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EQUALITY OR SUBORDINATION?

4

Allen Guenther

The Creation Account

Gladys Aylward, the unmarried missionary whose life-story, "The Small Woman," was made into a film, expressed her insecurities about her famous ministry: "I wasn't God's first choice for what I've done for China. There was somebody else . . . I don't know who it was — God's first choice. It must have been a man — a wonderful man. A well-educated man. I don't know what happened. Perhaps he died. Perhaps he wasn't willing. . . . And God looked down . . . and saw Gladys Aylward." — Phyllis Thompson, A Transparent Woman: The Compelling Story of Gladys Aylward

Genesis 1—3 stands at the center of the Bible's teaching regarding the role and relationship of women and men. It is a foundational word which addresses all humanity.

Genesis 1 and 2 lead us to the original beauty of God's design — how we might be. From that original masterpiece, we can judge all attempts to express responses of faithful ministry among the people of God.

GENESIS 1:1—2:3

The Perspective

The account of creation is given from two interlocking perspectives. The first is recorded in Genesis 1:1—2:3. Here, in two parallel, three-day sequences, the writer pictures the creation of all things.

In the first three days God creates the world, separating it into its component parts (land, air, sea) and fixing their boundaries. The next three days God fills the earth with the moving beings and gives them the task of ruling over the spheres previously created.

The account takes us from the heavens to the earth, from the inorganic to the organic, from the lower forms of life to the highest form—people. The movement of thought points to people as the apex of creation. It is only after human beings (both male and female) have been created, and commissioned as God's representatives, that the world is said to be “very good.” It is then that God rests from his creative work. The human beings are to carry out the remainder of the task under the blessing and supervision of the Almighty.

The Image of God

To fulfill that task, humans, unlike all other life forms, are made in “the form (image) and with the features (likeness) of God” (1:26). Unlike other creatures, of whom God made many kinds (1:20-22), God made only

one kind of human (1:26-27). He made two of them (man and woman), but only one kind.

The alternation between the singular and plural, as well as the emphases on their being male and female and together being the image of God, are important aspects of the description:

“Let **us** make [a] human in **our** image, having **our** features So God created the human in **his** own image. With **his** own features **he** created **him**. **He** created **them** male and female. Then God (**he**) blessed **them** and said to **them**: ‘You (plural) have many children, so that you (plural) can fill the world and rule over all of it. Control all the fish. . . .’ (vv. 26,27).

The retelling of this event in Genesis 5:1-2 adds the detail of their naming: “On the day God created a human, **he** made **him** with God’s own features. **He** created **them** male and female. Then **he** blessed **them**. **He** also named **them** ‘human’ on the very day **he** created **them**.”

This alternation between singular and plural, with reference to both God and humans, suggests that male and female are together in the image of God and collectively share God’s features. Alone, they cannot adequately reflect the image of God. Every reference to the “image” or “features [likeness]” is to the collective human [= *‘adam*], subsequently explained as creation of the male and female. Being male and female is an essential part of what it means to be like God. There is something unusual about people in that their sexuality reflects the nature of God implanted in them. In addition, the statement “let **us** make [a] human in **our** image,” implies that their complementary nature reflects the social character of God.

The first picture of creation affirms that both male and female are given the mandate to procreate and to

rule the life that has sprung from the earth at God's command. Neither is responsible to rule, control, or dominate the other. In fact, the world of people is excluded from the sphere of human dominion and rule.

Significantly, objections to the view of male and female as equals do not focus attention on Genesis 1. This passage clearly affirms the total equality of male and female. Not a syllable is uttered about role distinctions. Nothing is said about one ruling over the other. Together they are human; together they are in the likeness and bear the features of God.

GENESIS 2:4-25

Perspective of the Passage

Genesis 2:4-25 gives us a second snapshot of creation. An underlying argument connects the two accounts as follows. In Genesis 1, humans are presented as God's agents on earth to rule all animate life and the source (earth) from which it springs. Humans are the apex of creation. The world exists in total harmony only if humans supervise it. But if people are created last, then the whole world can exist, for a brief time at least, without humans. That would deny the essential role of people in maintaining the organic world in its right relationship to God. Therefore, this second creation snapshot shows God empowering people for their task and modeling the creation activity. Humans are shown how to rule over the plants (the Garden of Eden) and are pictured exercising authority over the animals (naming).

Verse 5 confirms this understanding of the passage. It cites two reasons for the lack of plant life: because God had not sent any rain, and because there was still

no person to do the work in the garden. The first deficiency was met by sending up a mist to water the soil (v. 6); the second, by creating a person (v. 7). Having made the point that the existence of people was essential to the well-being of all life on earth, the author then proceeds to describe in detail the creation of all living beings **in the same order they are given in Genesis 1: plants, animals, and people (2:8ff.)**. Describing the creation of male and female in two different stages is necessary to point out that humans are essential for the proper functioning of the rest of the organic order. Without it, the two snapshots of creation stand in conflict with one another.

The Creation of the Woman

The creation texts assume a male figure original. The evidence for this lies in the words, "because she was taken from a man" (v. 23b). Some interpreters contend that we should see significance in Eve being created after Adam. But nowhere in Scripture is the argument made that the husband is head of the family because Adam was older than Eve, or because any other husband was older than his wife.

The man was created distinct from all other life forms. Genesis 2:7 describes him as personally shaped by God from the dust of the ground and infused with life-giving breath. He stands apart from the animals on both counts.

The woman is a clone with a difference. This unique cloning operation suggests that the male human is incomplete, an incompleteness which cannot be addressed by another male alone. That constitutes a strong statement in a patriarchal society where women were more seen than heard, and where marriage was not known

primarily for companionship. Yet the text emphasizes the social rather than the reproductive function of the woman at this point. Presumably, God could have created multiple persons of the order of Adam by a means other than sexual intercourse. The animal world even now contains creatures (hermaphrodites) which possess both male and female organs.

The subsequent creation of the woman does not point to a lesser role for her (witness the mandate given equally to man and woman in Gen. 1). Nor can the fact that the man was created first be read as grounds for his authority over the animals and the woman, any more than the fact that the animals were created before the woman point to their superiority over her. Nor is the ground, created before all living beings, more important than the animals, plants, and people formed from it. Since woman is different than man, the text indicates that the essential identity (image of God) which characterizes them is clearly recognizable in both. Being male and female does not erase or diminish their essential identity with one another or their kinship with God.

The woman is created because "it is not good for the man to be alone" (2:16). She is God's solution to his incompleteness. She answers to his need by being a "helper who corresponds to him, one who is his counterpart." Strictly speaking, the word "help" used here refers to a person who has the capacity to help. A helper uniformly refers to someone, like God (16 out of 21 occurrences), who is stronger or has more resources than the person in need. It never refers to an assistant, an inferior, or one unrelated to the circumstances or condition for which the help is required. Woman's role as "helper" (by

any interpretation of that word) indicates that she shares the tasks mandated by God.

When the man recognized the woman as his counterpart, he broke out in poetic ecstasy: "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" (2:23). This phrase appears elsewhere in the Old Testament as a reference to people who share a common bloodline or relationship (Judg. 9:2; 2 Sam. 5:1; 19:12,13). It is never used of children (minors), of descendants, or of subordinates. Instead, it is a claim or appeal by the speaker, for his/her own benefit, to equality of right or relationship (except in the case of Laban [Gen. 29:14], where it appears to be a statement of qualification for marriage). This phrase becomes a way of emphasizing the equality of the speaker and the person addressed.

Many interpreters have argued that Adam here names his wife, thereby accepting responsibility for her and exercising kindly authority over her. That interpretation, however, does not reflect a careful reading of the Hebrew. When a person names another, such as a child or a slave, an active verb is used (he named....). When, as in verse 23, the passive is used, the name refers to a nickname or a characterization by others to describe the person being referred to. This verse should, therefore, be translated, "people will call her woman" or "she will be called woman." In other words, the man does not name the woman. The passive (she will be called) is never used in the Scripture to describe the naming process by which a person asserts responsibility for, or authority over another. The act of naming the woman, by which the man asserts his authority over her, occurs only after the fall (3:20), thereby pointing to the naming as one of the consequences of the fall.

The Marital Relationship

The essential oneness of the two (bone of my bone; flesh of my flesh) in a special relationship is affirmed in marriage. The union of these two complementary persons (male and female) is sealed by a covenant, expressed in the words, “forsake” and “cling.” “Forsake” speaks of a severing of one’s primary tie in favor of another. The act is particularly significant when written to people in a culture where the tie to the parental home was strong. The original creation design was that the husband/wife relationship would become the primary tie of human relationships, setting aside the parent/child, child/parent, child/child, or individual/kinship group tie.

Every Israelite would have immediately noticed the unusual phrase, “therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings (is glued) to his wife” (2:24). The woman does not get attached to the man’s family as a possession or as an assistant. The man goes to her. That is particularly significant since Israelite couples lived with the husband’s parents. But this text describes the husband as “leaving” his parental home and “being united” with his wife. The woman is the helper of the man. She now assumes the social role formerly held by his parents.

Genesis 2:4-25 contains no hint of superiority or inferiority of role distinctions, or of the loss of identity. Together, man and woman, both fully in God’s image, are one whole in a way in which the man alone, or two men together, could not be.

GENESIS 3

Temptation and Fall

Throughout the centuries students of the Scriptures have puzzled over why Eve was approached by the serpent. We simply are not told. And since there are no clues, we do well to leave the question unanswered.

What we know is that the tempter stimulated in Eve the longing to be as God in respect to exercising independent moral judgments. The act of ruling requires decisions. "Knowing good and evil" is the quality whereby people make mature moral judgments. The woman wanted to make self-determined decisions. This act of disobedience represents the short-cut to moral maturity. It is a grasping for the Creator's power by the one appointed to represent God.

The text indicates that Eve was deceived (3:1,13) and hints that Adam sinned knowingly (3:6). The difference between "sins of the moment" (Lev. 22:14; Num. 35:9,15; Deut. 4:42; 19:4; Josh. 20:3,5,9) and "sins committed with a high hand" (deliberately, exultantly; cf. Num. 33:3; Deut. 19:11) is important. Those designations appear in Israel's legislative literature to distinguish between one who has committed manslaughter and one who is a murderer. The willful sin merits the death penalty; the unwitting sin does not. That makes Adam the more accountable sinner. That is why he is addressed first, not because he is the representative of the family.

Consequences and Curses

It is important to note the effects of the fall on human relationships. Our present experiences are not representative of God's design for redemptive restoration.

Since redemption represents a restoration to harmony as God initially created humanity, it should lead us back to Genesis 1,2 (not chs. 3ff.) as the norm for understanding the ministry of men and women in the divine economy. Those who are being recreated in the divine image are freed from the power of sin, even though the consequences of sin remain very much apparent in people of faith as well as in the world. But God's work of salvation reverses the effects of the fall through Christ's victory over death and Satan, and by breaking the stranglehold of the powers of this age. One of those powers is the frequent domination of men over women.

The first sin brought with it a tidal wave of consequences. The new self-understanding of Adam and Eve was mixed with shame and fear of self-disclosure, followed by their refusal to acknowledge responsibility and by mutual accusations. But God would have none of it. He addresses each as an independent moral agent. He addresses the man first, however, since his sin was the greater and worthy of greater punishment. God issues the curses in the reverse order to the call of accountability, namely, on the serpent, the woman, and the man. The final stages of punishment—acts of grace as well as judgment—are expulsion from the garden and death (3:22-24; 5:4ff.).

Eve is cursed in the realm of childbearing, Adam in tilling the ground. Why does the text distinguish between the two in terms of the two aspects of the creation mandate of 1:26-30? Did women not work the fields? Did men not have a role in begetting and rearing children? Of course! The reason for this separation and distinction is unclear. It was not present in the original mandate. In the case of Adam, the connection with the soil is linked to his being uniquely formed from the soil. In the

case of Eve, the act of childbearing is connected to her unique contribution to their joint calling. Both share in each aspect of the creation mandate; each experiences the pain most sharply in one dimension.

The meaning of "Eve's desire" has attracted considerable attention because it bears upon the issue of the woman's subordination or equality. If we read *teshuqah* as "sexual desire" (cf. Canticles 7:10), the divine decree on the woman means that her sexual longing for her husband will supersede her fear of the pain of bearing children. But this reading of the text does not clarify how and why the man should/would rule over her. On the other hand, a comparison of these words with God's reproof of Cain (Gen. 4:7) suggests quite another meaning for *teshuqah*. In 4:7 God confronts Cain for being angry because God has not accepted Cain's cavalier attitude in bringing an inferior sacrifice. The confrontation includes the words, "Isn't it the case that if you had done the right thing, you would be smiling, but since you have not done the right thing, sin is crouching at your door."

Its desire (is) for you
but you will/shall rule over it.

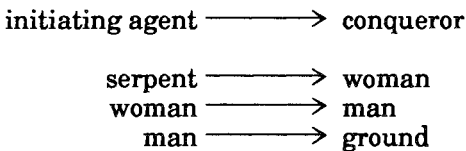
The comparable text with regard to Eve (3:16), says:

Your desire (is) for your husband
but he will/shall rule over you.

The parallel is too perfect to be coincidental. The construction of the two sentences is identical. The only difference between them is in the referent of the pronouns. Genesis 4:7 indicates that an acceptable translation of *teshuqah* is "desire to rule or to dominate," es-

pecially in view of the fact that the line ends with the concept of ruling. If we accept this translation, Genesis 3:16 introduces us to the battle between the sexes. As a consequence of the fall, women will attempt to dominate their husbands, but the males will forcefully assert their rule (domination) over women.

This latter interpretation also does justice to the parallel to the curses spoken against the serpent and Adam. In each case hostility has sprung to life. In the first instance, the conflict erupts between the serpent and the woman (and her descendants). In the second, it invades the marriage and creates disharmony, with the man becoming dominant. In the third instance, the curse brings the earth into revolt against the man. The task of ruling is made immeasurably more difficult, only to result in a return to the very soil from which the man came. The winner of each round becomes the loser of the next.



A perversion has occurred. In failing to heed God's command, every domain of life has become the scene of major conflict.

The implication is that the domination of the female by the male is a result of the fall. Such domination, it suggests, is the inevitable course of events in a sinful world, but it does not represent God's original intention. Since God's redemptive plan is to reverse the consequences of the fall—to remake us in his image—to continue male domination is to deny the reconciling work of God in the relationship between the sexes.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY

Genesis 1 teaches the equality and complementarity of women and men in their being and their calling. Arguments drawn from Genesis 2—3 for the subordination of women cannot be sustained. While it is true that Eve fell into sin first, why should that restrict the ministry of women? The man's sin was the more severe. If anyone's ministry were to be restricted, it should be his.

Clearly, arguments against the full and equal ministry of women cannot be sustained from Genesis 1—3. Instead, these chapters affirm the complementary character of man and woman and their full equality in the mandate to rule the created order and to procreate and fill the earth with offspring. The issues of power and control were introduced in the fall. The man's domination of the woman over the centuries is the result of fallenness, not the result of being in God's image or in any mandate given to him. The woman's attempts at domination are equally the result of fallenness. At its very least, redemption addresses that perversion, making men and women capable of ministering to one another through the gifts and according to the calling of God.

SUGGESTIONS FOR READING

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