

All the royalties from this book have been irrevocably assigned to Langham Literature (formerly the Evangelical Literature Trust).

Langham Literature is a programme of the Langham Partnership International (LPI), founded by John Stott. Chris Wright is the International Director.

Langham Literature distributes evangelical books to pastors, theological students and seminary libraries in the Majority World, and fosters the writing and publishing of Christian literature in many regional languages.

For further information on Langham Literature, and the other programmes of LPI, visit the website at www.langhampartnership.org.

In the USA, the national member of the Langham Partnership International is John Stott Ministries. Visit JSM at www.johnstott.org.

issues FACING CHRISTIANS TODAY

4th EDITION

JOHN STOTT

FULLY REVISED and UPDATED by ROY MCCLOUGHRY,
with a NEW CHAPTER by JOHN WYATT

 ZONDERVAN®

ZONDERVAN.com/
AUTHORTRACKER
follow your favorite authors

Equality is based on creation

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created man
in his own image,
in the image of God
he created him;
male and female
he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

GENESIS 1:26–28

If we put together the divine resolve ("Let us make man . . . and let them rule . . ."), the divine creation ("So God created . . .") and the divine blessing ("Be fruitful . . . fill the earth and subdue it . . ."), we see that the emphasis seems to be on three fundamental truths about human beings, namely that God made (and makes) them in his own image, that he made (and makes) them male and female, giving them the joyful task of reproducing and that he gave (and gives) them dominion over the earth and its creatures. Thus from the beginning humanity was "male and female", and men and women were equal beneficiaries both of the divine image and of the earthly rule. There is no suggestion in the text that either sex is more like God than the other, or that either sex is more responsible for the earth than the other. No. Their resemblance to God and their stewardship of his earth (which must not be confused, although they are closely related) were from the beginning shared equally, since both sexes were equally created by God and like God.

Moreover, the threefold affirmation of God's creation in verse 27 is not just poetic parallelism. There is surely a deliberate emphasis here, which we are intended to grasp. Twice it is asserted that God created man in his own image, and the third time the reference to the divine image is replaced by the words "male and female". We must be careful not to speculate beyond what the text warrants. Yet, if both sexes bear the image of God (as is forcefully asserted), then this seems to include not only our humanity (authentic humanness

reflecting divinity), but our plurality (our relationships of love reflecting those which unite the persons of the Trinity) and even, at least in the broadest sense, our sexuality. Is it too much to say that since God, when he made humanity in his own image, made them male and female, there must be within the being of God himself something which corresponds to the "feminine" as well as the "masculine" in humankind?

So we should not, in the name of eradicating male bias in Scripture, create an androgynous language to refer to God. What we should do is give full weight to those passages of Scripture which speak of God in feminine – and especially maternal – terms, for these texts help to illumine the nature and quality of his "fatherhood". For example, according to the Song of Moses, Yahweh was not only "the Rock who fathered you" but also "the God who gave you birth". This is a remarkable statement that he was simultaneously Israel's Father and Mother. In consequence, Israel could be sure of God's preserving faithfulness – for though a human mother might "forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne", yet, Yahweh promised, "I will not forget you!" Instead, he would unfailingly love and console his people: "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you." Moreover, if Yahweh in these texts revealed himself as the mother of his people Israel, the individual Israelite felt at liberty to enter into this relationship. The psalmist dared even to liken his quiet confidence in God to the humble trustfulness of a breast-fed child. Then Jesus himself on occasion used feminine imagery, likening God to a woman who had lost a coin, as well as to a father who had lost a son, and likening himself in his anguish over impenitent Jerusalem to a hen wanting to gather her chicks under her wings (Deuteronomy 32:18; cf. Isaiah 42:14; Isaiah 49:15; 66:13; Psalm 131:1ff.; Luke 15:8ff.; Matthew 23:37).

So then, returning to the creation story, it is clear that from the first chapter of the Bible onwards, the fundamental equality of the sexes is affirmed. Whatever is essentially human in both male and female reflects the divine image which we equally bear. And we are equally called to rule the earth, to cooperate with the Creator in the development of its resources for the common good.

Equality is distorted by the fall

This primeval sexual equality was, however, distorted by the fall. Part of God's judgement on our disobedient progenitors was his word to the woman: "Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you." Thus the sexes

would experience a measure of alienation from one another. In place of the equality of the one with the other, and of the complementarity of the one to the other (which we have yet to consider), there would come the rule of the one over the other. The domination of woman by man is due to the fall, not to the creation.

Moreover, men have misused this judgement of God as an excuse to maltreat and subjugate women in ways God never intended. Examples could be given from many cultures and historical periods. I will give four. Firstly, from Gandhi's autobiography: "A Hindu husband regards himself as lord and master of his wife, who must ever dance attendance upon him."¹⁰ Next, consider Surah 4 of the Koran, entitled "Women": "Men have authority over women because Allah has made the one superior to the other . . . As for those from whom you fear disobedience, admonish them and send them to beds apart and beat them. . ."¹¹ My third example comes from the Eskimos. Raymond de Cocola spent twelve years among the "Krangmalit" in the Canadian Arctic as a Roman Catholic missionary and got to know them well. He was shocked when an Eskimo hunter used a word of a woman which was also applied to a she-wolf or a bitch. "Trained to do all manner of mean tasks," he reflected, "the Eskimo woman is used to enduring the weaknesses and appetites of men. But I still could not get used to what appeared to be a master-and-slave relationship between the hunter and his wife."¹² As my fourth example I choose pornography, a major symbol of Western decadence, in which women are made the objects of male abuse and violence.

These are examples of the exploitation of women. In the Old Testament the husband was certainly the patriarch and *ba'al* (lord or ruler) of his clan. Yet his womenfolk were not despised or ill-treated. They were regarded as an integral part of the covenant community, so that "men, women and children" were together assembled to listen to the public reading of the Torah and to share in the worship (e.g., Deuteronomy 31:12). Marriage was held in high honour, modelled on Yahweh's covenant love to Israel, the beauty of sexual love was celebrated (as in the Song of Songs), the capabilities of a good wife were praised (e.g., Proverbs 31), godly and enterprising women like Hannah, Abigail, Naomi, Ruth and Esther were held up for admiration, and it was constantly emphasized that widows must be cared for.

Yet the prophets looked forward to the days of the new covenant in which the original equality of the sexes would be reaffirmed. For God would pour out

his Spirit on all flesh, including sons and daughters, menservants and maid-servants. There would be no disqualification on account of sex.

Equality is affirmed by Jesus

When Jesus came, he was born of a woman (Galatians 4:4). Although Protestants are anxious to avoid the exaggerated veneration of the Virgin Mary accorded to her in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, we should also avoid the opposite extreme of failing to honour her. If the angel Gabriel addressed her as "highly favoured", and if her cousin Elizabeth called her "blessed . . . among women", we should not be shy to think and speak of her in the same terms, because of the greatness of her Son (Luke 1:28, 42).

It was not only his birth of a woman, however, which restored to women that measure of dignity lost by the fall, but also his attitude to them. In addition to his apostles, who were all men, Jesus was accompanied on his travels by a group of women, whom he had healed and who then provided for him out of their means. Next, Jesus had a theological discussion with someone at Jacob's Well despite the fact that she was a woman, a Samaritan and a sinner, which gave him three reasons to ignore her. It was similar with the woman who had been caught in the act of adultery; he was gentle with her and refused to condemn her. Then he allowed a prostitute to come behind him as he reclined at table, to wet his feet with her tears, wipe them with her hair and cover them with kisses. He accepted her love, which he interpreted as gratitude for her forgiveness. In doing so, he risked his reputation and ignored the silent indignation of his host. He was probably the first man to treat this woman with respect; previously men had only used her (Luke 8:1ff.; Mark 15:41; John 8:1ff.; Luke 7:36ff.).

Here were three occasions on which he received a sinful woman in public. A Jewish male was forbidden to talk to a woman on the street, even if she were his wife, daughter or sister. It was also regarded as impious to teach a woman the law; it would be better for the words of the law to be burned, said the Talmud, than that they should be entrusted to a woman. But Jesus broke these rules of tradition and convention. When Mary of Bethany sat at his feet listening to his teaching, he commended her as doing the one thing that was needed, and he honoured another Mary as the very first witness of the resurrection.¹³ All this was unprecedented. Without any fuss or publicity, Jesus terminated the curse of the fall, reinvested woman with her partially lost nobility and reclaimed for his new kingdom community the original creation blessing of sexual equality.