

#23 “Does the Bible Teach a Cultural Mandate?”

by Brent Barnett

www.relevantbibleteaching.com

First and foremost, what do people mean when they say that we are to fulfill a cultural mandate? The cultural mandate is the belief that we are to bring God's truth to bear upon every area of human society, from arts and literature, to politics, to government, to economics, to the schools, to scientific progress, and so on. It is based in Genesis 1:28 which says, "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."

At face value, the cultural mandate sounds wonderful. Of course we as Christians are to be good stewards of creation, so there is an environmental mandate, so to speak. As Christians we are to use our God-given gifts and abilities to serve Him in our careers, no matter what field we are in. We are not to do anything immoral or that elevates man and dismisses God. We in our writing and art forms are not to do anything vile, evil, or degrading, but we are to write, paint, and sculpt in a way that pleases God. Government structures should be based upon Biblical truths, such as the fact that the heart of man is desperately wicked so checks and balances are needed, as in our government. The Bible does have implications for how we live in all areas of human expression. Absolutely, God's truth has something to say to all areas of life. As Colossians 3:23 says, "Whatever you do, do it with all your heart, as for the Lord, rather than for men." Everything we do is a matter of worship and stewardship as we seek to honor God and advance His kingdom.

But this is the sticky part when it comes to the cultural mandate. The kingdom of God as Christ defined it is a spiritual kingdom in the heart of man. That is why, even though He would be crucified and then ascend into heaven, that He could say that the kingdom of heaven was in their very midst (Matthew 10:7). It is Christ in us and among us, taking dominion over our hearts, minds, and souls (the whole purpose of the beatitudes which defined who could enter the kingdom of God). Yet those who are adamant about the cultural mandate assert based upon Genesis 1:28 that we are to rule the earth as Christians. They say that we are, in effect, to subdue all institutions, governments, and power structures so that Christians rule and put Christian principles into play for all men. They speak of Christians advancing by creating a Christian culture. This almost seems more important to them at times than advancing the kingdom of God in the hearts of men. This is where their theology is unbiblical.

God never commissioned us to subdue the earth in the sense that radical Islam seeks to subdue the world for Allah. We don't rise up and kill people so that we can honor God in the name of advancing a Christian kingdom. Haven't we learned our lesson from the crusades? Christianity is advanced through prayer and the proclamation of the gospel. It is this that we are commissioned to do. As Christ said, "Go into all the world and make

disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them all that I have commanded you.” This is our mandate. Genesis 1:28 is simply telling us in context to be caretakers of creation. It is not telling us to conquer the world for Christ.

Culture is an outgrowth of belief. In academia, a debate rages as to whether religion creates culture or whether culture dictates religion. Which comes first, religion or culture, the chicken or the egg? Actually, just as we know God created the chicken before the egg because the Bible tells us so, we know that culture is merely a reflection of the heart of a man because God tells us that the central issue is always a heart issue. A godly culture is the result of godly belief and a heart transformed and subdued by the Word of God. Cultures change on a daily basis, but the Word of God endures forever. God doesn’t change. As such, the call to the Christian is not to subdue culture through influence, power, and position (though there is nothing wrong with using government mechanisms and positions of influence to be witnesses for Christ and to herald the truth (i.e. William Wilberforce arguing for the slave trade to be abolished in England)). Rather, the call to the Christian is to preach the gospel to every nation. It is to be a caretaker of creation. It is to let the truth of God permeate and impact every area of human life and practice, including our jobs and our rights in mechanisms of government. Doing these things will create a culture of godliness, which is the church of Christ (see Acts 2:42-46). In other words, there is no such thing as a Christian culture apart from the true church. A nation may have Christian roots and values, but apart from a life transformation of the gospel, such roots and values will be cast aside as the people of the nation create rules and legislation that suit their true hearts’ desires. The only answer is true heart change. We can’t subdue a lost person’s heart, but God can if we love them, preach the gospel to them, and show them what a godly culture looks like (love, unity, generosity, gospel proclamation, praise of God, talk about God, prayer, Bible teaching about all relevant areas of theology and issues of life, true friendship and fellowship, etc.).

So in a sense there is a cultural mandate, though we must understand how the Bible defines culture and how cultures are changed. The kingdom of God is presently in the heart of a person and that is where it advances. However, Christians should do what they can to serve as those transformed from the inside out in their God-given roles in the culture in which they live. We should speak out against wrongs in culture and not engage in unbiblical aspects of culture. Yet we must remember that the only way to truly change a culture is not by legislation (e.g. like when we tried to outlaw alcohol and created an underworld of bootlegging and crime), though godly legislation is certainly a step in the right direction. If we outlaw abortion, people will still abort, though it will be more difficult for them to do so. If we outlaw killing of the weak or elderly, people will still do it. We have outlawed illegal drugs, and people still do it. The issue is always an inner transformation of the heart through faith in Christ. It is this we must focus on and make central. Culture will change if we as Christians live out Christ and proclaim Christ. If we live as hypocrites and fail to proclaim a full gospel or any gospel for that matter then our efforts to subdue culture will fail miserably. Do we want to impact culture and bring truth to bear upon it? Then let us live as Christ, proclaim the gospel of Christ, and use the places and positions that God has given us to show why and how the Bible’s way is the

better and right way in all areas of life.

God's plan all along is that we would preach the gospel, a seemingly foolish task in that we are relying upon a message to change the world. Indeed it will change the world for it has been doing so since Christ came. Colossians 1:5-6 says, "Because of the hope laid up for you in heaven, of which you previously heard in the word of truth, the gospel which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard of it and understood the grace of God in truth." Yes, we should stand for truth and morality in our culture and nation, but ultimately our hope is in Christ through the word of truth, the gospel of Jesus Christ. This we must proclaim, regardless of whether or not our culture accepts it and receives it. If they do, they will be changed, and if they do not, they will become further corrupted and store up more wrath from God. We can only do what God has asked us to do and preach the truth, stand for truth, and live out the truth. If that doesn't work, there is no plan B until Christ comes.

Want to see your culture become more God-centered? Don't rely upon outward mechanisms to subdue it; rely upon God to subdue their hearts through the foolishness of the message preached and through the power of prayer. After all, we battle not flesh and blood, culture, government, or any earthly foe, but the principalities and powers of darkness (Ephesians 6:12). The kingdom is spiritual and, as such, it must be advanced through spiritual means.