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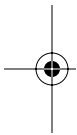
GOD'S IMAGE IN HUMANITY

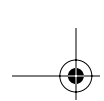
Sonja's childhood in Germany was spoiled by abuse of various kinds, while her teenage years and young adult life were marked by addiction to alcohol, pornography and sexual fantasy. Her early wounding predisposed her to believe that no one, especially men, would ever care for her. She thus sought to meet her own needs through drugs and fantasy. Such responses, in turn, led to shame and self-hatred.

Her affliction intensified when she was excommunicated from her church due to her struggle with sexual fantasies for certain men in the congregation. Sonja had never acted on these desires; still, she was deemed a threat. Abandoned by the church, she also felt abandoned by God. Ultimately she was restored to fellowship, but her heart remained broken in its capacity to trust God and the kindness of his people.

She arrived at Desert Stream Ministries in great need of the healing for sexual and relational brokenness we help supply. Slowly she began to open up to us. Through the prayers of caring believers, she discovered God's comfort as well as cleansing from her sin. His power began to replace the shame that previously had covered her vulnerabilities.

Especially helpful for Sonja was the love of the men on staff. Because of her history of abuse, most of which came from men, Sonja had yet to really trust men. She either hated them or fantasized about them from a distance. The pure respect and affection she received from





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the Desert Stream men further enabled her to receive love. She could then refuse both her illusions and her defensive self-sufficiency toward men.

Her growth continued over her five years with us. Sonja has since returned to Europe, where she coordinates the ministry of Living Waters—our healing, teaching and discipleship series—for the entire continent.

Sonja’s gifting to reach Europe became apparent during our first conference in Paris. Many had gathered to receive healing in areas of sexual and relational brokenness. They responded hungrily to the stories and teachings shared by all the speakers. However, it was not until Sonja spoke that the power of the Holy Spirit broke through.

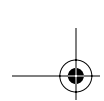
Her starting point was strength in weakness, physically speaking, as she was sick with the flu at the time. She haltingly stepped up to speak, then shared her history of abuse and addiction, the shame that pervaded it all and the slow but sure breakthrough of God’s grace. In all this the apostle Paul’s self-description could be applied to her. She “did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom.” She “came . . . in weakness and fear, and with much trembling . . . but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that [their] faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power” (1 Cor 2:1-5).

As Sonja spoke to the French gathered for the conference, her words pierced their hearts. People responded en masse to release their shame to Jesus so that he could cover their affliction with his powerful grace. The Spirit administered that truth mightily through a weak vessel, yet one containing the power of God.

Sonja exemplifies how God empowers us to love others well. And loving well really matters to God because he created us to be in right relationship with others.

Indeed God commands us to work out our humanity and our salvation together as male and female. Doing so exposes our sin—and a slew of weaknesses underlying our sin. But given the truth of who God calls us to be, we can honestly admit where we are not yet what





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we ought to be. We can then welcome God's strength into our relational weakness.

JESUS AND THE TRUE SELF

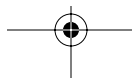
We need holy ground on which to stand and relate to one another, and that ground is our identification with Jesus Christ. His offer of resurrection raises us up so that we can approach one another with new vision and new life. As Pope John Paul II wrote, "When the human heart enters an alliance with this ethos, . . . the deepest and yet most real possibilities and dispositions of the person are manifested."¹ Jesus alone possesses the love that can call forth our true design from the darkness that has shrouded it.

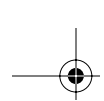
Suppose a painter created a beautiful painting, one that bore his distinctive style. His pride in the painting was matched only by his distress when it fell into the hands of vandals who mistreated the painting until its original design was barely recognizable. Their fingerprints smudged it; layers of dust and grime obscured the painting's true form and colors. The artist searched everywhere, going from gallery to loft to attic until he found his work. Then gently, with unerring accuracy and skill, he restored the work, repairing the damage and enabling his design to emerge.

Jesus is that master painter. He persists in love in order to reclaim the true self in each of us. Then we, through the power of his love, begin to emerge as we in truth are. This has profound implications for our personal identities and our relationships.

The biblical creation story provides the basis for understanding authentic personhood and relationships. Genesis 1—2 shows us our true design as male and female together. Genesis 3 provides the keys to how and why we became broken. The sources of our sin and shame, including the hostility between the sexes, lie there.

But while the creation story tells us how we got in this shape, hope for recovery of our true identity is anchored in our union with Jesus. His cross, in fact, is the lens through which we can view both God's





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design for humanity and its brokenness. Every barrier in us becomes Christ’s opportunity.

For some, beholding the damage done to humanity creates a temptation to despair. If that is the case for you, look up! Christ has broken the chains that shackle our efforts to love. And he pours out his power to enable even the weakest of us to love well.

In other words, we go through Christ to get to Adam. While the original pair—Adam and Eve—provide keys to God’s intention for our own humanity, especially in the areas of gender and sexuality, Christ alone is the means to authenticating that intention in our lives. What the Father wills for us, Jesus enables us to realize through his strength at work in our weakness.

MADE IN GOD’S IMAGE

God’s intentions for humanity are summarized by the declaration that “God created man in his own image” (Gen 1:27). Somehow we reflect him in a way that makes us different from any other created being.

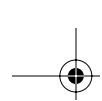
Our bearing God’s image means that we represent him. And a crucial part of this representation involves our having an upright relationship with him. How can one reflect light unless he or she is in a position to receive its rays?

Genesis 1, offering the first version of God’s creation of Adam and Eve, shows that they were upright before the Creator. These two stood in unqualified communion with him. Indeed I believe that worship of God was their primary identity and function—authentic worship confirmed their authentic humanity.

As one expression of their devotion, the pair had the authority to rule over the earth (1:28). Rightfully submitted to God’s reign, these human bearers of his image reigned with him over the rest of creation.

What is crucial for our purposes is that God’s image is revealed in dual form: humanity as male and female. Genesis 1 describes image bearing as a relationship between two human beings.





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God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them. (1:27)

Adam and Eve required more than union with God in order to know their true selves; they were created to know each other as well.

It is not too much to say that Genesis 1:26-27 provides the thesis statement for a high and holy view of men and women standing together before their Creator, united in relationship and in mission. Their service extends to one another as they represent God's powerful provision of love to the other. As Donald Bloesch wrote, "We find our humanity only by losing ourselves in the service of the welfare of our fellow humanity, who always exists in twofold form: male and female."² John Paul II extended this view by saying, "Man can fully discover his true self only in a sincere giving of himself."³

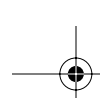
The bearing of God's image, then, involves two things for humanity: an upright relationship with the Creator and a commitment to relating to his fellow image bearers. The second creation account, contained in Genesis 2, helps us understand the implications of all this better.

MALE AND FEMALE

The creation account in Genesis 2 elaborates on the yearning for relationship that God instilled in his still-sinless human creation. Here we read how God declared that the man was ill suited to stand by himself. "I will make a helper suitable for him," determined the Creator (v. 18). Then he went on to form Eve from Adam's rib. The two met, drawn by their suitability for each other and yearning for their original unity.

While God created Adam and Eve both as bearers of his image, their meeting together authenticated that call. In other words, the two discovered their inspired humanity in union with each other. As John Paul II wrote, "Man becomes the image of God not so much in the





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moment of solitude as in the moment of communion.”⁴

We cannot discount nor downplay that call upon the original couple to become human in the rich exchange between the two of them. Though his humanity was determined by God, said Ray Anderson, “Adam cannot be complete without encountering himself in the other who is ‘bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh.’”⁵ His humanity hinged at once upon his communion with God and his communion with the woman.

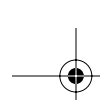
Part of God’s provision for Adam and Eve’s humanity lay in their difference. Likewise, we are rightfully called out of our aloneness by the blend of similarity and dissimilarity that marks heterosexual encounter. As Anderson remarked, “Intimacy is intensified by otherness.”⁶ How can one’s aloneness be eased, his or her humanity rounded out, unless that person encounters members of the opposite sex in their inspired difference?

The dance of difference between man and woman is in truth inspired. Its purpose? For the two parts to create a whole, thereby representing God in his fullness on the face of the earth.

Though Genesis 2 grants us few clues into the intrinsic difference between man and woman, one significant variance can be gleaned from the different forms of their creation. God formed the man “from the dust of the ground” (v. 7). This predisposed the man toward a special relationship with the soil; he would tend to be more identified with the work of his hands than would be the woman. She, on the other hand, was taken from the man (vv. 21–22). Eve was thus inclined to define herself more in terms of her relationships. We could say that her greater strength lay in her capacity to be for others, while the man’s greater strength lay in his doing.

These inclinations emerged out of creation and were free from particular role prescriptions. Before the Lord, both the man and the woman possessed a freedom for spiritual devotion and relational harmony. Their posture was upright before the Lord and each was secure in the love of the other. Together they bore the image as equal and yet





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different counterparts in God's whole intention for humanity.

In paradise the power struggles now common to male-female relationships did not exist. There Adam and Eve complemented one another in a way that revealed the best of each. I believe Adam, in his greater physical strength, loved Eve powerfully, encircling her softness in his desire to secure her in love. And Eve, in her more feeling heart, responded to his strength with powerful love—a love that awakened his heart and satisfied the emptiness within.

Their differences united them. In paradise they discovered wholeness, not a striving for power. Paul alluded to this interdependence when he said, "In the Lord . . . woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as woman came from man, so also man is born of woman. But everything comes from God" (1 Cor 11:11-12).

GENDER MATTERS

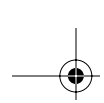
God's intention for humanity is represented by the harmony of man and woman together. But that freedom to be for another requires security in one's personal identity as male or female. Thus gender security matters profoundly.

In paradise that security was a given. But in the post-garden reality of a child's development, one can either grow or fail to grow into that confident posture. Whereas biology determines one's physical sex, gender identity involves the more complex process of acquiring a sense of oneself as male or female. And that process can go wrong.

Still, it remains true that security in one's own identity as a man or a woman precedes the freedom to be for another. The compelling nature of the "otherness" perceived in a member of the opposite sex results from the clarity and security one experiences in his or her own gender identity.⁷

The image of God, then, involves gender identity *and* complementarity. God created gender in its duality as male and female. And he created us as his representatives to discover that duality. In order to be





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true to the divine command, a person must reckon forthrightly and concretely with his maleness or her femaleness in relation to the other.

The “true self” always includes one’s gender identity and its relation to the opposite sex. We live in an age when many speak in hushed tones about gender differences for fear of sounding sexist. For the sake of truth, however, we must hold fast to gender identity and complementarity as central to the image of God.

John Paul II spoke profoundly to the power God’s image when he said that the “dignity and balance [of human life] depend . . . on who she will be for him, and he for her.”⁸ The harmony of man and woman together engenders security in the lives that emerge out of that union. Generations are blessed by the respectful, committed love between a man and a woman.

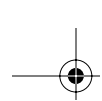
Karl Barth laid out three basic points that govern the outworking of this dignifying interdependence between man and woman.

First, one must be faithful to God by standing in one’s own gender. That means discovering the clarity and security we need to stand uprightly as ourselves in regard to the opposite sex. We find our distinctly masculine or feminine voice and in gratitude go forward to exercise it in relation to the other gender. Barth wrote, “The essential point is that woman must always and in all circumstances be woman: that she must feel and conduct herself as such and not as man. . . . The command of the Lord . . . directs both the man and the woman to their own proper sacred place and forbids all attempts to violate that order.”⁹

This increasing clarity and ease in one’s gender issues forth from God’s command to be male or female. Barth implored people to be not merely aware of their gender, “but honestly glad of it, thanking God that they are allowed to be members of their particular sex and therefore soberly and with good conscience going the way marked out for them in this distinctive.”¹⁰

Second, we are to go forward in our gender distinctive and engage with the opposite sex. “There is no such thing as a self-contained and





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self-sufficient male or female life," said Barth.¹¹ One lives out the divine command by "remaining true to this polar relationship, ripe for it and active to it."¹²

While gender security precedes wholeness in heterosexual relating, it is also strengthened by such relating. One is empowered in his or her own gender by actively engaging with the other. "The male is a male in the Lord . . . to the extent that he is with the female, and the female likewise." Barth insisted that such engaging be worked out in reality and not merely be assented to.¹³

Third, true complementarity involves masculine initiative and feminine response. Barth cited the special responsibility of the one who was created first. In humility before God, man takes "the lead as the inspirer, leader, and initiator in their common being and action." But of course this order "would have no meaning if [the woman] did not follow and occupy her own place in it."¹⁴

Part of man's greater tendency to do and to act involves his initiating with woman. Her response imbues the relationship with heart. He instigates, but she is catalytic in the union due to her more developed relational sensibility.

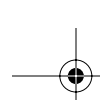
That in no way means that men alone initiate and women only respond. Over the course of their relating together, both genders interact with a variety of initiatives and responses. Still, there exists an essential rhythm of masculine initiative and feminine response that helps secure both parties in the goodness of their genders.

Man needs to act lovingly toward woman and to be blessed for it. She, in turn, needs to feel security in his love and to offer her heart to him. The command of God establishes a divine interdependence between man and woman that lends balance and dignity to the two as well as to those around them.

IMAGE BEARING APPLIES TO ALL

It may sound as though I am referring primarily, if not exclusively, to marriage. Though I will talk about the marital covenant as one expres-





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sion of God’s image, I want to make it clear beforehand that single people bear the image as fully as do married people. All are called by God to work out their distinctiveness as one gender in relation to the other. In that interaction we discover the provision of God for our aloneness and the practical need for what the other imparts that we do not possess.

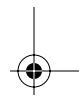
Perhaps we as a culture have so emphasized the sexual dimension of maleness and femaleness that we have lost sight of the power of friendship between men and women. We need each other. Many will not forge a marriage covenant, but all must obey God’s command to live interdependently with the opposite gender. One can become a good gift to the other without romantic intentions or practice.

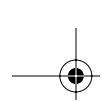
Marriage does not qualify one as a bearer of the divine image; God does. He commands unmarried and married persons alike to engage with members of the opposite sex. In so doing, we exercise our humanity and more fully reveal the image of God in us. “Unmarried persons . . . are not denied full completion of the imago dei,” wrote Anderson.¹⁵ And Barth declared, “Whether in love or marriage or outside this bond, every woman and every man should realize that he is committed to live consciously and willingly in this interrelationship, not regarding his own being abstractly as his own but as being in fellowship and shaping it accordingly.”¹⁶

But what about the specifically sexual dimension of our humanity? We experience the bodily urge to merge with a member of the opposite sex physically. How does that urge relate to our nature as bearers of God’s image?

SEXUALITY AND THE IMAGE OF GOD

The first thing to note about sexual desire is that God inspired that longing in us when he called us to be human, to bear his image as male and female. Indeed sexual desire emerges out of gender complementarity. What better reveals the difference between the sexes than





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the longing of the man to enter into the woman and the woman's desire to receive him?

We catch a glimpse of that longing for union in Genesis 2. God removed Adam's rib and reshaped it into the woman. Both now possessed an aspect of the other; each was whole and yet longed for communion with the missing part. That's why Adam declared of his wife,

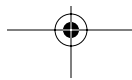
This is now bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called "woman,"
for she was taken out of man. (v. 23)

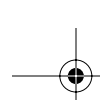
The longing of the two for their original state of union distilled the essence of sexual desire. It was a gift from God, as it emerged out of his creative intention for humanity.

In paradise, consequently, we glimpse the formation of marriage. "A man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh" (v. 24). The sexual act sealed Adam and Eve's reunion. It symbolized their oneness and satisfied their aloneness.

Such is the power of sexual intercourse. It makes us one with another for life. Though we continue to live as male or female with many others, sex renders the marital relationship exclusive. When we marry someone and consummate that marriage with intercourse, we declare a unique oneness with this other. Until parted by death, this one will be primary, and therefore others secondary, in the working out of our humanity on earth, before God, as male and female.

Yet in order for intercourse to be constructive, it must be preceded by a conscious commitment to unite with the other on levels less binding than the physical. We first must seek to know this other with our clothes on, revealing who we are on emotional, intellectual and spiritual levels. We can then determine if in truth this is the one with whom we will choose to share an exclusive lifetime bond. Only when two persons are ready to do the hard work of forging a lifelong com-





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mitment are they ready to become one flesh.

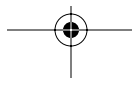
The intimate power of intercourse functions as the signature on the contract. Sex may deepen intimacy, but it is only inspired to the degree that the one is committed to the other in the totality of his or her being. Barth wrote, “The Christian will realize that he can only enter into sexual relationship with her if each is concerned for the whole being of the other, so that for both of them it is not a question of something partial or future, as in prostitution, but . . . as something total.”¹⁷

One is ready to be naked and unashamed before his or her desired partner (see Gen 2:25) only when committed in full to the other. Such commitment prepares the marriage bed. There the one-flesh union begins, only to be repeated over the course of a lifetime. Godly sex reminds both partners of their unity; it reinforces again and again the self-giving essential to finding oneself. We give the most powerful and precious offering of the self to the other. We then find ourselves, that lost part removed from us at creation.

But not only does godly sex require the boundaries of a lifetime commitment; so does the new life that is conceived in such a commitment. God commanded the first man and woman to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28 NASB). Children resulted from their unity. Similarly, today, in order for parents-to-be to fulfill God’s call responsibly, they must take seriously the need to provide a secure context for the raising of new life. The dignity and honor of children depend on it.

This parental commitment, furthermore, manifests with clarity the image of God as male and female. Through the presence of both parents, said John Paul II, children witness “the mystery of femininity [which] is manifested and revealed completely by means of motherhood. . . . Man’s masculinity, that is, the generative and fatherly meaning of his body, is also thoroughly revealed.”¹⁸

God makes it clear that his image bearers must live in dynamic communion with one another, thereby discovering and celebrating





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the good gift of one's own gender and that of the other. With a cross-shaped lens, we behold the beauty of man for woman and woman for man. None of us has ever lost that original design. No matter how broken we have become, we have never lost the potential to be good gifts for others!

