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**“With specific reference to the *Imago Dei*, to what extent are gender relations in
Genesis 1-3 ‘egalitarian’?”**

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i. Introduction/Definitions

By way of introduction, it is worth mentioning that this paper is quite contextual, originally finding life as an MA essay in Old Testament whilst I was grappling with what I thought about what the church can say theologically about trans* issues. I am someone who has come on a theological journey on a host of issues - one of the most transformative has been travelling from a hard cessationism to a charismatic understanding deeply informed by Kingdom Theology, a perspective that has been shaped by my church and para-church experience. This paper is not about the Kingdom of God as a theme, but I hope it will shape and guide my thoughts. The context, then, is my understanding that at least a part of Kingdom involves the restoration and dominion of God's shalom, the resurrection of the body, and the new creation. This means that, in the grand sweep of biblical theology, we need to peer back behind the events of the fall to creation, to see what God says rather than what we think, about sex and gender.

This paper represents a key building block of my wider theological focus - trying to understand theologically what it means to be human. The vital phrase that ties it together, for me at least, is 'being made in the Image of God'. Bound up in the meaning of the imago Dei, is the liberating and radical truth that Haddox notes, "Women and men are both affirmed as being in the divine image" (2008, 13). This has implications for gender relations as being something inherent to redeemed creation and new creation, rather than an outworking of the result of the Fall that affected humankind in Genesis 3. The egalitarian nature of gender relations, then, stand in stark contrast to the patriarchy of many today, and yet at the same time speaks with power into what Ray Anderson identifies as "the dynamics of present-day culture, in which unisex has become a life-style for some and feminism a new "liberation theology" for others" (1982, p. 106). Anderson wrote this words back in 1982 - before I was born - and long before the present day confusion over gender, identity and humanity. The imago Dei, then, promises resources for engagement in and with the great debates and flash-points of our culture, providing a useful aid to the Church as she seeks to model the kingdom to a world without a king.

The two key words for this paper are image; alongside the word egalitarian, and thus require basic definition at this point. For the purposes of this paper, a definition of egalitarian will be lifted from Reuschling, as "unlike in Hierarchy... egalitarianism advocates that all individuals are owed dignity and opportunities to utilize their talents and skills for self-fulfillment and to contribute to the greater good of societies" (2011, 270). For the purposes of this essay, Reuschling helpfully notes that "the first humans were given responsibility to care for the creation with no hierarchical difference in status in carrying out their God-given responsibilities" (2011, 270). This is the understanding of gender relations as egalitarian that will be examined here.

ii. Etymology of Image

Difference over the etymology of 'image' is a hallmark of many commentaries on Genesis 1:27 in particular, and David Wenham offers a helpful overview of what he identifies as "five main solutions [that] have been proposed" (1987, 29) before noting that "none of the suggestions seem entirely satisfactory, though there may be elements of truth in many of them" (1987, 31). As an example, we should note with Middleton that "the semantic range of selem... includes idol" (2005, 25), which would imply the importance of keeping focus on humankind as the image of God, rather than being important separately.

Christopher Middleton notes in his excellent 'The Liberating Image', that "interpretation of the imago Dei covers two and half millennia and crosses the boundaries of two religious traditions" (2005, 39). The latter observation should also be further (beyond the obvious and important Judeo-Christian conversations) related to the study of, and textual interaction with, other Ancient Near Eastern religious texts, such as the Enuma Elish and the Gilgamesh Epic. Middleton notes that in the Genesis account there is a "democratization of Mesopotamian royal ideology" which "serves to elevate and dignify the human race" (2005, 145), arguably in an egalitarian fashion. This dignity should be seen as applying equally to the parts of the Image of God; to the male and the female human.

This discussion over 'image' gives us something of a basis on which to start to talk about the image of God, and the different qualities within which the egalitarian nature of gender relations interact and work out obedience to God. Phyllis Bird sees the image as being bound up with being "one uniquely identified with God and charged by God with dominion over the creatures" (1995, 9), which comes with the qualification, notable amongst literature of the Ancient Near East, that "sexual constitution is the presupposition of the blessing of increase" (1995, 10). This language of blessing is crucial to Genesis, and Brueggemann notes that "It belongs to the goodness God intends for creation" (1982, 33).

One way in which humans can be seen to be in the Image of God, and one which specifically resonates with discussion of gender relations, is that which Anthony Thiselton identifies as relational capacity, within the context of embodiment (2007, 252). The relationship between the male and female is at the heart of both their difference and their unity, and the male/female phrase is, as Middleton puts it, "anticipatory, looking ahead and preparing us for ... where human beings... are blessed with fertility and commissioned by God" (2005, 50). The relationship between male and female only makes sense in the context of the passage, the theme of the blessing of fertility, and

their role as the commissioned image of God in the world. This has wider implications, as relationship is not confined to human, but echoes divine relationships, and exists in the relationship between humankind and creation. Fretheim states this emphatically, with the understanding that ““Human beings are not autonomous creatures; they are defined by their relations to others; relationships are constitutive of what it means to be a human being” (2001, 20). Relationships, and the capacity for them, are innate to human be-ing, and are echoed and affirmed fundamentally in the way that the male and female together are the image of God.

A second way that the Imago Dei is seen in human beings and reflected in gender relations in Genesis 1-3 is the notion of humans as embodied beings. The complementary nature of the male and female form is echoed in what Bird identifies as the fact that this is “established in the creation and exhibited in the mutual drive of the sexes toward each other” (1995, 15). It is crucial, as Davidson notes, to remember that “Genesis 2:24 is dealing with monogamy: it mentions explicitly only one man and one woman who become one flesh” (2007, 21-22). There is an egalitarian and vital unity in the flesh in the act of sexual union. This is an equal union. Such an interpretation, then, is also helpful for challenging the problems raised by the observation of Cheryl Anderson, who notes that “in classical Christianity, the subordination of women was based... on those supposedly ‘improper bodies’” (2004, 102). Such an approach, we can see in the mutuality and unity expressed above, does not do justice to the text.

A third and final way in which we can understand human beings in the context of gender relations as possessing the Imago Dei is the notion of fruitfulness, and creativity. The notion of sexual fruitfulness has already been explored above, but the dominion and imaging of God goes beyond this. Not for nothing does Middleton stress that “Genesis 1 understands fertility as an intrinsic part of organic creaturely life that does not need to be achieved or guaranteed by cultic means” (2005, 211). Bray can be seen as supporting this, noting that “The Genesis texts are universalistic in scope, and not obviously interested in cultic matters” (1991, 203). This is in contrast to the approaches of other creation narratives in the Ancient Near East, and can be seen as part of Middleton’s argument in *The Liberating Image*, finding its roots in an article of the same title, where he notes the importance of humanity being “gifted” and “called”, “In contrast to dehumanizing ancient Near Eastern Alternatives” (1994, 24) which echoes the liberating approach of the Genesis account compared to alternative constructs.

iii. Sexual Distinction and the Divine Image - a challenge to androcentricity

A key question in relation to the Imago Dei and gender relations is that of sexual distinction and divine image. In his brilliant ‘Flame of Yahweh’, Davidson notes that sexual difference/distinction “is presented as a creation by God and not part of the inherent nature of divinity itself. This emphasis... appears to form a subtle but strong

polemic against the divinization of sex so common in the thought of Israel's neighbours" (2007, 18). This is a helpful reminder of the strength of Genesis 1-3 in the Ancient Near Eastern context, as well as of the difference between humankind and God, echoed in that fact that it is humankind that is in the image of God.

As alluded to above, when discussing the Imago Dei in the context of Genesis 1-3 it is important to discuss the concept of Androcentricity. Bird, focusing particularly on 2:23, comments that at a fundamental level "the narrative is androcentric in form and perspective" (1995, 14), going on to observe that "the one who confronts him is truly like him... in substance" (1995, 14). This echoes Barth's powerful language of the relationship of God and man, in the image of God, as being "an open confrontation and reciprocity" (1958, 185, CD III.i, 41.2). The creation of woman is crucial in the account of Genesis 2, echoing the importance of Genesis 1:27, and the essential nature of the image of God as being in the male/female creation of humanity. The endurance of androcentricity, however, means that it demands some attention - this could be seen as being linked to the modern gender fluidity theories.

The question raised by Augustine and addressed in different ways throughout church history is regarding who has the image of God: men, women, humanity in general, or the androgene 'adam' of Genesis 1, and what this means for gender relations in the church. Borresen notes, setting Augustine's interpretation in specifically Christian eschatological terms, the terms in which gender relations are conducted, that "Augustine emphasises that salvational equivalence of gentiles, slaves and women, obtained through faith in Christ, does not modify racial, social and sexual inequality in this world" (1995, 201), which is in contrast to the direction of this essay. It is reasonable to agree with Groothius, who rightly observes that "The account of the creation of male and female (Gen 1-2) says nothing about the woman being designed and created to submit to the man's authority" (2005, 5). Further, Davidson is quick to stress that "God created the bipolarity of the sexes from the beginning" (2007, 19); going on to note that the notion of "ha'adam as an ideal androgynous (or hermaphroditic) being later split into two sexes cannot be sustained from the text of Gen 1" (2007, 19). Whilst it has been debated as an option throughout church history, androcentric readings of Genesis 1-3 do not do justice to the text, and cloud the radical message of the liberating nature of male and female as equally and inherently imaging God.

Roberts notes that "Luther and Calvin believed that sexual difference is theologically and morally significant" (2007, 139), drawing a line ultimately to Barth's discussion of the topic. Barth writes, bringing the sexual difference in the imago Dei to centre stage, that "Everything else that is said about man... has reference to this plural: he is male and female" (1958, 186, CD III.i. 41.2). We could, perhaps, contend from this that the resultant ethics of scripture, especially those focused on gender relations, all flow from the important fact that humanity is created male and female, not one over

another, but as two essential parts. For such ethical potentiality, Barth offers us a helpful definition; ““In our image” means to be created as a being which has its ground and possibility in the fact that in “us”, i.e., in God’s own sphere and being, there exists a divine and therefore self-grounded prototype to which this being can correspond” (1958, 183, CD III.i, 41.2). This notion of ground gives us our foundational premise of the importance of sexual difference, whilst possibility is, in the context of Barth here, loaded with future promise. Almost as if the Kingdom of God is a theme rooted in Scripture!

Modern engagements with this discussion are conducted in a new and constantly changing world. If we are to take seriously the importance of the egalitarian nature of the imago Dei, echoing the Barthian stress of ground and possibility, then Christian theology, relying here on the Old Testament, can speak creatively into a range of questions. Ray Anderson echoes such language; “despite the potential confusion.... being orientated toward a goal where the polarity is one of differentiation and complementarity through perfect unity is a source of comfort and courage” (1982, 112). The gendered nature of the Imago Dei, and the egalitarian nature of gender relations, should be seen as a secure foundation; a good creation.

Modern theological anthropology, and work on the Imago Dei, androcentric or not, is in conversation with, or at least awareness of, modern constructs of gender. Cheryl Anderson rightly observes that “Gender theory challenges the traditional notion that familiar gender attributes are natural” (2004, 7), and any contemporary engagement with the imago Dei in the context of gender and sex - as Genesis demands - must have some engagement with this. It is here that we must observe again the importance of stressing both the equality of the sexes in the imago Dei, and the difference that denotes male and female. Hall is helpful here, arguing that the imaging of God in sexual difference is to be seen as “imaging God inasmuch as its being is at once and fully a relational being in partnership, a coexistence - “male and female”” (1986, 72). Hall’s language of partnership rather than hierarchy, and his echoing of the nature of the God of whom the image is, is important for responding to the flattening, natural-difference-denying principles of gender theory.

iv. The Fall - Everything changes

One notable feminist scholar, Luce Irigaray, poses a problem, that “Man has been the subject of discourses... the gender of God, the guardian of every subject and every discourse, is always masculine and paternal, in the West” (1993, 6-7). This, having established an egalitarian emphasis on the two sexes in the imago Dei, is a challenge that the resources of Old Testament theology can be seen to meet. Indeed, as Middleton muses, “it is unclear how a text that attributes the imago Dei explicitly to “male and female” (1:27) could be originally intended, or legitimately taken, as referring

only to men” (2005, 206). A close reading of the text and the pre-Fall state of mankind is powerful and fruitful for engaging with the theories of thinkers like Irigaray.

When Irigaray writes that ““The link uniting or reuniting masculine and feminine must be horizontal and vertical, terrestrial and heavenly” (1993, 17), it is arguable that, in understanding the imago Dei in the way this essay attempts to, we can agree with Irigaray. Yet the sensitive exegete can go further, noting that such a link, such an approach that is binary rather than exclusive, can be seen in the very theology of imago Dei, arguably inherent to the very meaning of what it means to be human, made in the image of God. Roberts provides us, however, with the genesis of a roadmap for what that might look like, beginning with a powerful statement about God;

“God loves humanity as God made it; God is committed to enjoying humanity as God has created it and not in demanding that human beings become something else... God loves and is pleased to have created two sexes, nothing more and nothing less, and for that reason, some difference between the sexes must be observed by men and women”
(2007, 47)

The nature of humans as being no more and no less than male and female in God’s image, is a result of God’s loving covenant with humanity. This is why Barth is so keen to note a theme which he later expands, that humankind “is the special creature of God’s special grace” (1958, 186, CD III.i, 41.2). In this, we echo our earlier observation of Barth’s setting of the discussion in eschatological terms.

There is a startling emphasis in Genesis 1-3 on the mutual/plural nature of humankind’s creation. This is notable from the occurrence in English translations of the word denoting plural, ‘them’, and its heavy usage in these opening chapters. There are twelve occurrences here, initially in relation to the command to multiply. As Davidson notes, “only a heterosexual couple, not a bisexual creature, could fulfill this command” (2007, 19). This ‘them’, then, is essential to the argument and direction of the text, even as it is directly related to a key part of this liberating imago Dei, the call to be fruitful and multiply. A close reading of this text forces the reader to notice and recognise the plurality here, the equal importance of male and female being directly linked to what human beings are to do, as well as, of course, to what they are.

One cannot meaningfully discuss the theological interpretation of Genesis 1-3 without acknowledging the events of chapter 3, known generally in Christian theology as the Fall. Here we see the influence of the serpent in causing/persuading humankind to go against the single command they had been given. The results of this are immediate, spoken by Yahweh who meets them in the garden and tells them the consequences of their action. Into a place where no hierarchy or specificity in male/female relationship had existed, there is a direct effect on that relationship, with Genesis 3:16b, “Your

desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you” coming as a different way of relating, coupled with the pain of childbirth for the woman and the pain of work and death for the man. Helmut Thielicke helpfully notes that, despite the changes that the Fall result in, “the male-female duality remains as a constant” (1978, 13). The vital element to view as important is that this’ “continues to endure through the crisis of the fall, except that... it becomes a disturbed relationship” (1978, 13). Thielicke’s project goes beyond the bounds of Old Testament theology, with an interest in the overall thrust of Scripture as salvation history, and we can note with him that “in the order of redemption men are called back to the original design of creation... as persons who stand equally under the grace of God” (1978, 13).

v. Conclusions and Suggestions

The other occurrences of the imago in Genesis have important things to teach us, too. As Childs notes, furthering the above discussion of echoes of our present passage in later chapters of Genesis; “The recurrence of the same terminology in Genesis 5.1 after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden makes it evident that the imago was not lost following the ‘fall’” (2001, 112). We have noted that gender relations have different qualifications applied post-fall, yet the imago remains. A further reminder of this can be seen in Genesis 9:6, where a prohibition on murder is directly linked to the notion that “for God made man in his own image” (ESV, Gen. 9:6). Clearly, even as the (now fallen) relationship between male and female continues, so too does the imago in mankind. That this is revealed in the context of an understanding of crime and sin is significant, stressing that the world is different.

Genesis, as a foundational text for Christian theology, is crucial for engagement with modern culture, especially conversations about gender constructs and relations. Claus Westermann identifies the danger of not recognizing the difference, or the equality, as he observes; “Every theoretical and institutional separation of man and woman, every deliberate detachment of male from female, can endanger the very existence of humanity as determined by creation” (1984, 160). Robin Routledge confirms the importance of recognising sexual difference in the image of God: “without a female counterpart, Adam’s maleness would have no meaning” (2008, 142). This point is important, and provides a check for those who might argue that sex/gender is irrelevant, as the provision of meaning and clarity is vindication for sexual difference, in one sense, and clarity of identity in another.

A further question, in closing, then, is perhaps regarding the notion of any visibility of difference, and what that might mean in the clear egalitarian trajectory of how male and female, equally image bearers, should relate to each other. We most note with

Anderson two key things, however. Firstly, that “gender identity which is expressed in terms of male or female personal being must be seen as an “ontological” rather than a pragmatic or social distinction” (1982, 109). This is in stark contrast to the fluidity of gender proposed by some recent theorists. Secondly, it is essential to note that this “assertion... does not entail a set of stereotyped characteristics by which to identify masculinity and femininity” (1982, 113). This stands in contrast to the efforts of some Christians to tie masculinity and femininity to proof-texts or certain historical-cultural models.

Whilst the focus of this essay has been on Old Testament theological interpretation, further consideration is perhaps warranted in terms of the way in which the language and concept of the imago Dei is carried over into the New Testament. Such a discussion would have a further set of texts to choose from, including those that impinge directly on contemporary debates within evangelicalism. One example of this is 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, which Michael Lahey wishes to discuss in relation to “the relatively recent dispute regarding gender in American evangelicalism” (2010, 2). Perhaps the debate here could be aided by the results of a consideration of the Old Testament text. A second example, wider in implication, is linked to the New Testament understanding of Christ as the “image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15). Here the work of Thiselton will be of particular use, spanning as it does the two Testaments and the discipline of systematic theology, and his conclusion, along the aforementioned trajectories of embodiment and relationality, is that Christ should be seen as “the paradigm case of the truly human” (2007, 241).

In conclusion, we have seen that to bear the image of God, the imago Dei, is to be human as male and female. We have noted androcentric interpretation of ha’adam does not do justice to what is actually happening in the text of Genesis 1-3, and that God has ordained sexuality as a good gift. The radical difference of the Genesis account as regarding humanity, in comparison to other texts of the Ancient Near East, has also been noticed, echoed in Richard Middleton’s concept of the liberating image. This has the added importance of being key to understand the ways in which humans differ from God in substance; God is above/beyond gender, not reliant on embodiment, and not subject to the effects of the fall. With regard to gender relations, it is demonstrable from the above study that because male and female share a “fundamental equality” (Davidson, 2007, 22), a mutual and egalitarian model for gender relationships is to be striven for. This is not to deny the important reality of sexual difference, but to echo humanity as originally created, with one eye on the eschatological dimension of restoration and redemption.

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