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In the Image of the Gardener-King: Re-reading Genesis 1:26–28 with Ubuntu for Gender Equality and the Care of Creation in Contemporary Zambia

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ABSTRACT

Genesis 1:26–28 has been read in two opposing directions. One reading takes the creation of the man before the woman, and the granting of dominion, as a charter for male authority over women and human mastery over the earth. The other, drawing on African women's theology and on ecological hermeneutics, reads the same passage as the commissioning of women and men together to bear God's image and to exercise a shared and responsible care of creation. This article argues for the second reading and develops it in dialogue with the African philosophy of Ubuntu. It contends that the image of God is relational and inclusive, reaching across colour, gender, and creed, and that the dominion it confers is the responsible stewardship of a gardener rather than the exploitation of a tyrant. Read through Ubuntu, with its conviction that a person is a person through other persons, the passage grounds both the equal dignity of women and an ethic of kinship with the wider community of creation. Set against the gender inequality and ecological degradation of contemporary Zambia and the wider continent, this re-reading offers a contextual theology in which the care of women, of the neighbour, and of the earth belong together as facets of a single human vocation under God.

1. Introduction

Few passages of Scripture have carried as heavy a freight of interpretation as Genesis 1:26–28. In a few verses it speaks of humanity made in the image of God, of male and female created together, and of a dominion granted over the creatures of the earth, and each of these claims has been pressed into the service of arguments their authors could scarcely have foreseen. In African contextual study the passage sits at the centre of a long debate about the place of women, since one influential reading has treated the order and manner of the creation of the sexes as a warrant for the subordination of women to men. A second reading, associated with African women's theology and with ecological interpretation, takes the same passage to commission women and men alike as stewards of the earth who share equally in its responsibility and its authority (Oduyoye 2001, 4–8).

This article argues for the second reading and develops it in a particular direction. It sets the image of God within the African philosophy of Ubuntu, and it shows that, read in this light, Genesis 1:26–28 grounds at once the equal dignity of women and an ethic of kinship with the wider creation. The argument moves from the biblical idea of the image of God, through the question of dominion and its proper meaning, to the position of women within the image, and on to the ecological and social crisis of contemporary Zambia that gives the whole discussion its urgency. Throughout, the conviction is that the care of women, of the neighbour, and of the earth are not separate concerns but facets of a single human vocation under God, and that an African reading of the image of God is uniquely placed to hold them together.

The question is not merely academic in the Zambian setting. Zambia is a society in which churches are full and influential, in which women carry much of the labour of the household and the field, and in which the land and water on which life depends are under mounting strain from drought, deforestation, and pollution. How the churches read Genesis 1:26–28, and in particular what they take it to say about the worth of women and the human relation to the earth, shapes attitudes that bear directly on the lives of millions. A re-reading of this passage is therefore a contribution to public theology and not only to biblical interpretation, since the convictions it forms are lived out in homes, fields, and public debate.

2. The Image of God in Genesis 1:26–28

The creation account turns, at its climax, on the making of humanity in the image and likeness of God. Udoekpo notes that the text raises the deep anthropological questions of the constitution, the limitation, and the potential of the human being, and that the formation of humanity from the dust binds it to the rest of creation even as the image distinguishes it (Udoekpo 2021, 206). The Hebrew words for image, selem, and likeness, demut, are used in the passage as near synonyms, and together they place the human being in a singular relation to God, authorised to act as God's representative and entrusted with the care of the world on God's behalf (Udoekpo 2021, 208). To bear the image is to be commissioned, and the commission is one of representation and stewardship rather than of ownership.

The meaning of the image has been understood in several ways across the history of interpretation. Some have located it in human reason or moral capacity, others in the human capacity for relationship, and still others have heard in the plural of the divine speech, let us make humankind, an intimation of the triune life of God (Udoekpo 2021, 208–209). Read in its fullness, the image points beyond any single faculty to the whole human being as one made for relationship with God and with others. It is on this relational reading that the present argument builds, for if the image is most truly seen in relationship, then it is shared equally by all who are made for relationship, and it cannot be the property of one sex, one race, or one class. The image is, by its nature, inclusive.

This inclusiveness has sharp consequences. If the image of God reaches across colour, gender, race, and creed, then it stands opposed to the racism and the gender discrimination that continue to devalue some human beings in contemporary society. The doctrine that every person bears the divine image is among the strongest theological grounds for human equality available to the church, since it locates the worth of the person not in any achievement or status but in the gift of the Creator. To deny the full humanity of any person, on whatever ground, is therefore to deny the image of God in them, and the recovery of this doctrine is a recovery of a charter for the dignity of all.

The image must be held together with the creatureliness it accompanies. The same passage that sets humanity apart as the image of God also forms the human being from the dust of the ground, binding it to the soil and the creatures from which it is drawn (Udoekpo 2021, 206). Rosner's study of personal identity draws out the deeper truth that human identity rests finally on being known by God rather than on any human capacity or achievement, which guards the doctrine of the image against the pride that would turn distinction into domination (Rosner 2017). To be the image of God is to be, at once, dust and dignity, a creature among creatures and yet entrusted with their care. Forgetting either side distorts the whole, and much of the misuse of the passage has come from remembering the dignity while forgetting the dust.

The plural of the divine deliberation, let us make humankind, has invited reflection across the Christian centuries. Read in the light of the church's later confession, some have heard in it an intimation of the triune life of God, so that the image borne by humanity is the image of a God who is himself a communion of persons (Udoekpo 2021, 208–209). Whatever weight one places on that reading, its direction matters for the present argument, since it locates the image not in the solitary individual but in relationship, in a God whose own being is relational and who makes humanity for relationship in turn. An image of this kind cannot be possessed in isolation or hoarded by one party against another. It is realised only in communion, which is exactly what the African understanding of the person will go on to affirm.

It helps to distinguish the several senses in which the image has been understood, since the misuse of the doctrine has often turned on confusing them. Some accounts locate the image in a human substance or faculty, a capacity for reason or for moral choice, while others understand it functionally, as the role of representing God's rule within creation, and still others relationally, as the human being's openness to God and to others. These need not be set against one another. The human being represents God as a reasoning, choosing creature made for relationship, and the functional reading, in which the image is the vocation of stewardship, sits especially close to the concerns of this article. What matters is that on none of these readings is the image the possession of one sex or the warrant for one creature's mastery of the rest.

3. Dominion as Responsible Stewardship, Not Exploitation

The grant of dominion in Genesis 1:28 has been among the most misused phrases in Scripture. Read as a license to exploit, it has been invoked, often only implicitly, to justify the human plunder of the natural world. Yet the passage will not bear that weight when it is read alongside the second creation account, in which the human being is placed in the garden to till and to keep it, to serve and to guard the ground from which it was taken (Genesis 2:15). Pope Francis presses this point in Laudato Si', challenging the failure to read Genesis 1:28 in its proper context and calling for an interpretation of faith that is sensitive to the charge of Genesis 2:15, so that the human vocation is understood as one of cultivation and care rather than of unrestrained dominion (Francis 2015, 67).

The biblical witness itself qualifies the language of rule. The dominion of the image-bearer is meant to mirror the rule of God, who in this very account brings order out of chaos and pronounces the creatures good, and whose kingship in the Scriptures is repeatedly shown as care for the weak and provision for the dependent (Psalm 72). The New Testament sharpens the point, where Christ redefines greatness as service and warns his disciples against the domineering rule of the nations (Matthew 20:25–28; Mark 10:42–45; 1 Peter 5:3). Dominion of the kind Scripture commends is therefore the responsible stewardship of a gardener-king, who exercises authority for the flourishing of those in his charge, and not the exploitation of a tyrant who consumes what he is meant to keep.

The vocabulary of Genesis 2 confirms this reading. The human being is placed in the garden to serve and to keep it, words that elsewhere in the Scriptures describe the service of worship and the keeping of the covenant, so that the care of the earth is framed as a sacred and covenantal task rather than a proprietor's privilege. The image language of Genesis 1 points the same way when it is set against its ancient Near Eastern background, where the image of a god, or of a king, was a representative who made the absent sovereign present and who ruled on the sovereign's behalf and in the sovereign's manner. To be the image of a God who rules by self-giving care is to be charged with a rule of the same kind, and the text gives no warrant for any other.

This reframing matters for the wider argument because the same logic of domination has been turned against women and against the earth alike. A reading that licenses the mastery of nature has tended to travel with a reading that licenses the mastery of women, and both rest on a misunderstanding of what it means to bear the image of a God whose own rule is care. Moo and Moo capture the corrective when they insist that we bear God's image not by our strength or our capacity for control but simply as those whom God has made and called, so that the image is found as fully in the child and the infirm as in the powerful (Moo and Moo 2018). To recover dominion as stewardship is thus, at the same stroke, to undercut the theological supports of both ecological exploitation and the subordination of women.

The blessing to be fruitful and to multiply has sometimes been read as a mandate for limitless increase and consumption, but the context resists that reading too. The fruitfulness of Genesis 1 is set within a creation pronounced good and entrusted to human care, and it is the fruitfulness of a steward who tends a garden, not the appetite of a consumer who strips it. Human flourishing and the

flourishing of the wider creation are meant to rise together, and a growth purchased by the ruin of the earth betrays the very blessing it claims to fulfil. The challenge the text issues is therefore not against fruitfulness but against the exploitative leadership and domineering mastery that turn a blessing into a curse for the world and for those who come after.

The history of interpretation gives the question urgency. Critics have charged that the Western reading of the dominion mandate, detached from its setting and married to the technological ambitions of the modern age, helped to authorise the exploitation of nature that has issued in the present ecological crisis. Whatever the merits of that charge as history, it identifies a real distortion, and the African church has no reason to inherit it. By reading dominion as the stewardship of a gardener-king, within the community of creation that the Scriptures describe, African theology can recover the text from its misuse and offer the wider church a reading truer to what Genesis actually says (Bauckham 2010, 1–12). The point is not to apologise for the Bible but to read it well.

The rhythm of the creation week itself sets a limit on human mastery. The God who works to make the world also rests, and he sanctifies a time of rest for the creatures and the land as well as for the human being. The Sabbath written into the order of creation declares that the world is not merely a field for endless production, that the worker and the soil alike have a right to rest, and that the worth of creation does not lie only in its usefulness to human ends. A dominion modelled on this God will know how to stop, will refuse the restlessness that strips the earth, and will honour the rest that the Creator built into the world he made.

4. The Image of God and Ubuntu

The relational reading of the image finds a natural partner in the African philosophy of Ubuntu, an indigenous theology of communal living in which the person is understood through relationship rather than in isolation (Johnson 2000, 564). Ubuntu breaks the chains of segregation, racism, and ethnocentrism, because it cannot conceive of a human being whose dignity is separable from the web of relationships in which they stand. John Mbiti gave the idea its best-known expression when he described the African understanding of the person in the words that the individual can only say, I am because we are, and since we are, I am, naming this as the cardinal point in the African view of the human being (Mbiti 1990, 106). The person, on this account, becomes conscious of their being and their responsibilities only in the company of others, in joy and in suffering alike.

Set beside the image of God, Ubuntu deepens and confirms the relational reading. If the image is most fully seen in relationship, and if the African tradition understands the person as constituted by relationship, then the two illuminate one another, and the result is an anthropology in which to be human is to belong. This belonging carries obligations. To live out the image of God as an Ubuntu person is to administer justice, peace, mercy, kindness, compassion, and righteousness to all, and with particular care to the poor and the oppressed, after the pattern of the one who came to bring good news to the poor and to set the captive free (Isaiah 61:1–3; Luke 4:18–19). The image of God, read through Ubuntu, is not a status to be possessed but a vocation to be exercised in the service of the whole community.

Mbiti's account of the person carries further implications for an African reading of the image. The self that becomes conscious of its being only in the company of others is a self bound to the living, to the ancestors who have gone before, and to the generations not yet born, so that the human community stretches across time as well as space. To bear the image of God within this web is to be answerable not only to one's contemporaries but to those who came before and those who will follow, and the care of creation takes on the character of a trust held on behalf of the unborn. An ethic of this kind is well suited to the long horizons that ecological responsibility demands, and it supplies from within the African tradition a motive for restraint that a purely individual anthropology struggles to provide.

A word of caution keeps this appropriation honest. Ubuntu has sometimes been romanticised, as though African community were free of the exclusions and hierarchies that mark every human society, and the same communal tradition that affirms the dignity of the person has at times been invoked to suppress the individual or to keep women in their place. The image of God supplies the corrective. Read alongside Ubuntu, it insists that the dignity belonging to the person is given by God and may not be overridden by the community, so that genuine Ubuntu protects rather than dissolves the individual, and includes rather than excludes the stranger, the woman, and the poor. The two ideas hold each other to account, the image of God guarding Ubuntu against collectivist excess and Ubuntu saving the image from individualist distortion.

Crucially, that community is not only human. Shingange has shown how a theology of Ubuntu can address the way images of God have been used to marginalise others on grounds of race, gender, and sexuality, recovering instead an inclusive vision of the divine image in every person (Shingange 2024). The same relational logic extends outward to the creatures, for if the person is constituted by relationship, there is no reason to halt the web of relationship at the boundary of the human. The interconnectivity that humanity shares with other living creatures becomes, on this reading, part of what it means to bear the image of a relational God, and the care of creation becomes a matter of kinship rather than of mere management. Ubuntu thus carries the relational image of God outward into an ethic of the whole community of life.

Ngolele's environmental ethics, developed in dialogue with Laudato Si', names the deep structure of this African vision as one of recognition and sacred care, in which the human being recognises the worth of the other, whether human, ancestral, natural, or divine, and responds with a care that honours the sacred in each (Ngolele 2019, 8–14). This is Ubuntu reaching its full extent, beyond the human community to the whole order of creation. The sense of relatedness that runs through the Bantu languages binds the person to the land, the water, and the living things around them, so that to harm the environment is to damage the relationships in which one's own humanity consists. Read together with the image of God, this vision yields an anthropology in which the care of creation is not an external duty laid upon the human being but an expression of what the human being most deeply is.

5. Women in the Image of God: Gender, Equality, and Care

The position of women has been the most contested application of Genesis 1:26–28 in African contextual study. The patriarchal reading appeals to the sequence of creation, the man formed before the woman, and to the grant of dominion, to argue that God established the authority of men over women. The ecological and relational reading rejects this inference and holds that both sexes

were created to bear the image and to be stewards of the earth, carrying equal authority and equal responsibility (Oduyoye 2001, 4–8). The decisive text is Genesis 1:27 itself, where the image is given to humanity as male and female together, so that whatever the image confers, it confers on women and men alike.

African scholarship has pressed this point with growing force. Mwandayi, reading Genesis 1:26 from a womanist perspective in the Zimbabwean context, argues that being created in God's image connotes gender equality, since the text declares that male and female alike were created in that image, and he draws out the implications for the just distribution of land to women in agrarian reform (Mwandayi 2022, 2–6). The reading is significant because it refuses to separate the theological claim from its material consequences. To affirm that women bear the image of God is, in a society where land is life, to affirm their right to a share in the land, and the doctrine of the image becomes a resource for justice rather than an ornament of piety.

None of this denies that women and men may carry distinct roles within a community. African societies have often distributed responsibilities between the sexes, with women caring for the home and children and men accountable for provision, and these roles can be understood as complementary and equally necessary rather than as a hierarchy of worth (Udoekpo 2021, 210). The error lies not in recognising difference but in deriving from it a subordination that the text does not support, and in excluding women from decision and from voice. A theology that holds together the equal dignity of women and the genuine diversity of gifts is faithful both to the creation account and to the lived reality of African community, and it resists the patriarchal habit by which difference is made to serve domination.

The patriarchal reading has often leaned less on Genesis 1 than on a particular construal of Genesis 2 and 3, in which the later formation of the woman and her part in the fall are taken to establish her subordination. African women's theologians have long contested this move. Oduyoye and the wider circle of African women theologians have shown how the selective reading of Scripture, filtered through patriarchal culture, has been used to bind women, and they have called for a hermeneutic that reads the whole canon in the light of the gospel's liberating intent (Oduyoye 2001, 4–8). On such a reading the priority of Genesis 1:27, with its joint creation of male and female in the image of God, governs the interpretation of what follows, and the subordination of women is seen as belonging to the disorder of sin that Christ came to undo rather than to the creation that God called good.

The recovery of women as equal bearers of the image has consequences for the ordering of community and church alike. If women share fully in the image of God and in the vocation of stewardship, then their exclusion from decision, from leadership, and from the shaping of the institutions that govern their lives stands in tension with the creation account itself. Complementarity, rightly understood, names a partnership of equals with diverse gifts, not a hierarchy in which one party decides and the other obeys. A church and a society that drew out the implications of Genesis 1:27 would welcome the voice and the leadership of women as a faithful expression of the created order rather than a concession to the spirit of the age, and they would find their common life enriched by gifts they had long suppressed.

The material stakes of this reading are highest where land is concerned. In agrarian societies the ownership and use of land determine survival, security, and standing, and the customary and legal arrangements that govern land have often excluded women or left them dependent on male relatives. Mwandayi's womanist reading of the image presses exactly here, asking whether the women of Zimbabwe have received a just share in land redistribution, and grounding their claim in the equal dignity that the image of God confers (Mwandayi 2022, 4–8). The same question presses in Zambia, where many women farm land they do not own. A theology that affirms women as equal bearers of the divine image gives the church a reason, drawn from the creation account itself, to advocate for their just access to the land on which their lives depend.

The witness of Jesus seals the case. In a society ordered by sharp distinctions of gender, he received women as disciples, accepted their support, defended them against their accusers, and entrusted to them the first proclamation of his resurrection, treating them throughout as full participants in the kingdom he announced. The early Christian confession that in Christ there is no longer male and female draws out the implication, that the redemption accomplished in him restores the equal dignity that the image of God conferred at creation and that sin had defaced. An African theology of the image, read in the light of Christ, therefore finds in the gospel not a reluctant concession to the worth of women but its ringing affirmation.

The cost of the patriarchal reading should not be understated. Where Scripture has been used to teach that women are made to obey and men to rule, the teaching has lent a sacred sanction to the control of women and, at its worst, to the violence done to them, and it has deprived the church and the wider society of the gifts of half their members. To re-read Genesis 1:26–28 toward the equal dignity of women is therefore not an academic adjustment but a matter of justice, with consequences for how women are treated in the home, the church, and the public life of the nation. The doctrine of the image of God, recovered in its fullness, stands as a rebuke to every arrangement that treats a woman as less than a full bearer of that image.

6. The Image of God and the Ecological Crisis in Zambia

The argument reaches its point of application in the ecological and social crisis of contemporary Zambia and the wider continent. Gushee observes that all human beings, including Africans who live by Ubuntu, depend not only on one another but on a healthy environment, on clean air and water, fertile soil, land to till, a stable climate, and the other creatures on which life depends (Gushee 2010, 250–251). The African anthropologist Christophere Ngolele makes the same point from within the tradition, holding that a person attains full human identity only in harmonious relationship with other human beings, with the ancestors, with created nature, and with God (Ngolele 2019, 8–12). On this account the degradation of the environment is not merely a practical problem but a wound to the very relationships in which the human person consists.

Yet the African reality too often falls short of this vision. The continent is marked by deforestation, recurrent drought, pollution, the warming of the climate, the shrinking of water supplies, declining agricultural productivity, worsening food security, and the deepening of poverty and disease, even though the resources of the Genesis creation account have long been available to its churches (Gushee 2010, 251). Zambia shares fully in this crisis. Read against it, the image of God in Genesis 1:26–28 supplies an awareness of the ecological responsibility that the present moment demands, and the inclusive meaning of the image, reaching to all humanity

and binding humanity to the rest of creation, grounds a claim that nature has a right to be sustained and that all people share the duty of sustaining it.

Pope Francis names the spiritual root of the crisis with precision when he speaks of a modern anthropocentrism in which human beings, and too often men in particular, place themselves at the centre of the world, abuse the rest of creation, and refuse to recognise their responsibility to protect the dignity of all, with the result that humanitarian, ethical, cultural, and spiritual crises follow together (Francis 2015, 115–119). The interplay between African Traditional Religion and Christian theology, far from being a threat, offers fertile ground for a contextual ethical theology that can address these environmental and gender-related questions together. Bauckham's recovery of the biblical vision of a community of creation, in which the human being is a creature among creatures and not a despot over them, lends weight to the same conclusion from within the Christian tradition (Bauckham 2010, 1–12). The witness of African theology and the witness of biblical ecology converge on a single point, that the human vocation is to belong and to care, not to dominate and to consume.

There is a particular link between the gender question and the ecological one that the Zambian context makes plain. In much of Africa it is women who carry water, gather fuel, and farm the land, so that the degradation of the environment falls first and hardest on them, lengthening their labour and threatening the health of their households. A theology that subordinates women and a practice that degrades the environment therefore compound one another in the lives of the same people. To affirm the equal dignity of women and to defend the integrity of creation are, in this light, not two causes but one, and the image of God, read inclusively and ecologically, grounds them both. The Zambian church that grasps this connection is equipped to address the gender and the ecological crises together rather than as separate concerns.

The encounter between African Traditional Religion and Christian theology is, on this reading, a resource rather than a rivalry. Where the two traditions meet, in the shared conviction that the human being belongs within a wider order of relationships and is answerable for its care, a contextual ethical theology can be built that speaks to African ears in African terms while remaining faithful to the Scriptures. The sense that the land is not merely a commodity, that creatures have their own standing before God, and that the person is realised in relationship finds support in both traditions, and a theology that draws on both is better placed to move African communities than one that speaks only in borrowed categories. The task is to let the gospel purify and fulfil the insights of the tradition rather than either to reject the tradition wholesale or to baptise it without discernment.

Bauckham's recovery of the community of creation deserves fuller statement, since it reframes the whole question of the human place in the world. Against the picture of humanity set above and apart from nature, ruling it from a distance, he retrieves the biblical vision of human beings as creatures among creatures, sharing the sixth day with the animals, bound with them in a single community before God, and called to a care that recognises the worth of the others rather than reducing them to instruments (Bauckham 2010, 1–12). This vision sits remarkably close to the African sense of belonging within a wider order of life, and the convergence is fruitful. Where biblical ecology and African anthropology meet, the human being is neither the lonely master of a dead world nor merely one animal among others, but the creature uniquely charged, as the image of God, with the care of the community to which it belongs.

Zambia's own situation gives these reflections a sharp edge. The mining that drives the national economy has left rivers and soils contaminated in parts of the Copperbelt, the demand for charcoal has thinned the woodlands, and the changing climate has made the rains less reliable for farmers who depend on them. In each case the burden falls hardest on the poor and on the women who grow much of the nation's food. A theology of the image of God that took Zambia seriously would not treat the environment as a backdrop to human affairs but as part of the community whose flourishing the church is called to seek, and it would name the degradation of land and water as a wound to the body of creation that God pronounced good.

7. Toward a Contextual Theology of Dignity and Care

Drawing the strands together, a contextual reading of Genesis 1:26–28 yields a theology in which the dignity of women, the dignity of every person, and the care of creation are held as one. The image of God is relational and inclusive, given equally to women and men, and reaching across every line by which human beings are divided. The dominion it confers is the responsible stewardship of a gardener-king, exercised for the flourishing of creation rather than its exploitation. And the African philosophy of Ubuntu, with its conviction that a person is a person through other persons, supplies both the anthropology of belonging that the relational image requires and the extension of that belonging outward to the whole community of life.

This reading has a clear public edge in the Zambian context. It tells against the patriarchal interpretations that have been used to subordinate women and to exclude them from land, voice, and decision, and it tells equally against the exploitative habits of mind that have degraded the environment on which all life depends. The same logic of domination underlies both, and the same recovery of the image of God as relational vocation undercuts both. A church formed by this theology will defend the equal dignity of women and the integrity of creation in the same breath, because it will have understood that they rest on the same foundation.

Conradie's broader work in ecological theology reinforces the point, locating the care of creation within the central story of the Christian faith rather than at its margins and refusing to separate the redemption of human beings from the healing of the world they inhabit (Conradie 2020, 14–18). Read in concert with African women's theology and with the philosophy of Ubuntu, the doctrine of the image of God becomes a meeting point for the church's concern with gender justice and its concern with ecological responsibility. The two are not rival causes competing for the church's attention but expressions of a single conviction about what it means to be human before God, and a theology that grasps this can speak to both with one coherent voice.

This theology asks to be put to work in the life of the church. It calls for preaching and teaching that present women and men as equal bearers of the divine image, for catechesis that frames the care of creation as part of the Christian vocation, and for a church practice that refuses to let either women or the land be treated as a resource to be used. It calls, too, for the church to model in its own structures the equality it proclaims, since a community that confines women to the margins of its life while preaching their equal dignity preaches against itself. A contextual theology of the image of God is finally tested not in the lecture hall but in the household, the field, and the congregation, where the dignity of women and the care of creation are either honoured or denied.

This contextual theology has a public and ecumenical reach. The questions it addresses, the dignity of women and the integrity of creation, are not the property of one church but the concern of all, and they invite the churches of Zambia to a common witness in the public square. Acting together, the churches can teach the equal worth of women and the care of creation with a moral authority that none commands alone, and they can press these convictions into the debates over land, environment, and the place of women that shape the nation's life. A doctrine of the image of God that remained within the seminary would have failed of its purpose, since it is meant to form a people, and through them to shape a society more nearly conformed to the creation that God called good.

Such formation begins in how the church reads its Bible. Where Genesis 1:26–28 is taught as a charter for male authority and human mastery, the distortions follow into the home and the field, and where it is taught as the joint commissioning of women and men to the loving care of creation, a different community begins to take shape. The work of re-reading is therefore not a scholar's luxury but a pastoral necessity, and it belongs in the pulpit, the Bible study, and the training of those who will teach others. A church that learns to read this passage well has taken a long step toward becoming the community of equals and of careful stewards that the passage describes.

8. Conclusion

There is no lasting dominion for those who imagine they may continue to subdue the rest of creation, for the logic of mere subjugation ends by destroying the one who wields it. What Genesis 1:26–28 commends instead is co-existence and fellowship between humanity and the rest of creation, and an equal partnership between women and men within the shared dignity of the image of God. Read with the eyes of African women's theology, of ecological hermeneutics, and of Ubuntu, the passage that has so often been used to justify subordination is seen to commission a community of equals to the loving care of a world that is not theirs to spoil.

The doctrine of the image of God, recovered in its fullness, presses upon the church the universality of human dignity. Human beings bear that image not by their wisdom, reason, strength, or capacity for moral judgement, nor by their colour, tribe, age, wealth, or gender, since the infant and the infirm bear it as fully as anyone (Moo and Moo 2018). A contextual African and Zambian theology, by holding the theological and the ecological together, gains a deeper understanding of how gender roles have been constructed and how they may be reimagined toward equality and sustainability, amid the many interpretations that Scripture has borne. The image of the Gardener-King, shared by women and men and exercised in care for the whole community of creation, offers the African church a vision equal to the gender and ecological crises of its time.

The vision is finally a hopeful one. It holds out the possibility of an African Christianity that has made peace between its faith and its inherited wisdom, that honours its women as it honours its men, and that tends the land entrusted to it as a gardener tends a garden rather than as a miner strips a seam. Such a Christianity would have understood Genesis 1:26–28 not as a charter for domination but as a calling to care, and it would have recognised in the image of the Gardener-King, shared equally by women and men, the truest picture of what God made human beings to be. To read the passage so is not to impose a foreign meaning upon it but to receive its own, and to let it form a people equal to the gender and ecological challenges of the present hour.

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