2025 TheoLogica
An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology
Published Online First: June 14, 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14428/thl.v9i1.82573

Image as Agency:
A Conceptual Model with Ontological Import for Human and Divine Persons

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Abstract: This essay argues for a dual-aspect, substantival and functional, model of the image of God following the relation of image to agency and to Christ as the exemplar human agent developed in two parts from exegesis to metaphysics. In part 1, I define agency and trace the functional aspect of the relation of image to agency through the arc of Scripture from the creation narrative to its fulfillment in Christ and Christian regeneration. In part 2, I define image metaphysically and highlight an inference of identity Jesus makes between himself and the Father founded upon their agencies; Jesus' identity includes the image of God grounded in the divine person of the Son. I argue that Jesus' inference extends the concept of image as agency to include an ontological entailment such that the agent is identical with an immaterial "person." The model provides reason to think that agency is the fundamental operator of God's image throughout Scripture and that divine and human "persons" are immaterial substances, powerful and responsible agents.

Keywords: *Imago Dei*, Agency, Christ, Human exemplar, Identity, Persons

Theologians have generally demarcated views on the "image of God" into substantival, functional, or relational views. The view I advance in this essay is substantival and functional.[1] The model I propose derives from the biblical narrative

[1] Because my model includes *agency* derivative of the substantive image-bearing agent it might also be termed *functional*. For support of image as substantival *and* functional given agency see Davison (2019, 108); fnn. 17, 19. For a substantive view that defines image as "human identity" grounded in the immaterial soul see Farris (2020, 86, n. 14, 89–93, 104–08, 109–11; 2016, 165–78). For a Christological view that aims to be closer to the biblical traditions than substantival and relational views see Crisp (2016, 51–70; 2019, 126–30). Note that Crisp (2016, 59–60) and Farris (2020, 89; 2015,

and intersects the ontologies of human and divine persons providing a hermeneutical key and an ontological explanation of persons as agents, and in particular, Christ as the exemplar human person and image-bearing agent. As such, it approximates a metaphysical definition of *image* and its respective function *as agency*. In this way, the model broadly tracks with Joshua Farris' (2020, 80) view of *imago Dei* as "a formal concept that shapes the whole of the scriptural portrayal on human identity."[2] It likewise shares Mark Cortez's (2016, 281) view that "we need to understand the Bible's image language as functioning within a broader conceptual framework." Lastly, my use of the term "model" corresponds with Oliver Crisp's (2021, 9–10) "conceptually 'thin' description" inclusive of its "hermeneutical function."[3] Consequently, the various uses of "image as agency" (and similar formulations) to signify the functional role of image are to be understood in the conceptually thin sense of the model. A metaphysical definition of image (as an organizing principle or secondary form) is suggested in the substantival aspect of the model (sec. 2.3). The definition serves in the construction of a coherent ontology for the model given the cumulative data on image. This ontology provides a fundamental explanation of the functional concept of image as agency such that it entails a relation of ontological dependence upon immaterial human "persons." In this way, the model fundamentally follows the Aristotelian maxim that "function follows form."[4] That said, the model is constructed in two parts, with the functional aspect preceding the substantival, following the origin of the model as highlighted below. In sum, the model acts as a conceptual framework or lens with which to view the nature and function of the image of God, and it can also be applied as a conceptual tool (as in sec. 3).

In respect to origins, the model developed naturally as the result of tracing the "image of God" through the arc of Scripture from Genesis 1–9, including the protoevangelium or "first gospel" (3:15), to its fulfillment in Christ as the exemplar human person resulting in a renewed image for Christians via regeneration. Thus,

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169, n. 22) cite Moreland's (2009, 4) substantive view stating that relational and functional views entail substantival views. I agree; this also aligns with Davison (2019, 108). Cf. fn. 40. For a functional view see Middleton (2005). For account(s) of divine presence bridging a relational, functional, and Christological view see Cortez (2010, 14–40; 2017, 99–129). For "human identity" views see Peterson (2016); Imes (2023). For a corporate view as "the body of Christ" see McFarland (2005). For image and gender, sexuality, disability, and technology in respect to embodiment see Peppiatt (2022).

[2] Similarly, Schoot (2020, 38–39) has argued that "the concept of 'image of God'. . . .is able to capture the whole of the architecture of the *Summa Theologiae*."

[3] See also Wood (2016, 47, 57).

[4] See, e.g., "function follows essence" in Oderberg (2007, 23); "form determines function" in Moreland (2018, 118). For Aristotle's reasoning see Irwin (1999, 1097b20–1098a20).

the model spans from protology to eschatology.[5] I have limited the model to "image *as agency*" following the relation of image to agency and to Christ as the exemplar human *agent*. In addition, Christ's agency entails an inference of identity with the Father in John. Much more could be filled in, however, via image and the commands in the Mosaic Law, Israel's repetitive crafting of images and idolatry, and the image of the beast which receives agency in Revelation.[6] Hence, the model is not exhaustive of the relation of image to agency in Scripture, nor of "image" as such.

Given the nature of a work in philosophical theology of this sort, several disclosures are in order. First, my philosophical commitments generally lie with metaphysical realism, essentialism, and a correspondence theory of truth.[7] Regarding agency, I make no argument for libertarian freedom; my argument here stems from a fundamental view of agents as substances. Second, when I make theological claims I do so in keeping with the biblical narrative or a biblical theology "on its own terms" (e.g., reading the primaeval narrative) practicing what Kevin Vanhoozer has recently termed a "mere Christian hermeneutics."[8] I make no attempt to construct claims from a particular Christian tradition.[9] I assume a minimal Chalcedonian Christology—the divine person of the Son is the singular fundamental person (*hypostasis*) in whom the human and divine natures are united in Christ.[10]

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[5] See Hubbard (2014; 2002), fn. 40.

[6] For image and God's command see Ex 20:4–5; Lev 26:1; Deu 27:15. For transgression of God's command see Jdg 18:31; 1 Ki 15:13; 2 Ki 21:3–7; Ps 106:19–20; Is 48:4–5. For image and agency and the beast(s) see Rev 13:14–15. Satan replicates God's pattern of creating agents in his image (Gen 1:26–27, 2:7) as well as naming and sealing agents (Rev 3:12, 7:3, 13:16–17, 14:1, 22:4; 2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13). Ultimately, Christ purchases agents created in his image with his own blood (1 Cor 6:20; Heb 9:12; Rev 5:9), writes their names in the Book of Life (Rev 13:8, 21:22–27), and they become the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16–17, 6:19; Eph 2:22; Rev 21).

[7] For more on my view of philosophical theology and the relation of truth and metaphysics to reality, see Kelly (2023).

[8] By "on its own terms," I refer to the words and sentences in their literary contexts and their intrinsic meaning as communicated by the text, i.e., what Vanhoozer (2000, 64) calls "textually mediated theological truth." For Vanhoozer's *thick description* for biblical theology see (2000, 52–64; 1998, 282–326); for his mere Christian hermeneutics see (2024, xxi, 368–70). In my mind, a Vanhoozerian approach is a responsible starting point for engaging Scripture as a philosophical theologian.

[9] Alternatively, see Farris (2021, 311) who thinks that "an immaterialist conception of the *imago Dei* is part of the dogmatic core . . . of Catholic and Reformed orthodoxy."

[10] For a minimal Chalcedonian Christology and the full statement following the Council of Chalcedon in AD 451 see Crisp (2016, 82, 105–06); Sanders (2007, 13–24). In brief, Chalcedon refers to the 'hypostatic union' or the union of subsistence (hypostasis) whereby the two distinct natures in Christ, human and divine, are fundamentally grounded in one person (hypostasis). Hence, person

That said, my model derived from what I think of as a natural reading of Scripture and is anchored in a dualist ontology (i.e., "persons" are identical to immaterial substances or souls; this need not equate with Cartesianism). This is not to say, however, that various concepts I employ here cannot be adapted to other ontologies or readings of Scripture. Thus, I am hopeful that my model, and more generally, *agency*, has a broad reach.

Moving forward, I have structured the essay in two parts following the natural development of the model (more or less) from exegesis to metaphysics. Broadly, part 1 traces the *functional* aspect of the model via Scripture, and part 2 explicates the *substantival* aspect of the model ontologically. In sections 1–1.3, I define agency and sketch the relation of image to agency via the arc of Scripture mentioned above highlighting the functional role of image. At the close of part 1, I provide a detailed rationale for the dual aspects of the model in section 1.4 to aid the transition from the biblical narrative to the metaphysical explanation. Then, I introduce part 2 by connecting the logic between image and agency to two claims regarding Jesus' identity in section 2.1, followed by a concise summary of the model in section 2.2 linking the functional and substantival roles of image via Christ the exemplar human agent. Next, in sections 2.3–2.4, I define image metaphysically and explicate the inference of identity Jesus makes with the Father founded upon their agencies. This includes Jesus' identity as the image of God. Jesus' inference, I argue, extends the concept of image as agency to include an ontological entailment such that the agent is identical with an immaterial "person." I conclude with a summary in section 3 and offer several applications of the model.

1. The Function of Image and Agency in Scripture

In this section, I will argue that the "image of God" in Genesis 1–9 functions in direct relation to human free agency. I take "image of God" to be representative of God's free agency (herein, "agency"). First, I will define agency. In my mind, when I refer to Christ the exemplar person as an agent, I mean to say (with Aquinas) that he is free to act as he chooses from his own power.[11] Following Aristotle's general principle of agency, I would say that Christ is a "first mover" or an "unmoved

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and subsistence share the same referent in Christ—the divine person of the Son, the second person of the Trinity.

[11] I assume rationality in this concept of agency as does Aquinas (1997), *ST* I q.93 a.5 o.2, and a.9 c.; cf. *ST* I-II, prologue, following Damascene: "the image signifies '*an intelligent being, endowed with free choice and self-movement*.'" Cf. fn. 19. See also: Moreland (2009,4–5); Swinburne (1994, 65–71). For more on Christ's agency see sec. 2.4, fn. 48.

mover."[12] Hence, on this view, agency entails the ability to act or not act in accord with one's own will such that the agent is the originating source of power. (This need not exclude a participatory view of fundamental dependence upon God.) As noted above, in what follows I am not making a philosophical analysis of libertarian freedom and causation.[13] Ultimately, my view of agency is grounded in the agent (i.e., agent-causation) which I take to be a substance with causal powers, not in event-causation whereby the agent acts due to prior causes (e.g. reasons, beliefs, desires—i.e., mental events).[14] Additionally, because I view the "person" to be an immaterial substance (per part 2), agency is identified directly with the person, the causal agent.

1.1. Agency in Scripture

That said, I can now sketch how the "image of God" functions as agency in Scripture. First, God is the Creator, an immaterial agent whose (trinitarian) agency extends to the Son or Word and is subsequently embodied in Christ (Gen 1:1; Jhn 1:1–3, 14). Hence, the trinitarian God created humans in his image: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1:26–27). (Herein, I treat "image" and "likeness" as having roughly the same meaning given their singular referent.) God's plural description of "us" and "our" in reference to God's creator agency emphasizes the view that *God is a trinitarian agent*.[15] Further, Christ is "the exact imprint of his [God's] nature" and the agent (qua Son) "through whom he created the world," (Heb 1:2–3). Likewise, Christ is "the image of the invisible God" by whom "all things were created" (Col 1:15–16). Consequently, as bearers of God's image, when humans

[12] See Aristotle (1996), *Physics* 8.5 256a; Rickabaugh and Moreland (2024, 243–45). See also Davison (2019, 20, 33–34, 44). Per a reviewer's concern about ontotheology (i.e., God as a being among beings), see Davison (ibid.); Wood (2021, 18–19, 130–58).

[13] For an overview of libertarian and compatibilist views of freedom see Timpe, Griffith, Levy (2017); Kane (2011); Timpe (2013).

[14] For a substance dualist argument for agent causation see Rickabaugh and Moreland (2024, 234–71); Goetz (2017, 522–30). For an emergent substance view of causal agents see Lowe (2008, esp. 121–78); O'Connor (2000, esp. 43–84). For a participatory view see Davison (2019, 217–38).

[15] Exegetically, while we learn that Christ the Son is Creator via the NT (i.e., that trinitarianism is entailed), this knowledge only expands our understanding of who the creator agent is in Genesis. Scripture itself is not committed to anything beyond agency at this point in the narrative. Yet, Scripture is positively committed to *agency* in relating God's image to human persons. Hence, in my mind, agency as such is an essential starting point for an analysis of image. Cf. Davison (2019, 220). See God's trinitarian identity, and revelation of, in Torrance (2016, 12–31, 94–95, 104, 194–204, 256); McCall (2010, 27, 39, 93, 231, 252). See also Cortez (2016, 279; cf. 2010, 24–25) who grounds image in the Spirit without positing a proto-Trinitarianism.

are said to be conformed to the image of God's Son (Rom 8:29), this image entails Christ's identity as the Creator agent.[16] Hence, insofar as Christ is the exact image of God and the Creator agent, his creative agency extends to his humanity. Thus, *Christ is the exemplar human agent*. This causal chain of agency is sufficient to identify the functional role of agency in God's image given that God's agency extends to the Son and Christ—who is the exact image of God, and through whom and in whose image human persons are created.

Given the narrative, therefore, Christ is clearly an agent. If humans are endowed with anything by being made in God's image, they must at least have agency. Contemporary theologians (e.g., Middleton 2005; Farris 2020; and Peterson 2016) affirm this connection between image and agency whereby Middleton (2005, 204) states: "Essential to the meaning of image in Genesis 1 is the dynamic power or agency that God grants humans at creation. . . .this power is to be exercised responsibly, with God's own exercise of power in creation perhaps as the model."[17] In light of Scripture's arc, anything less than "agency" is insufficient in keeping with the narrative (and is perhaps a nonstarter).[18] If humans are going to be or do anything intrinsically subject to themselves, they must be agents. Human persons cannot be automatons, nor, on my view, agents of event-causation. Persons are powerful actors. Similarly, Cortez (2016, 282) has argued that "being made in the image of God suggests that human persons . . . are a unique and powerful expression of God's own presence." If God is fundamentally a powerful actor (i.e., an agent) and Christ represented God's image "exactly" in human embodiment (Heb 1:3, Col 1:15), then humans created in God's image ought also to be understood principally as agents. Andrew Davison echoes this fact when he states, "In creating, God shares some likeness of himself with his creatures . . . God acts to create *agents*, creatures with the power to act."[19] Thus, human agency is an essential feature of image-bearing derivative of the substance-agent. Fundamentally, therefore, any (agential)

[16] In reference to "identity," the relation humans have to the image in Christ is asymmetrical insofar as they share God's image via their universal human natures, but their image and nature is not grounded in the divine essence as is Christ's. Hence, humans are bearers of God's image, whereas Christ *is* the image of God (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3).

[17] See Middleton (2005, 19, 27, 29, 34, 88–89, 204–13, 287–97, nn. 42–43, nn. 46–47); Farris (2020, 89, 96, 105–11, 128–33); Peterson (2016, 37–39, 45, 82, 101–02, 117, 123); McFarland (2005, 5–9, 22–25); Schwarz (2013, 22–24, 29, 211–15); Cortez (2017, 113, 125, 178–79; 2010, 18–23, 31–39, 133–37); Moreland (2009, 4–5, 14, 20, 23, 41–66); Imes (2023, 45–47, 174–76, 184–86); Peppiatt (2022, 118–21). Cf. fn. 1.

[18] Cf. fn. 15.

[19] Davison (2019, 44, 217–28; emphases mine) explicitly states that these agents have "*the power to be causes themselves*." See also Aquinas (1997), *SCG* III.70, in Davison (2019, 222–23).

qualities derived from bearing God's image flow out of the image-bearing agent.[20] More on this in part 2.

1.2. Image in Scripture

Next, let us move to the context of how image functions in Scripture. Immediately after God creates humans in his image and likeness, he blesses them and gives them *dominion* over creation and commissions them to *create* offspring and *steward* creation (Gen 1:26–31; 2:15). Hence, humans are created in the image of their creator with an intrinsic power to create and act according to God's purpose and representative of his likeness. Next, and in evidence of human agency, God places a direct limit on their agency via his command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and further that if they do so they will die (Gen 2:16). Thus, in the opening scene of Scripture, we see a Creator who creates human creatures in his image with the power to create and act accordingly. Yet, they must *choose* to exercise their power within set limits.

Unfortunately, through the exercise of their own power, humans quickly transgressed their limits. Their actions were a direct transgression of God's image and likeness, that is, God's creation coheres with his character as Creator. On this view, "creation is a communication of the good according to its proper inner nature" and humans "depend, ontologically, on the participation of the creature in the creative goodness of God" (Muller 1991, 173).[21] Hence, the image of God in humans is central to their nature (and form) per God's good creation (Gen 1:31). Thus, the bearers of God's image ought not represent him in contradiction with his character or nature (cf. Rom 1:20; Jas 1:16–18). Again, Christ is the standard for image-bearing agents (Heb 1:2–3). Respectively, humans are *responsible* for their own actions—for their own agency as causal agents.[22] This is further evidenced, or enforced rather, by

[20] Accordingly, agency could accommodate a complete view of image via a robust view of natures or essences. For a list of features essential to image-bearing agents (e.g., reason, self-determination, moral action) see Moreland (2009, 4–5).

[21] See Muller (1991, 173) in Stanglin and McCall (2012, 76–77). See also Davison (2019, 67, 76–80, 225–28, 288–89, 348–65, 371–72); Inman (2022, 293–321).

[22] Or, as first movers. Cf. fnn. 12, 14, esp. Rickabaugh and Moreland. Regarding responsibility, it is noteworthy that the agents immediately accused other agents of being the source of their actions, i.e., they had immediate objective awareness of the direct effects of their agency and simultaneously blamed others for being its originating cause. Hence, they immediately acted (either by belief or disbelief) as though they were not the originators of their powers of agency. Thus, Scripture quickly becomes embroiled in a "she said–he said" conflict of agencies. In sum, the narrative portrays the

God who executes judgement upon human agents through the proclamation of curses.

Here enters the villain. Of the three creaturely agents, Adam, Eve, and the serpent, the serpent is the first to be condemned by God (Gen 3:14–15). As a creature (albeit of another kind), we can assume that the serpent was acting in direct contradiction to both God's limit for humans and God's image and likeness insofar as it coheres between God's self and creation as noted above. Hence, the serpent acted of his (or their) own power in accord with his character (e.g., as an adversary and false accuser, literally "satan" or "devil," Rev 12:9–17); he acted as an autonomous agent in disregard of his Creator's authority and cosmic order—that is, he asserted himself to be "like the Most High" (e.g., as Lucifer, Isa 14:12–14).[23] In so doing, he violated God's will and God's purpose for humanity as God's image-bearers. Should we infer, therefore, that the serpent's guilt absolves Eve (or Adam) of her responsibility? On the contrary, each agent is responsible on their own terms (as will be shown in sec. 1.3).

Of critical import, however, is that the serpent questioned Eve in direct connection with the limit God placed on her agency: "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat...?" (Gen 3:2). And further, that the serpent cunningly inserted the phrase "be like God" (3:5) into the limit God set, which in fact God did not say. Hence, the serpent questioned, not merely Eve's agency qua agency, that is, her freedom of power and will, but her explicit likeness to her Creator. The serpent's deception rested in an implicit promise that if Eve transgressed the limit, that is, if she acted freely with no regard for God's particular limit, then she would be *like God* (3:1–5).[24] This raises the question, however, why did the serpent target the human agent, and do so in the specified manner? Or, given that he did, what significance does this have for the narrative?

In light of the arc of Scripture, including the serpent (and Lucifer, the devil, etc.) and the cosmic conflict with the woman in the protoevangelium (see sec. 1.3) resulting in Christ's death, the narrative provides reason to think that by questioning

truth of agency and agent responsibility: First, real agents exemplified real agency. Second, agents who are not responsible have no need to accuse others of their actions when they are held in account.

[23] The serpent claimed autonomy when he (Lucifer) asserted himself to be *like the Most High* (Isa 14:12–15; Eze 28:2, 6, 14–16). Scripture refers to him as adversary (Job 1–2; Zec 3:1–2; Luk 10:18), accuser (Luk 4:1–13; 1 Pet 5:8), a murder, devoid of truth, and the father of lies (Jhn 8:44), and the great dragon, serpent of old, Devil, and Satan (Rev 12:9; 20:2). For perplexity about the origins of Satan see Imes (2023, 62–63).

[24] My point here is not to speculate about the serpent's claim—we know it is false, in whole or in part, given that Eve already exemplified God's likeness within the limit God had set. My intention is to highlight the correlation between agency and image.

Eve the serpent directly challenged God's authority and hence Christ the Creator and coming Messiah. More precisely, by questioning Eve, *an agent created directly by God in his own image and likeness*, the serpent targeted the thing or relation most directly united to God's self, that is, God's image, which in due course would be identified as the God-man, Jesus Christ (Heb 1:2–3). On this view, the image of God is a direct point of contact between Eve and God due to a transitive relation between Eve and Christ (forthcoming) via their universal human natures and the ultimate ontological ground of the image in Christ's asymmetric divine nature via the Son (see sec. 2.3).[25] Therefore, given the identity of Christ as the Messiah and the image of God inclusive of the trinitarian agency of the Son and Creator (sec. 1.1), the biblical data provides a logical explanation for the serpent's targeting of Eve, a human agent and bearer of God's image. Additionally, given that Messiah would arise from a woman (Isa 7:14; Mat 1:21–23; Rev 12:13), the protoevangelium provides further cause for the serpent's targeting of Eve. Thus, viewed through the arc of Scripture, the serpent's acts (and agency) are sufficient to indicate a direct relationship between God's image-bearers, God's image, and God's self. Subsequently, here, in the human agents' transgression of God's limit—that is, the limit God set on the agency of God's image-bearers—there is sufficient reason to think *a direct relation exists between agency and image or likeness of God*. Consequently, Scripture points to a functional application of image exercised via the agency of human image-bearers.

1.3. Agency, Image, and the Protoevangelium

Finally, let us turn to the curses where further evidence of a direct connection between agency and image is seen. The serpent is the first agent to receive its curse from God. It is critical that even before Adam and Eve received their curses, God pronounced humanity's victory over the serpent (Gen 3:15).[26] Theologians refer to this as the "first gospel" or protoevangelium, such that God promised to overcome the serpent and the fall via the *woman's offspring*. In short, God immediately intervened and pronounced a second chance for humanity. It is not ironic that God's

[25] Cf. fn. 46. If the relation between Eve and Christ is ontological (rather than logical) it appears to be quasi cross-temporal given the eternal subsistence of the Son and the future subsistence of Jesus Christ qua Son plus human nature. Inman (2022, 293–94) comments that *imago Dei* is founded upon a (participatory) grounding relation. Cf. Davison (2019, 84–112). For discussion on cross-temporal relations and grounding see Ciuni, Miller, Torrengo (2013). See also explanatory dependence in Correia (2008, 1020–23).

[26] Given that God not only judged the serpent first but pronounced his ultimate defeat, this provides another reason to infer that the serpent's targeting of Eve was a direct challenge to his Creator and God's image, and the Messiah especially given the fact and nature of his death.

deliverance was conditioned upon woman's agency as an image-bearer of God—the very thing that was transgressed. The intrinsic value of the woman and her potential as a powerful and creative agent made in God's image was still preeminent in God's view of humanity and the unfolding creation narrative.

What does this promised deliverance entail? Fast-forward several millennia and the New Testament opens with the birth of Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, as foretold via the woman's offspring (Mat 1:23; Isa 7:14). Christ is the second Adam who would obtain victory over the serpent via the cross and resurrection.[27] Hence, Christ exemplified proper (i.e., according to the Creator's intention) human agency and the image of God throughout his life culminating in his deliverance of humanity. Thus, Christ restored (the ability for) proper agency and a renewed image of God to human agents who have and will believe in his salvific work. As will be suggested in section 2.4, this restoration is sourced in the Holy Spirit's agency.[28] The point, here, however, is that God immediately, and personally, pronounced a promised state of *restored agency and image* to humanity via another human agent. It just so happened that the second Adam was a God-man, and this Christ lived a life of obedience as the exemplar human agent—as "the image of the man of heaven"—and thus procured deliverance for humanity from sin and death and claimed final victory over the serpent.[29]

Regarding Eve's and Adam's curses, it is important to note that both received judgements that corresponded directly with their agencies as creative and powerful human agents in relation to creation (Gen 3:16–19). Hence, as they continued to procreate and steward creation as God's image-bearers, they did so in excessive toil—a constant reminder of their place in the created order as responsible agents (i.e., a cosmic humbling). And further, humanity would have an amplitude of time to reflect on this fact and look with expectation for the coming Christ, the serpent crusher, who is "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). Thus, God is "just and the justifier" (Rom 3:26) of human agents created in the image of God who have been restored via faith in Christ—at last, the protoevangelium is fulfilled.

Finally, one last note is in order. Following the curses, the human agents were removed from the garden and forbidden to eat from the tree of life, lest they live forever (in their fallen state presumably). Thus, God set a second limit on human agency. Unlike the first limit, this second limit was deterministic; perhaps in accord with their fallen state of agency (i.e., as agents enslaved to sin; Jhn 8:34; Rom 6:6, 16–

[27] For Christ and the serpent and cross see Num 21:9; Jhn 3:14. For second Adam see 1 Cor 15:45–49; Rom 5:14–19. See also fn. 29.

[28] See fnn. 46, 53. Cf. Crisp (2019, 128–30; 2016, 55, 64–66).

[29] See 1 Cor 15:21–22, 45–49, 55–57; Rom 5:12–21; Heb 2:14–15; 1 Jhn 3:8; Col 2:9–15.

22).[30] What is critical, however, is that yet again, God immediately, and personally, intervened in human lives *for their good*. God's purpose in creating humanity had not changed, nor his character, nor his intention to inform creation with his powerful image. He would not be easily moved; God is truly an unmoved mover.[31] Thus, God instituted a second limit upon human agents in order to preserve them for their future state of restored image (and agency) in the likeness of Christ their Creator.[32]

In summary, given the context of image and agency, and the arc of the narrative following the protoevangelium, Scripture provides strong warrant for a view of the image of God functioning as, or in direct relation to human agency grounded in human agents with causal powers and moral responsibility. In addition, Scripture provides good reason, or so I will argue given Christ's agency and identity in part 2, to view these *image-bearing agents* as "persons," immaterial substances.

1.4. Rationale for a Dual-Aspect Model

Before transitioning to the metaphysical explanation in part 2, a quick reorientation is due. As noted above, the model has a dual aspect, functional and substantival, composition. In part 1, I traced the functional aspect of image as agency through the arc of Scripture. The functional account sought to highlight the conceptual application of image as agency throughout the narrative. It did not define image. Neither did it state how Christ is the image of God (nor how humans bear the image). Consequently, no metaphysical explanation of Christ's *identity* as the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15) was provided. Yet, this fundamental claim of Scripture ought to be explained by a model of *imago Dei*. Similarly, Jesus' claim of identity with the Father in John 14:9 requires an explanation insofar as both claims refer to identity with "God" and therefore overlap.[33] Examined together, the claims support the view that "image *as agency*" provides the conceptual glue by which the narrative and the metaphysical claims of identity cohere (see sec. 2.1). This said, part

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[30] Stanglin and McCall (2012, 102) note that divine concurrence preserves human agents, e.g., "God places limits on the extent of sin and its effects." When God sets a third limit—the Mosaic Law or "tutor" (Gal 3:24–25)—it follows the relation to human agency in the first limit (i.e., it is non-deterministic). This suggests that humans are being preserved by the second limit (as noted below).

[31] Likewise, God instructs Christ-followers to not be moved by sin and evil (Eph 6:10–18; Jas 4:7; Heb 12:3–4). Note that the agent does not forfeit their agency via the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 14:32), in contrast with an "unclean spirit" (Mrk 9:17–27).

[32] Cf. fn. 30. For renewed image see fn. 46.

[33] Colossians 1:15 refers to God as "*theos*." John 14:1 refers to God (*theos*) and then in 14:2–32 to Father (*pāter*). References to Father in 14:2–32 can be interpreted generally as "God" following 14:1. Hence, the identity claims in Col 1:15 and Jhn 14:9 share the same referent to God qua God.

2 aims to provide a metaphysical explanation that can ground these claims concerning Jesus' identity and which coheres with the functional aspect of image in part 1, as well as accounts for some relevant data on image pertaining to human agents universally and Christians particularly. In this sense, it will be seen that part 1 derives from (i.e., ontologically depends on) part 2 but also feeds or supplies content to it—ergo, this is the sense referred to above, in which the concept of image as agency is "extended" to include an ontological entailment. The underlying logic here might be summed up by the Aristotelian maxim noted above—*function follows form*.[34] Hence, Scripture articulates the *functional role* of image and the identity of Jesus as the image (i.e., a metaphysical claim), and the *substantival role* of image provides the ontological ground upon which both the biblical narrative and Jesus' identity rationally cohere. Thus, Scripture provides the framework for a dual-aspect model aptly supported by metaphysics. Therefore, in my mind, a comprehensive model of the image of God—like that of "image as agency"—ought to account for both the functional and substantival aspects of image articulated in Scripture. It is to this latter aspect of the model that I turn now.

2. Image and the Metaphysics of Persons

My aim in part 2 is three-fold. First, in section 2.1, I will highlight the logic for image as agency given Jesus' identity as the image of God and his identity with the Father followed by a concise summary of the model in section 2.2 to aid in connecting elements from the biblical narrative to the metaphysical explanation grounded in Christ the exemplar human agent. Then, in section 2.3, I will define image ontologically. Lastly, in section 2.4, I will explicate the relation between image and agency dependent upon persons and draw part 2 together.

2.1. Image, Agency, and Jesus' Identity

As noted above, Jesus' identity as the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15) is explicit and ought to be explained by the model. Additionally, because Jesus' claim of identity with the "Father" (Jhn 14:9) shares the same referent to the "invisible God" (namely, 'God' or *theos* in 14:1), both claims of identity overlap given that they both bear on Jesus' identity and his fundamental relation to God qua God.[35] Hence, both claims bear on what is entailed in Jesus' identity as the image of God, and, therefore,

[34] See fn. 4.

[35] This overlap (i.e., transitivity) turns on "*theos*" in Col 1:15 and Jhn 14:1. See fn. 33. See also Craig (2024, 29–30, n. 3), Williams (2024, 31–34).

ought to be examined together. Viewing the claims together provides at least two points of clarity. First, Jesus' identity with the Father in John 14 is non-numerical (as would be expected per a trinitarian view of God and Leibniz's Law).[36] Second, image corresponds directly to agency (this supports the functional concept in part 1). I will highlight each in order. Note, in the following uses and constructions, "is identical to" equates with numerical identity, and "non-numerical identity" acts as placeholder for something akin to "sameness without identity."[37]

First, per the shared referent for "God," transitivity can illuminate Colossians 1:15 as follows:

> 1. Jesus is identical to the image of the invisible God. (Col 1:15)
> 2. Jesus is identical to the image of the Father. (Jhn 14:1, 9)
> 3. Therefore, the image of the invisible God is identical to the image of the Father.

Point 3 seems straightforward. Point 2, when applied to John 14:9, clearly shows that Jesus' identity with the Father entails his "image" and, therefore, that it must refer to *non-numerical* identity.

Second, Jesus' claim of identity with the Father in John 14:9 is substantiated by (i.e., ontologically depends on) their "works themselves" (14:10–11) or their agencies. Hence, Jesus' agency and the Father's agency correspond in a unified or direct manner such that their works are sufficient to account for non-numerical identity between persons (from pt. 2 above). Consequently, when *agency* is applied to Jesus' identity regarding image and the Father—that is, as an explanation of both claims—we get the following:

> 1a. Jesus is identical to the image of the invisible God. (Col 1:15)
> 2a. Jesus is non-numerically identical to the Father. (Jhn 14:9)

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[36] Numerical or self-identity expresses that a thing is what it is and not something else. Philosopher's commonly refer to this as Leibniz's Law (i.e., the Indiscernibility of Identicals): for every X and Y, if X has the same properties or features as Y, then X is identical to Y. See Inman (2024, 100–04). Cf. fn. 37.

[37] For non-numerical and sameness without identity see fn. 55. See also various uses of "is" for identity, sameness, and predication in Brower and Rea (2005, 17), Williams (2024, 56–60), McCall (2010, 45–49, 121–124), Craig (2024, 52–53, 121 n. 16, 181, 243), Moreland and Craig (2017, 598–90). My concern throughout is not to define the identity relation between Jesus and the Father, but merely to underscore the role of agency in Jesus' claim of identity.

> 2b. Jesus' (non-numerical) identity with the Father ontologically depends on agency qua agents such that Jesus' agency and the Father's agency correspond directly. (Jhn 14:10–11)
> 3a. Therefore, Jesus' identity as the image of God ontologically depends on agency qua agents such that Jesus' agency and the Father's agency correspond directly.

Again, the conclusion seems straightforward. It tells us that for Jesus to be identical to the image of God, necessarily his agency and the Father's (i.e., God's) agency correspond directly. When point 3a is applied to human image-bearers universally, we get the following generalization:

> 4a. Human persons are not identical to the image of God. (Gen 1:26–27)
> 4b. Human persons are identical to image-bearers.
> 5a. Human persons' identity as image-bearers ontologically depends on image corresponding directly to agency qua agent. (3a, 4b)[38]
> 6a. Human persons exist.
> 7a. Therefore, image corresponds directly to agency. (4b, 5a, 6a)

Point 5a tells us that for human persons to be image bearers, necessarily image corresponds directly to agency derivative of the agent or person. This seems straightforward, and given that human persons, identified by Scripture as image-bearers (4b), exist (6a), the conclusion generalizes: image corresponds directly to agency (7a). This direct correspondence between image and agency supports the functional concept of image as agency.

In sum, according to the logic formulated here, given the contribution of both claims regarding Jesus' identity applied to humans universally, the conceptual (and functional) link between image and agency is evident and the metaphysical (and substantival) relation to the agent or person is clear. Conceptually, image corresponds directly to agency: image functions as agency. Metaphysically, the relation between image and agency is a relation of ontological dependence upon the agent. Fundamentally, the agent is organized by the image and is the source of agency (per sec. 2.3 below). Consequently, image functions as agency via

[38] In reference to Jesus as a genuine human, as will become clear in sec. 2.4, technically, Jesus also *bears* the image of God; only, Jesus' ontology uniquely includes the image grounded in the divine essence given the hypostasis of the Son. See fn. 46 Hence, pt. 3a above could also be stated thus: "Insofar as Jesus bears the image of God, Jesus' identity as the image of God [includes his unique ontology] ontologically depends on agency..."

dependence on the agent (i.e., function follows form). This latter metaphysics of image and the agent will be unpacked in subsequent sections.

2.2. Summary of the Model

With the above understanding of Jesus' identity and agency in relation to image and the Father before us, a concise summary of the model integrating its diverse elements is fitting before moving forward. The model can be summarized as follows:

> Given the immaterial nature of the person of Christ via the hypostasis of the Son including Christ's identity as the image of God, and the immaterial nature of the Holy Spirit, the causal agent who renews the image in Christian persons, the image can reasonably be thought to be an (immaterial) organizing causal principle, a secondary form, located as a constituent in the immaterial human soul or person. According to this metaphysics, Christ is the image insofar as he is the exemplar human agent and image bearer of the invisible God via the hypostasis of the Son such that Christ's agency corresponds directly to the Father's agency.[39] This ontology coheres with Christ's identity and the Christian's regeneration (including, e.g., sanctification, resurrection, and the intermediate state). It can also explain Christ's inference of identity to the person of the Father. According to Christ, agency (i.e., work) is sufficient to ground his identity with the Father. The explanation provided here suggests that: (a) agency is derivative of an agent, (b) the person of the Father is an immaterial agent, (c) Christ's embodied human agency is fundamentally grounded in an immaterial agent via the person of the Son, (d) therefore, the Father's agency and Christ's agency are grounded in immaterial agents or persons, and (e) given the divine nature of the Father and Christ via the Son, their agencies fundamentally bear upon the divine essence, and finally (f) because Christ is the image of the invisible (i.e., immaterial) God, the image is fundamentally grounded in Christ's agency derivative of an immaterial agent or person who is likewise sufficient to infer (non-numerical) identity with the immaterial person of the Father. Hence,

[39] I appreciate a reviewer for drawing my attention to a similar argument by Osmundsen (2019, 344–48), where he attributes a formal cause to Jesus as the exemplar. Ontologically, by defining image as a secondary form, I can account for Osmundsen's view with a hylomorphic-like ontology (e.g., fnn. 41–42) given the faculties of the Christian's soul are informed by the renewal of the image and the concursive agency of the indwelling Holy Spirit (what Osmundsen refers to as the efficient cause of the Spirit, 343–44, 347). Cf., fnn. 44, 49.

> *image functions as agency* insofar as it provides a logical explanation of Christ's identity as the exemplar human agent and the image of God, it explains his non-numerical identity with the Father, and it coheres with human persons as bearers of God's image capable of a renewed image via Christian regeneration. Thus, the model accounts for the data on image and a coherent ontology of persons.

With this framework in mind, I will now define image and then expand on Jesus' inference of identity with the Father.

2.3. Image and Form

To begin, I want to suggest a way of thinking about image ontologically to account for some of the metaphysical work it does in accomplishing God's purpose in creation and redemption.[40] Whatever ontology is given, it ought to cohere with the functional role of image as agency via Scripture in part 1. Hence, when Scripture states that Christian's are to be conformed into the image of God's Son (Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18), three things (at least) can be said: (1) the image of God is something and (2) it does something—that is, it is a metaphysical entity with the ability to express God's or Christ's likeness (e.g., as depicted by his agency), and (3) the image of God is identified with Christ (Col 1:15; 2 Cor 4:4) as the exemplar human person or agent (cf. sec. 1.1). For purposes here, therefore, "image" might generally be articulated conceptually as Christ-likeness (i.e., as depicting a functional view of Christ's agency), and ontologically as the *form* of Christ. That is, if the soul of a human is the "form" including the human essence—roughly, the causal organizing principle of the body—as many dualists argue broadly following Aristotle and Aquinas, then this idea of image being identified ontologically with a form (i.e., a second form) seems reasonable.[41] (This concept of form need not assume a strict Thomistic view

[40] Moreland (2009, 4–5) states: "the image of God is straightforwardly ontological. . . .even the functional, relational aspects of the image of God have ontological implications." Cf. Davison (2019, 108). Hubbard (2014, 168) comments on the link and nature of image entailed in creation and redemption in 2 Cor 3:18 and 4:4–6: "this transformation is explicitly linked to the restoration of the *imago Dei*, revealing a theological perspective informed by protology, as well as eschatology." Cf. Hubbard (2002, 155–61, 180–85, 235–36, 241).

[41] For the relation of image to form see Davison (2019, 78, 84–91, 101–08, 146–50). For Aristotle (1996) see *De Anima* II.1. For a concise view of Aquinas' form and soul see Pasnau (2012, 348–68, n. 12, 366). For a thorough hylomorphic account of form and essence see Oderberg (2007, 44–47, 65–71, 241–60). For hylomorphic-like views that posit the soul as a subsistent substance see Moreland (2018); Owen (2021, 87–167). For discussion on unicity and plurality of form(s) see Oderberg (2007, 68–71,

of hylomorphism.[42]) Additionally, unlike the primary form or human essence which is fixed, because the image is renewed via regeneration and thus entails change, a *secondary form* is fitting.[43]

Further, on a dualist view where form and soul are identical with the immaterial person this link with image and a "second form" is even tighter considering the role of the Holy Spirit in the following points: (1) the causal relation of the Holy Spirit, an immaterial agent, in bringing about the person of Christ who is the image of God (Mat 1:20; Col 1:15), (2) the indwelling relation of the Spirit in the Christian's soul causing the regeneration of the person (Tit 3:5), (3) the Spirit's renewal of the image of God in the Christian causing the person to become like Christ (2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29), and (4) the Christian's intrinsic relation to Christ via the Spirit such that the person is caused to be "in Christ" (2 Cor 5:17).[44] Critical in points 1–4, is the fact that an *immaterial causal agent*, God the Spirit, is producing real metaphysical effects in human *persons*, presumably within their immaterial souls (with subsequent effects resulting in their material bodies). Hence, returning to the link between image and second form, because God's image yields a qualitative difference in Christian persons, it appears to be an *immaterial causal principle* (an organizing principle) at a metaphysically deep level—that is, in the soul.[45] Again, this is fitting for the dualist who views the immaterial soul to be the person. Metaphysically, this reduces to a second form, an immaterial principle, located in a person, an immaterial substance, dependent upon the Holy Spirit, an immaterial agent. Thus, by suggesting that image is a secondary form, this locates image as a constituent (in or supervening on the human essence) in the soul or person who is *the metaphysical ground of God's likeness in the world* (and in the exemplary "person of Christ" as "the image of the

75, 268, n. 9); Ward (2014, chs. 5–6); Pasnau (2011, 574–605). I leave it open how a secondary form might be configured or grounded. Cf. fn. 46.

[42] See e.g., the hylomorphic-like views of Moreland and Owen in fn. 41.

[43] Alternatively, it has been suggested to me by Crisp and Inman that a dispositional view of image is perhaps more fitting. I am not opposed to this given one's metaphysics coheres. My initial intuition, on a non-modal essentialist view, however, is that "image" requires a deeper distinction from the primary "human essence" than a power or disposition that is rooted in the primary essence. My concern is that a change in image via renewal (cf. fn. 46) would incur a change in the primary essence which on my view is fixed. A further analysis of part-whole relations, predication of properties, and the nature of powers is needed. This is not to say, however, that this concern cannot be met.

[44] Inman (2022, 293–94) comments that these causal relations are founded upon a participatory ontological dependence on God as the *efficient causal source*. Cf. Davison (2019, 13–34, n. 83, 42–59, 227). See also Osmundsen's (2019, 341–48) Aristotelian four-causal model of Jesus' Trinitarian agency and joint dependency relations.

[45] For a concise argument of image grounded in the immaterial soul see Farris (2021, 311–24).

invisible God, firstborn of all creation" Col 1:15).[46] Furthermore, given that human persons—the ontological ground of God's image in the world—are causal agents (i.e., image-bearing agents), I am now in position to suggest that the relation image has to agency is through human agents or persons. It is to this relation via human "persons" that I turn now.

2.4. Image, Agency, and Persons

In this section my intention is to demonstrate that *image as agency* entails a relation of ontological dependence upon immaterial human persons."[47] In doing so, I will highlight the inference from Christ's agency to the person of the Father in John 14 as referenced in section 2.1 above. The basic logic of this inference follows from Christ's autonomy *and* unity with the Father grounded in their respective agencies and assumed in a transitive relation of identity between persons that entails the divine essence of the Son and the Father. My argument proceeds from the biblical narrative

[46] Bray (2000, 576; emphasis mine) concludes that "the 'image (likeness) of God' refers to *a permanent aspect of our created nature* which was not affected by the fall." This "aspect" is what I am referring to as a "second form" in distinction from human "nature." Albeit, on my view of the NT use of "image" (2 Cor 3:18; Rom 8:29; Eph 4:22–24), image is affected by the Christian's regeneration by the Holy Spirit and can thus be renewed or change (see explanation below). Hence, the fall had some effect on image. For the renewal of the image see Davison (2019, 268–71).

This concept of "second form" could function as the node of the relation between human and divine persons (i.e., the Christian's "in Christ" relation, and perhaps the relation of the hypostatic union in Christ) and ground the indwelling relation of the Holy Spirit. On a dualist view, the secondary form would be a constituent of the primary form or soul, specifically of the human essence, or it might supervene on the human essence. As I will argue in sec. 2.4, it can explain Christ's claim of (non-numerical) identity with the person of the Father (cf. sec. 2.1). Therefore, and to return to Bray's comment, the second form would be instantiated in all human persons whatsoever as "a permanent aspect of our created nature," but, given the non-Christian's unregenerate status it is not complete or not fully actualized until it is renewed in junction with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Lastly, when I say "in the world," I am signifying that the triune God is the ultimate ground of his image, but, he has so inclined that human beings (i.e., immaterial embodied "persons") are the ground of his image in creation. His image is what endows human agents with authority over creation and other creatures (Gen 1:28–29, 9:1–7), including angels (1 Cor 6:3; Heb 1:4). This order within creation follows directly from Christ being *the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, and creator* (Col 1:15–17) and extends to humans in connection with their relation to Christ via the Spirit and God's image. In difference to Christ, however, humans do not bear the image in union with the divine essence and thus do not bear the exact likeness of God (Heb 1:3), nor identity with God's image (2 Cor 4:4). Cf. fn. 16.

[47] This dependence follows ontologically from pt. 5a in sec. 2.1. For discussion on ontological dependence and persons and Christ see Kelly (2024).

and assumes the fundamental view of human agency in part 1 applied to Christ as a genuine human agent. A treatment of Christ's autonomy is beyond the scope of my model. I do think, however, that Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (Mat 26:36–44) can demonstrate Christ's autonomy via his human agency grounded in his human nature. According to this reasoning, Jesus experienced a genuine conflict of will with the Father, but he ultimately submitted his will to the Father's will via dependence upon the Holy Spirit.[48] Consequently, the narrative portrays Jesus as an autonomous human agent who also declared symmetry with the Father's agency.[49] Jesus lived and acted in such a manner that portrayed unity with his Father, so much so as to exemplify an accurate expression of his Father's agency, whereby he could claim: "I always do the things that are pleasing to him" (Jhn 8:28–29). Thus, Jesus could say a harmony existed, whereby if one observed his agency—that is, his person—they likewise observed the Father, stating: "Whoever has [known and] seen me has [known and] seen the Father" (Jhn 14:7, 9). This inference between agency (and image) and persons turns on Jesus' claim that a *transitive relation of identity* exists

[48] In short, given that he agonized in prayer over his divine knowledge of the forthcoming events *and* that he submitted his will to the Father's will, there is strong evidence that Jesus experienced a *conflict of will* with the Father. If Jesus had no freedom of will, i.e., had a mere deterministic divine will, this conflict within himself and with the Father would have been incoherent and doubtful occurred. See Lombardo (2013, 8, 133); Swinburne (1994, 198); Moreland and Craig (2017, 608–09); Horrell (2004, 405–06, 419).

A rough metaphysical explanation of Christ's conflict of will, bracketing the debate concerning Christ's mind(s) and two wills, is that he experienced this conflict via a disjunction between his human and divine natures. But, because of his *sinless dependence upon the Holy Spirit* (cf. fn. 49), he was able to surrender his contention and his will acquiesced to his divine knowledge (see Lombardo 2013, 101), and harmony was restored with his divine essence and the Father. On this view, Jesus had asymmetric relations to the Spirit via both natures grounded in his human and divine essences. Likewise, the Father had a relation to the Spirit grounded in his divine essence. Thus, it was through Jesus' relation with the Holy Spirit via his human nature that he surrendered his will in alignment with the Father. Cf. fn. 53. In sum, Jesus is a genuine human agent with autonomous agency grounded in his human nature, who *chooses* to act in unison with the Father by total dependence upon the Spirit. In this way, Jesus is autonomous *and* unified with the Father. See Fee (2006, 44) in McCall (2015, 101); Morris (2001, 210); Issler (2007, 189–94, 199–213); Hawthorne (2003, esp. 84–85, 96, n. 94, 133–35, 140, 160, 208–25, 234).

[49] This "*symmetry*" with the Father's agency might also be described as *dependence* given Christ's relation with the Holy Spirit via his dual natures noted in fn. 48. Scripture's link between Jesus' dependence on the Father and symmetry of will—e.g., "I can do nothing on my own. . . .I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me," (Jhn 5:30, 8:28–29)—assumes a dependence relation via the Holy Spirit grounded in the divine essence of the one triune God. Thus, because all three persons of the Trinity are grounded in the one divine essence and subsistence, Jesus can make explicit metaphysical claims to dependence, symmetry, unity, etc., with the Father. Cf. fnn. 46, 53. See also similarities with Osmundsen's (2019, 341–48) model of joint Trinitarian agency.

between himself and the Father *dependent upon their agencies* (cf. sec. 2.1). Two clarifying points here: First, as noted above, Jesus offers their "works" (Jhn 14:11) as support for his claim. Metaphysically, this reduces to substantive agents and agency. Second, the Johannine narrative does not require that this relation signifies numerical identity.[50] More on this below.

What does Jesus' inference of identity with the Father entail? First, minimally, it entails that identity is grounded in the immateriality of persons given that the Father is immaterial and that his immaterial agency is included with Jesus' agency as support for the claim qua agents. This further entails that Jesus' embodied agency is likewise grounded immaterially. Hence, if Jesus is "identical" to the Father (non-numerically or in any other way), fundamentally, his identity is not grounded materially. Second, viewed through the arc of Scripture, Christ's identity must include the exact image of the invisible God (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). (Section 2.1 provided reason to view both claims regarding Jesus' identity together given their entailment.) Whatever this "image" is as such (per sec. 2.3, I do think a "secondary form" provides an adequate definition), we have good reason, therefore, to believe it is immaterial given Jesus' inference of identity with the Father.

Here is why. First, Jesus infers that there is a direct relation between the person of the man of Nazareth and the person of the Father, such that if Jesus is seen, the Father is seen. Of note, is that Jesus' inference includes his material embodiment; this is critical to his human agency, yet it need not define the identity of his person. (More on Jesus' embodiment below.) He makes no mention that, "If I am seen, the *image* of the Father is seen." That is, Jesus does not infer identity with the Father based merely on the divine image nor the divine essence. Rather, he makes a direct inference from his own agency as an embodied human agent to the person of the Father. Per section 2.1 (pt. 2b), Jesus' identity with the Father ontologically depends on Jesus' agency corresponding directly with the Father's agency. Likewise, Jesus' identity as the image of God depends on Jesus' and the Father's agencies corresponding directly (pt. 3a). Consequently, both Jesus' identity with the Father and his identity as the image of God depend on agency. Presumably, therefore, Jesus' inference from his agency to the person of the Father is substantiated by the fact that *Jesus' agency corresponds exactly with the divine image and the Father's agency*, and therefore, that the bearer of the image—namely, himself, the person of Jesus Christ—corresponds exactly with the divine image and the person of the Father (non-numerically).[51] This dependence between Jesus' agency and person

[50] Cf. sec. 2.1, pt. 2. For a definition of numerical identity see fn. 36.

[51] This follows from pts. 2b and 3a in sec. 2.1.

corresponding exactly with the image and the Father's agency and person follows logically from the view of image as an immaterial organizing principle (sec. 2.3). Fundamentally, the image organizes the person or agent from whom agency is sourced and flows. Thus, Jesus' human agency ontologically depends on the image organizing the agent. Ergo, function follows form. (I explicate this ontology for Christ and the Father below.) In sum, this dependence relation between agency and image grounded in the agent is apparently sufficient to substantiate Jesus' inference of transitive identity between *persons*. Again, Jesus offered their works as evidence of his identity with the Father (sec. 2.1). Hence, the relation between image and agency is extended ontologically to include persons.[52] Thus, according to Jesus' inference, persons (minimally, human-natured) are agents capable of exemplifying God's image—that is, *God's image is fundamentally grounded in persons*.

Second, the persons or agents entailed in Jesus' inference are human- and divine-natured. That is, Jesus is both human and divine and the Father is divine. What metaphysical implications does this have for the ontology of persons? I will highlight three. First, the Father is an immaterial person. Second, given a Chalcedonian metaphysic, the subsistent person (i.e., hypostasis) of Jesus Christ of Nazareth is also an immaterial person (qua Son). As human-natured, Jesus is also embodied. Third, if the immaterial person of the Father is directly evidenced in the immaterial person of Jesus as an embodied agent, then it logically follows that the inference is between immaterial persons. Hence, the transitive relation of the immaterial persons depends on their immaterial agency (and image per Christ's human nature). And, while the relation to persons might include embodiment given Jesus' asymmetrical human nature, identity is not grounded in any material substance. Thus, *the inference Jesus makes between agency and persons entails a transitive relation grounded in persons that are immaterial.* Hence, if the embodied person of Jesus is to be identified with the person of the Father, this cannot be by any mutual material persons or properties. Rather, Jesus' agency and the Father's agency are fundamentally grounded in the divine essence shared by both immaterial persons. Therefore, when Jesus states that if you see me, you see the Father, what he is asserting is that the person of the Father is knowable and demonstrated in the agency of the person of Jesus Christ—that is, the Father is seen in the very works of the God-man of Nazareth who is the image of God.

[52] Moreland and Craig (2017, 606) make a similar correlation between image and (immaterial) persons: "Human beings do not bear God's image in virtue of their animal bodies. . . .Rather, in being persons they uniquely reflect God's nature. God himself is personal, and inasmuch as we are persons we resemble him."

Lastly, while not essential to the model conceptually nor scripturally, it might be questioned how this is metaphysically possible. One answer, I propose, is that the Holy Spirit provides the power of the first mover grounded in the divine essence of both immaterial persons and is exemplified in their respective autonomous yet unified agencies.[53] On this view, when Christ acts as a human agent, he depends on the Holy Spirit and exemplifies the divine image grounded in the divine essence qua Son.[54] Consequently, he can make this claim of transitive identity between persons. Only, we know it is not numerical identity lest the distinct persons of the Trinity collapse into a single person (cf. sec. 2.1).[55] For these reasons, therefore, it is plausible that *Jesus' inference depends on a transitive relation between immaterial persons founded on their respective agencies—including the image of God grounded in or supervening on Jesus' human essence—united in the divine essence in reliance upon the Holy Spirit*. Thus, when Jesus' disciples see Jesus they see the Father, not because they see the body of a man, but because the Father, an immaterial person, is evidenced in Jesus, an

[53] This relation of the Holy Spirit to persons of the Trinity is clearly seen in the following passages, e.g., the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8:9; 1 Pet 1:11), and the Father's Spirit (Eph 3:14–17; Mat 10:20). While this relation (e.g., the quasi–exemplification of the Spirit, a person, likened to a property) might perplex the analytic philosopher (see Plantinga below), it is biblically warranted. This view could be worked out on a model of the Trinity founded upon distinct persons united in the divine essence grounded in one divine subsistence. The individual persons could exemplify distinct agencies united in the divine essence and be fundamentally empowered by the subsistence of the Spirit via *perichoresis* (or mutual indwelling). Cf. fnn. 46, 48–49. Note, given the distinct agencies of the persons, this model may fit more naturally in a modified "social" view of the Trinity in distinction to a classical view of divine simplicity and inseparable operations. See Moreland and Craig (2017, 590–93); McCall (2021, 137–76); Anderson (2007, 11–59); Williams (2013, 84–87, 2024, 15, 34, 46–60); Koons (2018, 337–57); Cotnoir (2017, 2025); Swinburne (1994, 170–91); Sanders (2016); Vidu (2021). See also Plantinga (1998, 235–40); cf. Vallicella (2019).

[54] See fnn. 48–49. The following quote by Davenant roughly captures my point about the transitivity of the persons of Christ and the Father such that the image is grounded in the divine essence, yet, as he also suggests, they are *not* numerically identical persons. "The person of the Son bears the likeness [or image] of the person of the Father; but the Essence or Divine Nature in the Son is altogether the same as in the Father: *I and my Father are one*. Christ, therefore, cannot be the same *in person* with Him of whom he is the image; but there is no reason why he may not be same *in essence*." See Davenant (1832, 175–76) in Sanders (2016, 207–08).

[55] Morris (2001, 209–10) states that Jesus "perceived the oneness between himself and the Father not to be that of numerical identity . . . . but rather to be that of some other sort of harmonious unity between ontologically distinct individuals." McCall (2021, 172, 163) states that the persons of the Trinity do not share numerical identity, "they share the numerically same instance of the divine nature." "[O]n the Brower-Rea proposal, the divine persons share numerical sameness that is '*essential* sameness,'" "a unique and irreducible relation, distinct from absolute identity, which they call 'accidental sameness without identity.'" See Anderson (2007, 51); cf. Brower and Rea (2005, 57–76), Williams (2024, 22–25, 34–36, 53–60). See also sec. 2.1; fnn. 37, 49, 53–54.

immaterial person, who shares the same divine essence which grounds their respective agencies; only, as an embodied human agent, Jesus' agency entails the divine image via his human essence.[56] Thus, Jesus and the Father are autonomous yet united persons—Jesus is non-numerically identical to the Father—and it can therefore be said, *Jesus is the image of the invisible God*.[57]

In summary, my point in highlighting Jesus' inference of identity with the Father is three-fold. First, it grounds agency ontologically in immaterial substances, agents, or persons, not in material bodies—this correlates with the full set of biblical data on image (and regeneration, etc.) and Jesus' non-numerical identity with the person of the Father. Second, it clarifies the immaterial nature of the divine image which corresponds with immaterial persons—this accounts for Jesus' identity as the image of God, and the renewal of the image (qua second form) via the regeneration of human persons by the Holy Spirit. Third, it gives reason to think that personal identity is ultimately grounded ontologically in immaterial persons or agents from whom their agency flows (as seen in Jesus' identity with the Father ontologically dependent upon Jesus' agency grounded in the divine image united in the divine essence)—this correlates with Christ as the exemplar human agent and bearer of God's image, and thus, human persons universally.[58]

3. Conclusion

In this essay I have attempted to demonstrate that agency is the fundamental operator of *imago Dei* throughout the arc of Scripture as seen both functionally and substantively in parts 1 and 2, respectively. According to this model, image functions as, or in direct relation to agency whereby agency provides a coherent understanding of the biblical data and a metaphysical explanation of image-bearing agents created in God's image. The metaphysical explanation extended the functional concept of "image as agency" to include an ontological entailment (i.e., agency derives from immaterial agents or persons) when applied to Christ's identity as the image of God and his non-numerical identity with the Father—of which, I

[56] See fn. 46.

[57] See fnn. 48–49, 52–55.

[58] By "personal identity," I am referring generally to numerical or self-identity (see fn. 36). Personal identity accounts for both what a thing (i.e., a "person") is at a time and through time—i.e., it is synchronic and diachronic. The point is general; given the dualist ontology here, personal identity is grounded in immaterial persons to whom agency is attributed and who do not change numerically via various psycho-spiritual and material transformations. The immaterial substance, agent, or person grounds personal identity.

contended, that both identity claims require an ontological explanation by any adequate model of *imago Dei*. Hence, the substantive aspect of image (part 2) provided this explanation and attempted to account for all the relevant data both for Christ the exemplar and for human persons universally and Christians particularly.

Ontologically, I have suggested that image is a secondary form or principle of organization grounded in the soul (specifically in or supervening on the human essence) of human persons or asymmetrically in union with the divine essence of Christ given that his human essence bears fundamentally upon the hypostasis of the Son. I have also suggested that because agency is fundamentally grounded in the divine essence of the persons of the Trinity, there is good reason to view persons qua persons as immaterial substances given that: (a) Jesus' inference between human and divine persons turns on a relation of transitive identity grounded in the immaterial nature of those persons whereby Jesus' agency is sufficient to exemplify the Father's agency and non-numerical identity, (b) Jesus' identity as the image of God requires a fundamental grounding of the image in union with his divine essence via the immaterial person of the Son, coupled with the fact that (c) humans are bearers of God's (renewable, i.e., permanent but not fixed) image, and therefore image must also have a ground in human persons, and thus (d) image can reasonably be identified as a metaphysical constituent (i.e., a second form), and finally (e) the coherence of a dualist view of human persons as immaterial substances, or causal agents, who are sufficient to ground God's image and the personal identity of image-bearing agents. Taken together, these concepts cohere in an ontology founded upon human and divine persons as immaterial agents (i.e., where human persons are naturally embodied agents): Human persons bear the image of God. They are image-bearing agents. Christ is the human exemplar, a unique image-bearing agent subsisting in the divine person of the Son. Christ is the image of God. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are divine persons, distinct immaterial agents whose agencies fundamentally cohere in the divine essence of the divine substance—the Holy Trinity. Therefore, the model of *image as agency* provides a logical reading of Scripture founded on a coherent metaphysics of human and divine agents as immaterial persons where image is a fundamental principle in human agents who can and often do exemplify the Christ-likeness of God via human agency.

In closing, I want to quickly suggest several payoffs of the model: (1) it provides a coherent view of Scripture's use of image language for human persons and for Christ's identity as the image of God and his non-numerical identity with the Father, (2) it provides a clear and objective conceptual tool or lens to assess the biblical arc of creator-creature relationship, (3) it provides an objective context for how

individual persons fit into this arc of reality as powerful and responsible agents, (4) the conceptual tool can be applied to questions of personal agency and formation to offer objective insight into identifying how one is or is not exemplifying the image of God, and in what manner with other agents, human or divine, (5) it can also be applied communally to account for the relationality of agents, and (6) it coheres with a dualist ontology, and, it could (more or less) be applied to other ontologies with alteration.[59]

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[59] I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers, Oliver Crisp, Ross Inman, and commentators at the EPS Far West conference in San Diego, April 2024, for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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