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Vive la différence! Reflections on Human Sexuality from the Old Testament Creation Tradition

In his consideration of gender difference and its significance, Tim Meadowcroft insists, in his reading of the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2, that our gender is integral to what it means to be in the image of God. Man and woman together are given a stewardly mandate in relation to creation, a unity-in-diversity that is a reflection of the Godhead. Despite the difficulties raised by feminist hermeneutics and the current debates over sexuality today, Meadowcroft holds that the OT vision of a creative and complementary role for the sexes must remain a cornerstone of Christian witness in this area of life.

In both accounts of creation at the beginning of Genesis, the final act of God prior to the Sabbath rest is the creation of humankind. In Genesis 1 the first humans are said to be made 'in the image of God' (Gen. 1:26, 27); in the second account they receive the breath of life from the Lord God himself (Gen. 2:7). It is not part of my present purpose to examine the full import of these two expressions. Whatever the case, I take both to indicate that there is some way in which humanity is like God. To put it another way, our observation of human nature and competence tells us something of the nature and competence of God the creator.

Much has been said and written about how that may be so. Is the imaging of God in humanity found in our creative potential, or in the impulse towards technology, or in the act of speech, or in the acquisition of conscience and the accompanying responsibility to make moral choices, or in the stewardship mandate? All of the above can be derived from the Genesis accounts of creation. But there is one characteristic of humanity as the image of God that does not need to be derived, because the narrative makes it explicit. It is arguably the only characteristic that is conveyed directly to us, and it is the fact that humanity is made 'male and female' (Gen. 1:27).

Genesis 1

Genesis 1:27 consists of three phrases in parallel to one another, in each of which the main verb is *br'* ('create'), a verb used exclusively of the creative activity of God. There is a collective and an individual aspect to this creation of humanity. In

the first phrase God creates 'adam, a term that is usually generic (although it has to be acknowledged that it is sometimes used in a gender specific sense). In the second phrase the singular pronoun is masculine ('he created him', although translated with the gender neutral plural in the NRSV), referring back to 'adam. The first two phrases with their singular objects express the collective aspect of the creation of humanity. The final phrase in v 27 reveals the nature of the collective as comprising 'male and female', and God created 'them' (this time a plural pronoun in the Hebrew).

The words translated as 'male' and 'female', *zakar* and *neqevah*, define the polarity of male and female within 'adam more strongly than 'ish and 'ishah ('man' and 'woman'; see Gen. 2:23). The latter more common pairing denotes the human personality of the different genders, while the former pair, the pair in the verse under discussion, is also used to describe the gender of animals. The terminology is thus explicitly to do with the physical nature of gender difference.

The structure of Gen. 1:27 draws this out. In the first two clauses the subject God 'creates' the object 'adam or, in the second clause, a masculine singular pronoun the referent of which is 'adam. In each of the first two clauses the creatures created are said to be in God's 'image' (*tselem*). The third clause almost but not quite contains the same key grammatical elements as the first two. God is still the subject, the verb is still *br* ('create'), and the object is still humanity (albeit with a plural pronoun). But the fourth element of each of the previous clauses, 'in his image', is absent. In its stead is the phrase 'male and female'. Thus the Hebrew poetics emphasise that humanity conveys the image of God in that we are physically male and female.

We can take this line of reasoning a little further with respect to the first account of the creation of man and woman. In biblical Hebrew the word *tselem*, translated in Gen. 1 as 'image', has a primary sense of some sort of physical representation. Sometimes this is a human likeness and sometimes it is a likeness of false gods. In Gen. 5:3 Seth is said to be 'according to (Adam's) image'. That this phrase is in apposition to 'in his likeness' suggests that a physical likeness is intended. Like its equivalent element in the final phrase of Gen. 1:27, 'male and female', the 'image' is a surprisingly materialistic way of describing what God is like. The first account of creation in Genesis insists that we take seriously our physical state, and a defining aspect of that state is our gender.¹ As von Rad reminds us, 'interpretations... are to be rejected which proceed from an anthropology strange to the Old Testament and one-sidedly limit God's image to man's spiritual nature.'²

In our maleness and femaleness humanity is also distinguishable from the rest of the created order. Gen. 1 begins to hint at that with the immediate context of

1 H. Thielicke, *How the World Began*, James Clarke and Co, London 1964, p 89, notes that 'the polarity of the sexes affects all of the ultimate mysteries of life'.

2 G. von Rad, *Genesis*, SCM Press, London 1972, p 58. One who defies the advice of von Rad is G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word, Waco, Texas 1987, p 37, who prefers to understand the verse in symbolic terms. But see also his useful summary of interpretations of Gen. 1:27.

v 27. The context of our understanding of gender is the command to 'have dominion' (Gen. 1:26) and to 'be fruitful' (Gen. 1:28). Some have argued from v.26 that the human stewardship of creation defines the image of God. I suggest that here dominion and creativity or fruitfulness describe the outworking of God's image in humanity. They are the result of the fact that we are made male and female. Gender remains central to what it means to be in the image of God. Dominion and fruitfulness express the outworking of that being.³

Genesis 2

Of course it would be banal to leave it at that. Part of what the Genesis 2 account does is to fill out the relational aspects of gender, hence the terminology of 'man' and 'woman' that is used along with the relationship language in Gen. 2:24.⁴ It is also seen in that highly problematic expression traditionally translated as 'helpmeet' (Gen. 2.18, '*eizer kenegdo*'; 'helper as his partner' in NRSV). The first word in the phrase is probably well translated as 'helper' but it ought not to be understood in the 'girl Friday' sense of a decorative but essentially useless partner. The cognate verb 'zr is often used with God as the subject helping humans. In the context of human relations, it may speak of one nation coming to rescue another in time of war (Josh. 10:33 is one of numerous examples). There is no indication of masculine superiority in the usage of Gen. 2:18, 20. In saying that, I take issue with von Rad, who says 'the verse speaks in the first place only of an assistant', and with Clines whose provocative essay 'What Does Eve Do to Help?' avers that Eve's primary function is to help Adam multiply.⁵ If anything, the reverse is the case. The creation of the woman is like the cavalry coming over the hill to rescue humankind from his incompleteness. It might even be tentatively suggested that in some cultures the role of moral guardian that women have so often been forced to play with respect to the male of the species is a post-lapsarian refraction of this understanding of the woman in Genesis 2. What a tragic irony it is, then, that one of the effects of human sin is that the woman is ruled over by her husband (Gen. 3:16).

The second word *neged* describes the way in which the woman achieves this helping or rescuing mission. It is a word that essentially conveys opposite sides of a conceptual coin, and tends to be context-specific in the way it is understood. It can have the sense of 'along with' or what to an English speaking mindset seems the opposite, 'over against'. To speak of the woman as 'corresponding to' the man probably overemphasizes the aspect of similarity in *neged*. On the other hand, to translate as 'opposite' overplays the other aspect, even if the picture of woman as

3 On this debate, see C. Gunton, 'Trinity, Ontology and Anthropology, Towards a Renewal of the Doctrine of the Imago Dei', in C. Schwöbel, ed., *Persons Human and Divine*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1991, pp 47-64, especially pp 57-58.

4 P. Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1978, p 21, refers to the uniqueness of sexuality as a human clue to the image of God.

5 Von Rad, *Genesis*, p 82, and D. J. A. Clines, 'What Does Eve Do to Help?', in his *What Does Eve Do to Help?*, JSOT Press, Sheffield 1990, pp 25-48, 35. Clines takes insufficiently seriously the context of stewardship also evident in Gen. 1. See rather D. E. Gowan, *Genesis 1-11, From Eden to Babel*, Eerdmans/Handsels, Grand Rapids/Edinburgh 1988, p 46: 'not a subordinate in any sense'.

a divinely appointed opponent resonates with some masculine experience!⁶ Man and woman as 'counterpart' to one another is clumsy but expresses well the tension inherent in *neqed* between unity and diversity. In creative tension men and women both oppose and complete one another.⁷ Completion, the becoming of 'one flesh' (Gen. 2: 24), is found in celebration of the difference.⁸

A Synopsis

There are a number of ways in which the synoptic accounts of creation complement and fulfil each other.⁹ At this point in the argument, we might ask how the physical and relational aspects of gender difference together constitute the image of God in humanity. I suggest they do so in that the creative tension generated in the opposition and complementarity of *ish* and *ishah* (man and woman) finds its sharpest focus in the fact that men and women are also *zakar* and *neqevah* (physically 'male' and 'female'). It is in the God-given drive within men and women to relate to another that humanity can experience most deeply what God is like. To put it another way, to be 'in the image of God' is to know a wonderful symbiosis between unity and diversity that finds unique expression in 'male and female'.¹⁰ While this is most obvious in relationships that have an erotic aspect to them, it is also evident in the wider field of masculine and feminine sexuality and relationships between the genders.

At this point any attempt to understand gender simply as metaphor, or to reduce it to a general principle about human community must be resisted. Ancient Hebrew thought demands that we take the embodiment of our personhood seriously, and so the embodiment of our sexuality must also be taken seriously. Karl Barth writes,

Every other differentiation and agreement will continually prove to be preliminary or supplementary as compared with the fact that they are male and female. And this strictly natural and creaturely factor, which is held in common with the beasts, is not in any sense an animal element in man but the distinctively human element – not in itself but because it has pleased God to make man in this form of life an image and likeness, a witness, of His own form.¹¹

6 See, from a feminist perspective, K. Parker, 'Speech, Writing and Power: Deconstructing the Biblical Canon', *JOT* 69 (1996), pp 91–103, p 101.

7 Here I take issue with R.E. Whitaker, 'Creation and Human Sexuality', in Choon-Leong Seow, ed., *Homosexuality and the Christian Community*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville 1996, pp 3–13, p 9, who asserts that 'when the *adam* saw the woman, what he recognized was not a sexually differentiated creature, but someone just like himself'. This comment fails to take adequate account of the use of *neqed*.

8 A wider theological context for this understanding might be found in the concept of 'dipolarity', the subject of an

Auckland University doctoral thesis in progress by Mark Brimblecombe. Gender is only one area in connection with which the concept may be explored.

9 Whether or not we attribute the two accounts to Priestly and Yahwist sources respectively, as in the Documentary Hypothesis, there are undoubtedly two accounts of the same event in the first two chapters of Genesis.

10 Tribble, *Rhetoric of Sexuality* p 21, writes, 'Unity embraces plurality in both the human and divine realms.'

11 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/1, T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh 1958, p 187. See his treatment of male and female as the image of God on pp 185–191.

Although the embodiment of our sexuality is not the whole story it is an indispensable part of the story, and the part that this essay seeks to address.

In the prophets

I have been arguing that the concept and the fact of gender differences are deeply rooted in creation and the biblical account of creation. From time to time other biblical writers appeal to that creation tradition to support their theology. One OT writer who does so perhaps most intentionally of all is Isaiah, and this is particularly the case in those chapters often referred to as Deutero- or Second Isaiah, Isa. 40-55. For instance, the only section of Scripture outside of the early part of Genesis which commonly uses the creation verb *br'* (the verb reserved for divine creative activity) is Isa. 40-55. It occurs nine times in Genesis, seventeen times in Isa. 40-66, and only seven times in the rest of the OT. As the prophet in Isa. 40-55 struggles to understand God's response to the people's covenant unfaithfulness, he moves towards a doctrine of redemption and a perception of the suffering servant as a special agent in God's redemptive activity. He also perceives that God as redeemer and God as creator are inextricably bound to one another (Isa. 43:1). Although there is some debate over the exact role of creation in Deutero-Isaiah's theology, it seems to me that we see in those chapters a God who redeems because he has created, and in the act of creation there is a commitment to redeem.¹²

Among the images chosen to convey this concept, one is that of the 'family of God'.¹³ I suggest that the prominence Isaiah gives this theme arises out of his theology of creation as well as the context in which he did his work. As one whose thinking (and we might suppose also the thinking of the strand of Israelite tradition that he epitomises) was deeply informed by a concept of God as creator, Isaiah could be expected to draw on it when wrestling with the problem of God's relations with humanity. In doing so, he draws on sexuality as a key component of the imaging of God in humanity. At the same time his and his compatriots' context was one where the ancient Near Eastern religions partly sought commerce with the gods through cultic prostitution.¹⁴ What more appropriate imagery, then, with which to reflect on God's care for the people that he has made.

There are several ways in which Isaiah does this. First, and he is not alone in doing so, the prophet uses both masculine and feminine images to portray God's attitude to his people. At one point God is the victorious warrior whose 'arm' sweeps all before him (Isa. 40:10). At another God is a woman in labour (Isa. 42:14). God

12 The debate is principally over whether creation faith is 'subordinate' to salvation faith in Second Isaiah. P. B. Harner, 'Creation in II Isaiah', *Vetus Testamentum* 17 (1967), pp 298-306, 306, instances one view: 'But for II Isaiah creation faith, although still "subordinate", becomes so important that it can serve as the basis for his belief in Yahweh's imminent redemption of Israel, and so in its turn it gives new vitality to

salvation faith.' Harner's view is in contrast to C. Stuhlmüller, *Creative Redemption in Deutero-Isaiah*, Biblical Institute Press, Rome 1970.

13 I am indebted to K. P. Darr, *Isaiah's Vision and the Family of God*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 1994, for her comprehensive treatment of this theme.

14 See W. von Soden, *The Ancient Orient*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1985, p 195.

is also the nursing mother (Isa. 49:15) filled with the fierce compassion of motherhood.¹⁵ How appropriate it is that the word commonly used of God's compassionate nature is *rachemim*, a variant form of the word for 'womb'. For another early prophet, Hosea, God is both the seductive lover (Hos. 3:14) and the nurturing presence (Hos. 11:3-4).¹⁶ Through the cumulative effect of this imagery we glimpse a little further into the mystery of the wholeness and diversity of God that is most fully expressed in the fact that we are male and female.

Secondly, Isaiah uses the image of marriage to express the love God has for those he made in his image and the response that he seeks from them. When Israel is cut off from God through her unfaithfulness she is like a deserted wife or a childless widow, both states in the ancient world that meant loss of status and heritage. But the love of God is such that he makes Israel his bride (Isa. 54). The link with creation is explicitly present in God's avowal to Israel that 'your Maker is your husband' (Isa. 54:5).

If the link between sexual imagery and the covenant is only implicit in Deutero-Isaiah, it has been made explicit in the words of Hosea, for whom human sexuality is a vivid picture of God's call and the varied responses of men and women to that call. Hosea's children by Gomer convey in their names ('not my people' and 'no mercy') the death of the covenant. The prostitution of Gomer represents an acute perversion of the image of God as defined in Gen. 1:27, and this is linked to the unfaithfulness of the people of the covenant.

Thirdly, Deutero-Isaiah begins to feel towards an eschatological understanding of the solution to the broken covenant by expanding the concept of the family of God as the fruit of the marriage union between Yahweh and his bride Israel. Consequent on Israel's discovery that her Maker is her husband in Isa. 54 is that her children 'will be more than the children of her that is married' (Isa. 54:1). Moreover those children will be disciplined by Yahweh himself and 'great shall be (their) prosperity' (Isa. 54:13). Their heritage or inheritance, once lost through widowhood and childlessness, will be rediscovered through this union between Yahweh and those he has made (Isa. 54:17). The hints of sections of Deutero-Isaiah (see 54:3; 51:5) are then made explicit in Isa. 56 that these children will transcend the ethnic boundaries of Israel. The call of those within this new expanded covenant is also to faithfulness (Isa. 56:6).

Incidentally, the prophet's discernment at this point thereby provides the raw material for the Pauline understanding of the church as the restored Israel (Rom.

15 The statement that God 'is' male and female is problematic. Trible, *Rhetoric of Sexuality*, pp 15-21, emphasises that this understanding is a metaphor. She wants to maintain the essential 'disparity' between 'vehicle' and 'tenor' of the metaphor. I am not so sure that this understanding sufficiently respects Hebrew thought, where there is a blurring of subject and object, so I am content with the statement that God 'is'

rather than that God 'is like' male and female. But this is a vast area and well beyond the scope of this discussion. See the observations of K. Syreeni, 'Metaphorical Appropriation: (Post)Modern Biblical Hermeneutic and the Theory of Metaphor', *Literature and Theology* 9 (1995), pp 321-338.

16 Note Jesus' use of the mother hen metaphor in Matt. 23:37 and Luke 13:34.

9-11). At the same time it prepares the way for the apostolic understanding of this covenant people as a body, as the offspring of the union between Christ and his bride the church (Eph. 5:25-33). This offspring enjoys the inheritance that is their entitlement through membership in the family of God (1 Pet. 1:3-5).

Covenant and creation

The application of the Genesis 1 and 2 perception of gender in the creation theology of Deutero-Isaiah and the covenant theology of Hosea has an important effect. Remember that the context in which male and female embody God's image in Gen. 1 and 2 is that of the call to dominion and fruitfulness, which we might summarise as the stewardship mandate. In the application of that understanding by Deutero-Isaiah and Hosea the context in which male and female embody God's image is that of the covenant, and the accompanying call to faithfulness. The genius of the prophetic understanding is to link the stewardship and covenant contexts.

Another aspect of the biblical witness here is the use of the divine name, *El-Shaddai*. Nobody is certain exactly what this name means. Some link it with the feminine aspects of God while others suggest that it refers to the God of the mountains. It is traditionally translated into English with 'the Almighty', which reflects the usage in Job where the term occurs most often. Whatever the problems in discerning the origins of the term, though, in the patriarchal narratives the name always appears when God makes a covenant with one of the patriarchs and promises that the family in question will be fruitful and multiply.¹⁷ Its appearance is a further manifestation of the link in the mind of the OT writers between the stewardship mandate of creation and the call to covenant faithfulness.

A fractured image

To be male and female is to be made in the image of God, and if God comprehends both male and female in the OT writings, then the unity within diversity inherent in our sexual natures is central to what it is to be human. The vision of male and female, both physical and metaphysical, is crucial to our understanding of God and his world. It is a vision that calls for obedience to both the stewardship and covenant mandates of the Old Testament, a vision that calls for creativity and faithfulness.

If, therefore, humanity's imaging of God is closest to the surface in our embodiment of male and female, then it is also true that the image of God in humankind is most abused and bent in that embodiment. Part of the nature of sin is that it cannot cope with unity and diversity together; it must either dominate or shatter. The human inability to hold together unity and diversity, and its particular application to our own day, is brilliantly explored by Jeremy Begbie in the 1995 Staley Lecture Series at Regent College, 'From Babel to Pentecost.' The sin of the builders of Babel was the desire not to be scattered, a failure to understand diversity. The result was disintegration.¹⁸ Although Begbie himself does not include the question of sexuality in his exploration, his thesis is illustrated nowhere more acutely than in the domain of sexuality and sexual relationships.

17 Gen. 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25; Exod. 6:3.

18 J. Begbie, 'From Babel to Pentecost', unpublished Staley Lecture Series, Regent College, 1995.

In a world fractured by sin, the blurring of God's image is most apparent in the breakdown of a God-like unity and diversity both in relationships between the sexes and in the individual experience of sexuality. On one hand, the breakdown of unity leads to disintegration instead of diversity. On the other, the breakdown of diversity leads to monism rather than unity.¹⁹

At this point a couple of clarifying points need to be made. First, in characterising human sexuality as fractured by sin I refer to both victims and perpetrators of that situation. Secondly, I recognize that masculinity and femininity are not absolute categories, but rather poles of a continuum on which a number of positions may be occupied. There are individuals who, for reasons psychological or physical and usually through no fault of their own, occupy particularly ambiguous positions on that continuum. The issues raised by the presence of such individuals for themselves and for their social settings are acknowledged. Nevertheless there is also a differentiation between male and female that can properly be made. That differentiation informs the present discussion.

Symptoms of disintegration are to be found wherever the sexes are at war with one another. The battlefields range from the workplace to the bedroom to the streets and squares of public life. The battle is seen wherever one of the sexes is disempowered. It is seen wherever the sexes are confined into gender roles. It is seen whenever a sexual relationship becomes a means of asserting power over another. Rape is perhaps the most explicit assertion of power by one gender over another, but it is not the only instance. It is seen when the link between sexual relationships and commitment to another is severed. All of these are ways in which the wonder of unity declines into the rage of disintegration. They also all deny the covenant context within which sexuality is to be understood.

The other way in which the image of God becomes blurred in the relationships between the sexes is in the failure to maintain diversity. When that happens unity is replaced by a type of monism. Sometimes this is expressed as tyranny, sometimes it is domination, and sometimes it is evident as the absence of a properly expressed differentiation between male and female. Symptoms of such are varied in our society. They can be seen whenever the God-like creative potential of sexual relationships is denied, or divorced from the physical facts of gender. They are also evident in the assertion of superiority by one sex over another. The denial of either male or female parenting to a child in the formative years is yet another form of failure to maintain the diversity of male and female. These have in common that they represent an expression of sexuality that is divorced from the creativity inherent in the OT understanding of male and female as the image of God.

Disintegration and monism are opposite sides of the same coin. Both demonstrate a breakdown of the creative tension between unity and diversity. Both also represent a dislocation from the creative and covenant contexts within which human sexuality is played out. Our response to each must be informed by the vision for the sexes evident in the Old Testament creation tradition. But before thinking about that response a difficulty must be confronted.

19 By 'monism' I mean here a regard for sexuality that lacks a proper differentiation between male and female.

A difficulty

The difficulty is highlighted by the work of a number of feminist exegetes who point out that the application of the image of God as male and female in prophetic thought seems not always to be in the spirit of unity within diversity found in Gen. 1:27. Athalya Brenner, for instance, notes that the textual voice is a male one, as a result of which

The dual image of husband/wife and, implicitly, male/female sexuality is consequently unbalanced. The 'husband' is divine, correct, faithful, positive, voiced. The 'wife' is human, morally corrupt, faithless, negative, silent or silenced: her voice, if heard at all, is embedded within the male discourse of the text.²⁰

Likewise for Mary Daly the image of God in the Scriptures is only a distorted one in which 'the husband dominating his wife represents God "himself"'.²¹

The treatment of textual voice is beyond the scope of the present treatment, but the problem of the respective portrayals of husband and wife in the prophetic imagery is not. What Brenner has conveyed in a particularly succinct manner is that the exploration of gender is undertaken within the framework of a specific worldview and constrained by the limitations of that worldview. In particular, the non-hierarchical nature of gender that reflects the image of God is conveyed through a text that accepts a hierarchy of the sexes. Brenner has identified one of the resulting ironies.²²

However she does not tell the whole story. The Scriptures themselves sometimes speak of the woman as having been 'abandoned' by husband Yahweh (Isa. 54:7). In a fascinating study of Hos. 2, Francis Landy notes the contrasts that are to be found with the Song of Songs, and suggests that there is a reversal of patriarchal assumptions evident in the chapter. The 'male fantasy' of voyeurism intermingled with rejection is under threat.²³ Tribie herself demonstrates the possibilities by making Gen. 1 and 2 the starting point of *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. In contrast, Mary Daly begins after the fall and must therefore wrestle without benefit of the vision of God conveyed in Gen. 1 and 2.

The problem of patriarchal texts must be acknowledged. I suggest that despite them, and by some divine irony because of them, we do glimpse a more all-embracing vision of who men and women are in the image of God. For all their human limitations, the prophets were working with that vision conveyed in the creation accounts. Because of that, it is still possible to understand more of God through the visions of the family of God conveyed by Isaiah and Hosea. With that in mind, we ask what implications for us there might be in the intimacy and complementarity of male and female.

20 A. Brenner, 'Pornoprophetics Revisited: Some Additional Reflections', *JSOT* 70 (1996), pp 63-86, p 64.

21 M. Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, Beacon Press, Boston 1973, p 13.

22 Another, of course, is that this essay has not managed entirely to break the shackles of the male pronoun for Yahweh while arguing

that the image of God is inclusive of male and female.

23 F. Landy, *Hosea*, Academic Press, Sheffield 1995, pp 31-47. See also J. Goldingay, 'Hosea 1-3, Genesis 1-4, and Masculist Interpretation', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 17 (1995), pp 37-44, an insightful look at the challenge of the passages from a male perspective.

Implications

At one level, as a community of redeemed people, as those who reflect the image of God, we in the church have a particular responsibility to reflect the image of God in the outworking of our sexuality. There are two particular aspects that we might highlight, arising from the creation and covenant contexts discussed above. The relationships between the sexes must embody the creative tension evident in Gen. 1:27. They must also embody the call to faithfulness that is so integral to the biblical understanding of our humanity as expressive of the image of God and that is drawn out by the prophetic treatment of the theme.

Each of these aspects is applicable in both structural or community terms and in terms of personal sexual relationships. The creative tension of our God-likeness ought particularly to be evident in the way our redeemed society is ordered. Both unity and diversity must be affirmed and celebrated. Any type of relationship or structure that does not do so must be questioned. But explicitly sexual relationships must also reflect the creative and complementary potential of gender. Any that do not do so must be recognised as not doing so.

The call to faithfulness also becomes a measure against which we set our embodiment of gender and sexuality. This has a more evident outworking in sexual relationships, whose God-likeness (and in NT terms, Christ-likeness) may partly be judged in terms of the faithfulness evident. But it also works itself out in community relationships and the respect accorded to both male and female.²⁴

There is a raft of sexuality issues, ethical and theological, in our own society which must be explored in the light of an appreciation of gender in the OT creation tradition. I can only signal a few of them. One would be ethical questions relating to birth technology. How for instance do we address the practice of fertilising *in vitro* the egg of a lesbian partner prior to implanting the fertilised egg in the womb of the other partner? What ought our attitude to be towards homosexual relationships *per se*? How committed should we be to achieving equality of the sexes in the work place? Is there a problem with purportedly Christian views on marriage that major on issues of headship and gender roles? What are the rights and needs of adopted children? Ought prostitution to be legalised as a counter to the criminal activity that the practice so often breeds and feeds off? How can the cycle of domestic violence be broken? What ought a pastoral response be to those in whose bodies the usual differentiation between male and female is not evident? When we address questions such as these we grapple with the application of male and female as the image of God in today's world. In that respect all issues of sexuality relate to one another, and all must be addressed within the same wider context.

24 With respect to faithfulness, Thielicke, *How the World Began*, pp 90-92, reminds us that it is not good that a person 'should be a self-contained organism which proceeds to develop itself; he must rather have a vis-à-vis, a partner, a companion, a thou'. Thielicke hastens to deny 'that this

formation of my own personality is possible only within marriage. So even the person who lives a single life can find his orientation in (Gen. 2:18).' For further on this see Sheila Pritchard, 'Sexuality and Singleness', in F. Foulkes, ed., *Sane Sex*, ANZEA, Homebush West, NSW 1993), pp 81-91.

A church with a biblical understanding and practice of these matters declares to the world part of what it means to be redeemed, to experience a renewal of the image of God which has become distorted in humanity. At the same time, those within the church are enabled to discover healing in the area of their sexuality. In the process the mystery of intercourse between God and humankind is more deeply understood.

All that relates most specifically to people and relationships within the church; and there is a sense in which the expectations within a redeemed community called to be the body of Christ cannot be imposed on those who do not acknowledge the lordship of Christ. However, gender is central to our nature as beings created in the image of God. The image of God in humanity, though bent, is not destroyed, and the ideal for the expression of human sexuality in a God-like way has not been obscured. It can still be glimpsed and affirmed by all who share a common humanity, despite the sin and brokenness that surrounds it. The way things ought to be for all people is still visible. There is a burden on the church to model, work for and pray constantly towards the realization of this vision in both church and society.¹²

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