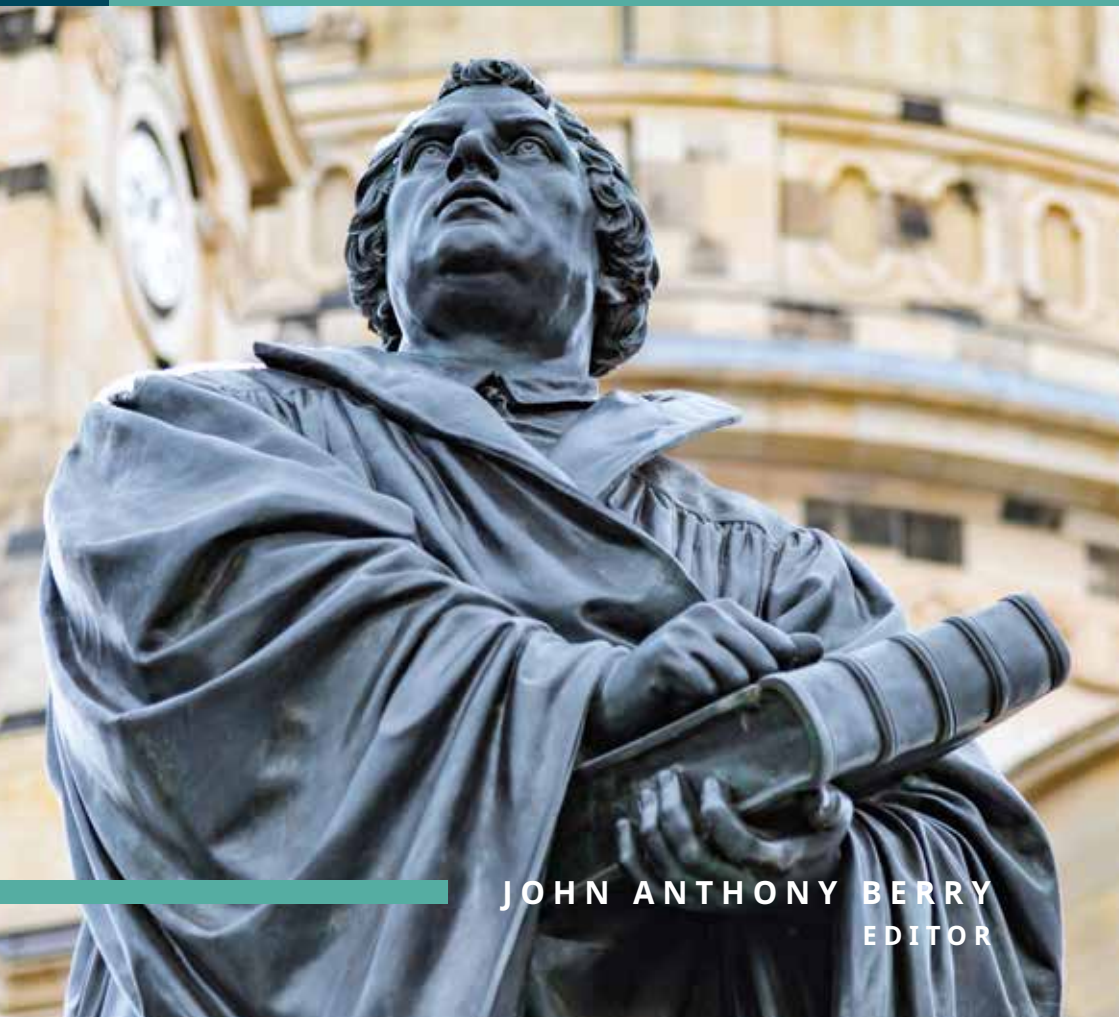


The Spirit of the Reformation

500 YEARS ON

Proceedings of the Malta International Theological Conference II



JOHN ANTHONY BERRY
EDITOR

**The Spirit
of the Reformation**

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Proceedings of the
Malta International Theological Conference
II

John Anthony Berry

Editor



L-Università ta' Malta
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The Human Being Created in the Image of God

Luther's Exegesis of *Imago Dei*

BEATE BENGARD

The interpretation of *imago Dei* is a central element in Luther's theology and is well suited as an example for illustrating the tendencies of his entire anthropology. Today, I will be presenting an outline of Luther's ideas about *imago Dei* and referring to a few important texts on the subject.

In his *Disputatio de homine*¹ (Disputation concerning man) from the year 1536, Luther voices his concept of the nature, destiny, and qualities of human beings. This is a very remarkable text which has often been cited in theological research, in part because it encompasses much more than just a definition of man. The *Disputatio de homine* is also a reflection on whether faith-based theology or reason-based philosophy would be more able to capture the nature of human beings and it is not surprising that the theologian Luther believed the ultimate interpretation to be on the side of theology. Because, as useful and

1 Martin Luther, "The Disputation Concerning Man, 1536," in *Martin Luther's Works*, (from now on referred to as *LW*), vol. 34, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 133-144.

important as reason may be for rule of worldly things, it is missing the ability to capture the true nature of human beings and their reason for existence.

The traditional interpretation was that human beings are most notably different from their fellow creatures through reason, and it is this which provides him with a particular closeness to God. However, Luther sees this differently: though human beings are most notably different because of their ability to reason, it is not reason that constitutes his nature in the proper sense. Luther explains that it is not an internal quality that constitutes human beings – in other words, none of his own characteristics or abilities, rather it is an external quality, namely his relation to God that distinguishes him. This connection to God, which gave human beings their innermost spirit, is expressed by Luther as follows: human beings were created by God in his image. Therefore, through this external relationship, human beings were designed and created for an interconnectedness with God.

Faith is the realisation of this relationship and sin is its rejection.² Following the theses 20 to 23 of the *Disputatio de homine*, one can say the following about human beings: Man is the creation of God. He was created by God at his best, meaning without sin, and with the charge of ruling over his fellow creations in God's image. But he turned away from this calling and has since been subject to the power of the devil. He can only be freed through his belief in Jesus Christ.³ Before we

2 Oswald Bayer, *Martin Luthers Theologie. Eine vergegenwärtigung* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 143.

3 *LW*, vol. 34, 138, "20. Theology to be sure from the fullness of its wisdom defines man as whole and perfect: 21. Namely, that man is a creature of God consisting of body and a living soul, made in the beginning after the image of God, without sin, so that he should procreate and rule over the created things, and never die, 22. But after the fall of Adam, certainly, he was subject to the power of the devil, sin and death, a twofold evil for his powers, unconquerable and eternal. 23. He can be freed and given eternal life only through the Son of God, Jesus Christ (if he believes in him)."

reconstruct the individual steps of loss and reclaiming of the *imago Dei*, let us first take a look at how Luther is positioned in these theses compared to the traditional theological anthropology of his time.

Reformatory Differentiation from Tradition

In his understanding of the *imago Dei*, Luther distances himself from Augustinian and scholastic theology.⁴ Augustine purported that the ability of human beings to become a likeness of God is reflected in three core qualities of the human soul, corresponding to the Holy Trinity. These are the faculties of memory (*memoria*), reason (*intelligentia*), and will (*voluntas*). Therefore, the inner state of mind of human beings is the actual *imago*, a reflection of the Holy Trinity.

While Luther does not openly criticise this Augustine teachings here (though he does at other points, such as in the *Genesis Teachings...*), he doesn't adopt them in the portrayal of human beings in the *Disputatio de homine*. In contrast to Augustine, Luther is not searching for substantial indicators of one special aspect of human being in which he can localise the *imago*. Instead, he is insisting on the relationally existential substance of God-likeness. In doing so, he is not engaging in Trinitarian speculations, but very clearly insisting on the likeness as a feature of creation, and furthermore, on the loss of this God-likeness through the Fall of Man.⁵

This emphasis on the loss of *imago* is very apparent in Luther's differentiation from scholastic tradition. The scholastic tradition usually points to the book of Genesis for an interpretation of God-likeness. Genesis 1:26 says:

4 Gerhard Ebeling, *Lutherstudien, Band II: Disputatio de homine: Dritter Teil: Die theologische definition des menschen: Kommentar zu these 20-40* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 99-101, notes 32-36.

5 Albrecht Peters, *Der mensch* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1979), 196.

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness (...).

In Latin:

Et ait: Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostrum (...).

Ever since the time of the church fathers, theologians have identified the Latin terms *imago* (Hebrew: *zelem*) and *similitudo* (Hebrew: *d'mut*) with two different levels of sameness with God. In this interpretation, human beings are the likeness of God in two different ways: first, as the image (*imago*), in that they are equipped with reason, with which they are also able to perceive God, and beyond that, secondly, in their ability to love. This quality to love – love in the sense of the *agape*, the unselfish love that gives itself away for the other – is identified by the term *similitudo* in the text of Genesis.⁶

The scholastic tradition interprets the Fall of Man to the effect that only one part of the God-likeness was lost, namely the ability to love – referred to as the *similitudo*. Consequently, a portion of the God-likeness is preserved – the actual *imago*, denoting reason. This is different in Luther's depiction. As a translator of the Old and New Testaments, he was of course aware of the difference between the two terms *imago* and *similitudo*. Nevertheless, he did not apply the scholastic interpretation, instead, he proposed a different understanding of the God-likeness.

Luther assumes a complete loss of the God-likeness. This loss is not restricted to one of the qualities of reason or capacity for love. The very fact that human beings possess reason endowed by God, is not something which Luther questions. Reason, is also for Luther,

6 Peters, *Der mensch*, 197.

the inner space wherein human beings should hear God's words. But unfortunately, since the Fall of Man, this reason has been subject to the power of the devil and is therefore incapable of choosing God of his own free will, as the scholastic teachings would suggest. For Luther, the loss of God-likeness is rooted in the loss of the original righteousness, which the first man was created and endowed with. Adam was initially fully devoted to God, his creator, and, by virtue of their sameness, shared his strengths and goodness. These vital central aspects were completely lost through the Fall. From Genesis, Luther interprets the Fall of Man as Adam turning away from the saving relationship with God through his own doing.⁷

In contrast to the scholastic tradition, Luther assumes that God-likeness is lost for the human being, which means that he is not capable of recovering it on his own. Human beings cannot through reason alone decide to recover it by turning back to God. They cannot contribute in this way to their salvation, which itself exists through the reclaimed closeness with God. While it is possible through reason to envision the existence of God's likeness, the human being cannot on his own grasp what this would mean for his existence.⁸ According to Luther, even true Christians have only a rough and imperfect concept of the reality of God-likeness.

To the Biblical Findings

For Luther, this new interpretation of *imago Dei* is also found within the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament and Apocrypha there are five passages about the God-likeness of the human being, in contrast to the New Testament, where there is only one. Instead,

7 Johann Anselm Steiger, *Fünf zentralthemen der theologie Luthers und seiner erben: communicatio – imago – figura – Maria – exempla* (Leiden, Boston, Köln: Brill, 2002), 109-110.

8 Bayer, *Martin Luthers Theologie*, 145-146.

there are multiple passages in the New Testament where Jesus Christ is referred to as the true likeness of God to which the human being should strive to become. The strong influence of the scripture in Luther's theology can be seen by the inclusion of Pauline theology in Luther's approach.

In Paul's juxtaposition of "flesh and spirit," Luther observes that the term "sins of the flesh" is in no way restricted to physical misdeeds or even sexuality. It is much more the soul itself that is entangled in physical or materialistic desires that affect the human spirit. This shows that not just one facet of man – namely the physical – was corrupted by the sin, while a spiritual-rational part remained intact. Instead, the entire person in his physical-soul-spirit condition is governed by the sin and cannot find his way back to the God-likeness. Through the inclusion of Paul's work, Luther is able to avoid a rationalizing or speculative line of thinking, which would reduce the influence of the original sin mainly on the physical desires of the human being. Instead, Luther delivers an existential interpretation of the idea of original sin which fully incorporate human beings, including reason and body.⁹

The exegetical findings however, result in a new question about the interpretation of *imago Dei*. It is apparent that there are two utterly conflicting theories in the Old and New Testament about who possesses the God-likeness. Is it mankind, who gained it through Adam? Or is it only Christ, who Paul describes as the true likeness? How is the God-likeness even to be understood? As protological, anthropological given, as suggested by the text of Genesis? Or as a Christian-centric and eschatological statement?¹⁰ The latter clearly points out the way to a recovery of the God-likeness, as suggested by many passages in the New Testament, from which only Colossians 1:13-15 is cited here. There it is said:

9 Peters, *Der mensch*, 39-40.

10 Ibid., 55.

Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son:

In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins:

Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature.

In response to this apparent conflict between the God-likeness of Adam and Christ as God's image, Luther develops a narrative approach to both forms of the likeness.¹¹ In his interpretation of *imago Dei*, he envisages the loss and recovery of the God-likeness as a coherent path within the history of salvation, which is based on the juxtaposition of the antitypes Adam and Christ.

Loss and Restoration of *Imago Dei*

1. BEFORE THE FALL

In his commentary to the Book of Genesis from 1535, Luther presents a detailed account of the condition of the first human before the Fall. The supralapsarian Adam (Adam before the Fall) possesses, through Creation, the full God-likeness. This is indicated through the sharing in God's essence and a special, intimate relation to his Creator - a status of righteousness, strength, and fearlessness:

“Therefore, when we speak about that image, we are speaking about something unknown. Not only have we had no experience of it, but we continually experience the opposite; and so, we hear nothing except bare words. In Adam there was an enlightened reason, a true knowledge of God, and a most sincere desire to love God and his neighbor, so that Adam embraced Eve and at once acknowledged her

¹¹ Ibid., 31.

to be his own flesh. Added to these were other lesser but exceedingly important gifts – if you draw a comparison with our weakness – namely, a perfect knowledge of the nature of the animals, the herbs, the fruits, the trees, and the remaining creatures. If all these qualities are combined, do they not make up and produce the sort of man in whom you would think that the image of god is reflected, especially when you add the rule over the creatures? Just as Adam and Eve acknowledged God as their Lord, so later on they themselves ruled over the other creatures in the air, in the water, and on earth. Who could adequately describe this glory in words? I believe that Adam could command a lion with a single word, just as we give a command to a trained dog. And he was free to cultivate the soil to produce what he wished. Our later discussion will show that thorns and thistles were not in existence at that time. Similarly, I also believe that in those days the beasts were not as fierce as they are now. But this condition is the fault of original sin, and from it all the remaining creatures derive their shortcomings. I hold that before the sin the sun was brighter, the water purer, the trees more fruitful, and the fields more fertile. But through sin and that awful fall not only our flesh is disfigured by the leprosy of sin, but everything we use in this life has become corrupt, as we shall point out more clearly below. (...)

Therefore, that image of god was something most excellent, in which were included eternal life, everlasting freedom from fear, and everything that is good. However, through sin this image was so obscured and corrupted that we cannot grasp it even with our intellect. Although we utter the words, who is there who could understand what it means to be in a life free from fear, without terrors and dangers, and to be wise, upright, good, and free from all the disaster, spiritual as well as physical? However, greater than these was the fact that Adam was fitted for eternal life. He was so created that as long as he lived in this physical life, he would till the ground, not as if he were doing

an irksome task and exhausting his body by toil but with supreme pleasure, not as a pastime but in obedience to God and submission to His will. After this physical life was to come a spiritual life, in which he would neither make use of physical food nor do the other things which are customary in this life but would live an angelic and spiritual life. As the future life is pictured to us in Holy Scripture, we shall not drink, eat, or carry on any other physical functions. Therefore St. Paul says (1 Cor. 15:45): “The first man was made a living soul;” that is, he will be a spiritual man when he reverts to the image of God. He will be similar to God in life, righteousness, holiness, wisdom, etc.”¹²

So, Adam was created in God’s image, from which sprung a deep personal connection to God, as well as an exceptional physical and psychological strength. The Fall can be perceived in contrast to this, like an avalanche of decay ending this state of affairs.¹³

2. THE FALL AND CONSEQUENCES

As the previous quotes from the Genesis reading shows, without the Fall of Man, God would have led him from his corporal life (*vita animalis*) to his spiritual life (*vita spiritualis*), without having to endure physical death. But after the Fall, as described in Genesis 3, the way to an eternal life is no longer accessible. It is only possible to reach this through death and judgement, and the call to Jesus Christ, who is the only true likeness of God.

The transformation of mankind after the Fall is depicted in drastic terms by Luther. In the beginning, human beings were created in the image of God. But because they sinned against this image of God, after the snake tempted them to eat from the forbidden tree with the promise that this would bring them closer to God, they were in truth

12 LW, vol. 1, comment on Genesis 1,26.

13 Peters, *Der mensch*, 45.

closer to the Devil. Instead of an image of God, an image of the Devil was placed within the human being. Because of this, human beings are no longer able to behold God as before.

The original trust in God then becomes mistrust. And man, no longer able to find stability and security in God, now turns to a search for stability in creation, namely himself, through which he will always find new disappointments. Only the conversion to Jesus Christ may stop this selfish instinct. Jesus Christ delivers the exact antithesis to the existential instability of man. In his earthly life, which the human being comprehends through the teaching of the gospel, the central trust in God the Father is restored. It can be seen in the call to Abba and the God-forsaken call on the Cross. Jesus Christ isn't tied to his worldly belongings or his human existence, instead he follows the path towards trust in God through his death and resurrection.¹⁴

3. RESTORATION

Luther abundantly illustrates the restoration of the God-likeness, in which mankind wins back the original harmony with God and his creatures through Jesus Christ. For this, it is necessary for human beings to transform themselves into the image of Christ and experience a spiritual recreation. Only then is it possible for Man to stand once again before God without fear. In *Disputatio de Homine* (Theses 35-38), Luther describes how Man remains fully passive throughout this re-creation, doing nothing by his own efforts.

35. Therefore, man in this life is the simple material of God for the form of his future life.

36. Just as the whole creation which is now subject to vanity (Rom. 8:20) is for God the material for its future glorious form.

14 Ibid., 204.

37. And as earth and heaven were in the beginning for the form completed after six days, that is, its material,
 38. So is man in this life for his future form, when the image of God has been remolded and perfected.¹⁵

In Luther's conceptualisation, the decision about the spiritual re-creation of the human being is in the center of his life, at the heart of his existence before God. This place is alone for God, the Creator of the human being. From this body-mind existential point, this new being permeates through all other dimensions of the human existence – his relationship to his fellow humans, to creation and to himself.¹⁶ According to Luther, the human being lives as a singular creature in different *coram*-relationships: *coram mundo* – towards the world, *coram se ipso* – towards himself, *coram Deo* – towards God. Through the renewal in Jesus Christ, these *coram*-relationships are once again in harmony and healed.¹⁷

The goal of God's design is to restore Jesus Christ as the *imago Dei* and recover the image lost through Adam's Fall. Luther establishes that this is the reason Christ became a man, because Christ had been in the image of the Father since all eternity. It is interesting, how at this point the anthropology of God-likeness relates to the two natures doctrine. According to the two natures doctrine, Christ is both truly human and truly God. Consequently, Christ is both the image of God as well as the image of humanity.

For Martin Luther, the restoration of *imago Dei* is to be equated with the justification of man by faith and by grace alone, his central reformation idea. God becomes human in Jesus Christ and therefore the image of man. Jesus Christ takes on the sins of humanity, while

15 LW, vol. 34, 139.

16 Peters, *Der mensch*, 49.

17 Ibid., 206.

the foreign righteousness of Jesus Christ is ascribed to man. In his theology, Luther also refers to this exchange of attributes as the “joyful exchange.” As a result, the human being is awarded the foreign qualities of Christ, in particular his righteousness, and appears before God’s judgement in the image of Christ.¹⁸

At this point it is clear that in this theological scenario, the term “image” extends beyond the basic definition. Here, “image” means not only the “representation of something.” If there was no representational relationship behind the God-likeness of the human being, but an existential relationship between God and Man, then we are also talking about an extraordinary form of depiction with the God-likeness of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, Christ is not an image of God in the sense of a plain representation or even a qualitatively defined copy. Rather, the doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that God himself exists within him. From the perspective of the believer, Christ is the visualisation of both the human and divine qualities. And only through the incarnation of God in Mankind do human beings find a link to the foreign image of God, otherwise fully closed to them. Luther metaphorically illustrates the unification of the human soul with Christ through the uniting of bride and groom. This comparison with the bride and groom visualises the tremendous attraction that Christ exerts as the likeness of God on the human being, who is under the power of the Devil.¹⁹ Luther writes the following in his Lecture to Genesis about the transformation of man when faced with the likeness of God:

“But now the Gospel has brought about the restoration of that image. Intellect and will have remained, but both very much impaired. And so the Gospel brings about that we are formed

18 Steiger, *Fünf zentralthemen der theologie Luthers und seiner erben*, 113.

19 Ibid., 114.

once more according to that familiar and indeed better image, because we are born again into eternal life or rather into the hope of eternal life by faith, that we may live in God and be one with Him, as Christ says (John 17:21). And indeed, we are reborn not only for life but also for righteousness, because faith acquires Christ's merit and knows that through Christ's death we have been set free. From this source our righteousness has its origin, namely, that newness of life through which we are zealous to obey God as we are taught by the Word and aided by the Holy Spirit."²⁰

Conclusion: Life in Conflict

In his mortal condition, the human being cannot return to full God-likeness. The restoration of God-likeness is instead an eschatological process. This means, that it will not happen until the Day of Judgement. Whereby only then will the mystical unity of the human being with Christ will be achieved. Until then, during his mortal lifetime, the believer is in an everchanging relationship with two different images – that of God and that of the Devil. In this life the process of becoming the image of Jesus Christ can only be started. Until then, human beings find themselves in conflict between their sinful nature and the likeness to God. Martin Luther coined a Latin formulation for describing this divided condition, where the human being is justified by God and at the same time a sinner: *simul iustus et peccator*. So, life in God's likeness begins in this life. Yet it is not achieved, and the human being – in contrast to the supralapsarian Adam – is far away from possessing that God-likeness.²¹

20 LW, vol. 1, comment on Genesis 1,26.

21 Steiger, *Fünffzentralthemen der Theologie Luthers und seiner erben*, 117.

In this life it is the teachings of the gospel and the baptism which bring about the transformation of the human being back in to the imago. Nonetheless, this is a process that is first beginning, and which will be brought to completion after death and judgement. An analogy is hereby created between the dual nature of Jesus Christ, both as an image of God as well as an image of Man, as far as Man itself is already beginning to accept the likeness of God, and at the same time is under the power of the Devil and therefore revolting against God.

Therefore the question stands, what status does Luther give the imago Dei in the life of Christian believers? One is most likely to do justice to this quality of the God-likeness, when understanding it as a promise that stands over mankind and from there works as an influence on his identity – also considering the contest through sin and death that continue to be present in Man's life.²² In other words: The idea of Godlikeness has a performative influence on those who believe in it and provides orientation for their daily actions.

As with the German theologian Albrecht Peters, we can draw three features that characterise the Lutheran anthropology.²³

1. Man's life is defined by an external relation: he exists not through his own force, but as God's Creation, who created him and endowed him with all that he needs.
2. Man is a responsive creature: He was created in the image of God, meaning he is called to a partnership with God, which the tradition of God-likeness denotes. However, this God-likeness is always in contest with sin. The message of the imago Dei therefore requires actualisation by means of human structures through the sacraments and teaching of the gospels.

22 Gerhard Sauter, *Das verborgene Leben. Eine theologische anthropologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011), 87.

23 Peters, *Der mensch*, 207.

3. Finally, the existence of the human being and his dependency on God is an eschatological reality what means that it is still in an emerging state. It is only begun through the mortal existence of the human being and achieved on the Day of Judgement in the full transformation.

Here we can draw several implications for Christians. Luther summarised this in a handy formulation, that Christians exist “solely through God.” In keeping with his critique of reason, Luther emphasises that it is the Spirit of God that, with the help of the Word of Man, can reach down to the human being. The human being does not rise up but stays passive as this comes to pass, meaning that Man does not bring about the imitatio Christi by his own power. Through the influence of the Word, Luther says, the “old Adam” – meaning the Adam after the Fall – is tirelessly pushed to his death every day. Through this, the restoration of God’s image is in progress. God breaks through from the future world, into that of the believers, and in them creates new people – the people that here and now are already living a just and sanctified life before God.²⁴

24 Ibid., 212-213.

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