SOME REFLECTIONS ON GALATIANS 3:28, SEXUAL ROLES, AND BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS

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> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).

In the Greco-Roman world that formed the environment of the Galatian churches to which Paul wrote, there was an increasing degree of confusion about the role identities of men and women. The economic rights of women in cases of divorce and inheritance were improving, and in Greece even professional athletics were opened to women in the first century B.C.[1] The confusing variety of opinion in the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament concerning the roles of men and women ran the entire gamut from the misogyny of Philo, the Hellenistic Jew, who felt that the husband's relationship to his wife should be like that of a master to his slave, to the full-fledged egalitarianism in theory and practice of the Epicureans, in whose philosophical sect women were accepted as equals in every respect.[2]

In our own contemporary situation we are likewise faced with increasing confusion about our role identities as men and women. For the past two centuries the process of industrialization and urbanization has moved the populations of the West from the farms, with their relatively clear and traditional role identities, into the increasingly bureaucratized cities, where traditional identities have become eroded. The recent impact of the feminist movement, the pressure for the equal rights amendment, and the gay liberation movement have called into question traditional understandings of sexual roles as well as their Biblical and theological foundations. There is much uncertainty, both inside and outside the Church, about what it means to be a man or a woman in our contemporary situation. The proper roles of men and women in marriage and family, in the Church, and in the wider society are the subject of an ongoing debate that has touched us all.

Galatians 3:28 has been a pivotal New Testament text in much of the discussion of changing role identities. It is the purpose of this essay to critically examine some of the presuppositions involved in a number of recent interpretations of this text in an attempt to shed some light on

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[1]W. A. Meeks, "The Image of Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity," in *History of Religions* 13/3 (1974), p. 168.

[2]*Ibid.*, pp. 122-177.

certain aspects of both sexual role relationships and Biblical hermeneutics.[3]

The first assumption has to do with the nature of *unity* and *equality*. The apostle says that the Galatians are "all one in Christ Jesus." It is a fairly common assumption in current interpretation that unity and equality in Christ, *coram Deo,* if consistently understood, implies both functional interchangeability in all social groups, including the Church, and strictly egalitarian, non-hierarchical patterns of authority.[4] It is my personal conviction that our contemporary understanding of equality derives more from the ideals of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century ("Liberty, Equality, Fraternity") than it does from Scripture.[5] The temptation is enormous to read contemporary views about the nature of equality back into the Bible, especially on such an emotion-laden issue as the nature of authority patterns in marriage and in the Church. The liberal theology of the nineteenth century was frequently guilty of tendential and ideological exegesis, reading its own social ideals into its picture of the historical Jesus.

First of all, it is quite clear that the immediate context of Galatians 3:28 is the nature of justification or, more specifically, the conditions of full inclusion in the Abrahamic covenant with its attendant blessings.[6] Paul was vehement in his insistence that the Galatians accept no other gospel, that they not submit to the demands of the Judaizing party that they be circumcised and submit to the law in order to become first-class members in the Abrahamic covenant.[7] Reception of the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant depended solely on faith in Jesus Christ, not on any human work whatever. Clearly, Paul's intention in this passage is to establish a theological point, a point of soteriology, not to expound the proper social relationships of men and women in the Church. This he does notably in Colossians 3, Ephesians 5, and other passages. Now it has been pointed out[8] that Paul's statement in Galatians 3:28 does have social implications, and that Paul indeed acted out these implications in

[3]Many examples could be cited, but I have in mind particularly K. Stendahl, *The Bible and the Role of Women: A Case Study in Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966). Stendahl's hermeneutic has been influential in two works widely read in evangelical circles: L. Scanzoni and N. Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1974), and P. K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

[4]Cf. P. K. Jewett, *op. cit.,* pp. 142-149; L. Scanzoni and N. Hardesty, *op. cit.,* pp. 106-111, 204 f.

[5]Cf. H. C. Cavallin, "Demythologising the Liberal Illusion," in *Churchman* 83 (1969), pp. 263-276.

[6]Cf. Gal. 3:7 ("... it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham"); 3:14 ("that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles..."); 3:29 ("And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise").

[7]Cf. Gal. 3:2, 10; 4:21; 5:2 f.

[8]Cf. K. Stendahl, *op. cit.,* pp. 32-35; P. K. Jewett, *op. cit.,* p. 144; L. Scanzoni and N. Hardesty, *op. cit.,* pp. 204 f.

the matter of Peter's table fellowship with the Gentiles.[9] Here it is all too easy to assume a false equivalency between the relationships of Jew/Greek, slave/free, and male/female. The relationships between various ethnic, political, and economic groups are not so deeply constitutive of human personality as is the distinction between male and female. Relations between the sexes reflect fundamental creational differences of physiology and temperament.[10] The misuse of hierarchical authority patterns in some social spheres does not entail their negation in *all* social spheres. The New Testament clearly indicates otherwise.[11]

It should be observed, as we examine this concept of equality, that in the New Testament documents it is not assumed that equality in the sight of God implies either role interchangeability among all Christians or egalitarian authority patterns. And as we have already noted, the religious equality of Christian husbands and wives does not, in the apostolic teaching, involve egalitarian and interchangeable authority patterns.[12]

In these discussions of role relationships in Christian marriage, the question frequently arises as to whether the apostolic teaching really reflects the original creation order (presumably egalitarian) or merely the traditional patterns of first-century Greco-Roman culture. It might be observed that the rule of the husband over the wife in Genesis 3:16b is part of the curse inflicted on the woman, a curse presumably overcome in the redemptive economy. Now Christ indeed redeems the Church from the curse of sin. But to draw completely egalitarian conclusions from this line of reasoning requires two further assumptions. The first is that in the redemptive economy the effects of

[9]Gal. 2:11-21. The epistle to Philemon can also be cited as evidence of the transformative power of Christianity on the matter of slavery.

[10] On this controverted matter of innate differences, cf. C. Ormsted and D. Taylor, *Gender Differences: Their Ontogeny and Significance* (London: Churchill Livingstone, 1972), and C. Hutt, *Males and Females* (London: Penguin, 1972), both cited by A. Stassinopoulos, *The Female Woman* (New York: Dell, 1973). See also S. Goldberg, *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* (New York: Morrow, 1973). Physiological research has established innate hormonal and cognitive differences between the sexes: Males are naturally more aggressive—men tend to excel in the manipulation of abstract concepts—while women excel in nurturant roles and in interpersonal sensitivity.

[11]On the relationship of husbands and wives, cf. Col. 3:18 f.; Eph. 5:21-33; Tit. 2:4 f.; 1 Pet. 3:1-7. Notice that in the passages in Col. and Eph. it is made explicit that the rationale for submission is *Christological* rather than merely cultural. The behavior functions "in the Lord" (Col. 3:18) or "as to the Lord" (Eph. 5:22).

[12]See the passages cited in the previous footnote. It is sometimes suggested that Eph. 5:21 relativizes the hierarchical pattern: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." Certainly mutuality is to characterize the Christian relationships of 5:22-6:9. In the apostle's thought this mutuality complements and transforms, rather than eliminates, the asymmetrical authority patterns that are maintained. If one insists that the passage really teaches an egalitarian pattern for Christian marriage, then the analogy husband/wife//Christ/Church would also negate the authority of Christ over the Church. Surely this is an unacceptable result.

sin are so completely eliminated that hierarchical authority patterns are no longer needed. The second assumption is that hierarchical authority structures exist only as a consequence of the fall and were not part of the original creation order. Neither assumption is adequately supported by the apostolic teaching.[13]

A further question concerns the relationship of the creation narratives in Genesis 1:26-28 and 2:18-25. One might argue that the Genesis 1 account implies egalitarianism and that the hierarchical conclusions drawn by Paul from Genesis 2 represent merely a traditional rabbinic reading of the text, a reading which in fact is erroneous.[14] Neither of these arguments is very convincing. The first, inferring egalitarianism in marriage from Genesis 1:26-28, is something of an argument from silence because the passage has nothing direct to say about the specifics of the marriage relationship relative to the question of authority, either egalitarian or hierarchical. One must look to Genesis 2:18-25, 3:16, and the New Testament interpretation of these passages before reading egalitarian marriage patterns into 1:26-28. This procedure follows the well-established hermeneutical principle of interpreting the less explicit passages in the light of the more explicit, and the Old Testament in the light of the New. Furthermore, the joint exercise of dominion and joint image-bearing of this passage does not establish egalitarianism with respect to every aspect of the relationship. Such a conclusion would be based on the fallacious premise that equality in *some* respects entails equality in *all* respects. Within the family

[13]In the Corinthian Church Paul seems to have faced a variety of "over-realized" eschatology. Cf. 1 Cor. 4:8: "Already you are filled! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings!" In 1 Cor. 11:2-16 he appeals to the hierarchical creation order as still valid in the redemptive economy when discussing the matter of women praying and prophesying. Apparently some Corinthian women had drawn the conclusion that in the new age visible signs of submission to their husbands were no longer necessary. Paul corrects this inference. For a detailed discussion of this entire passage see J. B. Hurley, "Did Paul Require Veils or the Silence of Women? A Consideration of 1 Cor. 11:2-16 and 1 Cor. 14:33-36," in *Westminster Theological Journal* 35 (1973), pp. 190-220.

Hurley notes that in the apostle's thought the ontological equality of men and women (1 Cor. 11:11 f.) and their mutual dependence are not in conflict with an economic subordination based on the creation order (pp. 212 f.). The "tension" and ambivalence seen at this point may well reflect modern misunderstandings of Biblical insights on the nature of authority relationships rather than unresolved tensions in the apostolic writings.

J. H. Yoder argues in *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) that the Pauline teaching represents a "revolutionary subordination" based on the stance of Jesus himself, not a stoic passivity in the face of the existing order. The Pauline summons to *willing* subordination implies a prior recognition of fundamental unity and dignity in Christ and calls for a degree of mutuality in the relationship which was a genuine novelty. See Yoder, pp. 163-192. Yoder also comments on the tendential hermeneutic of K. Stendahl: "In order to overcome the uncritical woodenness of certain traditional interpretations, Stendahl plays off the Paul he agrees with against the one he disagrees with..., thereby cutting off the possibility that any new light might be received by hearing the apostolic witness at those points where it says something that does not reinforce what we already believe" (p. 176, n. 22). Maybe we should take seriously the possibility that the apostles have insights about the nature of Christian marriage that neither traditionalists nor feminists have fully grasped.

[14]Cf. P. K. Jewett, *op. cit.*, p. 119. Paul refers to Gen. 2 in 1 Cor. 11:7-9 and 1 Tim. 2:13.

relationship both parents and children bear the image, and older children can exercise a measure of dominion over the creation, but this does not establish symmetrical authority relationships between parents and children.

Now concerning Paul's "rabbinic," culturally-influenced exegesis of Genesis 2:18-25, we certainly recognize that revelation is conditioned by the thought forms of the culture in which it was given. This does not mean, however, that Biblical principles that are culturally conditioned (all are) and that may seem strange to twentieth-century people can no longer be authoritative. The Biblical doctrine of the substitutionary atonement is culturally conditioned and reprehensible to many enlightened moderns, but this does not establish its obsolescence and lack of authority.

One finds in a number of contemporary interpreters a tendency to play the Paul of rabbinic Judaism against Paul the enlightened Christian (especially the Paul of Galatians 3:28). There is a tendency to see in Paul's thought "tensions" and "contradictions" that Paul apparently was not aware of himself. The suggestion is that Paul was guilty of a rabbinic eisegesis of Genesis 2:18-25. Might it not rather be the case that modern interpretation is guilty of an eisegesis of Paul, reading into the apostle's views the egalitarian social ideals of the modern age? There are too many precedents for such an occurrence for us not to consider the possibility.

This matter of the cultural conditioning of revelation merits further analysis. As we have previously noted, contemporary interpreters often argue that the apostolic teachings on the roles of men and women are merely reflections of first-century patterns rather than of abiding creational and revelatory norms and are therefore not necessarily binding for our own cultural situation. As has also been previously noted, one must keep in mind that all Biblical interpretation is culturally conditioned as well and that consequently we must always be aware of the temptation to read the fashionable views of the day into the Biblical texts. One can not assume that twentieth-century social patterns are more correct than first-century ones simply by virtue of their modernity. The assumption that what is new is more likely to be true is itself a modern idea, largely produced by modern man's fascination with scientific and technological achievements. In matters of religion and revelation it is more often the opposite. Biblical history gives ample evidence of the decline and deterioration of pristine revelation among the people of God over time. There is no natural process of moral and spiritual progress. By tacitly equating modernity with social enlightenment, one is committing the fallacy of inferring moral from technological progress.

Having argued that modern culture has no presumption of moral authority, the difficult question remains as to how one discerns which elements of the Biblical cultural patterns are normative for the Church today. Certainly no blanket endorsement of every social pattern contained in the Scriptures is being suggested here. Customs described and permitted in the Scriptures—for example, slavery, divorce, and

polygamy—are not *ipso facto* authoritatively taught as creation norms. A distinction between creation norms and permissive rules can be drawn here. This implies that social principles which are grounded in the creation order and explicitly taught in the redemptive economy are normative for the Church in all ages and cultures. This means that marriages which are monogamous, heterosexual, permanent, and patriarchal[15] are the norm for the Church, not merely a matter of cultural convention. Here it is necessary to again reject false analogies between slavery and hierarchical authority patterns in marriage. Marriage is clearly grounded in creation as a fundamental structure; slavery is not. Slavery represents a sinful distortion of creation structures and has no proper claim to abiding validity.

At this point a number of interpreters will allow that Christian marriage is creationally monogamous, heterosexual, and permanent, but will differ on the matter of its patriarchal nature, understanding this as a matter of cultural convention. This position must be prepared to face three difficulties: (a) that the patriarchal principle, to whatever extent culturally conditioned, is explicitly taught by the apostles; (b) that there are appeals to Christological rather than to merely cultural motivations; [16] and (c) that the God of the Scriptures sovereignly and providentially controls all cultural development and individual action, as well as the normative interpretation of cultural patterns in the canonical Scriptures.

On consideration (a) above, one must squarely face the fact that the matter of cultural conditioning is logically subsidiary in matters of Scriptural authority to the question, "Is a given doctrine or social principle explicitly taught by Scripture?"[17] Every conceivable doctrine or principle (and interpretation thereof) is culturally conditioned simply by virtue of its mediation through human agents. The basic question remains: Is this principle taught by the apostles? Resorting to the formula, "only cultural convention," in the matter of explicit apostolic principles is in effect an evasion of apostolic authority. By arguing "only cultural convention" or some such formula in the case of explicit principles, one is in effect saying that the writer of Scripture is mistaken in his teaching.[18] Such a conclusion cannot be consistently harmonized

[15]In the sense of the husband's headship. Loving leadership, not domination, is intended here. "Patriarchal" in a Christian sense implies mutuality, partnership, and self-giving love on the husband's part within the headship order.

[16]Eph. 5:22, 23; Col. 3:18; cf. 1 Pet. 2:13; 3:1.

[17]Here of course it is recognized that some practices explicitly taught in the Old Testament are explicitly rescinded in the New.

[18]Cf. P. K. Jewett, *op. cit.*, p. 119. Jewett feels that Paul's "rabbinic" understanding of the Gen. 2 creation narrative is mistaken. On this matter of explicit teaching, the question of Biblical cosmology may arise. One can distinguish between a culturally conditioned *expression* (e. g., a three-level universe in Php. 2:10) and the *principle* communicated (the universal lordship of Christ). In the case of Christian marriage relationships we have, in the apostles' view, a matter of principle reflecting creational and Christological truths, not merely cultural convention.

with the classical evangelical doctrine of Scripture. On such a reading, the fact that a given teaching is apostolic does not mean, *ipso facto,* that it is binding on the Church. Such a position undermines Biblical authority not only on questions of social practice but on doctrinal matters as well.

With regard to consideration (b) above, the Christological rationale, we note again that the Ephesians 5:23 analogy (husband/wife//Christ/Church) is transcultural in its structure. The reference is not to a particular culture but to the unique covenant relationship of loving mutuality and willing subordination established between Christ and the Church. This unique covenant relationship, not the Church's pagan environment, provides the paradigm for Christian marriage. The New Testament ethic generally does not assume that Christian behavior will merely reflect environmental factors. On the contrary, on the basis of its unique Christological dynamic its mission is to transform both the ethos and the structures of its secular environment.[19]

With respect to consideration (c) above, God's providential control of human history and culture, it would seem that the "only cultural convention" argument overlooks key features of the Biblical teaching concerning the character of God. It is at this point that it becomes evident that the questions of Biblical hermeneutics, authority, and inspiration are integrally related to the doctrine of God. It is the sovereign, omnipotent God, the Almighty Maker of heaven and earth, who stands above and beyond the "hermeneutical question." The "only cultural convention" argument would seem to imply that an autonomous human culture at certain points successfully frustrated God's revelatory purposes so that, in the matter of Christian marriage, Jewish culture and rabbinic exegesis combined to obscure the genuine message. The "real" message became apparent only in the twentieth century.

The foregoing assumptions are more in harmony with a deistic understanding of God's relationship to culture than with the Biblical understanding. The God of Scripture sovereignly directs, through the structures of human freedom, the actions of men and nations. Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, and Cyrus are the instruments of his sovereign will. The Almighty accomplishes all his purposes (Isaiah 46:10), and his word-revelation achieves its intended effects (55:11). The God of the Bible is the Lord of culture, not its victim. The patriarchal structure of Jewish society was not an historical accident but a providentially prepared social paradigm for the Christian Church, grounded in creation and, though distorted by sin, redeemed in Christ and reaffirmed by the apostles.

Some concluding observations are concerned with the relationship of subordination and self-realization. In some modern thought, both inside and outside the Church, subordination to authority and self-realization seem to be understood as contradictory, or at least as in

[19]The argument for New Testament family patterns presented here should not be dismissed as reactionary, obscurantist, sexist, etc. These patterns are understood as essential to a positive, dynamic, and missionary-oriented thrust toward secular culture. It is presupposed here that the distinctive Christian ideology is integrated in distinctive, redemptively based forms of social life.

tension. Self-realization, on such a view, presupposes autonomy and egalitarianism. Subordination is demeaning to one's personhood and stifles the free development of the ego. Subordination, it would seem, is an inappropriate posture for a mature, self-realizing individual.

One finds a very different paradigm for subordination and self-realization in the Christian faith. The dynamics of the trinitarian life show decisively that functional subordination for a redemptive purpose in no way demeans essential personhood. "Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself..." (Php. 2:5 f.). Though by nature co-essential in being and dignity with the Father, the Son willingly became in the redemptive economy functionally subordinate to the Father. Self-fulfillment is both achieved and transcended in the yielding of self to the redemptive purposes of God. Authentic freedom and fulfillment is found in the service of the One whose service is perfect freedom. Authentic self-realization for both men and women is found in the willing submission to the divinely-appointed structures grounded in creation and redeemed in Christ. This is the liberating dynamic of the trinitarian life and the truth of the Christian gospel.

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