

Session 2 The Cultural Mandate

Jesus taught us to pray: “Give us this day our daily bread.” When we do ask God to provide our needs for food, few of us expect him to rain down miracle manna from heaven. Rather, we intuitively assume that God will use farmers, truck drivers, bakers, marketers, warehouse handlers and cashiers to make the answer to our prayer possible. Is this a legitimate answer to prayer or only an example of market capitalism at work? The question introduces us to the part played by human **culture** in God’s plan for our lives.

I. The Two Mandates.

What is man’s purpose? Why was he created and placed here on the earth? What is his mission? These are questions of great importance. The Biblical answer to this question tends to fall under two commands that encompass the purpose for which man was created: the **evangelistic** mandate and the **cultural** mandate.

A. The Evangelistic Mandate.

Often called the Great Commission, the evangelistic mandate is found in several forms in the New Testament but the classic expression is in Matthew 28:19-20.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

- Who? This command is addressed to the **disciples of Jesus**.
- Where? The disciples are sent to **all the nations (peoples)**.
- What? The heart of the commission is to **make disciples**. This is done by going... by baptizing... and by teaching

B. The Cultural Mandate.

Sometimes called the Creation Mandate, this command is also found in several forms, primarily in the Old Testament. But the classic expression is found in Genesis 1:28.

And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

- Who? This command is addressed to **Adam and Eve (mankind in general)**.
- Where? The command is global, covering **all the earth**.
- What? The heart of the commission is to create **families and communities** and to be **good stewards** God’s creation.

In speaking of this cultural mandate, James Davison Hunter says:

*In the Christian view... human beings are, by divine intent and their very nature, **world-makers**.... People fulfill their individual and collective destiny in the art, music, literature, commerce, law, and scholarship they cultivate, the relationships they build, and in the institutions they develop – the families, churches, associations, and communities they live in and sustain.... As a rule, indifference toward the world is quite rare in the history of God’s people. The passion to engage the world, to shape it and finally to change it for the better, would seem to be an enduring mark of Christians on the world in which they live. To be Christian is to be obliged to engage the world, pursuing God’s restorative purposes over all of life, individual and corporate, public and private. This is the mandate of creation. (To Change the World, p.3).*

C. Two Mandates? Or Two Aspects of the Same Commandment?

Look again at these two mandates.

Churches/Christians that are defined by the Cultural Mandate (Mainline, Catholic, state churches, etc.)	Churches/Christians that are defined by the Evangelistic Mandate (Evangelicals, Charismatic, etc.)
Social action	Evangelism
Help the needy	Save the lost
Build schools, hospitals, orphanages, etc.	Build churches
Embrace culture	Keep a distance from culture
Be in the world	Separate from the world
Love your neighbor – he is in the image of God	Evangelize your neighbor – he is lost in sin
Artistic, esthetic, beautiful	Functional, utilitarian, practical
“Worldly” Christianity (in the world)	“Spiritual” Christianity (separate from world)

How do these two mandates go together? Ah, that is the question. Christians have debated this question for centuries. The result has often been division in the church, based on **dualistic** kinds of thinking (either/or). Four basic positions have been taken by various people at various times:

1. Those who see **only** the evangelistic mandate as valid for the mission of the church.
2. Those who would give **priority** to the cultural mandate – seeing the evangelistic mandate as secondary.
3. Those who would treat both mandates as **equal** – arguing that we must not separate what God has joined together.
4. Those who would give **priority** to the evangelistic mandate – seeing the cultural mandate as secondary.

The International Congress on World Evangelization meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974 reflected long and hard on this question. The *Lausanne Covenant* states:

*... we express penitence both for our neglect and for having sometimes regarded evangelism and social concern as mutually exclusive. Although reconciliation with man is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless, we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbor and our obedience to Jesus Christ.... Faith without works is dead.... We affirm that Christ sends his redeemed people into the world as the Father sent him, and that this calls for a similar deep and costly penetration of the world. We need to break out of our ecclesiastical ghettos and permeate non-Christian society. In the church's mission of sacrificial service **evangelism is primary**. World evangelization requires the whole church to take the whole Gospel to the whole world.... (From Articles 5 and 6).*

Charles Colson makes similar point in his book *How Now Shall We Live?*

*It is our contention in this book that the Lord's cultural commission is inseparable from the great commission. That may be a jarring statement for many conservative Christians, who, through much of the twentieth century, have shunned the notion of reforming culture, associating that concept with the liberal social gospel. The only task of the church, many fundamentalists and evangelicals have believed, is to save as many lost souls as possible from a world literally going to hell. But this implicit denial of a Christian worldview is unbiblical and is the reason we have lost so much of our influence in the world. Salvation does not consist simply of freedom from sin; salvation also means being restored to the task we were given in the beginning – the job of **creating culture**. (pp. 295f.).*

D. Characteristics of the cultural mandate.

We gain a fuller picture of what the Cultural Mandate entails by examining the context in which we find it (Genesis 1-2).

²⁶ Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have **dominion** over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. ²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be **fruitful** and multiply and **fill the earth** and **subdue** it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.".....¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to **work it** and **keep it**.... ²⁰ The man **gave names** to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field.... (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:15, 20).

From this passage, we begin to understand that the Cultural Mandate:

1. Is a reflection of the **image of God**. Indeed, making culture and making disciples are two aspects of God's image. To separate creation from redemption would be to make a separation in the very being of God himself.
2. Involves **creativity**. The garden needed someone to both "work it" and "keep it" (Genesis 2:15). This has a thrust that is both developmental and conservationist. Some things in

nature need to be enhanced, developed. Other things need to be maintained, conserved, and restrained. Sinful cultures usually fall into one of two ditches:

- Either they develop nature without conserving it... (materialistic, industrial societies).
 - Or they conserve it without developing it... (animistic, primitive societies).
3. Is a **community** project. Adam cannot fulfill the cultural mandate alone. He needs Eve, family, community. *It is not good that the man should be alone (Genesis 2.18).*
 4. Is **universal** in its scope. There is no area or sphere of the created order where man's dominion is not meant to be exercised.
 5. Involves **manual** work (gardening) as well as **intellectual** work (naming the animals). The mandate includes the cultivation of both the soil and the soul.

Thus Adam and Even are co-participants with God in the work of culture making. This is man's most basic task. The question therefore now becomes: what kind of culture will they make?

II. What happened in Genesis 3?

A. From the Garden of Eden to the **Tower of Babel** (Genesis 3-11).

When sin entered Eden, everything changed. The consequences were devastating not only for individual humans (guilt, fear, shame, alienation, wrath) but also for all human cultures that these fallen men and women would now create. When man fell, **culture fell** too.

1. Nature now began to work **against** man and life in this world became marked by difficulties and dangers. Gardening (picking fruit) became farming (hard labor of plowing, weeding, harvesting, etc.). Enjoyable work now became painful toil.

*And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' **cursed is the ground** because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; **thorns and thistles** it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."* (Genesis 3:17-19).

Isaac Watts captured this truth in his wonderful Christmas carol "Joy to the World."

*No more let sins and sorrows grow, not thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found,
Far as, far as, the curse is found.*

2. Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden. As culture makers, this had huge implications for human history. The image of God in man/woman was still present in some degree, but it was severely **damaged and distorted**. From now on, cultures would now be a mixture of good and evil. *Because man is God's creature, some of his culture is rich in beauty and goodness. Because he is fallen, all of it is tainted with sin and some of it is demonic. (Lausanne Covenant, Article 10).*

Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he **built a city**, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch. ¹⁸ To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad fathered Mehujael, and Mehujael fathered Methushael, and Methushael fathered Lamech. ¹⁹ And Lamech took **two wives**. The name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other Zillah. ²⁰ Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have **livestock**. ²¹ His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the **lyre and pipe**. ²² Zillah also bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of **bronze and iron**. The sister of Tubal-cain was Naamah. ²³ Lamech said to his wives:

“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
 you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:
 I have killed a man for wounding me,
 a young man for striking me.
 If Cain's revenge is sevenfold,
 then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold.” (Genesis 4:17-24).

Human culture, from its beginning, is clearly a mixed bag: cities, polygamy, farming, music, metallurgy, and poetry... all in their twisted glory. The story in Genesis seems to go from bad to worse as sin and depravity increase finally resulting in the flood. But the new beginning with Noah and his sons (sinners all!), didn't change the situation at all (Babel, Sodom, etc.).

B. The Implications.

Sin changed everything. The Garden of Eden was exchanged for the Tower of Babel. But even in places like Babel (and Sodom, Egypt, Nineveh, Babylon, Rome, etc.) there were still glimmers of the divine image and the paradise that had been lost. **Discernment** is needed to distinguish the good from the bad. The following three realities are present in all cultures throughout human history. These elements will be found, in differing degrees, in any culture.

1. **Kingdom** culture. Whenever people in a given culture, consciously or unconsciously, obey God's laws which are manifestations of his character, then the marks of Kingdom Culture are present in a given society. Whatever is **true**, whatever is **just**, and whatever is **beautiful** comes from God and reflects His image. Christians should have no hesitancy in celebrating and enjoying aspects of any culture that reflect the image of the Creator God.

KINGDOM CULTURE: BUILT ON REALITY¹

Truth:	Reflecting God's metaphysical and physical laws
Justice:	Reflecting God's moral laws
Beauty:	Reflecting God's aesthetic laws

¹ Darrow L. Miller. *LifeWork*. p. 96.

Name some elements of American culture that reflect Kingdom culture:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

2. **Counterfeit** culture. Whenever men and women believe Satan’s lies concerning what is true, just and good, then they begin to build culture that is antithetical to God’s Kingdom culture. This means that elements of culture may have characteristics that are evil and demonic (child sacrifice, widow burning, cannibalism, killing the elderly, tribal wars, ritual prostitution, infanticide, etc.). This understanding of culture flies in the face of one of the sacred cows of modern anthropology: **cultural relativism**, which pretends that all aspects of culture are morally neutral and should be maintained and preserved. Anyone who tries to change culture is an imperialistic full of arrogant paternalism.

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! (Isaiah 5:20).

Name some elements of American culture that reflect Counterfeit culture.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

3. **Natural** culture. Many elements of a given culture are morally neutral, neither good nor evil. They are simply the manifestation of the amazing creativity that comes with being created in the image of God. These facets of culture give color, shape, flavor, texture and sound to a people group and help define their unique identity. These aspects of culture should be freely celebrated and enjoyed.

Name some elements of American culture that reflect Natural culture:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

III. Christ and Culture.

A. Richard Niebuhr's Classic.

Few people have helped Christians to better understand the different possibilities of how best to respond to culture than H. Richard Niebuhr in his classic book *Christ and Culture* (1951). He outlines five ways that Christians have sought to deal with human cultures through the centuries.

1. Christ **against** culture.

Christ and culture are in fundamental opposition. Like oil and water, the two do not mix. In this perspective, culture is inherently evil and irredeemable. The main concern of Christians then, should be to separate themselves and keep pure. I John 2:15-17 and James 4:4 are favorite passages. For the disciple of Christ it is clearly a matter of "either-or". Such people develop a "life-boat theology." Examples of those who may hold such a view include: some monastic orders, Quakers, Mennonites, some small denominations, etc.

2. Christ **of** culture.

At the other end of the spectrum from #1 is the view that sees Christ and culture in harmony. The goal is to make culture Christian. Constantine led the way in the 4th century when he made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Many state churches in Europe did the same thing. The belief was, to some degree at least, the kingdoms of this world can indeed become the kingdoms of our Lord. Examples include: State churches (Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant), Western civilization ("Christendom"), Liberation Theology, the religious right in America (?), etc.

3. Christ **above** culture.

This position holds that we can never fully "Christianize" a culture. Yes, Christ can be part of a culture, redeeming various aspects of it, but there will always be a clear distinction between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of man. Thomas Aquinas is the best representative of this position... also perhaps Roger Williams (Rhode Island).

4. Christ and culture in **paradox**.

Here the goal is not to retreat from culture nor to attack culture as evil. Rather it is to recognize that we must live as citizens of two kingdoms at the same time. This creates tension and paradox. The only real resolution to the problem will come beyond the grave. Martin Luther is the great representative of this position.

5. Christ the **transformer** of culture.

This position holds that culture is indeed fallen, but it is also capable of redemption. The aim here is to not just to convert individuals but to convert the entire culture and its institutions. Christians should be agents of change in the midst of a fallen world. Augustine, Calvin, Wesley, and Edwards are examples. Often those who seek to transform culture begin to believe that they are building the Kingdom of God on earth. Consider William Blake's poem which became a favorite English hymn during the days of the British Empire and still today.

*And did those feet in ancient time,
Walk upon England's mountains green:
And was the holy Lamb of God,
On England's pleasant pastures seen!*

*Bring me my Bow of burning gold;
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!*

*And did the Countenance Divine,
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here,
Among these dark Satanic Mills?*

*I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand:
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green & pleasant Land*

TABLE TALK

1. Had you ever heard of the “cultural mandate” before today? If not, what does this ignorance tell us about the spiritual environment in which we were raised?
2. Look again at the ways Christians have tried to put together the cultural mandate with the evangelistic mandate (pp. 2), How do you think they go together? Which one is primary? Why?
3. Why is it so important to use discernment in assessing cultures? What happens when we don't.
4. Look again at the ways Christ relates to culture (pp. 5). Do you find this presentation helpful? Which option do you think is the most biblically sound?
5. Do you see your job (and the church's job) to bring in the Kingdom of God? If yes, how? If not, then how will the Kingdom come?

IV. Two Amazing Culture-makers.

A. Bezalel.

*The LORD said to Moses,² “See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah,³ and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with **ability** and **intelligence**, with **knowledge** and all **craftsmanship**,⁴ to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze,⁵ in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, to work in every craft.⁶ And behold, I have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan. And I have given to all able men ability, that they may make all that I have commanded you.... (Exodus 31:1-6).*

³⁰ *Then Moses said to the people of Israel, “See, the LORD has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah;³¹ and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with **skill**, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship,³² to devise artistic designs, to work in gold and silver and bronze,³³ in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, for work in every skilled craft.³⁴ And he has inspired him to **teach**, both him and Oholiab the son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan.³⁵ He has filled them with skill to do every sort of work done by an engraver or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue and purple and scarlet yarns and fine twined linen, or by a weaver—by any sort of workman or skilled designer. (Exodus 35:30-35).*

Bezalel was basically the General Contractor and Chief of Design for the Tabernacle (which later became the Temple... the most important influence on worship in Jewish religion). If culture is an expression of the cult (worship) of a people, then this story is surely Exhibit A. Notice:

1. This artist/laborer is the first person in the Bible who is said to be **filled with the Spirit** of God. This designation is not first used for a prophet, patriarch, king, or priest... but for a workman, a culture-maker.
2. Bezalel reminds us that our work (profession) should be:
 - a. Inspired **by God**.
 - b. For **God's glory**.
 - c. With **excellence**.
 - d. With **creativity**.
 - e. In **community**.
 - f. For the benefit **of others**.
 - g. As being **co-laborers** with God.
 - h. So that others are **trained** to do the work after he leaves/dies.

B. Jesus.

Certainly, Jesus was a culture-maker. More than anyone who ever lived, he thought, created, spoke, worked and ministered in ways that left a profound impact on the world. His primary ministry began at the moment of his baptism (age 30) and focused especially on the final week of his life (his death and resurrection). We tend to forget, however, that for 18 years prior to those three years of ministry, Jesus worked as a **manual laborer**.

*He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ² And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?" ³ Is not this **the carpenter**, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. ⁴ And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household." ⁵ And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. ⁶ And he marveled because of their unbelief. (Mark 6:1-6).*

Though the Bible gives no information about the years Jesus spent working in his father's wood shop, it would be fairly safe to assume:

1. He was not **wasting his time**.
2. This is what God wanted him to do.
3. The products (tables, chairs, etc.) Jesus made were of the **highest quality**.
4. Though this labor as a carpenter did not accomplish redemption for others, it was just as much a part of what Jesus was called and sent to do as was his dying on the cross for the sins of the world.

TABLE TALK

1. What strikes you most about the character Bezalel?
2. What strikes you most about the fact that Jesus spent 18 years as a carpenter and 3 years as a preacher?
3. Do you ever feel that your work is unimportant? What makes you think this way? Is your work unimportant? Why or why not?
4. How has the study today changed the way you think about your work? What is going to be different on Monday because of this study?

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