

Male and Female He Created Them in the Image of God

John Piper

Genesis 1:26-28:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after 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 earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."

I want to think with you this morning about three things taught in this text. One is that God created human beings. The second is that God created us in His image. The third is that God created us male and female.

It is possible to believe these three truths and not be a Christian. After all they are all taught right here in the Jewish Scriptures. Therefore a good Scripture-believing Jew would accept these truths. But even though you can believe these three truths and not be a Christian, all of them point to Christianity. They all beg for the completion that comes with the work and Christ. That's what I want to talk about, especially in regard to the third truth - that we are created in God's image as male and female.

1. Let's take the first truth: that human beings have been created by God. I think this begs for an explanation. WHY did He create us? When you make something, you have a reason for making it. But does the world as we know it give an adequate answer to that question? The Old Testament speaks of man bringing the world under His dominion. It speaks of being created to show forth God's glory (Isaiah 43:7). It speaks of the earth being filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord.

But what do we see? We see a world in rebellion against the Creator. We see the Jewish Scriptures coming to an end with the story of creation utterly unfinished and the hope of glory still to come. So just believing that God created human beings the way the Jewish Scriptures teach that He did begs for the rest of the story to be told, namely, Christianity. Only in Christ can the purpose of creation be achieved.

2. Or take the second truth for example: God created us in his image. Surely this must have something to do with why we are here. His purpose in making us must have something wonderful to do with the fact that we are not frogs or lizards or birds or even monkeys. We are human beings in the image of God, we alone and no other animal.

But what a mess we have made of this awesome dignity. Are we like God? Well, yes and no. Yes, we are like God, even sinful and unbelieving there is a likeness. We know this because in Genesis 9:6 God said to Noah, "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image." In other words, even in a world where sin abounds (with the likes of murder) human beings are still in the image of God. They may not be killed like mice and mosquitoes. You forfeit your life if you murder a human being. (See James 3:9)

But are we the image God made us to be? Is not the image marred sometimes almost beyond recognition? Do you feel that you are like God in the way you should be? So here again the belief

that we were created in God's image begs for a completion - in this case a redemption, a transformation, a kind of re-creation. And that is exactly what Christianity brings. "By grace are you saved through faith; and this is not your won doing, it is the gift of God - not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works...Put on the new nature created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 2:8-10; 4:24). God created us in His image, but we have marred it almost beyond recognition and Jesus is the answer. He comes by faith, He forgives, He cleanses, and He begins a reclamation project called sanctification that will end in the glory that God intended for human beings in the first place. Therefore since we know that we were created in the image of God, our sin and corruption begs for an answer. And Jesus is the answer.

3. The third truth in these verses is that God created us male and female. And this too points to Christianity and begs for the completion of Christ. How? In two ways at least. One comes from the mystery of marriage. The other comes from the historical ugliness of male-female relationships in sin.

Take the mystery of marriage. In Genesis 2:24, right after the account of how woman was created, Moses (the writer of Genesis) says, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." Now when the apostle Paul quotes this verse in Ephesians 5:31 he says, "This is a great mystery, and I say it refers to Christ and the church." And, with that as his clue, he unfolds the meaning of marriage: it's a symbol of Christ's love for the church represented in the husband's loving headship toward his wife; and it's a symbol of the church's glad submission to Christ represented in the wife's relation to her husband.

He calls Genesis 2:24 a "mystery" because God did not reveal clearly all His purposes for the marriage of male and female in Genesis. There were hints and pointers in the Old Testament that marriage was like the relation of God and His people. But only when Christ came did the mystery of marriage get spelled out in detail. It is meant to be a portrait of Christ's covenant with His people, His commitment to the church.

Do you see then how God's creating man as male and female and then ordaining marriage as the relationship in which a male leaves mother and father and cleaves to his wife in covenant commitment - how this act of creation and this ordinance of marriage beg for the revelation of Christ and His church. They beg for Christianity as the revelation of the mystery.

This is a very foreign thought to most people, even most Christians, because marriage is a secular institution as well as a Christian one. You find it in all cultures, not just in Christian societies. So we are not prone to think of all the non-Christian marriages that we know as mysterious symbols of Christ's relation to the church. But they are, and our very existence as male and female in marriage cries out for Christ to make Himself known in His relation to the church. Christianity completes our comprehension of the marriage covenant.

Let me paint a picture for you here and give it a twist that you may not have thought of before. Christ is coming again to this earth. Even as you saw Him go, He will come again, the angels said. So imagine that day with me. The heavens are opened and the trumpet sounds and the Son of Man appears on the clouds with power and great glory and with tens of thousands of holy angels shining like the sun. He sends them out to gather His elect from the four winds and raises from the dead those who died in Christ. He gives them new and glorious bodies like His own, and transforms the rest of us in the twinkling of an eye to be fit for glory.

The age-long preparation of the bride of Christ (the church!) is finally complete and He takes her arm, as it were, and leads her to the table. The marriage supper of the Lamb has come. He stands at the head of the table and a great silence falls over the millions of saints. And He says, "This, my beloved, was the meaning of marriage. This is what it all pointed toward. This is why I created you male and female and ordained the covenant of marriage. Henceforth there will be no more marriage and giving in marriage, for the final reality has come and the shadow can pass away." (See Mark 12:25; Luke 20:34-36)

Now recall what we are doing: we are trying to see that the third truth, God created us in His image as male and female, points to Christianity as its completion. And I said it does this in two ways. The first was by the mystery of marriage. The creation of human beings as male and female provides the necessary framework in creation for the ordinance of marriage. You could not have marriage without male and female. And the meaning of marriage is not known in its essence or fulness until we see it as a parable of Christ's relationship to the church.

So creation as male and female points to marriage and marriage points to Christ and the church. And therefore the belief that God created us in His image as male and female is not complete without Christianity - without Christ and His saving work for the church.

Now I said that there was another way that the creation of male and female in God's image points to Christianity as the necessary completion, namely from its distortion in the historical ugliness of male-female relationships. Let me try to explain.

When sin entered the world the effect on our relationship as male and female was devastating. God comes to Adam after he had eaten the forbidden fruit and asks what has happened. Adam says in Genesis 3:12, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree and I ate." In other words it is her fault (or yours for giving her to me!) so if somebody must die for eating the fruit it better be her!

There you have the beginning of all domestic violence, all wife abuse, all rape, all sexual slurs, all the ways of belittling woman whom God created in His own image.

Genesis 3:16 pronounces a curse on fallen man and woman like this: to the woman God says, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." In other words the result of sin and the curse of our age is conflict between the sexes. This verse is not a description of the way things should be. This is a description of the cursed way things are going to be while sin reigns. Dominating men and devious women. This is not the meaning of male and female in God's image. It is the ugliness of sin.

Now how does this ugliness point to Christianity? It points to Christianity because it begs for the healing that Christianity brings to the relationship between men and women. If God created us in His image AS MALE AND FEMALE, that implies equality of personhood, equality of dignity, mutual respect, harmony, complementarity, a unified destiny. But where is all this in the history of the world? It's in the healing that Jesus brings.

There is so much to say here. But let me just mention two things.

3.1 First, Peter says in 1 Peter 3:7, that a Christian husband and wife are "fellow heirs of the grace of life." What does this mean? It means that in Christ men and women recover what was meant by being created male and female in God's image. It means that together as male and female they are to image-forth the glory of God and together as fellow-heirs they are to inherit the glory of God.

Creation as male and female in God's image (when you see it along side sin) begs for the completion of the healing that comes with the transforming work of Christ and the inheritance He purchased for sinners. Christ recovers from sin the reality that male and female are fellow-heirs of the grace of life.

3.2 The other thing to mention about the way Christ turns things around and overcomes the ugliness of our warfare and fulfills the destiny being created male and female in the image of God is found in 1 Corinthians 7. There Paul says something almost unbelievably radical for that day: "To the unmarried and widows I say that it is well for them to remain single as I do. . . the unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord and how to please the Lord...the unmarried woman is anxious about the affairs of the Lord and how to be holy in body and spirit...I say this...not to lay any restraint upon you, but to...secure your undivided devotion to the Lord" (1Corinthians7:8,32-35).

Do you see what this implies? It implies that the healing which Jesus brings to male and female created in God's image is not dependent on marriage. In fact Paul's experience as a single man (and the model of Jesus as a single man) taught him that there is a kind of single-minded devotion to the Lord possible to the single man or woman that is not usually the portion of married saints.

Another way to say it is this: marriage is a temporary institution for this age until the resurrection of the dead. The essence of its meaning and purpose is to represent Christ's relation to the church. But when the reality comes, the representation as we know it will be laid aside. And there will be neither marriage nor giving in marriage in the age to come. And those who have been single and devoted to the Lord, will sit down at the marriage supper of the Lamb as full fellow-heirs of the grace of life. And according to their devotion to the Lord and their sacrifices they will be rewarded with affections and relationships and joys beyond all imagination.

So let me sum up what we have seen.

1) God created human beings. And as the Old Testament closes, this awesome fact demands the rest of the story, Christianity, to make sense out of what God was up to. His purposes in creation are incomplete without the work of Christ.

2) God created us IN HIS IMAGE. But we have marred the image so badly it is scarcely recognizable. Therefore this truth begs for the completion of Christianity because what Jesus does is reclaim what has been lost. It is called a "new creation in Christ." The image is restored in righteousness and holiness.

3) God created us in His image AS MALE AND FEMALE. And this too begs for completion in the truth of Christianity. No one can fully grasp what it means to be male and female in marriage until they see that marriage is meant to portray Christ and the church. And no one can know the true destiny of being created male and female in God's image until they know that male and female are fellow heirs of the grace of life. And finally no one can fully understand the meaning of singleness as male and female in God's image until they learn from Christ that in the age to come there will be no marriage, and therefore the glorious destiny of being male and female in God's image is not dependent on marriage, but on devotion to the Lord.

Therefore dwell on these truths: God created you; He created you in His image; and He created you male or female that you might be utterly and radically and uniquely devoted to the Lord.