

The Image of God Buffet

Semantic Overload, Hermeneutical Drift, and the Collapse of Imago Dei Clarity

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Central claim

The *imago Dei* cannot by itself ground a definite claim about dignity, rights, or policy while its content is left open among rival interpretations. A public inference becomes defensible only after a meaning is selected and separate descriptive and normative bridges are defended. The symbol may still inspire; polyvalent inspiration is not a determinate premise.

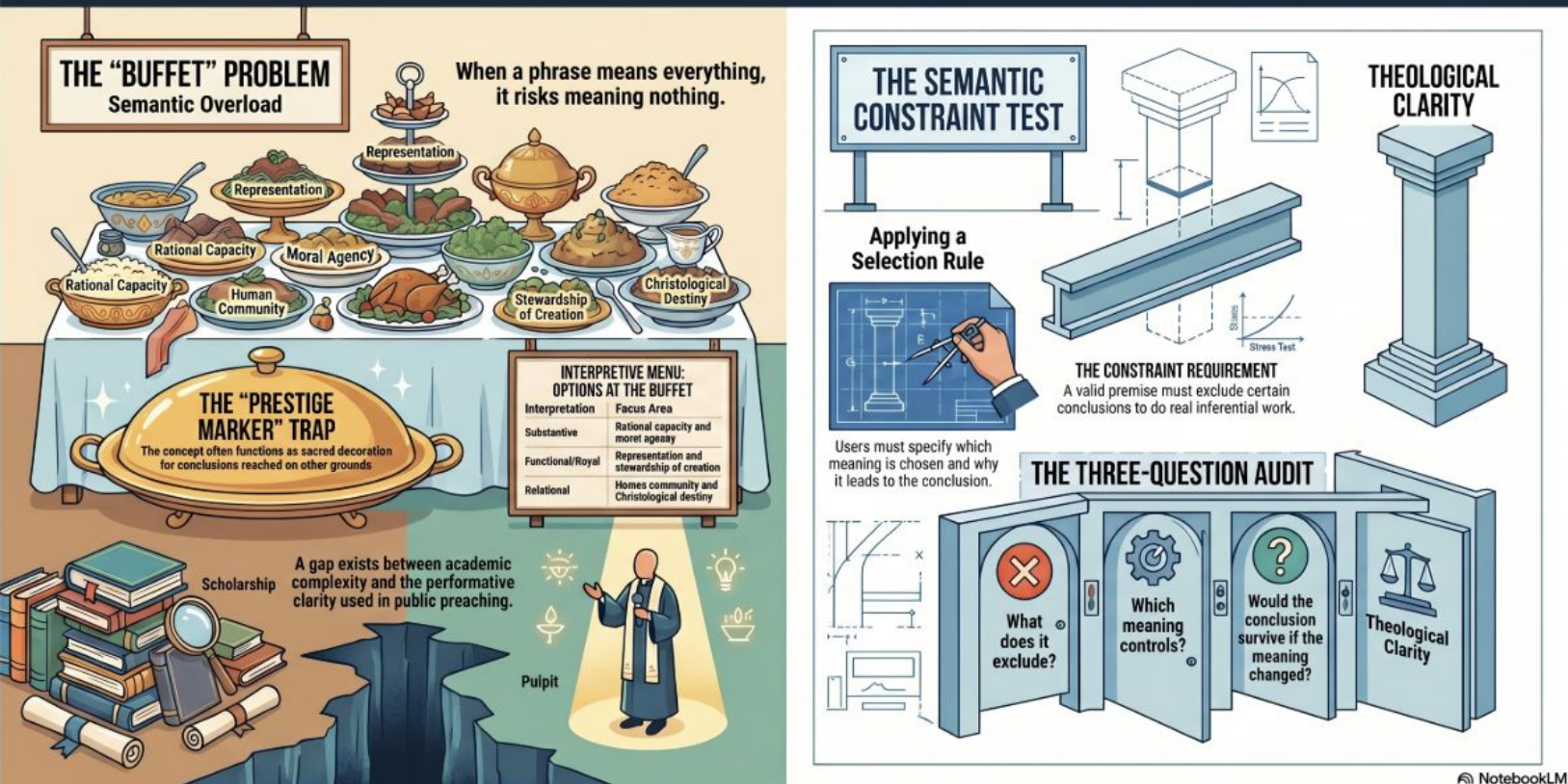
Preview:

Starting claim	Selection needed	Bridges needed	Warranted result
Humans bear <i>imago Dei</i> .	Which substantive, relational, functional, vocational, or Christological meaning controls?	Why does that meaning confer the stated status, and why does that status support the conclusion?	With those links defended, a theological argument may succeed; without them, the phrase does not supply the conclusion.

The test does not demand one timeless dictionary definition. It demands enough interpretive discipline to show which meaning is active, what follows from it, and where the moral or political judgment enters.

Visual preview:

The *Imago Dei* Buffet: Moving from Semantic Overload to Theological Clarity



NotebookLM

The left-hand buffet depicts interpretations chosen to suit different conclusions; the right-hand structure depicts the discipline required of a public premise. The three-question audit asks what the phrase excludes, which meaning controls, and whether changing that meaning changes the conclusion. The image diagnoses an inferential burden; it does not show that every theological use fails.

Abstract

Christian appeals to *imago Dei* often present it as a clear revealed foundation for human dignity, equality, rights, or policy. The difficulty is not simply that the phrase has several uses. It is that public arguments frequently move from an unspecified theological formula to a specific conclusion while leaving the controlling interpretation and the connecting warrants unstated. This paper develops a three-link constraint test: an argument must justify a selection among substantive, relational, functional, vocational, and Christological readings; show what human status follows from that reading; and defend the normative bridge from that status to the proposed conclusion.

Applied to dignity arguments, the test exposes a recurring mismatch. Capacity readings risk excluding humans with diminished capacities; functional and vocational readings identify tasks more readily than inviolable status; relational and Christological readings protect universality only by adding substantial theological commitments. None of these results makes *imago Dei* worthless. The phrase may organize Christian identity, motivate solidarity, or summarize a developed theology. It does show that interpretive abundance cannot be advertised as public clarity. The limited conclusion is inferential: an unspecified *imago Dei* premise does not determine a particular moral or political result. A stronger argument remains possible, but it must name and defend the links that the slogan usually conceals.

Keywords: *imago Dei*; theological anthropology; human dignity; hermeneutics; semantic underdetermination; public reason

1 A Sacred Phrase Asked to Do Too Much

Few biblical expressions are assigned as many modern jobs as *imago Dei*. It appears in Christian arguments about equal worth, disability, abortion, race, punishment, artificial intelligence, environmental responsibility, political rights, and the uniqueness of the human species. In each setting the phrase sounds foundational. A conclusion is presented as secure because human beings stand in a special relation to the biblical deity.

The appearance of clarity fades as soon as the relation is specified. Does image-bearing consist in rational capacity, moral agency, embodied representation, royal rule, a social relation, a vocation, a granted status, conformity to Christ, or an intended destiny? These proposals do not merely provide different illustrations of one transparent idea. They locate the image in different kinds of thing: an ability, a task, a relation, an identity, a status, or a future transformation. Surveys of theological anthropology therefore treat the topic as a field of live alternatives rather than a settled definition (Cortez 2010; McFarland 2005). Old Testament scholarship has likewise debated whether Genesis emphasizes resemblance, royal representation, function, presence, or some combination (Clines 1968; Middleton 2005; Herring 2008).

Plurality is not automatically a defect. A text can carry several compatible implications; a tradition can develop an ancient expression in fruitful ways; a symbol can gather associations that no single paraphrase exhausts. The problem begins when theological richness is converted into argumentative certainty without showing how the conversion works. In scholarship, the phrase is complex, disputed, and canonically developed. In public apologetics, it is suddenly clear enough to settle a controversy. The same flexibility that protects the doctrine from counterexamples is then hidden when the doctrine is used as evidence.

The buffet metaphor identifies this maneuver. A diner selects the dish needed for the occasion: rationality for species distinction, relationality for social ethics, dominion for stewardship, granted status for universal dignity, vocation for responsibility, and Christological destiny for spiritual formation. Each selection may be defensible. What is not defensible is presenting the final plate as though it came ready-made from the phrase itself.

This paper challenges a particular inference, not Christian character or every use of the doctrine. A *God-concept* is a specified conception of a deity, including claims about that deity's nature, intentions, and relation to humanity. Different Christian God-concepts can produce different accounts of image-bearing even when they appeal to the same texts. The question is therefore not whether a vague word called "God" explains dignity. It is whether a specified theological account supplies a transparent route from text to interpretation, from interpretation to human status, and from that status to a public conclusion.

The governing thesis is direct: *imago Dei* does not ground a determinate public conclusion while its controlling meaning and inferential bridges remain unspecified. This thesis does not entail that no Christian argument can be completed. It entails that the familiar slogan is not the completed argument.

The constraint principle

A premise contributes support only through features that are stable enough to exclude some conclusions and favor others. If an interpreter may change the premise's content whenever a difficulty appears, the verbal formula remains constant while the inferential premise changes.

2 Semantic Richness Is Not Inferential Permission

Three ideas must be separated: richness, ambiguity, and underdetermination. A rich concept has several connected aspects that may jointly illuminate a subject. An ambiguous expression has more than one available meaning. An underdetermined inference leaves the conclusion unsettled because the stated premises do not select among relevant possibilities. The first can be a virtue. The second is manageable through context. The third is a problem when an argument is presented as complete.

Suppose a community calls an exemplary leader a "pillar." The metaphor can communicate stability, support, visibility, and endurance. Its richness is useful. Yet a policy cannot be derived from "she is a pillar" until the relevant feature and a policy bridge are identified. Stability might support keeping her in office; structural dependence might support distributing her workload; visibility might support using her as a spokesperson. The metaphor does not choose among these results merely because each association is apt.

Imago Dei behaves similarly, but with greater stakes. Its sacred status adds rhetorical authority to the conclusion. When a speaker says, "Every human bears *imago Dei*; therefore policy *C*," listeners may reasonably hear the first clause as the revealed ground of *C*. Yet the first clause may do little more than identify a theological neighborhood. The real work is performed by a selected interpretation and a moral principle that are never stated.

A concept constrains an inference when changing its content can change whether the conclusion follows. If every major interpretation is said to support the same favored conclusion, two possibilities arise. The interpretations may genuinely converge through different defended arguments. Or the conclusion may have been fixed first, with each interpretation recruited afterward. The second pattern is the buffet problem. It is detected not by counting meanings, but by asking where the argument would permit a different result.

This point does not require a controversial theory of meaning. It is an ordinary rule of reasoning. If a term has several live interpretations, an argument must either select one, show that all relevant interpretations independently support the conclusion, or state a disjunction whose every branch reaches it. Simply moving among meanings is not synthesis. It is a change of premises.

Nor does the argument presuppose moral realism. "Dignity" may be treated as an objective moral property, a construct within a political practice, a negotiated commitment, or an expressive norm. On any of those views, a public argument still needs to show why the theological premise bears on the

adopted norm. The question here is not whether moral facts exist independently of attitudes. It is whether a particular theological expression supplies the support attributed to it.

3 The Interpretive Menu and Its Different Burdens

The explicit Old Testament references are sparse: Genesis 1:26–27, Genesis 5:1–3, and Genesis 9:6 carry much of the discussion (Clines 1968). Their theological afterlife is not sparse. Later Jewish and Christian interpretation brings those texts into conversation with wisdom, moral agency, sociality, incarnation, renewal, and eschatological conformity. The result is not one menu item with several sauces. It is a set of proposals with different logical forms.

Table 1: Major interpretations and the burden each leaves

Interpretation	Image-bearing consists chiefly in	Typical argumentative use	Unfinished burden
Substantive	A capacity or feature such as reason, freedom, moral agency, or spirituality.	Species distinction, responsibility, or special worth.	Explain why possession is universal, why degrees of capacity do not create degrees of worth, and why this feature supports the stated norm.
Relational	A relation to the biblical deity or to other persons.	Equality, sociality, dependence, or mutual regard.	Specify the relation, show that every human stands in it, and defend why it yields the proposed public obligation.
Functional or royal	Representing divine rule within creation, often through dominion or stewardship.	Ecological duty, vocation, authority, or responsibility.	Distinguish office from worth, resolve whether inability affects status, and justify the move from ancient royal imagery to the modern conclusion.
Status or identity	A standing conferred on humanity rather than an achieved capacity.	Universal dignity and inclusion.	Explain the content of the status and why conferral entails the specific right or policy rather than merely redescribing worth.
Christological or eschatological	Conformity to Christ, renewal, or humanity's intended destiny.	Spiritual formation, restoration, and completed humanity.	Explain the scope beyond Christian commitment and distinguish present universal status from a future or confessional end.
Composite	A coordinated cluster of capacity, relation, function, status, and destiny.	A broad theological anthropology.	State the rule that combines the elements, resolve conflicts among them, and identify which element supports each conclusion.

The substantive family has intuitive force because likeness is naturally associated with shared features. Reason and moral agency can explain why humans appear distinctive. They also create a familiar danger: if the relevant property comes in degrees, is absent in infancy, or is impaired by disability, it cannot

straightforwardly explain equal and exceptionless status. Kilner's sustained critique of capacity-centered accounts is motivated by precisely this risk (Kilner 2015). A defender may answer that the relevant capacity belongs to human nature even when it is not presently exercisable. That answer can be coherent, but it adds a theory of natures and membership. The phrase alone did not provide it.

The functional or royal family reads Genesis within ancient Near Eastern patterns in which an image represents rule or presence. Middleton develops the royal-vocational reading, while Herring argues that representation may concern presence as well as mere function (Middleton 2005; Herring 2008). These accounts can illuminate Genesis better than a detached inventory of mental faculties. Yet a vocation is not identical to a status of inviolable worth. A monarch's representative has an office; an office can carry duties, powers, or honor. Which of those becomes universal dignity, and why, still requires a bridge.

Relational accounts avoid reducing personhood to a measurable mental trait. They can also connect image-bearing to communion and responsibility. But "relation" is not self-interpreting. Being created, addressed, loved, elected, commanded, or destined are different relations. MacDonald's engagement with Barth illustrates how exegetical and doctrinal questions become intertwined when relation and election govern the reading (MacDonald 2008). Such an account may be powerful within a Christian theology. Its public force depends on the additional reasons offered for accepting that theology and its moral implications.

Status and identity accounts most directly protect universality. They say, in effect, that every human is accorded a standing that does not fluctuate with performance. This is morally attractive, but it risks circularity when used as a ground. If "bearing the image" is defined as "having equal dignity," then "humans have dignity because they bear the image" becomes "humans have dignity because they have dignity." If the status contains more than dignity, that content and its consequences must be stated.

Christological and eschatological accounts shift attention from an original human possession to a pattern revealed in Christ and a destiny toward which humanity is directed. Kilner and McFarland develop importantly different Christ-centered constructions (Kilner 2015; McFarland 2005). These approaches may integrate the doctrine across a Christian canon. They also make the argument more openly confessional. A conclusion addressed to citizens who do not accept the canonical or Christological premises cannot be advertised as though it followed from a universally transparent phrase.

The menu therefore matters. Each dish brings its own ingredients, strengths, and liabilities. Combining them may produce a richer theology, but only if the combination rule is disclosed. Otherwise, an objection to one item is answered by quietly substituting another.

4 The Three-Link Constraint Test

A public use of *imago Dei* normally compresses at least three links. The first is interpretive selection: why does a particular meaning control in this context? The second is a descriptive bridge: what status, property, relation, or task follows from that meaning, and to whom does it apply? The third is a normative bridge: why does that description support the specific moral or political conclusion?

Table 2: The three-link diagnostic ledger

Link	Question it must answer	Evidence or argument needed	Failure when omitted
Interpretive selection	Which meaning of <i>imago Dei</i> governs this inference?	Textual context, canonical method, theological commitments, and reasons for preferring this reading to live rivals.	The speaker can change meanings to avoid objections while retaining the authority of one verbal formula.
Descriptive bridge	What human property, status, relation, or vocation follows, and is it universal?	An account of scope, possession, degrees, impairment, membership, and the relation between present condition and destiny.	The conclusion is attached to a vague predicate whose application is unclear or uneven.
Normative bridge	Why does that description support this duty, right, policy, or prohibition?	A moral or political principle plus reasons for accepting it and applying it consistently.	The moral judgment enters unnoticed and is then credited to revelation.

Consider the common dignity argument in its shortest form:

1. Every human bears *imago Dei*.
2. Therefore every human has equal dignity and must receive equal legal protection.

The conclusion contains at least two claims: a status claim about equal dignity and an institutional claim about legal protection. Neither is a lexical restatement of the premise. If image-bearing means rational agency, the argument needs an account of equal possession and a rule linking agency to equal protection. If it means royal vocation, the argument needs a rule linking shared office to equal protection. If it means a conferred status, the argument needs to specify what was conferred and why that status has legal consequences. If it means a relation to the biblical deity, the argument needs to show why that relation generates obligations for those who do not share the theology.

The three-link test is not an impossible demand for certainty. Selection can be probabilistic, contested, or tradition-relative. A descriptive bridge can admit difficult boundary cases. A normative bridge can rest on a political commitment rather than an objective moral fact. What the test forbids is the pretense that no such work is needed.

It also distinguishes three different kinds of success. An *exegetical* success shows that a reading fits the relevant text and context. A *theological* success shows that the reading coheres with a wider doctrinal system. A *public-argument* success shows that the resulting premises give an audience adequate reason for a conclusion. One success does not automatically include the others. A reading may be exegetically strong but morally incomplete; a theological synthesis may be internally coherent but publicly unshared; a public norm may be attractive but only loosely connected to the text.

This distinction explains why the phrase can be valuable without doing the work commonly advertised. A symbol may summarize a network of commitments already accepted by a community. In that role, saying “we all bear *imago Dei*” can remind believers of conclusions reached through their broader theology. But a reminder is not a ground. It activates an argument stored elsewhere.

The hidden-premise diagnosis

When a speaker can defend the conclusion after replacing one account of image-bearing with another, the stability may belong to an unstated moral commitment rather than to the theological premise. The conclusion can still be good. The stated ground has simply been misidentified.

5 Dignity: The Strongest Case and the Clearest Test

Dignity is the most attractive application because it aims at inclusion. Christian thinkers have used image-bearing language to oppose contempt, enslavement, racism, exclusion, and the reduction of human worth to performance. Kilner emphasizes both the constructive promise of the doctrine and the devastation associated with some of its interpretations (Kilner 2015). Szczerba explicitly presents *imago Dei* as a symbol of religious inclusion and human dignity (Szczerba 2020). The humane intention deserves recognition.

The very importance of the conclusion makes the argument's structure more urgent. If equal standing depends on a variable capacity, the most vulnerable humans become counterexamples. If it depends on carrying out a vocation, those unable to perform the function appear marginal. If it depends on a relation established by the biblical deity, the defender must explain both the universality of that relation and its public authority. If it depends on a bare status declaration, the declaration may protect universality but explain little.

A familiar solution is to relocate the image from an achievement to a gift. Every human has the status because the deity confers it, not because each person displays a qualifying trait. This blocks graded dignity. Yet the move does not complete the public argument. It adds at least four propositions: the relevant deity exists; that deity confers the status on every human; the status has a specified content; and that content supports the proposed norm. Those propositions may be defended. They may not be smuggled into the word "image."

Another solution treats image-bearing as a cluster whose elements jointly support dignity. Capacity, relation, vocation, and destiny are said to converge on a holistic anthropology. The cluster can be theologically richer than any single account. But a cluster raises questions of its own. Are all elements necessary, or is any one sufficient? What happens when one is absent? Which element explains equality rather than difference? What resolves conflict when dominion, dependence, and future conformity point in different practical directions? Calling the cluster "holistic" does not answer those questions.

Wolterstorff's theistic account of rights illustrates how much additional argument a grounding project requires. His case does not merely invoke image-bearing and stop. It develops a theory of rights, worth, and the relation of that worth to divine love (Wolterstorff 2008). Whether one accepts the account or not, its complexity is instructive. A serious ground is an argument system, not a slogan.

There is also a difference between motivating respect and explaining it. A Christian may be moved by image-bearing language to protect a stranger. That motivational success is real. It does not show that the stranger's status is inferentially derived from a clear interpretation of Genesis. Music, memory, national symbols, and family stories can motivate admirable action without functioning as public foundations. Theological symbols can do the same.

The paper's conclusion about dignity is therefore neither cynical nor maximal. It does not say that the Christian tradition cannot support dignity. It says that "humans bear *imago Dei*" is not, by itself, an explanation of equal dignity. Once the theological and normative bridges are supplied, the completed account should be credited for the result. If the conclusion can be maintained while those bridges change, the independent commitment to equal standing may be doing more work than the phrase.

6 Scholarly Plurality and Pulpit Certainty

The credibility problem appears most sharply when standards change with the audience. Scholarly writing rightly emphasizes disputed texts, historical layers, canonical development, and the limitations of every model. Public preaching and apologetics often suppress those complications, presenting image-bearing as one of the clearest foundations available. When challenged, the defense retreats to richness: of course the doctrine cannot be reduced to one definition. When used, it returns to certainty: of course the doctrine grounds the conclusion.

This oscillation lets the argument collect the benefits of both precision and vagueness. Apparent precision supplies authority at the moment of assertion. Vagueness supplies flexibility at the moment of criticism. A capacity objection is met with relation; a function objection with status; a public-reason objection with internal theology; a textual objection with canonical development. Any one of those replies might be defensible if stated as a change in the argument. The problem is treating the change as though nothing inferentially important moved.

Brueggemann's theological commentary and Middleton's contextual study illustrate why responsible interpretation cannot be collapsed into a slogan (Brueggemann 1982; Middleton 2005). Genesis 1 connects humanity's creation with rule over other creatures, but moving from that ancient literary setting to contemporary rights language involves historical, theological, and moral judgments. Those judgments need not be illegitimate. They are mediation, not immediate revelation.

The public claim should therefore match the scholarly admission. If the doctrine is genuinely multivalent, say which strand is active and why. If the argument depends on a canonical synthesis, identify the synthesis. If dignity rests on a broader account of divine love, human identity, or political commitment, name it. Precision does not weaken a good case. It prevents sacred vocabulary from receiving credit for premises supplied elsewhere.

The deeper issue is accountability. A premise exposed to public evaluation must be stable enough that evidence and objections can count against a use of it. If every objection licenses a new interpretation while every favorable conclusion remains attached to the unchanged formula, the doctrine has become insulated. It can bless outcomes but cannot be tested by them. That is not richness. It is inferential drift.

7 Five Strong Replies

7.1 Reply 1: A theological concept may be analogical and inexhaustible

This reply is correct but insufficient. No serious interpreter should demand that a theological concept behave like a laboratory definition. Analogy, metaphor, and layered reference can communicate what literal paraphrase cannot. The argument here does not require exhaustion. It requires local control. An inexhaustible concept can still be used responsibly if the speaker identifies the aspect relevant to the conclusion and defends the connection.

The distinction is between semantic surplus and inferential permission. A poem may sustain several readings without authorizing every claim about its subject. Likewise, a doctrine may exceed one definition without licensing an interpreter to choose whichever meaning protects a preferred result. Inexhaustibility removes the demand for a complete paraphrase; it does not remove the demand for a valid argument.

7.2 Reply 2: The interpretations are complementary, not rivals

Sometimes they are. Humans might be represented as rational, relational, vocational, and destined for transformation within one systematic theology. Complementarity, however, is a conclusion to be argued rather than a label that resolves tension. Capacity and status answer different questions.

Present function and future destiny have different temporal structures. Royal representation can elevate humanity while also distinguishing rulers from subjects in its ancient setting. A composite account must show how these elements fit and which one bears each inference.

More importantly, convergence does not eliminate the three links. If five interpretations independently support dignity, display the five arguments. If they jointly support it, state the joint premise. If one supplies status and another supplies content, show the division of labor. The buffet criticism disappears when the menu becomes an explicit recipe.

7.3 Reply 3: Canon and Christ supply the selection rule

A canonical Christological account can indeed supply a rule: earlier image language is interpreted through the person and destiny of Christ. This is one of the strongest Christian replies because it replaces arbitrary selection with a theological center. Kilner and McFarland show how much constructive work such a center can perform (Kilner 2015; McFarland 2005).

The cost is not incoherence but scope. The argument now depends on claims about canon, Christ, creation, and destiny. Those commitments may guide an internal Christian ethic. They are not a neutral public premise shared merely because the English phrase sounds familiar. The honest conclusion is conditional: given this canonical and Christological theology, these norms follow through these bridges. That is clearer and more defensible than claiming that one phrase supplies a universal foundation by itself.

7.4 Reply 4: The phrase identifies status rather than a property

Status accounts avoid the exclusionary danger of variable capacities. They can declare that every human stands equally within a relation established by the deity, regardless of performance. The reply therefore improves the moral shape of the doctrine.

But a status must still have content. Diplomatic status, citizenship, childhood, ownership, and office generate different rights and duties because institutions specify them. Saying that image-bearing is a “status” does not yet say what anyone may demand, forbid, or protect. If equal dignity is built into the definition of the status, the grounding claim becomes partly stipulative. If dignity is derived from the status, the derivation needs a warrant. Either route can be made explicit; neither is contained in the word “status.”

7.5 Reply 5: The slogan works even if philosophers want more detail

It may work as moral formation. Communities often need memorable language rather than a seminar before every act of care. A slogan can focus attention, restrain cruelty, and express solidarity. Szczerba’s description of *imago Dei* as an inclusive symbol fits this legitimate role (Szczerba 2020).

The problem is the promotion from usefulness to foundation. A phrase can work because hearers already share the conclusion and use the phrase to reinforce it. That does not show the phrase independently grounds the conclusion. The distinction matters when the slogan is offered to outsiders as evidence, when rival policies claim the same symbol, or when vulnerable people depend on which interpretation prevails. A community may keep its rallying language. It should stop presenting motivational resonance as though it settled the argument.

8 What Responsible Use Would Look Like

The constructive standard is demanding but practical. A Christian advocate who invokes *imago Dei* in public should be able to answer five questions in ordinary language.

1. **What does image-bearing mean here?** Name the controlling interpretation rather than listing every historical option.

2. **Why this interpretation?** State the textual, canonical, or theological rule that selects it and acknowledge serious rivals.
3. **What follows descriptively?** Identify the status, relation, capacity, vocation, or destiny attributed to humans, including difficult cases.
4. **What moral bridge is being used?** State why the descriptive claim supports the proposed duty, right, or policy and whether that bridge presupposes moral realism, a political agreement, or an internal religious commitment.
5. **What would change the conclusion?** Explain whether a different interpretation, theological premise, or moral bridge would alter the result. If nothing could, admit that the conclusion is grounded elsewhere.

These questions do not ban theological reasoning from public life. They improve it. They make clear when an argument is conditional on a God-concept, when it is internal to a tradition, and when it also rests on reasons accessible outside that tradition. They also protect Christians from overstating the certainty of contested exegesis.

Responsible use should distinguish four roles. As a *textual claim*, *imago Dei* belongs to the interpretation of particular biblical passages. As a *doctrinal synthesis*, it can coordinate creation, Christology, anthropology, and destiny. As a *moral symbol*, it can motivate inclusion and resistance to dehumanization. As a *public premise*, it must expose the complete route to a conclusion. Confusion arises when success in one role is cashed out as success in all four.

This framework also clarifies disagreement. Two Christians may affirm the same formula while differing over the selected meaning, the scope of the descriptive claim, or the moral bridge. Their dispute is no longer hidden behind shared vocabulary. A non-Christian can then evaluate which steps depend on confessional commitments and which are independently available. That transparency is a gain even when consensus remains impossible.

The most honest Christian claim may therefore be modest: “Within this theological account, image-bearing helps us understand and sustain our commitment to equal regard.” That sentence does not pretend to derive a complete public ethic from three words. It names the tradition-relative role without surrendering the commitment. What should be abandoned is the stronger sales pitch that a contested phrase supplies effortless clarity unavailable to secular moral negotiation.

9 Conclusion

The *imago Dei* is not useless because it is multivalent. It can organize a Christian anthropology, connect texts across a canon, motivate solidarity, and give believers a memorable language for human significance. Its religious power is real. That power is not the same as inferential clarity.

The central failure occurs when a speaker moves from “humans bear *imago Dei*” to a definite conclusion about dignity, rights, or policy without identifying the active meaning and defending the descriptive and normative bridges. The buffet then supplies whatever ingredient the conclusion needs: capacity, relation, vocation, status, or destiny. When one ingredient attracts criticism, another replaces it while the conclusion and sacred authority remain untouched.

The three-link test blocks that maneuver. Select the interpretation. Show what human status follows. Defend the moral or political bridge. If those links are supplied, the resulting theological argument deserves evaluation on its merits. If they are not, the phrase has not grounded the conclusion; it has decorated a judgment reached elsewhere.

This conclusion is intentionally limited. It neither disproves a Christian God-concept nor denies that a fully specified Christian ethic can support human dignity. It does not require moral realism,

and it does not imply that religious symbols lack moral value. It establishes a narrower and more uncomfortable point: interpretive abundance cannot honestly be marketed as revealed clarity. A buffet may nourish a tradition. It cannot pretend to be a single, self-selecting premise.

A Formal Reconstruction of the Central Thesis

A.1 Ordinary-language reconstruction

- P1.** If an expression is offered as a premise for a definite public conclusion, the argument must identify the expression's controlling meaning and supply the bridges connecting that meaning to the conclusion.
- P2.** The bare claim that humans bear *imago Dei* leaves open several materially different meanings and does not itself state either the descriptive or normative bridge to a particular conclusion.
- P3.** Where the meaning and bridges are neither stated nor fixed by a shared context, they cannot be credited to the expression as though the expression itself supplied them.
- P4.** Therefore the bare *imago Dei* claim does not, by itself, entail a definite conclusion about dignity, rights, or policy.
- P5.** A completed theological argument may still support such a conclusion if it justifies a controlling interpretation and defends the necessary descriptive and normative bridges.

The inference from P1–P3 to P4 is deductively valid as a claim about argumentative sufficiency: if the required links are absent, the conclusion is not derived from the stated premise alone. P2 is interpretive and empirical rather than logically necessary; its support comes from the documented plurality of substantive, relational, functional, status, and Christological accounts and from the common short form of public appeals. P5 states the scope limit. The reconstruction blocks an under-specified inference; it does not show that every expanded Christian argument fails.

A.2 Symbols

- I : the proposition that humans bear *imago Dei*.
- M : the set of materially distinct interpretations available in the argument's context.
- m : one interpretation belonging to M .
- $S(m)$: a justified rule selects m as the controlling interpretation.
- $D(m)$: the relevant descriptive status, property, relation, or vocation follows under m .
- C : the definite public conclusion at issue.
- $W(m, C)$: a defended normative warrant connects $D(m)$ to C ; in the reconstruction, $W(m, C)$ includes the conditional $D(m) \rightarrow C$.

A.3 Symbolic form

$$I \wedge \exists m \in M (S(m) \wedge D(m) \wedge W(m, C)).$$

Plain-English annotation. This line states what a complete argument needs. The claim I is joined by “and” to the existence of at least one interpretation m that belongs to the available set M . That interpretation must be justified by $S(m)$, must yield a relevant description through $D(m)$, and must include a warranted bridge to the conclusion through $W(m, C)$. The formula does not say that any such interpretation is actually correct.

$$I \wedge \neg \exists m \in M (S(m) \wedge D(m) \wedge W(m, C)).$$

Plain-English annotation. This line represents the buffet failure. The premise I is asserted, but the “not” sign before “there exists” says that no controlling interpretation is supplied together with both bridges. The formula describes an incomplete argument, not a contradiction in the doctrine itself.

$$I \not\vdash C.$$

Plain-English annotation. The turnstile with a slash means “does not logically entail.” The bare image-bearing proposition I does not, on its own, force the public conclusion C . This does not mean that C is false. It means that extra premises are needed to reach it.

$$I, S(m), D(m), W(m, C) \equiv [D(m) \rightarrow C] \vdash C.$$

Plain-English annotation. This line shows the repaired form. Once a meaning m is selected, its descriptive consequence $D(m)$ is established, and a warrant says that $D(m)$ implies C , the conclusion follows by modus ponens. The validity of that final step does not prove that the selection, description, or moral warrant is true; those premises still require textual, theological, and normative support.

The symbolic sequence preserves the same bounded result as the body. It distinguishes a valid final step from the disputed support for the premises. It also shows why changing interpretations is substantive: a different m may change $D(m)$, the plausibility of $W(m, C)$, or both. The argument becomes responsible when those changes are visible rather than hidden behind the stable verbal shell of I .

A.4 Validity and support for the premises

The valid part is modest. If $D(m)$ is established and $W(m, C)$ includes the conditional $D(m) \rightarrow C$, then C follows. Likewise, if a public argument requires a selected meaning and two connecting bridges, but presents none of them, then C is not derived from I alone. These are claims about what the stated premises contain. They do not determine whether C should be accepted for some other reason.

The controversial work lies upstream. The set M is supported by the documented plurality of interpretations, but scholars can disagree about which members deserve admission. The selection claim $S(m)$ depends on an exegetical or theological method. The descriptive claim $D(m)$ depends on what the selected interpretation actually attributes to humans and whether that attribution is universal. The warrant $W(m, C)$ depends on a moral or political principle. None becomes certain merely because the final inference is valid.

A simple countermodel explains why $I \not\vdash C$. Imagine two interpreters who both affirm I . One selects a functional reading under which image-bearing concerns a vocation of responsible rule. The other selects a status reading under which image-bearing concerns equal standing. They may agree on the verbal premise while disagreeing about what follows for a person unable to perform the vocation. Because the same I is compatible with those different downstream descriptions, I alone cannot decide the disputed conclusion. A selection rule and bridges are doing indispensable work.

Two replies could meet the burden. Showing that every admissible m yields the same $D(m)$ under one public warrant would establish genuine convergence. Alternatively, defending one authoritative selection, its description, and its warrant would complete a conditional theological argument. Either reply must display the work the buffet hides.

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