

COMPETITION AND CREATION

by Frank Reich

From the cradle to the grave it seems as if we compete in just about everything we do. The problem is that Christians have a difficult time understanding how to deal with the “competitive spirit” that lies within us. At one extreme, some choose to ignore it, thinking that competition is evil, therefore trying to avoid it at all cost. At the other extreme are those who worship it by finding their identity by the results of competition. Is the reality of our unremitting competitive mindset simply one more outworking of our sinful flesh fighting to see ourselves superior over others? Or could it be that in God’s Dominion Mandate to “be fruitful and multiply, rule over and subdue the earth” (Gen 1:28) is the seed that breeds the competitiveness in each one of us? Clearly the “ruling and subduing” portion of this command seem to imply some kind conquering, and if this is true it seems as if competition is inevitable. The old preachers use to say that sin is not in a bottle; it is in our hearts. In the same way I would say that competition is not inherently sinful, but due to our fallen nature we repeatedly use it for selfish gain. We will briefly examine the Dominion Mandate within a Kingdom of God framework, and in the end I will suggest that we are, in a sense, created to compete!

THE DOMINION MANDATE

Christian men and women of all vocations are constantly warned about the dangers of allowing our jobs to be the source of our identity and self-worth. We are rightly taught that it is only through the blood of Christ that we have been redeemed from the bondage of sin and been brought into the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:20; Gal 3:13 Col 1:13,14) – this is to be the foundation of our identity and self-worth! Nonetheless, having a clear vision of what we have been called to do is important. Certainly the diversity of the body of Christ is great in respects to many different vocations we are called to by God. But one assignment that is common to all Christians is that we practice multiplication and dominion (Gen 1:28).

It is helpful and necessary to see this command in context of God’s creation that reaches its climax on the sixth day. Doug Kelly draws the comparison to the methodical construction of a great mansion where “the work of the first five days of creation was preparatory for the crowning action of the sixth day: the creation of mankind.”¹ Kelly notes a significant shift in the language at Genesis 1:26 that denotes what follows as the high point of creation. The language now becomes personal giving strong indication that God is in

¹ Douglas F. Kelly, *Creation and Change* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor) 215.

“consultation within Himself.”² The final result of this ‘executive divine counsel’ (as called by some theologians) is the creation of the human race. The distinguishing mark being that mankind is made in the image of his Maker, and as such, Kelly says, there is a divine pattern in mankind that is not found in other creatures in which we are “like Him in certain definite respects.”³

This fact does not diminish the significance that we are still only finite images of an infinite God. Our purpose here is not to give detailed explanation of the difference between being an image and a duplicate ? for that I would commend Von Rad’s comments on the subject.⁴ Instead, our focus is on the fact that to those image bearers who are Spirit-filled ? God has provided with the credentials for the task He assigned us ? namely, that of the dominion (cultural) mandate to “be fruitful and multiply, rule over and subdue the earth” (Gen 1:28). Kelly writes, “Only because mankind was created in the image of God was it appropriate to grant him the awesome responsibility of dominion over the entire created order.”⁵

As Christians we must be careful not to take for granted, abuse, or take pride in the position and job we have been given. We are reminded that we have simply been placed here as “God’s sovereign emblem,” and “summoned to maintain and enforce God’s claim to dominion over the earth.”⁶ Our task is the most humble of tasks since it is not done out of self-interest or from our own strength. Richard Pratt writes that “God did not call us to have dominion over the earth for our own glory and honor...We work hard at our tasks so that God might be honored...Ruling over the earth as God’s likeness is a service that often entails forfeiting personal pleasure and gratifications for the glory of God.”⁷ It follows that everything we do ? including our vocation but not limited to it ? is directed to giving glory to God.

The cultural mandate calls for multiplication and dominion, but what exactly does this mean? Many Christians have a limited view that sees bearing children and “farming the land” as the primary extent of this command, but there is much more to consider. We have seen comic strips where good and an angel on one shoulder and the devil on the other depict evil. They are competing against each other as they fight to capture the heart and mind of the character. The scene is usually one in which a moral decision needs to be made, and so they are vying to influence the character in their particular direction. Although this is not a perfect theological picture, there is something worthwhile we can learn from this representation; primarily, there is a war being waged between the spiritual forces of good and evil in which the human race plays a significant role.

² Kelly, *Creation and Change*, 216-217.

³ Kelly, *Creation and Change*, 219.

⁴ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis* (Revised ed.; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972) 57.

⁵ Kelly, *Creation and Change*, 224.

⁶ Von Rad, *as quoted by Kelly in Creation and Change*, 226.

⁷ Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *Designed for Dignity* (Second Edition; Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2000) 36.

Geerhardus Vos writes that the battle against Satan and his demons is nothing short of “kingdom against kingdom.”⁸

In all competition there is an objective to the battle. I am reminded of an old board game we use to play called Risk. The game board is setup as a world map and each player receives an allotment of armies that he can place on his selected countries. The object of the game is to establish global dominance. Players battle against one another to overtake their opponent’s countries. Each conquest is one more step leading to the eventual outcome where the winner has established a worldwide reign. In some ways this is a fair picture of what the Bible describes as the ongoing war between the two kingdoms. T.F. Torrance describes the war as pictured in the book of Revelation: “In the eschatological account it presents of what takes place behind the scenes in interaction of the Kingdom of God with the cosmic powers and forces that seek to dominate the history of humanity and the course of the created order.”⁹ The battle between these two kingdoms will eventually end when all evil is destroyed and God has established a universal worldwide reign.

We are in the midst of a conquest that is taking place each and every day that involves the expansion (multiplication and dominion) of the Kingdom of God. Pratt suggests this central theme of the Bible is found in the Lord’s prayer.¹⁰ Consider the “kingdom phrases” Jesus uses in teaching the disciples how to pray? “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven... for yours is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. Amen” (Matt 6:10,13). This teaching given to us from the council of godly men will aid us in our understanding of exactly what Jesus is asking for in this prayer:

?? **Your kingdom come...** “Rule us by your Word and Spirit in such a way that more and more we submit to you. Keep your church strong, and add to it. Destroy the devil’s work; destroy every force that revolts against you and every conspiracy against your Word. Do this until your kingdom is so complete and perfect that in it you are all in all.”

?? **Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven...** “Help us and all people to reject our own wills and to obey your will without any back talk. Your will alone is good. Help us one and all to carry out the work we are called to, as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven.”

?? **For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever...** “We have made all these requests of you because, as

⁸ Geerhardus Vos, *The Kingdom of God and the Church* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing) 53.

⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 232.

¹⁰ Pratt, *Designed for Dignity*, 3.

our all-powerful king, you not only want to, but are able to give us all that is good; and because your holy name, and not we ourselves, should receive all the praise, forever.”

?? **Amen.** “This is sure to be! It is even more sure that God listens to my prayer, than that I really desire what I pray for.”¹¹

As we can see, the essence of what Jesus is praying for is that God's kingdom would manifest itself here on earth, as it already has in heaven. In heaven, all acknowledges God's position as King and submission to His rule is universal. But even though God is King over all, including the earth, not everyone on this planet recognizes Him as King or submits to His authority. As Vos states: “To him the kingdom exists there, where not merely God is supreme, for that is true at all times and under all circumstances, but where God supernaturally carries through his supremacy against all opposing powers and brings man to the willing recognition of the same. It is a state of the things in which everything converges and tends towards God as the highest good.”¹² Hence, we have the convergence of the Incarnation. Torrance writes:

In the incarnation the order of redemption has been made to intersect with and overlap the order of creation in such a way that the whole history of mankind and the universe comes under the Kingdom of Christ as the First and the Last, the *Protos* and the *Eschatos*, the origin and the goal of creation – and so we have the Christological and soteriological interrelation between eschatology and cosmology that is apocalyptically indicated for us in the Revelation of St John the Divine.¹³

Christians know that Jesus had to come to earth to be the perfect sacrifice for our sins (2 Cor 5:21). But it is equally important to see the connection of the His coming to the establishment of the Kingdom of God. The arrival of Jesus Christ announced the final stage of the coming of the Kingdom. Vos reminds us, “What the Saviour does is the outcome of what he is.”¹⁴ We must make no mistake about it, what Jesus did in the incarnation was a result of who He is? the “KING OF KINGS and LORD OF LORDS” (Rev 19:16). The King had now visibly shown Himself to His people. Christ's victory at Calvary marked the redemption of His people that, in the end, serves the purpose of bringing them into the kingdom before the heavenly throne of the Father (1 Pet 3:18). But as Vos notes: “He came to introduce the ‘the kingdom of God’ and not merely in its final outcome but in its entire course of development.”¹⁵

¹¹ Heidelberg Catechism, Q123,124,128,129.

¹² Vos, *The Kingdom of God and the Church*, 50.

¹³ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, 214.

¹⁴ Vos,, *The Kingdom of God and the Church*, 10.

¹⁵ Vos, *The Kingdom of God and the Church*, 48.

So what does this mean to us right now? It means that for those of us who have already submitted to Him as King, we now serve as warriors (servants) in His army. Indeed, we are in a war and, by His grace, God is using us to compete against the forces of evil to bring about the future fulfillment of His kingdom. Surely, we must see this connection as we consider Jesus' last words to His disciples before His ascension:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age (Matt 28:18-20).

The context of this passage points specifically to church leaders, but there is a general application to all Christians. King Jesus has given us authority to go out with a spirit of power, love and self-discipline (2 Tim 1:7), competing against the forces of evil in both word and deed? expanding the borders of the Kingdom of God with the life-giving message of the Gospel. In this way, we glorify God and enjoy the blessings of "kingdom life" forever. Pratt writes: "We fulfill the cultural mandate by completing the gospel mandate."¹⁶ It is from this vantage point that we begin to see that multiplication and dominion are much bigger than Christians might first think. Ultimately, the thrust of the Dominion Mandate can be seen in spiritual multiplication and geographic expansion of the kingdom of God.

Since there is no escaping the fact that we are indeed in a war, we must then also admit that competition is unavoidable. It is in this sense that I have suggested above, we were created to compete. It is interesting to consider that the Dominion Mandate is given before the Fall of man in the Garden. It appears that ruling over and subduing involves some kind of conquering, but if there is no evil then what/who are we competing against? Allen Ross suggests the following: "Humans are to have dominion over the world. The terms used suggest putting down opposition and were perhaps used in anticipation of the conflict with evil."¹⁷ This seems like a more than reasonable solution, but some are not convinced that the term is used in anticipation of the battle with evil. Pratt's apparently unique perspective on the Dominion Mandate is that we must first look back to the "dramatic tension" that is present between the chaotic world and the Holy Spirit in Genesis 1:2 before we can think about anticipating the future conflict with evil. Here we witness God taking a formless and void world (chaotic) and turning it into a magnificent place of Sabbath rest. Pratt goes on to show how this message would have been particularly encouraging to the Israelites. As they read of God's actions in primeval history, they would have seen the parallel to their own situation. Egypt was a land of chaos in relation to God's design, and just as He turned chaos into Sabbath rest in the creation account, He would also

¹⁶ Pratt, *Designed for Dignity*, 32.

¹⁷ Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988) 113.

take them out of chaos and into the land of Canaan where they would once again exercise dominion according to God's design.¹⁸

For modern day readers this sheds much light on our understanding of the Dominion Mandate in our lives. With the knowledge that Christ has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into his kingdom (Col 1:13), we can again see the parallel to the chaos to Sabbath rest in the creation account. Pratt points to further Scripture that shines light back to the Creation account (John 1:4,5; 2 Cor 4:6; 2 Cor 5:17; Col 3:9-10).¹⁹ These show us that it is indeed God's design to take us out of the chaotic world of sin and misery, and to be used to bring about His complete restoration. As to fulfilling the Dominion Mandate Pratt writes, "By filling and ruling over the world, we fulfill our true purpose in life. We reach the heights of dignity because we represent and extend the authority of the King of the universe."²⁰

Although it appears competition is unavoidable, we must confess that our "competitive grids" (the way we think about competition) are tainted due to our sinful nature. Our definitions of success or victory and the manner in which we compete are in constant need of re-evaluation according to the principles of Scripture. Western society holds in high regard people we label "highly competitive." We often talk about business leaders and top athletes in this way. We reason that these men and women have made their ascent by continually defeating the opponents in their path. The evolutionists want to pervert competition and live under the banner of "the strongest shall survive." But although their victories may be many, the motive of selfish gain can taint every one.

RESURRECTION AND EXERTION

It is possible to compete (labor) and obtain a victory that is not in vain. The Apostle Paul understood this very well when writing to the Corinthians. I believe a brief examination of 1 Corinthians 15 will greatly aid our perspective on the matter of competing in a way that honors the Lord.

Throughout much of this letter Paul has been responding to reports he has been receiving about the Corinthian Church that he had started a few years earlier. There were several significant problems with regards to worship that had arisen among these spiritually immature believers, but the most concerning trouble was that some of the leaders were actually denying the resurrection of Jesus.

¹⁸ Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1993) 280-282.

¹⁹ Pratt, *Genesis Video Series*.

²⁰ Pratt, *Designed for Dignity*, 27.

Paul reminds the Corinthians of the gospel they have believed: Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, and appeared to many who were witnesses of his resurrection. He informs his Jewish brothers and sisters that the gospel is not only based on historical events, but it is in accordance with the Scriptures (OT) which they were to embrace with all of their heart (vv.3-8). This is the gospel they were to believe and hold firmly to — it is of primary importance — otherwise they have believed in vain (v.2).

The disbelief in Christ's resurrection stemmed largely from those people (Sadducees and Greek philosophers) who rejected the idea of bodily resurrection, but they attacked this issue in reverse manner. Their argument was that since there is no general resurrection (all people) than Christ could not be resurrected. Paul acknowledges their thinking as consistent but incorrect. He asserts that bodily resurrection is essential to the gospel, and to accept anything less would lead to the following conclusions:

- ?? The apostles' preaching would be useless and would make them out to be false witnesses.
- ?? The Corinthian's own faith would be futile, and they would still be in their sins.
- ?? Those who had died in Christ would be lost forever.
- ?? Christians should be pitied more than all men.

Paul's teaching on the resurrection points to the fact that Christ's death and resurrection, although personal, had implications for all mankind. He makes reference to a concept with which his readers would be quite familiar. He calls Christ's resurrection the firstfruits of all who have died. To the believers of that day, they would understand this was making reference to the Old Testament ritual of firstfruits — meaning the rest of the harvest was soon to follow. So then belief in the Resurrection, was the foundation of their hope for a future with God ? without it all Paul says his life is completely in vain.

Paul highlights this truth further by contrasting Christ with Adam. Through their reading of Genesis, the Corinthian believers would recognize this same principle in Adam. His sin was personal, but the result had implications for all his descendents. Paul concludes that just as sin entered the world through one man; so to the resurrection of the dead also comes through one man, Jesus Christ. Adam was the representative by which sin (death) entered the world, but Christ is the representative who brings new life to all who belong to Him. As our representative Christ the King ushers us into a kingdom where "God will be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). Vos writes: "Because the kingdom is thus centered in God but for the glory of the King."

The relationship of the cultural mandate to the principle of federal headship in my opinion is crucial. Many Christians struggle with this doctrine that is so important to understanding the full extent of the victorious life available to us in Christ. It's interesting that most people can somewhat accept the concept of having a representative such as a United States Congressman or even a captain to a sports team who represents the teams needs. However, they are always quick to point out that in theory this sounds nice, but since we are all corrupt no one can be completely trusted. But what if we were to tell them that they could elect a person that was not at all corrupt? Imagine a politician that was completely honest and trustworthy. His agenda was in perfect harmony with the needs of those he represents and his desire was to see them each fulfill their destiny. Or how about the captain of sports team who was completely selfless and was always attempting to bring out the best in his teammates. His work ethic was a model for everyone to follow and his attitude brought life to entire team. Would they accept this kind of representative? Knowing he was truly perfect, would they live and die with his every thought, word, and action? Even though this is hard to imagine, I am assuming they would say yes. I am further assuming they would think we are talking about Jesus. Imagine the shock when we tell them we are not talking about Jesus — at least for right now. Instead, we are talking about Adam.

In creation, Adam was appointed by God to be the perfect representative of the human race, and when we say perfect it is to be taken in the literal sense. Adam, like all mankind, was created in the image of God. But unlike us, prior to his first sin Adam lived in a state of perfect harmony with God. This is not to be confused with equality with God — he was never at any point in his life equal with God. The difference between Adam and us was that he was in a position in which he had the ability **not** to sin. He was in perfect relationship with God and the environment that he lived. It was only after disobeying a direct command from God did Adam and subsequently all mankind fall from this complete harmony with God.

Adam is the center of blame, but before we go to far in removing ourselves from responsibility we must think again. This is where many people struggle. We are quick to want to be “in Christ,” but for some reason we do not want to live with Adam's choice. We must realize that Adam was our representative who was not only chosen by God, but also equipped (created) perfectly by Him. As our representative, we are bound to live with the consequences of his decisions and actions. Our temptation to think this it is not fair, and that we should be able to decide our own fate, is countered two ways: First, we must realize that we would have made the same decision Adam made. How could we possibly expect to have done any better? Adam was perfect prior to his first sin, and we were never even close to that state of being.

Secondly, understanding the idea of having a representative is not so bad when you consider the second part of the equation. Yes, in Adam all have sinned

and suffered the consequences of spiritual death — separation from God. But all who belong to Christ are restored into a right relationship with God. Even though Adam was perfect, it was only for a period of time before he was deceived by the devil. Satan being the master tempter that he is, also tried his work on Jesus for forty days in the desert, but he was unsuccessful. Jesus has always been perfect, is now perfect, and will always be perfect — He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb 13:8).

By God's grace, Jesus Christ becomes the new representative (Head) of all who trust in Him. To trust in Him, first and foremost, means to accept and believe in His death, burial and resurrection. Paul's emphasis on this fact is because he knows for us to be restored into God's family; the penalty for our sins must be paid. Christ's resurrection was proof of His victory over sin and death, and it also validated He was the perfect sacrifice for our sins once and for all. This matter of "first importance" in the life of the church led to Paul's glorious conclusion on this matter: "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor 15:56-58). This serves as the foundation of our confidence to compete, and gives us a clear picture of "holy" competition. When we "labor in the Lord (compete)" ? win or lose ? it is never in vain because we know that our King has secured the victory.

Even though our role in the battle is as a humble servant, we have a sure hope for a glorious future in which we reign with Christ in the new heavens and new earth. For now we must focus on being faithful to God's calling on our life by fulfilling the command of multiplication and dominion. Pratt writes, "God ordained humanity to be the primary instrument by which his kingship will be realized on earth...The human race has the unique role of bringing the kingdom of God to fruition and the wonderful destiny of sharing in its glory."²¹

²¹ Pratt, *Designed for Dignity*, 7.