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All People (and All Things) Made New

Lee Smith

In 2016, a colleague and I gave a two-part presentation at the Pepperdine lectureships entitled “All People (and All Things) Made New.” It was drawn from the passage in 2 Corinthians 5.17: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.” Given this passage and numerous other ones with similar content, we had become convinced that there is a great overarching theme that runs through all the Scriptures that gives meaning and purpose to life, and establishes the basis for all relational interactions between renewed, redeemed humans (male and female), i.e., those that have chosen to be in Christ.

The theme we settled on was *new creation*. Granted, it is a term Paul uses sparingly, only twice to be exact (2 Cor 5.17; Gal 6.15). But, it is also a term Paul equates to being *in Christ*—a term he uses over 170 times!

Paul appears to introduce *new creation* much like one would a new song. It is intended to be a brand-new haunting melody in life’s journey with varying chords and integrated notes that ends in a powerful climatic chorus: *Godly union has been restored!*

Put another way, our research suggested that with *new creation*, Paul meant “creation completed.” It describes creation perfected. It is creation at peace. In the sweep of Scripture, it is God’s “good creation” (Genesis 1, 2), which was temporarily despoiled, defiled, and divided by human rebellion, but has been reconciled back into perfect unity (Rev 21, 22).

The fuller complement of Scripture seems to frame new creation even broader as a story of great love—the last Adam (resurrected Jesus) who commissions his bride, the last/new Eve (his church), to declare his glory and witness to the restored oneness brought about by his action on the cross for all who would seek his face.

Contextual Framework

The big picture that we discerned goes something like this. In the beginning, after creating the human species (male and female) in his image and blessing them, God said, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1.28). Or, in other words, “*I have created a space for you, go and fill it.*” Then he continues, “As you fill creation, represent me to the rest of creation in such a way that, as living bearers of my image, you return its harmonious wholeness or oneness back to me as your worship of praise.” In Genesis, God declared this phase of creation, “good.”

But humans failed this mission miserably. The unity and harmonious oneness that marked God’s good creation as at peace devolved into a divisive, faction-filled, violence-prone living environment with people separated from God and each other.

Then came the cross and a new divine filling. In Paul’s perspective, this is a cosmic transformational game changer! In Galatians 6.14–15 he writes, “May I never boast of anything except the *cross* of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which *the world* has been crucified to me, and *I to the world*. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a *new creation* is everything” (emphasis added).

As we looked at these verses, two aspects really stood out. First, Paul doesn’t just change his view of the world. *Instead, Paul sees a changed world coming into being!* For Paul, Christ’s cross event ushered in a brand-new world order as a contrast to the old one. This is a new world order where God’s holy presence is

fused (filled) into renewed persons, both male and female—a sphere of influence embracing values which stand in great opposition to the value system inherent in the current “evil age” (Gal 1.4).

The impact this change has on renewed humans is revolutionary—most particularly for women. We will look closer at it later in this article.

In Paul’s renewed worldview, God didn’t simply intrude into human affairs with Christ’s work on the cross making no waves, as his opponents claimed (Gal 2.15–21). On the contrary, Paul is claiming that the Christ/Holy Spirit event is God’s *deliberate invasion into this world to embed his goodness into the old and bring about change*. This event established a beachhead of good that penetrates into the life of the existing age of evil. It is a sphere of being with a different internal *life dynamic* available only to Christ followers, i.e., those who believe in Christ.

However—and this second aspect is critical to remember—this new world order does not replace the old world order yet! Romans 8.18–30 describes God using a two-stage renewal approach that occurs in reverse sequence to the creational order. In Genesis 1 and 2, the living environment was established in the first three days; then in the next three days the species are introduced to populate creation. In God’s renewed creation, humans are redeemed first; then at Christ’s second coming, the living environment will be completely cleansed. This sequence of reversal underscores the point that while God is in the process of renewing the old, remnants of the old still remain to tempt and befuddle new creatures in Christ.

And just what is it that remains? According to Paul, while people in Christ have been reconciled, the evil age waits, under domination by powers hostile to God and characterized by the exercise of power *over others* for self-enrichment and self-benefit. It is an age or realm characterized by deceit, self-control, decay, mortality, decadence, destruction, and death. All is perishable (see 1 Cor 15.53). It is a sphere of being within the sovereign power of God, but still controlled or dominated by the power of sin and death. Tensions between the new and the old will inevitably exist until all is totally summed up when Christ comes again and *all becomes one*. (For biblical support, read Gal 3.27–28; 1 Cor 12.12–13; Col 3.10–11; Eph 1.10; Col 1.15–20; 1 Cor 15.20–28, and others).

Until then, God says to his renewed, uniquely recreated Christ followers, “*You create a space in you* (both individually and as a group) and *I will come in and fill it with my presence*. Together we will complete the task of producing relational oneness—creation at peace—with all parts working in harmony for the good of the whole. That will be your worshipful praise as renewed people in Christ.”

This divine filling produced a unique new creature—a new creation, *a unique new relational holy union* that Paul aptly describes in Galatians 3.27–28 NRSV: “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

When we examine the passage from four different angles, we can see how it depicts the unique new holy relational union that characterizes redeemed humans in Christ.

1. **Baptism into Christ results in new access and a new life walk.** The first angle (or component) is from the perspective of baptism that produces new access to God and a new life walk in Christ. Access into this brand-new holy union comes through a putting off/putting on process. When Paul speaks of baptism into Christ, he pictures it as “clothing oneself with Christ.” In Romans 6, Paul goes further. He equates baptism to death and burial: it is an immersion into Christ’s death so that, “just as Christ rose from the dead,” believers too can “walk in newness of life” (Rom 6.3-4). Significantly, baptism—as the visible physical mode of new creation into the new family of God—enables them to walk in “newness of life.” The cycle is one of *emptying, filling* and then having *full expression* as renewed human beings. And it is the same for males and females. The picture is vivid: by divine filling, the old person has been transformed by God into a new person. This is a powerful signal to all that real change has occurred and that a new organic relational union has emerged.
2. **Into or in Christ yields a new transformed relational union.** The second angle we will explore from the text is Paul’s use of the phrases *into Christ* and *one in Christ*. In Christ’s time, who a person

is *in*—for example, in Abraham or in Adam—frames and gives substance to one’s family lineage and one’s sense of personal identity. Likewise, Christians then reframed their lineage and identity by a renewed spiritual blood lineage that came from putting their trust and allegiance in the risen Christ as Savior and Lord. Put another way, *who* a person, male or female, is *in* (or embedded in) not only defines their relational righteousness with God, but it also *delineates or redefines their sense of identity*. Stated yet another way, who you are depends on *whose* you are. The idea of being in someone depicts a relationship of embeddedness that is transformational. Paul is saying that being in Christ drastically changes who a person is.

3. **The significance of opposite pairings is totally transformed.** The third angle deals with the pairing of opposites—a continuation of the theme of old being transformed into new. Baptism depicts a new mode of entering into a unique new relational unity of being in Christ. Now Paul says pairings of opposites such as Jew/Greek; slave/free; male/female, and even circumcision/uncircumcision (Gal 6.15) have all undergone a significant relational transformation.

Before Christ, these particular pairings connoted and perpetuated division, separation, and even dominance over another. For example, Jews were considered to be right or one with God. Physical markers of circumcision and the law denoted them as being God’s treasured possession. Greeks or gentiles, the uncircumcised, were excluded. Slaves were considered to be property, barely human, compared to their masters who enjoyed greater status and dominant control over their property. Women, by Roman and Greek law and even by Jewish practice, were inextricably embedded in males—totally dependent on the male for any hint of righteousness before God and absolutely dependent on the male for livelihoods and their mere existence.

But after Christ, for all renewed persons in Christ, any former significance attached to these pairings, even though they are still physically present and still physically distinct, passed away. Within the renewed context, they now reflect **mutual interdependence**—a unique fusion of God and man with all parts working harmoniously together in support of their new family lineage. And, as the new household of God in Christ, they now connote and promote unity, not division; peace (*shalom*), not animosity or distrust.

4. **All are one in Christ Jesus.** All of this leads us to the final angle: the intimate connection that Paul draws between baptism, transformed relational pairings, and *oneness found in Christ*. This theme of oneness in Christ is so pervasive throughout all of Paul’s teaching that we believe it to be God’s intended end-goal as well as the framework or lens through which all interpretation of Scripture must pass.

For Paul, the cross is the singular event that inaugurates or ushers in this complete transformational oneness in power. Nor is this goal of oneness in Christ just Paul’s theological construct. It is what Jesus prayed for in his priestly prayer to God in John 17.11, 20, and 23; is reflected in his mission statement in Luke 4.18–19; and is evidenced by his treatment of women in all his encounters. Jesus came not only to bring release from enslavement by the powers of this evil age to the marginalized but he also came to release embedded humans back to full productivity as proper stewards of God’s creation.

A New World for Women

The impact this has on women cannot be overstated. For women, we find that the option to personally choose to be a new creation in Christ through baptism is completely revolutionary. Before, women had virtually no rights over their own destiny. Through baptism, they now can not only personally choose to be right with God and to live as his new creation, they also have a mode of access into the community of God that is exactly the same as the men. All negative traces of embeddedness are removed.

Additionally, they have new power for living! God’s gift or filling of his Holy Spirit—the seal of his new covenant—is granted to them the same as to men as a new mark of God’s ownership. Scripture depicts the Holy Spirit gifting individual members with abilities to empower communication, administration, and service without regard to gender, socioeconomic or racial status “for the common good” (1 Cor 12.7).

And, as if that is not enough, this renewed humanity (male and female)—the collective new *creation in emergence* which is the church—is blessed with a new ritual depicting this transformational deliverance: the Lord’s Supper. Here the emptying and filling cycle results in a uniquely new fellowship or partnership of new life. Think about what this signifies. It is a communal meal taken at the table, which not only embraces and displays the newly achieved oneness but also accords welcome and acceptance to all who partake. Incredibly, women could participate freely even though Roman and Greek laws and regulations prohibited “respectable” women from dining in public. The reason for this is fascinating. The earliest churches, which met in households, were thought of more as familial settings, and thus were considered to be private rather than public locations. Because church assemblies were considered private, women could actively participate and even lead in a manner that would have been completely unacceptable in a more public setting. As we read in Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth, women regularly shared in the Lord’s Supper and communal meals (1 Cor 11.17–34).

The Bottom Line

The new divine filling produced a uniquely new union based solely on Christ’s sacrifice on the cross and sustained solely by selfless, sacrificial love. Sin barriers between God and renewed humans are removed; full communion has been restored. The brand-new embedded organic connection that Paul terms a *new creation is everything* (Gal 6.15). And yet, the old and the new remain dynamically in tension with each other.

This brings me to my primary point. While unity has been restored and a new organic relational union between God and the church has emerged, a quandary facing newly restored people remains. The major challenge we face as God’s new creation is that we are called to live by the Spirit, but we have no previous experience in how to do it! Our new worldview and new life practices, illuminated and powered by the indwelling Spirit, must still be learned, experienced, and expressed in the midst of others who neither understand nor have any appreciation for the radical change God has brought into being. And, as if that is not enough, unless we adopt our new creation status as the lens through which we interpret Scripture, we can easily fail to see how the two-age tension frames God’s guidance for our lives.

To illustrate what I mean, take the so-called “headship passage” from Paul in 1 Corinthians 11.3. Before making his point, Paul first admonishes the Corinthians to do everything for the glory of God without offending Jews, Greeks or the church of God (1 Cor 10.31-32). It is a powerful point that serves to remind them (and us) that how we conduct ourselves as God’s church can, and does, have a significant impact on those not yet in Christ.

After that, Paul states, “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” (NRSV). Three pairings are present, beginning with “Christ is the head of every man.” Then Paul declares, “the man is the head of a woman” (NASB) or “the husband is the head of his wife” (NRSV), depending on the version you use. Finally, Paul states, “God is the head of Christ.”

What strikes me, as I choose to read this passage through my new creation interpretive lens is that Paul chooses his Greek word for *head* very carefully. *Kephale* can be understood three ways: “cranium” (the biological meaning); “authority” (e.g. a company CEO); and “source” (e.g. head waters of the Nile). Thus, when we examine the passage through our new interpretive lens, we can conclude that when Paul writes “Christ is the head of man,” he is delineating a new organic union, i.e., a “renewed man” or “spiritual man” (a renewed person who is Spirit-birthered & powered)—*not* defining who is or should be in charge of whom.

If this is the case, then the next pairing must reflect this same organic new fusion. The renewed man or husband is the head of the renewed woman or wife not in the same sense of being the CEO to the relationship but in the sense of being organically joined together. This new pairing produces a new divine/human unity—a totally renewed, divinely infused, human entity that we call the church. The final pairing, “God is the head of Christ,” indicates the full reunion of God the Father and his Son, who reunited with the human race as the first part of this cosmic reconciliation.

Paul’s treatment of circumcision also serves as a case in point. In Galatians 5.2–4, Paul clearly states that if you let yourselves be circumcised, you actually cut yourself off from any benefit of being in Christ! And

yet, in Acts 16, in verses immediately following the decision by the Jerusalem Council that one need not be circumcised in order to be a Christian, Luke writes, “Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him; and he took him and had him circumcised because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek” (Acts 16.3). This text in Acts strongly suggests that Paul’s rationale for having Timothy circumcised has to do with how relationships, particularly the image we present to others, impact bringing someone to Christ or not. This was a situation where Paul was about to evangelize in Timothy’s hometown of Lystra so he wanted Timothy to be circumcised “*because of the Jews who were in those places.*”

The almost inescapable conclusion is that in these cases the conditions of the relationship dictated the manner and method of how Paul chose to represent and serve his risen Lord. In 1 Corinthians 9.19–23, Paul tells us why. “For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews, I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. . . . To the weak, I became weak so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.”

And now we come to my final thought—an offshoot from Paul’s declaration, “I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some.” Life, as we formerly practiced it, still holds powerful sway over our thinking. But, as Paul says, Christ has come. Everything has changed! Messiah people now live a new life: Spirit-birthed, led and powered; marked by and expressed through grace; no longer governed by law. But this new life must be lived and expressed among people who do not hold the same viewpoint.

And maybe, as it appears in Paul’s framework regarding the paradox of circumcision, some conditions just demand spiritual discernment so people will be brought to Christ. I believe that Paul’s admonition for women to be silent (1 Cor 14.34) falls into this category. The context suggests that Paul’s request is driven by his desire that outsiders or unbelievers who enter might view the proceedings as being chaotic and not giving proper glory to the Lord (1 Cor 14.23). This could mislead them to determine that God is actually a God of confusion and not the God of peace (1 Cor 14.33).

All of which brings us back to our original text. Paul declares that Christ has come! Renewed humans in Christ, a uniquely new living organism that Scripture calls the church, have become the vanguard of God’s *new creation*. And this *new creation is everything!* Godly unity is not only possible; it is present. May our acts of loving service reflect this truth, and become stepping stones on the way to that day when every knee shall bow at his name (Rom 14.11; Phil 2.10) and all of God’s creation will be renewed and restored.

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