

“The Cultural Mandate”

Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15-17; 9:1-7

December 27, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

So far in our sermon series on the mission of the church, we've been focusing on what that mission is. We've considered three of the “Great Commission” texts of the New Testament to help us understand this. To summarize those texts, Jesus clearly teaches that the mission of the church is to be sent out into the world to be his witnesses and to make disciples.

Today, we want to come at this from the opposite side by focusing on what the mission is not. Stephen Neill has issued the warning, “If everything is mission, nothing is mission.” In other words, if we broaden the mission of the church too much, we end up losing the true mission. One area where the Bible is sometimes misunderstood, leading to an over-broadening of the church's mission, is the cultural mandate. This is the mandate given to Adam to subdue the earth and have dominion over it. Our task today is to understand this cultural mandate and its current application.

I. The Adamic Version of the Cultural Mandate

The cultural mandate as originally given in Genesis 1-2 had both horizontal and vertical components, describing man's responsibility both to the world and to God. The horizontal component is described in verse 28: **“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”** The verse begins with the command to be fruitful and multiply. Mankind was created in the image of God, and it was God's intention that this world should be filled with reminders of what God is like. Ancient kings would typically fill their land with statues of themselves, and God does something similar here, except that God's statues are living and breathing people. Next is the command to subdue the earth. There was a wildness to the earth that needed to be overcome, tamed, and shaped to man's needs. This was similar to the work God had done in creation as he brought order out of the original chaos (1:2). Finally, mankind was put in charge of all other creatures. He was to have dominion and authority over them. We see that authority being exercised in the very next chapter when Adam calls the animals to himself to name them. They come when he calls, submitting to his voice. And naming involves authority, an authority Adam rightly possesses. In short, Adam and Eve are little assistant kings to the great King, God himself. Theologians use the term “vice-regent” to describe this.

There was also a vertical component to this mandate, describing Adam's responsibility to God. It is found in 2:15: **"The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it."** As we saw in our first sermon in this series, the garden of Eden was designed to be something of a temple, a place where God and man dwell together in joyful harmony. That's the significance of this tree of life. The essence of man's life is found in God and man's relationship to God. So these two duties given to Adam are significant. He is to work the garden and keep it. Significantly, these two verbs are used repeatedly in the Old Testament to describe the work of the priests in the temple (Num. 18:1-7). The verb "keep" has the sense of guarding and protecting. So Adam was to protect the garden as a special place of fellowship with God, a temple.

In the middle of the garden was the forbidden tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is significant that this tree was in the middle of the garden (3:3), meaning that Adam and Eve would pass by it frequently and would be reminded on a regular basis that fellowship with God depended upon submission to God's authority. Isn't it significant that something we regard as burdensome and unwelcome (having to submit to the authority of another) was a prominent feature of life in paradise? So part of Adam's vertical duty was to protect the garden as a place of fellowship with God through joyful submission to God's authority. We all know the tragic outcome of this. Adam failed to protect the garden. He allowed an enemy to trespass in the garden. Instead of chasing him out, he stood by passively as Satan spread lies about God and tempted Eve to eat of the forbidden fruit. Then Adam himself swallowed Satan's lies about God, which led to his swallowing of the forbidden fruit. Adam failed to keep the cultural mandate.

II. The Noahic Version of the Cultural Mandate

A restatement of the cultural mandate is given to Noah in Genesis 9. Before considering that, however, let's observe the changes sin brought to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. It is obvious that the cultural mandate is still somewhat in place, but with some significant and unwanted differences. They will still be fruitful and multiply, but now there will be pain associated with that task. God said to the woman, **"I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children"** (3:16). And Adam will still be at work to subdue the earth, but he will not succeed. **"Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you... By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return"** (3:17-19). Instead of Adam subduing the earth, he will be subdued by it.

God restates the cultural mandate to Noah after the judgment of the flood. This is the form the mandate continues to have for us today. Notice again that the

command to be fruitful and multiply continues. But then in verse 2 we read of a change in man's relationship to creation. **"The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens."** No longer will the animals submit meekly to Adam as they did when he called them to himself to name them. God placed within them a wildness, a terror of man that would make them flee in his presence. Animals would now become food for man. It would seem that prior to the days of Noah, human diets were vegetarian. And then we have the introduction of a sword-wielding government, tasked with the punishment of evil-doers who take the lives of other humans. The existence of human government, together with its sword-wielding authority, is assumed to become a regular part of fallen life now. In other words, there will always be a need to deal with human evil by use of the blunt instrument of forceful punishment.

One of the most important things to see about the changes in this restatement of the cultural mandate to Noah is something that is missing. Nowhere do we read here that God tells him to subdue the earth. The reason for this omission is that it will no longer be possible to do so. Sin has had such a devastating effect on the earth and humanity that it will no longer be possible to fulfill the cultural mandate.

It's important before moving on that we pause to tease out some significant implications of the cultural mandate for us today. These implications are far too numerous to explore them all this morning, so let me mention just a few of them. The first one is the need to renounce any expectation of a Christianized world. This world will not be able to be subdued for God's glory until the return of the second Adam, our Lord Jesus. Until then, what we ought to expect is the growth and development of two kingdoms: the kingdom of this fallen world and the kingdom of God as seen through the Church. When we turn to the book of Revelation, what is described when Jesus returns is the presence of two competing kingdoms. The kingdom of this world goes by various names, including "the great prostitute" and "the beast." In one place, it is called **"Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations"** (17:5). And then in chapter 18, a passage we're going to look at later in this series, the fall of this evil worldly kingdom is described. But what we see is that it has become a mighty kingdom when it is judged and destroyed by our Lord Jesus.

The Bible's portrayal of this world prior to the return of Jesus is that these two kingdoms, the kingdom of this world and the Church, will both grow and will remain in constant conflict with one another. The Church will not be able to bring about the downfall of the evil kingdom of this world, and the kingdom of the world will not be able to destroy the Church. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there was great optimism in the Church in America that the coming century would be one of great advance for the Church. A magazine began to be published to give voice to this optimism, called *The Christian Century*. But as we know now, the twentieth century didn't turn out to be such a Christian century after all. It

was marked by two devastating world wars, a Great Depression, the Holocaust, and the rise of an atheistic communism responsible for the murder of millions, including large numbers of Christians. We see these two competing kingdoms in almost every advance that is made. The internet is used to spread God's life-giving word, but also the destructive effects of pornography. Medical advances are used to sustain life, but also to more efficiently take life through abortions. Drugs can be used to relieve pain, but also to enslave through addictions.

The important lesson in all this for the mission of the Church is simply to prevent us from an over-broadening of our mission. It is not to bring about a Christianized world. It is to be sent out into a world that will remain hostile to Jesus and to us with the goal of being Jesus' witnesses and making disciples. This gives rise to another question, though. Most of us spend most of our time and effort in the kingdom of this world. If this world is not to be Christianized, then what should be our motivation as we go to work in schools, hospitals, government services and myriad other occupations and worthwhile endeavors? Let me mention several motives the Scriptures offer to us. First, we ought to look for echoes of Eden in all our work. Though this is a fallen, broken world that will remain so until Jesus returns, God has left pointers to the way things ought to be. For example, we saw earlier that in Eden the animal world submitted to Adam's authority, while after sin the animals were terrified by mankind and fled from them. But God has left at least one species of animal largely untouched by this fear, the loyal dog. That's an echo of Eden. We can also point to Eden simply by doing our jobs with as much excellence as we are capable of bringing to them. In the second century, there was a Christian writer named Justin Martyr who grew up over the hill from Galilee. "Interestingly, he notes that the plows made by Joseph and Jesus were still being used widely in his day" (Guinness, *The Call*, p. 202).

Another motive we can bring to our work in this fallen world is to do good to others as part of our witness to Jesus. Just as God is kind to all, saints and sinners alike, so we are called to be godlike in doing the same. In doing good in the name of Jesus, we are bringing glory to God. A final motive I want to mention is to let the brokenness of this world work in our hearts a longing for the return of Jesus. While it is true that we will never be able to rid this world of its brokenness, there is one who can and will do so. It is our Lord Jesus, and he will do so at his return. That brings us to our final point.

III. The Jesus Version of the Cultural Mandate

The cultural mandate teaches that the first Adam was supposed to be a king and a priest. As a king, he was to rule and have dominion over the earth. He failed to do so because of his sin. As a priest, he was to guard and protect the garden as God's temple, the place where God and man would meet and enjoy fellowship with one another. Once again, he failed to do so, allowing Satan to

come in with his lies about God and his temptations to Adam and Eve. Jesus is the better Adam who has succeeded in these roles of king and priest. As a king, Jesus is able to rule and to subdue the earth. He is the rightful king who will be able bring about a reign of peace.

And Jesus is also able to serve as a priest, guarding and protecting the garden by keeping Satan out. Jesus binds the strong man so that we might enter his house and plunder his goods (Matt. 12:29). By his death, Jesus silences the accusations of Satan. The Bible tells us that through Jesus **“the accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God”** (Rev. 12:10). Satan’s accusations are forever silenced by the voice of the Lamb, saying, “The price has been paid already for these sins of which you are accusing them. Your accusations are without merit.” And then we read of the end of this great enemy of ours. **“And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever”** (Rev. 20:10). The ancient prophecy that the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15) will have been fulfilled.

The cultural mandate, then, will not be fulfilled by us. That is a job for the last Adam, our Lord Jesus. The church’s mission now is to lift up Jesus as the only hope for this broken world. Our job is to live out the reality of the coming kingdom as we in the church seek to become this outpost of the coming kingdom. As we do so, we show the world more clearly what Jesus is like, that they may come to him and know him.

CONCLUSION:

We can summarize this by pointing out an overly pessimistic and overly optimistic view of the mission of the church. We’ve already mentioned the overly optimistic view, the one that says it’s possible to bring about the kingdom of God through human effort. The overly pessimistic view is also one to guard against. It says that any work outside of evangelism and discipleship amounts to rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. God will use our good deeds done in service to others to play a part in his overall work. In the last book of the Bible, John reports hearing a voice saying, **“Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”** (14:13). Our works, no matter how small or insignificant in the eyes of the world, follow us into heaven. That means that they have eternal significance. We may not be able to bring about the kingdom of God by our efforts, but we can work, whether directly in the church or outside the church in our daily calling, knowing that our works have eternal significance. So we do all to the glory of God, awaiting Jesus’ intervention in his good time to bring about the consummation of the kingdom.