

God creates every unique person as a child with dignity.

Doug McConnell

The sidewalk café outside the restaurant was crowded as I moved toward the door. Before I could enter, a familiar voice called out, “Grandpa you’re late! I’ve already eaten.” I looked up to see Emma sitting at a table with her family. In her mind, my presence was not only appreciated, it was expected. As I paused to greet my daughter’s family, I realized that to five-year-old Emma the only reason Grandpa would be there was to spend time with her. While that would have been my preference, I was late to another dinner with my colleagues.

In her innocence, Emma reminds us of an important theme in Scripture. Relationships help to define who we are and why we exist. In the story of creation, human beings hold a special position in the created order.

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Gen. 1:27-28).¹

The Genesis account provides the beginning point from which to understand the uniqueness of humankind. Being in relationship to God, to one another, and to all of creation is a unique characteristic of humans created in the image of God. To better understand the image of God, we must look at these relationships individually.

In Relationship to God

We understand the being of God as existing in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the beginning the triune God created all things and declared them very good (Gen. 1:31). At the crown of this creation, God created humankind in his image distinct from the rest of creation (Gen. 1:27a). Created as persons, human beings are in relationship to God. In an attempt to state this clearly, the Westminster Assembly in 1647 articulated this in the form of a question and answer. “Question. 1. What is the chief end of man? Answer. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”²

The term “man” is used to mean human beings, not simply individuals. In a very significant way, the creation of male and female as persons in relationship to their Creator is in contrast to all the rest of creation. As Barth noted, humans have the ability to enter into a personal relationship, speak to God, and make covenants with him.³

In Relationship to Humankind

In addition to the relationship to God, human beings are in relationship to one other. From the beginning, humankind was both male and female (Gen. 1:27b). As created persons dependent upon God, human beings are also interdependent on one another. This is clearly

¹ All Bible references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

² Westminster Assembly, 1647. *The Westminster Shorter Catechism*; available from <http://www.reformed.org/documents/wsc/index.html>; accessed 4 June 2005.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957-75), III.1: 183-187.

seen in the fulfillment of the command to “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28a). God chose to multiply humankind through the physical bond between the male and female. As Gunton puts it, “To be in the image of God is therefore to be in necessary relation to others so made.”⁴

In the creation of humans, there was the ability to procreate and thus carry the image of God from generation to generation. This act of divine design has important consequences for what it means to be human. Each child born of human parents is linked irrevocably through procreation to the first two human beings. And with that link there is a relationship to God and to every other person. The dignity we share as persons is not based on privilege or decision, but rather on God’s plan for creation.

As persons in relationship with one another, we find an important expression of the image of God. Through creation, we are responsible to and for one another. While this seems overwhelming, we must understand that it is practiced as a community.

In Relationship to Creation

Along with the dignity shared by all human beings, there is a God-given responsibility to care for creation. One important result of the command to populate the earth was that we would, “subdue it; and have dominion over [the earth]” (Gen. 1:28). Part of the uniqueness of being human is that we must be stewards of the planet that is our home. The extent of this stewardship is difficult to comprehend, but the implications are not. Our relationship to God requires that we recognize his ownership of creation. In the goodness of God, we see not only his ownership, but also our own dependence on the creation. The bountiful earth provides the home on which we may be fruitful and multiply.

Based on our relationship to God, to other persons, and to creation, we can now more fully understand the dignity of personhood. Every person is created in the image of God, with dignity and the unique capacity to impact our existence. It is here that anyone who works with children at risk must stop and ask about the reality of sin.

The Problem of our Experience

Looking, as we must, at the despicable actions of the sex trafficker or the oppressive hand of a corrupt political leader, we are aghast at the thought that they too are created in the image of God. Is it not right to hate them as somehow less human than we are and certainly as less in need of care than the children we commit our lives to serving? This tension gnaws at our minds even though we see the created order. While the consequences of the Fall will be covered in the next section, we must at least acknowledge that we live in a world in which humanity is fallen and creation is cursed (Gen. 3).

Gunton provides some relief to the dilemma, “At the very least, the human being, simply as created, is of the kind of *being* that a certain radical moral respect is due to every human person, however sunk in villainy and depravity.”⁵ One of the biggest challenges for all who serve children at risk is to maintain perspective in the midst of crisis. To do so, we

⁴ C.E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 208.

⁵ Gunton, 204.

must identify with the source of the dignity. It is not in the creature, but in the Creator. As Grogan noted, “The infinite value of each person rests on the divine image.”⁶

In Jesus, we are introduced to an amazing new dimension of the dignity of the divine image. Through the incarnation, God became human in order to reconcile us to himself. Our collective uniqueness as humans in the created order, therefore, is grounded in the image of God, on the event of the incarnation of God to reconcile the world, and the promise of his coming kingdom, thereby consummating all of human history.⁷

Serving With Dignity

Through creation, every human being begins the journey of life as a child with dignity. Every child is of infinite value to the Creator simply because they are created in God’s image. Their worth is not primarily found in their potential, but in their being as a child. Through the birth of Jesus as a child, God became a human, revealing the true value of all human life. As it is so often stated, children are human beings, not human becomings. We therefore affirm that childhood is an integral part of God’s plan for human beings.

Beyond this affirmation, we recognize that as bearers of not only the image of God, but also the message of redemption in Christ, our service is not limited to children at risk only. If we are to embrace the transformation that God desires, the mission is to seek the welfare of the children at risk and the ones who put them at risk. As we recognize the overwhelming scope of our mission, we must also recognize that God is calling us to serve together with other followers of Christ.

By networking with others, we begin to expand our impact. Through our local churches, we can develop networks of witness and service that seek to impact the varied needs of children at risk. Perhaps the best place to start is to find out what other groups are working with the children we serve and how can we multiply our efforts through working together. When we identify the range of service to the children and the areas that still need help, we are better able to find the unique contribution we are called to make.

Questions:

1. Why are relationships an important part of who we are as persons?
2. What are the implications of our relationships?
3. How should our stewardship of creation impact our work with children?
4. In what ways do our actions toward others and toward creation relate to God?

⁶ Grogan, G.W., “Image of God,” in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, ed. David J. Atkinson and David H. Field, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 476.

⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*, trans. M. Douglas Meeks (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 20.

Children need parental love in a broken world.

Katharine Meese Putman

God's design is for each child to be born, vulnerable and dependent, to loving parents within the covenant of marriage. God's desire is for each child to grow in this secure, caring environment. In a fallen world, people and relationships can be damaged. When parents struggle to fulfill their intended role, others must provide dedicated care for them and their children.

God intends for all children to be raised by at least one loving, committed adult.

Impact of Original Sin on Relationships

The first sin of humankind began with a breach in Adam and Eve's relationship with God. Adam and Eve mistrusted God's guidance for them and listened to the serpent instead.⁸ This mistrust in their hearts created the path for the first sin, and continues to be a major consequence of original sin. The consequences were that Adam and Eve no longer reflected God's image, as they were created. They started hiding from God, and their mistrust and blame were directed toward each other. We were created in God's image to be in harmonious relationships, to reflect God's image of the Trinity in that we are in unbroken, harmonious relationship and yet retain our unique selves. The consequences of sin are that this mistrust and marred image break our intimate relationships and ultimately damage our ability to be in community.

When children are born into a home with two loving parents who know God, they are ahead in the journey of spiritual, psychological, and emotional development. From a theological point of view, the goal of child development is for the child to become a unique being who is in relationship with both God and other human beings.⁹ When children have parents who model God's love and care for them and are attentive to their needs, they have help in the restoration of God's image in them.¹⁰ Children are more likely to trust God, themselves, and others, and are more likely to be in community, which is where God's image is expressed most profoundly.¹¹ Since children are born entirely dependent on their parents and their communities, they are the most vulnerable to the consequences of sin's destruction of relationships.

Impact of Sin on Children's Relationships

Sadly, the impact of sin in children's lives often leads to more mistrust, which cyclically makes it more difficult for them to be in relationships. Children who are exposed to the consequences of sin in their family relationships and in their communities are vulnerable to multiple difficulties. The more risks children face, the more developmental difficulties they are likely to have. In certain environments, such as many global urban environments, children face poverty, malnutrition, unsuitable housing, inferior medical care,

⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 191.

⁹ Jack O. Balswick, Pamela E. King, and Kevin S. Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective*, (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 49.

¹⁰ Vigen Guroian, "The Ecclesial Family," *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 66-67, 70-71.

¹¹ Grenz, 207-208.

inadequate schools, family disruption, family and community violence,¹² child labor, and sexual exploitation.¹³ The consequences of sin in our communities, such as poverty, additionally make it more difficult for parents to perform the duties of parents. The risk of living in these kinds of environments is that parents are often overwhelmed, distressed, and fearful. In these situations, it can be difficult for primary caregivers to establish a secure relationship and bond with young children. Additionally, poor mothers, who are often single mothers and are isolated by lack of support or fear of community violence, are more likely to be abusive than nonpoor mothers.¹⁴ The isolation of caregivers in these situations is often compounded by the absence of community support to both encourage parents and step in to help with children.

Impact of Sin on Children's Development

Sadly, the impact of sin on children's development often makes it more difficult for them to be in positive relationships, which are the very thing that can help them. The absence of a secure, warm, stable, parent-infant attachment during a child's early life makes it difficult for children to form intimate, lasting relationships later in life,¹⁵ including a relationship with God. In addition to impairment in relationships to primary caregivers, children living in chronic stress, violence, and abuse, can have difficulty concentrating and sleeping, form aggressive or sexualized play, begin to act in an uncaring way from experiencing pain and loss, and have severe restriction in their play and intellectual development for fear of experiencing a traumatic event again.¹⁶ Additionally, these children are more at risk for psychological disorders, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, and can have impaired intellectual and moral development. These developmental difficulties make it much more difficult for children to form stable, positive relationships if there is no response from a loving community.

Children Need Parental Love

Parental love is nurturing, caring, stable, and attentive to children's needs. Children need to have parental love that models Christ's love for them. They need a community to encourage, support, and provide information to their parents, if their parents are too overwhelmed or depressed to care for them adequately. Equipping parents to be better parents is providing parental love for children. Additionally, children need adults to step in and model Christ's love to them directly, either as individual mentors or as a loving church community. These kinds of interventions can reverse the effects of sin and broken relationships and help to restore God's image in children and in their relationships with God and others.

¹² James Garbarino, et al., *Children in Danger: Coping with the Consequences of Community Violence*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992), 52.

¹³ World Vision, "The Sexual Exploitation of Children"; available from <http://www.worldvision.org/8525644B006FF375/0/8D9F47960E1299C688256FFC0050A574?Open>; accessed 26 August 2005.

¹⁴ Richard J. Gelles and Claire P. Cornell, *Intimate Violence in Families*, 2d ed. (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990), 56.

¹⁵ Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 60, 63.

¹⁶ Garbarino, 56.

God gives children as a gift to welcome and nurture.

Jennifer van Heijzen

It is a privilege to join with children in celebrating their uniqueness, embracing childhood as formative for all of life. Family, friends, church and the local community are responsible for creating an environment that promotes children's well-being.

God intends for children to thrive in stable and loving relationships.

Biblically speaking, what is the community's responsibility toward its children? What roles should the community play in the lives of children? Furthermore, are the roles of children limited to being subjects and recipients of care, and nothing more? Should children have responsibilities in the life of the community as well? In biblical, historical, and contemporary theological perspectives, children and their communities have related to one another in a variety of different ways. In the present day, Christians must learn from these perspectives to understand their implications for ministry to children, especially children at risk.

Theological Perspectives

A community is more than a neighborhood, more than a group of people who live near each other. It is a theological concept, and it relates to God's intentions for the world. As has been discussed previously, God's gift of his image gives inherent dignity to each human being, but sin has marred that image. In God's redemptive plan, however, Jesus Christ serves as the ultimate image of God that makes possible abundant life both in heaven and on earth. This life is not limited to individual achievement and self-fulfillment.

Indeed, Jürgen Moltmann claims that Christian living in *community* is the fulfillment of the human destiny.¹⁷ The image of God in each human being includes an innate concept of community. God lives in community in the Trinity, and his essence of love is fully realized in relationships between the members of the Trinity. As a relational Being, God created humanity to be relational as well. This relationship extends from a connection with God to a bond with other people. The Church as a community, then, must seek to live out God's intentions for his people by providing a network of support to children. With this in mind, let us examine what the Bible says about the relationships between children and their communities.

Biblical Perspectives

In the Bible, children are presented as a gift to the entire community. They are called "olive shoots" (Ps. 128:3), a "heritage from the Lord" (Ps. 127:3), and "arrows" in a quiver (Ps. 127:4-5). Children serve as living testimonies to God's faithfulness and blessing. The messianic child serves as God's ultimate gift to communities – to all of the communities of the world! God gave his Son, Jesus, to the world as a child to promote justice and righteousness throughout the world (Is. 9:6-7).¹⁸ Just as Jesus blessed the world by entering it, children bless their families and communities through their very existence.

¹⁷ Moltmann, 16.

¹⁸ See also Robin Maas, "Christ as the *Logos* of Childhood: Reflections on the Meaning and Mission of the Child," *Theology Today* 56, no. 4 (2000): 456-468 and Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*, (London: Fortress Press, 1984), 89.

