

Book Review

The Cross and Gendercide: A Theological Response to Global Violence Against Women and Girls

By Elizabeth Gerhardt (IVP Academic, 2014)

REVIEWED BY SHAUN C. BROWN

The media has in recent years given increasing attention to global violence toward women and girls. In 2012, the Academy Award for Best Documentary (Short Subject) went to *Saving Face*, which focuses upon survivors of acid attacks in Pakistan. In October 2014, Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani teenager, became the youngest ever Nobel Peace Prize laureate for her activism on behalf of young people (especially girls) denied access to education. Another past Nobel Peace Prize laureate, former US President Jimmy Carter, has also committed himself to activism on behalf of subjugated women. In light of these occurrences, Gerhardt's *The Cross and Gendercide* is a timely work.

Gerhardt confronts domestic violence, rape, gender-selective abortions, female genital mutilation, sex trafficking, early marriage, disfigurement, and other acts of violence toward women and girls around the globe. Gerhardt utilizes the term "gendercide," coined by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn in *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunities for Women Worldwide* (Knopf, 2009), as an umbrella term that can refer to all of these acts of violence. She also notes that many women and girls live in poverty and lack access to education, nutrition, clean water, and basic health care.

She warns the church against "detached confessionism"—the preaching of the gospel divorced from the "reality of the plight of millions of women and girls" (19). Alongside the need for prayer and reflection, she argues, "What is needed is a powerful, holistic and missional response rooted in a biblical theology of the cross because a theology of the cross does not separate proclamation of the gospel from the prophetic and active role of working to end injustice for millions of women and girls" (25). She sees the gospel as "the right point of departure" for the church's response to gendercide (32). In addition to theological resources, she utilizes the writing of journalists, social scientists, and statisticians, as well as her own extensive experience with victims of gendercide as a clinical counselor, battered women's program director, and educator.

Gerhardt notes, "Historically, most societies have tolerated physical abuse of women when it occurs in a family setting," seeing this violence as a "private matter" (60). Many have blamed the victims of abuse rather than supporting and protecting women from male aggressors. Unfortunately, the Christian tradition has also often tolerated domestic violence. Gerhardt connects this tolerance with theological views that blame women for the fall or see women as an impediment to male sexual purity. Fortunately, support for abused women has increased through the building of women's shelters and the criminalization of domestic abuse. Unfortunately, Gerhardt notes, "Christian churches in the United

States were marginally represented in these late-twentieth-century efforts to end violence against women" (65).

Gerhardt notes that while human rights language concerning violence toward women and girls is relatively new in the United States, statements on human rights by the United Nations or other organizations in Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Africa have used rights language for decades. She argues that human rights language "ensures its high visibility" (69). She also discusses the relationship of human rights to the Bible and theology, noting the use of human rights language used by Lutheran and Reformed theologians, as well as in encyclicals by popes John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II. Gerhardt rejects the discussion of human rights in the abstract and says, "The gospel is the foundation for human rights" (77).

Gerhardt primarily develops her theology of the cross in dialogue with Martin Luther. She argues, "A theology of the cross is rooted in the self-giving act of Jesus on the cross" (84). While a theology of the cross does not negate human experience, Gerhardt notes, it "shifts the center of ethics from human experience to the *theologia crucis*" and "provides a broader paradigm for addressing" issues of injustice like gendercide (84). Since Christians are called to take up their crosses and die to themselves, then "Christ is the starting place for the mission of the church" (86). The cross of Christ conquers evil and gives the church freedom "for the other as God has acted for us" (86). As Luther emphasized, the Christian is justified by faith "that empowers works" (102).

Gerhardt sees Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church's response to Nazi Germany as "a helpful example of one church response that was rooted in a theology of the cross" (114). She sees Bonhoeffer's discipleship, confession, resistance, and proclamation that the church act on behalf of the other as a framework for the contemporary church's response to gendercide. Gerhardt closes the book by calling the church to theological reflection, confession for its past sins, activism, prophetic speech on behalf of the voiceless, and providing aid to victims through programs like counseling services, transitional housing, and microfinancing. Churches should also provide leadership opportunities for women.

Gerhardt's work has a few weaknesses. While she is correct that Christians have misused theology to tolerate abuse of women, in her historical account of Christian views of women she paints with too broad of a brush and misses resources that could have aided her theological critique of gendercide (e.g., John Chrysostom's critique of violence toward wives and female slaves). In addition, she associates the medieval church with an

emphasis upon “piety” at the expense of “social ethics,” ignoring the role of the church and monasteries in developing hospitals and other services for the poor and downtrodden. Gerhardt’s account lacks any engagement with Christian ethicists, such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Oliver O’Donovan, and Stanley Hauerwas, who see “rights” language as inadequate because of its complicity in liberal social orders, and instead understand justice as right order and/or mutual obligation within particular virtue-forming communities. She also accepts the view popular in the twentieth century that God suffers in God’s nature.

Despite these weaknesses, Gerhardt’s work has much to commend, and her own experience with victims of gendercide only bolsters her scholarship. She correctly identifies abuse

and oppression of women and girls due to their gender as sin and heresy, and provides churches with resources to confront gendercide locally and globally.



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Book Review

Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God

By John F. Kilner (*Erdmans, 2015*)

REVIEWED BY CHRISTA L. MCKIRLAND

In his book, *Dignity and Destiny: Humanity in the Image of God*, bioethicist John F. Kilner sketches the theological history of the image of God, critiques prominent viewpoints from this sketch, and offers a robust formulation of what it means to be in God’s image. Since the understanding of this theological doctrine has both dignified and vilified certain human beings, Kilner astutely asserts the importance of explicating this doctrine well. All human persons, regardless of sex, ethnicity, class, ability, etc., must be valued, and this book gives the theological underpinning for the imperative nature of this valuation.

Kilner begins with stark examples of how the image of God has been used as a weapon to oppress certain human beings. Such oppression was especially prevalent, for example, during the time of slavery in the United States and has been used throughout church history to subordinate women to men. He specifically notes how women have borne the brunt of a misunderstood image of God, especially when it has been associated with rationalism and the soul. Women have been caricatured as being less rational, less spiritual, and consequently, less in the image of God and even less human. Kilner argues this is the necessary consequence of basing the image of God on the manifestation of certain attributes believed to be the possession of males rather than females.

The second chapter proffers that the starting point for understanding the image of God is Jesus Christ since he *is* the image of God. Here, Kilner offers the thesis of his book: “*actual* likeness to God is not what being created in God’s image involves. Creation in God’s image is God’s expressed *intention* that people evidence the special connection they have with God through a meaningful reflection of God” (79). This approach differs

markedly from most theological approaches throughout church history. Instead of claiming that humans intrinsically possess the image of God, Kilner affixes the divine image to God’s intention that all people *become* like Christ. Furthermore, humans are created in this image as whole beings—including the physical and non-physical. This formulation ensures that everyone is equally in the image of God, regardless of attributes, and it also inhibits sin from damaging the image.

Knowing that many theologians have argued for an attributive understanding of the image of God, Kilner shifts to exegetical support for all persons being in the image of God, regardless of their attributes. A helpful distinction he articulates in ch. 3 is between image and glory. Being in the image of God cannot be degraded, but how well someone reflects God’s glory can be degraded. A potential concern might arise here for an egalitarian reader since Kilner claims that men and women reflect God’s glory differently (94). Although he is clearly making the point that men and women share the same image, his argument could be interpreted as “equal in image (essence), different in glory (function).” For this reason, a more complete elaboration of what this means would strengthen his argument.

Chs. 4 and 5 focus on the impact of sin on the image of God and also on misunderstandings about the image that have pervaded church history. Since Jesus Christ is the image of God and humans are in this irrevocable image, sin cannot mar it. This remains true for all human beings, regardless of whether they are being conformed to the image of Christ. Furthermore, maleness and femaleness do not constitute the image of God. Kilner argues, focusing on the Hebrew syntax of Gen 1:27, that the statement “male and female he created them” gives the means by which