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Ember Still Glowing: Humankind as the Image of God (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

An Ember Still Glowing: Humankind as the Image of God, by Harry R. Boer (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans) 1990. $14.95. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

> Constant amid all the turmoil of history is the fact that every human being has the capacity for faith in Christ. There is no question of a secret divine decree destining some for salvation and others for perdition. However laden with consequences in eternity faith and unfaith may be, they are not grounded in a pre-creational divine decree. Both take their rise in time. Whoever hears the gospel is, because of his sinful nature, disposed to reject it, but because of the light and life vouchsafed to him as participating in the *imago Dei*, he is also capable of believing it. The intent of the witnessing Spirit is the same for all—it is salvation (96).

That pretty well catches the gist of Boer's program in this work. There is no hidden agenda here. Boer is up-front about his purpose: he wants to use the *imago Dei* concept as a device through which Reformed theology can be understood and examined. Is the book then a constructive work on the image of God or a polemical piece on Reformed scholasticism?

The image of God, as Boer understands it, creates problems for such traditional Reformed doctrines as total depravity, particular election, limited atonement, and decretal thought in general. While I share Boer's basic opinion of decretal theology and find his treatment of scholasticism interesting, provocative, and altogether novel, I must admit that I have some misgivings about the very thing that gives the book its freshness—the use of the *imago Dei* as a rubric by which traditional Reformed soteriology can be appraised.

Boer did not set out to write a book about the image of God. He does not present and defend a theory of the *imago*. In the span of one short paragraph he notices the variegated history and number of explanations of the *imago*, commenting only that the different theories often say more about the prevailing anthropologies than they say anything of substance about the image and its textual base. Without ever really telling us what constitutes "personhood," Boer simply presents his own "personal judgment" that "the central characteristic of Man as image of God is the quality of personhood" (7-9).

Boer is totally unconcerned with the traditional debates over image and likeness, and substantive versus relational definitions of the image. The "assumption" he works with is that the *imago* is a unitary concept. Each individual human being is not a separate image of God. Rather, the *imago Dei* is a "unitary organic entity, the sum total of all human beings," a vast fullness in which individual human beings participate (*ix*, 171). Beyond this, Boer is not interested in defining the *imago* too closely. In fact, he picks and chooses from among all the traditional interpretations in order to make his case against Reformed scholasticism. From the classical Reformed "dominion" position he borrows the idea of the *imago* as representative to creation, from Augustine he takes the notion of *vestigia Dei*, and there is even a bit of Calvin's emphasis upon man as religious respondent. From all of these Boer forges the idea of the image of God as God's creational "alter ego."

The concern of the book is not to define the image of God, but to explore the consequences for Reformed theology of assuming that the image is unitary. Boer uses his understanding of the *imago* to criticize Reformed scholastic thought on two fronts.

First, he challenges traditional Reformed understandings of total depravity and common grace on the basis that the image of God is not eradicated in the fall. There is still an ember, a spark of the image in fallen man. Humankind has not been utterly brutalized by the fall. Traditional Reformed theology agrees, but gets at this idea by correlating total depravity and common grace. Boer's critique here is harsh but insightful. Common grace renders total depravity a straw man, a man who never did or never could exist. The Reformed tradition believes that fallen man is "in fact a cosmeticized humanity, whose true face is never seen. The only concrete, living, visible humanity that can ever be seen is 'common grace' humanity" (61). Thus, total depravity is no more than a theological abstraction, a context under which no human being ever lived. "When Man fell into his alleged total depravity, he fell—without any intervening period whatever—into the restraining and the favoring arms of common grace" (61).

Second, and here Boer introduces his idea of the *im-*

ago into the picture, common grace does the very thing which the image of God is intended to do: restrain sin. "Man's weapon against sin is not an artificial 'common grace' granted to him as a post-fall bestowal. It is rather that very human entity which he himself is, . . . a greatly impaired but still functional dynamic, namely . . . the image of God" (71). Thus, Boer's understanding of the image of God makes both total depravity and common grace problematic theological constructs.

Clearly, Boer wishes to think of the *imago Dei* as "governing more theological territory than is usually associated with it" (71). He alters his use of the *imago* concept somewhat when it comes to his discussion of election and predestination. Rather than stress his idea of fallen *imago* as a still working and vital respondent to revelation, he again picks up his primary assumption of the image of God as a unitary entity. The idea of a numbered election of particular persons is to be doubted, he says, when it is understood that God works not with individuals but with the human race as a unit (81-82, 173). Boer acknowledges the problem of universalism and treats it as problematic, but he gives contradictory answers to the issue. He admits that the biblical language dealing with the wrath of God upon an unredeemed humanity makes a benign universal salvation sound frivolous and offensive to the material of scripture (113). Yet the book ends on a clearly universalist note. God may not redeem all people on this side of eternity, but all things are possible in the age to come (185-187).

An Ember Still Glowing is a most interesting book. It will not convince everyone on every issue. As a reasoned treatise on the *imago Dei* the book is less than successful. But as an exploration, a "how about this" piece, it is challenging. Boer has produced enough good ideas and presented them in an engaging enough format to make the book well worth reading. Yet I could not help wishing that he had let these ideas simmer a bit longer. His argumentation at times reads like bluster, at other times settles for the convenient, and often lacks exegetical teeth. I do not mean to suggest that Boer may not be right regarding a number of the issues he takes up in the book. But a little less tirade and fewer nameless generalizations about the foibles of Reformed theology and a bit more examination of the nature of the *imago Dei* would have made a more satisfying and convincing work. Nevertheless, his conviction that the concept of the image of God is an important biblical theme is absolutely correct. The biblical notion of image of God is important, and it deserves more attention than we have often given it in the past.

Tracking the Maze: Finding Our Way Through Modern Theology from an Evangelical Perspective, by Clark H. Pinnock (San Francisco: Harper & Row) 1990. $24.95. Reviewed by Michael Williams, Assistant Professor of Theology.

Just as a child reaches a stage in life when it is necessary to assert an independent identity apart from his or her parents, so evangelicalism has been proclaiming itself to be a postfundamentalist movement for some decades now. Carl F.H. Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* in 1947, and Edward J. Carnell's *The Case for Orthodox Theology* in 1959, stand out as early examples of the genre. The early postfundamentalists placed the onus for taking such distance upon fundamentalism, a theological movement which Carnell defined as "orthodoxy gone cultic." More recent thinkers like Bernard Ramm have said that evangelicalism has simply outgrown the rigid wineskins of fundamentalism (*After Fundamentalism*, 1983). Pinnock follows elements of both tracks here, but the message is the same: evangelicalism is no longer spelled with an "F."

Pinnock thinks of evangelicalism as a middle channel between fundamentalism and modernism. He understands Protestant thought as a continuum existing between two equally dogmatic and closed theological poles. "Fundamentalism" is ever backward-looking in its emphasis upon an uncompromising faithfulness to a traditional message, while "modernism" is unabashedly presentist in its continual redefining of the message in order to gain contextual relevance. Pinnock's evangelicalism is uncomfortable with each of these extremes and thus seeks a more dynamic interchange between the received tradition and contemporary culture (11-13).

Following Henry, Carnell, and Ramm before him, Pinnock is more concerned with defining evangelicalism in terms of a critical engagement with the fundamentalist pole than the liberal. This is a reasonable procedure given the familial relationship between fundamentalism and evangelicalism. In fact, in the preface he goes so far as to define an evangelical as a postfundamentalist with a college education (x).

Pinnock's critical engagement, however, is often scathingly harsh. He characterizes the fundamentalist mindset as doctrinaire, fearful of theological contamination, rationalistic, unable to hear criticism, defensive, authoritarian, and insensitive to human need (33-42). Pinnock is at his most vitriolic when he