

## **Gospel Truth in Contemporary Culture: Further Reflections on Five Central Issues**

In the course of the debate between John Stevens and Joe Boot (June 2015), a number of theological issues were raised that require careful consideration when determining the extent to which Christians should engage with the culture, what the nature of that engagement should be, and what we can expect to accomplish. Here we reflect further on just five of those issues: the reign of Christ, the defeat of Satan, the role of civil government, what we mean by 'the church' and the relationship between the great commission and the cultural mandate.

### **The reign of Christ**

What do we mean when we make the confession, 'Jesus is Lord'? How far does his lordship extend? For many modern evangelical Christians it often means little more than that Jesus is 'King of my heart' and 'Head of my church'. But the language of the New Testament goes far beyond that.

Immediately prior to his ascension into heaven, the risen Lord Jesus Christ declared: 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth' (Matthew 28:18). And the apostle Paul writes of Christ that God the Father 'put all things under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all' (Ephesians 1:22-23). Note that the apostle does not say that Christ is the head over the church (though he certainly is that), but that he is 'head over *all things*' and governs all things for the good of his people.

The 'all things' unquestionably must include the nations of the earth and their rulers. Is it therefore improper for Christians to pray and to seek to exercise an influence on national leaders to the end that they acknowledge the Lordship of Christ, submit to his rule, and enact legislation and pursue policies that reflect his mind?

One day the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever (Revelation 11:15), and on that day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11). But when Paul writes that 'he must reign till he has put all enemies under his feet' (1 Corinthians 15:25), he seems to be expecting a progression in Christ's work of subduing his enemies in the present age. As Geerhardus Vos wrote:

Here the kingship of Christ is equivalent to the process of subjecting one enemy after another... Christ's kingdom as a process of conquest precedes the final kingdom of God as a settled permanent state.<sup>1</sup>

We do not know when this age will come to an end, and the Lord Jesus warned us that we can expect to face many tribulations along the way (John 16:33). Nevertheless, if Christ's reign means anything at all, do we not have a basis for anticipating progressive gospel triumphs before Christ returns in glory?

### **The defeat of Satan**

Immediately after man's fall into sin, Satan's condemnation was announced (Genesis 3:15). From then on, there was bitter conflict between the children of God and the children of the devil in every generation, beginning with Adam and Eve's own children, Cain and Abel (1 John 3:10-12). It was only a matter of time until the enmity would reach its climax and, through his own suffering, 'the seed of the woman' would deliver the decisive blow and crush the serpent's head. Satan's final doom was effectively sealed at the cross. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it: 'Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared in the same, that through death he might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil' (Hebrews 2:14).

---

<sup>1</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church*, American Tract Society, 1903, 90-91.

Since that time, Satan's power has been severely limited. The glory of the Lord has been declared among the nations and his wonders among the peoples (Psalm 96:3) and 'all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God' (Psalm 98:3; Is 52:10). Nevertheless, the New Testament still describes him as 'the god of this age' (2 Corinthians 4:4) and as 'the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience' (Ephesians 2:2). He is designated 'the tempter' (1 Thess 3:5; cf. 1 Cor 7:5) and our 'adversary' who maliciously 'walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour' (1 Peter 5:8).

In terms of his present activities, the devil is able to snatch away the word of God from the hearts of its hearers (Mark 4:15) and to 'transform himself into an angel of light' in order to deceive the unwary (2 Corinthians 11:14). He blinds the minds of unbelievers (2 Corinthians 4:4), employs a range of devices to take advantage of believers (2 Corinthians 2:11), and can, subject to the will of God, hinder ministers of the gospel (1 Thessalonians 2:18).

Believers are exhorted not to give place to the devil (Ephesians 4:27) and to 'put on the whole armour of God, that [they] may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil' (Ephesians 6:11). James exhorts Christians to 'Resist the devil and he will flee from you' (James 4:7). Perhaps significantly, believers are nowhere exhorted to crush the devil. That is God's work and will be performed in God's time, and it will be accomplished under the feet of God's people (Romans 16:20).

So are we warranted to view every gospel advance and every cultural change accomplished by the Lord's people as an instance of the crushing of Satan under the feet of believers? That every conversion entails a turning from the power of Satan to God (Acts 26:18) and that the gospel has social and cultural effects that present a threat to Satan's dominion is beyond question. But are they serial fulfilments of Romans 16:20?

We would suggest that the victories which we witness and experience in this life are both the fruit of the crushing blow dealt to Satan by Christ at the cross *and* anticipations of the full and final victory that we shall share with our living head when Satan is finally and for ever trampled into the dust by the power of the God of peace, under the feet of his people. It is not in this life, but at the return of Christ in glory, that 'dust shall be the serpent's food' (Isaiah 65:25).

### **The role of civil government**

The apostle Paul exhorts us to pray 'for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence' (1 Timothy 2:1-2), but are we to take it from this that the function of civil government is limited to securing peace and freedom for churches to worship and evangelise without interference?

While such conditions are desirable and should be priorities in our prayers both for our own land and other parts of the world, the calling of the governing authorities would appear to go beyond that. In Romans 13, Paul not only teaches that national rulers are 'appointed by God' as a divine ordinance, but three times he refers to them as 'God's ministers'. In Romans 13:4, he twice applies the word 'diakonos' (servant, minister, deacon) to them, and in Romans 13:6, he employs the word 'leitourgos' (a word which, with one possible exception, the New Testament employs in connection with the service of God).

As for the function of the civil ruler, the apostle teaches that he is 'God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil'. Whose wrath? His own or God's? Lenski notes that the word 'wrath' appears eleven times in Romans and in each instance it is the wrath of God that is referred to. He comments: 'here it is the divine wrath as executed by God on the evildoer through the government as his 'minister''.<sup>2</sup> John Murray agrees that the wrath of God is in view and comments: 'Thus the magistrate is the avenger in executing the judgment that accrues to the evil-doer from the wrath of God... [H]e is the agent in executing God's wrath'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> R C H Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, Hendrikson Publishers, 1998, 793.

<sup>3</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, 1965, Vol 2, 153.

But this raises the question of the standard by which the magistrate is to exercise judgment. If the state is God's minister to execute the wrath of God against evildoers, how is the state to define evil? Lenski contends that:

The New Testament... lays down no laws for the secular state on any matter. This is left to the natural sense of right and justice found among men, who also bear the responsibility for the laws they put into force and must bear the consequences, whether these are beneficial or detrimental. Shall a state inflict or not inflict the death penalty for extreme crime? The answer is one that the state must give.<sup>4</sup>

However, if the state is to execute the wrath of God, does that not rule out the arbitrariness that will inevitably ensue if each government effectively does what is right in its own eyes? If the ruling authorities are truly to function as 'ministers of God', does that not imply an obligation to govern according to divine standards?

### **What do we mean by 'the church'?**

At times the debate as to whether the church should be involved with politics and engage with the culture becomes confused when the word 'church' is being used in different ways. Sometimes 'church' is used to refer to a denomination, at other times to a local church, and at still other times to individual Christians as they pursue their callings in the world.

So, for example, when an Anglican or a Presbyterian says that 'the church' should send out a clear message to the government that it should or should not pursue a particular policy he may mean that the senior representatives of the denomination (archbishops, bishops or moderators) should make representations to the government and/or that the various councils of the church (synods, assemblies or committees) should make a formal resolution and issue a statement on the issue under discussion. An Independent, however, is more likely to think in terms of the elders of the local church making a clear statement on the government's proposals on behalf of the church and, if the church belongs to a larger umbrella grouping (e.g. EFCC, FIEC, GBA), he may feel that the officers of the wider fellowship of churches also have a role to play.

Many evangelicals are concerned that the involvement of 'the church' in politics, cultural engagement and ministries of mercy (whether at a denominational or local church level) could prove a distraction from the primary calling of the church to worship, evangelism and discipleship, and could lead to the adoption of some kind of 'social gospel'. The question, therefore, needs to be raised as to how Christians are to show love towards their neighbours and seek the welfare of the city where the Lord has placed them (Jeremiah 29:7). Should it be done primarily by Christians acting together in the context of the local church (or associations of local churches) or individual believers acting independently of the oversight of the local church?

For example, most evangelicals would agree that a crisis pregnancy centre that seeks to encourage women to continue with their unplanned pregnancies and offers advice and support performs a valuable function. But should such a service operate under the oversight of a local church, or should it be established as a separate charity with an independent board of trustees?

The New Testament commends congregational demonstrations of practical concern and financial provision for needy believers elsewhere (Acts 11:27-30; Romans 15:26-27; 1 Corinthians 16:1-3; 2 Corinthians 8-9) and, subject to strict criteria, requires churches to provide for the needs of widows who lack means of support from within their own families (1 Timothy 5:3-16). But charitable works are by no means to be confined to corporate activities under the oversight of the local church. Individual believers are also to perform good works on their own initiative. This is explicitly taught by the Lord Jesus himself in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and there is nothing to suggest that the good works and charitable deeds performed by Dorcas in making tunics and garments for the poor was a ministry of Joppa Evangelical

---

<sup>4</sup> Lenski, *op. cit.*, 792.

Church (Acts 9:36-42). Rather, she provides an outstanding example of a humble believer selflessly employing her gifts and opportunities on behalf of those in need.

In our discussions of political involvement and cultural engagement it is helpful to carefully define what we mean by 'the church' and to clearly differentiate between the role of the institutional church (the church as the gathered community) and the role of individual Christians (the church scattered in the world). The Christian life is much bigger, broader and more multi-faceted than 'church life'. There are many good works that lie outside the remit of the church as an institution but which individual believers may and should engage in according to their gifts, callings and opportunities. Equally, there are many worthy causes which it may not be right and appropriate for the church to support as the church, but nonetheless merit the support of church members in their personal capacity.

In this context, John Murray helpfully distinguishes between the responsibility of the church and the responsibilities of its members:

To the church is committed the task of proclaiming the whole counsel of God and, therefore, the counsel of God as it bears upon the responsibility of all persons and institutions. While the church is not to discharge the functions of other institutions such as the state and the family, nevertheless it is charged to define what the functions of these institutions are... To put the matter bluntly, the church is not to engage in *politics*. Its members must do so, but only in their capacity as citizens of the state, not as members of the church.<sup>5</sup>

### **The relationship between the great commission and the cultural mandate**

Has the great commission of Matthew 28:18-20 superseded the cultural, or creation, mandate of Genesis 1:26-28? Does God's mandate to Adam in Eden find its fulfilment in Christ's commission to his church? At one level that would appear to be a reasonable conclusion to draw. It was as divine image-bearers that the first man and the first woman were commanded to fill and subdue the earth and to exercise dominion over every created thing. Adam and Eve, together with their progeny, were to serve as God's representatives on earth and to fit the entire planet to serve as a habitation for God to the praise of his glory. As Beale and Kim put it: 'Worship is...the goal of mission in Eden, filling the earth by multiplying image-bearers in the temple of God's presence who would worship and reflect God's glory to the ends of the earth.'<sup>6</sup>

As a result of the fall, the image of God in man has become distorted, man has been banished from Eden, and the earth is no longer the dwelling-place of God. In his natural condition, man is therefore ill-equipped to exercise godly dominion on the earth. It is only through Christ that the image of God is renewed in us (Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 4:24) and therefore it is only through the fulfilment of the great commission that fallen men, women and children will come to the Saviour and be made new. Only as the gospel is proclaimed among the nations will local sanctuaries of God's people be established in which the praises of God will be sung to the ends of the earth.

All too often, evangelicals have tended to interpret the great commission too narrowly and understood it to be little more than a call to bring people to Christ, to baptise them and to involve them in the life of the church. The injunction of the risen Jesus to 'teach them to observe all things that I have commanded you' is frequently overlooked and not given due weight. As John Frame has observed:

The great commission tells us not only to tell people the gospel and get them baptised, but also to teach them to obey everything Jesus has commanded us. Everything. The gospel creates new people, people radically committed to Christ in every area of their lives. People like these will change the world. They will fill and rule the earth to the glory of Jesus. They will plant churches, establish godly families, and will also plant godly hospitals, schools, arts, and sciences. That's what has happened by God's grace. And that is what will continue to happen until Jesus comes.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> John Murray, 'The Relation of Church and State', in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol 1, Banner of Truth, 1976, 255.

<sup>6</sup> G K Beale and Mitchell Kim, *God dwells among us: Expanding Eden to the ends of the earth*, IVP, 2014, 29.

<sup>7</sup> John M Frame, 'Christianity and Culture', Lectures given at the Pensacola Theological Institute, July 23-27, 2001

[http://www.thirdmill.org/newfiles/joh\\_frame/Frame.Apologetics2004.ChristandCulture.pdf](http://www.thirdmill.org/newfiles/joh_frame/Frame.Apologetics2004.ChristandCulture.pdf)

Far from rendering the cultural mandate redundant, redemption through Christ enables, equips and motivates men, women and children renewed after the image of God to more adequately represent their Creator in the world and to bring everything into subjection to him. The fact that 'The earth is the Lord's and all its fulness' (Psalm 24:1) teaches us to do away with any concept of a sacred-secular divide. Thomas Howard and J I Packer put it well:

To affirm and bask in the goodness of the world, to praise God for the wonders of creation, to practice responsible stewardship of this small planet, and to honour its Maker by using its resources widely for the welfare of the race and the enriching of human life are all integral aspects of work that Christians are called to do. Any idea that consistent Christianity must undermine or diminish concern for the tasks of civilisation should be dismissed once and for all.<sup>8</sup>

Or as Abraham Kuyper famously expressed it more succinctly: 'There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human life of which Christ, who is Sovereign of all, does not cry: 'Mine!''<sup>9</sup>

*Norman Wells*

*(This article was originally published in the Affinity Social Issues Bulletin for June 2015 and reprinted in the June 2020 edition as a tribute to the author. The whole edition can be found at [www.affinity.org.uk](http://www.affinity.org.uk))*

---

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Howard and J I Packer, *Christianity: The True Humanism*, Regent College Publishing, 1999, p.180.

<sup>9</sup> Abraham Kuyper, 'Sphere Sovereignty', a public address delivered at the inauguration of the Free University, 20 October 1880, translated by George Kamps.