

4B DOMINION AND COMMON GRACE

From the earliest chapters of the book of Genesis we find two concepts that are critical to a Christian understanding of engineering: (1) Dominion and (2) Common Grace.

Dominion -The Cultural Mandate

Immediately after God has created humankind, male and female, in His image, in the Garden and before the Fall, we read this:

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Genesis 1:28)

The KJV uses the expression “replenish the earth,” which also fits (and which we often have not done well.)

This passage has been termed the “cultural mandate” or the “creation mandate” or the “dominion covenant”. God was telling Adam to use the earth, with minimum direction on how that was to be done.

We should note a couple of things about the mandate: First, humans are not only given the opportunity to use the earth but are actually *commanded* to do so. Second, the dominion is given to all humans and it is over the earth, not over people in any sense. One mistaken interpretation has been that Christians should rule over non-Christians. The Hebrew concept of “subdue” means to tame and to use, never to pillage and destroy.

The term “subdue” (in Hebrew, “kabash”) is used in the Old Testament to describe when someone takes control of a piece of land or group of people and subjugates it (or them) with the express purpose of yielding a benefit from it (or them) ... One of the most important implications of this verse is that human beings are to cultivate, investigate, develop, and look after the planet (and its resources). I also believe that this logically includes the cultivation and development of ideas themselves. Some ways of doing things are verifiably better than others. It’s not good subjugation to continually re-tread ineffective (and in some cases, disastrous) suggestions.

The main idea is that we are to derive benefits from what God has blessed us with and given us stewardship over. [1]

Gen. 1:28 is God’s first commandment to Adam – “Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it.” “Fill the earth” is not simply saying “have so many kids that you populate the whole earth.” Adam has already been told to be fruitful. Peel points out that the Hebrew words used here mean “Bring to full flower” or “to fulfillment.” Besides begetting children (first statement) humans were to fully develop the potential of the earth’s resources (second statement). [2]

Humans produce offspring after their likeness. They also produce the product of their ideas, in a sense also after their likeness. “As an outworking of “subduing the earth,” humans develop the earth’s resources, are involved in discoveries and inventions, and have skill in productive work.” [3] So the primal command to subdue the earth (often called the creation mandate) is a cultural mandate. [4]

Working with God-

God could have created everything imaginable and filled the earth himself. But he chose to create humanity to work alongside him to actualize the universe’s potential, to participate in God’s own work. It is remarkable that God trusts us to carry out this amazing task of building on the good earth he has given us. Through our work God brings forth food and drink, products and services, knowledge and beauty, organizations and communities, growth and health, and praise and glory to himself. [5]

God assigned a task to the first humans. They were to subdue the earth, an indication that the natural world, while unquestionably good in itself (Gen. 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25), is incomplete. It requires active administration. The natural world, even before the curse of the ground (Gen. 3:17-19), was not to be considered normative. It is God’s law which is normative, and man, as the image-bearer of God, is to exercise dominion in terms of God’s law. [6]

The Cultural Mandate and the Image of God

“As that which was created, man is no higher than all that has been created, but as created in the image of God he has the responsibility to consciously care for all that which God put in his care.” [7]

Recall Psalm 115:16: “...the earth He has given to the children of men.”

There is ...a close connection between the command to have dominion and man’s nature as image of God. To be created in the image of God means that man bears a resemblance to God, shows what God is like. There are many dimensions to this likeness of man to God—the New Testament explicitly mentions righteousness, holiness, and knowledge—but in the present context it has to do with lordship. God as creator is sovereign Lord over the works of his hands; so man, too, is in a derived sense to be lord of creation. ...We find the same connection made in Psalm 8: “Thou has made him (i.e. man) little less than God... Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands, thou hast put all things under his feet.” To be like God, to bear his likeness, means to subdue the earth. [8]

...(I)t is not just nature that is God’s gift to humanity. Culture is a gift as well. In the biblical view culture is not simply something we have made up on our own — God was the first gardener, the first culture maker. As in Genesis 1, he asks us not to do something fundamentally different

but rather to imitate him — in Genesis 1, to imitate his creativity and gracious dominion over the creation, and here in Genesis 2, to imitate him by cultivating the initial gift of a well-arranged garden, a world where intelligence, skill and imagination have already begun to make something of the world. [9]

The Cultural Mandate and God's Ambassadors

Human beings are God's ambassadors, his representatives, to the rest of creation. We are the stewards he has set in the authority over the earth to manifest his presence and to reflect his glory in all our cultural doings.

But note that the image consists in our bodily representation of God. The whole person, and not some inner spiritual part, is created in God's image. We reflect God's glory and represent him on earth by our total physical presence. Indeed, visibility is of the essence, for we are to make the invisible God visible by our lives. In the whole range of our cultural activities we are to demonstrate Yahweh's loving rule. [10]

Our work then is to understand, control, develop, protect, use, care for, nurture and sustainably manage the earth for God and ourselves. Our work is to partner with God in caring for and utilizing the earth. God's plan has us working with his creation. "It is good, very good." Being fruitful, increasing in number and filling the earth describes homemaking, human relationships and voluntary domestic work as being of value to God. Part of being human is to work, contributing to society with dignity. [11]

The Cultural Mandate and Engineering

Scripture sees humanity as fallen into bondage to sin and sees faith in Christ as the key step in reversing that fall. Thus, if we are to understand God's purposes in the world, we also need to think about God's pre-fall purposes. (Genesis 1:28)...Many theologians have used this passage and others to develop the concept of the cultural mandate, sometimes also called the creation mandate-the idea that God's pre-fall purpose for human beings included that their population should increase, they should develop science and technology, and they should develop cultures including social networks, means of communication, art, music, literature, and so forth. [12]

(I)t is therefore of the greatest importance to keep that first, foundational word in mind when we listen to the many subsequent words which God addresses to man. All other revelation presupposes this. The history of God's progressive self-revelation can be compared, in a very legitimate sense, to an inverted pyramid. Everything is poised, is pivoted upon, a single focal point upon which the whole structure rests. And that pivotal point is the cultural mandate. [13]

Ever since humans were first created they have populated the earth, built villages and cities, domesticated animals, carried out work, and developed culture.

In summary,

- We are neither to despise the natural world nor to love and worship it as if it were the Giver.
- We subdue, replenish, and fill it.
- We see ourselves in one sense as connected to it, as physical beings.
- We treat it as God's gift to us.
- We unlock its secrets to use it.
- We overcome its wildernesses in certain areas to live in it.
- We use its resources to meet our physical needs and to bless others.
- We enjoy, appreciate, and give thanks for it.
- We maintain it as trusted stewards.

Common Grace

“Common grace” is a theological term referring to God's innumerable blessings to mankind that are not strictly part of salvation. These demonstrate His love and mercy to all people. The most popular statement of common grace is that the sun shines on everyone and “it rains on the just and on the unjust.” (Mt. 5:45).

In the physical realm common grace includes natural resources, the weather, food, health, and the ability to work.

Acts 14: 17 – “Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.”

Ps. 145:9, 15-16- “The Lord is good to all; He has compassion on all he has made...The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time. You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every living thing.”

Common grace means that

- God is a loving and giving God
- God desires humans to flourish
- God's kindness is evidence to the world of His existence
- God's kindness should lead many to repentance (Rom. 2:4)
- God makes possible all the features of culture, including art, music, science, general morality, and government.

“God also makes possible all the aspects of culture, including art, music, science, discovery, innovation. Whether they are followers of Christ or not, people have unique talents. Tubal-Cain

(Gen. 4:22) was probably the first blacksmith and the man who introduced the technology of metallurgy to the world.” [14]

“By God’s “common grace” people have been able to do much good in the areas of education, the development of civilization, scientific and technological projects, the development of just laws, and general acts of human benevolence to others.” [15]

Medicine

Beyond actual medicine that we take, the very discipline of medicine is a blessing from God. Although it is absolutely not the case that all doctors are Christians, and there are compelling reasons to believe that the rise of science is a result of (or at the very least, dependent on) the Christian worldview, it is true that even Christian doctors are not studying Scripture in order to learn how to treat medical conditions. Doctors study the natural world to obtain that information. Because of this study, we are able to perform surgery, treat illnesses, and delay death (not all delay of death is a good thing). We are able to do these things because God has, in his providence and wisdom, revealed through nature how.

Technology

In a related way, the study of the natural world has yielded technological advancements that serve to, when used properly, better the life of humans on earth. These advancements range from things as seemingly simple as paper and writing (without which we would not have Scripture), to things as mind bogglingly advanced as the technology used to power the internet ...

Like medicine above, these insights have been given to humanity and are a blessing irrespective of a person’s status as a member of God’s people, or as a member of God’s enemies. Like all created things, God’s enemies twist his blessings and they become curses. However, that does not change the fact that these things are indeed blessings. [16]

Max Deffenbaugh and David Che have written specifically about engineering as a “common grace activity” since (1) the field can be entered by people from all possible backgrounds and (2) the results of engineering design can benefit everyone:

It is a valuable lesson in helping students to work effectively and comfortably in diverse teams to appreciate the engineering excellence of their colleagues as a gift of God, even if their colleagues may not recognize it as such...Understanding engineering as a common grace activity is foundational to making students effective engineers and effective Christian witnesses in a diverse workplace. [17]

The doctrine of common grace helps those in science and engineering professions to understand God’s dominion mandate, and His will and purpose for the entire human race. Engineering is part of God’s common grace to mankind. He gave man this gift to help fulfill His call to “subdue

the earth.” *Non-Christians are also bestowed this dominion mandate and they could contribute to the work of “subduing the earth” according to God’s common grace.* [18]

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