

Your Life's Work Matters to God

Gregory A. Smith

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Objectives

- ❖ To communicate clearly the significance of the cultural mandate found in Genesis 1.26-28.
- ❖ To encourage participants to consider their role as Christians in contemporary culture.
- ❖ To motivate participants to view their educational and/or occupational pursuits in function of the cultural mandate.

Introduction

Ask participants to state, in turn, their current occupation and/or educational goal. Note the diversity of activities in which we are or intend to be engaged. State that today's lesson will help us to see this diversity from God's perspective. Refer the participants to Genesis 1.26-28.

Text

Genesis 1.26-28 (NKJV)

"Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.' So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'"

Biblical Concepts

Theologians call the divine commandment recorded in this text the "cultural mandate."¹ Richard T. Wright explains why it is referred to as such: "This mandate means that God has intended for humankind to interact with his creation in such a way that we would develop a culture. In doing so, we use the created elements and so demonstrate clearly our dominion."²

What is culture?

"The word 'culture' originally referred to cultivating the ground, and it has never completely lost this rapport with natural productivity. While the word is often used more narrowly for the fine arts, culture is better understood as the total pattern of a people's behavior. . . . Culture includes all behavior that is learned and transmitted by the symbols (rites, artifacts, language, etc.) of a particular group and that focuses on certain ideas or assumptions that we call a world view."³

The cultural mandate is essentially a call for mankind to manage nature's resources so as to bring glory to God and ultimate benefit to the human community. According to Henry M. Morris, it involves "intense study of the earth . . . and, then, utilization of this knowledge for the benefit of the earth's inhabitants, both animal and human. Here is the primeval commission to man authorizing both science and technology as man's basic enterprises relative to the earth."⁴

¹ Some authors refer to it as the "creation mandate."

² Richard T. Wright, *Biology through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 169.

³ William A. Dyrness, "Christianity and Culture," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 212.

⁴ Henry M. Morris, *The Genesis Record: A Scientific and Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings* (San Diego: Creation-Life Publishers; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 77.

Does the cultural mandate apply today?⁵

Arthur F. Holmes: "Culture was ordained by God. The creation mandate to replenish and subdue and have dominion has never been rescinded."⁶

Henry M. Morris: "This primeval commission has never been abrogated--man is still under its obligations."⁷

According to Erich Sauer, the words of Genesis 1:26-29 "plainly declare the vocation of the human race to rule. They also call him to progressive growth in culture. Far from being something in conflict with God, cultural achievements are an essential attribute of the nobility of man as he possessed it in Paradise. Inventions and discoveries, the sciences and the arts, refinement and ennobling, in short, the advance of the human mind, are throughout the *will of God*."⁸ Therefore, every sphere of human endeavor can and should be pursued to the glory of God.

Implications

What does this mean for the Christian today?

- ❖ Virtually every vocation is capable of bringing glory to God. Throughout history, God has used merchants, fishermen, doctors, teachers, government officials, religious leaders, craftsmen, farmers, and homemakers to accomplish his will. The key to glorifying God through any vocation is viewing it as God does and practicing it as God would. This involves thinking critically about our life's work, making use of both general and special revelation.⁹ In addition, it requires us to challenge our culture where it is contrary to God's revelation.
- ❖ Non-ministry vocations are not inferior to ministry vocations. Investigation of any part of God's creation has worth in that it involves the creative use of the abilities we have due to our creation in the image of God. It is worthy of note, however, that the pursuit of the cultural mandate is not opposed to ministry. In fact, the success of the evangelistic mandate¹⁰ depends to some degree on that of the cultural mandate.

Conclusion

As Christians we are responsible to fulfill both the cultural and evangelistic mandates. The two should not be seen as conflicting but as complementary. Our vocations differ in the degree to which they allow us to serve each mandate. Wherever God puts us in life, we should serve him gladly to the utmost of our ability, making use of all the resources he places at our disposal.

⁵ There are essentially two schools of thought on this issue. The first, the Anabaptist view, holds that Christians are part of a spiritual kingdom that is wholly separate from the world, society, state, and culture. On this basis it proposes that the fall of mankind invalidated the cultural mandate. The second view follows Reformed theology. It maintains that humans are inevitably cultural beings. Christ's work does not eliminate culture but transforms it. Rather than form isolated communities, Christians are to live within their culture and redeem it for the Lord.

⁶ Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 20.

⁷ Henry M. Morris, *Genesis Record*, 77.

⁸ Erich Sauer, *The King of the Earth: The Nobility of Man According to the Bible and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 80-81. Sauer discusses the cultural mandate at some length but never calls it by that name.

⁹ General revelation is that divinely revealed truth which is within the grasp of all men through the study of nature and history. Special revelation is supernatural and is located in the Scriptures and the Person of Christ. The Scriptures tell us that in Christ "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2.3). In other words, "*all truth is God's truth, wherever it be found*" (Arthur F. Holmes, *Idea*, 17).

¹⁰ This term refers to Christ's Great Commission.

Our life's work matters to God. We cannot afford to divorce our occupation from our spiritual life. God does not distinguish between the two. We must live out our relationship with God in every facet of life. We must strive to view everything we know and do from God's perspective. Understanding the cultural mandate is a significant step toward the accomplishment of this goal.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ Was the image of God in man affected by the fall? If so, how?
- ❖ Is the unbeliever capable of fulfilling the cultural mandate? If so, to what extent?
- ❖ How, if at all, was the cultural mandate affected by the fall?
- ❖ What is the best context for sharing the gospel--immersion in the culture or separation from it? What are the dangers of each strategy?
- ❖ What can you do to view your field of study or work more from God's perspective? How can you integrate the insights of both general and special revelation into your sphere of activity?