

Human dominion and reproduction

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In the early chapters of Genesis, God instructed Adam and Eve—the entire human race at that time—to “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.” Mankind was instructed to rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and every other living creature that moves on the ground. But are these commands really commands? If so, are they still applicable for today? Are societies in general, and Christian communities in particular, still obligated to continue to have children and reproduce themselves, especially in light of the apparent exponential growth of the human population in recent decades? How many people is enough? This article explores all these questions and demonstrates why human reproduction is not only a core part of God’s mandate but also fundamentally important in providing the knowledge and manpower to drive the development and technological innovation that improves both our standard of living and the environment.

In a previously published three-part series of articles, I presented a perspective on Human Dominion that viewed human beings as having a special relationship with the created order: We are God’s image-bearers, the pinnacle of His creation, and He has placed everything else under our stewardship. The articles also presented a Christian view of development and environmentalism, and a Christian approach to environmental issues.

The basis for such a view is, naturally, found in the first few chapters of 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. 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.’ Then God said, ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.’ And it was so” (Gen 1:26–30).

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die’” (Gen 2:15–17).

“To Adam he said, ‘Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I

commanded you, “You must not eat of it”, Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return’” (Gen 3:17–19).

But are God’s commands to Adam and Eve still applicable to us today? Is a society that fails to have enough children in order to reproduce itself disobeying God’s mandate? How does the Fall affect our stewardship role, and what does having dominion over creation imply?

God’s mandate for today?

Regarding God’s instruction to “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” (Gen 1:28), it could be argued that this mandate is no longer in effect today: it was a commandment issued to Adam and Eve in their pre-Fall world. But this objection cannot be sustained. This can be demonstrated using a thought experiment: suppose the overwhelming view of every society around the world was that the planet could no longer sustain any more people and couples decided not to have children or were prevented by authorities from doing so. In less than one hundred years the entire human population would be extinct and the human beings that lived during that time would be subjected to abject poverty and disease as the loss of human capital resulted in the loss of human services and technological ‘know-how’, and thus the loss of human capacity to cure illnesses, maintain existing systems and infrastructure, and develop new technologies. Is the suffering and eventual extinction of the human race what God would want? Would that be pleasing to Him? Would it bring glory to His name? Moreover, is refusing to have children when we are physically able to do so not a prime



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Figure 1. Human reproduction is a fulfilment of God's mandate and ensures that our role as God's image-bearers is continued.

example of selfishness, which is one of the fruits of the sinful nature (Gal. 5:19–20)?

It could be argued that the Bible tells us to go out and make disciples of all nations, not go out and make nations (Matt 28:19). But this would be a red herring. The Great Commission refers to the Christian mission. It is the prime objective of the Church in general and every Christian in particular, but it is not an all-encompassing prescription for what Christians should and should not do. Having said that, it must be asked how the Great Commission could be achieved if there were no future generations to continue the task. Active evangelism and ministry is tough going and foreign mission work is even tougher. It is a bit much to expect retirees and octogenarians to do the work of young men and women.

But how can the failure to have children be sinful when both the Apostle Paul and Christ Himself purposefully and intentionally did not marry or have children? Such an objection confuses God's mandate for society and His mandate for individual Christians. In Genesis 1:28, God's command to "[b]e fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" was issued to Adam and Eve. But Adam and Eve were not merely the first human couple, they were—at that time—the entire human race! Thus, the command to be fruitful and fill the earth was, in fact, a command to the entire human race. The command was a corporate one rather than being directed to specific individual(s). A society violates God's command when it fails to reproduce itself. This does not mean that every person in that society must be a progenitor of multiple children. Not everyone will marry and not every married person will be physically capable of having children. But the society as a whole must value children and procreate.

Nevertheless, it may be possible to object to my argument—that societies not procreating at a rate that guarantees their long-term survival are failing to uphold this God-given mandate and therefore are sinning against God—on the basis that there is no such sin as 'national

suicide'. But this objection hinges on whether there is such a thing as a communal or corporate sin. The Old Testament record clearly indicates there is. Sodom and Gomorrah, the Amalekites, and the Babylonians were societies that corporately sinned against God. Indeed, as the book of Judges testifies, Israel as a nation sinned against God many times. Therefore, this objection cannot stand.

It should also be noted that a failure to pro-create due to low birth rates is characteristically a symptom of other sins (figure 1). The anti-Christian left-wing social agenda that accompanies both Marxism and secular humanism—abortion, gay marriage, and hedonism—leads to the culling of unwanted children, the destruction of the family unit and rank selfishness, and will ultimately bring a society to a literal dead end.

Mandate or blessing?

It may also be argued that God's statements in Genesis 1:28 to be fruitful and multiply and subdue the earth were not commands but blessings to Adam and Eve, even though the blessings were intended to incite action. Indeed, this idea appears to be supported by Genesis 9:1, where God used similar language when speaking to Noah: "And God Blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.'" In other words, the reference to being fruitful, multiplying and subduing the earth in Genesis 1:28 is merely a description of the blessing just given. However, this argument is not supported by the Hebrew grammar. The verb בָּרַךְ (wǎy^ebārēk, 'to bless') has the Piel stem. Contrary to earlier beliefs, the Piel is not the stem of intensification but indicates causation of a state of being.¹ Thus, wǎy^ebārēk 'otām 'lōhīm is best translated: "Then God caused them to be blessed." In addition, both פְּרֹו (p^erū, "be fruitful") and רַבּוּ (r^ebū, "become many") are Qal imperatives indicating commands.

Stewardship and the Fall

Does our stewardship role imply that we resist the Fall and reverse its effects? Does this mean that we are to reverse what Adam did? Firstly, the choice of words here is important: we are to reverse the *effects* of the Fall. We cannot reverse the Fall itself; that task can only be accomplished by Christ Himself when the Kingdom of God is finally and fully ushered in. Secondly, the notion of reversing the effects of the Fall is clearly implied right at the beginning when God cursed the ground. God said to Adam:

"Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:17b–19).

The cursed ground naturally produces thorns and thistles, yet Adam is to work the soil in order to produce the ‘plants of the field’ that will be his food.

One may argue that human beings simply do not have the capacity to do this to any significant degree. Indeed, Romans 3:9–18 states that we have all turned away from God and become corrupted by sin. However, this passage includes a quotation of Psalm 14:3 drawn from the Septuagint (LXX). The Greek verb ἀχρειόω (*achreioō*), rendered in many translations as ‘worthless’, can also mean ‘depraved’, and this would seem a better rendering given that the corresponding Hebrew word in Psalm 14:3 is אָלֵף (*ālāh*) and refers to moral corruption. All humanity has—as a result of their turning away from God—become depraved and morally corrupt. However, in turning back to God and accepting His gift of salvation, this moral corruption begins to be reversed. Moreover, humanity’s moral corruption has often proved no barrier to human ingenuity or physical capacity.²

Note also that reversing the effects of the Fall does not mean or imply a ‘reconstructionist’ view where humans overcome all evil and restore everything to a state analogous to the pre-Fall world. Again, that would be doing the work of Christ. I am merely suggesting that we have a responsibility and a mandate to resist evil and all its effects, including the physical effects in creation. Yes, human beings are fallen but we are still image bearers of God, and although we have often been guilty of environmental neglect and abuse, and generated much pollution, there are also many instances where human ingenuity has led to great advances in agricultural production and marked improvements to environmental health.

But why preserve the planet when God intends to completely refashion it anyway (2 Pet. 3:7)? Is our God-given mission for this world not to win the souls of mankind? But why should it be an either/or scenario? Can we not honour God and do good when dealing with the created order *as well* as leading people to Christ?

Human dominion

What does it mean to ‘subdue’ the earth and to ‘rule’ over all the other living creatures? The Hebrew word כָּבַשׁ (*kābāš*) refers to subjugation.³ Swanson’s dictionary by semantic domains gives the meaning “overcome, enslave, i.e. conquer and control an environment or people”.⁴ The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* states:

“Despite recent interpretations of Gen 1:28 which have tried to make ‘subdue’ mean a responsibility for building up, it is obvious from an overall study of the word’s usage that this is not so. *kābāš* assumes that the party being subdued is hostile to the subduer, necessitating some sort of coercion if the subduing is to take place Therefore ‘subdue’ in Gen 1:28 implies that creation will not do man’s bidding gladly or easily and that man must now bring creation into submission by main strength. It is not to rule man.”⁵

The Hebrew word רָדָה (*rādāh*) means to ‘rule’ or ‘have dominion’. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* states that the word means “‘to rule’ and is used some twenty-two times in the OT, occurring in every section and type of context.”⁶ Swanson points out that in the Qal stem (as in Gen 1:28) it means to “rule over, dominate, direct, lead, control, subdue, i.e., manage or govern an entity, people or government with considerable or forceful authority.”⁷ The *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* concurs: the word “stresses the act of dominance by force”,⁸ as does the Koehler and Baumgartner standard Hebrew lexicon: “to rule (with the associated meaning of oppression).”⁹ While it is true that not every possible rendering or nuance of a particular word is equally applicable in all contexts, the semantic range of *rādāh* is very narrow: it means to rule or dominate with an associated connotation of the application of force,¹⁰ and all the above lexical authorities explicitly cite Genesis 1:28 as an example of this meaning. Thus, both *kābāš* and *rādāh* indicate mankind’s active participation in forcibly manipulating and controlling the created order.

It may be argued that the notion of human beings ruling and dominating the created order using the application of force is suggestive of an original good creation that was—contrary to Genesis 1:31—not “very good”. In other words, the supposedly “very good” creation was hardwired to resist Adam’s dominion even *before* the Fall. But such an objection overextends what it means to have dominion through the application of force. What is in view here is for humanity to manipulate the created order so that it better serves our needs and purposes. For example, in the beginning the ‘streams’ that watered the ground were still not enough to cause all of the shrubs and all of the plants of the field to grow. This was because it had not yet rained and there was *no man to work the ground* (Gen 2:5). Exercising human dominion would imply working hard ground by breaking it up, aerating the soil in order to allow seed germination, and adding fertilisers. Water does not naturally flow where one wishes it to go. It naturally submits not to human will but to gravity, and generally takes the path of least resistance. Therefore, exercising dominion implies that we force the water to flow to places where it would not normally flow. This could be achieved by digging irrigation trenches or using a mechanism to pump the water through pipes to the required destination.

Possession and control

Psalm 115:16 states that God has given the earth to mankind. But does this mean mankind has been given control over the earth or is it merely stating the fact that God has provided the earth to be our home? It is important to distinguish between the concepts of ‘title’ and ‘possession’. If a person owns a piece of property, then they have ‘title’ to that property. If a title owner lets out their property, they still retain title in that property but no longer retain possession. The tenant occupying the property has no title to it but

they maintain possession to it, and this possession allows them to control what goes on at that property. Consider human dominion an analogous situation: Psalm 24:1 and Deuteronomy 10:14 make it clear that everything belongs to God, yet Psalm 115:16 states that the earth has been given to mankind. In other words, God still retains the title to His creation, but possession (and thus control) have passed to mankind. This is illustrated in Genesis 12:7: “The LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.” The land of Canaan was to be given to the descendants of Abram. It was to be their home and they would rule over it and control what happens inside its borders.

Overpopulation and the environment

As noted in a previous article,¹¹ human beings are subject to God, while the rest of creation is subject to mankind and exists for our benefit. In other words, God rules over mankind, who rules over the rest of creation (cf. Psalm 8). Humanity’s special relationship with the Creator and position over the rest of creation was set in place at the very beginning (Gen 1:26–31). It is clear, then, that not all life is equal. Human life stands above all other life. Human beings are God’s greatest creative achievement and more precious to Him than any other creatures because they reflect His own image and have been given dominion over the rest of creation.

Yet many intellectuals and environmental activists today believe that we are no different to any other animal; that in fact we are more akin to pests and vermin. Ever since the publication of Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* in 1968, there has been a wide spread view that the earth is overpopulated, and drastic steps need to be taken to stop this growth. This view has become pervasive among many intellectuals and ‘progressive-minded’ politicians, commentators and journalists. Therefore, in an age of hysteria about ‘dwindling resources’, our greatest resource—us—is seen as a liability! “We are so bad, so polluting, so exploitative, so violent, so destructive that we owe it to the world not to be born in the first place.”¹² As Melbourne Neuroscientist Dr John Reid states:

“The fact is, Planet Earth cannot support the present human population ... [We] in the affluent world will have to accept substantial reductions in our standard of living The population of the world must be very quickly reduced to 5 billion And then, as the average level of affluence rises, fairly quickly reduced further to, say, 2 to 3 billion Humanity must undergo a mind-shift Indeed, humanity has been all too compliant with the Biblical injunction to be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The precepts of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam represent the quintessential perversion of the human mind. They must be abandoned and the notion of the



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Figure 2. Scientific progress and technological innovation is a product of human intelligence and human action. Less human beings means less scientific progress and less technological innovation.

sanctity of human life must be subjugated to the greater sanctity of all life on Earth.”¹³

Even some churchmen believe this lie:

“Wading into the population debate, the General Synod of the Anglican Church has warned that current rates of population growth are unsustainable and potentially out of step with church doctrine In a significant intervention, the Anglican Public Affairs Commission has warned concerned Christians that remaining silent ‘is little different from supporting further overpopulation and ecological degradation.’ ‘Out of care for the whole of creation, particularly the poorest of humanity and the life forms who cannot speak for themselves ... it is not responsible to stand by and remain silent,’ a discussion paper by the commission warns. ‘Unless we take account of the needs of future life on Earth, there is a case that we break the eighth commandment—Thou shall not steal.’”¹⁴

But the reality is that there is no population bomb—and there never was. The United Nations’ most recent population report has revised the global fertility rate down to 1.85—below replacement rate—and world population is expected to peak around 2075 and then fall.¹⁵ Human beings are the *real* endangered species, not the black rhino! The problem is not the cutting down of trees—it is the cutting down of the family tree!

Climate change—the current eco cause *de jour*—is seen as an issue regarding the future of our children. But the problem is that so many societies today (especially in the developed world) are having so few children, and far fewer than the minimum replacement rate of 2.1 per woman. Even if climate change was a real problem, much of the planet would become *uninhabited* long before it becomes *uninhabitable*!¹⁶ Yet the environmental movement is fixated on the fate of the giant panda, the Siberian tiger, and the green-cheeked parrot.

But aren't human beings also part of the environment? We certainly have environmental significance.

The eco-doom alarmists consistently get everything wrong because they fail to take into account human creativity and ingenuity. We are often told we will not be able to produce enough food to feed our growing population, yet we continue to develop more efficient farming methods and create more arable land. We are constantly told we will soon run out of oil and other consumable resources, yet we continue to discover more deposits and find better methods of extraction. But, as Mark Steyn rightly notes, "human inventiveness depends on humans—and that's the one thing we really are running short of..." (figure 2).¹⁷

It is true, however, that our planet's resources are finite and thus there is a limit to the number of people it can support. Given that the human population has grown exponentially in recent decades, how many more can the planet sustain? Is there a point at which humanity must stop reproducing? Human beings must continue to reproduce to fulfil God's mandate, but the *rate* at which we reproduce can certainly be decreased and thus population growth will slow and eventually stabilize.

Regarding the question of the maximum number of people the planet can support, J.E. Cohen has pointed out that before we can begin to arrive at a number (if such a calculation is even possible), some critical parameters must first be set: how many people for how long? How many at what average level of well-being? How many with what distribution of well-being? How many with what physical, chemical and biological environments? How many with what values, tastes and fashions? The number and nature of the assumptions necessary to make any calculation of maximum sustainable human population size would make any resulting estimate extremely debatable.¹⁸ Nevertheless, assuming a population density similar to New York City, the earth's entire present population of seven billion could fit into the state of Texas. At a density similar to London, everyone could fit into the states of Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana.¹⁹ It should be clear, then, that whatever the maximum sustainable population is, we are presently nowhere near it.

Conclusion

As fallen human beings, we are still God's image bearers and still stewards of His creation. This means we must continue to fill the earth and subdue it, and to rule over the rest of creation. But we cannot reverse the effects of the Fall through human ingenuity, or continue to be God's image bearers or His ambassadors or His evangelists, if we, as a society, opt for voluntary self-gelding. Society as a whole—and Christians in particular—have an obligation to reproduce, because human beings provide the knowledge and labour that drive development and technological innovation that improves both our standard of living and the environment.

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