

THE CULTURAL MANDATE AND THE NEW TESTAMENT GOSPEL IMPERATIVE

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Herman Dooyeweerd in his *In the Twilight of Western Thought* concludes his chapter on "The Sense of History and the Historicistic World and Life View," with the following thought:

There would be no future hope for mankind and for the whole process of man's cultural development if Jesus Christ had not become the spiritual center and His kingdom the ultimate end of world-history.¹

Dooyeweerd further comments that "in the historical process of cultural development a normative human vocation reveals itself, a cultural task committed to man at his creation."²

Taylor amplifies this thought further by noting that various societal groups including the churches as well as the family, the university, the business world, the farm and the like hold a "cultural mandate directly from the Creator for the pursuance of their own peculiar task."³

From the above it may be gathered that the injunction of God to Adam and Eve to subdue the earth and have dominion over it (Genesis 1:28) is to be understood by the Christian and the Christian Church today as being their task to bring the world into conformity to God's will, to make the world Christian in every sphere of society. However, this is to minimize the effect of the fall of man (Genesis 3), with the resultant human depravity of all mankind.

In analyzing further what has just been said, it is to be noted that Scripture clearly indicates that the individual Christian is to give his witness to the salvation he has received through the cross of Christ in whatever vocation he finds himself. Following the biblical example, it is to be noted that tax collectors were to carry on their trade with honesty and soldiers were to practice their soldiery without violence and false accusations against others (Luke 3:12-14). However, that the corporate church is to engage itself in the various societal units by way of political and social action as a *primary part* of its witness is another question.

1. H. Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Phila.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1960), pp. 111, 112.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
3. E. L. Hebdén Taylor, *The Christian Philosophy of Law, Politics and the State* (Nutley, N.J.: The Craig Press, 1966), p. 416.

At this point there should be noted some of the concepts used in describing aspects of the cultural mandate it is said that Christianity is obligated to perform. In discussing the principle of sphere sovereignty and in positing that "God alone is the absolute sovereign," Taylor states that the "Kingdom of God should not, in the collectivist sense, be identified with any temporal organization" and that "every temporal organization must reflect the divine law of love as it governs the eternal Kingdom of God."⁴ This thought seems to be conveying the idea that all organizations, as involved in God's divine law of love, are in a sense to be Christianized. Dooyeweerd's thought agrees with this when, in discussing the "one radical and Scriptural idea of the Christian state" he stresses that:

The genuinely Christian idea of the state is rooted in the radical Scriptural view regarding the relationship between the Kingdom of God in Christ Jesus and the temporal societal structures in which God's general or common grace arrests the dry-rot caused by sin.⁵

But then the question is to be asked, where in this age is there such a societal structure as a Christian state? Also, since man's fall into sin (Genesis 3), it must be asked whether a Christian state is possible, that is, until the millennial reign of Christ (Rev. 20).

That Dooyeweerd in his system intends that all societal structures, including the church, be thought of as connected with or seem as a part of the body of Christ is evident in his statement:

All temporal societal relationships, including state and organized church-institute, are in accordance with their God-willed structure, merely temporal manifestations, temporal expressions of the one and only true supra-temporal root-community of renewed mankind in the "body of Christ," the "invisible church" of which Christ is the only Head.⁶

But such a thought again loses sight of the fact that fallen humanity is totally depraved, "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1), and that men only become a part of the Church by the redemptive act of Christ on the cross (Ephesians 5:25-27) and the application of this redemption to men's hearts by the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 12:13; Titus 3:5, 6); men do not become a part of the Church because of political or social action. There is danger of ignoring this human depravity which can only be changed by the supernatural redeeming work of Christ, in maintaining with Dooyeweerd that "the State[*i.e.*, the Christian State] has to unite the whole nation into a Christian political community of faith, so long as the public national opinion shows a Christian stamp."⁷

4. Taylor, *The Christian Philosophy . . .*, p. 415.

5. Herman Dooyeweerd, *The Christian Idea of the State* (Nutley, N.J.: Craig Press, 1968), p. 4.

6. *The Christian Idea . . .*, p. 10.

7. Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought*, vol. III (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1957), p. 505.

This brings us to the subject of the purpose and work that has been laid out for the Church. Taylor argues against the idea that Christ, that is, Christ and his Church be confined "strictly to the sphere of the supernatural, the ecclesiastical and sacramental, and the preaching of the Gospel."⁸ But care needs to be taken here to assure that these very factors just mentioned which are those set forth by Scripture⁹ be stressed as the primary action of Christ and his Church in this period before the Savior's second coming. Stressing that "Christian political action seeks as the political activity of the Body of Christ to reform the world in its political aspect. . .," as Evan Runner does¹⁰ not only confuses the nature of the Body of Christ which Paul says is The Church (Eph. 1:22, 23)—not Christian political activity—but also operates on the premise that the world, from a post-millennial viewpoint, can be and is to be Christianized. This is not to deny that individual Christians may serve the Lord in their vocations in any of the levels of societal life, as Daniel served in government, Zacchaeus conducted his tax collecting business in an honest way, and Cornelius carried on his military responsibilities in an honorable and fair manner.

In the light of the emphases set forth in the several positions referred to above, it is well to examine the Scriptures themselves to determine what purpose and activity are emphasized there for Christ and his Church to perform.

Our study will concern itself with New Testament teaching.

THE ATTITUDE AND ACTION OF JESUS

Jesus in his first coming did not put Christianizing the world through social and political action as primary in his own life or as primary in his goals for his Church.

Evidence in His Words

A few examples from the many sayings of Christ will suffice to show that Christ in his incarnate ministry in the first Christian century placed his stress on the spiritual need of man and stressed that he came the first time to meet that need.

In his trial before Pilate, when the Savior certainly needed political deliverance, he stated quite emphatically, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then my servants would fight that I not be turned over to the Jews."¹¹ Then he goes on to say, "But

8. *The Christian Philosophy* . . . , p. 522.

9. Matthew 28:19, 20, etc.

10. Evan Runner, *Christian Perspectives*, 1962, pp. 176-177 through Taylor, *The Christian Philosophy* . . . , p. 600.

11. One needs to be careful, in making the statement as Klaas Runia does, that "Jesus Christ is now already King of the world," to point out that though Christ is ever the infinite sovereign over his universe (Colossians 1:16, 17), yet he at this time is not setting up his political kingdom of absolute righteousness. Cf. Klaas Runia, "Evangelical Responsibility in a Secularized World," *Christianity Today*, June 19, 1970, p. 13.

now, for this time (note that the Greek word, *nun*, is emphatic) my kingdom is not here" (John 18:36). The true intent of the Savior's mission is to be seen clearly in his statement that he came to serve and to give his life to ransom many (Matthew 20:28).

When the disciples tried to get a response from the Lord about restoring the physical kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6), Christ by implication indicated that anything of that nature was not in his plans for the days following his ascension. Rather, he said that his Church was to continue to exercise a primary, spiritual emphasis—that of being witnesses for him as to his life and teaching, and particularly as to his death and resurrection (Acts 1:8). And this is the emphasis seen in all of Acts, as exemplified by such statements as those of Peter: "a witness with us of his resurrection" (1:27), "God raised this Jesus of whom we are all witnesses" (2:32), "you killed the Prince of life, the one God raised from the dead, of whom we are witnesses" (3:15); and statements of Paul such as, "they asked Pilate to have him killed. . . but God raised him from the dead" (13:28-30).

This emphasis on man's spiritual need is seen in Christ's personal witness to Nicodemus (John 3), and to the woman at the well (John 4). It is also stressed in Christ's public statements such as the one at the Feast of Tabernacles when he said, "If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink" (John 7:37) and later, the one at the Feast of Dedication, "I give unto my sheep eternal life" (John 10:28). This emphasis is certainly to be seen in Jesus' high priestly prayer when he states that the essence of eternal life is to know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (John 17:3). The same stress is to be seen in his answer to Martha's insistence that her sister Mary placed more emphasis on social concerns: Jesus stresses above all the need for spiritual concern (Luke 10:38-42).

Of singular significance is the message Christ sends to John the Baptist (Matt. 11:5). Christ does indicate in this message his concern for the health of those to whom he preaches, but when he comes to the subject of the poor who in this world would need food and shelter, Jesus in quoting Isaiah 61:1, says, "Tell John the poor have the gospel preached to them." Compare the fuller quotation of Isaiah 61:1-2 in Luke 4:18, where the first element of Christ's ministry is said to be preaching to the poor—that is, giving them the message of salvation. It is to be noted that although Jesus was vitally concerned with meeting the physical needs of the poor, he implies that the economic plight of the poor was not to be completely eradicated in the world's society when he says, "you have the poor with you always; but you do not have me always" (Matt. 26:11).

Evidence in Christ's Actions

Also the Savior's actions reveal the primacy of his mission—that of bringing spiritual salvation to the hearts and lives of his people.

His action in cleansing the temple (John 2:13-22) was not a revolutionary one. He was not bent on destroying or radically changing the

worship structure of the temple, much less overthrow the Roman government to whom he pledged his allegiances. Observe, for example, his agreement with giving tribute money to Caesar when he says, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," (Mark 12:17). His action in John 2 was in part symbolic and a token of his sovereign control, but it was certainly not complete or severe: what could a simple whip made of reeds really do¹²—and wielded by one man at that. Furthermore, the action wasn't lasting, for later in Christ's ministry (Matt. 21:12ff.) he found the activities at the temple going on in the same way as they had been at the earlier time. The content of John 2 shows that the deeper significance and purpose of the cleansing of the temple there is involved with Christ's concern for true spiritual worship and his desire at this point, though in a veiled way, to introduce the concept of his coming death.

At a later time, following the feeding of the five thousand, the crowds began to conceive of Jesus as a political deliverer. When it became evident that they wanted to make Christ a king, the Savior countered this intended action by sending the disciples on ahead by boat (Matt. 14:22) and by going off alone into a mountain (John 6:1-15).

Following the public display at his triumphal entry (Matthew 21:1-11), and the further public display of his concern for the worship of God in cleansing the temple for the second time, and in the acclaim given him by the children as the son of David—following all of this, Jesus then took himself out of this atmosphere of Messianic proclamation and went to the Mount of Olives and to the quiet of Bethany (Matthew 21:12-17). As was true on other occasions, Jesus was on guard lest too much politically be made out of his Messiahship.

THE EMPHASIS IN THE GREAT COMMISSIONS GIVEN BY JESUS

In the several places where Jesus challenges his disciples concerning the mission of the Church, there is to be seen this same spiritual emphasis on preaching and teaching—not on political and social action.

In Jesus' summary of the central purpose of his mission set forth in Matthew 20:28, the message comes through ever so clearly: "he came to give his life a ransom for many."

Following his statement in Matthew 28:18 concerning the all encompassing authority given to him both in heaven and on earth, Jesus in verse 19 spells out the area in which that authority, dispensed to his disciples, was to be used: to go make disciples (learners of his message and ways); to baptize the disciples—identifying the disciples with the sacramental sign; and to teach them to be obedient to all the Lord's commands. Then he says (v. 20) "I am with you for all this period to the consummation (*sunteleia*) of the age. This last statement gives the impli-

12. Cf. B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (London: J. Murray, 1900), p. 41.

cation that it is only at that time, the time of the second coming consummation, that his kingdom in any political sense will be in full force.

In his message to his disciples in Luke 24:46-49, Christ emphasizes the Old Testament prophecy regarding his death and resurrection and the effect of this in preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins. Then Jesus lays stress on their witness to these vital historical spiritual truths; and he also tells them of the promised Holy Spirit who in power was to make this message effective in the lives of men—effective witnesses to the truth of the death and resurrection of Christ and to the truth of repentance and forgiveness of sins through Him.

In Acts 1:8 the Lord lays stress on the disciples' need of spiritual power for an effective witness of Christ, but he has nothing to say about their need of power for political and social action.

The Church's Primary Concerns Exemplified

Following the example of Christ, the book of Acts exemplifies the Church's primary concern for the spiritual needs of men. Acts 6 shows that the Church's social concerns, though important, did not hold the primacy over, nor take the place of, the spiritual concerns of proclaiming the message of Christ's death and resurrection. The remarks of the apostles in verse 4 testify to this: "We will continue to put our emphasis on prayer and the ministry of the Word."

After the prayer service in Acts 4 in which intercession was made for fearlessness to speak the message of the Gospel,¹³ it is first noted that the request was granted, as was seen in a demonstration of their witness through the power of the Holy Spirit and then after that it is stated that the Church shared its material goods with all who had need (Acts 4:23-34). This last emphasis, the sharing of material goods, was actually a resultant working out of the Gospel in the hearts of the believers.

Again, it is following the thrilling story of the effective witness to the people of Antioch in which a dynamic church was born, that mention is then made of the offering being sent to the poor at Jerusalem (Acts 11:19-30; cf., also I Cor. 16:1-3; II Cor. 8:9; Rom. 15:26).

Paul's Emphasis on the Gospel Imperative

The apostle Paul's emphasis is the same: the importance of preaching the message of God's redeeming grace in Christ. This is his concern as he cries out in I Corinthians 9:16, "Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel" (*euangelizomai*). And in I Corinthians 15:1-4 he explains what he means by that Gospel when he says that its substance is that corpus of biblical, scriptural material (observe the Greek *ho*), which the Corinthians had received—that corpus of Scripture truth which Paul himself had received. The apostle then enumerates the central points of that body

13. They were not praying that they might have power to change the world politically or socially.

of scriptural teaching: Christ died in behalf of our sins; Christ was buried—he really died; Christ arose on the third day—all according to the Scriptures. This was the heart of the Gospel, the message of primary concern for the Church. It is by this, Paul says, men are saved. He does not say that by political and social action men are led to salvation.

As a result of the preaching of this message, many everywhere believed in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, so that it could be said of Paul and his companions at Ephesus, “These men have turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). Actually, the word *anastatoo* means to *disturb, upset*. At any rate, it was the truth of Christ’s death and resurrection applied to the hearts of men, that provided the *upset*, not a demonstration of social concern, although that undoubtedly followed.

The Emphasis in the Usage of the New Testament Word, Euangelizomai

In examining the New Testament usage of the word *euangelizomai*—a word often translated, “preach the Gospel”—the conviction comes that the emphasis in the word is almost exclusively on the primary point of God’s means, through his Word and through the death of Christ, of saving the souls of men.

One group of usages places emphasis on “preaching Jesus,” proclaiming his person and work. Beginning with Isaiah 53, Philip preached Jesus to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:35), as did also the Cypriotes and Cyrenians to the people of Syrian Antioch (Acts 11:20). The philosophers at Athens were curious about Paul because he preached Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 17:18). The apostle tells the Galatians that the heart of his work is to preach Jesus (Galatians 1:16), and he talks to the Ephesians about preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ (Eph. 3:8). Peter and John and the others proclaimed Jesus as the Christ (Messiah) (Acts 5:42), and in doing so, they preached peace—peace with God through Christ (Acts 10:36).

Another emphasis of *euangelizomai* closely related to the usage just considered is that on preaching the word and preaching the faith, by which is meant preaching the essentials of that story about Jesus. Paul and Barnabas at Antioch are said to preach the word of the Lord (Acts 15:35). Peter talks about the things that were preached (i.e., the things about Christ’s suffering and glory, with emphasis on Jesus as the Lamb slain) (I Peter 1:12-19), and says that this is the word that has been preached to the saints in Asia Minor to whom he is writing (I Pet. 1:25). He also states that in Noah’s time, the people had the Gospel preached to them—that is, they were told to repent and turn to the coming Messiah for salvation (I Pet. 3:18, 19). In Revelation 10:7, the mystery of God is spoken of as having been preached to God’s servants, the prophets.

The preaching of the faith, the substance of the word about Christ, is spoken of by Paul when he writes to the Galatians in 1:23; it is that

particular faith which he has just described (1:3-9) as encompassing the truth about Christ who died for forgiveness of sins.

One aspect of the Old Testament promise which Paul says was preached, is definitely defined as being the truth that Christ was raised from the dead (Acts 13:32), a part of that core of truth about Christ's work mentioned in I Corinthians 15:1-4.

In one place, *euangelizomai* is used by Paul in preaching to the people at Lystra to stress that aspect of the Gospel story that men should repent and turn to the living God (Acts 14:15).

This important word is also used to stress the widespread extent to be involved in the preaching of the message of Christ's redemptive work. In II Corinthians 10:16 Paul talks of preaching to the regions beyond, and in Romans 15:20, the apostle speaks of preaching where Christ is not named.

The evidence from the usage above clearly indicates that by *euangelizomai*, the New Testament is talking about preaching the word, the faith, the message that Christ died for sinners and that he rose from the dead.

It might be questioned as to how far beyond this basic primary meaning the expression "preach the kingdom of God" (Luke 8:1; Acts 8:12) might be taken. There is nothing in the context, however, that leads to the conclusion that anything more is in mind than was seen to be in the usages already examined. Although the expression, "preach good things," found in Romans 10:15 and taken from Isaiah 52:7, might of itself mean more than simply preaching the message of Christ's death and resurrection, in the light of the context of Romans 10:9-14, where hearing and believing in Christ is stressed, the "good things" can only mean the good things about Christ's life and redemptive work.

CONCLUSION

It has been observed that although the Scripture presents the fact that preaching the Gospel of Christ's death and resurrection results in social concern for the total welfare of men, yet the Scripture most clearly sets forth that the *primary task* of the Church is its proclamation of the message of God's redeeming grace through Christ's work on the cross for salvation, and its gathering together and nurturing God's people in the Church for effective Christian living. Of course, the Church's message on Christian living leads to the application of the spiritual results of Christ's death to the individual believer's relationship to God and to his fellow man, particularly in the spiritual and moral realms. But involvement in the secular world in political and social action is not the primary or direct concern of the Church.

A study of the *euangelizomai* as used in the New Testament also

shows that the primary concern of the Church is to preach the Gospel, that message which invites men, through faith in Christ, to turn from sin and receive from God eternal salvation.

Furthermore, it has been noted that the individual Christian is to live as a Christian wherever he is, and in whatever area of society. This is his individual responsibility. But he is not the Church, nor is his involvement to be thought of as a part of the activity of the corporate visible Church.

In considering the Christian's activity, as well as that of the corporate visible Church, it is always well to keep in mind the viewpoint expressed in the 1970 Frankfort Declaration as it sets forth "Seven Indispensable Basic Elements of Mission" and states:

...all our social achievements and partial successes in politics are bound by the eschatological "not yet" of the coming kingdom and the not yet annihilated power of sin, death, and the devil, who still is the "prince of this world."¹⁴

14. See the English translation of the 1970 Frankfort Declaration by Donald McGavran in *Christianity Today*, June 19, 1970, pp. 843-846. *cf.*, also the article by Robert Recker, "Satan: in Power or Dethroned?" *Calvin Theological Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (November, 1971) p. 133.