

Reflections on Human Dignity and the Image of God in Every Human Being

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Abstract

The question of "Human Dignity" is not only a global concern but also a controversial subject that has attracted multidisciplinary debates across civilizations. Over the years many academic reflections as well as numerous international and ecumenical covenants on human dignity have been published, but the treatment of every human being with the dignity they deserve remains elusive. Although there are many players advocating for the wellbeing of humanity in every society, there seems to be no universal agreement on the meaning and justification of treating people with dignity. Consequently, different approaches and criteria have been applied leading to selective justice. Bearing in mind that the church has a primary stake in promoting peace and justice for all, this paper examines the meaning of human dignity in relation to the biblical doctrine of the image of God in man, its theological basis and how it informs the agenda of the church today and in the future.

1. Introduction

Biblically, and also theologically, the concepts of "human dignity" and the "image of God in human beings" are inseparable. Human dignity is derived from the image and likeness of God in every human being and every human being is also called upon to fulfil God's purpose for human dignity. Historically the concept of "Human Dignity" has been a subject of great discussion across disciplines, often without any regard to its relation to the image of God in human beings which is its true foundation. Consequently, over the years many academic reflections as well as numerous international and ecumenical covenants on human dignity have been published, but the treatment of every human being with the dignity they deserve remains elusive. Global discourse on human dignity tends to focus on human rights and how they can be protected, but there is no consensus on why and how human beings have to be treated with dignity.

Historically, different philosophical traditions associated the distinct nature of humankind with both privileges and obligations that do not apply to non-human beings. In the contemporary world, the concept of human dignity has acquired currency as the bedrock upon which claims for human rights are based and justified. The turning point in the significance of the concept of human dignity was in 1948 when the United Nations used the concept as a basis for the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (UDHR), with a preamble reading as "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world..." In article 1 of

UDHR it is stated “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward one another with a spirit of brotherhood.” Currently the office of United nations High commissioner for Human rights oversees the human rights issues.

Similarly, international agreements, conventions, as well as professional and academic conferences have been held and publicized on the basis of human dignity. Notable examples include the International covenant on economic, social and cultural rights (1966); the international covenant on civil and political rights (1966); the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW) of 1979, the declaration of UN decade for women (1976-1985); the Copenhagen women conference of 1980; the Nairobi women’s conference of 1985; the Beijing women conference of 1995; and the Universal declaration on bioethics and human rights (2005). The cross-cutting theme in all these and other forums has been “human dignity”. According to Roger Brownsword, “Human dignity is a fundamental value in many legal systems. It plays a prominent role in both the northern, southern hemispheres, in common laws and civilian legal systems; it is also a cornerstone concept of many regional and international conventions and declarations¹.” Some countries have even based their constitutions on the concept of “human dignity” and with chapters on human bill of rights..

It is important to note that the church has also been actively involved in the pursuit of human rights albeit with different motives largely informed by biblical doctrine on the image of God in man. For example, a WCC commission of the churches for international affairs (CCIA) played a key role in the declaration United Nations declaration of human rights (UNDHR). CCIA also participated in the drafting of blue prints for the international covenants of 1966, which were promulgated in 1976 and signed by 35 states. In 1974 CCIA facilitated an ecumenical dialogue in St. Polten on human “Human rights and Christian responsibility” with representatives from the socialist states and developing nations. The outcome of this dialogue was a list of human rights beginning with the right to life. Indeed issues related to human dignity have always featured in many regional and international ecumenical forums including all General conferences of AACC since its formation in 1963. The Roman Catholic Church is also actively involved in the struggle for human dignity. In its second Vatican council (1962-65), the pope and Bishops of the church

¹Roger Brownsword, “Human dignity from a legal perspective” IN Düwell Marcus, Braarvig Jens, Brownsword Roger, MiethDietmar (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of Human dignity: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (UK Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1

endorsed the inclusion of human rights in the social teachings of the church with emphasis on human dignity as the most basic standards to which all human behavior is accountable².

The results of the above global developments on the theme of human dignity are evident. A lot of ground has been covered in securing human rights. Notable achievements since 1960s include condemnation of racism and a critique on political colonialism and economic exploitation in Africa, Asia, Latin America and other parts of the world³. Some of the universally acknowledged rights are the right to life; cultural identity; participation in decision making process; freedom of expression; freedom of religion; personal dignity; right to nourishment; and socio-economic rights.

In spite of the above achievements, a lot remains to be done in the pursuit of human dignity. Some of the universally acknowledged rights are yet to be guaranteed for every person. It is also common knowledge that discourses on human dignity have been with the elites and academics in forums such as conferences but not much has been done at the grassroots level. Part of the reason for this is that global approaches to human dignity have been in the past been generalized without paying attention to specific sections of society that continue being marginalized. In addition, the spread of secularism and the ushering in of postmodern worldview, have put into serious doubt objective pursuit of human dignity (in the name of human rights) because everything has been relativized. The situation is complicated by advancements in biotechnology which have introduced ethical issues that were not there before. Above all there is need to redeem the scriptural basis for human dignity which has been obscured in secular discourse. Bearing in mind that the church has a primary responsibility in protecting the dignity of every person, I will re-examine the meaning of human dignity in relation to the biblical doctrine of the image of God in man, its theological basis and how it informs the agenda of the church today and in the future. Specific themes that will feature in the presentation are the concept of human dignity, philosophical discourse on human dignity, Image of God in every human being as a basis for human dignity, Gender and human dignity, Bioethics and human dignity, environment and human dignity.

2. The concept of human dignity

² David Hollenbach, Jr., "Human dignity in Catholic Thought" IN Düwell Marcus, Braarvig Jens, Brownsword Roger, MiethDietmar (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of Human dignity: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (UK Cambridge University Press, 2014), 250

³ Jurgen Moltmann, *Political Theology and Ethics* (London: SCM Press Ltd 1984), 5

In order to understand the concept of “human dignity”, we must begin by exploring the meaning of the notion of “dignity”. The term “dignity” is a noun derived from the Latin word *dignitas*, which refers to a state of being worthy of honor or respect. It is synonymous to rank, esteem, decorum, decency and nobility. In many societies we encounter two forms of dignity, namely, achieved dignity and ascribed dignity.

Achieved dignity refers to merited and distinguished personal behavior that commands respect from others. This type of dignity may also be known as “meritocratic dignity” in the sense that it is determined by the status or rank that one holds in society by virtue of personal effort which others acknowledge as well deserved⁴. In sociological terms, meritocratic dignity is indicative of a status achieved by an individual by exhibiting outstanding qualities or performance. This type of dignity is conditional: it has to be earned and it can be lost.

Ascribed dignity is a distinguished social standing that is acquired by default or by virtue of belonging to a dignified category⁵. It is a privileged status that one enjoys through membership. For example, members of the royal family in Great Britain obtain this dignity either by birth or through marriage into the family. Similarly, in a caste system birth alone determines people’s destiny⁶. Previously in India, those who were born into the higher caste of priests and rulers were regarded as higher in rank compared to others in lower castes. The same was the case during the days of apartheid in South Africa where whites assumed a higher status than the blacks. Ascribed dignity may also be realized through occupation of highly regarded public offices. For example in Kenya Bishops, Judges and elected leaders are dignified because of the offices they occupy. This type of dignity is ceremonial and may be lost when one leaves office.

Unlike the merited and ascribed forms of dignity which are defined within specific social contexts⁷, the concept of “Human dignity” is used specifically to refer to the distinct nature of human beings from non-human beings. It is regarded an innate value that is inviolable and equally shared by all men and women. Human dignity is a distinguished social standing that is divinely given to all human beings, regardless of merit or social class. It is an inherent worth or

⁴ Josiah Ober, “Meritocratic and civic dignity in Greco-Roman antiquity” IN Düwell Marcus, Braarvig Jens, Brownsword Roger, MiethDietmar (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of Human dignity: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (UK Cambridge University Press, 2014), 53-63

⁵ Thomas E Hill Jr, “Kantian perspectives on the rational basis of human dignity In Düwell Marcus, Braarvig Jens, Brownsword Roger, MiethDietmar *The Cambridge Handbook of Human dignity: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (UK Cambridge University Press, 2014), 216.

⁶ John J. Macions. *Sociology. Annotated instructor’s edition* (Upper saddle river, New Jersey: Pearson, 2005), 249

⁷ The socially determined forms of dignity as described above may not be accorded the same status outside their social groups.

status of humankind that is neither earned nor can it be forfeited. Every human being has dignity by virtue of being human. This type of dignity is unconditional and cannot be lost.

In order to appreciate the notion of dignity, it is necessary to explore some of the philosophical foundations upon which the concept of human dignity can be understood. In the following section I will discuss some of the philosophical traditions which I believe shape global understanding of human dignity and by extension human rights

3. Philosophical foundations of Human dignity

Appropriate treatment of human beings must be based on a sound philosophy that explains the dignity and worth of all. Here I argue that society will continue undermining the dignity of some people as long as the understanding of humanity is based on false or incomplete philosophical premises. As an illustration I will examine some of the philosophical traditions which contribute significantly to the way human dignity is perceived. Two questions will guide my reflection on the various philosophical approaches to human dignity: What is the basis of human dignity? What does human dignity consist of?

To begin with I look at the tradition of Confucius who lived in the 6th century BC. He was one of the first thinkers to systematically explore the notion of goodness and whether moral superiority is a divine privilege or is inherent in humankind and can be cultivated⁸. He challenged the popular belief that only reigning rulers of the Zhou dynasty were given their authority directly from the gods under the mandate of heaven and the quality of *ren* (humanness) was the attribute of the ruling classes. Confucius too saw heaven as the source of moral order but he argued that the blessing of heaven was open to all, and that the quality of *ren* could be acquired by anyone. Confucius explained that it is the duty of everyone to cultivate the attributes that make up *ren*-seriousness, diligence, generosity, sincerity, and kindness. In summary Confucius held the view that everyone has a divinely given potential rise to a dignified rank and therefore human dignity is achieved. However, this philosophy does not justify the priority given to humankind as the distinct from non-human beings.

The Indian concept of caste is based on the concept of dharma which provides the doctrine of the proper ordering of the universe as including correct ordering of human life and society⁹. The ordering of society is based on varnas (color) where the light skinned Indians and thought to be of higher caste and the dark skinned are regarded as inferior. Behind this social order is a theory on how the four classes of people were created. All were created from the divine person

⁸ Gareth Jones, Georgia Palffy (Eds), *The Religions Book* London Dorling Kindersley, 2013, 74

⁹ Gareth Jones, Georgia Palffy (Eds), *The Religions Book* London Dorling Kindersley, 2013, 97-98

Purusha. Brahmin (priests) was created from the mouth. Kshatriya (military) were created from the arms, Vaishya (merchants) created from the thighs, and the suddra (common) from the feet. Because they all come from the same human person they are interdependent and all have essential part to play in the ordering of society. The four classes are castes. The caste system was discriminatory, emphasizing separation as being necessary in order to avoid pollution. The higher caste people feared contamination by the lower caste people. Marriage across the castes was prohibited. This divisiveness was recognized in the constitution of India, drawn up in 1948, which prohibited discrimination against lower classes, although popular prejudice has taken longer to eliminate. As already noted in the previous section, the caste system subscribes to the view that dignity is ascribed and therefore some people may not be looked down upon.

According to philosophical tradition of Cicero, human dignity is a central a central requirement of virtuous life that one should behave in a way that is appropriate to the dignity of human beings. Cicero used the Roman term *dignitas* to express the idea of human beings' elevated place in the universe. He universalized *dignitas* to apply to all human beings¹⁰. He argued that all human beings have a rank or elevated position in nature. While arguing for the higher position of human beings he argued that animals are governed by instinct while human beings have reason. Because of this superiority it would be unworthy of humans to live a life of pleasure. Human beings would be ashamed if caught living out their pleasure. Therefore living a life of pleasure is unworthy of elevated position human beings occupy. Because people are above animals they should not live like animals. His argument that nature has given reason and therefore one should act according to nature. Being elevated or having dignity in this way was said to yield duty to behave in a way that is worthy of this dignity.

African philosophical tradition applies the concept of Ubuntu to refer to how people ought to live. Ubuntu means humanness or personhood among Bantu speakers. The term is used to sum up particular view of what is morally fundamental, roughly, to live a genuinely human way of life or to become a real person. In Ubuntuism, life is meaningful only when lived in community. This understanding is captured in the traditional saying "I am because we are and since we are therefore I am". Implicit in this saying is the claim that a person is a person through other persons is the judgment that one ought to develop one's personhood or humanness, where these come in degrees. In ubuntu philosophy attribute the dignity of human beings to their special nature of having something akin to the soul, an important substance which will survive the death of their body. Human beings are viewed as the most precious beings on the planet hence they deserve respect in the form of universal entitlements to life, liberties, resources etc.

¹⁰¹⁰¹⁰¹⁰ Oliver Sensen, Human dignity in historical perspective: The contemporary and traditional paradigms In European Journal of Political Theory 2011 no 10 (1) 71-91

Emmanuel Kant has had the greatest influence on western perspectives of the dignity of human beings. According to Kant, all human beings have dignity regardless of their rank or social class, have an equal intrinsic worth or dignity¹¹. He maintained that Human dignity is an innate worth or status that is not earned nor can it be forfeited. Kant calls dignity “an unconditional and incomparable worth” that admits no equivalent. The basic Kantian answer is that human beings have dignity by virtue of their rationality and freedom, but this has been interpreted in different ways for example, capacity to set ends, as pragmatic and technical predispositions, as a good will, and as all rational capacities. Dignity however calls for responsibility. Human beings must strive to make our individual choices worthy of this moral standing, which elevates us above animals and other things.

Kant has been criticized for having shared some common prejudices of his time about the capacities of women and non-European races but his mature works repeatedly affirm the equal dignity of any person with the essential capacities to be moral agent. By doing wrong we do not forfeit our fundamental status as human beings, even though by criminal acts we may forfeit various rights. Even those who do evil must be respected as human beings assuming that despite their bad choices, they have the basic rationality and freedom necessary for being moral agents. The Kantian thesis that human beings have dignity by virtue of their rationality and autonomy has been repeatedly challenged on the ground that it devalues animals, children and the mentally incompetent human adults, making them subject to treatment merely as means.

All the philosophical traditions of human dignity discussed above do not seem to offer real reasons why human beings ought to be regarded as higher than non-human beings. Human rights based on the above philosophical assumptions of dignity cannot guarantee the treatment of every individual with respect they deserve as human beings. In the following section, I offer a biblical and theological reflection on human dignity and the image of God in every human being.

4. Biblical and theological basis of human dignity: Image of God in man

The Christian view of human dignity is based on biblical testimonies in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament. As Jurgen Moltmann observes, “Christian theology understands

¹¹Thomas E Hill, Jr Kantian perspectives on the rational basis of human dignity In Düwell Marcus, Braarvig Jens, Brownsword Roger, Mieth Dietmar *The Cambridge Handbook of Human dignity: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (UK Cambridge University Press, 2014), 215-216.

human dignity on the basis of biblical testimonies, the narratives of Israel and Jesus¹². Biblical sources indicate that human dignity is grounded in God's creative activity and his power to create everything from nothing. The principle texts that explicitly present the dignified position of human beings are Genesis 1:26-28; 5:2; and 9:6. They are also implied in Genesis 2, and Psalm 8. According to these texts, human beings are the only godlike creatures and they are clearly elevated above the rest of the creatures.

The concept of the "image of God" in man is a subject of great theological debate that is primarily concerned with the ontological design and functionality of human beings. A study of this subject not only reveals its intrinsic function as the basis of human dignity but also triggers three practical questions for the church in Africa, now and in the future: How should human beings relate to God? How should human beings relate to one another? How should human beings relate with the rest of creation? With these questions in mind, this presentation seeks to examine the essence of *imago dei* in man and its implications for the future of the church and the church of the future in Africa. A narrative approach to biblical exegesis will be applied in the analysis of selected biblical texts in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

5. Interpretation of Imago dei in Genesis 1:26-28

As it has already explained in the previous section, the Biblical view of anthropology is that God created man in his own image and likeness. There are several passages that address this subject but for purposes of this presentation I will spend more time on Genesis 1:26-28 because it is the primary text. The passage will be translated and expounded according to the principles of narrative criticism and reference will be made to other passages where necessary. But before this is done, it is necessary to provide some background information which will help the reader to appreciate the exegetical comments on the selected passage.

Genesis 1:26-28 is part of the first creation narrative that runs from Genesis 1:1 to Genesis 2:4a. God is the sole creator of the universe and he does his work in six days, after which he takes a rest on the seventh day. God creates progressively with specific tasks accomplished on each day in the following sequence: Day I creation of light (Gen 1:3-5); Day II creation of the firmament (Gen 1:6-8); Day III Creation of land and vegetation (Gen 1:9-13), Day IV creation of the sun, moon and stars (Gen 1:14-19); Day V creation of aerial and aquatic creatures (Gen 1:20-23); Day VI creation of wild animals and livestock (Gen 1:24-25) and creation of humankind (Gen 1:26-31); Day VII God rested (Gen 2:1-3). Each day covers a complete episode with various scenes. In the entire narrative the events in each creative act are characterized by a brief

Jurgen Moltmann 1984. Political Theology and Ethics, (London: SCM Press Ltd), Xi

introduction by the narrator “And God said...”, followed by a report of action, divine evaluation, subsequent action and naming of the day. It is important to observe that the vegetation, birds, aquatic creatures, and the land animals were all created according to their kinds. What follows below is the author’s translation and exegesis of Genesis 1;26-28.

²⁶ *Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea, and over the birds in the skies, and over cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."*

²⁷ *So God created the humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

²⁸ *God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that creeps upon the earth."*

(Gen. 1:26-27 author’s translation)¹³

V. 26 *Let us make humankind...*

The creation of humankind is carried out in the second scene of the last episode of the creation narrative. The scene begins with God’s expression of the intention to create human beings and the purpose for doing so. However, God’s utterance is problematic because it is not clear why he speaks in first person plural “let us”. All along God has been creating by commanding, but suddenly he changes his language from commanding to consulting.

The question is “why does God consult and who does he speak to”? The answer to this question can be found by careful consideration of the entire context of the creation narrative. Given that God also expressed the intention to create humankind in his own image, it can be deduced that God changed his mode of creation by command to consultation as an indication that what he was to create next was extra ordinary. All along God has been creating simply by commanding but when it comes to human beings he makes an announcement which indicates that human beings would be unlike the rest of creation.

The plural speech of God is an expression of the divine plan to set apart humankind as distinct from the rest of creation¹⁴. By reading Genesis 1:26 alone, one may fail to understand God’s addressee in the consultation. But on account of Genesis 1:27, the ambiguous plural utterances of Genesis 1:26 are clarified. The singular pronoun references of God “*God created the humankind in his image*” shows that the creator God is one and he created humankind in his

¹³ The translation is based on the author’s interpretation of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*

¹⁴ See also Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing. A guide to the exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 112

own image. It is therefore evident that God was talking to himself, just as he did in Genesis 3:22, 11:7, and Isaiah 6:8, in what is considered as “divine plural of deliberation¹⁵.”

The Hebrew word **Adam** has several meanings, such as mankind; male person; personal name of the first male human being. The actual meaning of this term depends on the context. In this context the term **Adamis** is a collective plural noun that stands for humankind, the crown of creation. This term is distinct from the Hebrew term **ish** which refers to a biological male person as opposed to his female counterpart, **isha**.

In our image, according to our likeness

This statement further gives a distinction between human beings and the other creatures. Only human beings are said to be made in the image and according to the likeness of God. The first person plural utterance by God has been discussed above but there is need to explain what it meant for humankind to be created “in the image” and “according to the likeness of God.” The Hebrew term for image is **selem** and its primary meaning is a hard copy representation of the original object. Von Rad explains **selem** as an actual plastic work, duplicate or idol.¹⁶ Although the default meaning of the preposition **b^e** is “in”, “by”, “with” or “along”, in this context this preposition may also be rendered as “as”. As Ross explains, the preposition is a preposition of essence that communicates better when translated as “as” and not “in”¹⁷. In other words, God actually says “Let us make humankind as our image”. God’s decision to create humankind in his own **selem** therefore meant that God purposed to create humankind as his representative to the rest of creation. A similar practice was reckoned among ancient Mesopotamians and Egyptians where kings or high ranking people in society were regarded as the image of gods¹⁸. It can therefore be seen that God accorded human beings a place of dignity by purposing to make them to be in charge of the rest of creation.

The Hebrew term **demut**, which is rendered as “likeness”, needs to be explained. Unlike **selem**, which refers to a physical representation, **demut** is an abstract semblance of an object. However, a close examination of the occurrence of the two terms indicates that they can be used interchangeably. For example, whereas both terms are used in Genesis 1:26, in Genesis 1:27 only **selemis** is used. Similarly in Genesis 5:1 only **demut** is used while in Genesis 9:6 only **selemis** is used. Since the two terms are interchangeable, they can be considered as linguistic

¹⁵ John Calvin,

¹⁶ Gerhard Von Rad. *Genesis*. A commentary translated by John H Marks (London: SCM Presss, 1956), 55.

¹⁷ Allen P. Ross. “Creation and Blessing”, 112

¹⁸ Victor P. Hamilton. *The book of Genesis chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids Michigan: William B Eerdmans, 1990), 135.

synonyms¹⁹. In light of this discussion, therefore, to be created in God's image and likeness is to be God's representative. As God's representatives, humankind were to rule over the rest of creation, just as Adam was put in the Garden of Eden to till and keep it (Gen 2:15).

V. 27 So God created the humankind...male and female

In this verse, the narrator gives a report of God's act of creating humankind. The meaning of the term Adam has been explained in v. 26 above but here a definite article is appended to serve as a back-reference so that the noun reads as **Ha-Adam**(the humankind). A new development in this verse is the qualification of Ha-Adam as consisting of both **zakar** (male) and **negeba**(female). The fact that Adam (humankind) is made up of both men and women is emphasized in Genesis 5:2 I where it is further clarified that God created male and female and named them "humankind". By clarifying that the humankind Ha-Adam is male and female, the narrator also implies that both man and woman are dignified above the rest of creation.

V. 28 "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and rule over..."

The purpose of this verse is to show that both man and woman, as dignified beings, share the same command of being fruitful, multiplying, filling the earth and subduing it and ruling over the rest of creation. Now that humankind has been created according to the divine plan, here God blesses humankind and commissions them to carry out the creation mandate. Two responsibilities are given to humankind. The first role is to procreate and fill the earth, not only by reproduction but also by being creative thinkers. God blessed humankind to be productive in all aspects of life. The second responsibility given to humankind is to subdue the earth and have dominion over the rest of creation. The word **kabas**(subdue) means application of force or subjugating someone or something thereby bringing it under bondage. Similarly, the word **rada** (rule over) suggests application of force in controlling. It is the act of having dominion over another. According to Waltke the command to subdue the land may be parallel to tilling and keeping of the land in Genesis 2:5, 15²⁰. To subdue the land and to rule over the rest of creation suggests having control over God's creation. The strong verbs used do not necessarily mean destruction of God's creation. Rather, humankind is given a stewardship role to serve as God's representatives in responsible use of God given resources.

6. Interpretation of Imago dei in 1 Corinthians 11: 2-16

Just as it is the case in the Old Testament, the New Testament contains very few texts that address the subject of the image of God in human beings. The Greek equivalent for image is

¹⁹C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch. *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*. Grand Rapids Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 63

²⁰Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 220.

eikon. It is found mostly in Pauline writings, where Paul alludes to creation accounts in Genesis but does not reproduce the exact content in the creation narratives. The New Testament presents *eikon* and its synonyms in three different senses: in Christological sense to refer to Christ as the image of God (2 Cor 4:4, Col 1:15, Phil 2:6, Heb 10:3); in eschatological sense to refer to man as the image of Christ (Rom 8:29, Col 3:10); and in ontological sense to refer to man as the image of God which occurs only in 1 Corinthians 11:7²¹. For purposes of this paper, I will explore the usage of eikon in 1 Corinthians 11:7, which states *A man ought not cover his head since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man* (NIV). This verse is important in this presentation for two reasons. First, the verse has been misinterpreted by some scholars to mean that a woman is subordinate to a man²², and more importantly that a woman does not bear the image of God. Secondly, this verse is important for our discussion because it addresses the question of human dignity which might easily be obscured when the text is read out of context.

It is instructive in biblical interpretation that the context be given prominence in exploring the meaning of a text. In this case, there is need to consider the social context the Corinthian church so as to better understand the whole passage of 1 Corinthians 11: 2-16. According to Bruce Winter²³ and Cynthia Long Westfall²⁴, the city of Corinth at the time of Paul's writings was characterized by paganism and licentiousness which thrived because of the vibrant economy. The pagan cult priests had a custom of distinguishing themselves from other worshippers by praying and scarifying with heads covered. Free and promiscuous women had attires and hairstyles that indicated their licentiousness as per the standards of that time. Having addressed the question of idol feasts and the believers' freedom (1 Cor 10:14-11:1), Paul now addresses the question of improper dressing by both men and women in home churches (1 Cor 11:2-16) before he turns to abuse of the poor at the Lord's table (11;17-34).

With the above background in mind, I now seek to survey the entire passage of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16, without delving into many details, except where the image of God in human beings and or human dignity is in focus.

V 2 I praise you a because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions just as I passed them on to you

²¹ See Victor P Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis* (William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990, 94)

²² See for example Kenneth L. Barker, John R Kohlenberger III, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* Abridged edition (Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan, 1994), 638 In their comment on 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 state "Christians must remember that God first created man, then woman (Ge. 2:21-23), and placed the man as administrative head over the woman and the woman as his helper companion."

²³ Bruce Winter, *1 corinthians* New Bible Commentary, Leicester Intervarsity press, 1161-1187, 1953

²⁴ Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Michigan: Baker Academic),

This is a hortatory remark, an invitation for the congregation to accept the new teaching. Paul offers a commendation as a way of winning the congregation to accept his new teaching which he is about to give in consequent verses.

V 3 But I want you to know that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ

This verse sets the premise for vv 4-5. Here Paul outlines the relationships between Christ and men, man and woman and finally God and Christ. The Greek term *kephale*, which is translated here as “head” has an alternative and more common meaning of “source”. Paul seems to allude to creation accounts in Genesis 1:26 and 2: 18-24. He seems to refer to the narratives of creation in both accounts but introduced the idea of Christ which is not explicitly given in Genesis. Paul’s main interest, however, is not to discuss the order of creation but to set grounds for addressing the problem of improper attire by both men and women in vv 4-5. It is therefore makes sense to conclude that in this verse Paul is not showing the subordination of woman to man but is simply drawing up relationships the sake of advancing his argument against undignified attire.

Vv4-5

Any man who prays or prophesies with his head covered disgraces his head. 5But any woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered disgraces her head, for it is one and the same thing as having a shaved head.

Having laid the premises in v 3, Paul now explains the problem of undesirable Christian attire in places of worship. Paul raises two problems related to dressing but affecting men and women in different ways. By praying and prophesying with his head covered (in the pattern of pagan worshippers), a man dishonors his head (explained in v 3 as Christ). Similarly a woman who prays and prophesies with her head uncovered (in the pattern of promiscuous women) dishonors her head (explained in v 3 as man in and in this case husband). These are different problems related to improper dressing. The offended parties in the two cases are different; man offends Christ, while woman offends her husband.

V 6 For if a woman will not cover her head, she should cut off her hair. But if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, she should cover her head.

Here Paul focuses on woman alone; if she does not cover her head she brings disgrace to herself. In other words, Paul tries to persuade women to safeguard their dignity by not stooping to the standards of promiscuous women, who by Roman law would have to be disciplined by cutting off their hair. As Cynthia Long Westfall explains,

The Roman matron's dress code signified her rank as well as her status and role as a sexually mature woman in Roman society. On the other hand, an unveiled head signified sexual availability, so that a woman slave or freedwoman was prohibited from veiling. An uncovered head diminished the value of a woman, it destroyed her appearance. If a woman was not dressed and was accosted, no one would be blamed. Exposed hair was also viewed as seductive²⁵.

V 7 For a man should not have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God. But the woman is the glory of the man.

As I have already explained in vv 4-5 above, Paul's concern is with improper dressing by Christian men and women in places of worship. Here Paul addresses the two problems with different prescriptions. For men, the point is that they are the image and glory of God (not gods), and the women are the glory of their husbands (not other men). Some interpreters take this to mean Paul excludes women from the image of God and this contradicts Genesis 1:26-27. Notice that the text does not say that woman is the image and glory of man²⁶.

Vv 8 -10

For man did not come from woman, but woman from man. 9 Neither was man created for the sake of woman, but woman for man. 10 For this reason a woman should have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

Here Paul alludes to the second creation narrative, where God declared that it is not good for man to be alone and therefore created woman as the glory of man. She ought to have a symbol of authority over her head because of angels. The symbol of authority here refers to a veil which a woman would put on her head as an indication of her status as a respectable married woman. The authority here is the woman's authority and not the man's authority. According to Phil Payne, the work of angels mentioned here is probably to observe worship and report to God²⁷.

V 11-12

²⁵ Cynthia Long Westfall, *Paul and Gender: Reclaiming the Apostle's Vision for Men and Women in Christ* (Grand Michigan: Baker Academic), 26

²⁶ Victor P Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis* (William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990, 94)

²⁷ See P. B. Payne, *Lecture handout on 1 Corinthians 11:2-16*, Payne Loving Trust 2018

In any case, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. 12For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman. But all things come from God.

In these verses Paul affirms mutual interdependence between man and woman which contradicts any suggestion of subordination of women in v 3. Paul nullifies the superiority of man over woman on account of priority of creation by concluding that “all things come from God.”

V 13-15

Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14Does not nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace for him, 15but if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For her hair is given to her for a covering.

Paul makes use of rhetorical questions to challenge the Corinthian church in self-examination. The appeal is to their own understanding of what is proper dressing. In this case Paul expects that the Corinthians would agree with his recommendation for appropriate dressing for both man and woman as already discussed in v 5. The short hair mentioned here matches with Paul’s recommendation for man not to cover his head while the long hair seems to be equivalent to Paul’s recommendation for a woman to cover her head. What is clear here is that what is not honorable for man is glory to the woman. Long hair probably functions as something that distinguishes the splendor of the woman and it has been given to the woman to serve as her covering.

V 16If anyone intends to quarrel about this, we have no other practice, nor do the churches of God.

Paul concludes his exhortation by appealing to what goes on in the churches so far established.

I conclude my analysis by emphasizing that 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 is about safeguarding the dignity of both Christian men and women in worship. The text does not in any way intent to subordinate women to men. Rather Paul is trying to find solutions for two notable problems associated with dressing for worship; Christian men are emulating pagan priests, and Christian married women are emulating secular women. By this text, Paul is also indirectly challenging Pagan priests and prostitutes to live according to the human dignity that is enshrined in the image of God in every human being.

7. The essence of *Imago dei*

What then is the essence of imago dei in man? From our analysis of biblical texts above, the following can be said to be the essence of imago dei in man. Firstly, the image of God in man is a unique quality that God bestowed upon humanity effectively setting them apart as special creation. Only human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. For this reason, human beings are dignified above the rest of creation.

Secondly, in Christianity and in Judaism, the intrinsic-universal value of human beings (human dignity) is embedded in God's decision to bestow upon humankind a representation role. By having God's image, human beings represent the presence of God in way similar to the way gods in the ancient Near East were believed to dwell in their statues and images.

Thirdly, image of God in human beings is certainly the basis on which God grants them the privilege of having dominion over the rest of creation. The essence of the image of God is found in the creation mandate of power and responsibility that God bestowed upon humankind at creation. In order to govern the earth, they need to procreate; therefore they were created male and female, blessed by God and therefore they multiply the divine image. But as Brueggemann observes, the power that God gave to humankind should not be exploitative. Rather it is power that should be exercised just as God would²⁸.

Fourthly, the image of God in human beings grants them sanctity. In Genesis 9:6, the uniqueness and supremacy of human life is declared. No one is allowed to kill a human being because he is made in the image and likeness of God. Here the sanctity of human life is declared and this further reveals the dignity of humankind.

Fifthly, the image of God in human beings is the basis for true worship. While the creation mandate gave freedom to human beings to develop their potentials, human beings are still obliged to depend on God as his creatures. According to Hoekema, the relationship between human beings and their creator has two dimensions. On the one hand a human being is a creature, who is perpetually dependent on God. However, on the other hand human beings are creatures who must act independently. It therefore follows that human actions must be those that are consistent with God's purposes for creating human beings.

Finally, the image of God in human beings underscores the fact that all human beings, whether male or female; rich or poor; tall or short; black or white; of all tribes, everywhere on earth are dignified beings. God elevated human beings above all creation. They are dignified and must be treated with dignity. Unlike the rest of creation, human beings think, relate, and bear the image

²⁸ Walter Bruggemann. Genesis. Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for teaching and preaching (Westminister: John Knox Press, 1982), 32.

of the divine. The Psalmist declares humanity as having been made a little less than angels and crowned with glory and honor²⁹.

It is regrettable to note that the dignity of human beings has been undermined by sinful activities. By neglecting God's word, human beings undermine their own dignity as well as the dignity of others and the sanctity of the environment. In the paragraphs that follow, I will explore the task of the church in promoting human dignity now as well as in the future.

8. Implications for the church now and in the future

The task of the church now and in the future is to address factors that undermine the ontological design and functionality of human beings. The church of the future should find ways of integrating everyone into society. No one should be discriminated against on the basis of gender, age, race or physical fitness. The church of the future should not divide people into categories; rather it should explore ways by which all could be brought into fellowship. Below are what I would consider as some of the priority areas of engagement by the church as it seeks to safeguard human dignity in Africa.

8.1 Gender Justice

Gender refers to the personal traits and social positions that members of a society attach to being female or male³⁰. In Africa Gender inequality is perpetuated by patriarchy, a form of social organization in which males dominate females. As I have noted in the biblical analysis of text above, men and women were both created in the image of God and there is no reason for discrimination against either gender. However, the road towards full realization of Gender justice in Africa has been rough and bumpy stretching from the days when women were thought to be non-human to 1948 when they were implied in the UDHR before the formation of CEDAW. The Beijing conference of 1995 called for action for equality, development and peace spells out twelve areas for action, detailing gender specific needs with respect to health, education, poverty and access to economic resources in addition to environment, peace and security.

In the UN documentation on women's rights and empowerment, the dignity of women tends to be more often explicitly invoked by states to reaffirm rather than to tackle existing gender norms³¹. In many cases, reports from UN member countries indicate progress made in trivial

²⁹ Psalms 8:5

³⁰ John J. Macions. Sociology. Annotated instructor's edition (Upper saddle river, New Jersey: Pearson, 2005), 325

³¹ Annika Thiem, Human Dignity and Gender inequalities. In Düwell Marcus, Braarvig Jens, Brownsword Roger, Mieth Dietmar *The Cambridge Handbook of Human dignity: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (UK Cambridge University Press, 2014), 501.

domestic matters in the name of protecting women dignity, while ignoring women's involvement in positions of public leadership and other high ranking sectors of the economy. There is need to continue engaging powers that be to open more room for women participation in all national affairs.

8.2 Corruption

Corruption is presently one of the major challenges facing the human race³². The world over corruption is increasingly being seen as a threat to human existence and leading factor undermining human dignity in Africa today. Corruption is the main obstacle to the realization of good governance, sustainable development and millennium development goals. It has monumental effects on the political, economic, social and cultural well-being of societies. It seems to me that corruption has become a persistent demon that requires concerted efforts of the church to exorcise it from all public and private spaces. There will be no end to human misery as long as corruption persists and therefore the church must continue raising its voice against this vice.

8.3 Socio-economic justice

The church should also be concerned with promotion of socio-economic justice for all. In our discussions above we noted that the image of God is not a preserve of any category of people. All human beings are dignified by virtue of being human. The creation mandate was given to all to procreate, multiply fill the earth and subdue it. In this respect justice must be done to all and each person has a right to fundamental freedoms. These freedoms include the freedom to have a family, to procreate, to worship and to engage in meaningful activities in life. Fundamental human rights include, the right to food, shelter, and the right to freedom from poverty. Waltke summarizes the Christian perspective on human rights as follows³³: First on account of having been created in God's image, they must be respected. Secondly; all human beings are equal hence the need to be treated without any form of prejudice. The church is therefore called upon to challenge all structures that undermine socio-economic justice.

8.4 Environment

Finally, one of the greatest challenges to humanity today is environmental degradation. The church is called upon to safeguard the sanctity of the environment. The environment and

³²Patrick Loch Otiendo Lumumba, Corruption: The Bane of Africa Elizabeth Nduku, John Tenamwenye (eds) Corruption in Africa A Threat to Justice and Sustainable Peace, Geneva: Globethics.net, 2014

³³Waltke 180

indeed all creation belongs to God. At creation God put the man he had created in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it (Genesis 2:7,15). Human beings are God's stewards of the environment. As the Psalm 115:16 the highest heavens belong to the Lord but the earth he has given to man. This means that the earth belongs to both God and man. The responsibility of keeping the environment is given to human beings. Although God gave man the power to have dominion over the rest of creation, man is still answerable to God.

8.5 Bioethics

Bioethics is particularly concerned with questions regarding the beginning and the end of human life. With developments in biotechnology, new ethical cases have emerged, for example, sustaining people with brain death on support machines, or others threatening to carry out cloning on human beings. There are many questions that need answers. For example: On the basis of what features do we subscribe human dignity? Suppose brain damage is irreversible, would we still hold that the patient in question has dignity? Where does human life begin? These and many and others are ethical issues that the church must continue deliberating on for the sake of preserving human dignity.

9. Conclusion

This presentation was an attempt to offer a reflection on human dignity and the image of God in every human being. I have tried to offer a global and multidisciplinary discourse on the subject. In conclusion, I wish to state that to be human is to bear the image and likeness of God, and to live in the fear of God. In order to be truly human we must exist as creatures dependent on God; act as persons with the cultural mandate; promote justice for all; care for the environment. Every inhuman activity violates the God given dignity of humanity. The church is therefore called up to advocate for the dignity and worth of every human being, regardless of gender, age, race, or any other form of differentiation.

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