

The Church Does Not Have a Cultural Mandate

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Man was to *subdue it [the earth]; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.*

The Hebrew word for *subdue* is *kabash* and means *to subdue*, or *bring into bondage*. The word for *rule* is *radah to rule*, or *dominate*. Clearly, man dominates nature (Psa 8:6-8). This has been developed into what is called the “cultural mandate.” Although many evangelicals are turning to this, it is primarily the teaching of the reformed and covenant groups. It says that this passage (Genesis 1:26-31) gives mankind a mandate to keep, guard, and improve the cultures of the world. For example, the SLJ Institute published this:

Now the filling of the earth and the subduing of it emphasizes the cultural mandate... Culture in the sense in which I am speaking, of course, then is not contrary to Christianity. It is the task of the believing family of God. It is no wonder then, that John Calvin when in his school in Geneva, he sought to teach young men the ministry of the word of God, insisted that those who studied for the ministry should first have a broad cultural training.

There are 3 significant problems with the idea of a cultural mandate for Christians:

1. The command to Adam and Eve was not cultural, it was physical. Subduing and ruling over the earth is defined as *over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth*. None of those creatures have culture. They have instincts, tendencies, needs and drives, but not culture. Culture is only developed by man, because only man has moral inclinations. The commands for ruling the earth have nothing to do with ruling over mankind and human activities. That idea comes from John Calvin, not Genesis.
2. There is no indication that God directed humans to influence the cultures of the world at any time in history. For example, at the time of Noah, the cultures of the earth were bad.
Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually (Genesis 6:5).
In the midst of this, *Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord*. But the Lord never instructed Noah to fix the culture, nor did He reprimand him for not doing so. Abraham was to journey to Canaan and dwell there, but he was never instructed to influence their culture. The Hebrews were made into a nation by the Mosaic Law, and they were responsible for the culture of the Jewish people. But they had no mandate to fix the cultures of the nations around them.
3. The church was never commanded to change the world. The church is pictured as being **in** the world but **not of** the world (John 17:15), as being aliens and strangers with a citizenship in heaven not on earth. Jesus and the apostles never became involved in changing or influencing the culture of the world around them. Their whole focus was on the body of Christ. Their only mandate for the world was *Go make disciples of all nations*. In John 18:36, *Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting*

Although I see no basis for teaching what the covenant community calls a “cultural mandate,” we do have an obligation to apply the commands given to our original parents to subdue and rule over the earth.

Application: It is man’s responsibility to see that animals are treated well, kept from hurting people, and destroying the environment. Man can hunt them, eat them, diminish and enhance the size of herds, flocks, schools, and swarms. But he must also protect them from cruelty. We must not hunt whales to extinction and cut down all the forests without replenishing them. But all this is not to preserve the planet or its wildlife. God will destroy all of it, burning it up with *intense heat* (2 Peter 3:10-12). From the commands of the sixth day, we can see that God wants us to be responsible to care for the plants and animals of the earth.