The Bible and gender-inclusive language

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In response to my comments in a chapel talk, one person—we will call her Mary Smith—states several arguments in favor of gender-inclusive language as "a necessary tool to be used by Christians because it reflects the position of women in the creation and in the new covenant with Christ." Respecting her as my equal in creation as bearing the image of God (Genesis 3:26-27); in our inclusion in the fall of Adam, in which we both became sinners (Romans 5:12-14); and in our redemption through Christ our living Head (Galatians 3:28), I offer the following responses.

Equality of Male and Female

The heart of her argument is that ". . . humans are created equal in God's sight. . . . Adam was [Eve's] source but she was created to be his partner, his equal." With some qualifications that I think Miss Smith will affirm, I agree. Male and female equally bear the image of God: ". . . God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them" (Genesis 1:27, NAS).

But does this equality in the image of God imply an absolute and unbounded equality, such that male and female are simply interchangeable? Is a woman a man's equal as a potential spouse for a woman, or a man a woman's equal as a potential spouse for a man? If not, then some very significant differences in roles are compatible with equality in essence.

Scripture tells us that one of the significant differences in roles is that God made men to lead, provide for, and protect women—particularly their wives—in a humble and servant-like (i.e., Christlike) manner. This cannot be rejected simply by an appeal to our essential equality, for essential equality permits significant differences in roles. So far is essential equality from ruling out authority and submission that Scripture tells us that Jesus Christ, the Creator of heaven and earth, the King of kings and Lord of lords, submitted willingly to Joseph and Mary, His essential inferiors (Luke 2:51), and that He submits willingly to God the Father, His essential equal (1 Corinthians 15:28).

Male Authority Rooted in Creation or Fall?

Supplemental to her point that Adam and Eve were created equal is her claim that "It was the result of [i.e., the curse pursuant to] the fall which placed husbands to rule over their wives" (brackets added). She provides no Biblical reference to support this claim, but perhaps she has in mind the text most commonly claimed by evangelical feminists to support it, Genesis 3:16b: ". . . your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." This allegedly indicates that Adam's rule over Eve is God's curse on Eve. But this neglects two important facts in Scripture.

First, the creation narrative includes important elements indicating Adam's headship (godly authority, not source—a point we shall discuss later) over Eve before the fall.

(1) ". . . it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve" (1 Timothy 2:13). The Apostle Paul uses the temporal order of creation as one ground of his argument against a woman's teaching or exercising authority over a man in church (1 Timothy 2:12), indicating—under the guidance of the Holy Spirit—that the order of creation, through whatever hidden premises in Paul's logic, betokens male authority over females in terms of roles in the church. Thus we have it on the authority of Scripture itself that Adam's being created first and Eve later (Genesis 2:7, 18, 22-4) implies that Adam properly had some sort of authority over Eve instilled at creation.

(2) Adam *named* both the animals (Genesis 2:19-20) and the woman (verse 23) whom God brought before him. In Biblical thought, to name something is to exercise authority over it; thus, as the nineteenth-century Hebrew scholars C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch point out, "Adam is to become acquainted with the creatures, to learn their relation to him, and *by giving them names to prove himself their lord*."[1] Similarly, Adam's naming Eve meant his exercising authority over her. (Interestingly, before the fall both the animals and Eve submitted amiably to Adam's authority. Animals' resistance to human authority follows the fall, as John Calvin points out in his commentary on Genesis 1:18-20.[2] Similarly, Eve's resistance to Adam's authority is also rooted in the fall [Genesis 3:16b; cf. verse 17].)

Second, the feminist interpretation of Genesis 3:16b is mistaken. The Hebrew translated "your desire shall be for your husband" indicates a desire to dominate, as seen in the use of the same phrase in Genesis 4:7, where God tells Cain that sin's "desire is for you, but you must master it." God's words to Eve are descriptive, not prescriptive; He tells her not what her desire *ought* to be but what it *will* be, and when He adds, "and he shall rule over you," He tells her not what Adam's response *ought* to be but what it *will* be. Eve *will* try to dominate Adam, but Adam *will* dominate her. But it is not Adam's proper authority over Eve that is part of the curse on Eve, it is Adam's perversion of that authority. The verb translated "rule" here is *mashal*, not *radah*, which we have in God's instructions to Adam and Eve to rule over the earth and its creatures (Genesis 1:28). As Keil and Delitzsch explain it,

> The woman had . . . broken through her divinely appointed subordination to the man; she had not only emancipated herself from the man to listen to the serpent, but had led the man into sin. For that, she was punished with a *desire* bordering upon disease ([*teshuwqah*], to have a violent craving for a thing), and with *subjection* to the man. . . . Created for the man, the woman was made subordinate to him from the very first; but the supremacy of the man was not intended to become a despotic rule, crushing the woman into a slave, which has been the rule in ancient and modern Heathenism, and even in Mahometanism also,—a rule which was first softened by the sin-destroying grace of the Gospel, and

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[1] C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols., Volume 1, *The Pentateuch*, 3 vols. in 1, trans. James Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976 rpt.), 1:88.

[2] John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, Called Genesis*, 2 vols. in 1, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984 rpt.), 1:131-2.

changed into a form more in harmony with the original relation, viz. that of a rule on the one hand, and subordination on the other, which have their roots in mutual esteem and love.[3]

Eve's first sin was not eating the forbidden fruit but stepping out from under Adam's authority to deal with the serpent herself and then to tempt Adam to sin by offering him the fruit. God's words of judgment bring her face to face with her insubordination and assure her that she will not prosper in it.

In short, male *tyranny* over females stems from the fall and the curse, but the godly and loving *authority* of husbands over wives and of male leaders in the church stems from creation and is restored in redemption.

Does Male Headship Indicate Authority?

Miss Smith tells us that only in the Old Testament are husbands "placed in the position of 'masters,' 'owners,' and 'lords' over their wives." In the New Testament, in contrast, the Greek word for "head" may mean either "master" or "source," and—although she does not explicitly say this, we must assume it for her argument to be complete—when used to denote the husband's relation to the wife, it means "source."

First, neither Testament teaches that husbands ought to be *owners* of their wives. The New Testament, however, cites approvingly the fact that "Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord" as exemplary for Christian wives (1 Peter 3:6), whom it exhorts, "be submissive to your own husbands. . . . For in this way in former times the holy women also, who hoped in God, used to adorn themselves [with "chaste and respectful behavior"], being submissive to their own husbands" (1 Peter 3:1, 5).

Second, there is good reason to reject the notion that *kephalē* ("head") ever was used as a metaphor for "source" in Greek literature, and compelling reason against such a sense in the New Testament. In the last decade there has been significant debate over this point in scholarly literature, and neither space permits nor my own abilities and resources enable me to resolve all of that debate here. Instead, I refer readers to Wayne Grudem's roughly 31,000-word study of every extant ancient Greek usage of *kephalē* (there are 2,336) in Appendix 1 of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*,[4] in which I am persuaded that Grudem convincingly answers all of the arguments in favor of "source" and against "authority." To summarize, even according to Grudem's critics who favor the metaphorical meaning "source" for *kephalē*, there are over forty instances in ancient Greek literature, including sixteen in the Septuagint (which is especially important in shaping linguistic usage in the New Testament), in which the context shows that *kephalē* is used metaphorically for "authority" or "ruler," but "there are only one possible example in the fifth century *B.C.* . . ., two possible (but ambiguous) examples

in Philo, no examples in the Septuagint, and no clear examples applied to persons before or during the time of the New Testament" in which even these critics claim the context shows that *kephalē* is used metaphorically for "source"—and in all of these instances there are good grounds to argue that the word means "extreme end, terminus," not "source." In light of this, it is no wonder that not one of the lexicons of New Testament Greek offers "source" as a metaphorical meaning for *kephalē* in reference to human beings, but all offer "authority."

Third, the immediate context in which Paul calls the husband the head of the wife (Ephesians 5:23) shows that the sense there is "authority," and nothing in it hints at "source": "Wives, [be subject (The verb is imported from the previous verse.)] to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the Church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives [ought to be] to their husbands in everything" (Ephesians 5:22-24). (Similarly, the explicit mention of authority (*exousía*) in 1 Corinthians 11:10 indicates that the metaphorical sense of *head* in 1 Corinthians 11:3-10, where Paul writes that "Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ" [verse 3] is also "authority," not "source.")

Does Equality in Redemption Imply Equality in All Things?

Miss Smith argues, "In the new covenant, the hierarchical position of men over women no longer exists, for as Galatians 3:28 states: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (NIV). One does not represent the other."

Again, does Miss Smith wish to argue that this verse eliminates all legitimate differences in roles between men and women? Including the fact that a woman is a proper spouse for a man but not for a woman, and a man for a woman but not for a man? If not, then we must learn what differences it *does and does not* eliminate from the immediate and larger context. It will not do simply to *assert* that this verse eliminates differences in authority and submission.

The context of Galatians 3:28 concerns salvation, union with Christ. This, Paul concludes, comes about in the same way for everyone—Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female—namely, by faith (Galatians 3:23-27). Thus one may continue to recognize the differences in roles taught, for instance, in Ephesians 5:22-33 without denying the truth of Galatians 3:28.

Does the Gender-Neutral Use of *Anthrōpos* Support the Demand for Gender-Inclusive Language?

"In the Greek," Miss Smith argues, "*anthropos* refers to both male and female, and should be translated as 'person.' Perhaps a word like 'people' or 'humanity' would more accurately communicate the meaning of those passages."

First, only sometimes does *anthrōpos* (*anthrōpoi* in the plural) refer to both male and female; sometimes it refers only to males. The same is true of the English *man* (or *men*) and of equivalent terms in other languages.

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[3] Keil and Delitzsch, *Pentateuch*, 1:103.

[4] John Piper and Wayne Grudem, edd., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to 'Biblical Feminism'* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1992).

Might *people* or *humanity* be a better translation of the generic *anthrōpos*? Perhaps. Unless, of course, there is something significant about the fact that while *anthrōpos* may designate either people in general, inclusive of females, or male human beings specifically (e.g., Matthew 11:8; Luke 7:25, etc.),[5] it would never designate women specifically, and one would never have used *gunē* ("woman") to designate people in general, inclusive of males. It is my contention that this apparently universal phenomenon in human language reflects a truth rooted in creation, fall, and redemption: that because the *male* First Adam preceded the female in creation and represented the whole human race (male and female) in the fall, and because the *male* Last Adam represented all His chosen people (male and female) in His death, resurrection, and ascension, male headship, in the sense of both authority and representation, is part of the warp and woof of the reality God intended in creation and is restoring through redemption.

Writers of the Greek New Testament did, after all, have an available option to using *anthrōpos* to denote people in general: they could (and sometimes did) use *polloí*.[6] Might we lose something significant in translation by opting for *people* instead of *men* (generic) as the translation for *anthrōpoi* where the New Testament uses that instead of *polloí*?

Just What Is Gender-Inclusive Language?

Indeed, Miss Smith accepts the generic *anthrōpos*, despite its masculine grammatical gender, as acceptably gender inclusive and a model for our own usage. But then why reject the generic use of *man* and masculine pronouns in English? If it is okay for Jesus to have said, "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men [*anthrōpōn*, genitive plural] to be noticed by them [*autois*, masculine relative pronoun]" (Matthew 6:1), what is wrong with—well, translating this as the NAS does, and speaking or writing so ourselves?

In reality, *man* and *men* and *he*, *him*, and *his* simply *are* gender-inclusive and have been so for hundreds of years, just as *anthrōpos* and *anthrōpoi* and *autos*, *autou*, *autō*, and *auton* (and their plural counterparts) were gender-inclusive language two thousand years ago (and still are) in Greek. If Miss Smith accepts the gender neutrality of these Greek words, why not of their English counterparts, which have a long history of precisely gender-neutral usage, as a quick check in any good dictionary reveals? For example, the definitions of *man* in *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, unabridged 2d ed., include: "1. a human being; a person, whether male or female. 2. the human race; mankind: used without *the* or *a*," and the definitions of *he* include "2. the person indefinitely; the one; anyone." Indeed, *he* formerly was used not only generically but also to denote a

woman specifically, as when the author of the Early English work *Joseph of Arimathie* wrote of Mary, "*He* chaungede cher & seide hou scholde I gon with childe / Without felauschupe of mon?"[7] This history helps to explain why *he* has properly been used generically, while *she* (which derives from another stem and specifies a female) has not.

Thus since *man* and *men*, like *anthrōpos* and *anthrōpoi*, refer to both male and female, they are just as good translations of *anthrōpos* and *anthrōpoi*—and just as gender inclusive—as *person* or *people*. Indeed, John Calvin, a Frenchman, could write in Latin what we find translated into English as "Why, even children know that women are included under the term 'men'!" (*Institutes* II.xiii.3.)

Who Bears the Burden of Proof?

Miss Smith thinks those who oppose the movement for gender-inclusive language wish to restrict how people speak or write. "But even if our English Bibles use 'man' and 'he' to refer to both sexes [as the Greek and Hebrew do, she might have added], does that mean that English-speaking Christians are required to do the same?" That is not the point at debate.

Opposing the *requirement* of gender-inclusive language does not mean *forbidding* people to use it (although it appears that Miss Smith would be as quick as I to scorn such real linguistic monstrosities as *s/he*, *she/he*, and plural pronouns with singular antecedents). Those who do not wish to use it ought not to be forced, particularly because for some it is a matter of conscientious scruple to maintain, in form as well as in substance, the Biblical truth of male headship. Those who wish may use it, although they should be aware that doing so may mean conceding in form a truth that they wish to maintain in substance—if indeed they think it a truth.

Morality does not change with time, place, language. If it is morally wrong not to use gender-inclusive language today, then it was morally wrong for the Old and New Testaments to be written as they were. But if it was morally permissible for the Old and New Testaments to be written as they were, then it is not morally imperative to use gender-inclusive language today.

Should We Compose Only Parallel, Non-Rhyming Poetry?

In objecting to my appeal to Scripture's example to justify generic masculine language, Miss Smith writes, ". . . should Christians compose only poetry in parallel structure because Hebrew poetry follows the rules of parallelism? If we follow Beisner's argument, it is inevitable that rules will be made not only in relation to what God's law says, but also according to the grammar and sentence structure that is used."

But this is, again, to forget that the argument is not over whether gender-inclusive language is permissible (it is, although—as I have suggested—it is debatable whether its wisdom is consistent

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[5]Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 68.

[6]Bauer, *Lexicon*, 688.

[7]Cited in *The Century Dictionary: An Encyclopedic Lexicon of the English Language*, 6 volumes, edited by William Dwight Whitney (New York: The Century Company, 1889), 3:2747.

with maintaining male headship) but over whether the use of generic masculine terms like *man* and *he* to refer to males and females alike is somehow wrong. My argument is that since Scripture does the latter, and the inspiration of Scripture involved the very words themselves (*plenary verbal inspiration*) and even whether those words were singular or plural (see, e.g., Galatians 3:16), to hold it wrong to do so is to hold Scripture and its Author wrong.

Furthermore, if Scripture does teach male headship and covenantal representation, and if this truth is reflected in the generic masculine, as I believe it is, then Miss Smith has drawn a false analogy. Since Hebrew poetic parallelism does not in itself reflect any truth of Scripture, but the generic masculine does, the two are not analogous. The one is mere form; the other is form rooted in substance.

What About Offensive Speech?

". . . Christians," Miss Smith writes, "should be most careful that their speech does not offend anyone, primarily God." This she offers as one reason to adopt gender-inclusive language.

Of course we should never offend God, but presumably the God who breathed out generic masculine terms in Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16) is not offended by our following His example.

But what of offense to others? Must we, in fact, *never* offend *anyone* with our speech? Surely Miss Smith does not mean to go so far. After all, that would mean we could never tell a murderer that murder was wrong, a liar that lying was wrong, an adulterer that adultery was wrong, or a thief that theft was wrong. The real standard is that we should not *needlessly* offend anyone with our speech.

But I suggest that those who are offended by generic masculine language, which people of many tongues for thousands of years have recognized as gender inclusive, are offended not because the language is not gender inclusive (it is) but because they reject the substantive notion of male covenantal representation and authority and they sense, however uncomfortably, that precisely this truth underlies generic masculine language. Where that is so, there seems no good reason to try to avoid in form an offense that must be made in substance.

The Path of Prudence

There are, as Miss Smith points out, ways to avoid generic masculines without using linguistic monstrosities. We may use plurals, although this can get dreary after a while. Or we may repeat nouns, as when Miss Smith wrote, ". . . once *the writer* becomes adept at gender inclusive language, biased writing becomes a monstrosity because it does not always accurately communicate *the writer's* thoughts"—although this, too, can get tiring. Avoiding cumbersome repetition is the purpose of pronouns. Or we may alternate between masculine and feminine pronouns, using both generically—although this requires asking most readers, accustomed to generic masculines but not to "generic feminines," to adjust consciously to our form and thus makes communication more cumbersome and less sure.

All of this is not to say that we who oppose the demand for "gender-inclusive language"—and I put the term in quotes here to contrast the language feminists demand from the gender-inclusive masculine—should at every opportunity wave our generic masculines in the faces of those who take offense at them. We need not *always* press every point of truth; sometimes pressing one may hinder communicating another, as happened when I delivered a paper at the Christianity Today Institute on Population and Global Stewardship in April 1994. One evaluation utterly ignored my paper's substance and condemned it solely because I used generic masculine pronouns.

There are times when—for the sake of the weaker brother or sister who is personally offended at what Scripture permits, like one who does not eat meat or who insists on observing particular days as ceremonially holy—it might be the part of prudence to give up our liberty to use generic masculines in order to remove an obstacle to communication. At those times, we should follow the example of the Apostle Paul, who wrote:

> For though I am free from all, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, though not being myself under the Law, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may be all means save some. [1 Corinthians 9:19-22]

Yet I hesitate to apply this passage too readily to gender-inclusive language, which is not quite analogous to the cases Paul addresses. There was nothing wrong with being a Jew or a Gentile, under the Law or without law, strong or weak. But there is something wrong with rejecting Biblical role differences of men and women, and to the extent that adopting gender-inclusive language implies approval of that rejection, it is imprudent to adopt it. Paul's becoming all things to all men did not, after all, entail his refusing to confront thievery merely because doing so might offend some thieves (Ephesians 4:28), let alone the whole catalogue of sins mentioned in Romans 1:26-32.

Those who *insist* on gender-inclusive language other than the historically gender-inclusive *man* and *men* and *he*, *his*, and *him* (1) falsely consider the latter gender-discriminatory, (2) insist on their version of gender-inclusive language to the possible detriment of an important Biblical truth, (3) imply that the God-breathed Scriptures themselves are morally flawed to the extent that they fail to conform to this new moral standard. Those who oppose the requirement of this version of gender-inclusive language, in contrast, (1) rightly consider generic masculines gender inclusive, as demonstrated by millennia of usage in many languages and cultures, (2) uphold an important Biblical truth about male and female roles, and (3) uphold Scripture as morally blameless not only in what it teaches but also in how it teaches it.