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Dominion! Kingdom Action Can Change the World

C. Peter Wagner

This article is a chapter of a forthcoming book by C. Peter Wagner.

A New Paradigm: Dominion Theology

If social transformation is what the Spirit seems to be saying to the churches today, we would expect that the Bible would support such an idea. Many will be asking the inevitable question: Is there a biblical theology to substantiate what we have been looking at up to this point?

Let's think about theology itself for a few moments.

From Theoretical to Practical

I know that theology can be dull and boring. A reason for this is that much traditional theology, brilliant scholarship that it might be, finds very little intersection with practical reality. I suspect that we are seeing a subtle paradigm shift in the attitudes of many Christian leaders toward theology. Back when I went to seminary, practically the whole church was laboring under the assumption that a prerequisite for ordination was thorough instruction in systematic theology, epistemology, and the history of dogma. A rationale for this was that such expertise would be necessary for the church to avoid heresy. Ironically, however, it has become evident that some of the most damaging heresies currently plaguing the churches, at least in Europe and North America, have been perpetrated by none other than learned theologians.

I don't find the same level of reverence for theology in most churches associated with the New Apostolic Reformation. Take, for example, the school that I founded several years ago, Wagner Leadership Institute (WLI). Since WLI was designed to train adults who are already in ministry, I, for one thing, decided not

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to have any required courses in the curriculum. My thought was that the mature students whom we were teaching would know better what they needed for improving their own ministry than some faculty committee might surmise. One of the realities of this new tailored approach that quickly came to our attention was that if we offered traditional courses in systematic theology, epistemology or the history of dogma, practically no one would sign up for them.

I'll go one step further and predict that theologians per se will likely become relics of the past as the Second Apostolic Age progresses. The Catholic Church has officially recognized the office of theologian and the Protestant equivalent is seminary professors whose courses, by the way, are, by necessity, required for graduation. New Apostolic churches, on the other hand, do not seem to be following in these footsteps. Their leaders do not seem to be carrying the excessive amount of doctrinal baggage that many of their predecessors did. Theologians are not mentioned, for example, in Ephesians 4:11 alongside of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. All this does not imply an absence of sound theology, however. It is just that apostles, prophets, and teachers are becoming the new custodians of a dynamic theology that turns out to be just as much practical as theoretical.

What Is Theology?

What are we talking about? What is theology anyway? Here is my attempt at a definition: *Theology is a human attempt to explain God's word and God's works in a reasonable and systematic way.* This is not a traditional definition. For one thing it considers God's works as one valid source of theological information. For another it sees God's word as both what is written in the Bible (*logos*) as well as what God is currently revealing (*rhema*). Admittedly, a downside of seeing theology in this way is possible subjectivity, but the upside is more relevance to what the Spirit is currently saying to the churches on a practical level. Teachers research and expound the *logos*, prophets bring the *rhema*, and apostles put it together and point the direction into the future.

Dominion Theology

The practical theology which best builds a foundation under social transformation is dominion theology, sometimes called "kingdom now." Its history can be traced back through R.J. Rushdoony and Abraham Kuyper to John Calvin. Some of the pioneering attempts to apply it in our day would be notably Bob Weiner, Rice Broocks, Dennis Peacocke and others. Unfortu-

nately the term “dominion theology” has had to navigate some rough waters in the recent past. A number of my friends, in fact, have attempted to dissuade me from using “dominion” in the title of this book, fearing that some might reject the whole book just because of the title. I think I understand where some of these objections have originated.

One objection, for example, comes from those who still hold the primacy of the evangelistic mandate over the cultural mandate. I explained the history of this creative dialogue very carefully in the last chapter, including my own former position that the evangelistic mandate was primary. Because I was there myself, I believe I understand and respect the position of those who still object on these grounds.

The End Times

A second objection is eschatological, dealing with our views of the end times. Dominion theology, true enough, tends to be eschatologically disruptive. Why? Many in my generation have been indoctrinated with the so-called “pre-trib, pre-mil” view of the end times. I cut my Christian teeth on the Scofield Bible and sat under those like Wilbur M. Smith who taught that the world was supposed to get worse and worse until finally all true believers would one day be raptured into heaven. Then those who had been left behind would go through seven years of tribulation with the Antichrist gaining control until Jesus would return on a white horse and lead us all into one thousand years (a millenium) of reigning with Him. This was our glorious hope.

If, on the other hand, we now believe that God is mandating us to be involved in aggressive social transformation, it is obvious that we will arrive at a different viewpoint. We no longer accept the idea that society will get worse and worse because we now believe that God’s mandate is to transform society so that it gets better and better. I agree with Jim Hodges who suggests that we Christians need to get rid of “our excessive desire to leave the planet.”¹ This makes us much less dogmatic on theories of the millenium. I often say facetiously that I no longer know if I’m premillennial or postmillennial or amillennial. I’ve decided to be “panmillennial,” believing that everything is going to “pan out” all right in the end!

Seriously, I will confess that up until recently I knew what eschatology I did *not* believe, namely the traditional Left Behind futuristic view, but I was not able to verbalize what I actually *did* believe. My changing point came when I read *Victorious Eschatology* by Harold Eberle and Martin Trench. Victorious eschatology fits dominion theology like a hand in a glove. Eberle and Trench

say, "Before Jesus returns, the Church will rise in glory, unity, and maturity. The Kingdom of God will grow and advance until it fills the Earth."²

Victorious eschatology makes a convincing argument that the biblical prophecies concerning the "last days" or the "end times" were literally fulfilled at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. The end times marked the ending of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New Covenant. Jesus will literally return to the earth in the future (see Mt. 24:35-25:46), but none of the signs of Matthew 24:4-34 will precede His return because they have already occurred. This is known by professional theologians as the Partial Preterist view of eschatology, and it is the view with which I personally identify.

Crossing Boundaries

For some, however, this steps outside of strict traditional doctrinal boundaries. As an example, a prestigious denomination such as the Assemblies of God is committed to premillennialism, and this has predictably led them to oppose dominion theology. In one of their official publications, they list dominion theology under a series of "Deviant Teachings [Which Are] Disapproved" by the denomination's General Presbytery.³

A similar objection came from John Stott who, in his commentary on the Lausanne Covenant, wrote: "What exactly is the church's expectation or hope? Some speak nowadays as if we should expect the world to get better and better, as if to secure conditions of material prosperity, international peace, social justice, political freedom, and personal fulfillment is equivalent to establishing the kingdom of God. . . .But Jesus gave no expectation that everything would get steadily better . . . This is simply not the Christian hope according to Scripture."⁴

I regret having to bring up a third objection that raised some barriers to the more general affirmation of dominion theology for a time, but it happens to be a fact that some of the higher visibility and most vocal advocates of dominion theology unfortunately became subject to serious accusations of moral turpitude. While it would be difficult to draw any cause-and-effect conclusions from this, nevertheless many were understandably alienated from dominion theology because of this unsavory association.

A New Season

So much for the rough waters that advocates of dominion theology had to navigate for a season. I am convinced that we are now in a new season. Growing numbers of church leaders

are no longer shying away from the challenge of transforming society according to the values of the kingdom of God. The rough waters are becoming smoother.

Admittedly, this is a personal opinion, but I think the best way to proceed is to affirm and redeem the term “dominion theology,” not to discard it. The most frequently suggested alternative is “kingdom theology.” “Kingdom theology” is good, but I regard “dominion theology” as stronger, more action-based, more aggressive, and more biblically comprehensive. “Kingdom theology” tends to have pastoral connotations, while “dominion theology” leans more toward the apostolic. This is not to deny that the kingdom of God is the theological underpinning of dominion theology. Our prayer still must be “Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Genesis 1

The nuts and bolts of dominion theology begin in the first chapter of the Bible. The original stated intention of God was to create the human race so that they would “have *dominion* over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Gen. 1:26). This is the reason that I said I think “dominion theology” is more biblically comprehensive than “kingdom theology.” The kingdom of God is a New Testament theme, while dominion is both Old Testament and New Testament.

The first thing that God said to Adam and Eve was, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have *dominion* over [all the creation]” (Gen. 1:28). We must not miss the significance of this statement. God not only created the earth, but He established a government for the earth with humankind, beginning with Adam and Eve, as the governors. He gave Adam and Eve full authority to take dominion in His name. But they were not puppets; they were free moral agents. What does this mean? This means that they had a choice. God would not coerce them. On the one hand they could take dominion, but on the other hand they had the authority to give their dominion away.

We often miss this point, mainly because we think we know the creation story so well. Chapter 2 gives us some additional details of the creation without mentioning dominion. By the time the serpent appears in Chapter 3, we might well have forgotten about dominion, which would be a mistake because that was what Satan was essentially after. Our traditional interpretation is that Satan wanted to break Adam and Eve’s relationship with God and thereby introduce original sin which would then be transmitted genetically to all their human progeny through the

ages so that people would not go to heaven but to hell. That was certainly one of Satan's goals, but an even greater one was to usurp the dominion over the world that God had given to Adam.

Power and Authority

Before his fall in heaven, Satan, or Lucifer, had both power and authority. He was called "the anointed cherub who covers" (Ezek. 28:14). His big mistake was to say one day, "I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God" (Isa. 14:13). He was not satisfied with authority delegated by God; he wanted to assert his own authority above God's. He said, "I will be like the Most High" (Isa. 14:14). As a result, he was cast down. When he was, he did not lose his power, but he did lose his authority. Then when God delegated authority for dominion over the creation to Adam, along with free moral choice, Satan saw an opportunity to take back the authority he had lost. God would not have given it back to him, but Adam now could.

This may sound strange at first, but think about it. God had given Adam the authority to give his authority over to Satan! This throws quite a different light on our usual understanding of the temptation and fall.

The so-called "apple" became simply the visual symbol of Adam's choice. Would he choose to obey God or would he go Satan's way? When Satan convinced him to disobey God, history was suddenly changed. Adam's authority to take dominion over God's creation was passed over to Satan. Worse yet, Adam put himself and the whole future human race under the authority of Satan as well.

A "Toothless Lion?"

Check human history out. Think of some of the biblical terminology to describe Satan and his dominion. He is "the prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2). He is "the god of this age" (2 Cor. 4:4). He is "the ruler of this world" (Jn. 14:30). These awesome titles are not to be taken lightly. Some insecure preachers who pooh-pooh Satan's power by calling him a "toothless lion" need a reality check. The first step toward defeating an enemy is to gain a realistic appraisal of who the enemy really is.

Think of the miserable condition of the human race before Jesus came. Think of the lawlessness, the atrocities, the bloodshed, the oppression, the immorality, the idolatry, the witchcraft, the wars, and the disease that characterized whole peoples in all parts of the world. Think of the Ayoré Indian mothers of the Bolivian jungles who routinely buried alive their first born. Think

of the Aztec altars running 24/7 with a fresh stream of blood from virgins who were being sacrificed to demonic forces. Yes there were godly exceptions like Job and Noah and repentant Nineveh and the Israelites for certain seasons where God was being glorified. But these exceptions were few and far between compared to the bulk of the whole human race which was under the dominion of Satan which he had usurped from Adam. No toothless lion there! Ask one of the Aztec virgins!

Paul's view of humanity is very realistic. "And you He made alive who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh, and of the mind, an were by nature children of wrath, just as the others" (Eph. 2:1-3).

A fresh look at Jesus' temptation will remove any lingering doubts that Satan had acquired true dominion over the earth. What I am going to say now assumes that we believe the three temptations were real. They were literal, not just figurative. In each of the three, Jesus could have decided to sin, which, of course, He didn't. So let's look at the third temptation where "the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory" (Mt. 4:8). How many kingdoms? *All* the kingdoms of the world! Then Satan said, "All these things I will give you if You will fall down and worship me" (Mt. 4:9). If the temptation was real, Satan must have had the authority over the kingdoms in order to make this offer. Even though Jesus did not yield to the temptation, He never questioned the devil's authority over the kingdoms.

The Second and Last Adam

If God's plan for history suddenly changed with the first Adam in the Garden of Eden, it just as suddenly changed back with the coming of the second and last Adam, Jesus Christ. We hear relatively little preaching on Jesus as the second Adam mainly because most Christian leaders have not been strongly tuned in to the dominion theology that I have been advocating. Once we become tuned in, however, what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15 becomes extremely relevant. "The first man Adam became a living being. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit . . . The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven" (1 Cor. 15:45, 47).

Most preaching, like that of Billy Graham for example, highlights the pastoral dimension of Jesus' death on the cross. He died for our personal sins in order to reconcile us individually to

God. Theologians call this the “substitutionary atonement.” Through Jesus we can become saved, born again, new creatures in Christ, holy, saints of God, and whatever else is necessary to fulfill the destiny for which God put each of us on the earth as individuals and ultimately to end up in heaven. This is so important that many of us can even remember the day on which we first decided to commit our lives to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Beyond that, however, there is also what I like to think of an apostolic dimension to Jesus’ death on the cross. Here is the way that Joseph Mattera puts it: “The main purpose of Jesus dying on the cross was not so that you can go to heaven. The main purpose of His death was so that His kingdom can be established in you so that, as a result, you can exercise kingdom authority on the earth (Lk. 17:21) and reconcile the world back unto Him (2 Cor. 5:19).”⁵ Mattera obviously is not denying the pastoral dimension, he is simply affirming that there is much more to Christ’s death than that. He is dealing with dominion.

The Works of the Devil

God sent Jesus in true human flesh to do what Adam failed to do. Jesus lived a human life of purity and obedience to the Father. He was the only human being who ever lived who qualified to take back the dominion from Satan that Adam had lost. “For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:8). The major works of the devil were wrapped up in the evil and tyrannical dominion that Satan had exercised over the whole human race since the first Adam’s fall. Jesus died to reverse history once and for all.

Look why the Father sent Jesus: “For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross” (Col. 1:19-20). How is this supposed to happen in real life? “[God] has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). This becomes quite a responsibility! For whom? For those of us who are committed to do God’s will. Among other things, it is a mandate for social transformation.

Joseph Mattera agrees. He says, “When Jesus was crowned Lord of all, it was over God’s entire jurisdiction—not just the church—and this includes ‘all things.’ All ‘things’ include the land, the environment, politics, education, science, medicine, healthcare, the arts, space, economics, social justice and all the humanities.”⁶

That Which Was Lost

At one point, here is how Jesus described His own mission: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Lk. 19:10). Our traditional pastoral understanding of this statement has been that Jesus came to save "those" who were lost, not "that" which was lost. Of course, He did come to save individual souls as I have said, but this particular verse does not refer to individuals; it refers to the dominion over creation which Adam lost in the Garden of Eden. I like the way Ed Silvano explains this: "Many Christians have no trouble believing that the devil—a created being with limited power—contaminated all creation with just one sin. But they find it difficult to believe that Jesus Christ—who is God—through a perfect sacrifice has made provision to recover all of 'that which was lost.'"⁷ Silvano adds the apostolic dimension.

Jesus' public ministry began right after his temptation. One of the first things that He did in His public ministry was to go into the synagogue in His hometown of Nazareth. There He delivered what was very likely His first public address. Not surprisingly, He used this occasion to lay out His ministry agenda. Here it is, taken from the Book of Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord" (Lk. 4:18-19). This is the gospel of the kingdom. It is clearly a blending of the cultural mandate with the evangelistic mandate.

Colonization

Speaking of the gospel of the kingdom, Myles Monroe suggests that God's plan for the earth could be seen as a form of what we know as colonization. "Colonization," Monroe says, "is a process whereby a government or ruler determines to extend his kingdom, rulership, or influence to additional territory with the purpose of impacting that territory with his will and desires."⁸ God's reign was in the heavenlies, and He created the earth with the thought of extending His reign. Earth was to be a colony of heaven. God was the king of all, and He delegated the human race, represented in the beginning by Adam, to be the governors over this colony. The visible earth is supposed to reflect the nature and the essence of the invisible parent kingdom of heaven. Jesus' announcement in the synagogue of Nazareth was a declaration that this original intent of God would, from

then on, begin to materialize in its fullness.

The second Adam did all that was necessary to put back in place God's original design for the earth as a colony of heaven. Once He did, He then delegated the responsibility of bringing God's plan into being. Steve Thompson says, "Jesus, having won back authority on earth, could now mediate and rule in the affairs of earth. However, Jesus did not stay on the earth to rule it. He ascended to the Father and is seated at His right hand. So who is now responsible to rule and reign in the earth? Believe it or not, the church, which is the body of Christ."⁹

This thought should move us from a passive mode to an active mode. A good part of the church expects that if we just pray enough for social transformation, God in His omnipotence will transform it. I don't think so. God expects us to pray, but He also wants to give us the authority and the resources and the revelation to move out in the power of the Holy Spirit and take back dominion from Satan.

One thing that should help is for us to begin to shift our focus from redeeming individuals to redeeming society as our end goal. Don't get me wrong. This is not to deny that the more individuals saved the better. Let's do whatever is necessary to save more! But it is to suggest that just saving individuals will not necessarily lead to social transformation. Joe Woodard reports an interesting debate between sociologist James Davidson Hunter and Chuck Colson of Prison Ministry on this subject. Colson favors the grassroots individual approach assuming that "transformed people transform cultures." Hunter's problem with this is that it simply doesn't work. He says that cultures change only when the elites who control social institutions decide that change would be good.¹⁰ The best strategy, according to Hunter, is to aim directly for the institutions that mold culture. As well as praying for individuals to be saved, let's also pray for redeeming entire social institutions.

The Great Commission

Although I am a bit reluctant to suggest it, I am convinced that we need to take a closer look at the Great Commission. We need to come to grips with what Jesus meant when he commanded His followers to "make disciples of all the nations" (Mt. 28:19).

The reason I am reluctant to bring this up is because for most of my career as a missiologist specializing in the Great Commission I confess that I advocated the individualistic approach. I refused to interpret "all the nations" as social units, even though that would be the literal translation of *panta ta ethne*. I leaned

toward Chuck Colson's assumptions and taught that the only way the social units embraced by the term *ethne*, from which we get the English "ethnic groups," could be disciplined would be to win enough souls to Christ within each *ethnos*, baptize them, and get them into local churches, and assume that they would provide the salt and light necessary for change.

This is now especially embarrassing because my missiological mentor, Donald McGavran, always interpreted the Great Commission as a mandate to change the whole social unit. McGavran said, "According to the Great Commission the peoples are to be disciplined. Negatively, a people is disciplined when the claim of polytheism, idolatry, fetishism or any other man-made religion on its corporate loyalty is eliminated. Positively, a people is disciplined when its individuals feel united around Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, believe themselves to be members of His Church, and realize that 'our folk are Christians, our book is the Bible, and our house of worship is the church.' Such a reorientation of the *social organism* [emphasis mine] around the Lord Jesus Christ will be accompanied by some and followed by other ethical changes."¹¹

As the first incumbent of the Donald McGavran Chair of Church Growth at Fuller Seminary, I knowingly became a McGavran revisionist at that point. One of the first things I now want to do when I get to heaven is to find McGavran and apologize! Without using the term, he was inherently convinced that we should take dominion, and I now agree.

Acts 3:21 talks of Jesus being in heaven "until the times of the restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began." "Restoration" also means transformation, and this dates back to the beginning when Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden. Even though Jesus came and changed history, He is waiting for us to do our part in bringing restoration to pass in real life. Meanwhile, He is reigning through us until "He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power, for He must reign until He has put all enemies under His feet" (1 Cor. 15:24-25).

It is our task to become spiritual and social activists until Satan's dominion is ended.

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NOTES

1. Notes taken from an address by Jim Hodges at "Starting the Year Off Right" conference in Denton, Texas, January 4, 2007.

2. Harold R. Eberle and Martin Trench, *Victorious Eschatology* (Yakima WA: Worldcast Publishing, 2006), p. 1.

3. General Presbytery of the Assemblies of God, "Endtime Revival—Spirit-Led and Spirit-Controlled: A Response to Resolution 16," August, 2000.

4. John Stott, *The Lausanne Covenant: An Exposition and Commentary, Lausanne Occasional Papers, No. 3* (Wheaton IL: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1975), p. 36.

5. Joseph Mattera, *Ruling in the Gates* (Lake Mary FL: Creation House Press, 2003), p. 5.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

7. Ed Silvano, "Evangelism," *Charisma*, September 2004, p. 49.

8. Myles Monroe, *Rediscovering the Kingdom* (Shippensburg PA: Destiny Image, 2004), p. 26.

9. Steve Thompson, "Your Authority in Christ," *The Morning Star Journal*, Summer 2006, p. 22.

10. Joe Woodard, "Solving the secular paradox: How can Christians influence world culture?" *Calgary Herald*, June 19, 2005, p. B7.

11. Donald Anderson McGavran, *The Bridges of God: A Study in the Strategy of Missions* (New York NY: Friendship Press, 1981), p. 14.