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to rule
or

Two biblical texts make counter commands. Which one are we to believe?



Why did God create human beings? In the creation stories of Genesis there are two possible answers to that question. The first answer is that God created humans to rule and subdue Earth. The second is that God created humans to serve and preserve Earth. And there is currently a fierce debate as to which answer is preferable and what the implications might be.

The mandate to rule

In Genesis 1 we read that God created human beings in God's image. God then blessed them so that they would multiply and 'rule' over all other living creatures and 'subdue' Earth (1:26-28).

Now the Hebrew term for 'rule' refers to what a king does when he has dominion over his enemies or his subjects. In Psalm 72, for example, the psalmist prays that the 'rule' of the king would be from sea to sea, that his foes would bow down before him and

lick his feet. So, the normal meaning of the Hebrew term for 'rule' is to dominate.

And the Hebrew term for 'subdue' is just as tough. It can mean 'crush under foot' (Micah 7:19), 'ravish women' (Nehemiah 5:5) or conquer a land. The land of Canaan is pronounced 'subdued' after Joshua conquers it (Joshua 18:1). The normal meaning of the Hebrew term translated 'subdue' is to overcome or crush.

There are scholars who argue that because humans are in the image of God, they should rule as God rules, that is, with justice. Or they should conquer with compassion. Either way, the text seems to provide a mandate to dominate creation.

And in the history of Christianity we can find numerous leaders who declare that because humans are created superior to the rest of creation they are to represent God and rule over creation. In popular

jargon we still speak of 'harnessing' nature and 'conquering' Everest. That the mandate to dominate and subdue Earth was a living force among early settlers is illustrated by a 19th-century poem, *The Pioneers*, by Frank Masters, an elder in a Christian congregation in Driver River, New South Wales:

'It was the overflow westward of the mainland expansion that surged first to the plains of this goodly land.
Then tackled scrub with roller and axe, an exodus obedient to great Biblical command:
"Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it!" with its accompanied blessing.'

The commission to serve

In Genesis 2, however, we read that God made the first human and planted a forest of trees in Eden.

Then God placed the first human in that forest garden with the tasking of 'serving' and 'keeping' it. The normal meaning of the Hebrew term for 'serve' is precisely that, to serve as the subject of a king or as a priest in a temple. The Hebrew term rendered 'keep' means to preserve and protect. According to this text therefore the task of humans from the beginning was to serve and preserve Earth rather than rule over and subdue it.

We are faced with a dilemma. We have two texts that are saying opposing things. Ruling is the opposite of serving, and subduing is the opposite of preserving.

Some interpreters seek to harmonise the two texts and try to make them say the same thing. Some interpreters choose the second text because it seems far more relevant in the current crisis facing our planet. Some interpreters follow a third path, which I would identify as the Lutheran way.

Ruling or serving with Christ

The third way is governed by the gospel principle. According to this principle, we make our choice based on whether a text is consistent with the gospel message that the true nature of God is revealed in and through Jesus Christ, who suffered, died and rose again.

In the words of Luther, we search for *Was Christum treibet*, 'what points to Christ'. Or in other words, 'what is consistent with the essence of the gospel, the centre of the Christian Scriptures, the ultimate revelation of God in Christ'. The gospel revelation supersedes prior revelations which are to be read in the light of this revelation. Ultimately, where I must make a decision, I choose

what is consistent with this gospel principle. I choose the commission to serve rather than the mandate to dominate. That choice is made very clear in Jesus' own words when he tells his disciples that they are to serve, not to dominate like Gentile rulers (Mark 10:41-45). And this commission of Jesus is grounded in the profound

gospel message that the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

What could be clearer? Jesus

could have claimed that, like the Son of Man described in Daniel, people should serve him as a mighty ruler. Instead, Jesus announces that he has come to serve and that his disciples should do likewise.

The extent of that 'serving' involves going all the way to the cross. The 'serving' of Christ is an expression of love, the love of God that brings hope and healing to all who suffer the effects of sin, whether humans or domains of creation.

Serving in the current crisis

We are facing a monumental crisis on our planet, a crisis caused by the effects of greenhouse gases. That crisis has been caused by humanity dominating creation, exploiting its resources and destroying its forests. Global warming is changing the complex ecosystem of our atmosphere. We are entering a greenhouse age, the opposite of an ice age.

We have ruled and subdued Earth instead of serving and preserving it. We have not followed the gospel principle exemplified by Jesus. If

serving means expressing a love that leads to the cross, how will we express our love for this planet?

We are facing a global crisis, with countries like China, USA and India relentlessly pumping greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. How do we convince the leaders of these countries to preserve, rather than pollute, our

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planet home? How do we get humans in power to hear the groaning of creation, the cries of injustice rising from the forests, the fields and the oceans? If we are to serve Christ and preserve Earth we need to listen to Earth's voice and be her advocate.

We need a campaign led by bodies such as the Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches and other such representative organisations. We need them to heed the voice of Earth rather than multinational corporations bent on dominating Earth's resources. We need to find a worldwide movement that reaches the consciences of the world's leaders so that humanity, food supplies, diverse species, rich forests and all the natural wonders of this habitat we call Earth are preserved before it is too late. ■

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