other works in this space that should be mentioned are Eleonore Stump's soon to be published *The Image of God: The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Mourning* and *Being God's Image: Why Creation Still Matters* by Carmen Imes (not yet submitted to the publisher at this time). I've not read either but expect both will make substantive and significant contributions to studies in the imago Dei. For a weighty philosophical defense arguing for heavy theological emphasis on the imago Dei over and against a male view of God, see Michael Rea's "Gender as a divine attribute", *Religious Studies* 52 (1):97-115 (2016).