

## THE IMAGE OF GOD: MASCULINE, FEMININE, OR NEUTER?

Henry F. Lazenby\*

We have often been instructed to define the image of God without consideration of the sexual identity we possess as human beings. Theological discussion about the *imago Dei* has been largely confined to stressing the moral, personal, or intellectual qualities that supposedly constitute it.<sup>1</sup> The image itself is presented as somewhat generic in character. Both male and female possess it, but their sexuality as male and female has little if anything to do with its essential nature. The image of God is conceived of as an asexual sort of likeness to God in which human sexuality does not play a significant role. It has something to do with reason, original righteousness, human personality, or perhaps with ruling over the universe, but not of course with sexuality.<sup>2</sup>

When human sexuality is mentioned by theologians in connection with the image of God, the intent is usually to demonstrate how male and female differ with respect to it even though both may possess it. As Thomas Aquinas explained:

The image of God, in its principle signification, namely the intellectual nature, is found both in man and in woman. But in a secondary sense the image of God is found in man, and not in woman; for man is the beginning and end of woman, as God is the beginning and end of every creature.<sup>3</sup>

Aquinas' comments echoed the thinking of many patristic and medieval theologians.<sup>4</sup> Interpreting passages like 1 Cor 11:7-10 and 1 Tim 2:13-14 in the light of Greek ideas about the physical, moral and intellectual superiority of male over female, these Christian thinkers contended that while men and women are both created in the image of God, a woman possesses it in a secondary and somewhat diminished sense. The woman was created after the man and from the man. This implied that she actually possessed the image of the man, not of God. But because man himself was created in the image of God, it was legitimate to affirm that woman also possessed it to some degree. However,

\*Henry Lazenby is professor of systematic theology at Oxford Graduate School in Dayton, Tennessee.

<sup>1</sup>Cf. e.g. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941) 202-210; M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 2, 495-517; J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Scribner's, 1966) 209-214. A notable exception is K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958) 3, 1, 184-206.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. e.g. D. Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London: Collins, 1973); P. K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

<sup>3</sup>T. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger, 1947), 1, 472.

<sup>4</sup>See M. C. Horowitz, "The Image of God in Man: Is Woman Included?", *HTR* 72 (1979) 175-206.

the secondary sense in which she possessed the image of God was well illustrated in the Genesis account of the fall when she, not the man, was deceived by the serpent. It seems that her fragmentary possession of the image limited her reasoning abilities, which in turn greatly increased the likelihood of her being easily deceived at times.<sup>5</sup>

While some theologians today will not explicitly affirm the secondary nature of woman as God's image-bearer, they implicitly maintain such an affirmation in practice. For example, according to George W. Knight "men and women equally bear God's image. . . . Men and women are, in and before Christ, equal." He further comments, however:

Men and women manifest in their sexuality a difference created and ordered by God. By this creative order, women are to be subject to men in the church and are therefore excluded from the ruling-teaching office and functions. . . , which men alone are to fill. . . . Women have a function to fulfill in the diaconal task of the church and in the teaching of women and children.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that "equality" as an image-bearer of God does not entitle a woman to express that image in the same way as a man does. She is limited because of her feminine nature. She is to be subservient to the male, not because she possesses less reasoning abilities, as Aquinas taught, but because her existence as a female dictates that this is the way God intended her to live.

In the way Aquinas and Knight have related the image of God to human sexuality, an asexual image of God is proposed that ascribes the image to both male and female but with the stipulation that the male is actually the only one qualified, because of his creation as a male image-bearer, to express it in a definitive and authoritative manner. Thus the image of God is conceived of as asexual in essence but ideally masculine in character. While an asexual rationality or righteousness may constitute its essence, only the attribute of masculinity can express the image of God in its fullness.

This way of defining the image of God assigns to Christian women not just a secondary status in the Church but little status at all with reference to their physical qualities and abilities. It seems that for a female to have any real status she must conform to the image of the male, since the male is presented as the supreme example of what it means to be human before God. While the woman might be granted various roles to play in the Church and society as wife, mother, or teacher of women and children, her true status as a human being is measured by how well she is able to express the asexual image of God in a masculine way.<sup>7</sup>

The attempt by many theologians to define the image of God in an asexual manner is perplexing in the light of the key Biblical passage that speaks about it: Gen 1:26-27. The image of God is here closely linked with human sexuality.

<sup>5</sup>Aquinas, *Summa*, 1. 467.

<sup>6</sup>G. W. Knight, III, *The Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Chicago: Moody, 1985) 28.

<sup>7</sup>See K. Vogt, "Becoming Male: One Aspect of an Early Christian Anthropology," in *Women—Invisible in Theology and Church* (ed. E. S. Fiorenza and M. Collins; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1985) 72-83, for a discussion of this tendency from the standpoint of early Christian thought.

Human beings, male and female, are pictured as created in the image of God. But these verses do not merely affirm that God created both male and female in his image. Only when one has preconceived ideas about the image of God is such a reading possible. Gen 1:27 reads: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." In other words, the image is presented in such a way as to make the image itself consist in being male and female. As Phyllis Tribble pointed out:

"Male and female" correspond structurally to "the image of God," and this formal parallelism indicates a semantic correspondence. Likewise, the switch from the singular pronoun "him" to the plural pronoun "them" at the end of these two parallel lines provides a key for interpreting humankind . . . in the first line.<sup>8</sup>

When Gen 1:26–27 is read as a definition of the image of God in terms of human sexuality, a basis is established for explaining how human beings are to relate themselves to one another, to God, and to the universe in general that does not ignore or distort the sexual dimension in being human but recognizes human sexuality as a crucial element in learning what it means to be human. Moreover this basis establishes the equal worth and value of both sexes before God without having to read into the verses ideas about rationality and/or morality that are not actually found in the verses themselves.

In the Genesis passage "humanity" (*'ādām*) is referred to first in the singular and then in the plural: "God created *'ādām* in his own image, . . . he created him; male and female he created them." Switching from singular to plural corresponds to the switch from *'ādām* as a collective noun to the nouns that attempt to express the plurality of *'ādām* in terms of being male and female.<sup>9</sup> In these verses humanity is pictured as a unity and yet a duality. Humanity is one and yet two. The oneness constitutes the basis for the duality, and the duality only demonstrates and reinforces the oneness. In this way the image of God is reflected in *'ādām*. But how does oneness in duality express the image of God?

In v 26 the pronouncement is made that humanity is to be made in the image of God (*'ēlōhîm*). The "us" and "our" in the pronouncement refer to *'ēlōhîm*, a plural form, which in turn reinforces the plural pronouns used. Who the "us" is in this pronouncement, and the significance of the plural form of the noun in this context, has caused much debate in the past. Is it a reference to the Trinity, or a plural of majesty associated with God, or a heavenly court where God is conversing with the angels?

That the "us" is a reference to the Trinity hardly seems likely since it

<sup>8</sup>P. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 17. See P. A. Bird, "Male and Female He Created Them": Gen. 1:27b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," *HTR* 74 (1981) 129–159, for an alternative reading. Bird contends that the image "relates only to the blessing of fertility. . . . It is not connected with sexual roles, the status or relationship of the sexes to one another, or marriage" (p. 155). Bird's strict interpretation ignores the implications of "us" in v 26. The "us" defines both the status and roles of male and female in relation to each other and the creation.

<sup>9</sup>For further discussion see G. H. Tavard, *Woman in Christian Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1973) 9–11, 189–192.

presupposes an understanding of the being of God far more advanced than is found in the rest of Genesis. The plural of majesty is also suspect since it does not explain who the "us" is. The only answer consistent with the text and the rest of Genesis is that it refers to the heavenly court where God is in residence with his angels.<sup>10</sup> As Gerhard von Rad has observed:

The extraordinary plural ("Let us") is to prevent one from referring God's image too directly to God the Lord. God includes himself among the heavenly beings of his court and thereby conceals himself in this majority. That, in our opinion, is the only possible explanation for this striking stylistic form. Proof for the correctness of this interpretation appears in Gen. 3.22, where the plural again occurs just as abruptly and yet obviously for the same reason.<sup>11</sup>

In this way of interpreting vv 26–27, the image of *'ēlohīm* would refer to the unity that exists between God and the angels, a unity that is there in the midst of their immense differences. This unity is not based on the subordination of the angels to God but on the common purpose of ruling over the heavens and earth. The "us" references in 1:26; 3:22 accentuate a shared purpose and knowledge of God and the angels, not a subordination of one to the other based on their ontological differences.

The unity of male and female as *'ādām* is to reflect this image of the heavenly court. The unity serves as a basis for the domination of *'ādām* over nature that is mentioned in vv 26, 28, a domination that mirrors the domination of *'ēlohīm* over the heavens and the earth. *'Ādām*, as male and female, is to rule over the other creatures and thus reflect the image of *'ēlohīm*, the oneness of God and the heavenly court, in ruling over the entire creation. It is by ruling in oneness or unity as male and female that *'ādām* displays a likeness to God that is not possible for the other creatures.

The creation of humanity in God's image does necessitate a bestowal of moral and intellectual capacities that are not given to the other creatures. This is illustrated in Genesis 2–3. But these capacities are not ends in themselves, as would be the case if the image is defined only with reference to them. The capacities are a means to an end: to rule over the creation in such a manner that God's image as Creator and Ruler is reflected. Such an image is reflected only when male and female use their rational and moral capacities to rule in unity over the creation, when the two rule the earth as one in a manner similar to God and the angels ruling in oneness over the heavens. By ruling as one, male and female fulfill the purpose of God for which they were created. United as one humanity, male and female are one with God and his heavenly court. And it is this unity between male and female, and between humanity and God, that is destroyed in the fall described in Genesis 3.

From this perspective the image of God cannot be conceived as asexual but as bisexual in the sense that it is both male and female—not, however, in such

<sup>10</sup>See Gen 18:1–2, where Yahweh appears with two angels to Abraham; 28:12–13, where in Jacob's dream Yahweh appears with the angels on the ladder; 32:1, 24–30, where Jacob wrestles with God after meeting the angels of God. See also Job 1:6–12 for an example of God meeting with his heavenly court.

<sup>11</sup>G. von Rad, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) 57.

a way that part of the image is masculine and part feminine. The image is displayed when a unity exists between the two sexes, a unity where both are recognized as equal before God and united with each other in a relationship of complementary characteristics. Each sex complements the other in such a way that a unity of purpose and meaning is formed and the image of God is reflected.

When the image of God is defined in this way, it is apparent that it is not to be conceived of as something possessed by human beings in the form of reason, freedom, or righteousness. The image is found in the type of relationship that was designed to exist between male and female human beings, a relationship where the characteristics of each sex are valued and used to form a oneness in their identity and purpose. When God created human beings as male and female he formed them to exhibit a oneness in their relationship that would resemble the relationship of God and his heavenly court.

As presented in Genesis 2 the oneness designed for the sexes, which reflects the image of God, is most profoundly exemplified in the marriage relationship. Whereas Genesis 1 refers to male and female as man and woman, Genesis 2 refers to male and female as husband and wife. This should not cause the reader to conclude that only in the marriage relationship is a oneness possible that reflects the image of God. The marriage relationship is only one of many possible manifestations of it. Other relationships—such as father-daughter, mother-son, brother-sister, friendships between men and women—can also reflect it because the emphasis is on a oneness that displays a common purpose and meaning in human existence.

This is one of the weaknesses in Karl Barth's interpretation of the image of God as male and female. Even though Barth affirms that the image of God consists in man being created as male and female, it is not human sexuality as such that is being referred to but male and female in fellowship or relationship to one another as man and woman. As Paul Jewett noted: "Barth frequently speaks of the fellowship of male and female as though it were all one with that of husband and wife."<sup>12</sup>

The image of God for Barth consists in fellowship between male and female as husband and wife, a fellowship that reflects the fellowship of the persons in the Trinity. Sexuality serves only to differentiate male and female in order for them to demonstrate that in spite of their sexual differences they are able to have fellowship with each other. But their fellowship as male and female is only really exhibited in the marriage relationship. "As there is no abstract manhood, there is no abstract womanhood. The only real humanity is that which for the woman consists in being the wife of a male and therefore the wife of man."<sup>13</sup> The wife, in this relationship, is to be subordinate to the husband in order to reflect the image of the Trinity, where there is a subordination of the Son to the Father.

But our interpretation of the image of God as the unity of male and female in their rule over creation is an attempt to explain the image in terms that are consistent with the Genesis account. After centuries of theological comment

<sup>12</sup>Jewett, *Man* 46.

<sup>13</sup>Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 3, 1, 309. See also pp. 184–206, 288–329.

about the image of God it is difficult for a modern reader to interpret these passages without reading more into the verses than is necessary.

In turning to the NT passages that speak about the image of God—1 Cor 11:3–16; Col 3:10; Eph 4:23; Jas 3:9—we learn that the emphasis is on living in a way that reflects its holiness and dignity.

1 Cor 11:3–16 is the only passage that specifically mentions the image of God as it relates to human sexuality. The primary emphasis seems to be on encouraging unity in worship by the two sexes as God's image-bearers in spite of the sexual differences that exist between them. The unity is based on the present dependence of the man on the woman and the original dependence of the woman on the man (11:11–12). Translating *kephalē* as "source" would tend to support this interpretation. The woman is to reflect the image of mutual dependence in worship by wearing a veil, the man by not covering his head. By acknowledging their mutual dependence, Christian men and women can reflect the image of their Creator as they worship in a way that does not offend the angels (11:10).

In the history of the western Church, this mutual dependence was ignored as male dominance shaped the thinking of Christians and the ecclesiastical structures of the Church.<sup>14</sup> Women were denied leadership roles and assigned a subordinate place in life and ministry. In essence, being a member of the Church usually meant being in conformity with male priorities and desires. This is especially evident in the Roman Catholic Church. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has observed:

In this model of Church the reality of the Church is coextensive with that of the male hierarchy. . . . The Church understood as clerical-patriarchal hierarchy is not only exclusive of women in leadership but also establishes its boundaries through sexual control. It does not center Church around the strength and needs of its members or of humanity as a whole but around institutional patriarchal interests. . . . The Protestant Reformation has not changed this patriarchal-clerical model of Church but only modified it in so far as it replaced celibacy through the clerical patriarchal family.<sup>15</sup>

A definition of the image of God in asexual terms of reason, righteousness, or another attribute, with an accent on the superiority of the masculine gender to express it, assisted the creation and perpetuation of the patriarchal-clerical model of the Church since it left intact the sense of male pre-eminence and privilege inherited from Greek social and scientific thought.<sup>16</sup> Thus unity among male and female Christians could never be achieved except in a superficial manner. An inequality of the sexes was asserted, whether explicitly or implicitly, based primarily on physical differences. While the female might

<sup>14</sup>See B. J. MacHaffie, *Her Story: Women in Christian Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Tavad, *Woman* 125–186; Jewett, *Man* 149–159, for critical assessments of such dominance.

<sup>15</sup>E. S. Fiorenza, "Breaking the Silence—Becoming Visible," in *Women—Invisible* 7–8. See also R. R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

<sup>16</sup>See A. W. Saxonhouse, *Women in the History of Political Thought* (New York: Praeger, 1985) 125–150, for an overview of the role of women in early and medieval Christian life and thought.

assist, she could never complement the male because she was never placed on an equal footing with him. Her roles were to be impregnated, nurse infants, care for juveniles, and provide sexual satisfaction for the male. Her physiology determined her status in the Church and society, and her creation in the image of God was only an afterthought since she possessed it in a secondary sense.

This is why the question of the sexual aspect of the image of God needs to be addressed by Christians. If one chooses to define the image of God in an asexual sense without regard for the sexuality of human beings as male and female, the inevitable result will be the development of a male or female chauvinism in the Church and society that extols the virtue of one sex over another and justifies the domination of one sex by the other. Being a valuable human being entails more than being a personal, reasoning agent who is able to be righteous in Christ before God. It also means living as male or female in such a way that one's sexuality is not denied or suppressed but appreciated for the resources it brings in finding fulfillment and satisfaction in being human.

Past theological debate about the image of God usually began with a concept of the image rooted in abstractions like personality, freedom, reason, righteousness, or even, as with Barth and Jewett, fellowship. Such abstractions were then applied to human beings in general and made to serve as the essence of what it means to exist in the image of God. Thus men and women are God's image-bearers precisely because of their rationality and possession of a moral consciousness not evident in other creatures. Sexual identity is assigned a secondary role in this framework and is portrayed as of little consequence.

Some think it is enough to resolve the problem of inequality of the sexes in the Church, and the tendency of one sex to dominate the other, by permitting women to be ordained and have a greater role in the overall life and ministry of the Church. But if the idea of the image of God as consisting in reason or righteousness is retained in an attempt to find a solution to such problems, it will only lead to a competition between men and women in which each endeavors to establish his or her superiority or equality with reference to the other. In other words, so long as the image of God is conceived of as a kind of individual asexual attribute, men and women will continue to try and prove that their sexuality has nothing to do with their ability to perform certain tasks as Christians or minister effectively in the Church. And the more they do so the more they demonstrate that their sexuality has everything to do with what they attempt. Their sense of maleness and femaleness will always play a part in who they try to be and what they try to do. This is because "man is not a sex being in addition to that which he is otherwise, but the sex difference penetrates and determines the whole of human existence."<sup>17</sup> The solution is not to ignore sexual differences by asserting that they make no difference but to acknowledge that they play a pivotal role in how we relate to ourselves to one another and to God.

In considering the image of God to exist in terms of the unity that male and female can display when they attempt to complement one another, the inequality of the sexes is denied and the necessity for one sex to dominate the

<sup>17</sup>E. Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology* (London: Lutterworth, 1942) 352.

other is removed. Each sex can assume a significant role in developing a common meaning and purpose. Each sex can bring to human existence a way of looking at life that complements and completes the perspectives and actions of the other sex. The distinctions of the sexes, whether viewed in physiological or psychological terms, can now serve as the basis for unity and harmony. Sexual differences are now valued, and not ignored, in arriving at an accurate assessment of what it means to be human.

In essence, an awareness should arise from an examination of one's sexual identity that causes one to acknowledge the incompleteness of one's maleness or femaleness to serve as the only basis by which to derive one's significance as a human being. But it is not just a physical incompleteness of the kind imagined by Freud when he proposed that femininity develops because the female recognizes that she lacks the outer reproductive organ of the male.<sup>18</sup> The sense of incompleteness experienced by both sexes is a physical, psychological and social deprivation that causes one to recognize a relationship needed with the opposite sex that will complement one's identity and bring a unity to the experience of being human. In Genesis 2, incompleteness is described in terms of the inability of the man to find a creature corresponding to him and the subsequent creation of the woman to remedy this situation (Gen 2:10-21). Her creation brings completeness and wholeness to both (2:23-24).

The common experience of being in God's image implies an equality of the sexes that allows each to assume similar duties and roles in the Church and in society as a whole. To affirm that both sexes are equal before God is to admit that each has equal rights and obligations no matter what the differences in physiology between the two. Such differences should not necessitate differences in social roles or ecclesiastical offices. They should rather be harmonized and united in a way that safeguards the equality of the sexes and lets each complement the other. To limit either sex to certain roles in the Church or society, and to deny the right of one sex to occupy a certain office in the Church or society, only demonstrates a male or female chauvinism that may admit equality of the sexes in theory but that denies it in actual practice. When one sex is made superior and the other is either ignored, denied, or repressed, both sexes become less than human—and the unity envisioned by their Creator, when he made them two and yet one, becomes an impossibility.

<sup>18</sup>See R. J. Stoller, *Sex and Gender* (New York: Science House, 1968), for criticism of this aspect of Freud's theory. See also J. Money, *Love and Love Sickness: The Science of Sex, Gender Difference, and Pair-bonding* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980), for further discussion of physical sexual differences.