

Deconstructing Passages Used for Cultural Dominion

Read Time: 5 Minutes

Genesis 1:28 and its New Testament counterpart, Matthew 28:19, have been used by some to justify Christians exerting top-down dominion over society. While a case can arguably be made for cultural influence, we need to interpret said passages properly to not justify erroneous methodologies.

In Genesis 1:28, God blessed mankind and instructed them to “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.” This dominion was to be exerted over the created order. Some understand this as a cultural mandate, while others interpret it as a dominion mandate. It is a mistake to call this a “dominion mandate” relative to the church today since God never commanded Adam to have dominion over fellow human beings.

The directive to have dominion was given to them before the earth was populated. Hence, it referred to dominion over the ecosystem, animal and plant life.

A case can also be made that this was a command to all humanity, not just Christians. Adam was the federal head of all humanity, not just believers (Psalm 8:4-8 gives clarity to Genesis 1:28 and its reference to all humanity). Consequently, throughout history, all human beings have exerted dominion over creation by cultivating the ground, building civilizations and utilizing ecosystems and raw materials for their benefit.

Nevertheless, some Christians can also rightly argue that God never initially intended to give the earth to those outside

His covenant. From this perspective, the primary people who are the recipients of this command to exert dominion over the created order would be Christians. This is especially so since Jesus is called the last Adam by the apostle Paul (1 Corinthians 15:45). While there may be a lot of truth to this last point, the fact remains that dominion was never meant to be dominion over people. We cannot utilize this verse to justify the advancement of Christianity by force or even by top-down political takeover. Voting and political influence remain a matter of Christian stewardship in democratic societies; these were never meant to be the only methods to influence culture.

Jesus, as the last Adam, illustrated that the primary way to have kingdom influence was by washing the feet of others and being a servant-leader (John 13:34). He modeled for Christians, more than unbelievers, God's mandate to cultivate the earth and serve humanity. He showed us how to become the greatest problem solvers and cultural creatives the world has ever seen. (In the past 2000 years since the birth of Christianity, especially in western civilization, the world experienced human flourishing as the church developed hospitals, universities, classical music and art and produced some of the world's greatest scientists.)

What About the Call to Disciple Nations?

Many have interpreted Matthew 28:19 (to disciple all nations) to mean that the church is called to use the Bible as a handbook to Christianize geopolitical nation-states. While there may be a 'spillover effect' after values derived from biblical ethics permeate every aspect of a society's culture, this is not the primary meaning.

The word nation in the Greek language is "ethnē," and in most places in the New Testament, it has been translated as Gentiles (Matthew 12:21, 25:32; Mark 13:10; Luke 12:30, 21:24, 24:47; Acts 4:25). This refers to non-Jewish people groups,

not necessarily a geopolitical construct that we see in the modern day. The modern-day geopolitical construct of nation-states didn't start until the "peace of Westphalia" in 1648. Thus, this political arrangement is less than 500 years old.

That Jesus wasn't primarily giving a command for a top-down political takeover of a nation is made clear by the rest of the context in Matthew 28:19-20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, [even] to the end of the age." In this context, "discipling the nations" meant planting churches in a non-Jewish cultural context among Gentile (ethnic) people groups, thereby expanding the influence of God's kingdom on earth.

We know this because Jesus described the process of discipleship as "being baptized" (which is part of the integration of a believer into church life), followed by "teaching" what Jesus commanded them (which has to do with catechism and teaching new converts the "first principles"—Acts 2:42; Hebrews 5:12-6:3.)

Consequently, according to Jesus, the only ways ethnic groups will be transformed are by joining the church and becoming disciples. Many people vying for cultural transformation today make no mention of the impact of the local church. They make it seem like cultural transformation only depends on national elections. Although it's important to elect godly leaders, we cannot focus merely on politics because, in doing so, we overlook the power of the gospel and the church.

History attests to how effective this biblical methodology can be. We have seen what happens when "a critical mass" of specific ethnic groups join the church and are discipled. The evident changes to a community, city and region's culture are visible after-effects. This was observed in the Roman empire

and many subsequent barbarian groups who experienced Christianization (in the Middle Ages). They adopted biblical law as a standard for cultural norms and ethics.

However, history also illustrates that a Christianized nation, without the strong thriving power of the church, will eventually become as equally corrupt as any heathen nation. For example, a case can be made that the church grew weaker after Rome was Christianized because it became politically advantageous for a Roman to become a Christian (in name only) and join the church.

The result was that many became “minimalist Christians,” thereby compromising the power of the church. Many committed saints felt they had to flee this carnality by secluding themselves, becoming hermits and joining monasteries. As defined by the Lord Jesus Christ, the church was to be built by Him to create a penetrating and lasting impact against which the gates of hell would not prevail.

My conclusion is that the political Christianization of a nation is not the ultimate answer. In my opinion, we are to perpetuate strong local churches that nurture disciples, who, in turn, will positively influence communities for the glory of God.

The result is civilization’s flourishing by the supernatural power of the gospel and its inherent wisdom and revelation. This is the only way communities can be transformed without the church being compromised.

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