

*‘Those he also glorified’*—Some Reformed perspectives on human nature and destiny

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*‘Those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified,  
and those whom he justified he also glorified.’*

—[Romans 8:30](#)

## **Abstract**

Reflecting on some distinctive contributions of the tradition of Reformed theology to our understanding of the nature and prospects of humans *qua* creatures within the economy of salvation, this paper looks to draw out key themes which may serve to orient contemporary Christian engagements with the discourse of transhumanism.

## **Keywords**

Theological anthropology, creaturehood, glorification, transhumanism, election

## **1/ Introduction**

This paper looks to make a modest contribution to the task of identifying some theological orientations and perspectives from which we might approach the discourse, ambitions and pursuit of transhumanism, the programmatic pursuit of the transcendence of the natural limitations of human existence by radical technological interventions into the form and processes of human bodily life itself.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, it reflects upon certain Reformed Protestant

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<sup>1</sup> See Carl Elliot, ‘Humanity 2.0’, *Wilson Quarterly* 27:4 (2003), pp. 13-20, Nick Bostrom, ‘A History of Transhumanist Thought’, *Journal of Evolution & Technology* 14 (2005), pp. 1-25 (including a reproduction of ‘The Transhumanist Declaration’ on p. 21), Phillippe Gagnon, ‘The Problem of Transhumanism in the Light of Philosophy and Theology’ in *The Blackwell Companion to Science and Christianity*, edited by J.B. Stump and A.G. Padgett (Oxford: Wiley, 2012), pp. 392-405, as well to two recent engaging articles, Steven John Kraftchick, ‘Bodies, Selves, and Human Identity: A Conversation between Transhumanism and the Apostle Paul’, *Theology Today* 72:1

theological accounts of human beings as creatures of God destined for radical transformation in virtue of the saving work of that same God. On the one hand, attending to the human as *creature* looks to discern those features of human reality which might be considered constitutive and inalienable, such that to forfeit them would be to forfeit our humanity as such. While on the other, attending to the human as a creature destined for soteriological *transformation* hopes to espy the imagined form and significance of such radical change. In this way, the twofold focus of the our original conference theme—‘deification and creaturehood in an age of technological enhancement’—quite rightly fixed attention upon the tension between recognition of the givenness of creaturely reality and appreciation of its susceptibility to thoroughgoing, even revolutionary, alteration.

There is no doubt that much of the discourse of transhumanism reiterates the western cultural trope of ‘science as salvation’, suggesting as it does that the bio-technological transformation of human being itself can and will free us from the suffering and limitations—including finitude and death—imposed upon us by our very biology.<sup>2</sup> Christian theology will rightly dismiss any suggestion that transcendence of our species limitations as such could or would constitute ‘salvation’. For the problem of sin that attends human existence would, to be sure, also attend any and all trans-human existence. Only where the concept of sin is trivially reduced to designate merely the problems which befall us as finite biological creatures could it be thought otherwise. But even and precisely when the transhumanist vision is stripped of its soteriological pretensions, important questions remain as to whether and how the kinds of radical transformations of human nature it envisages and pursues comport (or not) with the reality of human creatures theologically understood. In so far as we have recourse to theological anthropology in our efforts to win some dogmatic purchase on the questions that transhumanism raises, the motifs of inalienable human nature and adventitious human transformation represent two *foci* around which our reflection should circulate.

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(2015), pp. 47-69 and Heidi Campbell, ‘On Posthumans, Transhumanism and Cyborgs: Towards a Transhumanist-Christian Conversation’, *Modern Believing* 47:2 (2006). pp. 61-72.

<sup>2</sup> See Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation: a Modern Myth and its Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1992). The famous opening declaration of Julian Huxley announced that ‘The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself—not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way—but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps *transhumanism* will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature’—in his *New Bottles for New Wine: Essays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), p. 17.

In what follows I draw chiefly upon a body of Reformed confessional materials from the 16<sup>th</sup> – 18<sup>th</sup> centuries together with the broad tradition of Reformed theology. While not necessarily endorsing all aspects of this historic theological tradition, I am ambitious to try to draw key aspects of this body of historic, substantive, and formative Reformed doctrine forward into the contemporary conversation about human nature which transhumanism provokes. I do so in the conviction that certain of its distinctive features might illumine the matter at hand in interesting and valuable ways.

## 2/ Human Being as Creatures

There is, of course, much in the body of traditional Reformed doctrine of creation which is held in common with the wider historic Christian theological tradition. Furthermore, teaching concerning human beings as creatures is always part of a more comprehensive account of God as Creator, of the act of divine creating *ex nihilo*, and of the nature of the creation as a whole. Four dogmatically uncontroversial claims might be taken to frame our subsequent discussion of the human *qua* creature: these four claims are that creation is *from* God, creation is *not* God, creation is *for* God, and creation is *good*. Reformed teaching concerning the *imago dei* articulates what each of these four claims means as regards humanity in particular, where humanity is understood as the apex of God's creation and indeed as a *microcosm* of the whole. So too does the distinctive Reformed doctrine of the foundational 'covenant of works' between God and Adam.<sup>3</sup>

In both of these doctrines, the derivation, difference, *telos* and goodness of Adam as God's creaturely counterpart is a synecdoche of God's sovereign and gracious relation with creation as such. But within that wider reference, both the *imago dei* and the 'covenant of works' specify that *qua* creature humanity is only ever conceived with relentless reference to God's potent action and purposes: reference to the originary vocational, activating relationship of God to the human creature is ingredient to the very idea of creatureliness here. This fact finds important structural expression and substantiation when Reformed theologies treat first the

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<sup>3</sup> Generally on these themes of *imago dei* and covenant of works in traditional Reformed sources, see Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions. Theology from Zurich to Barmen* (Louisville, KY: WJK Press, 1998), pp. 64-72, Michael Allen, *Reformed Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 34-46, as well as Hendrikus Berkhof, 'God as Creator and the World as Createdness', and William Klempa, 'The Concept of Covenant in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Continental and British Reformed Theology' in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, edited by D. K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 79-86, 94-107. For a traditionally-minded 20<sup>th</sup> century restatement of these themes see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1949), pp. 202-210, and 211-218 respectively.

eternal divine decree, predestination, and election in advance of the doctrine of creation. Even when the order of presentation treats of creation first, the material *ordo rationis* regularly gives precedence to these other doctrines which express the originary divine will, promise and purpose in creating. To understand creation in this way as an expression of the goodness of God—the *bonitas dei*—involves acknowledging the fundamentally purposed character of human creatures amidst the good creation.

Thus, traditional Reformed theologies acknowledge that the human creature is always already a creature who exists in the light of the *finis creationis* and so is always already summoned to a peculiar vocation. To be a human being is simply to exist *for the sake of* a divinely afforded vocation and destiny. This distinctive emphasis finds expression when Reformed confessions teach that God creates humanity ‘*so that*’. As the *Heidelberg Catechism* puts it, ‘God created man good and in his image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, love him with his whole heart, and live with him in eternal blessedness, praising and glorifying him’.<sup>4</sup> In other words, God is confessed to have ‘created the world, in order to render Himself to it, and especially to the intelligent creatures, as the absolute *Bonitas* for their possession and enjoyment’.<sup>5</sup>

The specific capacities of created humanity that classical Reformed teaching likes to pick out for particular comment reflect this overriding vocational and purposeful emphasis in its thinking about creation. So, for example, the *Scots Confession* speaks of human ‘wisdom, lordship, free will, and self-consciousness’, while the *Westminster Confession* emphasises that human beings are given ‘reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness after his own image, having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfil it; and yet under a possibility of transgressing, being left to the liberty of their own will’.<sup>6</sup> In short, human beings are made capable of and appointed to creaturely communion with and creaturely service to God.

This same emphasis also marks the typical discussion of the composition of human beings as body and soul. Women and men are constituted by an ‘intimate union’ of a material body and an immaterial soul or ‘personal spirit’ as befits their appointed end. The body is made of ‘earth’, a shorthand for its character as material, spatial, temporal, dissoluble and so mortal, as well as sexual; while the soul is made ‘of nothing’ because it is not to be understood to be ‘in any

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<sup>4</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question 6.

<sup>5</sup> Heirich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, revised and edited by E. Bizer and translated by G.T. Thomson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), p. 195.

<sup>6</sup> *Scots Confession*, article II; *Westminster Confession*, IV.

sense a part of the physical body, nor an efflorescence of the bodily life, nor yet as a part of God's substance either'.<sup>7</sup> And this entails its character as immaterial, infused—rather than traduced—simple and so indissoluble and immortal *per naturam suam*. The essential human powers of 'knowing and willing' have their seat and source in the soul and their material instrument in the body. Traditional Reformed teaching, perhaps surprisingly, has often taken pains to emphasise that the *imago dei* pertains to the human being whole and entire, as Calvin himself emphasised, and not merely to any one aspect, not even to personal spirit as such.<sup>8</sup>

Hermann Bavinck summarises this concisely:

The whole person is the image of the whole deity . . . It is important to insist that the whole person is the whole image of the whole God, that is, the triune God. The human soul, all the human faculties, the virtues of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, and even the human body, all of it images God. . . God himself, the entire deity, is the archetype of man.<sup>9</sup>

There is a holism to the understanding of the *imago dei* here which suggests that the human creature in its entirety is constituted for the sake of its vocation: human being as a whole, and not merely in part, is ordered to God's calling and purposing.

Distinctively, as noted above, a notable strand of traditional Reformed doctrine accounts for and elaborates the originary vocation of the human being created body and soul as the image of God by way of the idea of a 'covenant of works', namely, by the idea that this original created state of integrity must be conceived with reference to God's establishing a covenant with the first human pair. Indeed it is a hallmark of such Reformed thinking to 'conceive of the original state of integrity in terms of the covenant'.<sup>10</sup> As the Westminster divines conceived of it, 'the first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience'.<sup>11</sup> Whatever else it might entail, one notable consequence is to insist that *qua* creature, the human being is *homo foederis*.

This brings with it the claim that the perfection of originary humanity is not simply a state that is given, but is rather a task set before it as something properly to be achieved, to be

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<sup>7</sup> Heppel, *Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 222-3; cf. *Second Helvetic Confession*, VII.

<sup>8</sup> See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, edited and translated by J. King (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 94-5.

<sup>9</sup> Hermann Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics. Abridged in One Volume*, edited by J. Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), pp. 319, 324.

<sup>10</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 329.

<sup>11</sup> *Westminster Confession*, VII; Cf. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q 17.

‘acquired for himself, by obedience to God’.<sup>12</sup> Human nature is here not perfect but to be perfected; or rather, the perfection that befits it lies in its having to become perfect in active covenant fidelity to God. The glory of humanity is found not in being as such but in being *in* this covenanted striving. For this reason, Reformed doctrine teaches that Adam’s original condition was ‘not the complete, ideal condition of man’.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as Bavinck summarises the classical view, ‘The ultimate destiny of humanity, individually as well as corporately, was not given in Adam’s creation; it was a goal. Christ, not Adam, is the first full, true, spiritual man’ and ‘Adam did not yet *possess* the highest humanity’.<sup>14</sup> With its doctrine of the adamic covenant of works, Reformed theology suggests a peculiar point of emphasis: namely, that the very being of human creatures *qua* creatures is in fact a religio-moral vocation and task.

Already on the basis of these few observations concerning the Reformed understanding of human creaturehood we can intimate two evident implications for orienting theological discussion of transhumanism. First, the inclusion of the *body* within the understanding of the *imago dei* by virtue of the holism noted above, suggests that consideration of its form and use and modification is a matter of properly theological concern, and not something that could be adjudged to be simply *adiaphorous*. Reformed theology can never be indifferent to what is done to and with the body as the body itself is at stake in the inalienable human vocation to bear out the image of God in creaturely life.

Second, the strongly *teleological* and *vocational* understanding of the human as creature as *homo foederis* suggests that the question of transhumanism must be asked against the horizon of the essentially purposed character of human being, i.e., with reference to the ‘*so that*’ of human existence and action, and so firmly within a discourse of penultimate ‘means’ and ultimate ‘ends’. In short, our humanity can never be conceived simply as material at our own disposal, because it is always already claimed and predisposed, as it were, by God’s gift, claim, and summons. The wider insistence of Reformed faith that first and foremost ‘we belong to God’ here finds a specific and significant iteration within the specific confines of the doctrine of creation.<sup>15</sup> But, within this, the idea of *homo foederis* does insist that it is ‘natural’ to humans to be agents in pursuit of their own proper perfection and completion, i.e., to be striving in covenant obedience in ways

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<sup>12</sup> Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 249.

<sup>13</sup> Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 250.

<sup>14</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 328-29, 330.

<sup>15</sup> As the *Heidelberg Catechism* famously begins, ‘Q1: What is your only comfort in life and in death?’ A. That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. . .’.

that can and will result in notable self-transformation. Even in creation, the human is not simply a given, but is a given set in motion after itself by virtue of God's covenanting action.

Affirmation of the *plasticity* of humanity is importantly ingredient in all this.<sup>16</sup>

At this juncture, however, there is another consideration which in fact sounds a significant note of caution. It concerns the human fall into sin. Traditional Reformed teaching has always emphasised the depth and scope of the disruption of human nature involved in the fall into sin: 17<sup>th</sup> century divine Matthaëus Martinius articulates the consensus when he remarks that under the condition of sin only 'some rough, rotten and confused ruins remain' of the *imago dei*.<sup>17</sup> The radicality of Reformed theology on this score suggests that perhaps rather severe limitations are to be placed upon anthropological insights oriented exclusively to human creaturehood. For what is understood to obtain as regards the originary character of humanity *qua* creature is fundamentally qualified and overrun by the anthropological significance of the usurpative and disintegrating reality of sin and the 'frightful deformity' it effects.<sup>18</sup> We are never

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<sup>16</sup> On this theme see especially the discussion of 'human nature' in Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 1-57. Importantly, with Tanner, Reformed ideas of *homo foederis* have in view not simply plasticity as such but rather a 'plasticity of a certain sort: openness to, essential dependence upon, the influence of the alien or foreign — God, who is other than creatures, what they are not'—Kathryn Tanner, 'Grace without Nature', in *Without Nature? A New Condition for Theology*, edited by D. Albertson and C. King (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), p. 371. Careful critical assessment of Tanner's case for the essentially plastic character of human nature are offered in Gerald McKenny, *Biotechnology, Human Nature, and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 137-145, and Joseph Rivera, 'Human Nature and the Limits of Plasticity: Revisiting the Debate Concerning the Supernatural', *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 59:1 (2017), pp. 34-53.

For a different but overlapping account of the external and relational sources and malleability of identity worked out in pursuit of a persuasive reading of Paul's understanding of human personhood, see Susan Grove Eastman, *Paul and the Person: Reframing Paul's Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017). Eastman is alert to the way in which Paul's thinking sees the human radically exposed to both corruption as well as salvation by virtue of the way in which identity is at stake in its constitutive relations and formative environment. One might think that Reformed views of the radicality of sin and the 'total depravity' of humanity, as well as the radicality of divine regeneration by grace reflect a similar anthropological intuition.

<sup>17</sup> Cited in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 237. I have reflected on this fact and its consequences for Reformed moral theology elsewhere, see 'The Adventitious Origin of the Christian Moral Subject: John Calvin', in *Militant Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2018), pp. 139-152.

<sup>18</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by J.T. McNeill and translated by F. Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PN: Westminster, 1960), p. 189 (I.15.4).

simply creatures but always concretely fallen creatures. This means that created human nature, including our capacity to acknowledge and actively to respond to the divine claim and summons as *homo foederis*, is fatally compromised.

Yet also, and all the more, human reality is further qualified and overreached by the adventitious reality of divine salvation. The human existence of which Reformed theology speaks when it treats of the Christian life is doubly denatured as it were, once by sin and again by grace. Whatever it means that humans are creatures is twice refracted: once diabolically, and again, graciously. Theological anthropology must not elide the fact that while human beings are and remain creatures to be sure, they are most accurately and concretely *sinful and reconciled creatures*. Apart from acknowledgment of this, our talk of humans as creatures is rendered unhelpfully abstract in virtue of being conceived in isolation from the determinative reality of sin and redemption. Theological anthropology must therefore always approach the question of humans as creatures only from the other side, as it were, of the career of sin and saving grace, and conceive of human beings as the reconciled sinners that they have become and are. The adventitious realities of sin and saving divine grace do not leave human nature serenely undisturbed. Rather, they both seize that nature and rework it. Such observations already signal Reformed theology's profound interest in the radical, serial, transformation of the human being in the course of the economy of salvation. And it is to further consideration of a particular aspect of this to which we now turn.

### **3/ The Glorification of Human Being**

While the language of *deification* has acquired some traction in Reformed circles in more recent decades—often in close connection with recovery of emphasis upon the theme of ‘union with Christ’ in earlier Reformed sources, and in ecumenical dialogues with Lutherans and the Orthodox in particular—in the realm of more traditional Reformed thinking I am looking to bring to bear here, the more native idiom in which to speak of the final eschatological transformation of human reality is that of *glorification*.<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting that traditional Reformed confessions and dogmatic manuals are, as a whole, rather reticent about this theme: many do not contain discrete articles or treatments of ‘glorification’, even where the theme is mapped as an explicit part of the *ordo salutis*.

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<sup>19</sup> For recent commendations of deification on Reformed terrain, see J. Todd Billings, ‘United to God through Christ: Assessing Calvin on the Question of Deification’ *Harvard Theological Review* 98:3 (2005), pp. 315-334, and Gannon Murphy, ‘Reformed *Theosis*?’, *Theology Today* 65:2 (2008), pp. 191-212.

The eschatological idea of glorification concerns the state of ‘complete’ or ‘plenary sanctification’ achieved when the Spirit finally triumphs in the ‘continual and irreconcilable war . . . against the flesh’ such that ‘the regenerate part doth overcome, and so the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God’.<sup>20</sup> The register here is more immediately religious and moral than ontological perhaps, though it is ultimately a matter of what the persevering saints *become* and *are*. The relational—and more precisely, the extrinsic—character of all this is often stressed in keeping with the covenantal framing of the whole matter of salvation.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, such claims are sometimes formulated in ways that make clear that the object of glorification is not in fact the human being but most properly God, as when the eschaton is described by Olevian as that day on which ‘sin in them will be completely slain and God will be glorified *in them*’.<sup>22</sup> Notably, the strictly eschatological character of glorification simultaneously informs Reformed polemics against overly-enthusiastic ‘perfectionism’ by insisting upon the incomplete, partial and limited nature of the sanctifying transformation believers are to expect within the bounds of this life.

If the gifts of regeneration and sanctification provide the ‘backward’ referent to glorification, its ‘forward’ referent is typically provided by a threefold concern with the status of the soul after death, the resurrection of the body, and the final judgment. As regards the first—the status of the soul after death—the idea of the human being as composite material and dissoluble body and an immaterial and indissoluble soul plays a role in Reformed teaching here. The *Scots Confession* can representatively put the matter under the rubric of the ‘immortality of the soul’ and claim that, ‘The chosen departed are in peace, and rest from their labours. . . for they are delivered from all fear and torment, and all the temptations which we and all God’s chosen are subject in this life, and because of which we are called the Kirk Militant’.<sup>23</sup> I emphasise here the concern to envisage the advent of a state of ‘peace and rest’ as the grace-given *telos* and conclusion of the Christian life.

As regards the expected return of Christ and final judgment, the *Heidelberg Catechism* teaches that the believer draws the comfort

That in all affliction and persecution I may await with head held high the very Judge from heaven who has already submitted himself to the judgment of God for me and has removed all the curse from me; that he will cast all his enemies and mine into

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<sup>20</sup> *Westminster Confession*, XV.3.

<sup>21</sup> See *Westminster Confession*, XIX on perseverance of the saints, for example.

<sup>22</sup> Olevian as cited in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 697).

<sup>23</sup> *Scots Confession*, XVII.

everlasting condemnation, but he shall take me, together with all his elect, to himself into heavenly joy and glory.<sup>24</sup>

In subsequent questions on this theme it suggests that the expectation of the resurrection of the body instils hope that ‘after this life my soul shall be immediately taken up to Christ, its Head, and that this flesh of mine, raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul, and be conformed to the glorious body of Christ’, and thereby know eternal life, for ‘since I now feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, I shall possess, after this life, perfect blessedness, which no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, and thereby praise God forever’.<sup>25</sup> As the later, *Leiden Synopsis* explained, ‘The end of the world is the manifestation of God’s wisdom and power and the perpetual celebration of these virtues among all creatures, especially among rational creatures’.<sup>26</sup>

Of emphatic importance here is that the eschatological situation is fundamentally envisaged as a continuing and living relation between the human being and God—their ‘being together’—marked by interactions denoted by terms like ‘judgement’, ‘conformation’ and ‘praise/worship’. Notable too is the imagined sociality of the eschatological condition, in which the believer is gathered ‘together with all God’s elect’. Other Reformed sources will regularly speak in related terms of a ‘glorious and perfected *fellowship*’ of believers with God and one another: when this tradition comments on the eschatological *state* of human being it does so chiefly with affective terms befitting this relational scenario, speaking of joy, blessedness, glory, and a ‘full and pleasant sense of God’s favour’.<sup>27</sup>

To the extent that such traditional Reformed theology conceives of the transformed human *body* it tethers its imagination specifically to the glorified body of the risen Jesus, though it does admit certain additional glosses. Most basically, the ‘risen and glorified body’ of the believer receives ‘the real imparting of eternal life’; what the created soul once possessed *per naturam sua*—namely, immortality—the fallen and redeemed person now receives *per gratiam dei*. Restraint is, once again, the norm; but where further description is ventured the glorified body is said to be characterised by imperishability, ‘clarity and radiance’ and ‘power and virtue’.<sup>28</sup> That these ‘attributes’ of the glorified body are understood in contrast to those of the present body is made

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<sup>24</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q 52. I have reflected upon the contemporary interpretation of this doctrine elsewhere, see ‘The Final Triumph of Grace: The Enmity of Death and Judgment Unto Life’, in *Militant Grace*, pp. 97-110.

<sup>25</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, QQ 57 and 58.

<sup>26</sup> *Leiden Synopsis*, X, 29

<sup>27</sup> Bucanus as cited in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 707.

<sup>28</sup> Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 707-8.

clear when the *Leiden Synopsis* declares that, ‘removed from glorified man are not only all those things which result from sin and are of the nature of a penalty, but also those regarding man’s animal estate, in virtue of the first creation in this world’.<sup>29</sup> There is once again a kind of final *denaturing* envisaged here, especially where ‘nature’ has become identified with the fallen—but crucially here also created—state of human beings. Even so, this traditional line of Reformed thinking finally resists the idea that the glorification of the human being entails a change in fundamental ‘substance’ rather than only ‘qualities’. So whatever our participation in the divine nature might be taken to entail, it is not taken to mean that the state of glory is ‘supernatural’ or involved the conversion of created into uncreated being. Thus, Bavinck can claim that while ‘what Christ gained for us is so much more than what Adam lost, nothing in Scripture even hints at the notion that is something “superadded” and not part of our original human nature’.<sup>30</sup>

As with our brief consideration of Reformed claims about the human *qua* creature above, so too here there are several aspects of this eschatological vision of human transformation in the light of divine glory that might provide our thinking about transhumanism with interesting perspectives. The rather distinctive traditional Reformed emphases upon the relationality and sociality of the eschatological state of human beings—reflecting eschatologically the original vision of the human being as *homo foederis*—suggests a critical horizon against which to consider the kinds of radical—yet always penultimate—human development the transhumanists conceive and desire. The eschatological imagination of Reformed Christianity conceives of human beings glorified *together*, existing with and for one another before God. Radical transformation does not come at the cost of fellowship with either God or one another, but rather includes and perfects it. This emphasis calls into question the propriety and fittingness of any and all technological development of our humanity which are indifferent to, or even contemptuous of, the fundamentally social and relational reality of our existence before God. Reformed theologians have good cause on these grounds to be sharply critical of the neglect of precisely these themes in transhumanist discourse.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Leiden Synopsis*, LII, 29. The idea of the ‘animal state’ here references the embodied and material reality of human beings as such, i.e., what human beings as creatures.

<sup>30</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 321-22. This view continues to be upheld: ‘Whatever its content may be no matter how great a transformation it involves, eschatological consummation does not bring transformation out of the status of creature . . . . There is strictly a creaturely participation in God’s life’—David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*. Volume 1 (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2009), p. 507.

<sup>31</sup><sup>3131</sup> On this neglect see, indicatively, Elaine Graham, ‘Nietzsche Gets a Modem: Transhumanism and the Technological Sublime’, *Literature & Theology* 16:1 (2002), pp. 69-71. For

Indeed, Reformed reflections on glorification typically affirm that what will be perfectly imparted to believers in the state of glory is ‘already possessed in germ here on earth’ as well as emphasising that the glorification of the human body will render it ‘like Christ’s glorified body, a blessed instrument of the revelation of God’s glory’.<sup>32</sup> This reminds us that the transit from creation to glorification suffers significant disruption *en route* by both sin and redemption, as noted above. Eschatological glorification is indexed primarily to the *covenant of grace* as the outworking of divine election, and so conceived with decisive reference to the merciful outworking of the divine work of salvation. The human who is the subject of glorification is that creature who, originally appointed to the pursuit of eternal life within the covenant of works, and having defaulted and forfeited that covenant (*lapsus*), has now by divine decree been elected in the covenant of grace to that same end solely in virtue of the divine mercy in Christ and its outworking in the economy of salvation. Glorification thus espies the ultimate conformity of humanity to Christ’s new, risen and glorified humanity, and no other. All of this strongly suggests that one could develop an account of the present vocation of the Christian life in terms of anticipations of the gift of eschatological glory as partakers in Christ’s own glorification—including the inalienable place of fellowship and sociality—which could critically inform current theological thinking about transhumanism.

#### **4/ Some Observations in Place of a Conclusion**

By way of ending, allow me briefly to formulate some few questions and observations. The tentative and exploratory character of this article reflects both the delimited scope of this essay as well as the indirect relation that obtains between dogmatic description and the concrete labour of theological ethics in relation to specific questions, including the questions that attend the prospect of transhumanism.

It is clear that the question ‘What does it mean to be human?’ is liable to a theological reply, and that such a reply must be decisively informed by and substantiated with appeals to both creation and redemption, origin and destiny. While analytically distinct, materially these appeals constitute a single theological account of humanity. It is also clear that from a Reformed

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more expansive and thoroughgoing critical reflection on this point cf. Jeanine Thweat-Bates, *Cyborg Selves: A Theological Anthropology of the Posthuman* (London: Routledge, 2016), Michael S. Burdett, *Eschatology and the Technological Future* (London: Routledge, 2015), as well as Robert Song, *Human Genetics: Fabricating the Future* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> Alstedius and Bucanus respectively as cited in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 708 and 707.

theological perspective the divinely superintended career of human reality—from election, through creation, covenant(s), fall, and salvation unto glory—must be taken fully into account. This demands a frank recognition that narrow appeals to created nature as such cannot constitute an adequate theological anthropology. It also suggests the notable plasticity of human nature subject to the adventitious realities of both sin and saving divine grace.<sup>33</sup> The intuition that transhumanist visions reprise—or parody?—historic religious conceptions of radical human transformation finds some support here. Christianly however, it is not plasticity as such, but the specific susceptibility of the human creature to saving transformation as the free and obedient covenant partner of the God of the gospel that is in view. Just how *this* plasticity relates to the kind that might be envisaged by practitioners of radical human technological enhancement is perhaps one of the fundamental questions to be considered. While the discourse of transhumanism is undoubtedly ‘salvationist’ in some sense, theology cannot adjudge the kind of human transformations it envisages to be a matter of direct soteriological concern. The questions of faith, obedience, sin, righteousness, and freedom addressed to our lives remain so even as our capacities are augmented—or indeed diminished—in this or that direction. On this score, is the challenge of transhumanism not but a variant of the question which attends any and all human development, be it cultural, technological, or otherwise?

Our brief consideration of strands of Reformed doctrine has also suggested that the question of the human *constitution*—body/soul, materiality, finitude, reason and will, essential sociality, etc.—but also of the fundamental human *vocation*—our purpose, destiny, determinative covenant relation with God, and the hopeful imperatives of the Christian life—are at stake in Christian reflection on the challenge of transhumanism. If we are to win the necessary theological orientation here we must ask not only ‘What are human beings?’ but also and with no less decisiveness ‘What are human beings *for*?’ Since our humanity is freighted with inalienable divine imperatives from the first—here, conceived in terms of covenant gifts and obligations in fellowship with God and neighbours, rather than as the innate imperatives of an autonomous human nature—the ethical dimension is inalienably ingredient in our theological anthropology. Discussion of transhumanism must be undertaken on the basis of faith’s confession that our human nature as the nature of a creature made and redeemed for the sake of covenant—*homo foederis*—belongs to the God of the gospel and is set in his service.

The emerging field of human technological enhancement is thus one on which to discern afresh the ways in which any given development affords new temptations, new occasions for sin,

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<sup>33</sup> Again, on the theme of plasticity see in particular the work of Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key*.

and/or new prospects for faithful exercise of Christian freedom, service and witness to God's sovereign purposes. This discernment will, for reasons canvassed briefly, require that we interrogate not only discrete enhancements which might be in view, but also the social practices, economic cultures and political ideologies within which such enhancements are pursued and out of which they arise. This critical scrutiny of the 'hegemonic superstructures' and operative 'social imaginaries' of the biotechnical industrial complex and its institutions will be essential to Christian moral judgement alert to the fundamentally social and relational character of human existence. For the vision of the human being as *homo foederis* insists that the question of the truth, faithfulness and righteousness of our lives must be asked and answered with reference to both our fellowship with God *and* our fellowship with one another.