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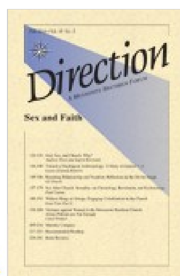

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Reuniting Relationship and Vocation: Reflection on the Divine Image

Gil Dueck

[1] We live in times where the value and dignity of human beings is a topic worthy of sustained discussion. On the one hand, there is an unreflective "givenness" around human uniqueness. Human rights language is axiomatic in ethical conversations and the need to dismantle various forms of oppression is grounded on self-evident notions of human equality and worth. We seem fairly convinced that humans are special and unique. But it seems that the *nature* of human value and dignity is an increasingly slippery concept.

> *I wonder if a notion of human identity that says only that we are fundamentally good and built for relationship could…lead to unintended and unwelcome results.*

We also live in somewhat misanthropic times. There is plenty of interest in knocking the human off the top rung of the ladder as a response to some of our more egregious behavior. Perhaps, some wonder, we would do well to reemphasize our embeddedness within the created order as an antidote to our tendency to exploit one another and creation for selfish and short-sighted purposes. There are insistent voices {150} arguing that belief in human uniqueness is a form of "speciesism," which enables all manner of destructive tendencies.[2]

It seems, then, that we are simultaneously enthusiastic and anxious about ourselves—a dilemma that certainly ought to be suggestive. As Christian Smith remarks, "Perhaps the mystery we are to ourselves makes us uneasy."[3]

This mystery impinges directly on our agonized questions in the area of sexuality, questions that have acquired a marked urgency in light of both frenzied cultural conversations as well as the real experiences we must navigate within our families and communities. What seems harder in these polarized times is to find the space to locate ourselves and our questions within larger historical, cultural, even theological frameworks.

WHAT IS A HUMAN BEING?

All this is to say I consider it to be a decidedly healthy instinct to talk

about sex within a wider conversation around theological anthropology. What, under God, is a human being? We need to acknowledge that we are incredibly mysterious creatures and this mystery can be approached from multiple angles. And it's precisely the *size* of this question that sidelines it in our conversations around human sexuality. It feels too big. It's kind of like the question: *What is the meaning of life?* It's too important to ever talk about.

Laura Schmidt Roberts began her plenary address at the 2015 MB Study Conference by asking the question of where we begin with respect to our theological anthropology. Do we begin in Genesis 3 or Genesis 1? Do we begin by naming the human as "sinner" or do we begin by naming the human as "image-bearer"? While this question may seem overly simplistic, I think it is foundational because it forces us to ask whether we have a *humanity-affirming* or a *humanity-denying* anthropology?

When studying this topic with students over the past decade, I would often begin with a paraphrase of Blaise Pascal's well-known words, "Our greatness and our wretchedness are both so evident that a true understanding must account for such amazing contradictions." In other words, our anthropology needs to make sense of Genesis 1 *and* Genesis 3. We need to account for our glory as those unique creatures who alone bear the divine image. And we need to honestly face the manifest conclusion that this glory is dimmed and distorted as it is refracted through our actual choices and lived experience.

This is an incredibly important balance to get right. Because even if we *say* that we begin with Genesis 1 and human goodness, the church has the reputation of putting the accent on Genesis 3 and especially so in the area of sexuality. We have been heard as "bad news people" who are {151} primarily interested in sexual repression and moral coercion. Reputations are not always fair, of course, but they are often indicators of how the church's collective voice is being heard.

What I want to consider below is not specifically the particulars of our theological anthropology, though I will offer a few nods in that direction. I want to consider, rather, *how that anthropology is heard in our particular context*. I believe this is especially important as we discuss how our vision of what makes us human informs our convictions in the areas of identity and sexuality.

Our culture has a framework or set of assumptions within which sex "fits" and acquires meaning. Jonathan Grant, in his helpful book *Divine Sex*, borrows from Charles Taylor's notion of "modern social imaginaries"[4] and describes a distinctly modern "sexual imaginary." He uses this term to indicate the way that widely-held cultural ideals in the area of authenticity, freedom, consumerism, and therapy have shaped our collective imagination in the area of sex and relationships.[5] Even if Grant's particular description of this "imaginary" can be debated, it seems hard to deny that *something* like this is operating in the background as we discuss human identity and sexuality.

My argument is that a Christian articulation of what constitutes human identity and what this means for our understanding of sexuality will "sound" different in different contexts. We will always put certain words in bold print depending on who we think needs to hear them. Our voices will go up in certain places because of who we imagine is listening to them. And this means we need to pay careful attention to both our convictions and our context, which is crucially important for our theological anthropology.

Roberts has bolded the word "relationship" with respect to how we identify our uniqueness as image-bearing creatures. As humans, we are dependent upon God for our identity. We are interconnected with one another and the rest of creation and this interrelatedness needs to be foregrounded as we talk about human identity. Relationship is a hard theme to overemphasize. The God whose image we bear, is a lover. God has always been a lover—a singular, eternal, self-giving community of three persons. And if this is our God, the term "relationship" must bear heavy weight when it comes to understanding how we bear God's image.

THE CULTURAL MANDATE

But I wonder if it can bear *all* of the weight. Specifically, I wonder if placing the heaviest accent on this particular aspect of the divine image, *at this particular cultural moment*, might give unintended support to {152} other anthropological narratives. I want to suggest that we might need to rehabilitate the Gen 1:28 command to fill the earth and subdue it as an important vocational counterweight to notions of the image of God that lean heavily on either ontology or relationship.

The command to fill and subdue the earth, sometimes referred to as the "cultural mandate," teaches us that God the Lover is also God the Maker. It teaches us that the love of God that existed from eternity spilled over into a world, into creation, into *others*. This means we have to conclude that love is by nature *generative*. It is not best understood as a static quality of relationship but rather as way of being in relationship that *does things* in the world.

The loneliness of Adam is the first problem, the first "not-good" that we confront in the creation story. It was not good for Adam to be alone. It is not good for us to be alone. And this is a significant and prophetic word in a culture where loneliness is endemic. But the loneliness of Adam is corrected, not only so that he and Eve could hang out together, watch some Netflix in the evenings, and meet each other's emotional needs for a few decades. Their love was meant to be extended into creation; it was meant to be generative.

I don't mean this only in the sense that they had children, although this point should not be understated in a time when the link between love and children has been so profoundly destabilized. I mean it in the larger sense that the original human task was to co-create along with God—to make something out of the garden, to bring order to the chaos, to build fences, to plant seeds, to design products, to compose music, to write books—in short, to *rule*. The

relational aspect of the divine image extends directly into the vocational.

The fact that the command to rule is given before the fall means that it is not a function of distorted power-relationships on the other side of human sin. This is clear when we look to the final scene in Revelation when Eden is restored and the curse of sin is removed and the redeemed see God face to face. Even then, the promise is, "they will reign for ever and ever" (Rev 22:5). In the beginning and in the end, *human* is a creature that is given dominion, called to rule and destined to reign forever.

HOW WE ARE HEARD

The question we need to ask is, How do our convictions on this feature of human identity sound *today*?

In our current cultural moment, we seem reluctant to talk about the human vocation and the reasons are mostly understandable. We have not, for the most part, done a very good job of ruling. Our "dominion" has not been good news, neither in the area of human relationships nor {153} in the area of our relationship to creation. We've played manipulative power games; we've used each other and the resources of creation for selfish and destructive purposes. We've been really interested in our own kingdoms and marginally interested in mediating the rule of the Servant King. And we know this.

More than this, we live in a cultural setting where we are aware of ecological crisis and of our contribution to the mess. We're aware that people lay some of the blame for this at the feet of those who read Genesis 1:26 and believe it's talking about them. Ours is a cultural moment that is simultaneously passionate about the dignity and worth of individuals while also harboring quiet suspicions that this whole planet might be better off without us. So we're a bit reluctant to name the human as *ruler*.

But our reluctance may give away too much. In our anxiety about the darker side of our glory, we may give away something important about our calling, even something fundamental to our identity. More worryingly, we may be left with a theological anthropology that offers a great case for authenticity and relationship but has trouble naming our brokenness and calling us to something beyond ourselves.

Over the better part of a decade I had the privilege of interacting with young adults at Bethany College, and each year we would go through the basics of Christian theology, including our convictions on theological anthropology. I would get mostly sleepy nods of somewhat disinterested agreement.

For my students these themes were, for the most part, uncontroversial: we were created in the image God which made us good. That was kind of obvious to most of them because they had been told they were special since the day they were born and had that message reinforced by every Pixar and Disney offering that their weary parents allowed. Human goodness and uniqueness are not hard to sell in a culture like ours.

Likewise, I never had a hard time convincing anyone that we were all fallen into sin. After all, "nobody's perfect," and "we all make mistakes" are truisms in the age of authenticity. And if our own sin is not immediately apparent to us, surely we can look at the world and realize that *something* has gone wrong. We may have all silently supposed that the really bad stuff was being done by other people, but we also knew ourselves well enough to know that we couldn't avoid all the blame.

SELF-EXPRESSION VERSUS VOCATION

But what became increasingly obvious to me over the years was that there was another "script" that was informing how many of my students saw themselves. I recognized it in them; I recognized it in myself. This {154} script has been summarized by Charles Taylor and others as the authenticity narrative. Many of my students wouldn't have known this term. Most of them would not have been able to describe its particulars. But it was part of the cultural air they had breathed; it was the imaginary that funded their imaginations.

The story's protagonist is the expressive individual. The central problem facing this person is a world that seeks to repress their uniqueness. The solution is for the individual to look within and find an essential "self" and then find the courage to embrace it. Taylor has aptly summarized this narrative: "Everyone has a right to develop their own form of life, grounded on their own sense of what is really important or of value. People are called upon to be true to themselves and to seek their own self-fulfillment. What this consists of each must, in the last instance, determine for him- or herself."[6] The key, of course, is the notion that being true to oneself involves a look *inward*, both for the *content* of the self as well as for the *authority* which can validate that self.

Once that self is discovered, it needs to be affirmed, nurtured and eventually externalized into the broader world. In our more honest moments, we have to admit that this self is often a bit idealized. It's been touched-up a bit so that it will play well on Facebook. But it's still identifiably *us* and it offers an identity, a purpose, and even a touch of heroism as we resist the forces of conformity and bravely chart our own paths.

Obviously Roberts's presentation is not an affirmation of this narrative. She is very clear that we are defined by our dependence upon God and our interdependence with all that God has made. She rightly emphasizes our *creatureliness* and suggested that we do not look inward but upward if we want to locate ourselves properly. This is a helpful and necessary antidote to what Taylor calls "the dark side of individualism," a view that "flattens and narrows our lives, making them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others and society."[7] A healthy notion of creaturely interdependence is an essential reply to this distortion.

But I wonder if a theology of the divine image that puts the heaviest accents on relationship and speaks in muted tones about vocation will enable

us to resist this powerful cultural script. I wonder if a notion of human identity that says only that we are fundamentally good and built for relationship could be refracted through a broken cultural lens and lead to unintended and unwelcome results. Ultimately, I worry that this refraction could unintentionally reinforce an anthropology that is content to simply affirm us in our uniqueness and teach us to aspire for connectedness with others.

I am not, to be clear, intending to minimize the relational aspect of the divine image—this is a crucial correction to more ontological {155} accounts. We are defined not only by our innate capacities or attributes by *whose* we are and the entire biblical story rests upon the bedrock of God's relational fidelity to his people. But I am increasingly reluctant to stop there. I am convinced that the *relational* aspect of the divine image needs the *vocational* aspect of the divine image and all the more because of the particular social and sexual imaginaries with which we must contend.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I want to offer two important benefits that are offered by a vocational reading of the divine image alongside Roberts's relational reading.

First, a vocational accent on the image of God reminds us of the wild, untamed, beautiful and (sadly) chaotic nature of creation. And much of that chaos is inside of us. Whether we acknowledge it or not, that chaos is crying out for order. A vocational reading of the divine image teaches us to look at the world and ourselves honestly. It refuses to settle for the misleading cultural imperative to "be true to ourselves" as if this was the highest available aspiration.

More than this, a vocational reading of the divine image invites us into the risky and exciting task of partnering with God in making the garden bloom, whether that is the "small" garden of our own lives or the "large" garden of the cultures and contexts within which God has placed us. Yes, at times this means pulling out the weeds, because we are called not just to *being* but also to *becoming*. Eden may be where we started but Eden was meant to be a generative reality, not simply a fenced off Green Zone where we insulate ourselves from the chaos outside.

Second, a vocational reading of the divine image reminds us that the "name" that God has given us is not only a gift to be celebrated (though it is that), it confers a vocation—a vocation that pushes us beyond ourselves. The Bible offers a vision of the human that includes our calling to be rulers and priests and orients us toward the world. We are not meant to pursue comfort, wealth, intimacy, or even sex as things to which we are entitled. We are not meant to pursue a small cocoon of material and interpersonal contentment where our private needs for security, intimacy, and comfort are met. Human identity was meant to extend outward into families, communities, and social life. Eden was meant to spread. And we have the enormous privilege, under God, of "ruling" toward this end.

At the heart of human identity is the simple but profound truth that we do not name ourselves. We are named by our Creator and the name we are given confers dignity and value and invites us into a relationship {156} of love. And it is a name that calls us to imitate the God whose love spilled over into creation. God the Lover and God the Maker are one. This is glory that we haltingly reflect.

NOTES

1. The following is a reworked version of a response offered to Laura Schmidt Roberts's presentation at the 2015 CCMBC Study Conference, "Honouring God with the Body." Her presentation was a theological reflection on human identity with a view to its implications for our discussions in the area of sexuality. [See previous article.—Ed.]
2. The term "speciesism" has been coined and popularized by Princeton bioethics professor Peter Singer, a man *The New Yorker* has described as "the most influential living philosopher."
3. Christian Smith, *What is a Person: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life and the Moral Good From the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1.
4. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
5. Jonathan Grant, *Divine Sex: A Compelling Vision for Christian Relationships in a Hypersexualized Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015).
6. Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1991), 14.
7. Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 4.

Gil Dueck serves as Program Director at Mennonite Central Committee Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, SK. He previously served as Instructor in Theology at Bethany College and is in the final stages of doctoral work through the International Baptist Theological Study Centre and the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam.

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