FamilyVoice and the Cultural Commission

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Rick Warren's book,** The Purpose Driven Life, **is one of the best-selling non-fiction books of all time. It topped the** Wall Street Journal **best-seller charts as well as** Publisher's Weekly **charts with over 30 million copies in print by 2006.[1] Why? Why has it been so successful?

The subtitle of the book provides a clue – it poses the question:** What on earth am I here for? **King or pauper, young or old, rich or poor, we all long for meaning and purpose in our lives. And Rick Warren seems to have tapped into this longing to understand the purpose of our existence.

We also want to know: Why are Christians here? Why is the church here? How should Christians engage with society and its culture? Why is FamilyVoice here? And how does FamilyVoice's ministry fit into the total purpose of Almighty God?

Made in God's image

It all starts with humans being made in God's image. After God had made the world, including all the flora and fauna on earth, we read in Genesis:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.[2]

What does it mean to be made in God's image? My understanding is that humans image God through being *relational*, *creative* and *responsible*.

People are *relational* in ways that animals are not. We are greatly privileged in being able to have a relationship with our Creator. In marriage, a husband and wife can reflect the relationship between God and his people. Our capacity for language enables humans to share ideas and build cultures, societies and nations.

Like God, people are *creative*. Humans have learned to grow crops, extract minerals, compose music, build homes, make computers and explore space.

People are *morally responsible* for their actions. God holds humans accountable for their rule – for the management of natural resources, for the treatment of neighbours and for the government of nations.

Cultural commission

The *purpose* of mankind being made in God's image is indicated by the command which follows in Genesis chapter 1:28 – sometimes called the *cultural commission*, *cultural mandate* or *creation mandate*:

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."[3]

Fulfilling the command to "be fruitful and increase" involves marrying, forming families, creating communities and building nations.

The command to "subdue the earth" contrasts starkly with pagan religions that worship the earth.[4] The biblical imperative to worship the Creator and not the creation removed this fear of disturbing the natural world and opened the way for scientific investigation of the natural world.

The command to "rule" involves accepting responsibility for wise management of the natural world. In her book *Total Truth*, Nancy Pearcey comments:

The first phrase, "be fruitful and multiply" means to develop the social world: build families, churches, schools, cities, governments, laws. The second phrase, "subdue the earth," means to harness the natural world: plant crops, build bridges, design computers, compose music. This passage is sometimes called the Cultural Mandate because it tells us that our original purpose was to create cultures, build civilizations - nothing less.[5]

Building a harmonious culture or a successful civilisation is no easy task. We too readily forget that creating a society that provides freedom, order and security for its people is not easy. We are greatly blessed in Australia – largely due to our Christian heritage.

The peace of the city

When God's people found themselves deported to Babylon in 587 BC, how were they to live in this alien land and pagan culture? The prophet Jeremiah spoke this word from the Lord:

"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper."[6]

This command reinforces the cultural commission given by God at the beginning.[7] The people were to marry, have children and increase their community. They were to subdue the land, growing food and building houses. And they were to engage with the society, seeking its peace and prosperity.

Decades later, Daniel and his friends were invited by king Nebuchadnezzar to participate in the governance of Babylon. So effective was Daniel's civic ministry and godly witness that the king came to worship the Most High God of whom Daniel had spoken. King Nebuchadnezzar declared his conversion in a message to "the peoples, nations and men of every language, who live in all the world", which ended with this confession of faith: "I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and exalt and glorify the King of heaven, because everything he does is right and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble."[8] What a wonderful outcome from seeking the peace of the city!

Salt and light

Hundreds of years later, after God's people had returned to Judaea but were under oppressive and pagan Roman rule, Jesus declared in the sermon on the mount how they were to live:

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a

lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."[9]

Like *salt*, Christians are to preserve society from decay. With modern refrigeration we seldom encounter salt used to prevent decay. However at the time of Christ, salt provided the best-known food preservative, especially for meat. Salt is still used today for making such meats as ham and corned beef - the latter named after the "corns" or grains of coarse salt used to cure it.

Like *light*, Christians are to show the way forward. Today, with electric lighting almost everywhere, we may experience pitch-darkness only during a blackout or when camping in a remote location. At such times, a candle or torch makes a huge difference. Likewise, Christians offering biblical wisdom can be a great blessing to society – and some people may recognise the benefit of Christian values before coming to accept the Christian faith.

By being salt and light to the world, Christians contribute to the peace and prosperity of the city and thereby fulfil the cultural commission. The early church became known for the quality of the lives of Christians and for their valuable contribution to society, as the second century AD Letter to Diognetus indicates:

For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality or in speech or in customs... But while they dwell in cities of Greeks and barbarians as the lot of each is cast, and follow the native customs in dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvellous, and confessedly contradicts expectation.

They ... bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers... They marry like all other men and they beget children; but they do not cast away their offspring. They have their meals in common, but not their wives... They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives. They love all men, and they are persecuted by all...[10]

The impact of the early church on society was extraordinary. In his book *The Rise of Christianity*, agnostic sociologist Rodney Stark examines the question: "How did a tiny and obscure messianic movement from the edge of the Roman Empire dislodge classical paganism and become the dominant faith of Western civilisation?"[11]

His conclusion was summed up in *Newsweek* thus: "Stark finds that Christians prospered the old-fashioned way: by providing a better, happier and more secure way of life... In the end, Stark concludes, Christians 'revitalised' the Roman Empire."[12]

The Great Commission

One of the most influential Christians in recent centuries was William Wilberforce.

He was a member of a group of Christians who aimed to apply the principles of the gospels to social life. These Christians championed penal reform, the abolition of slavery and missions to the native people of the empire. Wilberforce helped found the Church Missionary Society - an Anglican ministry which still flourishes in Britain and Australia today. He also founded a group similar to FamilyVoice, quaintly titled the *Society for the Reformation of Manners* (in a day when "manners" meant morals).[13]



Jesus said "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden." (Mt 5:14)

Although best known for his lifelong campaign for the abolition of slavery, Wilberforce successfully nominated the first two chaplains of the colony of New South Wales: Richard Johnson and Samuel Marsden. He was also influential in the appointments of Matthew Flinders, Charles La Trobe and governors Ralph Darling and George Arthur. Wilberforce's Christian vision was clearly nation-building in scope.

Wilberforce and his friends were inspired by the Great Commission:

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."[14]

In a recent book on *The Great Commission*, Timothy George writes: "William Wilberforce ... declared that there are 'many passages of Scripture, wherein the promoting of the glory of God is commanded as our supreme and universal aim, and wherein the honour due unto him is declared to be that in which he will allow no competitor to participate.'"[15] George goes on to say: "... the New Testament vision of the Great Commission is universal in its sweep. It declares that all things in heaven and on earth are to be united or summed up in Christ..."[16]

Many English translations of this passage render "disciple" as a *noun*, whereas in the Greek it is *verb* of command: "Disciple all nations!" Going, baptising and teaching obedience are all embraced in the command to disciple.

The scope of the command is "all nations" – *ethnos* in the Greek – not "all persons" – *anthropos*. The scope extends beyond individuals to encompass communities, societies, nations! Matthew Henry's 18th century commentary on this passage puts it thus: "Christianity should be twisted in with national constitutions … the kingdoms of the world should become Christ's kingdoms, and their kings the church's nursing fathers… Do your utmost to make the nations Christian nations… Christ the Mediator is setting up a kingdom in the world, bring the nations to be his subjects."[17]

Charles Colson in his best-selling book *How Now Shall We Live?* puts it this way: "We need prayer, Bible study, worship, fellowship, and witnessing. But if we focus exclusively on these disciplines – and if in the process we ignore our responsibility to redeem the surrounding culture – our Christianity will remain privatized and marginalized."[18]

The Great Commission complements the cultural commission in important ways. Both are commands by the sovereign Lord God. The Great Commission commands Christians to disciple the nations formed in response to the cultural commission. And the command for mankind to rule the earth is extended to the vision of bringing everything in heaven and on earth under the rule of Christ.[19]

Church and state

Discipling nations does **not** mean establishing theocracies.

Theocracy means a "form of government by God or god directly or through a priestly class" – from the Greek *theos* meaning "god" and *kratos* meaning "rule". A contemporary example is Iran where the Supreme Leader, currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is an Islamic cleric appointed for life by an assembly of Muslim clerics.[20] A Council of Guardians, half of whom are appointed by the Ayatollah, can veto election candidates, reject legislation deemed incompatible with the constitution or Islamic (*sharia*) law and interpret the constitution.[21] Through these means, all power – both religious and civil – is controlled by Muslim clerics.

Muhammed set the Islamic precedent for theocracy when he became the religious, political and military leader of Medina following the migration (*hijra*) from Mecca in 622 AD. In contrast, Jesus consistently rejected political power, most memorably in his words: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."[22] This decree is consistent with the separate roles of priest

and king in ancient Israel and the separate temple and palace.

Christ's short but profound statement provided the basis for separation of church and state – but not separation of Christianity and state – in the development of Western democracies. In the 5th century, Augustine of Hippo distinguished the spiritual realm of the *City of God* from the temporal realm of the *City of Man*.[23] At the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, Martin Luther articulated a doctrine of the two kingdoms: God rules the earthly realm through secular government and in the heavenly realm through grace.[24] The modern concept of separating church and state is often credited to the 17th century writings of English philosopher John Locke.[25]

The Australian Constitution has the balance right. The preamble, which sets the context for the whole Constitution, acknowledges the sovereignty of God over Australia, whose people agreed to unite while "humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God".[26] Significantly the term "Almighty God", used throughout the Old and New Testaments, uniquely identifies the God of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. This is balanced by asserting the separation of church and state in section 116:

The Commonwealth shall not make any law for establishing any religion, or for imposing any religious observance, or for prohibiting the free exercise of any religion, and no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office or public trust under the Commonwealth.[27]

Consequently, the Commonwealth Parliament:

- *cannot establish a State church*,[28]
- *cannot enforce religious observance*,[29, 30, 31]
- *cannot prohibit religious observance*[32] and
- *cannot impose a religious test for public office*.[33]

Give to Caesar

Under God's sovereignty and with church and state separate, Christ calls us to give to Caesar. But what are we called to give? Scripture outlines several obligations Christians have to government including *prayer*, *honour*, *service* and *rebuke*.

Prayer is our first obligation to government. The apostle Paul makes this clear in his first letter to Timothy: "I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness."[34] Later in the letter Paul implies that his instructions are intended to be normative for church conduct, not private instructions to Timothy: "I am writing you these instructions so that ... you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God".[35] Christian churches today should be praying regularly for federal, state and local government representatives and other public officials such as police and judges.

Honour to our rulers is obligatory. Scripture could not be clearer: "Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people."[36] To curse a ruler is tantamount to reviling God, who created civil government to accomplish His good purposes within and between nations.[37] When we disagree with our rulers or they behave badly, we should debate the issue, not abuse people. Christian churches today should seek to honour federal, state and local government representatives, for example in civic services.



Jesus said "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's." (Mt 22:21)

Service is both an opportunity and an obligation. Daniel's faithful service of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon shows how effective God's people can be in a pagan context by enthusiastic acceptance of opportunities for service.[38] During the hated Roman occupation of Judea, those serving the government as tax collectors and soldiers were socially despised, yet Jesus welcomed them; they were commended and encouraged to serve faithfully.[39] Today we have many opportunities for service in civil society, including voting, joining a political party or seeking nomination for election to local, state or federal governments. Christians should be encouraged to seek such involvement.

Rebuke is part of keeping governments accountable. Rulers seldom like being held accountable, yet our Lord Jesus Christ reminded the regional representative of the greatest political power of his day of his accountability when he said: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."[40] Ultimately, governments are accountable to Christ who is described as "the ruler of the kings of the earth."[41] Just as Nathan the prophet rebuked king David over his gross moral failure,[42] so Christians today have a responsibility to hold our governments accountable. Indeed, all citizens in a democracy share this responsibility.

Preparing the way

People become Christians for a variety of reasons. In today's world, people increasingly have little or no knowledge of the Bible or God's plan of salvation. Preparing the way for the Lord therefore becomes increasingly important.

John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord Jesus Christ. T. M. Moore, dean of the BreakPoint Centurions Program, describes him as a perfect example of what is required of believers in holding rulers accountable to God and His Word.[43]

John was neither a politician nor a pundit. He ... knew he must call the people to repentance from sin... At some point in his ministry he must have had an audience with Herod, the Edomite puppet of Rome, who had been appointed as king in Jerusalem... John declared ... it was against the Law of God for Herod to have his brother's wife.

The confrontation between John and Herod is important for at least three reasons. First, it demonstrates that the Law of God was not given only for the governance of the people of Israel... Most governments of the world recognize the value of God's Law for securing the wellbeing of their people—although they may not admit it—and readily adopt large portions of it for the common good. This is because the works of the Law of God have been written on the hearts of all men as the image bearers of God (Romans 2:14,15). Thus, murder, perjury, and theft—among other things—are routinely proscribed in most nations.

Second, John shows us by his example that, even though we may not be called to work in the political realm, every believer must be ready to speak an appropriate word to Caesar when he has strayed, or is in danger of straying, from the path of goodness marked out in the statutes of the Lord... John called Herod to repentance in this matter of moral compromise, because a ruler must embody goodness before he can presume to govern for goodness.

Finally, John shows us the cost that must be endured by all who take up this challenge to speak the Word of God to power. John's demand for repentance on Herod's part cost him his freedom, and ultimately, his life... As believers we can expect to be shouted down, mocked, warned against violating the separation of church and state, and a host of other usual accusations. But this no more relieves us of the responsibility of rendering to Caesar our clear understanding of the requirements of God's Word than it relieved John the Baptist or the Lord Jesus of theirs. We must be willing to suffer the opposition, opprobrium, and even oppression of men for the sake of the Truth of God.

Christian apostolate

The Christian *apostolate*, a term used in Catholic,[44] Orthodox[45] and Protestant[46] circles for the *mission* of proclaiming the kingdom of God, has its origin in Jesus' consciousness of being *sent* by the Father to carry out His mission.[47]

The word "apostolate" comes from the Greek *apostello* "to send" and *apostolos* "apostle" or "sent one", while "mission" comes from the Latin *missio* "to send". In particular *apostello* has the sense of being "sent with a commission"[48] – which includes the Great Commission.

From the beginning the Christian apostolate was characterised by *sending*. First, after Jesus had chosen the Twelve he *sent* them to the lost sheep of Israel.[49] Second, Jesus appointed the Seventy whom he *sent* to "every town and place where he was to go" including the gentile region of Tyre and Sidon.[50] Finally, after his resurrection, our Lord *sent* the Eleven – and by implication all Christians in all ages – into the whole world.[51]

Today the Christian apostolate includes both those sent to foreign lands as missionaries and those sent to secular cultures here in Australia – universities, parliaments and the media – to engage civic leaders as Paul did in Athens.[52]

Civic engagement is a particular responsibility of Christian laity and in Catholic thought is often called the *lay apostolate*.[53] Since lay people "live in the midst of the world and its concerns, they are called by God to exercise their apostolate in the world like leaven..."[54] Their role is "to infuse a Christian spirit into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which one lives".[55]

The laity have many opportunities to apply their Christian wisdom. "In loyalty to their country and in faithful fulfilment of their civic obligations ... they should make the weight of their opinion felt in order that the civil authority may act with justice and that legislation may conform to moral precepts and the common good."[56]

Conclusion

Charles Colson sums up well the challenge facing the Christian church today:

Understanding Christianity as a worldview is important not only for fulfilling the great commission but also for fulfilling the cultural commission—the call to create a culture under the lordship of Christ. God cares not only about redeeming souls but also about restoring his creation. He calls us to be agents not only of his saving grace but also of his common grace. Our job is not only to build up the church but also to build a society to the glory of God…

When advancing the biblical perspective in public debate, we ought to interpret biblical truth in ways that appeal to the common good… To do this, we must translate God's revelation into the language of the world. We must be able to speak to the scientist in the language of science, to the artist in the language of art, to the politician in the language of politics.[57]

Through seeking the peace and prosperity of the Australian nation and commending the common good in accordance with a biblical perspective, FamilyVoice Australia can honour our Lord and help expand the kingdom of God. ■

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