

The Corporeal Aspect and Procreative Function of the imago Dei and Abortion

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The crucial question in the abortion debate is not when human life begins. Even many pro-choice advocates, from early on in the history of their movement, have quietly acknowledged that human life begins at conception. This after all had been the consensus of the medical community until *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973. But in a strategy of deceit, well chronicled by Curt Young, the reality of human life beginning at conception was carefully concealed from the public mind in order, as one pro-choice physician put it, "to separate the idea of abortion from the idea of killing." This physician did recognize that human life begins at conception but he also realized that killing innocent human life is intolerable to most people. So he, among others, believed a strategy of deceit was necessary until the new ethic of abortion was accepted - a new ethic that would recognize the relative value of post-conception procreative choice over immature human life.

The evangelical Christian will, of course, recognize that he must turn to Scripture to determine what is the value of human life at the earliest stages of its growth and development, i.e., from conception until birth, and what are responsible procreative choices. For the Christian the crucial questions are: (1) What value does God place on immature human life? (2) Does God ever give human beings the right to choose to take away an innocent human life once He has created it? (3) What are responsible procreative choices? While these questions have been looked at biblically from many different perspectives, my hope is that the same reflections on the nature and function of the imago Dei will add fresh insights to the abortion debate. In the process, a recognition of the corporeal aspect (which has been neglected by scholars of all theological

persuasions) will be argued for.

The creation and procreation of man in the image of God and the command to protect that image is detailed in the book of Genesis in Chapters 1,5, and 9. (The bold print and underlining to follow is to highlight passages which will be cited to argue for the procreative function of the imago Dei):

(Gen. 1:26) Then God said, "Let us make man in our image (selem), in our likeness (demut), and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." (1:27) So God created man in his own image (selem), in the image (selem) of God he created him; male and female he created them. (1:28) God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

(Gen. 5:1) This is the written account of Adam's line. When God created man, he made him in the likeness (demut) of God. (5:2) He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them "man" [Adam]. (5:3) When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness (demut), in his own image (selem); and he named him Seth.

(Gen. 9:1) Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. (9:2) The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. (9:3) Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything. (9:4) But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. (9:5) And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. (9:6) Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man his blood be shed; for in the image (selem) of God has God made man. (9:7) As for you, be fruitful and increase in number; multiply on the earth and increase upon it."

In Genesis, two Hebrew words are used by the author to describe the relationship of man to his Creator, i.e., "image" (selem) and "likeness" (demut). In the Ancient Near East "image" primarily referred to the representative of something rather than its resemblance. The kings of the Ancient Near East, as representatives of the divine on earth, were called the image of God. And these kings, when they could not be present in person, often left images (idols) of themselves in various cities and territories to represent their majesty and power. "Likeness," on the other hand, is a more abstract term primarily meaning "similarity" or "resemblance." To be a divine likeness, then, is to have features analagous to God in some way(s).

Scholars have pointed out that the two terms "image" and "likeness" are synonyms which are used interchangeably in Genesis. But while synonyms always overlap in meaning and thus are often interchangeable, they may retain their primary sense. Therefore if "image" and "likeness" retain their primary sense, man created in the image of God is both God's representative and is like the God he represents.

Many OT scholars now recognize that man's corporeality is included in the concept of the image of God in the OT. For a physical image, e.g., a statue or idol, is the most frequent meaning of "image" in the OT, as well as in contemporaneous extra-biblical literature. Contextual support for the thesis that corporeality is a significant ontological aspect of the image of God is readily apparent if our second thesis is correct, i.e., that procreation is only possible among corporeal beings. Further contextual support comes from a recognition of the creation of the imago Dei as male and female (primarily differentiated on the basis of physical attributes) and from a recognition that when the image of God is attacked in Gen. 9:6, it is corporeal man whose blood is shed. Some evangelical scholars, however, have been hesitant to accept corporeality as an integral aspect of the image of God. For if man as a corporeal being is created in the image of God, an anthropometric deity after which the image is fashioned is one logical inference. Indeed, the creation of men and women in the image of a god or goddess in Babylonian culture often included a physical similarity between the created human being and the god or goddess. However, there is another much more logical inference to the inclusion of the man's corporeality in the concept of the image of God in Israelite religion; namely, man is a "transcription of the eternal, incorporeal Creator in terms of temporal, bodily, creaturely existence [emphasis mine]." God, in His essence, is both invisible and incorporeal; however, man (God's image) is visible and corporeal. But while it is true that God in His essence is both invisible and incorporeal, God Himself (not just His image) can appear in the visible form of the shekina, in the bodily form of an angel, i.e., the angel of the Lord, and in the corporeal form of a human being in Jesus of Nazareth (see also Genesis 18 and 32 for OT examples of God in corporeal form). Therefore, since God Himself can appear in such visible and even corporeal forms, corporeality as a part of the nature of the image of God should not be rejected on theological grounds. Indeed, given the evidence for the prominence of the concept of man's psychosomatic unity in ancient Israelite anthropology, the exclusion of the corporeal from the nature of the image of God seems highly unlikely. In short, the ontological aspect of the imago Dei includes man's corporeality. While aspects of man's nature other than corporeality are likely to have been

included in the concept of the image of God, e.g., various mental and spiritual faculties, few commentators agree on what those aspects are. For there is little if any extra-biblical or OT evidence to support most speculations.

The immediate context of Genesis suggests the ways in which men and women function as the *imago Dei*. Many commentators have pointed to representative rule over lower creation as one way in which man is like God (see especially Gen. 1:26-28). God rules over all of creation, visible and invisible. Men and women are His representative rulers in the visible realm and like God rule, but only over lower creation.

In contrast to acceptance by many scholars of corporeality as an ontological aspect and representative rule as a functional aspect of the *imago Dei*, few scholars, if any, have done more than intimate that procreation is another way in which men and women function as the image of God. "Might there be in procreation," Henri Blocher says timidly, "a reflection of divine creation?" Support for the thesis that procreation is a way that men and women function as God's image follows:

1) An analogy between creation and procreation is clearly implicit in Gen. 5:1-3. "When God created man, he made him in the 'likeness' of God ... When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son [Seth] in his own 'likeness,' in his own 'image.'..." In commenting on this passage, Meredith Kline says, "Clearly we are being advised that there is a similarity between these two processes [creation and procreation], both of which result in products like their authors. Adam's fathering of a son provides a proper analogy to God's creating of man and the relationship of Seth to Adam is analogous to man's relationship to his Maker. Through procreation, then, men and women resemble God in His creative activity. 2) In the same context where it is announced that man is created in the "image"/"likeness" of God (Gen. 1:27 and 5:1,2), the author also announces that God created them male and female. According to Gordon Wenham, the expression "male and female" highlights the sexual distinction within mankind and Claus Westermann says, "The human race is God's creation as male and female. There can be no

human existence apart from this existence in two sexes. ... As God's creation, the human race receives a blessing. That blessing is primarily, as with the animals, fertility. Through procreation, conception, and birth the blessing produces the chain of generations ... after the Creation story in Chapter 5." Thus the creation of the image of God as male and female naturally points to procreation as a function of the image.

3) In Gen. 1:28 the command to "be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth" immediately follows man's identification as the "image of God" (1:27). Likewise in Gen. 9:6 man's identification as the "image of God" is contained within a literary inclusion that opens (9:1) and closes (9:7) with the command "be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth." Thus the command to procreate is associated with the image of God. Indeed the relationship of the various sections of Gen. 9:1-7 becomes more intelligible when the procreative function of the image of God is recognized as the unifying theme. The postdiluvian remnant of mankind is reminded of its commission to procreate (9:1,7), a commission which naturally follows man's creation in the image of God (9:6). This commission, however, goes beyond the act of procreation itself to procreation's purpose. For if images of God are to increase in number and fill the earth, not just be fruitful, they must provide sustenance to their offspring (9:3). Beyond this, their offspring must be protected from both man (9:5b,6) and beast (9:2,5a). This protection is grounded in the sanctity of life in general (9:4) and in the sanctity of the life of man, who is created in the image of God, in particular (9:5,6).

4) Further contextual support for the significance of the association between procreation and the image of God in Gen. 1:27, 28 is offered by Warren Gage who sees an analogy between man's commission to "fill the earth and subdue it" (1:28) and God's subduing and filling the original creation in Genesis 1. "During the first three days," says Gage, "God is depicted as subduing the chaos of the original creation, bringing about an ordered cosmos. During the final three days God is depicted as filling the heavens and earth, the former with starry hosts and the latter with all manner of life. ... The work of man, as he is commissioned by his Creator, is a mirror of the divine activity in Genesis 1. Man is commanded

to fill the earth and to subdue creation. ... Thus in his work of filling and subduing ... man is commissioned in the image of his Maker."

5) As we have seen above, in the OT the theme of procreation is associated with the image of God. In the NT the language of procreation is associated with the image of God. For example, in the same context in which the "Son" (Col. 1:13) is called the "image (eikon - the Greek equivalent of *selem* in the Septuagint) of the invisible God" (1:15), He is also called the "firstborn over all creation" (1:15). The idea of the image of God made a word associated with procreation, i.e., "firstborn," appropriate. However, the hymnodist (Col. 1:15-20 is a hymn honoring the Son) was careful to choose a word which in the appropriate setting could refer to supremacy in rank through the exercise of the privilege of primogeniture. Likewise in Hebrews, the "Son" (1:3,5), through whom God made the universe, is said to be "the exact representation of His being" (1:3); and in the same context He is called God's "firstborn" (1:6). Now it could be argued that the idea of sonship is what makes the word "firstborn" appropriate in both Colossians 1 and Hebrews 1. But, of course, the language of sonship is also a part of the language of procreation. Interestingly, in many ancient Babylonian and Egyptian texts the idea of sonship is associated with that of image. Luke, in his genealogy of Jesus, may have consciously recognized this ancient association between sonship and image. For the Lucan genealogy of Jesus, which reflects the Genesis 5 genealogy of Adam (where, as we have seen above, Adam is created in the likeness of God even as Seth is created in the likeness/image of Adam), calls Adam "the son of God" even as Seth is "the son of Adam" (Luke 3:37). Finally in Jas. 3:9, in the same verse in which the author identifies men as "made in the likeness of God" he calls God "Father." In the two other places where the author of James calls God "Father" there is a reason for so doing clearly identifiable in the immediate context, i.e., in 1:17 God is the "Father of the heavenly lights" and in 2:27 the "Religion that God our Father accepts" includes looking after "orphans" (see Ps. 68:5 where God is said to be "A father to the fatherless"). In 3:9 the reason for calling God "Father" is because all those "made in the likeness of God" are in some sense children of God our Father (though many are also in

very real sense the children of the devil - see for example John 8:44). In brief, the language of procreation, specifically "firstborn," sonship and paternity is associated with the concept of the image of God_ even in contexts where procreation is not primarily in view.

6) In the NT the theme of recreation, which is closely linked conceptually to the theme of procreation, is associated with the image of God_. The new man, who has been raised with Christ, is being made new again in knowledge in the "image (eikon) of his Creator" (Col. 3:10, also see Eph. 4:24 where the new man is [re]created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.) In commenting on Col. 3:10, F.F. Bruce recognizes the association between recreation and the image of God and the link between recreation and procreation when he says, "Christ-likeness is being reproduced more and more in the life of the believer." And Bruce is right, for Paul says that the Son is the "firstborn" among many brothers who are destined to be conformed to His "image" (eikon, Rom. 8:29).

There is then strong support for the thesis that men and women function as the *imago Dei* not only through representative rule over lower creation but also through procreation. One objection that could be raised to our thesis is the fact that procreation does not distinguish man from lower creation while man alone is created in the image of God. Thus our thesis needs a little refinement. Men and women function as the image of God not only through representative rule over lower creation but also through procreation of divine likenesses.

In summary, God is the invisible, incorporeal Creator of His visible, corporeal image. Ontologically, corporeal human beings are the image of God. Functionally through procreation, men and women are God's representatives for creating His image and are like God in their ability to produce likenesses of themselves which when traced back to the origin of man are likenesses of God. Men and women also function as the *imago Dei* through representative rule. But representative rule is, of course, dependent on procreation of divine likenesses. For through procreation the earth is filled with representative rulers.

Thus the command to fill the earth and subdue it is a command to extend the kingdom of God through procreation and to establish God's reign over all the earth through representative rule.

In the light of the above discussion, it is not surprising that God has pronounced the sentence of capital punishment on all murderers as their just retribution (Gen. 9:6). For murderers so devalue the image of God that they choose to destroy it. And to devalue the image of God, God's representative ruler and likeness, is to devalue God Himself. God will not, indeed cannot, ignore such an assessment of His worth.

In addition to destroying and devaluing the image of God, the murderer is acting in a way that is completely antithetical to responsible functioning as the image of God. Murder is, in other words, directly contradictory to one of the functions which our nature as those created in the image of God calls for, namely procreation. By destroying and devaluing the image of God and by functioning in a way so contradictory to human nature as the image of God, the murderer forfeits his right to life.

The recognition of an ontological aspect of the *imago Dei* in corporeality safeguards _the sanctity of all human life_. A purely functional definition of the *imago Dei* would not afford such safeguards. For many people do not function as the image of God. Sometimes people do not function as the image of God for ethically neutral reasons. For example infants and children because of immaturity are unable to constructively rule over lower creation and infertile couples are unable to procreate. Many other times people do not function as the image of God for immoral reasons, as in environmental pollution and the illegitimate use of birth control. However, regardless of the reason people do not function as the image of God, they are still by nature the image of God as long as they are living human beings. And as long as they are living human beings they are to be afforded the protection of Genesis .

The fetus is an example of a living human being who is not functioning as the image of God for ethically neutral reasons. The fetus cannot constructively rule over lower creation or procreate. However, the fetus is by nature

the image of God. For while some have denied the "personhood" of the fetus, no rational medical experts have denied its corporeality. Abortion is recognized by all rational medical experts to be the destruction of human life. Therefore, to abort is to destroy and devalue the image of God. And as noted above, to destroy the image of God is to devalue God Himself.

If murder is directly contradictory to functioning as the image of God, to procure or to perform an abortion is the paramount example of such contradictory behavior. For in abortion, the destruction of human life is carried out at the very time when bringing forth life by completing the act of procreation (an act which began with sexual intercourse) is our responsibility as those created in the image of God. Abortion, then, is a particularly heinous crime, since in one and the same act we both destroy and devalue the image of God and we reject our procreative function as the image of God.

The prevalence of abortion in modern America is clear evidence that the ethical aspect of the image of God is lost, at least in part. Unregenerate men and women no longer have true knowledge of the Creator (Col. 3:10) and are unrighteous and unholy (Eph. 4:24). Imagining themselves to be gods, rather than the image of God, they are no longer satisfied to rule constructively over lower creation. Instead they participate in a reign of destruction directed against the very likenesses of God. And rejecting their procreative role to fill the earth with divine likeness, they even go so far as to attack God's image-bearers at a time in their lives when their createdness is their most prominent characteristic. The creature could hardly be in more open rebellion against his Creator.

Only if men and women are recreated in the image of the Son will the ethical aspect of the image of God be restored. And the results of that recreation will be new men and women who live lives true to their nature. As God enable them, these recreated men and women will extend the kingdom of God through procreation. Being conformed to the image of God's Son, they will establish God's reign over all the earth through representative rule and that reign will include protecting the image of God wherever they find it.

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Endnotes

1. Unfortunately, as recently as 1989 one evangelical physician confused matters regarding the issue of when human life begins by suggesting that it begins at implantation. See Arden Almquist's article entitled "When does Human Life Begin?" in the Christian Medical and Dental Society Journal, Winter, 1989, pp. 12 - 15. My letter to the editor was not accepted but a number of convincing rebuttals to Almquist's position were printed in the letters to the editor in the 1990 Summer volume of the CMDS Journal, pp. 16-20.
2. Young, Curtis J., *The Least of These*, 1983, pp. 21 - 32.
3. Wilson, S.G., "New Wine in Old Wineskins: Image of God." *The Expository Times*. September, 1974, pp. 356.
4. von Rad, G., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1964, Vol. II, p. 392, and Blocher, H., *In the Beginning*, 1984., p. 81
5. Johnson, S.G., op. cit., p. 356 and Blocher, H., op cit., p. 85.
6. Silva, M., *Biblical Words and their Meaning*, 1983, pp. 121-125. It will become apparent that this author does not accept James Barr's thesis that demut defines and limits the meaning of selem (summarized on pp. 161, 162). Rather, we believe that selem and demut are complementary terms - synonyms that overlap but have distinguishable primary senses which have been retained.
7. For examples see Jacob, E., *Theology of the Old Testament*_, 1958, pp. 166ff., von Rad, G., *Old Testament Theology*, 1962, Vol. 1, pp. 144ff., Eichrodt, W., *Theology of the Old Testament*, 1967, Vol. II, pp. 122 ff. This author does not agree with all the ways in which these scholars argue for corporeality as an aspect of the image of God. That all three of these well-respected OT scholars recognize corporeality as an aspect of the image, however, is highly significant.
8. For example, see Wenham, G., *Genesis 1-15*, 1987, p. 30.
9. Eichrodt, W., op. cit., p. 122.
10. Kidner, D., *Genesis*, 1967, p. 51.
11. For example see Clines, D., "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin*, 1968, especially his brief summary on p. 101.
12. Blocher, H., op. cit., p. 93. In commenting on Genesis 1:26,27 and 2:21f, Kline says, "...biblical revelation thus intimates that this creating of man is a kind of divine authoring analogous to human procreation."
13. Kline, M., *Kingdom Prologue*, 1989, p. 30.
14. Wenham, G., op. cit., p. 33.
15. Westermann, C., *Genesis: A Practical Commentary*, 1987, p. 11.
16. Gage, Warren, *The Gospel of Genesis*, 1984, pp. 31,32.
17. Blocher, H., op. cit., p. 89.
18. Bruce, F.F., *he Epistles to the Colossian to Philemon and to the Ephesian*, 1984, p. 146.