

God's Law for Modern Man

Chapter 5: Societal Sanctification

[Brian Schwertley](#)

Many believers have a very limited view of the effects of the redemption achieved by Christ upon society. Redemption is viewed as something that affects individual Christians but has little or no impact on the world and society. The Bible teaches that salvation by Christ is comprehensive. The salvation wrought by Jesus will affect the whole world. It will extend to all nations. Men are not regenerated and saved just to go to church and Bible conferences. God saves men to restore them to a right relationship with Himself. Then they are to serve God by exercising godly dominion over the earth. The task of godly dominion to which Adam was called before the fall was restored by Jesus Christ, the second Adam. “For if by the one man’s offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:17). “Christ’s redemption means man’s reign in time and in eternity.... To defer the fact of reigning to the other world is a Manichaeian separation of the world into two alien realms, one (the material) surrendered to one God, and the other (spiritual) reserved for the other God. The hostility of many to the idea of victory in the material world is evidence of Manichaeian leanings. St. Paul is emphatic: we ‘reign in life.’ The biblical doctrine of salvation requires it.”¹

Godly Dominion

When God created Adam and Eve in His image, He commanded them to have dominion over the whole earth (cf. Gen. 1:26-30). God’s intended purpose for man before the fall was to develop a worldwide godly culture where the Lord is honored and glorified. All of man’s activities and pursuits were to be done to glorify God. All the accumulated labors of mankind over time: music, art, science, medicine, architecture and economics would reflect unfallen man’s love of God and man. If Adam had obeyed the covenant of works and the dominion mandate, the result would have been a worldwide, obedient, theocentric civilization. This was God’s original plan for mankind before the fall. But Adam’s sin, the eating of the forbidden fruit (the breaking of the covenant of works), necessitated the work of a savior. God, in His kindness and mercy, instituted the covenant of grace. The entrance of sin into the world did not eliminate the Lord’s plan for a worldwide godly civilization. However, now God’s plan could only be accomplished through a redeemer—the Lord Jesus Christ.

What Adam could not do because of sin, Christ made possible when He established the judicial foundation for godly dominion by His sacrificial death and sinless life. After His resurrection the victorious Christ gave the Great Commission: “All authority has been given unto Me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

¹ R. J. Rushdoony, *Salvation and Godly Rule*, p. 487.

Amen” (Matt. 28:18-20). The Great Commission is our Lord’s command to build a worldwide Christian civilization; it is the dominion mandate for the new creation. Because of His completed redemptive work and resurrection victory the whole earth (i.e., *every* nation) has been definitively sanctified or set apart by Christ.

Most professing Christians have misinterpreted or ignored the significance of the Great Commission. Christ could have instructed the apostles to disciple all individuals or all men, but He told them to disciple all *nations*. “Nations,” according to Scripture (cf. Acts 17:26, Rev. 7:9, and particularly in the Great Commission) refers to large groups of people that are distinct from other groups in various ways, such as language, customs, heritage, culture and geographic location. The significance of Christ’s choice of “nations” rather than “men” is that the church’s goal is to disciple whole cultures and bring entire societies, including civil governments, under the subjection of Christ. Therefore, the church must not be satisfied with a few scattered individuals submitting to Christ, but must strive to bring all institutions under His feet (cf. Ps. 2:7-12).

The Church

The church’s task is to progressively bring to pass (by the power of the Holy Spirit) what Christ has already achieved at the cross: the salvation of all nations. The church is central in bringing about God’s kingdom and godly dominion because the church has the means of grace: the preaching of the word of God, the sacraments, etc. The starting point for godly dominion is *not* political action or reform, but the gospel and regeneration. This involves much more than preaching the gospel; it includes teaching the entire Bible, including God’s righteous law. People must be taught to obey God’s law and apply it to every area of life: agriculture, business, science, education, the arts, civil government and so on. Thus, the kingdom of God is like leaven. The parable of the leaven teaches that the gospel will spread throughout the world until the whole world is thoroughly leavened. There will be an incredible development of Christianity in the world. Christ’s glorious gospel will have a sanctifying effect upon men, institutions, cultures and even civil governments. The Old Testament prophets described this discipling process as the nations going up to Zion to learn God’s holy law. “Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, ‘Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Is. 2:2-3). In the New Testament “Mount Zion” (cf. Heb. 12:22) is spiritualized to mean the church. The church, because of its important job of discipling the nations, is seen by the prophet to be prominent in world affairs. The church teaches the nations the word of God and submission to God’s holy law.

Such a view is a far cry from modern Fundamentalism, which presents the gospel as little more than a fire escape from hell. The Fundamentalist’s gospel will have no visible impact on the nations, so the church’s only hope is the rapture. They regard the idea of godly rule and dominion through discipleship as a theological perversion. “What fundamentalists want is a watered-down gospel message suitable for children, and only for children. The problem is children grow up. What do you tell a newly converted adult when he asks the question, ‘All right, I have accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior. Now what do I do?’ The modern fundamentalist says all he has to do is tell someone else about what just happened to him. Then

that person can tell another, and so on, until the Rapture ends the whole process. Modern fundamentalism looks at the gospel as if it were some kind of gigantic chain letter scheme. Nothing is of value in God's sight, they say, except keeping the chain letter alive. But the gospel is not a chain letter. It is the good news that Jesus has overcome the world. It is our job to demonstrate this victory in our lives, meaning every aspect of our lives. We are to exercise dominion. We should do this as Church members first, but in all other realms."²

Through teaching the word, administering the sacraments, and exercising discipline the church is used by God to sanctify nations. This does not mean that the church and civil government are one, or that the church is an extension of the state. It simply means that discipleship by the church will have an effect on individuals, families and civil governments, which will lead to godly dominion. The church achieves dominion, in a sense, indirectly. Why? Because the task of dominion is predominantly economic, agricultural, scientific, etc.; these spheres of activity are accomplished by individuals and families. The teaching elder does not have time to develop new strains of wheat or new types of medical equipment because he is devoted to expounding the word of God and to prayer. But, if these tasks are to be done to God's glory in accordance with the Christian worldview and God's law, then it is absolutely essential that the businessman, scientist, farmer and so on be church members in good standing who look to and stand on God's word in all their endeavors. "In Thy light we see light" (Ps. 36:6).

This point is a fundamental aspect of biblical Christianity. Yet many professing Christians limit the application of God's word to church affairs and personal piety. They have accepted the myth that many areas of life (e.g., science, economics, education, etc.) are religiously neutral, or that Satan will control the earth until the second coming. Many believers think that the Bible has little or nothing to say regarding issues outside individual behavior. But the church must not forsake the application of God's word to every area of life. "As Paul puts it, 'Whether you eat, or drink, or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God' (1 Cor. 10:31). The reign of Christ is not restricted to internal matters of the heart—to prayer, meditations, and piety. That is only the beginning. The kingdom of God 'brings forth fruit' (see Matt. 13:23; 21:43) such that by means of the visible quality of a person's life his inner state of heart can be discerned: 'by their fruits you shall know them' (Matt. 7:16-21). So then, even eating and drinking as external activities are included within the Messiah's reign. The inward reign of the Savior must become manifest in *public* righteousness: genuine hearing of the word, genuine religion, and genuine faith are seen in faithful doing of the law, outward helping of the oppressed, and practical aid of the afflicted (James 1:22-2:26). To restrict the reign of Christ to inward matters is to lose touch with the true character of submission to the King."³

Christ said the church is to act as salt and light in society. Salt penetrates meat and thus preserves it from corruption. If the church does not do its job, society decays; it rots. Therefore, when liberalism captured the mainline denominations, and Fundamentalism adopted Dispensationalism and unbiblical pietism, American society and culture began to rot. Secular humanists were happy to fill the void when Christians apostatized and abandoned their task of dominion through discipleship.

Since the church has the means of grace and the responsibility to teach God's word to all peoples, individuals and families must become church members and place themselves under the

² Gary North, Foreword to Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Greatness of The Great Commission* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), p. xi.

³ Bahnsen, "This World and The Kingdom of God," in Gary DeMar and Peter Leithart, *The Reduction of Christianity* (Co-published by Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press & Atlanta, GA: American Vision, 1988), p. 356.

authority of elders in Reformed Churches that teach the whole counsel of God. “Dominion requires a knowledge of God’s law; without such knowledge, no dominion is possible. To disregard the laws of God is to forfeit dominion.”⁴ Christians must be church members in order to be under God’s lawful church courts, to worship God publicly on the Lord’s day as a covenanted body of believers, to systematically learn God’s word under a divinely-called teacher; to partake of the Lord’s supper as a member of Christ’s body, and to serve Christ under the guidance and direction of godly elders (Heb. 13:7, 17). God commands believers to worship Him every week with His people. “And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:24-25). How can one have an impact on and be used by God to extend His kingdom in the world? One must believe in Christ, submit to Him as Lord, become a member of Christ’s church, and regularly attend the means of grace. This is fundamental; it is primary. Yet many professing believers think it is optional. It is not optional! In order to receive the Lord’s blessing, one must begin with the fundamentals. “The piecemeal Christian faith so widespread today does not measure up to the calling of discipling toward a Christian culture (Matt. 28:19). The church should actively train people to submit to Christ’s authority (Matt 28:18) and work (Matt. 28:19-20). As a leading officer in the church, Paul was concerned to promote ‘the whole counsel of God’ (Acts 20:27).”⁵

The Family

The dominion mandate was originally given to a family: Adam and Eve. Because of the fall and sin, the church has become the primary administrator of the Great Commission since *godly* dominion can only be achieved through the preaching of the gospel and the discipling of the nations. The covenant of grace is dependent upon the preaching of God’s grace. The family unit exists on earth, while the church, God’s spiritual family, extends throughout eternity. Although the Great Commission was given specifically by Christ to His church, Christian families are still very prominent in achieving godly dominion.

There are a number of reasons why the Christian family is crucial to godly dominion. First, the family is the nursery of both church and state. God has always dealt with families covenantally. The children of believers are members of God’s covenant. God wants believers to think in terms of the future, to think generationally. The Christian discipline and self-government taught in the home will have a tremendous impact on the future of both the church and society. Secular humanists and statisticians are aware of the importance of controlling children. Thus, state schools are adept at making children “good” citizens of the state. Children are taught to look to the messianic state as savior and lord of society. Whoever controls the children controls the future. For worldwide dominion to occur, it must extend and expand into the future. Second, private property, economic activity and scientific progress rest not with the church or the state, but with the family. The church has the means of grace and the state bears the sword of justice, but neither is responsible for direct economic and scientific progress. The church may own meeting places and theological schools, but it is not an economic or scientific organization. The state, being responsible for civil defense, has a scientific and economic interest in weapons

⁴ R. J. Rushdoony, *Salvation and Godly Rule*, p. 35.

⁵ Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., *The Greatness of the Great Commission* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), p. 114.

systems and military training institutes, but the state has no biblical mandate to engage in economic activity and own property outside of the limited parameters of civil justice and defense. “The earth is indeed the Lord’s as is all dominion, but God has chosen to give dominion over the earth to man, subject to His law-word, and property is a central aspect of that dominion. The absolute and transcendental title to property is the Lord’s; the present and historical title to property is man’s. The ownership of property does not leave this world when it is denied to man; it is simply transferred to the state.”⁶

Families are to diligently train their children for godly dominion into the future. The next generation of businessmen, ministers, scientists, farmers, and civil leaders must be taught self-control and discipline, and how to apply the word of God to all areas of life. Those children who apostatize from the faith must be disinherited as Christ-denying covenant-breakers. “The biblical economic goal is to increase the dominion of Christians, not families as such; the institutional focus is on the kingdom rather than the family. Thus, parents should normally leave their wealth to believing children, *assuming* that the children are economically competent and faithful to the external requirements of the covenant. If they are not, then parents should consider setting up trusts governed by competent church members.”⁷ The church primarily consists of and is supported by families. While the family carries on dominion through labor, technology, and science, etc., the family’s priority in life is the local church and not economic endeavor. The son who has apostatized, who has a Ph.D. in engineering, should be disinherited and his portion should be given to the son who is a faithful believer yet may be a plumber or electrician. If all the children have apostatized, the money should go to the church and not to unbelievers. Spiritual brotherhood takes *priority* over unbelieving blood brotherhood.⁸ Furthermore, finding and attending a true Reformed church should take priority over one’s economic career. Moving to an area that does not have a truly Reformed church should not even be considered. The church has a responsibility to support Christian families (teaching, counseling, discipline, fellowship, charity, etc.) and Christian families have a responsibility to support the church (e.g., church membership, regular attendance, cheerful giving, etc.).

Since the family is the training institute of the next generation, the primary property owner of society and the spearhead of economic growth and science, etc., the head of a Christian household must take seriously his role as the leader in family worship, Bible training, doctrinal instruction and prayer. Parents are also responsible for their children’s economic and intellectual training as well. Sadly, it is common for Evangelicals to send their children to anti-Christian state schools and to let them watch pagan nonsense on TV for several hours each day. This is not only unbiblical, but amounts to generational spiritual suicide. It is one of the main reasons that Evangelicalism is so impotent and saltless in our day. God’s law-word is to be learned and integrated into every area of life throughout each and every day.

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deut. 6:4-9). Although this passage addresses all believers, it especially speaks to Christian

⁶ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 471.

⁷ Gary North, *Tools of Dominion*, 1990, p. 271.

⁸ Christian children still have an obligation to honor and support unbelieving parents in their old age, etc.

parents. Parents who are new to the faith must first diligently begin with themselves and then earnestly, frequently and consistently teach their family. What a dreadful, foolish and disobedient thing it is for parents to be slothful and neglectful in such an important God-given task. What a sad day it will be on the day of judgment for those parents who delegated their responsibility of godly dominion through child-rearing to Hollywood and the pagan state. “If there be any compassion to the souls of them under your care, if any regard of you being found faithful in the day of Christ, if any respect to future generations, labour to sow these seeds of knowledge, which may grow up in after-times.”⁹

The State

Of the three God-ordained governmental spheres (the family, the church and the state), the civil government has the least important role to play in godly dominion. Why? Because the state plays a primarily negative role in God’s plan. That is, the state has been given the task of protecting the family and the church from visible attack. The state is to provide a law-abiding atmosphere in which Christian churches and families can flourish. The civil government’s job is to punish evildoers who commit those sins which God has designated in His word as crimes. The state is to implement negative sanctions against criminals (biblically defined) and to protect the people from foreign invasion or attack. Thus, any system of civil law which denies the penal sanctions of the Old Testament civil law is unbiblical, defective and even dangerous to society. Biblical law provides a framework in which to protect private property (thus enabling dominion through economic growth and science to flourish), the family (by discouraging divorce and driving deviant sexual behavior underground) and the church (by forcing non-Christian religions and cults underground).

The state’s role is to restrain evil. Paul says, “For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God’s minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God’s minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil” (Rom. 13:3-4). When the civil government stops punishing behavior that God says is criminal and attempts to be both savior and parent to its citizens, it will eventually collide with both church and family. Communism, socialism and welfare statism are all the result of the state going beyond its proper domain. Statists believe in salvation by regulation—that proper legislation will eliminate poverty and ignorance and bring world peace. Such programs have failed and will continue to fail and cannot lead to godly behavior and dominion. Why? Because, “while a man can be *restrained* by strict law and order, he cannot be *changed* by law; he cannot be saved by law. Man can only be saved by the grace of God through Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ The law is good if one uses it lawfully (1 Tim. 1:8). All attempts to regulate mankind into a millennial paradise by civil governments have ended in failure. The arbitrary and often absurd laws devised by statist bureaucrats have only served to help enslave the masses while impeding economic growth.

The state (compared to the church and family) has a very minor role to play in godly dominion. Although the state has the right to enforce God’s law by punishing criminals (biblically defined), it does not have the authority to preach the gospel or compel (i.e., use force)

⁹ Thomas Manton, *To The Christian Reader, Especially Heads of Families* p. 6.

¹⁰ R. J. Rushdoony, *Law and Liberty* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1984), p. 3.

people to become Christians. Biblical dominion starts from the bottom up in a decentralized manner. The gospel leavens society when individuals and families are converted, become church members and then apply the Christian worldview to their own particular spheres of influence economically, scientifically and socially. The civil government will become Christian, covenant with Christ, submit explicitly to Christ as king and adopt His law-code *only* after society has first been leavened by the gospel and the majority of people have become Christians. This scenario presupposes that most people have adopted a biblical form of Christianity (i.e., Reformed Christianity); and that people accept God's sovereignty, Christ's lordship over all, God's holy law, and biblical worship. If the majority of Americans were to adopt modern Evangelicalism (with its denial of most of God's law, its unbiblical pietism, its acceptance of pluralism, its focus on entertainment, its Arminian theology, etc.), then America (with its abortion, pornography, corrupt leadership and so on) would probably not change at all. (Perhaps the leadership would change from being liberal secular humanists to conservative secular humanists.) Thus, the importance of fulfilling the Great Commission and teaching the *whole* counsel of God to the nations cannot be overemphasized. The church conquers the world with the sword of the Spirit—the word of God. The victory of Christ's kingdom is certain. "For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; in every place incense shall be offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name shall be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts" (Mal. 1:11). Political action, without the solid foundation of the true Reformed Christian religion, is at best a holding action, and at worst the implicit acceptance of right wing secular humanism (e.g., Rush Limbaugh, Pat Buchanan, Bill Buckley, etc.) and unbiblical ecumenism.

Although the state's role is limited, its role is not unimportant. The state that does not abide by God's law hinders godly dominion through anti-Christian and anti-family legislation. In countries that have abandoned the Christian worldview in favor of secular humanism there has been an erosion of biblical law in favor of positivistic (man-made) law. Humanists reject the transcendent, ontological God of the Bible who gives man absolute, unchanging law. Therefore, humanists have implicitly declared themselves to be God and the sole determiner of what is good or bad for society. "Modern humanism, the religion of the state, locates laws in the state and thus makes the state, or the people as they find expression in the state, the God of the system. As Mao-Tse-Tung has said, 'Our God is none other than the masses of the Chinese people.' In Western culture, law has steadily moved away from God to the people (or the state) as its source...."¹¹ As R. J. Rushdoony has noted, "*the source* of law [in a society] is the god of that society."¹² Since the secular humanists, who have come to a dominant position in our civil government, do not believe that anything exists above them to appeal to, to limit their legislative agendas, they have rejected the rule of law. "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Jdg. 17:6). Thus, they seek jurisdiction over every area of man's life, including the family, private property, the economy and the church. Any religion or worldview which seeks to limit the role of the civil government is seen as a threat to the messianic state. Biblical Christianity is the greatest threat to the humanistic state because it proclaims that Christ is Lord over *all*, that everyone (including the state) must submit to Christ and His law. The Bible teaches that salvation comes *only* through Jesus Christ and not through state action.

The church plays a central role in societal sanctification because it proclaims God's word to individuals, families, institutions and governments. But a church that does not proclaim the

¹¹ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, p. 5.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 4.

whole counsel of God (or that refuses to apply God's word to civil government) is not truly discipling the nations. The church is responsible to teach *all* that Christ has commanded, including the validity of the Old Testament moral case laws (Matt. 5:17ff). Christianity is not just a message for individuals to escape hell, but a religion that speaks to every area of life. Christ did not come to have dominion only inside the four walls of a church building, but over all the earth. The church must resume its responsibility to be salt and light to the nations. "The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God." (Ps. 9:17)

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