Engendering the Imago Dei: How Christ Grounds Our Lives as Parables of the Divine Image

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The glory of God is the human being fully alive

—St. Ireaneus

Today the world will ask you who you are, and if you do not know, the world will tell you.

—Attributed to Carl Jung

She has done a good thing to me.
—Jesus of Nazareth, speaking of the woman with the alabaster jar

Introduction

“What does it mean to you that you are created in the image of God?”

When I conducted a qualitative study with a group of young women attending the Christian college where I teach communication, they did not know how to answer. After some reflection, they reported how the influence of their families and churches, as interpreted through the biblical narratives, were strong sources for understanding their identities and how they were supposed to live in the world. My experience echoes theirs: In more than thirty-five years in evangelical churches, I have never heard a sin story—male and female—to bear the divine image and charge to replenish the earth, and how Jesus Christ, as the incarnation and image of the invisible God, is engaged in the work of restoring this image in God’s fallen children.

In this article, I explore what it means to be created in the imago Dei, how men and women equally and interdependently bear this image and charge to replenish the earth, and how Jesus Christ, as the incarnation and image of the invisible God, is engaged in the work of restoring this image in God’s fallen children. Instead of reinforcing and codifying gender inequity as God’s plan, the Genesis narrative affirms the sacred nature of all human life, making our lives and actions living parables of God’s grace, as evidenced by the mutuality of men and women.

Narratives and gender identity formation

Who am I? What is my relationship to the world? Does my life have a purpose? These are a few of life’s most fundamental questions. Many find answers through stories shared within their communities. Alasdair MacIntyre noted how essential stories are to helping humans organize their experiences into a coherent reality: “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” He described the intimate connection between the stories humans tell and their understanding of their roles within a symbolic universe: “We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters—roles into which we have been drafted—and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed.”

Communication scholar Helen Sterk also affirmed the importance of narratives in the development of the self within a community, as it is only “through social relations, through communication and measurement against other humans, can one attain a self.” Further, in citing Carol Gilligan, Walter R. Fisher, and theologian Stanley Hauerwas on the connection of self, narrative, and community, Sterk concludes that “perhaps women even more than men, find narrative logic familiar, comfortable, and congenial and use it to make decisions about how to live their lives.”

There is no greater account from which to construct a life than the story of God as the master creator who formed human beings—male and female—to bear the divine image and to perform God’s work in the world. Yet, as the lack of awareness shown by these college girls, and varied interpretations of Genesis through history confirm, the connection between this compelling narrative and human identity has been limited and truncated. Further, these texts have too often served to justify the privileges, position, and power of men while reducing women to silence. I believe that the Genesis narratives offer the rich potential to bind together the values, identities, and symbolic actions of women and men, and that the work and incarnation of Jesus Christ help to restore that image.

From the Genesis narratives of creation and the New Testament, I make several assertions. First, both men and women bear God’s image and share the work of replenishing and caring for creation through their interdependent relationship and actions in the world. Each gender bears this image uniquely and needs the other to reflect it fully. Second, this gender unity and interdependence expresses itself within the very fabric of human gifts and capabilities as well as in the nature of human relations with God, other humans, and the world itself. In the fall and curses of Genesis chapter three, the distortion of the image is laid bare. Third, Jesus Christ, as the image of the invisible God, came to restore the image of God in God’s children. Through his life, teachings, actions, death, and resurrection, Jesus begins the process of recreating the imago Dei for both women and men and offers a paradigm for renewed gender balance. Finally, through the connection of values and identity with these crucial biblical narratives, all of human life—its practices and artifacts—can be read as parables inviting others to pursue the values of the kingdom of God.
In the beginning, we are image bearers

In Genesis chapter one, God creates the world in a progression of days, bringing order from chaos, light from darkness, life from nothing. As recounted in the narrative story, at the end of each day, God takes note of what he accomplished and declares it good. Then God creates humankind in his image:

Then God said, “Let us make people in our image to be like ourselves. They will be masters over all of life—the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the livestock, wild animals, and small animals.” So God created people in his own image; God patterned them after himself; male and female he created them. God blessed them and told them, “Multiply and fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters over the fish, birds and all the animals.” (Genesis 1:26–28 NLT)

Key questions that emerge from the chapter one account: What does the image of God mean? What can we know about God’s purpose for men and women in the created order? What were the humans commanded to do? How is the image of God reflected in both genders?

First question: What is the image of God and what does it mean that humans are created in this image? To begin to consider this question, we must look at the nature of God and what it means to image God. Bible scholars and theologians have long speculated on this mystery. I highlight the significance of male and female sharing and bearing that image and what it means to be “masters over all of life.” In the Genesis accounts, God created male and female in the imago Dei for divine connection, creativity, communication, community, and freely chosen caring for the world, as they mutually reflect God’s justice and love to the world.

Who is God? Historically, Christians understand God to exist in Trinity or as three distinct—yet united—persons in one. While the Bible never uses the word Trinity, theologians have proposed that the creation account is one place in Scripture where God as Trinity is present: the plural noun Elohim, indicating God “is somehow plural in relationship, so the created Adam is to enjoy the relationships that come from plurality.” This three-in-one God is found in both the beginning of Genesis and the gospel of John creating the world like a loving artist delighting in the craft. This good God makes a good world and is its moral center. The concept of the imago Dei of humans as a unity, a whole, is central to understanding the correct relation of the genders to each other in all of life.

The New Living Translation uses the word “people” to describe those God made in the divine image; other versions use “Adam” or “the Adam” which can be associated with the “them” of male and female referenced in the next part of the passage. “Human-kind” is another common English translation: “If ‘Adam’ is made in the image of God then ‘male and female’ have been made in the image of God,” Aída Besançon Spencer notes. “Conversely, in order to understand God’s nature, males and females together are needed to reflect God’s image.” God’s unity is reflected in the interdependence of male and female.

Second question: What does it mean to “image” God? In part, it means that humans both mirror and represent God. Hebrew University scholar Aviiah Gottlieb Zornberg explains that humans are like God’s shadow, or tslem, cast onto the world.7 The words “image” (tslem) and “likeness” (demuth), according to Old Testament scholar Richard Hess, are best compared with “the practice of ancient Near East kings of erecting or carving out images in order to represent their power and rulership over far-reaching areas of their empires.” The representative ruled when the king was physically absent from a place.9 This image, then, makes humans more than God’s shadow; it also makes us coworkers with the mandate to act as stewards in God’s replenishment of the world (Gen. 1:28–29).

How do we bear this image? Reformed theologian Anthony A. Hoekema concludes that the image of God within humans has two inseparable parts, the “structural” and “functional.” The structural aspect includes “gifts, capabilities and endowments” while the functional aspect stresses the “actions,” “relationships to God and others,” and the manner in which these gifts are used.9 In other words, human image-bearing involves the gifts we are given and the way we express these gifts in relationship to God, self, others, and the world.

Third question: Why make the image as male and female? Paul K. Jewett outlined three schools of thought about the “sexual polarity” of human existence. In the first two schools, the distinction of humans as male and female “has nothing to contribute” or is secondary to understanding the imago Dei.10 The third school, in line with theologian Karl Barth’s view, is that to be male and female is to reflect God’s image: “Not only do men and women participate in the divine image, but also their fellowship as male and female is what it means to be in the image of God.”11 Gilbert Bilezikian affirmed, “Neither maleness nor femaleness connotes a disparity in rank or function . . . they both share equally in the God-assigned task of creation rulership without any intimation of role distinctions.”12 Apparently, men and women reflect the nature of God in fellowship as a unity, and we need each other to mirror and represent that image to the world in all its fullness.13

Fourth question: What mandate is given to humans? The “Creation Covenant,” Dallas Willard points out, is what intimately connects us with God and each other as men and women. Humans are called to serve as agents for the shalom of God, reflecting the peace and unity of the created order. Each part functions according to its design, echoing fellowship between God and the interdependent humans. God has “equipped us for this task by framing our nature to function as a conscious, personal relationship of interactive responsibility with him,” Willard argues.14

Anthropologist Miriam Adeney named these mandates “the creation mandate” and “the love mandate.” In the fulfillment of the creation mandate, women must embrace the world, “because God has made us creative and commissioned us to exercise dominion on earth.” The love mandate means that women get involved with others “because God loves this world and constrains us to be his ambassadors of reconciliation.”15 She argues further that the dual ideas of “dominion and image-bearing” are connected to human...
identity as reflecting the image of a creative Creator: “In his image, we are creative” as humans who “order and structure and develop and beautify his world.” In this account, both men and women share the imago Dei; know harmony with God, creation, and each other; and share the charge to replenish and master creation.

The fall: disconnection, disunity, and distortion of the image

The story continues in Genesis chapter three when the humans betray God and each other through belief in the serpent’s lie and the action of disobedience. This betrayal results in the severing of relationship with God, creation, each other, and self. The fall distorts the imago Dei and results in the sins of patriarchy and silence, reinforced, in part, from the way the story has been interpreted by generations of Christians.

In the disobedience of our first parents, their lives fall apart. In their betrayal of God, the man and the woman lose their own moral bearings by severing themselves from the source of that morality: God. They listen to the lie of the serpent, doubt God’s loving care, willingly do the only thing that was forbidden, and then lose everything: intimacy with God, each other, the created order, and themselves (Gen. 3:8–13). The consequences of this severing of relations for the woman include pain in childbirth and desire for the man who will “be your master” (Gen. 3:16 NLT). Her struggles manifest themselves in relation to her body, her tendency toward enmiveness—a distortion of the original healthy interconnection—and the curse of patriarchy or perversion of the creation covenant. For the man, he is to struggle to make a living. Yet, even in the midst of these pronouncements, God “made clothing from animal skins for Adam and his wife” (Gen. 3:21 NLT). As God evicts the wayward children from the garden, they are still provided for and loved—and they are promised hope and redemption through the agency of a woman’s seed (Gen. 3:15).

What happens to the image of God? It is not lost, but it is distorted. As Hoekema argues, humans still reflect God’s image after the fall in their gifts and capabilities, but have lost their proper relationship with God in the expression of these gifts and calling to the world. While fallen humans still have their gifts and abilities intact, “they now use these gifts in sinful and disobedient ways.” So, all persons reflect the imago Dei and must be considered sacred. Thankfully, Jesus Christ, as the restored, incarnation imago Dei, came to restore God’s image in the fallen children of Eden.

Jesus and the restoration of the imago Dei

“Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” This is part of the liturgy spoken by many faith communities before the ritual of the communion table, as the faithful remember the story of Jesus’ passion, focus on its meaning, and identify with his death and resurrection. This symbolic action, as bread and wine are metaphorically consecrated as Christ’s body and blood, represents the means of identification with the life, teaching, and actions of Jesus as the incarnation, or God in the flesh. These are powerful images that have breathed life and empowered believers for two millennia. Jesus, as the image of God, restores this image to men and women through his life, death, resurrection, example, and teachings.

Jesus Christ, as the incarnation and parable of God, came to restore the imago Dei. Bearing God’s image in all of its fullness, Jesus affirmed the equality and agency of women, reaffirmed this central teaching from Genesis, restored gender balance in his relationships and friendships with women, and is still restoring God’s image today. As the incarnation, or the Parable of God, God literally becomes a living, breathing, working, embodied person in Jesus Christ (John 1:14, 1 John 1:1–4), whose actions and teaching are God’s means to bring about the reign of God. Identification and participation in this larger story transforms the smaller stories of each believer’s life into living parables of the kingdom.

Jesus as the restored imago Dei

In the opening of his gospel, John proclaims that Jesus is the “witness of the light” and states, “To those who did accept him, he gave the power to become children of God” (John 1:12 NLT). This power of restoration in the imago Dei is affirmed by Paul, who proclaims that Christ is the very image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15) who reconciled all things and made peace through his death on the cross (Col. 1:19–20), reconciling humans regardless of nationality, class, and gender. All are one in Christ, as reunited children in our identification through baptism (Gal. 3:26–28).

Throughout the gospels, we can see just what the living, breathing image of God looks like in relation to God, others, and the created order. Jesus was wholly committed to the will of God and to loving people into the kingdom of God. Likewise, the creation responded to Jesus as the imago Dei personified in miracles like healing and turning water into wine.

Jesus reaffirmed the primacy of the imago Dei and women’s equality

In considering how women identify with the teaching and example of Jesus as the re-engendered imago Dei, I will examine three related arguments from the gospel accounts. First, Jesus reaffirmed the equality and interdependence of men and women in the created order; second, he related to women as disciples and friends in a culture that did not, while, third, affirming women’s voice, moral agency, and action as God’s coworkers in the world.

Jesus reaffirmed the equality and mutuality of women and men from the beginning. In the discourse of Matthew 19:1–12, some Pharisees, seeking to trap him, ask about the allowable causes for a man to divorce his wife (19:3). Jesus tersely asks the teachers if they remember the story and replies, in affirmation of the imago Dei in the Genesis narrative, “Have you never read that the Creator made them from the beginning male and female?” (19:4). He adds that what God has joined must not be separated (19:5–6) and says that treating women as disposable property in marriage was permitted only “because your minds were closed” (19:8 NLT). This encounter subverted the existing power structures and treated women as full, voiced members of the human family: this was central to Jesus’ life and teachings.
Jesus recognizes the image-bearing action of women

In Jesus’ relationships with women, he affirms them as friends and disciples. Two incidents described in three gospels exemplify how Jesus affirms the symbolic actions of a woman: the unnamed woman with the alabaster jar. In Mark 14:1–9 and Matthew 26:6–13, Jesus is traveling toward Jerusalem during the final days of his life and stops to eat at the home of Simon the Leper. Then, “a woman came in with a beautiful jar of expensive perfume. She broke the seal and poured the perfume over his head” (13:4–5). Many at the dinner were angry at her extravagant action because they considered it a waste of what could have gone to the poor (14:4–5). But Jesus responds, “Leave her alone. Why do you rebuke her for doing such a good thing to me? You will always have the poor among you, and you can help them when you want to.” He continues, “But I will not be here with you much longer. She has done what she could and has anointed my body for burial.”

The action of the unnamed woman and the action of Christ are living parables or stories that illustrate the servant nature of the God whose image they each bore. All are invited to do likewise. Further, Jesus’ approval of her symbolic action as a living parable exemplifies Christ’s affirmation of women’s agency. This example highlights how the restored imago Dei is an empowering point of orientation for women and men seeking the sacred in their lives.

Jesus is restoring God’s image in humans today

Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection make it possible to restore God’s image in human beings. While this process is incomplete until the kingdom comes in all of its fullness, the Holy Spirit’s work of regeneration and our active cooperation and participation help restore our relationship with God, each other, and creation. As Hoekema states, this involves “every aspect of life,” and does not concern only religious piety in the narrow sense, but rather, “the redirection of all of life.” Humans are called to pursue this redirection and renewal of God’s image actively. Toward this end, let us conclude by considering how God redirects and renews our relationships with God, others, ourselves, and creation.

The incarnational life of Jesus reflects the very nature of embodied, everyday action as symbolic of a profound but hidden reality. Jesus, as the Living Parable, uses parables to reveal this reality and to beckon people to participate in the kingdom of God. Paul calls all believers to make Christ’s parable live practically in the actions of their lives, following in the footsteps of Jesus (Phil. 2:5), identifying with his attitude and example (2:12), and working together with God inwardly and outwardly to perform his purpose in the world: “You must work out your own salvation in fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you, inspiring both the will and the deed, for his own chosen purpose” (Phil. 2:13, NEB).

First, humans are called to look into the face of Jesus to reflect the glory of God. The veil separating us from God is removed as we turn toward God. The writer of Hebrews encourages us to look to Jesus as the author and finisher of our faith (Heb. 12:2), and Paul boldly proclaims in 2 Corinthians 3:17–18 (NLT):

For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. So all of us who have that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image.”

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Second, humans are called to pursue the renewal of God’s image actively. The call to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, to renew our minds so that we may know the will of God (Rom. 12:1–2), and the metaphor of clothing in Colossians speak to our active participation in the process of renewal. Like Stacey London and Clinton Kelly do in any episode of The Learning Channel’s What Not to Wear, Paul instructs God’s people to wear only the clothes that reflect their renewed image (Col. 3:1–17). Humans are called to “strip off” the old sinful nature (3:9), “put on” the new nature as we imitate God (3:10), and to clothe ourselves with the attributes of God, the one whose image we bear (3:12). In this image, we “represent” the Lord in all we do and say (3:17), and our lives become parables, reflections of God’s power and activity in our world.

Finally, as humans acknowledge the reign of Christ in every area of life, God will continually reveal his image in our lives. In Matthew 16, as Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” and Peter acknowledges that he is the Christ (16:17), Jesus then names Peter and bestows on him the identity of “the rock” (16:18–20). While it was quite a process to get there, Peter clearly went from being the man who betrayed Christ before the fire to “the rock” who proclaimed Christ to the three thousand converts in Acts. In every area of our lives, where we acknowledge who Christ is, he will tell us who we are as we are remade in his image.

A restored vision of the imago Dei serves as a liberating perspective from which women and men can understand how their lives and gifts have sacred worth in connection with Jesus, the Christ. In effect, women can connect with a renewed understanding of God’s image within them and begin to see how their spirituality, faith, values, and actions express God’s creation and love mandates in partnership with men. This cultural expression of religious values may serve as a living, enacted parable that persuasively invites those outside biblical traditions to become a part of the world of Christ’s story.

This egalitarian approach embodies religious language and understanding of one’s placement in God’s story and frames this story within the symbolic actions of lived practices as part of this experience. Both women and men find balance and can see their lived actions as vehicles for sacred meaning. Empowerment also emerges from a perspective focusing on the unity and cooperation of the genders and not in their opposition, or the struggle of unequal power relations. Instead, the concrete actions of men and women, in all of their forms, as words, ritual performances, and religious buildings, books, icons, and other artifacts, function as parables inviting all to participate in the narrative world they embody. These actions, in short, can be seen as sacraments, as they are commonly understood: outward and visible signs of an inward and spiritual grace.

Is every action of every man and every woman sacred and incarnational? No, according to the biblical narrative, sin and evil still exist in the world, and they must be unmasked, confronted, and overcome. Nevertheless, through identification and participation in Christ’s story and the perspective of the imago Dei, it is possible to connect our individual stories with this larger story and participate in restoration.

What does it mean to be created in the image of God? Hopefully, the young women of the Bethel College study, and the millions of women and men who live their lives in faith communities, can realize that their lives—and the fruit of their lives—can be sacred expressions of the values they hold dear. Through Christ, women and men are equal, active moral agents in the world, reflecting the image of God as revealed in the Genesis narratives. To be created in the imago Dei means that women and men are both called to be co-creators of culture and to replenish the earth, reflecting the very being of the divine.

Notes

1. Islamic tradition speaks of the creation of two persons: Adam and Hawwa (Eve), although her name is not mentioned in the Qur’an. As with the Genesis account, Adam was created from earth (15:26), and men and women share the same nature which joins them in love (7:189) [cited 4 April 2007]. Online: http://islam.about.com/od/creation/a/creation_2.htm.


10. Paul K. Jewett, Man as Male and Female (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975). Jewett adds to the point: “Rarely, of course, do the affirmations of any major thinker fall neatly into one of these categories” (23).

11. Jewett, Man as Male and Female, 24.


13. Hoekema, Created in God’s Image, 97.


17. Hoekema, Created in God’s Image, 72.

18. According to Moses, a man could give his wife a bill of divorce if he was displeased with her (Deut. 24:1–4), and the Pharisees sought to trap Jesus in his answer. Perhaps they were also looking for affirmation of this practice favoring the whims of husbands.


21. Hoekema, Created in God’s Image, 88.

22. Emphasis added.