

Northwest University

Exploring Human Sex Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation Through The Theological Lens of

Imago Dei

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Abstract

In a sex-saturated world where people are often reduced to objects and bought or sold, it is the role of the Church¹ to reclaim the image of God (*imago Dei*) in each person. This thesis begins with a journey through the author's personal awakening to problem of human sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. Following the personal narrative, this essay establishes definitions relevant to the conversation. After establishing pertinent definitions, the paper considers how pornography creates demand and the importance of including males as victims of abuse. From there, this thesis will present a few current approaches and refutes as to why these approaches are insufficient to adequately address the problem of sexual exploitation and trafficking. These approaches include treating exploitation and trafficking as solely a human rights issue, legalizing prostitution, demoralizing portrayals of victims, and poverty as the only cause of trafficking. Finally, the last section considers a theological approach to ending sexual exploitation and trafficking by exploring the biblical narrative of Creation, the Fall, Redemption, and New Creation. I ask the question, "How can the Church change the cycle of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking by honoring people through the lens of *imago Dei*?"

¹ The Church in this thesis includes all denominations of Christianity. It includes all people who confess Jesus as Lord, ranging from Catholic to Evangelical. When referencing the Church, I am referring to Christians belonging to a range this range of denominations, who function as the body of Christ on earth.

Part One: Introduction Through Personal Experience

I grew up in the evangelical, American church. Conversations about denominational rifts and controversies over choir robes were regular dialogues. I am familiar with the way non-Christians often view the Church as irrelevant or caught up in minor issues. One day when I was a student at my idyllic Christian college near the ocean, I was waiting for my classes to end and daydreaming about drinking a smoothie on the beach when I heard a chapel speaker talk about modern-day slavery. The numbers were staggering—millions of people were enslaved. In the safe and protective environment of my school, we often debated issues of injustice, but it had never occurred to me that injustice reached the point of slavery in some places. I discovered that modern day slavery meant that thousands of people around the world faced entrapment and abuse. That chapel planted a seed that continued to grow slowly over the next few years; its branches overshadowing what had previously seemed important.

As I drew closer to the issue of modern-day slavery², I examined what was actually meant by the phrase. Slavery included issues such as forced labor, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation. The more I learned, the more appalled I became. As I studied the Bible, it became clear that one of the overarching biblical narratives is God's heart for the oppressed and exploited. It became very clear to me that if I, as a Christian, wanted to be aligned with things God cared about, I had to start caring about uncomfortable and controversial topics like exploitation, trafficking, oppression and slavery. I committed to educating myself on these social justice issues, especially their link to the Bible.

² Modern-day slavery is another term for 'trafficking in persons' or 'human trafficking.' It is used "as umbrella terms for the act of recruiting, harboring, transporting, providing, or obtaining a person for compelled labor or commercial sex acts through the use of forces, fraud, or coercion" (*Trafficking in Persons Report* 9). These definitions will be further explored under the "Definitions" section of this thesis.

The literature addressing sex trafficking and sexual exploitation reveals a link between pornography and sex trafficking. I dug deeper. I discovered there is a direct association between supply, which is driven by many factors, including pornography, and demand in the sex industry. This means the issues of sexual trafficking were also linked to demand of sex-for-sale, including pornography, prostitution and sexual bondage. Furthermore, pornography is inherently exploitative, which will be discussed later in this thesis. This increased knowledge made me restless to “do something”.

In 2014, I took a job opportunity in Bangkok, Thailand, a place renowned for commercial sex work. Local Thai men lay the foundation for foreigners buying sex. A study released in 2000 “reported that 75 percent of Thai men were prostitution buyers, and almost 50 percent had the first sexual intercourse with women in prostitution” (Raymond 38). Foreigners come from destinations near and far to explore the sex industry. Tourists or ex-pats discussed the “choices” women or men have when involved in the commercial sex industry. General dialogue regarding choice often centers on how sex workers³ enjoy selling their bodies for an easy income. However, my research (and basic observation) reveals that this reality does not address the unequal power dynamics at play between customers and ‘workers’. It also omits the darker side of sex work—rejection, fear, violence, sexually transmitted diseases, pimps, drugs, and trafficking. These are the daily soul-crushing realities of sex workers.

³ The term sex worker is a controversial term because of the implied choice the term holds. In the 1970s and ‘80s, a distinction was created between “forced and free prostitution and between sex trafficking and prostitution. This movement made *consent rather than exploitation and harm* the foundation and focus of national and international law and policy” (Raymond, introduction). However in this thesis, I will interchangeably use terminology of prostitutes and sex workers, per the majority of referenced literature. However, I will also seek to choose phrasing which redirects the focus on demand for prostitutes, since there would be no sex work without sex buyers.

As I studied and interacted more with people and theories, I realized that in my personal investigation of sex trafficking, I thought of it in fairytale terms—the menacing pervert or trafficker bent on exploiting everyone for money or fulfilling sexual fantasies. The heroes were the police who swooped in and closed brothels, or the undercover aid worker guising himself as a customer and saving a child from further abuse. However, we are complex and fallible creatures; no one is wholly evil or wholly good. As theologian Miroslav Volf describes in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*:

[W]e should demask as inescapably sinful the world constructed around exclusive moral polarities—here, on our side, “the just,” “the pure,” “the innocent,” “the true,” “the good,” and there, on the other side, “the unjust,” “the corrupt,” “the guilty,” “the liars,” “the evil”—and then seek to transform the world in which justice and injustice, goodness and evil, innocence and guilt, purity and corruption, truth and deception crisscross and intersect, guided by the recognition that *the economy of undeserved grace has primacy over the economy of moral deserts*. (84-85)

Both consumers and sex workers started as “the other” for me—people who were unlike me. People who bought sex were evil and abusive. People who chose to stay in commercial sex work were depraved. It became clear to me that both good and evil existed in all people. Sometimes the trafficker would defend a woman against an abusive customer. On the other hand, sometimes men and women who were given the opportunity to leave prostitution chose to stay. I met many women and ‘ladyboys’ (Thailand’s terminology for the male transgendered population) who had the opportunity to leave sex work but kept returning. There were various reasons for this—some suffered psychological abuse, some were in the industry for years and knew how to survive,

some were encouraged by their families to make an income by whatever means, and other various reasons.

These same polarities of good and evil were also true of people I met who frequented prostitutes. They were often lonely and despairing, looking for excitement or companionship. If they were new to the process, they were often ashamed or embarrassed or increasingly looked for ways to lead a double-life—one that excluded the admission of paying for sexual experiences. Sometimes they sought to make a new life in Bangkok, where their behavior wouldn't be stigmatized.

However, as I heard individual stories of people in the commercial sex industry, I realized my Christian upbringing and biblical understanding of social justice offered hope. The people I encountered were not wholly good or evil, but they were made in the image of God. That image was marred by sin (discussed later in this thesis), but God offers restoration and healing by bringing all people into a relationship with Himself: the trafficker and the trafficked, the exploiter and the exploited, the women and men, the adults and children.

As I grow into this understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God, I realize that as an individual, my ability to decrease exploitation worldwide is limited. Even nonprofit organizations fighting trafficking are limited in their scope and impact. Who will care about restoring the image of God? Restoration can come in two ways: either through direct divine intervention or through the Church—the community of people who listen and respond to God. The seed that grew in me has produced some fruit—I realize the reason why the chapel speaker chose to address Christians. He believed that Christians from all denominations could grapple with the theology of restoring the image of God in humanity. This recognition of the image of God has to start by realizing that the problem is not just “outside” but also “inside.”

This means people inside the church but also dealing with the root issues of the heart, which perpetuates exploitation. This thesis is the exploration of the theological idea of the “image of God” or “*imago Dei*” and how that understanding is essential to enabling Christians to holistically address both the exploiters and the exploited. While this applies to forced labor and other issues of modern-day slavery, the focus of this thesis will be related to sexual exploitation and human sex trafficking.

Part Two: The Problem of Sexual Exploitation and Human Sex Trafficking

Definitions

To begin, it is important to discuss the relationship between sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. Sexual exploitation includes any type of sexual abuse and I will make the case that it includes all types of pornography and prostitution, even if the act was ‘voluntarily’ chosen. The reason for this argument is rooted in the idea that one person is being objectified for another’s pleasure. It is understood that any person who has been trafficked is by definition also exploited, but trafficking does not need to occur for exploitation to transpire. Exploitation can be sexual, forced labor or services, or simply the intent to exploit another for personal gain (“The Definition of Trafficking”).

Most people acknowledge sex trafficking is wrong. The *2015 Trafficking in Persons Report* as defines sex trafficking as “When an adult engages in a commercial sex act, such as prostitution, as the result of force, fraud, coercion or any combination of such means” (9). Human trafficking is destructive on multiple levels—destroying individual lives and families. It is also destructive to economies. As the article “Economics of Human Trafficking” explains:

Human trafficking tears apart the structure of local economies, adds to the bureaucratic and law enforcement burden at all levels of government, and destroys people’s lives. It leads to increased crime and immigration problems, decreased safety for vulnerable populations, and decreased welfare for nations.

(Wheaton et al 132)

Sex trafficking is objectively harmful to individuals, families and communities.

While this general definition of trafficking includes all ages, child sex trafficking is more specific. The accepted terminology regarding child sex trafficking is any person under eighteen

who is “recruited, enticed, harbored, transported, provided, obtained, or maintained to perform a commercial sex act, proving force, fraud, or coercion is not necessary for the offense to be characterized as human trafficking” (“Trafficking in Persons” 7). This definition of child sex trafficking explains that when a child is part of a profit-oriented sexually transactional relationship, the term trafficking *always* applies.

This definition clarifies that trafficking does not need to occur across state or national borders, as it can also happen within a country, known as “internal trafficking” (“The Definition of Trafficking”). For example, the *2015 Trafficking in Persons Report* discusses how family units are sometimes a factor in sexual trafficking—families need money and sell their children (31). Part of the problem with minimizing human trafficking is that often there are family members involved in the process due to economic hardships. In Africa, it is common that trafficking takes place within national borders. The article titled “Searching for Best Practices to Counter Human Trafficking in Africa: A Focus on Women and Children,” discusses the unique situation of trafficking and exploitation in an African context, showing that conversation around human trafficking has typically been presented around issues of public order, economic competition, efficiency and human vulnerability (Truong and Angeles 23). This report makes the essential point that “those concerned with human vulnerability see the state as a key actor driven by plural interests and currently being stranded between three poles—crime control, human rights protection, and economic efficiency—in an era of global competition” (Truong and Angeles 23-24). However the state is not solely responsible. The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer poses the question: “What right have we to blame the government when we do not do that which is good ourselves” (*Discipleship* 293)?

Demand: Pornography and the Link to Prostitution

Having briefly established what is meant by sexual exploitation and trafficking, and why it is harmful to individuals, communities and economies, we turn to address the question ‘why is the demand for commercial sex is so high?’ A leading international researcher on human trafficking, Donna Hughes, wrote an essay called “Why Is Demand Important to Tackle and What Can the Church Do About It?” Hughes discusses “four components that make-up the demand: (1) the men who buy commercial sex acts, (2) the exploiters who make up the sex industry, (3) the states that are destination countries, and (4) the culture that tolerates or promotes sexual exploitation” (93). As Hughes points out, buyers are “seeking sex without relationship responsibilities” (93). It is assumed in certain circles that sex sells—and it is a highly profitable business. Buyers create the need for the product, which needs a steady supply to keep up with the market. (Wheaton et al. 120).

The demand and supply for human beings is twofold. First, in order to keep pornography interesting and profitable, it must continue providing new material to the market. Secondly, porn often leads to acting out sexual fantasies by purchasing sex acts. In the article “Isn’t It Time We See the Links Between Pornography, Prostitution and Sex Trafficking?” the authors acknowledge that “direct causation” is difficult to establish between pornography and purchasing sex (Garcia and Crawford 119). However, researchers have examined the links between pornography and purchasing sex: “One researcher found that men who purchased sex acts are twice as likely to have watched pornography in the past year than those from a random national sample of men” (Hughes, *Best Practices* 18). The leader of a Christian ministry explained

[I]n his experience use of pornography *always* precedes men’s use of prostitutes.

He explains that when men start using pornography, they enter into a cycle of

learning, desensitization, escalation, and finally actualization where they act out rituals, such as purchasing sex acts. [emphasis added] (Hughes, *Best Practices* 18)

It is important to note that some acts of prostitution are viewed as voluntary, income-generating 'work' opportunities. Janice Raymond's book title captures this falsehood of individuals choosing prostitution: *Not a Choice, Not a Job: Exposing the Myths about Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade*. There are generally two categories of people advocating for women in prostitution. Raymond explains that "The conservative view of prostitution is to blame women and girls for their alleged choice to be in prostitution; the liberal view is to romanticize women's 'choice' as self-determination and use it to normalize prostitution as 'sex work'" (35).

Beyond strictly prostitution, it is known that pornographers may "force victims of trafficking to make pornography or perform live Internet sex" (Garcia and Crawford 119). This would be an explicit example of trafficking, where strong coercive methods used, pressuring performers to actions they do not want to perform (Garcia and Crawford 119). This coercion is always exploitative but in some cases it qualifies as trafficking. These statistics show that, much like a 'gateway drug', pornography is a gateway to other sexual behavior. The desensitization that occurs through viewing pornography encourages viewers to forget that the images are of real people. Once that process happens, pornography users perceive human bodies as objects whose sole purpose is for their stimulation and pleasure. As Garcia and Crawford state: "pornography may not pull the trigger in making a person go out and purchase sex but it does seem to be a contributing factor as it does normalize such behavior and acts as a permission-giver" (121). This leads to a host of other implications, but the main point to emphasize is that pornography is a leading factor in promoting sexual acts with someone with whom there is no emotional

relationship. It disconnects sex from emotion and objectifies bodies. Thus, pornography must be addressed as one of the key components for driving demand.

Gender: Boys/Girls, Men/Women

A common misconception when discussing sexual exploitation and trafficking is that the only victims are girls or women, and the only perpetrators are men. Some of the language in this thesis may also give that impression because a disproportional amount of literature is allocated to girls and women. However, women are also exploiters and boys and men are victims. Men also abuse other men and boys. In fact, in some places boys and men are more at risk than girls and women. The reason most people do not think of boys/men as victims of exploitation and trafficking is answered in the essay “Why Do We Focus More on Girls than Boys?” This essay by Alastair Hilton, a social worker who specializes in working with sexually exploited males believes that “until recently the prevalence, dynamics and effects of sexual abuse of boys have been largely concealed from social consciousness” (Hilton 170). This lack of social awareness became clear to me the summer of 2015 when I interviewed eighteen college students. I asked them, “Are men and women both at risk as victims of sex trafficking?” The answer was a tentative yes, with the most common answer being that “women were at a *much* higher risk” (personal interviews conducted at University Wisconsin Milwaukee and Concordia University Mequon).

This perception of female sexual exploitation being disproportionately higher than male may be why the conversation around exploitation and trafficking focuses more around girls and women than on boys. Perhaps the most important misperception is society’s view of masculinity. Boys and young men are “trapped in a media-maintained male stereotype and are expected to be

self-reliant, devoid of fear, power-seeking and controlled” (Hilton 172). This perception is also strengthened by the idea that giving a platform to boys in discussions of exploitation will detract from efforts with girls. However, “Recognition of the abuse of boys and men does not detract from the experiences of women and girls but rather improves our understanding of how power and control has the potential to be abused in all settings” (Hilton 173).

A report that focused on the vulnerabilities of street boys in Cambodia indicated that almost 19% of boys between the ages of 12-15 had been sexually abused, with abuse starting as early as the age of nine (Davis and Miles 11). Commercial sexual exploitation of boys included sophisticated grooming techniques by pedophiles who often formed relationships with their abuser prior to exploitation (Davis and Miles 12). Child pornography was also used to expose children to sexual violence and encouraging children to behave in particular ways (role play) when having sex with clients (Davis and Miles 14).

A report commissioned by International Justice Mission (IJM) in Cambodia showed remarkable attention and improvement to targeting child sexual abuse, but the report also concluded that society restricted further progress against exploitation because perceptions of abuse were limited to females. IJM receives grants from a range of groups, but their main donor support comes from individuals within churches (“Charity Navigator”). Churches tend to believe in the biblical mandate for justice for the “least of these,” a term Jesus uses when talking about the most marginalized in society (Matthew 25:40). As such, the report recognized the need to broaden the focus to include those who do not fall within the “target group,” but are nonetheless marginalized. The recommendation of this report is that:

Cases of rape and violence against children should be linked with sex trafficking and with the broader child protection system or gender equality efforts... This

could be done by requesting donors to support... broader possibilities to use funds more holistically and with the ability to provide services to rape victims, boys or other vulnerable children and support community-based services. (van der Keur 124)

This recommendation recognizes the need for donors to understand that trafficking encompasses more than just females.

In this section, I have established some of the key definitions encompassing sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. This section has also begun to address the underlying issue of exploitation, which is the demand. Demand is fueled by many factors, but one of the most accessible ones is pornography. I also briefly introduced the need to include boys and men as victims of exploitation. I now turn to a discussion of current methods used to reduce sexual exploitation and trafficking of persons for sexual purposes.

Part Three: Current Approaches and Refutes

In this section, I will present some of the ways sexual exploitation and human sex trafficking are currently being addressed. These include approaching the topic as solely a human rights issue, legalizing prostitution, and portraying rescue from exploitation in exploitative terms. I will then refute these methods as incomplete or ineffective in addressing the root cause of sexual exploitation and trafficking.

The Failure of a Rights-Based and Legalization Approach to Effectively Address Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking

One of the ways human trafficking and sexual exploitation have been framed is in terms of human rights violations. While pertinent to the conversation, the concept of human rights violations does not satisfactorily address exploitation and trafficking because it is insufficient for deterring exploitation in the first place. Human rights are universal and as such it is universally understood that force, fraud and coercion are denying rights to an individual (*Trafficking in Persons Report*). This argument is unlikely to change the motivation of someone who is violating the rights of another. Examples of this include peacekeeping troops who are responsible for committing acts of rape or trafficking (Hughes, *Best Practices* 52). The movie *The Whistleblower* depicted UN peacekeepers who were stationed in Bosnia to protect its people, but participated as offenders buying sex from women and girls (Raymond 8). This would be an example of those who society has entrusted to keep the peace and value universal human dignity (with a job title like peacekeeper), but in reality are perpetuating the problem. Human rights may be universal, but power differentials between social classes means that the marginalized are often exploited at the hands of the powerful and influential. Human rights cannot necessarily motivate

someone to forgo their power in order to protect the marginalized. It also cannot change a heart struggling with lust or greed that may participate in exploitation.

Currently, one of the more popular ideas to address the problem of sex trafficking is to mitigate the problem by legalizing prostitution⁴ (Raymond 4). The ideas behind this are multifaceted. One theory is that legalizing prostitution will prevent the demand for trafficking because men and women can choose this profession, so there will not be a need to force someone into 'sex work'. Another theory is that decriminalizing prostitution will allow involuntary sex workers/ trafficked victims to seek help from the police. It is believed that this will allow legal forces to focus their efforts on crimes against prostitutes. The effort to legalize is an attempt to de-stigmatize sex work and allow sex workers to report violence, which is known to occur in high rates against prostitutes (Hughes, *Best Practices* 13). In fact, research indicates, "women in street prostitution are eighteen times more vulnerable to being killed than other women" (Raymond 33).

Prostitution from the perspective of this measure is often portrayed as freedom and empowerment for women to earn income in whatever skill or trade they want:

Individual writers, academics, and groups advocating the idea that prostitution is a form of work for women claim that providing sexual services can be empowering for women. These representations usually overlook the violence and victimization involved, or suggest that more empowerment is the solution to exploitation and abuse of victims of the global sex trade. (Hughes, *Best Practices* 3)

⁴ According to Raymond, many academics define prostitution as sex *work* and defend prostitution as a woman's human rights rather than a violation of a woman's human rights.

Amnesty International is one of the forerunners for this proposal supporting legalized sex work. Amnesty's Deputy Europe Director, Gauri van Gulik, defends this new stance of legalizing prostitution so that sex workers can have the rights to safety and health care, "to be free from trafficking, exploitation and force" (van Gulik). Amnesty believes criminalizing the buyers would force sex work underground, which "has the same impact as criminalizing of sex workers themselves" (van Gulik). In the United States, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act rejects the legalization of prostitution by asserting "prostitution is inherently harmful and dehumanizing and fuels trafficking in persons" (Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons). Some argue that women have the ability to act as "moral agents within prostitution, and who argue that abuse and exploitation in the sex sector is intimately connected to the fact that sex workers are rarely afforded the civil and labour rights enjoyed by other citizens and workers" (O'Connell 14). One of Amnesty's goals in legalizing prostitution is to protect sex workers. After all, "Prostitutes are considered to be a population that can be violated with impunity, and violent perpetrators seek them out knowing they are unlikely to be apprehended" (Hughes, *Best Practices* 12).

However, this conversation dismisses the fact that "Legal or tolerated markets create a safe-haven for criminals" and that "This veneer of legality allows trafficking to continue" ("Shared Hope"). We may ask, "Who are the criminals?" when prostitution is legal. Criminals in areas where prostitution is legal are traffickers, but their network overlaps with the legalized commercial sex industry. An example is in Amsterdam's legalized prostitution area—"pimps and brothel owners had formed online links with pimps and traffickers who bring women into the country and treat them as 'a piece of garbage,' often resorting to violence and murder" (Raymond 88). Amnesty is misguided in its stance that sex workers are by definition voluntarily engaging in sex:

“By definition,” Amnesty’s proposal states, “sex workers who are engaging in commercial sex have consented to do so.” This definition fails to take into account the dire economic need, the childhood sexual abuse, the brutal coercion employed by pimps, and the vast power differences of sex and race that drive the commercial sex industry. (Neuwirth)

The assumption that legalizing prostitution will decrease trafficking is problematic. It does not take into account the transnational movement of sex workers from one country to another—with sex workers gathering in one centralized location for ease of johns and pimps/traffickers (Hughes, “Why is Demand Important” 94; Raymond, ch. 3). In other words, if a sex worker could work openly in a place like The Netherlands but it was illegal in France, then they would all centralize in The Netherlands. This does not mean that all go there freely, but could be transported there for the business of pimps and brothel owners. Legalization of prostitution increased the demand for it (Raymond 85).

Contrary to the model The Netherlands provides, which legalizes prostitution, we have another model, a “victim-centered approach” to trafficking, which focuses on sex workers as victims instead of instigators or criminals. A victim-centered approach puts the responsibility on pimps or johns—a male who pays for sex. When I interviewed eighteen undergraduate students in 2015, most had never heard of a victim-centered approach but believed the only solution for protecting sex workers from abuse was to legalize prostitution. However, there are examples of victim-centered approaches to sex work. Many countries have adopted the “Nordic model,” named after the Scandinavian countries that first implemented this method, which is a model that

prosecutes sex-purchasers⁵. The protection of the sex worker is the main defense offered by both Amnesty and the “Nordic model.” However, they are different approaches. Amnesty wants to legalize prostitution to protect the human rights of sex workers. In comparison, the “Nordic model” protects sex workers through the criminalization of any sex purchase. The “Nordic model” is a victim-centered legal approach to minimizing sexual exploitation and trafficking. The issue van Gulik has with the “Nordic model” is that its intent is to decrease prostitution overall, whereas Amnesty’s position is not to decrease prostitution (which is seen as a voluntary career choice) but to provide health and social services to sex workers.

Many people believe that the normalization of prostitution will solve the problem of trafficking. However, instead of legalizing prostitution in order to make it safer for sex workers, the focus should be on addressing the demand for prostitution. Demand is borne out of emotional needs not sexual ones. The lack of healthy emotional relationships is ultimately what drives demand. As Hughes further instructs: “Researchers conclude that men are purchasing sex acts to meet emotional needs, not physical needs” (Hughes, “Why is Demand Important” 93). Those participating in demand need to be held responsible for meeting their emotional needs in ways that do not include purchasing sex. Instead of legalizing prostitution, we must create policies that minimize sex work and in this way participate in our “shared moral responsibility” (Hughes, “Why is Demand Important” 92).

⁵ “Most of the Nordic countries have passed legislation criminalizing the buying of sex. It is this model that is creating a paradigm shift in many countries and jurisdictions” (Raymond 37). Raymond also points out that this model is “both legislative and normative. It makes prostitution users legally accountable for their actions while at the same time sends the message that there are societies that do not accept the buying of women in prostitution as normal. By recognizing that prostitution is violence against women, a human rights violation, and a crime, the legislation educates other countries, as well as NGOs, on how to challenge male sexual exploitation and violence” (70-71).

The documentary “Demand,” discusses some of the differences between the sex buyer and the person selling sex (whether it is a pimp or a prostitute). Any buyer who is driving demand is focused on his own sexual needs/desires while the humanity of the sex worker (and in some ways the buyer) is lost in the financial transaction of purchased sex. The common perception among buyers and advocates of transactional sex work is that it’s a victimless crime. In some cases it is viewed as empowering women. This is once again a ploy to minimize the abuse and objectification that takes place. As Raymond clarifies:

The sex work apologists romanticize ‘empowerment’ for women in the sex industry and locate female power in the very behaviors that feminism has rejected—sexual objectification, acceptance of the use of women’s bodies as commodities for male pleasure and for profit, and misrepresentation of this as rebellion. (34)

Even if a prostitute is not trafficked, they are still being exploited and subjected to physical risks. Instead of organizing prostitutes like a labor union that helps them fight for better wages or better equality, we should focus on a biblical understanding of honoring the image of God (Lynn).

We need to address exploitation as a theological issue. Where pornography is concerned, it harms and demeans the viewer of porn, and it degrades the image of God of the person who is viewed on the screen. “Throughout the literature it is clear that crime prevention rather than crime control and policing is needed to decrease human trafficking” (Wheaton et al 131). In order to prevent buyers from participating in prostitution, we need to address the emotional needs they seek to fill—a need for connection and intimacy. This will be further discussed when I present the idea of *imago Dei*, which reframes the discussion of human rights and buying sexual acts.

Explaining Trafficking in Explicit Ways, Which Further Demoralizes the Victim: “The Other”

As the thesis searches for an approach that minimizes demand and dignifies sex workers, one attitude that needs further discussion is objectification, which treats people as profitable objects. Another way to discuss this objectification is describing people who are involved in the sex industry as “the other,” meaning people unlike us. It is a “basic exclusionary polarity: ‘us against them’” (Volf 99). The conversation about “the other” is central to how we represent the exploiters, victims, survivors, and trafficked people. It circles back my argument that people are neither wholly good or bad, good versus evil, or us versus “the other”. When we think in these polarities, we often consider ourselves wholly good and do not examine the ways we contribute to exploitation. For example, men who hear about women trapped in sexual slavery may not associate her exploitation with their porn usage.

Similarly, “otherness” in trafficking and sexual exploitation is sometimes represented in anti-trafficking and anti-exploitation campaigns. In many cases, an exploited woman may be represented naked or as a dead body. This confirms the stereotypes of otherness because the representation exemplifies objectification. Through sexually suggestive ads attempting to bring awareness to human sex trafficking, “cultural norms are reconfirmed or secured . . . because the sacrifice of the virtuous, innocent woman” (Brofen 181). Upholding the dignity of the victim should be paramount at every stage of trafficking interventions. The way anti-trafficking campaigns show images of sexualized women propagate objectification and otherness. “The display of suffering and beautiful victims positions the woman’s body as the object of the (male) gaze and mobilizes erotic ways of looking that disclose a voyeuristic eroticization and fetishist fascination with a severed/captive female body” (Andrijasevic 42). This conversation applies to individuals and groups campaigning against sexual exploitation inadvertently perpetuate the

problem. One campaign displayed women in vending machines to communicate they are for sale. Another campaign depicted women half-naked and chained to the wall, indicating their helplessness. While these efforts might be effective at gaining attention, they minimize the complexity of the situation and continue the objectification of women who are portrayed as sexual objects to be rescued rather than dignified human beings.

Lisa Thompson, current Vice President of Education and Outreach for the National Center on Sexual Exploitation and former Director of Anti-Trafficking at World Hope International, wrote an article regarding the sensationalism of trafficking stories by the very agencies working to combat the issue. She writes, “In an end-justify-the-means stratagem, some activists in the field of anti-trafficking have resorted to exploiting, even manufacturing, shocking survivor stories as their primary ploy in the battle to convince the world that it should care” (Thompson). If the goal is a sensational story, it becomes more important to contrive something sensational, where victims are horrifically exploited or trapped. It creates a different type of objectification, which makes the plight of “the other” a story for entertainment or shock value. This type of marketing portrays women as hopeless, sexualized victims who need heroes to save them.

Instead of sensationalism and objectification in campaigns to confront sexual exploitation are campaigns that dignify “the other” by understanding their divine image (*imago Dei*). We do not need to create a perfect victim in order to reject exploitation and trafficking. Providing the perfect victim leads to disillusionment or a feeling that victims deserve their fates when the veneer eventually falls away. Volf explains this in his discussion concerning blame and innocence: “Failing to find a blameless victim, however, we will be left with two equally

unattractive choices: either to withdraw from engagement in moral disgust . . . or to impose clear-cut moral narratives” (104).

Offering cartoonish or one-dimensional portrayals of victims to “force people to care” does not satisfactorily address exploitation and trafficking and can leave people disillusioned when the representation of “the other” does not match the reality of the human person in God’s image.

Material Poverty as the Sole Cause of Trafficking

Material poverty is often presented as the root of trafficking. However, poverty is more than the lack of material things. Bryant Myers in his book *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* defines the complexities of the result of poverty.

Poverty can be addressed as:

[D]eficit, as entanglement, as lack of access to social power, as diminished personal agency, as disempowerment and as lack of freedom to grow. . . . We can conclude that poverty is a complicated social issue involving all areas of life—physical, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual. (Myers, ch. 4)

It is true that the material poor are burdened with economic and physical problems, which results in increased vulnerability to exploitation and trafficking. An article recently appeared in a popular Kenyan newspaper titled, “Alarm as Kenyan Children in Slums Turn to Prostitution to Make Money.” It is alarming because the article presents the children’s actions as a choice, but failed to adequately describe how they were manipulated. Men near schools pay for children’s lunches in exchange for sexual favors. Girls drop out of school when they realize they can earn money without an education (Omollo and Ogutu).

Orphaned and poor children also experience high rates of sexual abuse, which is another gateway into long-term exploitation (“Child Abuse in Kenya”). Exploitation such as rape often occurs in poor urban dwellings and slum communities. World Vision released a report on the case of a 14-year-old girl who was raped on the road as she tried to walk home and died as a result (“Making Cities Safer” 23). Children can be better protected from this type of sexual abuse by providing them with safer environments within their schools, families and communities, and by listening to the voices of affected children so that change can be in response to the real needs of a community (“Making Cities Safer” 30). Protecting children from sexual abuse is one way to reduce risk factors, which contribute to exploitation.

The reality is that exploitation often occurs when the powerful exploit the physically poor, who are unable to defend themselves. Power is given to the exploiter, and it perpetuates the cycle. As Hughes highlights, “Poverty, unemployment and lack of opportunities are compelling factors that facilitate the ease with which traffickers recruit women, but they are not the cause of trafficking” (“Why is Demand Important” 92). It is important to remember that physical poverty does not *cause* trafficking, but the poor are more vulnerable because of their lack of power, disempowerment and lack of freedom to grow (Myers, ch. 4). Joni Middleton, a Training and Network Consultant for an anti-trafficking group called Europe Project Rescue Network argues that that poverty is not the root cause of trafficking, but it is one of the factors. She believes, “dysfunctional sexuality is the foundation” for exploitation as it is often portrayed purely as “entertainment, profit and power” (Middleton). In contrast, she believes the appropriate way to view sexuality is “love and building an intimate relationship and reflecting God’s intimacy in that relationship” (Middleton).

Middleton's assessment was affirmed in a study, which drew similar conclusions that poverty is not the sole cause of prostitution. Researchers investigated the main reason children are commercially exploited and the answer was demand. Although social and economic factors contributed to commercial sexual exploitation, the root of exploitation is not lack of jobs, but regular demand from customers (Hughes, *Best Practices* 23). Globalization and poverty may factor into the growth of prostitution, but without male demand, all other factors—including globalization and poverty—cannot sustain the system of prostitution (Raymond 62). This was affirmed by a caseworker at International Justice Mission who stated:

Blaming poverty for crimes like this [sex trafficking] is convenient – it seems to make trafficking a problem beyond our control. But I strongly believe that poverty is just one of the factors that makes people vulnerable to being trafficked, and that trafficking still exists because an effective public justice system doesn't in my country. (“Casework: Sex Trafficking”)

When demand for commercial sex ceases, the poor find other ways of achieving an income.

Power also relates to the burden of the poor because those in power have access to those who are vulnerable. Many in poverty are unable to earn dignified income because others want to keep them oppressed, so they (as victims) willfully exploit themselves or their loved ones (particularly children). Traffickers have easy access to vulnerable children and families stuck in poverty. This must be recognized as a root problem perpetuating international and internal trafficking and exploitation. Children who have safer environments, including safe families, communities and education, are less at risk for becoming victims of violent crimes (“Making Cities Safer” 30). A systems approach to protecting children—which incorporates physical, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual areas of life— aims to “strengthen the protective

nature of the environment around children and to strengthen children themselves, in order to ensure their well-being and fulfill their rights to protection from abuse, neglect, exploitation and other forms of violence” (Forbes 1). It is vital to a child’s well-being to implement a systems approach, which includes all-important actors in a child’s life, including the parents, extended family and community, as well as the international and state actors (Forbes 3).

The physical causes of poverty are intensified by the social causes of poverty. Many times the social norms of society are enough to keep people trapped in the cycle of poverty: “There are large-scale social practices and a whole system of social roles, often firmly approved by the members of society generally that cause or perpetuate injustice and misery” (Wolterstorff 24). What is important regarding the link between poverty and exploitation is to realize that, “At the end of the day, people are the cause of poverty, and it is people who must change for things to change” (Meyers, ch. 4). This leads us to suggest the need for people to change in order for the problems to change.

Review

I examined the shortcomings of approaching exploitation and sex trafficking through the lens of human rights, legalizing prostitution, portraying victims exploitatively, and considering poverty as the sole cause of trafficking and exploitation. Each of these approaches has merit, but does not give a completely satisfactory answer as to why exploitation and trafficking continues. In the next section, I will offer one way of holistically approaching this topic.

Part Four: Imagining a New Way of Approaching Sexual Exploitation Through the Theological Lens of *Imago Dei*

When I came to the belief that the Church must be instrumental in addressing sexual exploitation and human trafficking in a holistic way, it included the realization that the church could address the whole person—physical and spiritual. As discussed above, people turn to sex work because they have been stigmatized and left on the margins of the community. They see themselves as objects instead of the beloved of God. I have argued that people buy sex when they desire intimacy and they mistake intimacy with control. One way to address the solution for intimacy theologically is to look at both exploited and exploiters through the lens of *imago Dei*.

The doctrine of *imago Dei* stems from Genesis 1:27, which states, “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (*New International Version*). Theologians have debated the full meaning of this verse, but there are some basic conclusions that can be drawn, including individual freewill and an eternal spirit. However, after the Fall (when sin entered the world because of disobedience in Genesis 3), *imago Dei* now exists in tension with sin, which separates humankind from God (Sands 4). It is important to consider how this brokenness leads to the need for grace and redemption, along with our need to reach out and accept “the other” (Meyers, Volf). The Church is meant to embody these concepts of grace and redemption. The Church is God’s instrument on earth to bring all people into right relationship with Himself (Wright 96-97). Thomas Torrance in his article, “What is the Church?” considers the most basic definition of the Church as the body of Christ. His description maintains a horizontal and vertical aspect to the Church: “It is only through vertical participation in Christ that the Church is horizontally a communion of love, a fellowship of reconciliation, a community of the redeemed. Both these belong together in the fullness of Christ” (Torrance 9). He proposes that the purpose of the church “is a communion of love. It

represents that area within humanity where the love of God is poured out by the Holy Spirit and where men and women are given to share together in their life on earth, and within the social cohesions of humanity, in the overflow of the divine Life and Love” (Torrance 16).

The church is the community where this life and love takes place. We begin the conversation about *imago Dei* by looking to the Bible. There are a few key biblical texts that clarify what it means for humans being made in the image of God. The primary text is Genesis 1:26-28, followed by Genesis 5:1-3, Genesis 9:6, and Psalm 8:5-6 (Sands 29). Genesis 5:1-3 mirrors Genesis 1:26-28 as it reads:

This is the written account of Adam’s family line. When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them ‘Mankind’ when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son *in his own likeness, in his own image*; and he named him Seth. [emphasis added]

Similarly, God declares humans special in Genesis 9:6, which states:

Whoever sheds human blood,
by humans shall their blood be shed;
for in the image of God
has God made mankind.

Finally the last key text for humans being made in God’s likeness is found in the Psalms. It reads: “You have made them a little lower than the angels/ and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands;/ you put everything under their feet” (Psalm 8:5-6, NIV). The image of God is conferred upon every human, both man and woman, and the image was not lost in the Fall (Sands 30).

Because the image was not lost in the Fall, we now examine what it means to be made in the image of God. There are three broad categories of how to interpret *imago Dei*: substantivist, relational and functional (Sands 31). These categories are essentially the ability to reason, the ability to relate, and the gift of divine vocation—“a divine call to a task that confers dignity and imposes obligation” (Sands 36). Although these three categories offer a range of implications and debate for the full meaning of *imago Dei*, it means that people can love each other and God. Preacher and theologian Timothy Keller, discusses in his book *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* the image of God as being a “work of art or of great craftsmanship” (81). He also clarifies that image in English can also mean “to resemble,” as reflecting in a mirror (Keller 83). In other words, the Bible teaches, “the sacredness of God has in some ways been imparted to humanity, so that every human life is sacred and every human being has dignity” (Keller 83).

The sacredness and dignity humans reflect because of *imago Dei* also relates to sexual love. In the book *Theology of the Body for Beginners*, author Christopher West considers Pope John Paul II’s “biblical reflection on the meaning of human embodiment, particularly as it concerns sexuality and erotic desire” (1). The reason the Church must openly discuss sex as more than a physical act (intercourse) is because “sex is not just about sex. The way we understand and express our sexuality points to our deepest-held convictions about who we are, who God is, the meaning of love, the ordering of society, and even the ordering of the universe” (West 1).

In order to approach sexual exploitation and human sex trafficking from a biblical narrative, we will follow the theological framework set out by Christopher Wright in his book *The Mission of God’s People*, using the model of Creation, the Fall, Redemption, and New Creation. Beginning with Creation, Wright address what it means to be human and the value,

meaning and purpose of life because we are made in the image of God (Wright 40). We recognize that the world is not in a perfect state because of the Fall, which has fractured every human relationship, as well as what it means to be made in God's image (Wright 40). Then we will focus on how God did not leave us in these imperfections, but chose to redeem us (Wright 41). The final segment of Wright's theology is New Creation, which is the hope for the perfect restoration of all things.

Creation

In the introduction of this chapter, we discussed the key passages where the idea of being made in the image of God is introduced in the Bible. It is important to remember that when God created mankind, he created man and woman as a reflection of himself. He also created human sexuality as a reflection of himself in the Trinity, or as Pope John Paul II would say, a "Communion of Persons" (qtd. in West 7). In sexual union, two separate people come together as one flesh. Sexuality is created good and enhances the deep emotional and spiritual connection of two people. It is a gift from God and a reflection of God's goodness. God declared that it was "not good" for man to be alone even before the Fall (Genesis 2:18). Adam needed a relationship with God and with his own kind; relationships that "were complementary but distinct, intertwining but with neither replacing the other" (Jensma 289).

We start with Creation remembering that in the beginning, all things were created perfectly good in relationship to each other and their Creator. This starting point helps us to understand that women and men were meant to desire and enjoy one another. The garden places sex in the ideal setting with two people safe and content with each other—naked and unashamed (Genesis 2:25). Here in the garden there were no dysfunctional relationships and no broken understanding of sex. Both Adam and Eve took delight in each other. There was no sexual

brokenness or addiction. There was no sex apart from a mutual relationship both with one another and relationship with God.

The Fall

However, intimacy and mutual relationship was broken in the Fall—from the moment when Adam and Eve chose to disobey God’s rule to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—the first act of sin (Genesis 3). Sin corrupted the perfect *imago Dei*, as well as the gift of perfect sexuality. Being no longer in harmony with the Creator meant all other aspects of relationship were broken. These broken relationships lead human persons to exploring other ways to fill the void—a key factor in the demand that propagates the abuse of the gift of sexuality.

Bonhoeffer suggests that the Fall divided the single, uninterrupted knowledge of God into parts. He states that:

Man at his origin knows only one thing: God. It is only in the unity of his knowledge of God that he knows of other men, of things, and of himself. He knows all things only in God, and God in all things. The knowledge of good and evil shows that he is no longer at one with this origin. (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* 21)

The Fall was a division of knowing only one thing—God—to knowing both good and evil.

When we knew only God, we knew only love because God is love (1 John 4:8). Once the Fall happened, we knew both love and selfishness. The Fall meant God had to create new ways for us to be in a right relationship with Him. In the Old Testament, this included laws and atonement. In the New Testament, the promise of full reconciliation came through the work of God who was in Christ Jesus. However, although God gave means to restore all broken relationships through

Jesus Christ, it could not happen without struggle against sin and humanity given the freedom to remain in their brokenness.

This broken way of relating to others and broken sexuality leads to shame. As mentioned earlier regarding the link between pornography and sex, “when men start using pornography, they enter into a cycle of learning, desensitization, escalation, and finally actualization where they act out rituals, such as purchasing sex acts” (Hughes, *Best Practices* 18). Viewing porn is typically an unsatisfying experience that leads to a cycle of shame and repetition. Many of the men have been “physically or sexually abused or emotionally abandoned in their early lives. As a result, they have unmet emotional needs which they try to fulfill in harmful ways that lead them to shame-based emotional lives. They live in shame” (Hughes, *Best Practices* 46). This is similar to what Bonhoeffer explains about the loneliness of shame:

Beneath the mask there is the longing for the restoration of the lost unity.

Whenever this longing forces its way towards fulfillment, in the partnership of sex when two human beings become one flesh (Gen. 2.24), and in religion, when a human being seeks for his union with God, whenever, that is to say, the covering is broken through, then, more than ever, shame creates for itself the very deepest secrecy. (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* 25)

The shame now experienced is a deep disconnection instead of union and connection experienced during Creation. Now people act in “self-defense against being treated as an object for sexual use” (West 25). This is because shame has made us hide instead of connect with God and others at the deepest levels.

One of the marks of shame is behaving in secrecy. This is one of the strongest allures of pornography in a digital age. Whereas before, men would have to obtain a printed magazine or

photo and potentially be stigmatized if the item were discovered, now they have access to the Internet through the privacy of a computer screen or smartphone. It can be viewed in secret. One of the keys to changing this condition in human relationships will be to address the issues of shame for both the perpetrators and the victims. Brené Brown, a researcher in shame and vulnerability studies, discusses shame in her book *Daring Greatly*. Her qualitative research identifies common factors in to how people identify shame. She says plainly: “Shame is Internet porn” (Brown 70). In her research she found that “shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we can change and do better” (Brown 71). Concerning sexual exploitation in the form of pornography, this means that users feel trapped by their behavior and feel an inability to change. Brown asked a professional therapist about the issue of sexuality, shame and worthiness. When the conversation centered on addiction and pornography, the therapist explained that men *think* they are getting what they need and do believe they are risking rejection with pornography (Brown 103).

Brown’s research offers advice regarding overcoming shame—one suggestion is to move from silence to engagement and through empathy, which says, “you are not alone” (Brown 81). One would hope that this conversation could be held within a church setting so that those who struggle with sexual addictions will not be left alone in their shame as “the other”. The Church may offer a place of confession, forgiveness, and healing. Confession of sin is offered in the freedom and grace of God through Jesus Christ and brings healing and restoration (James 5:16), and Brown’s research affirms this from a secular perspective: “If we can share our story with someone who responds with empathy and understanding, shame can’t survive” (Brown 75).

The conversation centering on shame and freedom is most beneficial in the context of the Church. As mentioned previously, human rights are universal⁶, but this approach lacks the ability to change a person's motivation because "divorced from its original interpretative context that roots human dignity in a relationship with God, the worth or dignity of a human increasingly has shifted to come to depend solely on the individual's own attributes and achievements" (Claassens 35). To remove dignity from the context of a relationship with God means that individuals can interpret dignity however they want. When considering *imago Dei*, our focus shifts from human willpower to God's role in creating us in his image" (Claassens 38).

Bonhoeffer explains this focus of *imago Dei* in the following way:

Originally man was made in the image of God, but now his likeness to God is a stolen one. As the image of God man draws his life entirely from his origin in God, but the man who has become like God has forgotten how he was at his origin and has made himself his own creator and judge. What God had given man to be, man now desired to be through himself. But God's gift is essentially *God's* gift. It is the origin that constitutes this gift. If the origin changes, the gift changes. Indeed the gift consists solely in its origin. Man as the image of God draws his life from the origin of God, but the man who has become like God draws his life from his own origin. (*Ethics* 22)

As we reflect on ourselves as made in the image of God, it is easier to understand that other people are also made in that image. If life is a gift rooted in the origin of God, then once we understand our origin we are able to relate to others as the likeness of God.

⁶ Human rights are the rights and freedoms that inherently belong to all people, regardless of sex, race, nationality, etc. As we see in Bonhoeffer's quote, it is challenging to separate rights from a belief in a God who endows humans with these rights. I have chosen to focus on the *imago Dei* as the source of dignity and rights conferred upon all people by God.

However, once we understand our origin, we can also understand our sinfulness, which comes with shame. As we explore shame and its association with sexual exploitation (including pornography), we also have to explore how to redeem shame. Katie Lynn, director of Exploit No More, believes pornography consumers feel shame for their behavior, often feeling powerless to stop. Her experience interacting with men caught in pornography is that they feel paralyzed by their sinful addiction and want to stop. This sin is explained in Jesus's teaching: "I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28). The seventh commandment in the Old Testament is "Do not commit adultery," but Jesus takes it a step farther saying that looking lustfully is on par with acting out of lust (Exodus 20:14). In this day and age where digital images are easily accessible and ubiquitous, pornography presents a challenge to the church.

The conversation Lynn has found most helpful regarding breaking a pornography addiction is not in shaming viewers, but reframing the scenario. Within the church, shaming is often the approach to convict viewers into repentance, even though viewers experience internal shame if they believe it is sinful. However, focusing solely on why someone should not be viewing pornography can produce further shame, instead of freedom that comes from repentance. Lynn suggests reframing the scenario. When men (or women) ask themselves when viewing porn, "What impact am I having on the person that I'm viewing?" then it has the potential to humanize the other person. It changes from objectification of "the other" to honoring their personhood—a soul made in the image of God. Lynn believes shifting the conversation from shame, powerlessness and addiction to the *imago Dei* will bring freedom to both viewers and performers. Freedom to viewers will come in the form of breaking sexual addictions;

freedom to sex workers and porn performers will come in the form of non-objectifying employment. Lynn explains how this shift in thinking is key to a breakthrough within the church:

The idea of *imago Dei* really comes into play for the people who are buying the sex and people who are selling children or supplying and trafficking them to try to wrestle with and grapple with the reality that those people are also made in the image of God is more challenging, but is really important but helps us look at the whole system as a broken system and for us to walk alongside and deal with every facet of exploitation, rather than just focusing on the victim. (Lynn, personal interview)

In addition to non-objectifying employment, sex workers embraced by the church community have the opportunity to be released from the shame of their objectification.

This conversation around shame reveals one of the methods helpful in breaking shame strongholds is to the freedom to talk about it. In his book *Shame Interrupted: How God Lifts the Pain of Worthlessness and Rejection*, Edward Welch discusses the need to talk about shame in order to redeem it. Shame is a defining characteristic of people and it is similar to guilt “but not identical. Shame is more common and broader of the two. In Scripture you will find shame (nakedness, dishonor, disgrace, defilement) about ten times more often than you find guilt” (238). Shame is often assumed more by survivors than by perpetrators, since any sexual violation brings shame (Welch 275). Those who have humiliated others exert power and control over their victims:

You can find this [shame] in the souls of most sexually victimized women. They are of two minds. On the one hand they know they were victims of ungodly perpetrators. But right next to that conviction is an equally strong sense that they,

somehow, deserved what they received. Even worse, they might think that God himself decreed the injustice as a form of punishment. Be on guard: assume that shame always accumulates lies. (Welch 367)

How does one overcome shame in this scenario? Welch believes hope is the antidote (309). Hope comes through honoring the image of God and offering redemption. Hope means loving and caring for each other, which is in direct opposition of exploitation.

Redemption

Thankfully, the discussion of broken sexuality does not end with the Fall and the shame it produces. We are invited by God to move from the Fall (sin, lust, shame, objectification, abuse, manipulation, exploitation, etc.) to Redemption. But how? Bonhoeffer offers this suggestion: “Shame is overcome only in the shaming through the forgiveness of sin, that is to say, through the restoration of fellowship with God and men. This is accomplished in confession before God and before other men” (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* 26). Indeed, shame can only be overcome when it no longer hides and is replaced by a healthy community that moves beyond shame and despair and into honesty about struggles and solutions for overcoming. The Church is the place this community can happen. It is not a place where, as some may think, there are only rules or more condemnation for sin, but instead it is a new community (Wright 96).

Keller in his book *Integrative Ministry* declares: “Most of the ethical principles or rules in the Bible are not simply codes of behavior for individuals to follow; they are descriptions of a new community that bears the spiritual fruit of love and holiness” (Keller, ch. 3). There is Redemption and Holistic Restoration offered to all through a relationship with God and participation in the Church—the Body of Christ (Jensma 295). Jensma further explores how our human relationships “mirror” the way we try to relate to God. She explains:

Humankind's mirroring needs result from the human person's desperate attempt to recapture the sense of goodness with which she or he was created... As the believer learns to understand what God is doing in his restoration of the *imago Dei* and as the believer learns to count on God's work in moments of frustration, confusion, and doubt, God does his work of restoration, and the believer progressively becomes a cohesive self (Jensma 295).

This same restoration is offered to those associated with any type of trafficking or exploitation, both perpetrators and victims.

In order to understand restoration, we must understand "common brokenness" (Meyers; Hewat). Common brokenness entails looking inward at our own intentional or unintentional contribution to these issues of sexual exploitation and sex trafficking. Common brokenness means the need for restoration. In my interview with World Relief's US Anti-Trafficking Specialist, Amy Hewat, she summarized how faith and the end of exploitation and trafficking are related to personal transformation as much as system transformation. This indicates that individuals need to recognize where they are lacking, or in other words, recognizing their own poverty:

Anybody who has lost sight of their identity in God and God's unconditional love for them and is experiencing brokenness and separation from God and is enslaved to whatever it is that is enslaving them and I believe we are all in bondage in some ways and our journey as individuals is to pursue Christ and that he sets us free. I believe as Christ followers we are called to walk in that journey with everyone and that includes those who are physically enslaved and mentally, emotionally enslaved and that human trafficking is the visible form of

enslavement—obviously—but it’s the culmination of the most pernicious, undignified, defiling affront to God’s creation and I believe as Christians we are called to allow God’s work through us to restore creation and in human trafficking that looks like helping people see the deeper need they were created with and help them to live in that freedom. (Hewat, personal interview)

We are all poor in different ways—as these examples identify. Our common brokenness underlies sexual exploitation in broken relationships. As Pope John Paul II believes, “the opposite of love is not hatred; rather, the opposite of love is to *use* someone as a means to our own selfish ends” (West 32). The Church offers the possibility of a community that does not use people as objects or “others,” but loves sacrificially.

It is essential to shift the conversation from “the other,” to a community of redeemed sinners. All people are sinful and therefore are all in need of grace, which is an unmerited favor—a foundational doctrine to the Christian faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). The conversation includes our role as individual contributors to the problem. We seek to move from exclusion to embrace, from viewing purchasers of sex and traffickers as evil “others” to recognizing our contribution in the problem. It is not a question of one group of people being perfectly blameless and the other evil, “Rather, the question is how to live with integrity and bring healing to a world of inescapable noninnocence that often parades as its opposite [*sic*]” (Volf 84). We are part of the non-innocent because, as this thesis has argued, sexual exploitation is a problem rooted in broken relationships.

Bonhoeffer believed that those who are in dire places are the ones who recognize their need for salvation: “[I]t is in relation to the tax gatherer and the prostitute that the gospel of Jesus Christ discloses itself most clearly to men” (Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* 62). This statement is similar to

Jesus telling his followers that it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick (Matthew 9:12; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31). The greater challenge is helping people who believe they are innocent understand their noninnocence and need for redemption.

Christians, who are the bride of Christ and God's chosen entity to convey His plan of redemption, represent the Church. The Church is also represented by its institutional framework: "Christian churches have a mission and purpose; they shape individual human lives and intentions just as they are, in turn, shaped by human lives and intentions" (Waller 3). In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer frequently comments about how the church should be a visible community in the world and challenges individuals who belong to the Church to connect through "worship and discipline" but also through "fellowship of brotherly living" (Bonhoeffer 289). This is done is through love and service:

If the world dishonours and insults him, the Christian will sacrifice his own honour to cover his brother's shame. Where the world seeks gain, the Christian will renounce it. Where the world exploits, he will dispossess himself, and where the world oppresses, he will stoop down and raise up the oppressed (sic).

(Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* 289)

For Bonhoeffer, authentic Christians cannot engage in exploitation because they are preoccupied with self-giving love.

Until all relationships and sexuality are put perfectly back in place, there are practical steps to help the Church try to help people recognize the *imago Dei* in each other. The Church is a place where love and healing should be the main theme. As the article "*What is the Church?*" answers,

[The Church] represents that area within humanity where the love of God is poured out by the Holy Spirit and where men and women are given to share together in their life on earth, and within the social cohesions of humanity, in the overflow of the divine Life and Love. (Torrance 16)

Signs of the Coming Kingdom in the Visible Church: New Creation

The final portion of Christopher Wright's model from Creation to Fall to Redemption is the hope of a New Creation. This is the hope for a new heaven and new earth, and a connection to God as it was in the beginning. In this future setting, there will be no exploitation because all people will be in proper relationship with each other and with God. While we can hope to achieve a portion of this personal restoration on earth, complete restoration will not take place until the New Creation. As such, this is the hope for the future—a perfect reflection of *imago Dei*.

Suggestions for the Church as the Redemptive Community Restoring All People to the *Imago Dei*

In the final section, I will address ways the Church can lead the conversation on sexual brokenness and restoration to its congregation and into the community. As the Church seeks to be the redemptive community bringing people from shame to restoration, one of the first steps members in the Church can take is to acknowledge their noninnocence. Once this has been acknowledged the Church community can act as a place of restoration to sexual brokenness. By having a conversation in Church, shame and stigmas attached to sexual brokenness are removed because they are no longer hidden. The Church has the opportunity to engage its congregation in discussing what the Bible says about sexuality. Parker Palmer in *Let Your Life Speak* says: “It is so much easier to deal with the external world, to spend our lives manipulating material and institutions and other people instead of dealing with our own souls” (ch. 5). Every interview I

had with experts in the field of trafficking believed the solution to trafficking and exploitation had to start from within the Church. Hewat encourages the Church to be:

[A] safe space for people to talk about pornography and sexual addiction and sexuality in general. It's one of these issues we avoid talking about, but how can a person who's experiencing sexual brokenness attempt to address it in someone else's life before addressing it in their own? The same is true for the Church family—if we can't support each other in that and walk through that together and rebuild each other, then I don't know how we expect to do that outside our own walls. (Hewat, personal interview)

Until the conversation about sexual brokenness takes place within the Church, the Church will not be able to effectively help those outside of the Church. The conversation about sexual exploitation and human trafficking will be incomplete without the Church because people perpetuating demand need to understand there is freedom from shame and a community of love.

There are various tools created for this conversation to take place in the Church. The Faith Alliance Against Slavery and Trafficking (FAAST) has curriculum called “Hands That Heal.” In it there are guides to talking about dysfunctional sexuality, the foundation of the cause of all other exploitation issues (Middleton). The authors reflect on American sexuality being about entertainment, profit and power, not “about love and building an intimate relationship and reflecting God's intimacy within that relationship” (Middleton). The community-based curriculum leads participants through exercises that examine the roots of exploitation and trafficking. This gives participants the tools for self-discovery to lead them to the reality of issues discussed in the Fall and Restoration.

April Foster, co-founder and director of Breaking Chains Network, believes that the Church is important for addressing human trafficking. First, it can be a key tool in prevention because it can validate the worth of every human being and be a place where accountability, responsibility, mercy and forgiveness are exercised (Foster). Those who have experienced exploitation or brokenness themselves should experience a healing community in the Church because it does address the spiritual, emotional and physical aspects of a person. It can also be a place that is key “in addressing demand issues by dealing with those things that create demand, and offer support groups for healing and accountability and integrity for men and women” (Foster). Finally, she considers the Church to be the potential nonjudgmental community that people are looking for. She believes,

The church has the resources to combat trafficking on every level because when you look at the congregation of churches, it’s professionals—counselors, lawyers, community activists—but also people who have experienced healing for themselves through grace and mercy and everyone can offer that to someone else who has gone through something like this. (Foster)

Another aspect the Church has to offer for its members and for those caught in sexually exploitative situations is by providing dignifying work. This is one issue that the effort to legalize prostitution has neglected—although there are ways to make money, the ability to be engaged in dignified work should also be offered to all people as they reflect *imago Dei*. I question if anyone wants the life of a prostitute for their child, which is a natural indicator of the dangers and indecency of the work. Even those of us with jobs that are stable and free from inherent risks have discussions about vocation and the purpose of our lives. Middleton believes

discussing vocation is another way the Church can address the issues of exploitation and human trafficking. She states:

God gives gifts, talents and ability to do meaningful work, even if those gifts, talents and abilities aren't used for that purpose. It helps to humanize people and to realize that we are all the same at the foot of the cross. It's not just raising awareness to provide a sentimental connection, it helps bring people back to humanity. These [prostitutes] are not monsters; these are humans and seeing people as being made in the image of God helps us realize that as a Church.

(Middleton)

This understanding that people have the ability to do meaningful work must also be part of the conversation for ending exploitation. While some argue that legalizing prostitution will solve the problem of human trafficking because it will be voluntary work, this thesis has shown the inadequacy of that argument. It is important that people are able to provide for their families and it is true that people will do whatever is necessary to achieve that purpose. However, that does not mean that prostitution is meaningful, fulfilling and dignifying work. Acknowledging what it means to be made in the image of God means restoring brokenness and giving purposeful work.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored how the Church has the potential to be the answer to sexual exploitation and human trafficking through the lens of *imago Dei*. I have looked at current models for addressing sexual exploitation and human trafficking and the reason they are not complete. Then I transitioned to the Church becoming the place that makes sense of broken sexuality and gives the opportunity for restoration, which would directly address the demand side of exploitation. Finally, I concluded by challenging the Church to look inwardly at its own brokenness before trying to solve sexual brokenness elsewhere. By starting with inward transformation, it is possible to acknowledge the *imago Dei* in others and ourselves. Once restoration takes place, then the Church can be a powerful force in the conversation to end sexual exploitation and trafficking.

Ultimately, the Church is uniquely positioned to understand why exploitation and trafficking is reprehensible to God's call for free will and dignified work. The Church extends grace, forgiveness, restoration and dignity to all involved with human trafficking and exploitation. Then, the Church needs to have a continual open discussion about the issues of brokenness and redemption in all parts of life, including sexuality—as the brokenness is the root cause for sexual exploitation. While the Church will not be perfect in addressing these needs, it has a place to step into the confusion and chaos of exploitative situations. The Church has redemption and healing available for survivors and perpetrators.

Some Churches have adopted a method of talking openly about issues related to sexuality—all of the specialists I interviewed working in this field said the most important thing the Church could do is start the conversation about sexuality. Opening up the forum for conversations regarding sexuality would naturally allow issues like sexual abuse, pornography

addictions, exploitation and shame to arise. This conversation would then allow the Church to minister to its congregation in important ways and directly reduce demand, which is the root cause for exploiting others.

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