

Creative Personhood

by Richard Zenith

"Man *makes* things, but only God *creates*." I will probably never forget that statement by my third-grade catechism instructor. He went on to say that any man who was presumptuous enough to say that he had *created* something would surely suffer a particularly creative torment in hell. I think this latter remark was the glue that so firmly fixed the first statement in my memory: "Man *makes* things; God *creates*." In order to be on the safe side of blasphemy, I decided to eliminate the word "create" from my vocabulary.

As the weeks passed I began to ponder the distinction between "making" and "creating." I finally confronted my teacher, and he explained to me that "to make" is to produce something new out of something old, whereas "to create" is to produce something out of nothing.

"Who can produce something out of nothing?" I asked.

"God can," he replied. "He created the world out of nothing."

"But we learned that the world is made of atoms."

"Yes, but God created the atoms."

"So He created the atoms and then all creating stopped. God just made everything else from the atoms. No one can create any more, right?"

"You ask too many questions, Richard. Just remember that man *makes* and God *creates*."

I knew that I had stumped my teacher, but I still was not sure of the answer to my question: what is the essence of "creating"? I decided to find out what the Bible would tell me and, much to my surprise, I found my answer on the very first page. "*Let there be light, and there was light.*" "*Let there be a firmament in the midst of the water, and it was so.*" Let there be ... and there was! God created the world by calling life into being. He spoke words which set the course of the world.

The essence of God's creation was His exercise of free choice. His crowning work was the creation of man. This was the ultimate of the creation, for in man God created someone who could in turn be creative. In order to teach man his creative power, God immediately confronted him with a choice: the tree of life or the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Man made the inevitable choice of the knowledge of good and evil, since he would need to learn all the misuses of his free choice before becoming confirmed and confident in the right uses of his creativity.

My catechism teacher was wrong. We do not only make things; we also create. If we did not create, we would cease being persons, for a person is a person only to the extent that he exercises his free, creative choice. Our free choice is what separates us from the animals. Beavers have been called the world's best engineers, but their dams are certainly not built by choice or design. Beavers have no say in the matter; they simply follow their natural instincts and build magnificent structures. Likewise, machines can produce things much more efficiently than men, but the most advanced computer is unable to make a free, personal decision.

The apostle John tells us in his first letter that God is love. God is love because He is a person—the supreme Person in the universe. Love and personhood are inextricably linked, because both involve free choice. Love is nothing more than my decision to reach out to another. I may feel strongly attracted to someone, or I may even find myself romantically involved with someone, but I have not begun to love until I make a creative choice to reach out to that person. On the other hand, I may feel an absolute repugnance toward someone, and yet I may choose to love that person in spite of my human repulsion.

I think a proper understanding of what love is and what it is not would alleviate much of the confusion and guilt which arises in many marriages. For example, a married businessman suddenly finds himself emotionally attracted to his secretary. He immediately feels guilty and decides to ignore his feelings. But the feelings persist and soon the married man concludes that he is hopelessly “in love” with his secretary. An extra-marital affair ensues. Such an affair is doubly unfortunate since the husband is usually feeling too guilty to fully enjoy it! In fact, guilt is the culprit from beginning to end of this adulterous affair. If the husband had not felt guilty when he was first aware of his feelings for his secretary, then he could have honestly expressed his feelings to his wife.

To experience romantic feelings toward various people is perfectly normal and healthy, regardless of age or marital state, but such feelings have nothing to do with love. It often happens that a husband and wife who have been together for years may feel that some of the romantic thrill has worn off, but they have made a commitment to each other. They have chosen to put each other first, even when the feelings are not there. That is what love is about.

The businessman wrongly concluded that he was “in love” with his secretary on account of some romantic feelings. Nonsense! The adultery would have been avoided if he had recognized his romantic feelings as nothing more than romantic feelings. Then he could have maintained control and stayed faithful to his wife, whom he knew he really loved.

Love is creative. Love is making a decision, a commitment to another. Love is not a matter of doing good deeds. At one time I was constantly preoccupied with performing good works. I participated in church groups and charitable organizations, and I also did good deeds for individuals that came in contact with me. All my activity had its merits, but I realized in time that I was not looking at the people I was helping. I did not really know them. Long ago I had become an unthinking machine that did good deeds for others. My endless good deeds were an escape to avoid God’s call to personhood. Ironically, my good deeds for other people were also an escape from actually loving those people.

I was behaving very much like an ant. An ant? I will explain. If beavers have been called the world’s best engineers, ants have been called the world’s most ideal social society. All its life every ant works tirelessly for the good of the whole nest. The nest is perfectly ordered and thrives because of the ants’ hard labor. But we cannot say that the ants love. All their labor is impersonal, by instinct. They perform the same monotonous activities without thinking or choosing. Creative, personal love is unknown to them. Love is personal, or it is not love; that is why the God of love is a Person.

I was doing many good and noble deeds, but I was refusing to be the full person that God had made me. I had forgotten the last three words of Si John’s injunction: “*Let us love in deed and in truth.*” Jesus said, “*You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.*” I had accepted the truth that Jesus Christ freed me from everlasting condemnation by His death and resurrection, but I was not free from my own condemnation. God showed me that I could only

love in truth when I accepted His true word about me—that I was a free son, one to whom He had given the right and the responsibility to share in His creative process of love.

To be whole lovers we must be whole persons. A whole person? I mean that we must be willing to step out and make choices. For so long we have been taught that it is somehow virtuous to avoid making ourselves stand out. Just as I was made to feel guilty as a child for “creating” something, so many of us feel guilty about pursuing our desires and our goals. We are so suspicious of ourselves, always questioning ourselves: “What’s my real motive? Isn’t this a selfish desire?” And so forth. The net result is that in certain circles a person is actually considered “saintly” if he is patronizing, dull, and lifeless. To speak of man’s creations and man’s desires and man’s importance does not take away from God’s glory. On the contrary, however great man is (and he is great), God is all the greater, for He is our Creator.

Isaiah rightly spoke of men as grasshoppers in comparison with God, and Peter truly says that all flesh is as grass, here today and gone tomorrow. Nevertheless, man is of tremendous value as proved by God’s unending love for us. Jesus Christ’s suffering and sacrifice is God’s statement to us of our infinite worth to Him.

“What is man, that You are mindful of him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and have crowned him with glory and honor. You made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands. You have put all things under his feet” (Psa. 8:4-8).

We have been created to be great, creative persons. God does not want us to be smiling dim-wits under the guise of some vague “humility.” No, He has made us to rule His universe with Him. He wants us to have glory, for the glory all goes back to Him.

Let us no longer be afraid of ourselves and our desires. We are full persons, ready for any task, because we are all shades of The Person, Jesus Christ. That is why it is a great error to belittle or even hate ourselves. In doing so, we are actually belittling God, for He is the One who has made us, and He is the One who expresses Himself through us. We give God high praise as we boldly and confidently move forward in our particular vocations.

To be a person is to live the life of faith, for faith is nothing more than the exercise of our free choice. Every decision we make is a faith decision, because we have faith that we are making the right choice. We learn not only to make faith decisions but also to persevere in faith. To “persevere in faith” is to follow through on our decisions. If I decide to become a doctor, I will undoubtedly experience difficult moments in my study. But I persevere, and as an outcome of my faith I indeed become a doctor. Of course, we also have the freedom to change our decisions, and we should feel confident in making such changes.

Do we have secret yearnings? Do we have certain longings which we have not expressed? Are we afraid to live out our desires? John says, *“There is no fear in love, for perfect love casts out fear.”* Christ loves us perfectly, and His love dwells in us. God perfectly accepts us and approves of us. His perfect Son, Jesus Christ, lives His life through our individual forms. How can we still fear? Christ has done away with fear, and now we are ready to love and to live.

We can and we must create, in whatever way our heart leads us. Creativity is not limited to art and music. Creativity is making choices and acting on them. Plumber, housewife, teacher, lawyer, student, or any other role is creative, provided that we do it with gusto. We are full persons as long as we actively pursue our desires and move forward in our choices. “Resting

in the Lord” is not the same thing as “sleeping through life.” “Resting in the Lord” means that we live life with quiet confidence, for we know that the Lord is in us, ready to supply our every need.

The key is to understand that a person is a person because he has the ability and the willingness to make free choices. All of us have the ability, but many of us lack the willingness. It is much easier to let someone else make the choices. By not making our own decisions we avoid the responsibility for their outcome. There are those who actually believe that God would have them make no decisions. Yet, as I have noted, God’s very first words to man forced him to take the reins: “*You* have dominion over the earth. *You* choose the names for the creatures. *You* choose between the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” If we refuse to make choices, we deny the essence of our personhood. We become passive, dull creatures that do not differ fundamentally from beavers or ants.

If we had no choice but to be kind to our neighbors, then we could not call such kindness love. True love must involve sacrifice, as witnessed to us by God’s ultimate demonstration of love in Jesus Christ’s sacrifice. True love is the choice to go out of our way for the sake of another. That is why love and creativity are forever entwined. As we step out of our towers and into the middle of life, dealing with all the pleasant and nasty situations that come our way—as we begin to live without fear—only thus do we begin to be full persons. And as full persons, love flows out spontaneously.

All the games and gimmicks to make ourselves loving people are perfectly useless. God’s love is not to be found by diligent searching. Rather, His love is all around us, in every particle of life. Actively love living, and you will find that you have nothing but love for others.