

IMAGO DEI RECONSIDERED: MALE AND FEMALE TOGETHER

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The popular press has designated the seventies as the "Me-decade," an era of concentration on such notions as "self-improvement" and "self-help." The obvious question is: have we improved? Are we "better" human beings for a decade of activities which promised character-reforming results from programs of jogging, dieting, therapy, meditation, etc.?

Doubtless much has been learned; hopefully, men and women are more interested in learning about themselves and the real choices which lie before them. But alongside many of the self-development programs is the subtle implication that it is simply or primarily myself that matters. This message reinforces (and perhaps contributes to) the shift within society from life in relatively stable relationships to life lived more or less on one's own. The catalog of social changes is familiar enough; we no longer live all our lives in one community, surrounded by extended family; many choose to remain single; religious experience is increasingly a "privatistic" as well as "private" matter. The old patterns cannot be recreated. But the shifts of recent years lead us to ask: what does it mean to be human? What is needed for full human life? What is the place in life of relationship?

An urgent task of contemporary preaching in the face of these often painful questions is to explore again the affirmation of the Bible's opening chapter:

And God created humankind in his image; in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. Gen. 1:17(1)

The basic biblical claim for the human self is that it is created in the image of God. Among modern theologians Karl Barth has been most insistent in stressing that this imago dei means the human self is inescapably relational. It is worth considering his claim in some detail since it challenges us to rediscover the meaning of the truly human as truly related being.

I

HUMAN RELATEDNESS AND THE IMAGO DEI

Characteristically, Barth states that the nature of the human is to be found not in scientific observation of humanity, but in the presence of the man Jesus. In him we see the perfect covenant partner with God and thus the man perfectly for others. God created all human beings for and calls them into covenant relationships which are the structure of the relation of God and humanity and the context for the fulfillment of human interaction. True humanity is never the isolated individual; rather it is what Barth calls "co-humanity," life which is shared with others: "We have to rule out completely the possibility of a humanity without the fellow-man." (2)

The basis for this inherent covenant relationship can be found in the nature or being of God himself. In the making of the covenant with humanity God repeats "a relationship proper to himself in his inner divine essence." Here is the first

indication that the imago dei in the human is more specifically the imago trinitatis:

Entering into this relationship, God makes a copy of himself. Even in his inner divine being there is relationship. To be sure, God is One in himself. But he is not alone. There is in him a co-existence, co-inherence and reciprocity. . . . In this triunity he is the original and source of every I and Thou. . . . And it is this relationship in the inner divine being which is repeated and reflected in God's eternal covenant with man as revealed and operative in time in the humanity of Jesus.⁽³⁾

Jesus is the quintessential image of God in that Jesus is perfectly obedient to God and the "man for others." The rest of humanity shares the imago as we live in relationship with others--as we and I-and-Thou, we are the imago dei.

Barth then argues that the existence of humanity as male and female is the exemplar of the I-Thou relationship: ". . . we cannot say man without having to say male or female and also male and female."⁽⁴⁾ Barth defines this as a "structural" differentiation from which no human is exempt. Though he does not use this terminology, Barth's argument is that there is no humanity without sexuality and that sexual determination is a fundamental and inescapable factor in any and all human relationships, whether between members of the same or opposite sex. As to what precisely constitutes the difference between male and female, Barth is cautious. Unlike Brunner, he does not wish to present a catalog of characteristics or roles. The critical fact is that the male-female relationship is a given: it is how we were created to be with one another, just as by grace it is given to us to be with God. We cannot decide not to be in these relationships without denying our very humanity.

Having said this much, and having shied away from an "archetypal" description of the male-and-female-in-relationship, Barth does maintain that this relationship has within it a necessary and unchangeable order. Beginning with an exegesis of Genesis 2:18-25 and continuing through most of the passages concerning male-female relations in the epistles, Barth concludes that man and woman exist in a necessary structure of superordination and subordination. The man is always primary, initiatory and the authority; woman is secondary, responsive (or passive) and accepting of the man's authority.

The foundation of this structure is two-fold: first, the relationship of male and female is the image of God's covenant relationship with Israel, in which initiation, primacy and authority are clearly on God's side. Second, the male-female-in-relationship is the image of Christ as his being and work is defined in Ephesians 5 and I Corinthians 11. In these passages Barth argues that Christ is pictured as the summary of all superordination (as he is the "head" of man and all creation): but Christ is equally the summary of all subordination or humility before God. So the female is to take the part of Christ's subordination to the Father as she relates to the male. Commenting on I Corinthians 11:3-7, Barth summarizes: "This basic order of the human established by God's creation is not accidental or contingent. . . . It is solidly and necessarily grounded in Christ."⁽⁵⁾

In concluding his discussion of the human as the imago dei Barth returns to the imago trinitatis. The human as created to be the covenant-partner is created "a being in correspondence to God himself."⁽⁶⁾ Human nature corresponds to the relationship for which humanity was ordained. Thus Barth can say that the human reflects the covenant-making and relational nature of God. God did not create the

human alone, but in his image, which is to say in fellowship.

God exists in relationship and fellowship. As the Father of the Son and the Son of the Father, he is himself I and Thou, confronting himself and yet always one and the same in the Holy Spirit. God created man in his own image, in correspondence with his own being and essence. . . . Because he is not solitary in himself, and therefore does not will to be so ad extra, it is not good for man to be alone, and God created him in his own image, as male and female. This is what is emphatically said by Genesis 1:27, and all other explanations of the imago dei suffer from the fact that they do not do justice to this decisive statement.(7)

Here then is Barth's doctrine of the imago dei: because God is essentially God-in-relationship, so the human as imago is essentially related, and the most basic and determinative relationship in which the human finds itself is that of male-and-female together. The major contribution of Barth's proposal is that it shifts the location of the imago from the isolated or independent individual. Traditionally, theologians have identified such human characteristics as rationality, spiritual capacity, or the ability of "self-transcendence" as the way in which the human bears the "likeness" of God and thus its distinction from other creatures. What is common to all these traditional interpretations is that it is the human being qua individual which bears the imago. (It is worth noting that in much of this tradition, rationality was considered an almost exclusively male characteristic, leading some to the conclusion that female was not included in the imago.)

Locating the imago in the male-and-female relationship has the obvious merit of bringing us closer to the biblical tradition. Throughout the Old Testament in particular, the individual is rarely considered apart from the covenant community: it is in relationship that individual identity is formed and grounded. Most notably with the second creation narrative, it is clear that the independent individual is incomplete (indeed many scholars argue that the adam lacked even sexuality) until the "companion" is created. This interpretation of the imago says something very accurate about the human condition: we exist and find fulfillment only as we are in relationship.

Contemporary tendencies to live life more or less on one's own do well to allow themselves to be instructed by this understanding of the imago dei. True humanity is truly related humanity. It therefore is possible, proper and important to stress the positive significance of basic human relationships as essential ingredients to full human life. Marriage is one obvious such relationship, but significant friendships are as well. The same should be said of family and broader communal ties. They can be vehicles through which the fullness of our humanity is both evoked and expressed. Of course their promise is not inevitably realized. Yet we cannot doubt, taking seriously the imago dei, that rightly developed relationships like these are utterly crucial to the meaning of our humanity.

II

THE STRUCTURE OF MALE-FEMALE RELATIONSHIP

Perhaps the most vexing feature of Barth's generally helpful stress on the relational quality of human selfhood is his insistence on a "necessary order" in the relationship. Though he believes it is a value free distinction, Barth claims a

position of superordination for man and a position of subordination for woman. The danger here is that all that has been promised for the relational significance of human life will flounder on an uncritical acceptance of inherited structures of the male-female relationship. Thus, while Barth has opened the door on the possibility of authentic human fulfillment by recognizing its relational quality, he tends to close the door before the goal is achieved. He perpetuates a structure of the relationship that leads to the dominance of one, the oppression of the other, and the fulfillment of neither.

The complaint is not simply that Barth is out of step with the march of time. It is rather that he has misused the analogy between humanity and the triune God. The result is a serious undermining of his own profound theological insight that authentic human selfhood inevitably involves relationship to other selves.

We have seen the way in which Barth focuses on the male-female relationship as reflecting the order within the Trinity: female subordination is the image of Christ's subordination or obedience to the Father. The question is simply whether this is the only or the best way in which to understand the analogy.

Thus, it is necessary that we examine briefly some of the major developments in trinitarian formulation and determine whether principles may be discerned as to how the analogy may properly be applied. The doctrine of the Trinity developed in the first five centuries of the church's life as theologians attempted to find rational (that is, philosophic or dogmatic) modes for expressing what the church experienced as God's revelation. In the writings which became canonical and in the liturgy, God was spoken of as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and yet all confessed that there was indeed only one God. The doctrine of the Trinity attempted to formulate an answer to this dilemma. The beginning of the settlement came with the doctrine of Athanasius and the Council of Nicea. According to this formulation, if what is said of the Father is also said of the Son, except that the Son is the Son and not the Father, then the Son is the same but not the same person as the Father.⁽⁸⁾ Here the distinction is drawn between "essence" and "person" (or between ousia and hypostasis, according to the Greek formulation). There was and could be, all agreed, only one essence or being of God. But the church came to assert that there were three distinct ways of being God, three Persons in one Godhead.

It should go without saying that the term "person" here is not equivalent to the modern definition of a "person:" i.e., an independent entity or substance with distinct center or will and understanding. In that sense, God is in fact only one "person," for the tradition always maintained that God had but one will and purpose.

How, then, did the church define the distinction between the persons? According to the formulation of Thomas Aquinas, the persons were distinguished by the relationships between them: the name of each person refers to its relation with the others. Thus the Father is distinguished by generation (or by being the one who begets), the Son is characterized by filiation (the one begotten) and the Spirit is denoted by procession (the one sent forth). At all times the tradition took pains to claim that these distinctions were real and not simply "masks" worn by God, while maintaining at the same time that the distinctions did not violate the unity of God. Often words like "community" and "harmony" were used to portray this relationship.

Throughout the trinitarian controversies and later formulations it is obvious that orthodoxy consists in holding together two sets of contraries: unity and diversity; order and co-equality. The church never questioned that the essence of God was one; yet its experience (in response to the life of Christ) was that of distinction in the manner of God's unity. Some interpreters claim that the Trinity

attempts to affirm the distinction of transcendence and immanence in one God. Once having affirmed the "one God in three Persons" the tradition then sought to hold together the principles of order and co-equality.

The church has often been tempted to emphasize one side of these sets of contraries to the diminution of the other. Probably the most frequent temptation has been to set aside co-equality in favor of order by concentrating upon the sovereignty of the Father God and the consequent obedience of the Son. The motive for this seems to be the "monarchian" tendency finally to locate authority in one Person and thus to designate that Person as the "source" of divinity for all three. This is the tradition of the west in particular and finds clear expression in both John Calvin and Karl Barth. The way in which this view of the Trinity has influenced Barth's interpretation of the human as imago trinitatis should be obvious. What is also obvious, however, is the struggle of the tradition to hold the contraries in tension so that co-equality is never compromised by order nor diversity by unity.

III

LIMITS AND PROMISE OF IMAGO TRINITATIS

On the basis of the foregoing, it may be said that the imago trinitatis has both limits and promise in the endeavor to understand the structure of male/female relatedness. Limits are involved because the terms of the comparison are palpably dissimilar. God is always one and God's relations are internal; humans in relationship are always more than one and the relationships are external.

Thus the human relationships which can be understood by analogy to the relations in God's life do not have a one-to-one correspondence to the relations within God. This renders inappropriate the attempt to connect different classes of human beings with distinct persons of the trinity, e.g., woman with the Son and man with the Father. The incommensurability of relations within God and between human beings simply does not legitimate such specific correlations.

However, there is also rich promise in a trinitarian understanding of the structure of male-female relatedness. For while there is no one-to-one correspondence between the persons of the Godhead and specific roles and functions within human relationships, there is a correspondence between the quality and character of internal relations within the Trinity and the quality and character of external relationships between human beings. The quality and character of internal divine relations serve as a model for the quality of external human relationships.

In a word, the Trinity can and should be seen as a model of partnership. The central affirmation of the Christian faith is that the one God is manifest in three distinct ways, which are not mere functions but "personalized" and understood as having real relationships between them. The uniqueness of these relationships is the complete agreement of purpose and will, a unity of action and intention which maintains real diversity and distinction. This vision can become a fruitful one for understanding human relationships and in particular for seeing how men and women ought to be related: united in purpose yet without compromising separate identity.

Finally a word must be said about how much cannot be said on both sides of this analogy. One of the striking things about the trinitarian debates is that the moment one moves beyond the distribution of origination, what is said of one Person is said of all because they share a common nature. This is curiously parallel to the state of the debate about the distinction between men and women. Once moving beyond the most obvious biological differences which have to do with procreation, it

is difficult if not impossible to reach consensus as to what if any "characteristics" are uniquely or even predominately male or female. Perhaps trinitarian dogma may give us guidance here: beyond the most basic distinction between male and female what must be stressed is the commonality of nature.

IV

CONCLUSION

What conclusions are to be drawn about the imago dei? First, that the human bears the image of God means that as God is not solitary or unrelated but rather a community of being, so humanity is created to be in relationship. The male and female--together--can be seen as the symbol for human relatedness because in that dyad we see a most fundamental human distinction, the reality of interdependence and co-creativity. Second, in discerning the point of the analogy between the Trinity and human relatedness we should look for models of partnership and unity which maintain distinction between persons while emphasizing at the same time what is common to all members of the human community.

Preaching can and should always be informed by substantive theological reflection. This understanding of the doctrine of the imago dei may effectively anchor preaching which seeks to challenge the destructive accounts of selfhood rampant in our time. Moreover, this understanding of the doctrine of the imago trinitatis may ground proclamation which calls us to restructure the patterns of our male-female relationships so that they may in fact typify the structure of all genuinely human relations: a union of purpose that does not compromise individual identity.

- (1) This translation is found in God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality by Phyllis Trible.
- (2) Barth, Karl, Church Dogmatics, III/2, p. 229.
- (3) Ibid., pp. 218-219. Underlings in this and all subsequent quotations represent Barth's emphasis as found in the German edition.
- (4) Ibid., p. 286.
- (5) Ibid., p. 312.
- (6) Ibid., p. 323.
- (7) Ibid., p. 324.
- (8) Lonergan, Bernard, The Way to Nicea, p. 57.
- (9) cf., Leonard Hodgson (The Doctrine of the Trinity) and Prestige (God in Patristic Thought).