

Cosmic Conquest

A Paradigm for Engaging Cultural Controversy

This essay contends that the social controversies with which the American church is engaged today are rooted in the conflict established in the Garden when the seed of the serpent was set against the seed of the woman. To deal effectively with these controversies, the church must recognize the spiritual nature of the conflict, understand its commission as one of cosmic conquest, and keep covenant with God through faithful obedience to Christ. In doing so, the church will not be overcome by controversy, but rather defeat its enemies by making them friends of God.

The Conflict is Cosmic

Christians in late-modern America are adrift in a sea of secular animosity toward Christ and his law.¹ As Aaron Renn observes in his essay, “The Three Worlds of Evangelicalism,” at one time it was socially advantageous to be a Christian in America (pre-1994). Between 1994 and 2014, society took a neutral stance toward Christianity. Presently, a negative view of Christianity is held by society, particularly among its “elite domains.” Renn asserts, “Christian morality is expressly repudiated and seen as a threat to the public good and the new public moral order. Subscribing to Christian moral views or violating the secular moral order brings negative consequences.”² One could quibble with Renn’s purported timeframes, but the “negative world” he describes corresponds to the present experience of most Christians in America. The spirit of the age is not merely post-Christian; it is anti-Christian.

Though cultural hostility toward Christianity may be a novel experience for many American Christians, the reality of such animosity should come as no surprise. This is not because the church has displayed spectacular failures in recent decades (though it has), nor because many prominent Christians have been entangled in scandalous sin (though they have). The root of societal hostility against Christ reaches back to Eden, where began the cosmic conflict between the seed of the serpent and seed of the woman. From that point onward history has been a story of God’s triumph, through the Seed who is Christ,³ over satanically inspired rebellion throughout all creation. This triumph was promised in the Garden, culminated at the cross, and continues today:

“I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;

¹ Here and throughout this essay, “law” is used to refer to the moral standards set forth in the whole of Scripture.

² Renn, A. M. (2022, February 1). *The three worlds of evangelicalism: Aaron M. Renn*. First Things. Retrieved August 15, 2022, from <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2022/02/the-three-worlds-of-evangelicalism>

³ Gal. 3:16

He shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.”⁴

Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them,
triumphing over them by the cross.⁵

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the
authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces
of evil in the heavenly realms.⁶

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.⁷

And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their
testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.⁸

Given this story arc of Scripture it is no surprise that the predominant understanding of Christ’s atonement throughout the first thousand years of the church was *Christus Victor*, wherein Jesus’ death and resurrection were seen as his victory over Satan and the liberation of those over whom the devil, through Adam’s sin, had claimed for himself.⁹ Should the modern church recover this paradigm of cosmic conflict the result may be more effective cultural engagement. For recognizing one is in a battle is prerequisite to fighting and winning that battle.

What this means is that Christians cannot be pietists, having merely a personal religious experience that remains insulated from the world. Nor can they be separatists, seeking to remove themselves from the pressures of the world. If Christ is triumphant over Satan, and Christians are the heralds of his victory,¹⁰ then it is imperative that the church joyfully proclaim Christ as Lord over all creation—from individuals to institutions to laws to politics to conceptions of gender to definitions of sin. Prior to Christ’s resurrection God overlooked the ignorance of those who rebelled against him,¹¹ “but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.”¹² Through his church, which is a pillar and buttress of the truth,¹³ he thus commands the world to repent and believe in the gospel.

⁴ Gen. 3:15

⁵ Col. 2:15

⁶ Eph. 6:12

⁷ Rom. 16:20

⁸ Rev. 12:11

⁹ Aulén, G., 2010. *Christus victor*. London: SPCK.

¹⁰ 2 Cor. 2:14

¹¹ Eph. 2:2

¹² Acts 17:30

¹³ 1 Tim. 3:15

The Commission is Conquest

If the church recovers this cosmic conflict paradigm, it may begin to see the Great Commission in a renewed light, which will further affect its cultural engagement. The commission is to “make disciples of all nations,” which involves baptizing and instructing them unto obedience to Christ’s law.¹⁴ It is important to note that the command to “make disciples” has “all nations” as its direct object.¹⁵ This detail is easy to gloss over, but it bears consideration. Jesus could have said to make disciples *from* all nations, or *in* all nations, which would place the focus on discipling *individuals*. But there is good reason to believe that he did, in fact, mean to disciple whole nations,¹⁶ and not merely individuals within the nations. What this means will be addressed momentarily. But first, to further support the notion of whole-nation discipleship, the Prophets must be consulted:

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains... and all the nations shall flow to it.¹⁷

The mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established... and many nations shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.”¹⁸

Both Isaiah and Micah envisioned the mountain of the Lord—which St. Paul¹⁹ and the author to the Hebrews²⁰ identify as the church—being exalted above all nations²¹ for the purpose of bringing God’s blessing to them through instruction in his ways. It was no coincidence, then, that Jesus gave the Great Commission to his church from the top of a mountain in Galilee,²² a symbol of his establishment of the new mountain²³ of the Lord whereby the nations would be taught to obey his commandments. And just as his commandments to Israel were not merely for individual holiness but were intended to create a righteous and wise society,²⁴ so the nations, being instructed by the church, will learn to walk in the light of Christ.²⁵

¹⁴ Matt. 28:19-20

¹⁵ Nations (*ethne*) is in the accusative case.

¹⁶ Whether nations (*ethnos*) is understood as ethnic peoples or political constructs makes no difference to the point at hand.

¹⁷ Isa. 2:2

¹⁸ Mic. 4:1-2

¹⁹ Gal. 4:21-31

²⁰ Heb. 12:22-23

²¹ 1 Pet. 2:9

²² Matt. 28:16

²³ Besides Galatians and Hebrews demonstrating a change from the physical Jerusalem to the Church being the mountain of the Lord, consider also Jesus’ prophetic judgement about the old mountain being cast into the sea (Mark 11:22), which the author considers an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

²⁴ Deut. 4:5-8

²⁵ Rev. 21:23-24

The discipleship of the nations is a very slow process, as Jesus said it would be when he described the kingdom of God increasing like yeast leavening dough.²⁶ This leavening is nothing less than the promised increase of Christ's dominion²⁷ until the earth is filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.²⁸ It is through the American church's slow but sure fulfillment of its commission that all of American society, as broken and twisted as it is today, will come under the rule of Christ. As surely as Christ has been raised from the dead will he have the obedience of the nations. For this is what he has asked of the Father, and the Father is eager to grant it.²⁹

Therefore, while the church is a place of healing and restoration, it is also a mighty army. Like the Israelites that conquered Canaan forty years after the first Passover, so the church, following the judgement on the temple forty years after Christ's Passover, is engaged in a cosmic conquest that spans the whole earth. And while the Israelites under the Old Covenant failed to drive out their enemies from the land, and thus became ensnared in idolatry leading to judgement, the church under the New Covenant has the promise that, as it engages in the great battle, "the gates of hades will not overcome it."³⁰ Christians, therefore, must take up spiritual arms,³¹ subdue all ungodly worldviews (and, by extension, the laws and policies that descend from them) that stand against God's Word,³² and fulfill their commission as soldiers who fight the good fight.³³

In other words, cultural pacifism is not an option. The church does not merely have a seat at the cultural table. The cultural table, and everything on it, belongs to Jesus; it is his by right of his sacrifice.³⁴ As his ambassadors, therefore, Christians must boldly proclaim to an unbelieving culture that it is in grave sin and rebellion, and that it must repent and turn to Jesus to be saved. Like John the Baptist,³⁵ the church must learn to speak prophetically to those in power, reminding them that there is a higher Power above them to whom they are accountable. It must not fear controversy and societal backlash, for a student is not greater than his master.³⁶

Keeping Covenant

Thus far it has been suggested that the church recover a cosmic perspective pertaining to the cultural controversies of today, recognizing their origin in the ancient enmity between the

²⁶ Matt. 13:33

²⁷ Isa. 9:7

²⁸ Hab. 2:14

²⁹ Ps. 2:8; cf. Phil. 2:9-10

³⁰ Matt. 16:18

³¹ Eph. 6:10-17

³² 2 Cor. 10:4-5

³³ 1 Tim. 6:12

³⁴ Rev. 5:9-12

³⁵ Luke 3:19

³⁶ Luke 6:40; cf. John 15:18

seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, which is now Christ and his church. Furthermore, a reconsideration of the Great Commission has been proposed, one which understands the church's mission as more expansive than the mere discipleship of individuals. Rather, it is the discipleship of whole nations which will, slowly but surely, be subdued under the good reign of Christ. Similarities to Israel's conquest of Canaan have been evoked, and as that conquest was not ultimately successful—for the Canaanite religion eventually conquered the Israelites—it is necessary to ask, what will be different this time? Indeed, the reader will likely have detected a triumphant tone in the preceding sections. However, when looking at the present state of the American culture and the church's (seeming) failure to bring it unto obedience to Christ, it is natural to question not only the tone, but the entire proposal. Where is the triumphant march? Are the nations really being subdued? Has not the rise of secularism, in a once Christian nation, nullified this thesis?

One must always remember to read the times through the lens of Scripture, and not the other way around. If American culture, and the West more generally—both of which descend from Christendom—is degenerating into greater godlessness, what does Scripture say?

First, this requires self-examination from the church. Jesus declared, “You are the light of the world.”³⁷ Therefore, if a once Christian culture is groping around in darkness, the church must ask, “Have we let our light shine before men?” There is evidence that the church has lost its saltiness and is, therefore, being trampled a bit by the nations.³⁸ This does not mean that God has abandoned his church, nor that his plans have been thwarted. Judgement begins with the household of God,³⁹ and if the church is undergoing the Father's discipline⁴⁰ then it is time to say with the prophet: “Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.”⁴¹ There may be comfort in Chesterton: “Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a god who knew the way out of the grave.”⁴² The Christian God is the God of resurrection. Even if, on occasion, the church must go through the grave, he will accomplish his purposes. In any case, the church must yield to the Father's discipline, get serious about confessing its sin, and receive the cleansing and forgiveness that is promised in the New Covenant and mediated through Jesus Christ.

Moreover, while it is discouraging to see the rise of secularism and the degeneracy which follows in its wake, and while it is tempting to view this as a triumph of evil, the Scriptures point to a different reality. The degeneracy of a secular culture is not its victory over against God, but

³⁷ Matt 5:14

³⁸ Matt. 5:13

³⁹ 1 Pet. 4:17

⁴⁰ Heb. 12:5-11

⁴¹ Hosea 6:1

⁴² Chesterton, G., n.d. *The Everlasting Man*. Project Gutenberg.

rather God's judgement against that culture, as St. Paul instructs.⁴³ He may give up a rebellious people to their depravity for three or four generations, but he is ready and willing to show steadfast love, mercy, and forgiveness to a thousand generations.⁴⁴

After having examined itself and confessed its sin, and with the knowledge that God sovereignly presides over the degeneration of nations under his judgement, the church ought to renew its commitment to keep covenant with God through faithful obedience to the word. And as it pertains to controversial issues, the church needs to keep covenant through faithful, unabashed, unqualified proclamation of the word.

Friends of God

The church need not establish rapport with the world to attract it to Christ any more than Israel needed to make alliances with its neighbors to win them to Yahweh. Rather, just as Israel was to keep covenant with God through obedience to the law, which would attract the nations to Yahweh,⁴⁵ so the church walking in obedience is a light to the world that attracts those whom God is calling to himself. Meanwhile, those who are not called will not be attracted.⁴⁶

It is not the church's responsibility to convince the world that Jesus is Lord, but the Spirit's.⁴⁷ The church confesses and proclaims Christ's lordship, and lives accordingly through faithful obedience. If this results in the hatred of the world, as Jesus said it would,⁴⁸ the solution is not to befriend, assuage, or appease the world. Rather, the church has only to stand firm in obedience and watch the Lord's salvation.⁴⁹ He uses even the derision of the world and the persecution of his people to bring salvation to his enemies,⁵⁰ making them friends of God.

In this hope the church can triumphantly engage the cultural controversies of the day, knowing that God will, through its obedience, bring the nations to himself.

⁴³ Rom. 1:21-32

⁴⁴ Ex. 34:6-7

⁴⁵ Deut. 4:6-8

⁴⁶ 2 Cor. 2:15-16

⁴⁷ John 16:8

⁴⁸ John 15:18

⁴⁹ Ex. 14:13

⁵⁰ Rev. 12:11