



THE CALL TO CREATIVITY

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There is a memorable scene in the original *Star Wars* film that shows a ship jumping into hyperspace. There is a flash of light, a burst of acceleration, and it is suddenly in a different place a long distance away. The evangelical Church needs this burst of light—this thrust forward—in how it views cultural transformation. For too long, the emphasis has been on personal salvation to the neglect of the larger implications of the Gospel. Fortunately, in a number of segments of church, people are recovering this broader vision, a new paradigm, a new perspective that applies to all creation – to all of life. Once Christians break out of their individualistic mindset regarding God’s redemptive plan and understand their roles in restoring creation, they can unleash their creativity as image-bearers of the Creator through their work.

THE CULTURAL MANDATE TO CREATIVITY

The broader vision to which many Christians are returning involves a realization of how the Great Commission, presented in Matthew 28:18- 20, relates to the cultural mandate, which God gave to man in Genesis 1:26-28. In the Great Commission, Jesus calls his followers to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to observe all that he has commanded. The evangelical church has focused on evangelizing and baptizing, but not on disciplining those already within the church, nor teaching the whole purpose of God. Above all, the church has not provided the context for the gospel that makes it so stunning: God wants to redeem all of creation, and Christians can participate in that restoration.

Discipleship involves not only knowing the nature of our personal salvation, but grasping the implications for our personal and public lives. In order to understand this, we need to start by acknowledging the purpose for which we were created. We were made in the image of God in order to use our creativity to develop the potential of the creation around us. We need to understand our dignity, uniqueness, and our task.

Genesis 1:26-28 has been called “the cultural mandate” because it shows the place of human beings in creation and calls us to work with the things God has made—ruling over, ordering, classifying, reshaping, developing, and unfolding the potential which we have been given. It is a key to knowing who we are and what we are to do. Genesis 1:26-28 reads,

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image according to our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth.” And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every thing that moves on the earth.”

God set human beings as rulers over the earth so that we could be cultivators and stewards of creation. This has important implications for who we are, what our calling is, and how we should approach our daily work.

DIGNITY

First, being made in the image of God, we have intrinsic worth, value, and dignity. The cultural mandate passage twice reiterates that humans are made in the image and likeness of God. James 3:9 rebukes those who would worship God with their mouths and then walk out the next moment and curse someone who is made in the likeness of God. What hypocrisy! When Christians bless God but curse those made in his image, they contradict themselves. They are failing to see the connection between the worthiness of God and the worth of people. Note the contradiction between blessing God and cursing his image.

C.S. Lewis understood that God created every single individual to be unique and to reflect his image. He sought to treat each person as inherently valuable, regardless of ability or personality, or likeability. On one occasion, C. S. Lewis and Walter Hooper were talking about a man who was unbelievably dull. Hooper remarked that the man amazed him by the very intensity of his boredom. Lewis responded, “Yes, but our Lord may well have said, as ye have done it unto the least of these my bores, you have done it to me.” In recognition of the dignity and worth of each person as an image-bearer of God, Lewis wrote, “There are no ordinary people. You have never met a mere mortal.”¹ Lewis lived out this idea that “there are no ordinary people” in the above instance, by writing personal, handwritten letters to everyone who wrote to him, by giving away all his royalties, honoraria, and half of his meager salary. When Hooper asked Lewis why he gave so much, he replied, “When Christ has done so much for such as I, how can I not give everything to him?” In contrast, the evangelical church has yet to mine the implications of the image of God for personal

and public life. Suffice it to say that the dignity, worth, and value of every person you see each day is more than you presently know.

CREATIVITY

The first task to which image-bearers are called is to “rule over” the creation.ⁱⁱ God is the King, but we are his vice-regents. He is the Creator, but human beings are sub-creators. Only God can create something out of nothing, but people can—and are called to—create something out of something. Humans are to be sub-creators. Christians are not to exercise a heavy-handed rule. Some object that God’s call for man to take dominion has given Christians an excuse to pillage the earth. On the contrary, Genesis 2:15 indicates that mankind was placed in the garden “to care for and keep it.” This could indicate that man was made for the garden rather than the garden for man. In any case, the cultural mandate is not a license to use and abuse, but to exercise caring stewardship over the created realm. To do this most successfully, humans must demonstrate creativity in order to develop a beautiful and productive garden.

Even after the Fall, humans used their creativity to fulfill the cultural mandate. Very soon people were making musical instruments and many things from bronze and iron.ⁱⁱⁱ God’s purpose was through human creativity to move from a garden to a city. Human gifts and creativity were to be expressed in building increasingly complex houses, buildings, walls, roads, etc. The biblical narrative begins in a garden but ends in a city. The Tree of Life from the Garden reappears in the holy city of God.^{iv} The setting is no longer pastoral but urban. Image-bearers have used their gifts to create new things to enhance others’ lives. This is what human beings are made to do; they use their creativity—their gifts and abilities—to develop the potential of the creation.

THE FOUR CHAPTER GOSPEL

The gospel has often been presented as a “two-chapter gospel” rather than as a “four-chapter gospel”. The two-chapter gospel states in chapter one that people are separated from God because of sin. It describes the solution to this dilemma in chapter two: Jesus has come into the world to bring salvation through his work on the cross. While these claims are profoundly true, they tell only part of the story.

In contrast, the four-chapter gospel presents the biblical narrative in four parts: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. It begins by emphasizing that God’s creation was real and good. Adam and Eve had “response-ability”—the ability to respond to God (personally), the ability to respond to each other (corporately), and the ability to respond to the Creation (cosmically). After the Fall, all these capacities were damaged or defaced, affecting the personal, corporate and cosmic dimensions of our responsibility. The Genesis account shows how this affected Adam and Eve right away. On the personal level, they hid from

God. Corporately, Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent for the sin of eating the fruit. Because of this sin, and the ground is “cursed,” bringing the effects of sin to the cosmic level.^v

Redemption applies to every area affected by the Fall. It is personal because Christ died for us, rose for us, reigns in power for us, and prays for us.^{vi} Corporately, Christians are now “baptized by the one Spirit into the one Body” – the church.^{vii} Redemption also extends to the whole cosmos. Acts 3:21 says that the prophets spoke of a time when there would be a “restoration of all things.” Colossians 1:20 says that the Father’s pleasure and purpose through the cross was “to reconcile all things to Himself.” Romans 8:19-21 proclaims that “the Creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God” and the “Creation will be set free from its slavery to corruption.” Just as we groan, waiting eagerly for our redemption, so the “Creation groans,” awaiting its redemption.

The fourth chapter is restoration. Through restoration, this final chapter of the four-chapter gospel, the whole creation is finally restored. There are two Greek words for “new.” One is *neos*, which means “completely new,” and the other is *kainos*, which means “renewed.” Almost every time the Bible uses the word new for new birth, new self, new creation, new heavens and new earth, the Bible uses *kainos* – renewed. God will not discard creation; he will restore it. Al Wolters says, “God does not make junk, and he does not junk what he has made.”^{viii} Tim Keller points out an important implication of this approach:

Some conservative Christians think of the story of salvation as the fall, redemption, heaven. In this narrative, the purpose of redemption is escape from this world; only saved people have anything of value, while unbelieving people in the world are seen as blind and bad. If, however, the story of salvation is Creation, fall, redemption, restoration, then things look different. In this narrative, non-Christians are seen as created in the image of God and given much wisdom and greatness in them (cf. Ps. 8) even though the image is defaced and fallen. Moreover, the purpose of redemption is not to escape the world but to renew it...It is about the coming of God’s kingdom to renew all things...if we lose the emphasis on conversion, we lose the power of the gospel for personal transformation. We will not work sacrificially and joyfully for justice. On the other hand, if we lose the emphasis on the corporate – on the kingdom – we lose the power of the gospel for cultural transformation.^{ix}

However, one might wonder whether conversion or cultural transformation is most important. Does the cultural mandate in Genesis 1:26-28, the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20, or the Great Commandment in Matthew 22:37-38 take precedence? Many would argue that the Great Commission is primary. That, however, would be to miss the fact that discipling others and teaching all that Jesus has commanded includes the Great Commandment and the cultural mandate. Even if one did view the Great Commission as primary, he would soon see himself pointed to the other two commands.

The Fall did not nullify the cultural mandate because redemption restores the whole of our lives from the effects of the Fall. We need to emphasize that sin does not annihilate the goodness of God’s creation. Al Wolters said:

The central point to make is that Biblically speaking, sin neither abolishes nor becomes identified with Creation. Creation and sin remain distinct, however closely they may be intertwined in our experience. Prostitution does not eliminate the goodness of human sexuality; political tyranny cannot wipe out the divinely ordained character of the state; the anarchy and subjectivism of modern art cannot obliterate the creational legitimacy of art itself. In short, evil does not have the power of bringing to naught God’s steadfast faithfulness to the works of his hands.^x

In fact, theologians have often regarded sin as a parasite on God's good creation. Good can exist without evil being present, but evil cannot occur without good. Nothing is intrinsically, inherently, or ontologically evil. Thus, redemption eliminates the effects of the Fall from creation on all levels. Creation will be restored and cleansed from the consequences of sin.

A recovery of creativity and a good understanding of the four-chapter gospel have many implications for our lives. One application is the importance of affirming the dignity of the poor. We should help the poor not only because the Bible tells us to do so, but also because each are made in the image of God, regardless of wealth or social status. Christians should desire that the poor not only survive, but thrive. Everyone should have the opportunity to use their God-given gifts and creativity to shape the world around them. They should be able to not just to provide for their families, but to also enjoy the fruits of their own labors. Micah 4:4 portrays an ideal vision of people sitting under their own vine and fig tree in a safe situation. Each person owns property and can enjoy life with their family in the midst of a community that is at peace.

Another possible application of the four-chapter gospel involves encouraging the drive to innovate in order to conduct one's business more efficiently or to create new products that enhance people's lives. Of course, this requires an ability to start new businesses without undue constraints and an environment that allows freedom without too many regulations that would discourage initiative. The Economic Freedom of the World Report, an annual publication put out by the Fraser Institute, indicates that economically free societies tend to foster longer life-spans, higher income for the poor, better the environmental standards, and greater satisfaction in life.^{xi} There is a definite relationship between economic freedom, creativity, and prosperity in a society.

CONCLUSION

A failure to grasp the "four-chapter gospel" has narrowed the vision of the evangelical church. Because of this, many Christians understand how redemption works in their personal lives but fail to see how it applies to the creation as a whole. This has led to a failure to see the purposes of humans in creation and to emphasize the dignity and creativity that each individual possesses and is called to exercise in working toward God's coming kingdom. If Christians would grasp what they were created to be as God's image-bearers, the results would be transformational. This realization would unleash a burst of creativity among Christians that would enhance their lives, their daily work, and the creation around them.

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ⁱ C. S. Lewis. *The Weight of Glory*, (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 46.

ⁱⁱ Gen. 1:26-28.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gen. 4:21-22.

^{iv} Rev 22:1-2.

^v Gen. 3:15.

^{vi} Rom. 8:34.

^{vii} 1 Cor. 12:13.

^{viii} Al Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 49.

^{ix} Tim Keller, "Our New Global Culture: Ministry in Urban Centers," *The Resurgence*, accessed May 1, 2010,

<http://www.theresurgence.com/files/Keller%20-%20Our%20New%20Global%20CultureMinistry%20in%20Urban%20Centers.pdf>.

^x Al Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 57.

^{xi} James Gwartney et al, "Economic Freedom of the World 2012 Annual Report," Fraser Institute, 2012, 24.