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Created Male and Female

THOMAS H. OLBRICHT

Much interest persists in our time as to the relationship of males and females in the plan of God. I believe some confusion reigns because those who write and speak on these matters do not discern the differing contexts in which these relationships are situated. The scriptures depict male and female in three time frames: (1) in God's original creation, (2) after being evicted from the garden, and (3) in the new creation that Christ initiated.

IN GOD'S ORIGINAL CREATION

The New Revised Standard Version of the scripture translates God's original creation of humans as follows:

Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them (Gen 1.26–27).

The NRSV translators twice used the word "humankind" rather than man. Critics of this translation point out that the NRSV is more interested in a "gender correct" translation than an accurate translation. Careful consideration will show that the NRSV translation best depicts the use of the Hebrew word for "man." The Hebrew word man in many cases is not simply referring to the male, but is talking about humankind, both male and female as distinguished from the other living creatures.

"Man" in the Hebrew is the human species. "Man" is created in the image of God. Genesis makes it clear that it is both the male and the female who are created in the image of God (Gen 1.27). The female is no less formed in the image of God than is the male. The female has the same rights and privileges before God as does the male in the original creation. Even though in Genesis 2 the woman is formed from the rib of the male, nevertheless she is still created in the image of God, not in the image of the male. Paul in 1 Cor 11.7 does not claim that the woman is in the image of man. He writes, ". . . since he is the image and reflection of God; but woman is the reflection of man." Perhaps the New King James translation is less confusing at this point, declaring, ". . . since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man." Women are just as much in the image of God in the original creation as are males, though they are likewise in the glory of males. That, however, does not make them independent from each other. "For just as woman came from man, so man comes through woman, but all things come from God" (1 Cor 11.12).

All the charges to man in Genesis are directed to both male and female, even though at first glance they may seem to be directed toward the male.

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2.15–17).

Male and female are both assigned to keep the garden. Male and female are both forbidden to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In other words Gen 2.15–17 is a charge specifically to “man,” that is, humankind. The woman is as much condemned for eating the forbidden fruit as is the male.

AFTER BEING EVICTED FROM THE GARDEN

Both male and female were guilty of eating the fruit forbidden by God (Gen 2.16). As the result, the male and female each suffered, as also did the tempter. The serpent suffered in that he was doomed to crawl on his belly, eat dust, and be exposed to the heel of the male and female striking at his head all the days of his life (Gen 3.14–15). The male suffered because when he was put out of the garden; in order to eat, he had to labor by the sweat of his brow, and the ground he tilled was cursed with thorns and thistles (Gen 3.17–19). The woman likewise suffered. God said to her,

“I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you” (Gen 3.16).

Of special significance is that the woman excluded from the garden will have an inordinate desire for her husband. The desire will persist despite the fact that the husband will rule over the wife—a new development that only occurred after the woman ate of the forbidden tree.

God did not at first intend for the male to rule over the female. It may be no accident that the female was created from a rib of the male. God intended that they go through life side by side. Woman was created to be a helper to the male. This word (in the Hebrew, *ezer*) by no means implies that woman was created subordinate to the male. The same Hebrew word is employed in depicting God as a “helper” to humankind. “Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help [*ezer*] and shield” (Ps 33.20). If “helper” implies subordination, then God is subordinate to humans. Had the author wished to declare that the female was to be a servant or slave to the male, there was a common word he could have employed: *ebed*. For example, “May God make space for Japheth . . . and let Canaan be his slave (*ebed*)” (Gen 9.27).

The sad fate of the female after the eviction from the garden is that she is now to be ruled by the male. For example, a husband has control over the vows his wife makes.

And if she made a vow in her husband’s house, or bound herself by a pledge with an oath, and her husband heard it and said nothing to her, and did not express disapproval to her, then all her vows shall stand, and any pledge by which she bound herself shall stand. But if her husband nullifies them at the time that he hears them, then whatever proceeds out of her lips concerning her vows, or concerning her pledge of herself, shall not stand. Her husband has nullified them, and the Lord will forgive her (Num 30.10–12).

It is also the husband only who can declare a divorce (Deut 24.3).

God created male and female in his image. That image did not depart from humankind when the male and female were forced from the garden. Even after the flood, despite Augustine, Calvin and many others, humans still retained the image of God.

Whoever sheds the blood of a human,
by a human shall that person's blood be shed;
for in his own image
God made humankind (Genesis 9.6).

James in the New Testament presumed that humans still possessed the image or likeness of God. He condemned the one who employs the tongue to “curse those who are made in the likeness of God” (Jas 3.9). At least one characteristic of the male and female persists all the way from the beginning, that even though the relationship of male and female has changed, they each alike bear the very image of God.

IN THE NEW CREATION THAT CHRIST INITIATED

When Jesus Christ came into the world, he changed the relationship of male and female. The mission of the incarnated Christ was to placard his own life as the exemplar for new human persons. His model was one of servanthood. “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10.45). Jesus Christ was a servant. He invited his disciples to be servants through walking in his steps. “He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’” (Mark 8.34). The servant lifestyle was new. It was not the way of the Gentiles.

So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all (Mark 10.42–44).

In the Gospel of John Jesus demonstrated the way of service by washing the feet of the disciples, then calling upon them to wash one another's feet.

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13.12–15).

Jesus did not set out to restore humankind to the status of the original male and female—Adam and Eve. He looked not backwards but forward and upward in depicting these new humans who will constitute the kingdom of God.

Paul is explicit about the disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ exemplifying a new creation. “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor 5.17). He envisioned this new creation as beckoning from the future, not harking back to a reconstituted Eden. The new being in Christ came about because of Christ's salvific victory on the cross and in his resurrection. The model for the Christian is not the Adam of Eden, but the new Adam from heaven.

Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor 15.45–49).

Christ is the progenitor of a new family. “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family” (Rom 8.29).

We are especially interested in male and female in the new creation. Their relationship is likewise altered. The headship of the male over the female continues as Paul makes clear. “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the husband is the head of his wife, and God is the head of Christ” (1 Cor 11.3). But the male headship must be exercised in a new manner that is based in servanthood. Christ is the head of the church and he demonstrates that his headship consists of servanthood to the church, as was the case in the washing of the disciples’ feet. He took the lead in demonstrating that to be his disciple involves the washing of the feet of others.

I think the Christian perspective on the headship of Christ over the church and of the husband over the wife is especially explicit in Ephesians 5. This chapter opens with a challenge to be imitators of God, as exemplified in Christ. Jesus demonstrated in his earthly ministry his love for his disciples who became the church. Christ “gave himself up for us” (Eph 5.2). If the husband is to imitate Christ it is clear that his headship is not exhibited in a “gentile” style of ordering and demanding. His headship is the reverse. Christ Jesus gave himself up for the ones over whom he is head (Eph 5.2). If the husband and wife take seriously Christ’s prior model, they are to give themselves up to each other. “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5.21). I think it is clear that “love,” being subject, and submitting all express the same meaning in Ephesians 5. As head of the church, Christ loved, subjected himself and submitted to the church. As head of the wife (Eph 5.23), the husband is to relate to his wife just as Christ as head of the church behaved toward the church, that is in love, in submitting, and in being subject (Eph 5.21, 25, 33). The wife is to accept the headship of the husband and to exhibit the same characteristics as Christ and her husband in love, submitting, and being subject (Eph 5.22–24). Paul depicts this new relationship of male and female as having arrived at the coming of and acceptance of Jesus as the Christ, “. . . there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ” (Gal 3.28).

Concretely what are the implications of being new men and women in Jesus Christ? My charge as the Christian head of my wife is to demonstrate to her servanthood so that she in turn will become a servant.

When we had our first child, we both woke up whenever she woke up. My wife had to get up because Suzanne was nursing, and I woke up because I am a light sleeper. After about a month of this we became aware that we both were wearing down because our first daughter was not a great one for sleeping. I decided that I must come up with some solution that would enable Dorothy to acquire the needed sleep. I have been an early riser all my life, while Dorothy has preferred to get up about 7:30 or 8:00. By this time Suzanne was on a bottle, so I told Dorothy that anytime Suzanne woke up after 5:00 a.m., I would get up and stay up and she should sleep until awaking. In turn I would not normally get up in the night when Suzanne cried out. I might be awakened but I could go back to sleep knowing that Dorothy was addressing the situation. That worked for us. We followed the same agreement through the next four children. We were servants to one another and to our children.

In 1978 the house of my aged parents in Thayer, Missouri, caught fire and they, as the outcome, were asphyxiated. My parents had accumulated an estate of some consequence through savings and real estate. The inheritance was divided among my three siblings and myself. When everything was settled, I put the monies into our joint account and both Dorothy’s and my name were placed on the investments and the real estate. Legally I could have kept all of my inheritance in my own name, but as head I wanted to be servant and share it with Dorothy. Twelve years later Dorothy’s mother died. After a time her father decided to divide up some of her mother’s personal inheritance among his four children. Dorothy has worked on occasion during our marriage, but for the most part she has not had much money she could really claim as her own. Now was her chance. She could have opened her own bank account and spent the funds as she wished. I suppose she gave that some thought. Anyway she said to me a few days after receiving the check that because I had put all my inheritance into our common funds she was going to do the same. I

was touched. I had exercised my headship in being a servant. Dorothy decided to follow the lead and do likewise.

My father did not become a Christian until I was eight years old, but my mother always saw to it that we prayed at meals. I recall her leading the prayer when I was small. But as soon as her sons reached what she perceived to be the “age of accountability,” she insisted that they word the prayers at meals. By that time also my father commenced saying grace. From that time on I never heard my mother pray, and upon later reflection, I always thought what a loss to our family. Dorothy’s parents also, at least, after I got to know them, always had prayers at meals led by males, even though Dorothy’s mother might ask the specific person to word the prayer.

As our children were growing up at times we would gather around their bedside, and the children would pray and then Dorothy and I would pray. But I never asked Dorothy to lead the prayer at meals because I had not thought this through. Once when Dorothy had a newly discovered interest in discipleship it dawned on me that she too should take turns praying at meals. I perceived she would not feel comfortable doing so, but I encouraged her and gradually we started to take turns wording the prayer when we were by ourselves. She sometimes now prays at meals with the family present, but she is still not comfortable doing so when we have visitors. Our life before the Lord has benefited greatly because I exercised headship in encouraging her to pray when we are together. She often brings dimensions to prayers that are missing in mine.

Because of Jesus Christ it is a new day for men and women. They are to serve each other just as the Lord served. The male or the husband is to lead the way in servanthood, then step aside so that women or wives can exercise their servanthood before the Lord and humankind. “. . . there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ” (Gal 3.28).

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