

The Foundational Command: "Subdue the Earth!"

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Many of us here have been taught that there is such a thing as a “cultural mandate,” and that this expression refers to Genesis 1:28, where we read that God says to the first man and woman: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, and subdue it.”

I am not sure, however, whether we always realize the significance of the *context* of this mandate. I believe that the context in this case is very instructive.

I need not belabor the point that quoting out of context is almost always, to a greater or lesser degree, a doing-violence to the meaning of the speaker or writer. On this score I think we Christians often sin grievously, and consequently often obscure completely the meaning and force of God's words to us.

For my present purposes I am going to distinguish three contexts of the cultural mandate (actually four, but I shall deal with the first two together.)

The *immediate* context is the story of creation—the six days of God's creative work as related in Genesis 1, and the concluding seventh day of God's rest. The account of this creation “week” (Gen. 1:1-2:3) forms a clearly marked-off literary whole, which is plainly meant to be understood as a unit.

The pattern of Genesis 1 is familiar to us. After the opening grand statement that God created both the heavens and the earth, the writer proceeds to restrict himself to the “earth” (i.e. the earthly cosmos which is man's home, as opposed to heaven as God's dwelling-place) and pictures how this earth was at first a dark, watery mass, with God's Spirit “hovering” (i.e. poised for creative action) over it. The writer here describes how God, through a succession of eight mighty creative Words, brought out of that undifferentiated earth-mass the whole range of created variety. First the darkness is flanked by light, and the alternation of day and night appears. Then the creation of the firmament brings about the separation of waters above and below. Next the lower waters are further differentiated into sea and dry land, and the dry land (now called “earth” in a narrower sense) is clothed with vegetation. Then, on the fourth day, God begins to populate the three major regions into which he has now divided the primordial earth-mass (seas, land, and sky) by creating the lights of heaven. The next day he fills the seas and sky with fish and fowl, and finally, on the climactic sixth day, he creates the inhabitants of the dry land: all the many species of land animals and the solitary man and woman of the human race, whom God has made to look like himself. When this is completed, and the human pair have been given their instructions, God's work is over, and on the seventh day he sits back and rests. The stage is set for history.

From this rough sketch of the first (and fundamental) chapter of the Bible it is clear, I think, that there is a concentration of meaning and importance on the sixth day. After the first five days—in which, as it were, the lights and props and scenery of the stage are provided—we see on the sixth day that the divine Stage-director introduces the hero and heroine of the drama, gives them their cue, and withdraws from the work of preparation to rest. It is now up to the actors to do their part. It is clear that, if we are to understand the meaning of the ensuing drama, it is extremely important to know how the actors have been introduced, and to know what their cue is. The story of the

sixth day gives us a clear answer: the actors are introduced as God's "image-bearers", and their cue is the so-called "cultural mandate".

Let's look a little closer at the passage involved. After the creation of the land animals, the creation story continues:

"And God said: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them and God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

What strikes us about this account of the sixth day (or rather, of the eighth mighty Word of creation) is that it breaks with the pattern of the previous days. It does not say, "And God said, let there be man. And it was so." No, for this, the eighth and final creative Word, the pattern changes. We are now told that God first formulated his *plan* for the creation of man (vs. 26), and then how he executed that plan (vs. 28). He says in effect, "Let us make man to be our image and to have dominion," and then proceeds to make man in fact his image and to command him to have dominion. We should note, therefore, *that this command to have dominion and subdue the earth, this so-called "cultural mandate," is part of the execution of God's plan for man in that final Word of creation with which he completes his work. Moreover, that this mandate is very closely connected in God's plan with man as the image of God.*

We are saying, therefore, that the sense of the passage we just read is concentrated in the two fundamental ideas of "dominion" and "image," and that these two ideas are closely related. All parts of this significant passage converge upon these two foci. This also applies to the command to be *fruitful* and multiply. This command is also given to the fish and fowl on the third day, and it is not mentioned in God's initial announcement of his plan, so that it must be taken to *lead up to* the specifically human task of subduing the earth. It is part of a purposive series: man is to be fruitful *in order to* multiply, he must multiply *in order to* fill the earth, and he must fill the earth *in order to* subdue it. The point is that man is to proliferate so as to deploy a *taskforce* over all the earth.

There is also a close connection between the command to have dominion and man's nature as *image* of God. To be created in the image of God means that man bears a resemblance to God, shows what God is like. There are many dimensions to this likeness of man to God—the New Testament explicitly mentions righteousness, holiness, and knowledge—but in the present context it has to do with *lordship*. God as creator is sovereign *Lord* over the works of his hands; so man, too, is in a derived sense to be lord of creation. The connection in the text between image and dominion is quite explicit: "Let us make man in our image ... and let them have dominion." In fact, a more idiomatic translation of the Hebrew paratactic style is that of the *Dutch Nieuwe* which has: "Let us make man in our image ... *in order that* they may have dominion." We find the same connection made in Psalm 8: "Thou has made him (i.e. man) little less than God... Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands, thou hast put all things under his feet." To be like God, to bear his likeness, means to subdue the earth.

The upshot, then, of our taking the "cultural mandate" in its immediate context, is that it is the climax and focus of God's creative work. Everything in this opening section of the Bible—the works of the previous days, man as God's image, the command to multiply, the cessation of God's work immediately afterwards—

everything converges to highlight the importance of that one fundamental command given to mankind: “Subdue the earth!”

But there is more than the immediate context. The command to subdue the earth also stands in the wider context of the book of Genesis as a whole. That first section of the seven days of creation is only the preamble of the story which Genesis has to tell. The writer of Genesis has given a very definite structure to the book, and in that structure the creation story clearly fulfills the function of *prologue* for what is to come. It is very plain from the way Genesis continues after 2:4 that this prologue is meant as the *setting-of-the-stage for world history*. Let me just mention a few indications which point in this direction.

The book of Genesis breaks down into eleven sections: the Prologue with which we have just dealt, and ten further sections. The beginning of each of these ten sections is marked by the significant phrase “these are the generations of.” The first section, immediately after the Prologue, begins, “These are the generations of the heavens and the earth once they had been created,” and there follows the story of the garden of Eden and the fall into sin. The other nine sections are introduced as the “generations” respectively of:

- Adam (5:1)
- Noah (6:9)
- the sons of Noah (10:1)
- Shem (11:10)
- Terah (11:27)
- Ishmael (25:12)
- Isaac (25:19)
- Esau (36:1)
- Jacob (37:2)

This is the framework, the basic outline of the book of Genesis.

We should note parenthetically that this list shows a certain pattern: beginning from a cosmic scope (the heavens and the earth), through the account of the origin and dispersion of all the world's peoples in “the generations of the sons of Noah” (which includes the story of the tower of Babel), the lens of the story zeroes in on the line among the Semites which leads directly to Terah and his migration away from Ur of the Chaldees: the beginning of the history of God's covenant people. The focus of Genesis becomes the election-in-history, from among all the nations of the world, of God's chosen people, and is therefore the world-historical placing-in-perspective of the history of redemption.

But what does this recurring phrase “the generations of” mean? The Hebrew word is *toledoth* from the root *yalad*, which means “to beget” or “give birth to”. The root-meaning of *toledoth* is therefore “begettings.” But its use in Genesis shows that *toledoth* has a much wider meaning as well: it refers to what developed (genealogically and historically) out of such-and-such. For example, the account of the “generations” (*toledoth*) of the sons of Noah (Genesis 10 and 11) gives not only extensive genealogies, but it looks upon the descendants it lists as primarily *bearers of history*, so that these “generations” include the rise of historically significant nations and the world-historical turning point of the confusion at Babel. As a rough-and-ready translation, therefore, we can say that *toledoth* means “historical developments”, with an emphasis on the genealogical.

Now how does this bear upon the context of the mandate to subdue the earth. It shows us that this mandate is significantly given just before the point where the

account of the history of the peoples of the world begins. No sooner has God finished his creation by giving this mandate, and rested on the seventh day, than the Bible continues (Gen. 2:4): "Now the following are the 'generations' (i.e. the historical developments arising out of) the heavens and the earth once they were created." It is in this light that we must see the story of the garden of Eden, and also the story of the Fall. In this immediate sequel to the command to subdue the earth it is made plain what this concretely means—namely to dress and keep the garden—and how man was unfaithful in the fulfillment of his task. It is important to keep in mind as we read the rest of Genesis that the author is recounting how man responds to the command to fill the earth and so subdue it. This accounts, I believe, for the references to Abel and Cain as shepherd and farmer, respectively. It accounts for the explicit mention of the sons of Lamech and their great cultural advances in technology and music, which shows that man's historical task is not changed after the fall, even in disobedience. The story of Babel is also to be read in this light: on the one hand the refusal to spread out (that is, not to "fill the earth") and on the other hand the specific mention of the invention of brick-making which made city-building possible.

It is a mistake, therefore, to view Genesis 2:4ff. as a "second account of creation," as is commonly done. There is only one account of creation, culminating in the command to subdue the earth. This is the backdrop, the foundation, the indispensable presupposition of all that follows. To repeat our earlier imagery, it is the stage which is set for the ensuing drama. Then, in the following chapters, explicitly introduced as the historical development ("generations") of this created scheme of things, we get the first act of the drama. To be sure, the author employs something of a flashback technique in the first act; in his focusing on the story of Adam (i.e. "Man") as the protagonist of the play, and goes back to recount details which were not mentioned, or not worked out, in the initial prologue (the creation of woman, for instance), but it is not at all a creation story: it presupposes the six-day creation of heaven and earth, and especially the final command given to man. What it does do is *explicate* that command, showing that it means such things as filling the ground, dressing and keeping the garden and naming animals. It is the historical outworking of the great task assigned to mankind, the execution in detail of the "cultural mandate."

There is much more that could be said, but the point, I think, is clear: within the context of the book of Genesis as a whole, the cultural mandate stands as the first and fundamental law of history. Together with the idea of the image of God, it sums up—in the context of the whole scope of the world-wide history of mankind—the place and task of man.

Yet there is still another context in which the cultural mandate is to be seen. It is the context of God's special revelation to man as recorded in the Bible. We know from the Bible itself that God's revelation to man is progressive: God discloses Himself ever more fully to man, and this progression can be traced right through the Old Testament, finding its climax in the New Testament revelation of the "mystery" of Jesus Christ. This revelation is progressive in the sense that it moves steadily onward; but it is not progressive in the sense that it leaves behind what went before it; every new addition to the fund of man's knowledge of God presupposes and builds on the knowledge which went before; a new revelation of God does not supersede the promises and commandments which went before, but it builds on them as on a foundation, each new message raising higher the building (so to speak) of God's revelation.

If we look at the cultural mandate from this point of view, we see again that it has a position of astonishing significance, for we realize that the very first communication addressed by God to man, the cornerstone (as it were) of all subsequent revelation, is precisely this command to fan out and subdue the earth. We notice again the special position of the sixth day in the creation story: all through the previous five days? work God has spoken briefly and in the third person: “Let there be light... let there be a firmament.” But now on the sixth day God suddenly becomes—if I may say so—loquacious, and begins to address in the second person that image of himself which he knows can understand and respond.

There is something highly dramatic about the moment when God has created a creature to be like himself and then clears his throat, so to speak, to address him. This is the moment when man, the crown of creation, is to be told what God's plan is for him, why God has placed him in this world, what his marching orders are to be for the long campaign ahead. It is the significant moment when God Almighty enters into communication with flesh-and-blood man, initiates the revelation-and-response structure of man's total life, making it into religion. It is at this moment of cosmic significance that God gives the command: “Fill the earth and subdue it!”

That is revelation and that is a command. It is the first and primary revelation, and the first and primary command. God is not a person to go back on a word once spoken, he is not one to countermand an order once given, for he is a constant God. And it is therefore of the greatest importance to keep that first, foundational word in mind when we listen to the many subsequent words which God addresses to man. All other revelation presupposes this. The history of God's progressive self-revelation can be compared, in a very legitimate sense, to an inverted pyramid. Everything is poised, is pivoted upon, a single focal point upon which the whole structure rests. And that pivotal point is the cultural mandate.

It is easy to overlook the centrality of the cultural mandate, because Genesis 3 relates the Fall of man into *sin*, and the whole rest of the Bible is overshadowed by this and focuses upon the history of *redemption from sin* which culminates in Christ. But we must not lose our sense of perspective and fall into a Christomonosim. For redemption means *restoration*, a ransoming out of the slavery of sin back into an original freedom. And a freedom for what? A freedom to serve, a freedom to obey God's commands, to do his will once again, a freedom to execute his mandate. Christ's work is a restoration to our original task, and his lordship is a re-affirmation of the original mandate.

To sum up, therefore, we can say that the command to subdue the earth assumes an importance of ever-widening dimensions, as we examine it in the successive concentric circles of its Biblical context. If we take the context of the sixth day, this command appears to be the focus, if we take the context of the creation story, this command shows up as the climax, if we take the context of Genesis as a whole, this command is the cue for the drama of history; if we take the context of the whole history of God's special revelation, this command turns out to be the foundation of the whole. It seems almost impossible to overemphasize the importance of this first and fundamental command of God to man.