

Appendix

How the New Testament Understands the Church's Role in the World.

A. Paul's Correction of the Thessalonian Error.

Christian Reconstructionists use “escapist, pessimist” or other pejorative terms to describe those who teach a potential imminent return of the Lord for the church. Defeat and victory are defined by their presupposed agenda, so that anyone who does not expect the church to Christianize the world and transform this world as it is into the kingdom of God before the bodily return of Christ is indicted with defeatism. The problem with this illogic is that of asserting one's conclusion. “Since the church is supposed to rule the world culturally, and you do not think it is going to happen, you have a pessimistic outlook and are defeated before you start. Since you are pessimistic and defeated, your understanding of the role of the church is obviously wrong.” This ad hominem argument works if you accept the premises of the one using it. Those who do not expect the kingdom of this world to become that of “our Lord and of His Christ” (Revelation 11:15) until after His bodily return do not thereby give up hope or loose motivation. The definition and means of final victory may be different, but the hope and expectation is not.

If escapism is indeed the major malady of the modern, Evangelical church, then we have a section of Scripture to correct it. The Thessalonians were guilty of this error and Paul wrote to correct them. They thought the Lord was coming so soon (or had already come) that they need not even work. If Paul understood there to be a dominion mandate which included running the world, then it would be reasonable to expect the Epistles to the Thessalonians to tell of it. Epistles written to correct false views of imminence would doubtless give the appropriate alternative.

Paul's advice was that they should work:

For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone will not work, neither let him eat. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread. (2Thessalonians 3:10-12)

This, after telling them of an apostasy which would come and the revealing of “the man of lawlessness” (2Thessalonians 2:3). In 1Thessalonians Paul spoke of these matters:

And to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you; so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and not be in any

need . . . For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. (1Thessalonians 4:11,12; 15-18)

The “dominion mandate” to culturally Christianize the world system is not mentioned. The context would seem to require that Paul tell them of their role in the world until the return of Christ. One searches in vain to find the Reconstructionist dominion mandate in either of the epistles to the Thessalonians. The best explanation for this is that Paul did not know of the golden age of Christian domination over all areas of society that was to happen before the return of the Lord. He wrote about apostasy and lawlessness.

B. Christians as a Minority Group

The writers of the New Testament apparently understood themselves to be a persecuted minority in the world. Peter's epistles show this perspective, even as he spoke of the end of the age.

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts, which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation. Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution. (1Peter 2:11-13a)

Peter saw the flock of God as suffering. They were aliens and strangers in this world, not world conquerors who would one day make the sinners aliens and strangers in a Christianized world.

But if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God. For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner? (1Peter 4:16-18)

Peter was an eyewitness to the giving of the Great Commission of Matthew 28. It is reasonable to assume that at least by the time he wrote his canonical epistles he understood what Jesus had commanded. Suffering, persecuted Christians who are saved with difficulty (contrasted with a world of godless sinners facing eternal judgment) do not seem to fit the role of cultural world rulers with dominion, political peace and economic property.

In his second epistle Peter tells of those who would mock Christianity because of a delay in the Lord's return (ch.3:4). “But the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men,” Peter writes (2Peter 3:7). He continues:

Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, on account of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless (2Peter 3:11-14).

Again, in a context that begs for the Reconstructionist dominion mandate to be told, it is missing. If Christ is coming back to a world that is full of righteousness and truth, Christianized and submitted at least externally to His will, why doesn't Peter say so? Instead he teaches an opposite agenda: God patiently enduring the evil railings of sinners because he wishes salvation for all, though only some respond. In his first epistle (3:20,21) Peter used the illustration of Noah and the ark in which a few were saved while the rest perished in judgment. The coming of the Lord in judgment, not the action of the church in history, will result in a new heavens and earth "in which righteousness dwells." The dominion agenda is not spelled out in the New Testament passages where we would expect it if it existed.

The Lord Jesus also taught a minority status for those who follow Him: "And someone said to Him, 'Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?' And He said to them, 'Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able'" (Luke 13:23,24). This is similar to the teaching in Matthew 7:13,14 - "Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it." Also consider Matthew 22:14, "For many are called, but few are chosen." A Christianized world with a population which consists primarily of Christians is not envisioned in the teachings of Christ to His disciples.

C. The Remnant and History

Paul reiterates the idea of a minority of the faithful (a "remnant") in Romans 9-11. Reconstructionists say that this only refers to Jews, but that the majority of Gentiles will one day be Christian. This they assert in spite of their doctrine that the church replaces Israel and that the Jews have no legitimate place or identity as a distinct people during or after the church age. It is handy to dismiss the teachings of Christ about the narrow gate and the few chosen to be only about Jews and give special status to Gentiles above the Jews in God's plans and workings. This, however, is the very error Paul warns against in Romans 11, the "grafted" branches boasting against the natural branches of the olive tree.

The few verses that are cited by dominionists when confronted with the evident minority status of God's

people in this world do not teach world dominion for the church. Tommy Ice has repeatedly challenged Gary North to cite one verse that teaches the Reconstructionist postmillennial system. Gary responds to the challenge by referencing Psalm 110:1, 2.¹ He links this passage, often quoted in the New Testament, with 1Corinthians 15:25,26 about death being the last enemy. His reasoning is that Christ will remain in heaven until His enemies are made a footstool. Therefore, the church must be the agency of making all enemies subject to Christ and this must happen in history (during the church age) before the bodily return of Christ. Does Psalm 110:1,2 support this doctrine?

This verse is quoted in the New Testament to prove the ascension of Christ (Acts 2:34,25), the Messiahship of Jesus of Nazareth (Matthew 22:44), the superiority of Christ over angels (Hebrews 1:13), and the fact that Christ's sacrifice for sins was offered once for all (Hebrews 10:13). No New Testament writer quoted this verse to prove the doctrine of cultural Christianization of the world before the return of Christ. Reconstructionists read their agenda into this passage also. The text does not state that world domination by the church is Christ's understanding of His enemies having been made a footstool. North's citation of 1Corinthians 15 showing death to be the last enemy to be conquered would seem to indicate that the final fulfillment is through the resurrection, not the action of the church in history. Sitting at God's right hand is a designation of authority, not particularly geography as we understand it. It is possible to understand the passage to mean that Christ remains in authority until all enemies are defeated. 1Corinthians 15:28 says, "And when all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, that God may be all in all." Here it is stated that it is God, not the church, who "subjected all things to Him." Psalm 110 and the passage in 1Corinthians 15 do not require a postmillennial interpretation.

World political and social dominion for the church was not envisioned by the writers of the New Testament. The idea of a "remnant" of faithful people is predominant in Scripture, particularly the Old Testament. This fits Paul's teaching in Romans and the universal witness of the Scripture. It never was the majority who were faithful to God. This also fits with the testimony of church history unto this day. The Reconstructionist agenda has had no historical fulfillment, Biblical or otherwise. It is not understood or clearly taught by the writers of the New Testament. The thousands of years they claim to have to make it happen would not suffice even if God were to allow history to run that long before the Lord's return. Jesus asked, "When the Son of Man returns, will He find faith [lit. 'the faith'] on the earth?" (Luke 18:8) He did not seem to assume He would return to a Christianized society.

1 . Bahnsen and Gentry, House Divided, Gary North's preface, xxvii.