

BaptistWay Press® Premium Commentary

By Dr. Ron Lyles

Pastor, South Main Baptist Church
Pasadena, Texas

Studies in Power & Purpose: God Unveils the Universe (Genesis 1-11)

Lesson Four

God's Creation of Human Beings

Focal Text

Genesis 1:26-28; 2:18-25

Background

Genesis 1:26-28; 2:18-25

Main Idea

God created humans in his image to relate with him and one another.

Question to Explore

What does it mean to be created in God's image?

Quick Read

God created human beings in his image. He created each person to reflect his character and personality. As God's people, we are to relate to him and one another in ways that mirror the personhood and unity of the triune God.

Introduction

Erik Erikson is considered one of the most significant contributors to the field of psychology in the twentieth century. Some of his pioneering thought may have grown from his personal life. He was born in 1902 in Frankfurt, Germany. His Danish father abandoned his Jewish mother before he was born. She later married Erik's pediatrician, Dr. Theodor Homberger. Erikson became an immigrant to the United States where he would have a distinguished career at Harvard Medical School and the University of California at Berkeley.

Page 1 of 8

Premium Commentary. Power & Purpose: God Unveils the Universe (Genesis 1-11)—Lesson Four. Copyright © 2017 BAPTISTWAY PRESS®. A ministry of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Go to www.baptistwaypress.org or call 1-866-249-1799 toll-free for additional Bible study materials for all ages. ***This lesson is not to be sold or distributed beyond the subscription agreement. The copyright notice and identifying information in this note must be included on any copies made.***

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in this *Premium Commentary* are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 Biblica. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Erikson is credited with coining the phrase “identity crisis.” The classical definition of that phrase is “a period of uncertainty and confusion when a person’s sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or roles in society.”

Erikson believed that in life we experience a series of crises or conflicts. Each one must be dealt with before an individual can move on to the next phase or stage in life. This thought was the basis of his influential theory of psychosocial development. For Erikson, life consisted of eight of these progressive stages.

He named the fifth stage of this development “Identity vs Role Confusion.” He described this stage as occurring in adolescence when teenagers were exploring who they are (identity) and what roles they would occupy as an adult. He evaluated it as a crucial stage to navigate successfully in order to have a healthy self-comprehension and then to relate in a healthy way with other human beings.

Jesus-followers understand the importance of having a genuine sense of self-understanding and identity. We also believe, although the social science of psychology offers tremendous help in this area, the best resource for arriving at this understanding is the God-inspired Scripture. The verses under consideration in this lesson are some of the most crucial ones in learning what the Bible says about who God created us to be. They convey the created identity of human beings, the authority conferred upon human beings, and the unity within the community of human beings.

Commentary

The focal text for this lesson comes from selected verses in the first two chapters of Genesis. These verses assert the uniqueness of human life as the climax or crowning achievement of God’s work in creation. The creation of human beings is described in greater detail than any other creature. It is the only creative act that involved divine deliberation or speech within God. Human life is the only category of life created in the image of God. Human life is the only creature that is given a divine assignment over other creatures in God’s world. Human life is the only “speech” creature who has verbal dialogue with God.

The Identity of Human Beings (1:26-27)

The most striking thing that almost every reader notices quickly is “us” in the “let **us** make man” statement (1:26). The plural pronoun agrees with Elohim, the plural form of the singular term, El, and the plural form of the verb “make.” The use of a plural pronoun for God is found three other times in the Old Testament (Gen. 3:22; 11:7; and Isaiah. 6:8).

Several theories have been advanced as to why these plural pronouns would be used to denote the one God of Israel. Some feel it is a reference to the spiritual beings or angels that are in the service of God, similar to the concept of “the LORD of Hosts.” Some have

used the phrase “plural of majesty” (somewhat of an editorial “we”), but that concept is not found anywhere else outside of Scripture. Others have seen in it an explicit reference to the Christian Trinitarian concept, but that view finds no support elsewhere in the Old Testament.

We must be content to allow this usage to retain a sense of mystery. I believe a positive move toward the best interpretation is through the concept in what Victor Hamilton calls “the plural of fullness,” and what Kenneth Matthews calls “the plurality within unity.” It may reflect a primitive understanding of God in community or plurality that would later be revealed in the New Testament doctrine of the Trinity.

The central theological affirmation of the ancient Israelites was the oneness or unity of God (Deuteronomy 6:4). The word “one” in that verse is the same one used in Genesis 2:24. It is a term that allows a plurality or diversity of persons within a single unity.

The fullness of God utilized the best of God’s creative ability to design the human creature in the “image” (1:26) of God. This word, *tselem*, occurs less than twenty times in the Old Testament, while the phrase “the *tselem* of God” occurs only four times. All four of them are in the Book of Genesis (1:26, 27 [twice], 9:6).

The human creature is not divine in nature, but he is described as having some kind of correspondence to God. What kind of correspondence is it? It could include a physical resemblance, since *tselem* sometimes has the connotation of things that closely resemble other things. It could be a cognitive resemblance or the capacity like God to think critically, make judgments, and act reasonably. It could be a moral or spiritual resemblance, possessing a conscience. This would facilitate the human capacity to have fellowship with God. It might point to an authority resemblance as humanity alone is given an assignment of dominion over other creatures.

It is not clear how the phrase “in our likeness” (1:26) expands or narrows the meaning of the image of God. It is a more abstract term. Some interpreters feel that it strengthens the concept of image, while others think it tones it down a bit.

Three things must be emphasized in the analysis of verse 27. First, as the New International Version shows, it is expressed in three lines of poetry or in rhythmic form. Secondly, the writer seemingly wants to demonstrate the superior work of God in making the human creature. He does that by using the technical, specialized term for something only God can do three times, the verb always rendered as “created.”

Finally, gender appears for the first time in the Creation account. The fact God created humanity as “male and female” affirms the goodness of sexuality. God does not have a sexual dimension, but human beings as a part of the creation do possess that capacity. Humanity is both a single entity and a community. Both the male and the female are

expressions of one common humanity, and they both share equally in reflecting the image of God and thus representing God in the world.

The Authority of Human Beings (1:28; 2:18-20)

God has sovereign authority over all of his created world. He has chosen to share that authority over creation with his human creatures. Even as he authorized the sun and the moon to govern the inanimate or non-living world, he authorized human beings to have authority over all living things including fish, birds, and land animals.

“Rule” (1:26, 28) was a term that primarily dealt with human relationships. It variously described the relationship between a master and his hired servants (Leviticus 25:43, 46) or a king and his subjects (Psalm 110:2). It also denoted the rule of one nation over another nation (Lev. 26:17; Numbers 24:19; Nehemiah 9:28), and even the supervision of a shepherd over his flock (Ezekiel 34:4). That last usage illustrates that this word had the sense of providing nurturing care. That is the way we should understand its presence here.

“Subdue” (Gen. 1:28) frequently conveys the idea of excessive force or violence. It is the word used to describe physical assault, reducing persons to slaves, and the capturing of enemy combatants. In contrast to those uses, Genesis 1:28 is about subduing the land, not individuals or nations. The notion here is the harnessing of the land in agricultural and pastoral pursuits. God blessed the human beings with reproductive capacity and commanded them to populate the world. Part of the filling of the earth assignment was to “subdue” the land and enjoy its productive potential. The first expression of the assigned authority to subdue and rule over other living beings is the naming of them by the man (2:19-20).

God did not give the human creature the right to use authority over the world harshly, resulting in selfish and wasteful exploitation. The phrase “servant leadership” might be applicable to this circumstance. That phrase captures the essence of authority exercised in a responsible and caring way.

Genesis 1 is filled with the expression “and God saw that it was good.” Now for the first time we read the evaluation of “not good” (2:18, 20). We cannot be certain whether this means simply that the man **was** alone or that he **felt** alone (lonely). The text does not say the man felt alone and came to God with his need. God made the judgment that man needed someone like him to complete him.

The man was alone because none of the animals were a “suitable helper” (2:20) for him; consequently, God determined to make a “helper suitable” (2:18) for him.

Construction is a component of many of the direct mission involvement trips our church has taken to El Paso, Baltimore, Chicago, St. Louis, the Rio Grande Valley, Collique, Peru; and other places. It is important we identify persons who have skills in the various

construction crafts. We need persons who are carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and people who have expertise in hanging drywall and painting. I have none of these skills, and so I go as a “helper.” In this context that is a far less significant position than any of the skilled positions listed above.

The meaning of “helper” in these verses is totally opposite from the mission trip context. It is the Hebrew word *‘ezer*. It means “to help someone” in the sense of giving aid or support. In three prophetic passages it refers to military aid (Hosea 13:9; Isa. 30:5; Ezek. 12:14). Its corresponding verb means to save from danger or deliver from death. This is the word used in declaring Yahweh was a helper to Moses (Exodus 18:4) and is a helper to all who need him (Ps. 20:2; 121:1-2; 124:8). The fact that God is our helper clearly establishes that it is not a less significant or inferior position.

These two verses (Gen. 2:18, 20) are the only time the word translated “suitable” appears in the Old Testament. It describes a position directly in front of the man, face-to-face, or on the same level. Although a sexual differentiation exists between the man and the woman, this phrase reinforces the equality of the two as noted in the previous discussion. Both reflected equally the image of God.

The Unity of the Human Beings (2:21-25)

These verses contain a new image of God’s creative work. Previously the creation account has depicted the Creator God in terms of a Speaker, a Planter, and a Potter. Here he does the work of a Surgeon and a Builder.

This story about the creation of the woman is completely unique. No other ancient account of creation has a separate process for the origin of the female gender. I believe this uniqueness could be God’s way of elevating the status of the woman within the male-dominated societal context of the ancient world.

The initiative of God dominates the narrative. God was in complete control of the process. Although the man was present and contributed a part of his body, he was not even a conscious spectator or witness to the event. The phraseology of “deep sleep” (2:21) referred to a divinely induced sleep (Isa. 29:10; 1 Sam. 26:12), often for the occasion of a divine revelation (Gen. 15:12-13; Job 4:12-13). God protected the mystery of divine creation.

The New International Version text reads that God took “one of the man’s ribs” (Gen. 2:21) and then in a footnote gives an alternate reading “part of the man’s side.” The footnote reading comes from the fact this Hebrew word is a general one for the side of something, like the sides of the tabernacle the Israelites built in the wilderness. In this verse it is probably a general reference to the area between the shoulders and the waist, where the ribs are located.

“Made” (2:22) is the common term for constructing a building. This is only one of two times it refers to God’s work in creation (also Amos 9:6). The woman is the first living being built from another living being. Similar to what we see at a wedding when a proud father walks his daughter down the aisle to present her to the groom, the proud “Father” Creator God presented the woman to the man. Then God stepped back a bit and let the man rejoice in the good work of God.

The man did name the animals (out loud we might assume), but for the first time in the creation account, God’s human creature speaks a sentence. The speech is poetic in form and gratefully rejoicing in content. To paraphrase the evaluations of Genesis 1, “and man saw what God had made and said that she was GOOD.”

“Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (2:23) should be taken literally in this verse, for the woman had literally been taken of (or from) the man. Elsewhere the phrase denotes loyalty due to the connection of family, kinship, or tribal ties (Gen. 29:14; Judges 9:2; 2 Samuel 5:1; 19:12-13).

The intimate unity of the man and woman is demonstrated by the change in language in verse 23. To this point in the creation account, “man” has always translated *‘adam*. That is the word underlying “the man said” (2:23), but the last “man” in this verse translates the Hebrew *‘ish*. The English terms man and woman sound similar as do the Hebrew terms here, *‘ish* and *‘issha*. These are the two terms found also in verse 24, but in the last verse of this chapter, the writer reverted to *‘adam*.

The widespread use of Genesis 2:24, especially with regard to weddings and marriage enrichment, is deserving. It is such an important verse about God’s original design for his human creatures and was certainly elevated in significance when Jesus quoted it (Matthew 19:5) and Paul used it (Ephesians 5:31).

Of course, the central focus or theme of the verse is about the necessity of establishing a new loyalty. In God’s design, this new loyalty of marriage becomes the supreme loyalty in human relationships, even surpassing the loyalty or commitment to one’s family of origin (parents). The new loyalty does not mean the previous loyalty is deleted from one’s life.

Of course, we rightly assume the man and the woman both have responsibilities in making this new loyalty the supreme commitment to another human being. In other words, the woman “leaves” her family as well. In fact, that was how it happened in ancient Israelite culture. The woman was “bought” (through a bride price), left the home of her parents, and became a part of the husband’s extended family and clan. A remnant of this practice is the fact the father of the bride “gives her away” to the groom rather than the groom being given away to the bride.

The ultimate goal of this new loyalty between a man and his wife is “one flesh” (2:24). This is, of course, the foundational verse for the wedding tradition known as lighting the unity candle. I cringe when I see a bride and groom light the larger candle and then blow out the smaller candles their parents have lighted. Marriage is not a relationship in which two persons lose their individuality by being absorbed completely into this new loyalty.

I believe the best symbolism is to light the larger candle and then let three candles burn. On one level the larger candle can represent God. This is a reminder that in order for the two to become one flesh, three full partners must be recognized in the marriage as working together. On another level, it is a reminder that this desired unity of purpose or oneness of intimacy is a unity within plurality. It is the living of two persons as one.

That is an important concept in the Hebrew word *echad*, translated here as “one.” The Hebrew language had another word that distinguished “one” as a number from all other numbers. *Echad* could be used for that too, but it also had this nuanced meaning of “one in plurality.” This is the word found in Deuteronomy 6:4 (the “Jewish John 3:16”) in the phrase “the LORD our God, the LORD is one.” We hold to a monotheistic faith. We believe in only one God, but that one God is unity within plurality (Trinity).

One evidence of the unity enjoyed by the human beings was that they were fully transparent with one another. “Naked” (2:25) was usually associated with the shame of being poor or the humiliation of shame and guilt. This verse asserting nakedness in a positive vein is the only exception.

Conclusion

It is customary for church leaders to give a word of counsel to teenagers and preteens as they board the church van or bus to make a trip. The advice goes something like this. We pray you have a meaningful time as you seek to grow in your relationship to Christ or as you go and minister. “Remember who you represent.” That is a reminder they represent the Lord and the church of the Lord.

The most important component of human identity is that we were created in the image of God. That means that in some way we resemble God or bear a likeness to him. We represent God in his world. As a result we should live every day in a way that honors God in our relationship with him, in our relationship with one another, and in our relationship with God's world.

Meet the Writer: Dr. Ron Lyles

Ron Lyles has been the pastor of the South Main Baptist Church in Pasadena, Texas for more than thirty years. He has also been writing Bible study material for most of that time. Dr. Lyles is a graduate of Dallas Baptist University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div., Ph.D.). He has served Texas Baptists in a variety of roles and also enjoys teaching adjunctively for Logsdon Seminary at their Corpus Christi location.

BaptistWay Press®

See www.baptistwaypress.org for additional study materials on

Power & Purpose: God Unveils the Universe (Genesis 1-11)

and more than fifty other Bible studies by BaptistWay Press®,
or call 1-866-249-1799 (M-Fri 8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m. Central Time).