

## **CULTURAL MANDATE**

In the world, but also increasingly in the Church, culture is considered to be separate from religion. Many people, including serious, reformed Christians, have been swallowed up by the old idea of “sphere sovereignty”.

This idea, taught in Europe by Dr. Abraham Kuyper and several followers, and practiced by many present day North Americans, proposes that each sphere of life has its own parameters. Life is divided into segments or spheres. Religion, medicine, law, science, entertainment, politics, etc. are all considered different spheres.

The Bible and also, particularly, the confessions, are considered as the fundamentals of religion, but different sets of fundamentals need to be established for the other spheres of life. When you think of it, this is how many people live their lives.

Just as an example think of medicine. Although many of us would still use the Bible and Confessions as rules in this sphere there are many others who want medicine to conform to the betterment of society. Abortion, euthanasia, plastic surgery, artificial insemination, birth control, sperm banks, transplants, psychology, psychiatry and many other controversial areas are dealt with in a manner that is based on community standards, costs, democracy, and humanistic reasoning. Some Christians also view aspects of medicine from a pragmatic perspective.

Dr. K. Schilder in his book, *Christ and Culture*, counters the idea of sphere sovereignty very successfully. Even though Dr. Kuyper wanted to establish Christian fundamentals in each of the spheres, Schilder points out that “we fully depend on the standards which God has established. Only the Word of God, Holy Scripture, is the standard; not the Christian or Christianity, but the speaking Christ Who has been made known to us by revelation, and Who also Himself “explains” God to us, and as the Giver, Keeper, and Interpreter of the Law speaks God’s Word to us without restraint - caused by sin or impotence.”

He wants to make the point that when we try to use the Bible as a guide to various spheres of life, or use Jesus and His example as illustrated in the Gospels as the analogy for culture we have missed the boat. Rather than following only the Jesus of the Bible we must realize Him in His full character, office and function. He is Jesus, the Christ.

The essence of His office is that He is the Saviour. He came to save from sin. The Catechism, in Lord’s Day 11 says that He is called Jesus because He saves us from all our sins, and because salvation is not to be sought or found in any one else.

The legitimacy of His office is to be seen in that He has been ordained of God and anointed with the Holy Spirit guaranteeing us that He will accomplish what He set out to do.

In this office He worked among men. He selected His fishers of men. He selected the apostolate from a range of seemingly insignificant people to preach. They could even tell the people that gold

may indeed adorn the chairs of the prominent ones if the chair had been built, not on the foundation that makes one great among men, but on that which is right before God.

In His selection of apostles He was on His way to the hour of revelation when He would cast down all the cultural philosophers with that fine and decisive word of revelation: “the fine linen”, the glitter and pomp, of the most beautiful city “is the righteousness of the saints” (Rev. 19:8).

On the one hand He will, in the cultural world, cause the grapes of the earth to ripen in order to be trodden in the winepress of God’s anger. On the other hand He comes, through the Holy Spirit, in Whom He completes the thousand years of his own dominion of peace, to equip the work-and-office community of God which He has purchased for work and service to God, in order that all its living members may enter into the city of perfect glory.

By His redeeming power He makes certain people again as they were “in the beginning”: men of God. In the midst of this “crooked and perverse generation” He places the types of humanity that is in principle pure. They are not perfect yet; however, in principle they are there again. They are there from the moment when Adam in faith submits himself to the Word of the first Gospel promise. And they continue to appear - they increase; they become “the great multitude which no man can number.” Their host is increasing in number and will always be there, until the last day.

Right from the beginning the cultural way in which man was to fulfill his mandate was expressed by God. “Dress the garden, be fruitful and multiply, subdue the earth and have dominion.” God spoke to man and with him all other creatures, because of his appointment as the chosen representative of God’s dominion. God speaks unto man and with him to and about the rest of the cosmos in spite of the fact that he himself is part of it - which means that self-distinction is thus awakened in him, and that self-cultivation/self-development is made clear to him as his duty, not as an end in itself, but as a matter of mandate.

Christian Culture is there where one cultivates everything, the ground on which one walks - the heart, plants, as well as the meditative spirit in its full depth. There one washes his undefiled hands as well as his soul in righteousness - the one thing cannot be separated from the other.

This is a mandate for all mankind. But we see that all the traffic of life is going down that broad highway leading to perdition. Now we have to travel the other way, against the flow of persistent, heavy traffic. Let us remember that we may work on the cultural mandate as members of the body of our Saviour, as members of His church. In this way we may help and sustain one another.

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(The foregoing is a summary of a speech presented to CRUX, post secondary students. Nov.25. 1994)

**THE PROBLEMS OF PAIN AND SUFFERING**

By: Neil Van Seters - An assignment for Bible Class

FOR GRADE TWELVE AT CREDO CHRISTIAN HIGH SCHOOL

“If God were good, He would wish to make His creatures perfectly happy, and if God were almighty He would be able to do what He wished. But the creatures are not happy. Therefore God lacks either goodness, or power, or both.” (C.S.Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 1940).

This myth has been a major barrier in the path of many people coming to the Christian faith. They can accept all the other teachings of Christianity except for the fact that God allows pain and suffering in the world. These people either conclude that God does not exist, or they believe in the absentee creator theory. This theory states that God, after the creation of the world, left it to fend for itself and now watches from a distance. It states that he is either unwilling or unable to intervene in the affairs of mankind.

But to think in such a manner is wrong. For us to try to judge our Creator is wrong. He has shown us this in the conversations he had with a certain man from Uz a long time ago. That man's name was Job. Job had been stripped of everything he had - his possessions, his children and his health. Even his wife was un-supportive, telling him to curse God and die. Convinced of his innocence, Job asked God why, and God answered him. He asked Job if he knew where earth's foundations were and who marked off its dimensions, who it was that stopped the sea, and where the darkness resided. They were questions that Job couldn't answer. It proved that no mere man, who with his own hands can create nothing, can question the creator of everything. If we have no real understanding of the world we live in who are we to judge the manufacture of it all? But after everything was gone, Job still had one thing - faith. Through his whole ordeal his faith was strengthened. And so God proved to Satan that Job loved Him out of faith, not prosperity.

Many people don't realize that suffering is a gift, not a punishment. There are two parts to this gift, the physical gift of pain, and the emotional and spiritual gift of suffering.

“Thank God for inventing pain. I don't think He could have done a better job.” (Dr. P. Brand). This may seem rather surprising at first but it is true. Without our sense of pain we would be in a lot of trouble. Pain is the one thing that keeps us from most serious injuries. If we touch a stove while it is not we pull away because our nerves tell us that it hurts. Many people wish for a life without pain, but they should be careful what they say. For if you live a life free of pain it may be that you are a leper. Leprosy is a disease that attacks the nervous system. People afflicted with this disease have no sense of pain and therefore often seriously injure themselves. There is no money in the world that these people wouldn't pay to get their sense of pain back. One example of the suffering such people have to go through is the story of a little infant. “The baby had bitten off the tip of her finger and was making patterns with the drips.” I was sick to my stomach when I first read this. But it doesn't stop there. These people lose fingers, toes, noses, etc. to the disease, all because they don't have the gift of pain.

There are also several ways God uses pain and suffering to our benefit. The first is to refine our faith as referred to in 1 Peter 1: 7 where it is compared to refinement by fire. And as in refinement of

metal our faith comes out purer. The second is that it matures our faith. In James 1: 2-4 it states that testing of faith leads to spiritual maturity, that we may lack nothing.

Suffering also lead to perseverance. In Romans 5:3-5 Paul informs us that perseverance leads to character and character leads to hope. Job's suffering led to greater perseverance, hi James 1:2, James informs us that we must consider it pure joy whenever we face trials for this reason. In 1 Peter 4:12,13 Peter tells us not to be surprised by our suffering but to rejoice in it. If we are commanded by God to rejoice in something it must be good and beneficial.

This is not to say that suffering is not an evil affect of the fall. If there had been no fall there would have been no suffering anywhere in the world. Suffering is a result of our rebellion against God's original design. Humanity has destroyed the earth from what it was meant to be. And while suffering can be turned to our benefit by God, the root of it is still evil.

The existence of suffering in this world is like an alarm bell going off. It is saying, "Look people, there is something wrong." The presence of suffering makes it impossible to believe that we are here just to party and have a good time. How can anyone stick to such ideas when a third of the world is starving each day? "If I try to escape the idea and merely enjoy life, suffering is there, haunting me, reminding me how hollow this life would be if this world were al 111 ever know." (Philip Yancey, Where Is God When It Hurts, 1980).

We must also take an example from God Himself, when He came down to earth in the form of man. The suffering He endured His whole life is too much for us to understand. Every day He woke up in an imperfect human body instead of His perfect heavenly one. He endured constant ridicule and shame throughout His whole life. And that was just a small beginning of what He had to bear. He had His body nailed on the cross and all the sins of die world were placed on His shoulders. He bore all of our sins, for which we would have received the death penalty, so that we may experience eternal life. So the next time we suffer a little, we should think of the Nazarene on the cross.

In Rom. 8:18 Paul makes a strong point. "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the life that awaits us." What is a short time of suffering, eighty years, compared to eternity and everlasting perfection?

Although there are often times when we wish that there was no suffering and no pain in this world we must thank and praise our Lord and Maker for His wonderful gift. And through all our suffering we must remember that "God will not allow a hair to fall from my head unless it is to the furtherance of my salvation "(Lord's Day 1, The Heidelberg Catechism).

#### ALL THE LIVING SHE HAD

Sometimes it's interesting to nose through an old musty book. Some time ago I looked through a Dutch book of meditations written by the well-known Dr. Abraham Kuyper and first published in 1899. The title was "Als Gij in Uw Huis Zit" which means, "When You Sit in Your House". In this book I came across the following meditation based on Luke 21:3, which I translated (in some instances using the "dynamic equivalence" method).

I find it an interesting meditation, since it brings to light an apparent shift in attitude towards raising money for good causes. What Kuyper writes here was evidently the general view in the Reformed churches almost a century ago.

In this meditation, Kuyper wanted to emphasize over against the secular influence of his time, that Christian faith means a different approach to many things in practice - also when it comes to generosity and raising money for good causes.

In Groningen once, a policeman was murdered and his body was found floating in a canal. So this man left a widow behind. And immediately the well-disposed and generous Groningers felt they should do something for that widow. And they did. A nice festive evening was organized. To attend, you had to pay a substantial entry fee. And the money raised, after the costs had been paid, would be for the widow.

Lovely, considerate trait of the generosity of our times! If some wretch murders your husband, the ladies and gentlemen “amuse” themselves greatly for an evening, and whatever is raised is for you.

Of course, the Calvinists didn’t participate. They sent in a sum of freely donated money through the youth societies.

But for the rest, the whole city participated. To not do so was callous. After all, it was for that poor widow of the murdered policeman!

We won’t go into this any farther.

From our side there have been constant warnings not to take part in those false forms of “charity”. Whoever gives, should give freely, out-offhand. All additional devices are actually unworthy of Christian love.

But what this sorry incident does teach, is that you should always let the light from above shine on all giving in your own circle, and on your own giving out of your own income and with your own hand.

Nothing lends itself more to phoniness, to self-deception and to deception of others than the giving of alms. And that’s why our Saviour was especially strict and unrelenting when it came to the matter of “giving”. What wasn’t given because of desire to do God’s will, didn’t count. If the right hand knew about the giving of the left hand, the left hand was condemned. To give out of ones abundance was worthless. Only what was given out of one’s lack, out of one’s living, shines in the treasury of the Lord like the gold of Ophir.

You remember that Jerusalem widow, for whom no one held a fund-raising event. She gave herself, all that she had in her house: two small pennies. Money with which she had to buy bread, and that she saved from her mouth in order to devote it to the Lord he God. Well, before as well as after that widow made her offering, gold and silver had rolled into that treasury box by the handfuls. But that didn’t stop Jesus from testifying before all: the two coppers which this woman put in are worth more than all that gold and silver which those others deposited. For what the others threw in, was out of their abundance; what the widow put in was out of her poverty.

Now, giving is a trait of spiritual beauty for which you may give thanks when you come across it in a nation, in your own circle, or in your own house and in your own heart. "Giving" as a special activity, "giving" in order to make a show, was a normal thing among pagans, and to a certain extent that still is the case. But "giving" such as you notice among Christians in the Netherlands and in the British and Scottish and American regions, is a fruit of Christian faith. We are still behind his comparison with the colossal gifts of the British. But whoever figures out what not the well-to-do, but especially our common people give for collections, for memberships, for organizations, for school and church - and then out of their living, not out of their abundance - comes to an amount that is truly amazing.

You can't calculate sums like that. All true giving escapes calculation, and must not be subjected to it. But we can say this much: all the money which others make available for entertainment and pleasure and going out, in these circles is devoted to the altar of love to the last cent. There is saving and scraping and the wearing of a faded coat, in order to have the enjoyment of giving even more or to give for a cause which wasn't supported before.

In this you find one of the spiritual strengths of our common people. They have received more abundant grace in the faith, and this works in a strengthening and ennobling way in their whole life and existence.

Giving is kind of an art which you have to learn from God. Otherwise you really won't know what it is.

There is in the first place a kind of giving in order to get it over with, like the well-known "generous Netherlander of fifty years ago who regularly budgeted a small amount for a good cause. Putting away and banking thousands, and then also ten or so for Christian causes in general. A drop out of the abundance, and therefore without any moral worth, because it didn't involve any saving, any sacrifice, any cutting back of own expenses. That was easy, artless giving. Giving to do what others do. It may have been well-intended, but without any real involvement of the heart. Nothing was given for church. Not a penny for the schools, a small contribution for three or four organizations. And some loose change for the needy man.

But by means of need, God had brought about a change in giving. He brought in an element of His art. Ten times as much is even on the low side, to express the difference between what the small man today offers per year, and what he was accustomed to give years ago. Whoever would take the effort to add up all the budgets of all the deaconries, churches, school societies, and other organizations which exist in our country today, and would set aside in his mind what comes from the small citizenry, would have to ask himself how it's possible that there is so much income from such a non-wealthy group of people.

And yet, no one is the worse for it! And the spiritual mood is heightened and not lowered by it. There is no becoming poorer because of giving. And if you want to see the mystery of "the blessing of our God," then confess freely that can be seen in this. This is something of the mystery of the oil in the jar which didn't dry up as it was being poured out.

This kind of giving as fruit of higher, holier attainment, brings with it side-benefits too. Think of your church-life. Almost every confessor of the truth knows that the conditions in the Reformed

and Lutheran churches which are supported by the state are unbearable. And they'd love to put an end to that. But... then they would have to stand on their own. Then the stream of gold from the State would freeze up and stop flowing. Then they would have to pay everything themselves. And who wants to do that? Who dares to?

That is the stone on which the ecclesiastical zeal of so many stumbles. But it's completely different in the circles of those who have learned the art of holy giving again. There it wasn't asked how the money would come. There they knew what the art of giving was capable of. And the happy result was that because they knew the art of giving, they regained their freedom in Christ (the Doleancie).

And it was the same in the social sphere. There is no equality on earth, but the supreme Love is a power in this world which evens out much inequality, and reduces the sharpness of inequality. And that power of love has shown here too. Not the pride of the giver who looks down on those whom he helps and so insults instead but the love which gives because God requires it, and also distributes through God to those who are smaller and lower in social position...

Whatever the case may be, it is true that according to Jesus' measure of giving, the bottom of the money chest of mercy hasn't been seen yet by far. We may give ten times more than fifty years ago, but that amount could easily be doubled or quadrupled over the next fifty years. If only those who are above the common man would apply the common man's system of giving, there would be an unbelievable amount available. And even then we wouldn't yet be where Jesus wants us to be! Jesus wants self-discipline in giving, so that the gifts may increase. Jesus doesn't disapprove, but approves that also the least of us participate in giving.

Take those two: first that you come to the art of requiring less for yourself and to give what you save by this for His cause; and second, that you broaden the circle of givers (who give in this style). Just guess what it would come to then!

That poor widow who gave the two coppers of her living is a means in God's hand to make the church of God rich throughout the ages. And the amount which has been given in Christian love because of the example of this woman, because of self-humiliation in the face other example, is certainly incalculable. That woman put two copper coins in the treasury; but by her being mentioned in the gospel, she actually gave millions and millions to Christ's church.

And that multiplication isn't only something that the poor can do. Your children who live from you don't have much money now. Well, they too have to learn to give - to give from the heart because they want to, to give from what they saved up and from what they denied themselves. They have to learn to give so that they will be able to give liberally later on, when God entrusts them with more too.

That is how the treasure-chambers of the church of Christ would overflow. As long as she offers for Him, to Whom belongs all the gold and silver, she will not be put to shame. That is the mystery of self-sufficiency in the love of Christ. It asks more all the time, but also finds more to give all the time.

It's like the mists which lift up and rise to heaven, only to fall later as great drops of rain. The need brings forth provision.

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That's as far as we'll quote old Abraham Kuyper. I believe he has a Scriptural message for the church of today too, in this affluent society in which we live. Maybe there ought to be less generosity that depends on getting something for giving, or trying to outdo another at an auction. The desire of the heart to give for the sake of Christ and His church and His people and His mercy is what counts. I think that's what we need to be reminded of today. For less is really more before God.

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