

# THE IMAGE OF GOD AND MISSION

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## INTRODUCTION

The creation of man in the image of God and the resulting cultural mandate are integral to understanding God’s intent for man, and the overall narrative of scripture. The fall of Adam did not make these irrelevant; to the contrary, they are essential to a proper understanding of the story of redemption and the resulting mission of the church. In this paper I will explain the meaning of the image of God, its partial restoration in the Patriarchs and Israel, its full restoration in Christ, and the resulting implications on the mission of the church. This will provide a biblical foundation for a comprehensive view of mission.

## THE IMAGE AND PRIMEVAL HISTORY

In Genesis 1:26-28 we see the account of God’s creation of man and the cultural mandate that is given to him. Adam was created in the image and likeness of God. It is essential to understand what image and likeness mean before we can truly understand the mandate or commission that is given. Theologians have held varying views on the meaning of the *imago Dei*. Many have held a relational view of the image, but virtually all Old Testament scholars have come to adopt the royal interpretation of the image.<sup>1</sup>

In the ancient Near East, kings were considered to be the living images of God.<sup>2</sup> The understanding was that they ruled on behalf of the gods. In this respect, the human couple’s

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<sup>1</sup> Middleton, J. Richard. *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 29.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander, T. Desmond. *From Eden to the New Jerusalem: An Introduction to Biblical Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2008), 76.

dominion or ruling over the earth reflects their role as God’s viceroys.<sup>3</sup> They were to represent God and mediate his reign over all of creation.<sup>4</sup>

The Genesis text supports this understanding of the image. In the context of verse 26, image and likeness are undoubtedly related to dominion. Richard Middleton notes the royal nature of the text and the “close linkage of image with the mandate to rule and subdue the earth and its creatures.”<sup>5</sup> This does not negate a relational understanding of the image. Indeed the relationship between God and man, as well as mankind’s volitional, rational, and moral nature are aspects of the functional image.<sup>6</sup> These attributes of God were to be reflected by Adam in his reign over creation.

Adam was not only a king mediating the reign of God over creation; he was also a priest, a priest-king. Eden was a temple-garden where God dwelt and man was to worship him.<sup>7</sup> In Genesis 2:15-17, God places Adam in the garden to work and keep it. The idea of working or cultivating the garden is priestly in nature<sup>8</sup> and carries with it the idea of expansion. Greg Beale believes the command to subdue and rule suggests an expansion of Eden until it extended throughout and covered the earth.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, God’s presence with his people would cover the earth. The word *keep* can be understood as protect;<sup>10</sup> thus, Adam was placed as a priest in the temple-garden to protect it from evil and to cultivate or expand it over all of creation. This was the beginning of his fulfillment of the cultural mandate.<sup>11</sup>

This understanding of Adam and Eve as priest-kings sheds much light on the cultural mandate given in Genesis 1:28. The human couple is to multiply and fill the earth, subdue, and exercise dominion over it. This was God’s reason for creating them; his original commission for mankind. It is important to understand each of the aspects of this commission.

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<sup>3</sup> Beale, G. K. *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 30.

<sup>4</sup> Dempster, Stephen G. *Dominion and Dynasty: A Theology of the Hebrew Bible*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 59.

<sup>5</sup> Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 26.

<sup>6</sup> Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 32.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 20-21.

<sup>8</sup> Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 64.

<sup>9</sup> G. K. Beale, “Final Vision of the Apocalypse,” 201, quoted in Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>11</sup> Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 383.

First is the command to be fruitful and multiply. This was to be a multiplication of image bearers who would reflect God's glory and extend his reign over all the earth.<sup>12</sup> This can be understood in the ancient Near East practice of a king erecting statues or images of himself in distant parts of his kingdom to indicate the reach of his authority.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, as Adam's descendants (image bearers) fill the earth, as priest-kings they will extend the temple-garden and the reign of God.<sup>14</sup>

Second is the command to subdue the earth. This command carries with it the idea of cultivation and expansion. Subduing the earth is the process of the expansion of mankind over the earth and making it their home.<sup>15</sup> The priest-kings are to expand the boundaries of the temple-garden (and thus God's presence) and civilization to the ends of the earth.

Third is the command to exercise dominion over all the earth. The Lord created mankind to rule over the earth in a way that reflects his rule.<sup>16</sup> More specifically, God was to accomplish his rule of the earth through the agency of Adam and his descendants.<sup>17</sup> As Adam cultivates and expands the temple-garden, and brings all of the earth under the reign of God, he will fulfill the cultural mandate. He does not create, nor does he rule in his own power and wisdom, but he is to be God's instrument to bring creation to God's desired end. Stephen Dempster refers to this emphasis on human dominion as simply 'the kingdom of God'.<sup>18</sup>

Prior to the fall, God has given humanity a great commission. They are to create life and fill the earth with image bearers, or priest-kings. These priest-kings are to subdue the earth by cultivating the temple-garden and extending God's dwelling throughout the earth. They are to protect the ever expanding temple-garden from evil, and mediate the reign of God over the whole earth. They are to be people set apart for God, who reign over the earth as the servants of God.

However, God's enemy quickly sets out to thwart his plan. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve disobey God and submit to the serpent. In so doing, they forfeit their role as priests and give

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 383-384.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 78.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>15</sup> Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 52.

<sup>16</sup> Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 62.

<sup>17</sup> McCartney, Dan G. "Ecce Homo: The Coming of the Kingdom as the Restoration of Human Viceregency." *Westminster Theological Seminary*, <http://files.wts.edu/uploads/pdf/articles/mccartney-vicegerency.pdf> (accessed February 7, 2012), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 62.

control of the earth over to God's enemy.<sup>19</sup> They are cast out of God's presence and are forced to live under a cursed condition. The serpent is cursed and the ongoing battle between him and humanity is intensified, until the seed of the woman prevails (Gen 3:14-15).

The woman, whose joy was to give birth to image bearers, will now suffer through child birth. Likewise, her relationship to the man is affected. Though created as a co-ruler, she will now be placed under the rule of her husband (Gen 3:16). Adam was created to cultivate and expand the temple-garden; however, now outside of the garden, his work will be laborious and much less fruitful (Gen 3:17-19).<sup>20</sup> Humanity continues to exercise dominion, but it now flows from a fallen nature leading to evil, oppression, and the exploitation of creation.<sup>21</sup>

This turn of events should not be understood as thwarting God's plan or the commission that humanity was given in Genesis 1:28. Indeed, the remainder of scripture details how the sovereignty of God will be restored and reestablished over the entire earth.<sup>22</sup> This will ultimately come to pass through the seed of the woman. In the immediate context it seems the *Protoevangelium* suggests that the victory of the woman's seed will lead to the return to an Edenic state and the reestablishment of humanity's rule over all of the earth.<sup>23</sup> This is the eschatological hope, but the Lord begins working toward this end immediately with Adam like figures.

The first of these is Noah. As a result of the fall, the earth has been progressively marred by sin until the Lord determines to destroy humanity (Gen 5:9-13). The Lord commands Noah to build an ark in order that the animal life and a remnant of humanity might be spared (Gen 5:18-21). In doing this, Noah was exercising dominion over the creation.<sup>24</sup> Later, after the flood, and not inconsequentially after the fall, God reiterates the commission from Genesis 1:28 to Noah (Gen 9:1-2, 7). In this, Noah and his descendants are expected to fulfill the commission that was previously given to Adam and Eve, though they will struggle as a result of the fall.<sup>25</sup> It is significant that while the fall had marred humanity's ability to fulfill the commission, the Lord none the less reiterated it. Noah's act of planting the first vineyard (Gen 9:20) should be

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<sup>19</sup> Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 78-79.

<sup>20</sup> Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 67-68.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 79.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 79.

<sup>23</sup> Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 68.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 83.

understood as exercising mankind's "fundamental vocation of transforming the world by the historical agency granted them at creation."<sup>26</sup> In the post fall, post flood era, Noah does not write off the physical world, but rather sets out to further the commission given to Adam and passed on to him.

### **The Image and The Patriarchs**

Noah ultimately failed to fulfill the commission from Genesis 1:28, so the Lord began to work through Abraham and the Patriarchs. The commission that was given to Adam and Noah as a command is reiterated to Abraham as a promise.<sup>27</sup> The Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:1-3) is a reiteration of the original commission, and reveals a new post-fall dimension. The Lord will bless the families of the earth through his relationship with Abraham. This alludes to a renewed humanity bearing God's image and filling the earth with regenerated children who once again reflect God's image.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the multiplication of image bearers in Genesis 1:28 will include "people who have left their old way of life and have become spiritually newborn and have come to reflect the image of God's glorious presence and participate in the expanding nature of the Gen. 1:26-28 commission."<sup>29</sup> This of course, will ultimately be fulfilled through the seed of the woman as was prophesied (Gen 3:15).

Abraham should be understood as a second Adam because the vision of humanity given to Adam in Genesis 1-2 is renewed with him.<sup>30</sup> For example, when the covenant is reiterated to Abraham in Genesis 22:17-18 the Lord states that his offspring will "possess the gate of their enemies" (ESV), which is an application of the ruling over the earth language from Genesis 1:28.<sup>31</sup> Likewise, the references to kings coming from Abraham in Genesis 17:6 and Jacob in Genesis 35:11 refer to the ruling aspect of the commission in Genesis 1:28.<sup>32</sup>

Once again, the scripture reveals that the commission given to humanity before the fall is still the end the Lord is working toward. The covenant with Abraham is not plan B, but rather the process in which the Lord intendeds to ultimately bring about the completion of his original

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<sup>26</sup> Middleton, *The Liberating Image*, 217.

<sup>27</sup> Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 54.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

<sup>30</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark; 2000), 37, quoted in Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 48.

<sup>31</sup> Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 463.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

intent for creation as seen in Genesis 1:26-28. Abraham will be the father of a nation of priest-kings which will advance God's kingdom toward this end. This begins to be fulfilled among his descendants in Egypt.

### **The Image and Israel**

The Hebrews entered Egypt as the family of Jacob (Gen 47:11), but grew to become a nation. They were fruitful and multiplied and the land was filled with them (Ex 1:7). This language strongly echoes the creation language of Genesis as well as the promise made to the patriarchs and communicates an advance of the commission from Genesis 1:28.<sup>33</sup> Here Israel represents the new humanity that is destined to restore the creation blessing to the world.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the battle that unfolds in Exodus can be regarded in its larger context as a working out of the battle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent.<sup>35</sup>

Through a series of plagues the Lord delivers Israel from certain annihilation at the hands of the Egyptians. The exodus event is significant in part because it leads to the establishment of Israel as a theocracy and the construction of the tabernacle. These are a partial fulfillment of the creation mandate.<sup>36</sup> Israel becomes a kingdom of priest-kings (Ex 19:5-6) as humanity was intended. In addition, via the tabernacle, the Lord once again dwells with his people as in Eden (Ex 40:34-38).

The concept of Israel as priest-kings is a clear advancement of the Lord's intent to complete the commission given to Adam in Genesis 1:28. Genesis 1 and 2 reveal that God requires priest-kings to fulfill his creation project and his establishment of Israel in this role indicates they will contribute to its completion.<sup>37</sup> This divinely instituted kingship will seek to reestablish God's sovereignty on earth.<sup>38</sup> This is an important concept to understand, Israel cannot bring about the establishment of God's sovereignty, yet as his obedient priest-kings they will participate in the process.

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<sup>33</sup> Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 93.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 94.

<sup>36</sup> Alexander, *From Eden to New Jerusalem*, 127.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

<sup>38</sup> Alexander, *From Eden to New Jerusalem*, 82.

In light of this, Israel will be “a nation set apart by its holiness or its service to God.”<sup>39</sup> They will magnify the Lord and His righteous reign to the nations, and serve the nations on behalf of God. In so doing, they will redefine the meaning of dominion as service to God and man.<sup>40</sup> This is a step toward the ultimate fulfillment of the promise that Abraham would be a blessing to the nations (Gen 12:2-3) and the Genesis 1:28 commission.

Ultimately, like their predecessors, Israel failed to live up to their role as priest-kings. The people do not obey the Mosaic Covenant and struggle throughout their history with idolatry, beginning with the golden calf (Ex 32). Likewise, the people reject their status as priest-kings and the nation ultimately ends up demanding a king like the pagan nations around them (1 Sam 8:5). David becomes their king and from him the Messiah will come to ultimately establish God’s sovereign reign and restore fallen humanity to God’s original intent.

### **The Image and Christ**

Psalm 8:4-8 speaks to humanity’s original position as God’s viceregent over the earth. In reference to this passage, Hebrews 2:5-9 explains that we do not currently see humanity exercising the dominion it was intended to. Instead, Jesus is crowned with glory and honor because of his atoning death (Heb 8:9). This passage clearly presents the restoration of humanity’s viceregency as a key theme of God’s eschatological plan.<sup>41</sup> Jesus as the last Adam is representative of all humanity and thus man’s viceregency is representitavly restored in him.<sup>42</sup> This restoration of man as viceregent, or priest-king, is the foundation of the arrival of the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims.<sup>43</sup>

An examination of the life and ministry of Jesus, reveals that his proclamation of the kingdom was accompanied with signs. These signs are significant as they reveal Jesus subduing and exercising dominion as the functional image of God. His healing of diseases (Matt 9:35) and power over demons (Matt 12:28), illustrate his rule over Satan.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, his ability to calm the storm (Matt 8:27) revealed his power over nature.<sup>45</sup> These are clear indications that the

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<sup>39</sup> Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty*, 101.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 101-102.

<sup>41</sup> McCartney. *Ecce Homo*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 427.

<sup>45</sup> McCartney. *Ecce Homo*, 8.

arrival of the kingdom of God was the restoration of man to his rightful position as image bearer mediating the reign of God.

Of course, humanity must identify with Christ in order to have the image of God renewed in them.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, the multiplication and filling of the earth with image bearers (priest-kings) from Genesis 1:28 now includes a spiritual dimension. Jesus clearly taught that no one could enter or even see the kingdom of God apart from being born again (Jn 3:3,5). It is impossible for man to be renewed in the image of God and therefore participate in the kingdom of God unless he is born again into the new creation. Those who are baptized with Christ into death, have been raised with Christ to walk in newness of life and be united with him in his resurrection (Rom 6:3-5).

### **The Image and The Church**

By inaugurating the kingdom of God, Christ restored human viceregency and the participation of believers in the kingdom is a restoration of their viceregency.<sup>47</sup> The commission of Genesis 1:28 is applicable to those who are in Christ “since he and they have entered into the sphere of the new creation and have begun to do what Adam failed to do.”<sup>48</sup> This fits with the kingdom parables of Matthew 13 where the kingdom is portrayed as growing or advancing slowly. The restoration of man to the role of priest-king began with Christ and progresses as humankind is restored to its proper role as image bearers.<sup>49</sup>

The Apostle Peter addresses the church as a ‘royal priesthood’ (1 Peter 2:9), which bears a strong connection to Exodus 19. The church is to fulfill the commission that Adam and Israel failed to achieve. The church is being built up into a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:5). As restored image bearers the church is the temple of God, and is spreading his presence throughout the earth. They are priest-kings whose good deeds (dominion) will bring glory to God.

In Christ, the church is restored to its role as God’s viceregents. “By living in obedience to Christ, his disciples participate in the establishment of God’s kingdom on the earth.”<sup>50</sup> This is an extremely important concept to understand regarding the mission of the church. N. T. Wright notes that God’s original ordering of creation was such that his work in the world took place

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<sup>46</sup> Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 386.

<sup>47</sup> McCartney. *Ecce Homo*, 14.

<sup>48</sup> Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 450.

<sup>49</sup> McCartney. *Ecce Homo*, 14.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander, *From Eden to New Jerusalem*, 96.

through his image bearers. From this he continues that through the work of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, God equips his restored image bearers to participate in the work of restoration. He calls this “building for God’s kingdom.”<sup>51</sup> The church does not bring about the kingdom, but the Scriptures clearly reveal God’s intention from the beginning was to mediate his reign over the earth through his human vicereagents.

For sure, the restoration of our viceregency has not yet come in its fullness, but it is our eschatological hope.<sup>52</sup> This fact should not preclude our working now to fulfill our role in creation as image bearers. G. K. Beale notes that those who believe in Christ “begin to be transformed into the image of God.”<sup>53</sup> From this we must conclude that those who believe in Christ, likewise, begin to exercise functional dominion.

### Conclusion

In light of God’s intent that man would be his vice-regents, mediating his reign over the earth, we must conclude that the mission of the church is a comprehensive one. The person and work of Christ reconciles the commission of Genesis 1:28 with the commission of Matthew 28:18-20. Arthur Glasser notes, “When Jesus inaugurates the Kingdom of God, these two mandates (cultural mandate & redemptive purpose) will fuse into one fundamental task.”<sup>54</sup>

In Christ, mankind is redeemed from sin so that we will fulfill God’s three fold purpose for humanity. We will glorify God by multiplying and filling the earth with his image. We will subdue the earth, which involves civilizing the earth and spreading God’s presence via the temple, the church. We will exercise dominion by meekly mediating the reign of God over the earth.

Any view of mission that does not adequately account for God’s original intent for his creation is deficient. Framing the church’s mission between the cultural and gospel mandates is a comprehensive way to express God’s concern for all of human life and creation.<sup>55</sup> To divorce Genesis 1 and 2 from our understanding of God’s plan of redemption, and thus mission, is to lose

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<sup>51</sup> Wright, N. T. “Building for the Kingdom: Our Work is Not in Vain,” *Perspectives On the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Pasadena: William Carey, 2009), 96-97

<sup>52</sup> McCartney. *Ecce Homo*, 16.

<sup>53</sup> Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 460.

<sup>54</sup> Glasser, Arthur F., Charles E. Van Engen, Dean S. Gilliland, and Shawn B. Redford. *The Story of God’s Mission in the Bible: Announcing the Kingdom*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 39.

<sup>55</sup> Ott, Craig, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent. *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 149.

the purpose and goal of the cross of Christ. We are redeemed from sin so that we might be restored to God's purpose for us found in Genesis 1:26-28.

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