

Let the Whole Creation Cry

Stopford A. Brooke (1832–1916)

Let the whole creation cry,
 “Glory to the Lord on high!”
 Heav’n and earth, awake and sing,
 “God is good and therefore King!”
 Praise Him, angel hosts above,
 Ever bright and fair in love;
 Sun and moon, lift up your voice,
 Night and stars, in God rejoice!

Warriors fighting for the Lord,
 Prophets burning with His Word,
 Those to whom the arts belong,
 Add their voices to the song.
 Kings of knowledge and of law,
 To the glorious circle draw;
 All who work and all who wait,
 Sing, “The Lord is good and great!”

Men and women, young and old,
 Raise the anthem manifold,
 And let children’s happy hearts
 In this worship take their parts;
 From the north to southern pole
 Let the mighty chorus roll:
 “Holy, holy, holy One,
 Glory be to God alone!”

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Mandate?

Kevin T. Bauder

Genesis 1:28 is sometimes called the *cultural mandate*: “And God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.” The context is God’s creation of humanity, and this verse is widely assumed to represent God’s commission to the human race, God’s most fundamental commandment to all of humanity, a commandment that all people, saved and lost, are obligated to obey. Some (especially various classes of Kuyperians) have also seen it as an essential Christian duty.

The notion of a cultural mandate is firmly settled among most evangelicals. The person who questions whether Genesis 1:28 contains a mandate at all—well, such a person invites stares of incredulity and snickers of derision. How could the verse be more plain? After all, God speaks, and what He says takes the form of an imperative. Imperatives are commands. *Of course*, the verse is a mandate.

Except for one thing.

Imperatives are *not* always commands. The imperative mood can be used in a variety of ways; issuing commands is only one of those ways. For example, imperatives are used to express invitation: “Come over to my house and enjoy a drink!” Imperatives are used to grant permissions: “I see you looking at those cookies—go ahead and take one.” Imperatives are used for offering apologies or pleading for forgiveness: “I’m sorry, excuse me.” Imperatives can be used for purposes of solicitation or advertising: “Step right up here, folks!” or “Drink Pepsi!”

Scriptural uses of the imperative run parallel to these everyday uses. The harlot invites the empty-headed youth into her house with the imperative, “Come!” (Prov. 7:18). Pharaoh gives Joseph permission to bury Jacob with the imperatives “go” and “bury” (Gen. 50:6). Joab deploys the imperative when giving Ahimaaz permission to run (2 Sam. 18:21). David appeals for God’s forgiveness with imperative verbs (Ps. 51:3). God solicits a right response from Israel in Isaiah 1:18, again using the imperative mood.



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All of these examples, whether from everyday conversation or from the Old Testament, employ imperatives. None of them, however, issues a command. In ordinary speech, people have little difficulty recognizing that they are not being ordered around when they hear imperatives used in these ways.

Imperatives also have at least one other use, and it is an important one. The imperative mood can be used to express maledictions and benedictions—wishes either for ill (curses) or for good (blessings). So when Commander Spock says, “Live long and prosper,” he is pronouncing an imperative, but he is not issuing a command. When the Chaldeans say to Nebuchadnezzar, “O king, live forever,” they are uttering a benediction, not ordering him around (Dan. 2:4). The same thing is happening with the person behind the counter at the drug store who says, “Have a nice day.” No right-thinking person responds, “Who are you to tell me what to do?” Even ordinary people—those who have no idea what the imperative mood might be—recognize that these are not orders. Yet the language of blessing and cursing is grammatically indistinguishable from the language of command. Both employ imperative verbs.

How does one tell the difference? Simple: context. Context is the key to detecting semantic (as opposed to grammatical) distinctions. Here as elsewhere in hermeneutics, context is king.

So does the context indicate whether Genesis 1:28 uses the imperative to issue commands or do something else? I believe it does. In fact, I think that the context of Genesis 1:28 includes two indicators that God is using the language of blessing rather than the language of command. These clues imply that Genesis 1:28 is not a cultural mandate but a divine blessing.

The first clue involves the similar wording in Genesis 1:22. In this verse God has just made the fish and the birds. The verse says, “And God blessed them, saying, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth.” The first part of God’s utterance is identical to that of 1:28: “Be fruitful and multiply.” In this case, the verse tells us explicitly that the words are a blessing—“And God blessed them, saying.” Furthermore, neither fish nor birds are presented as creatures possessing sufficient sentience to understand and obey a command. Clearly 1:22 communicates a blessing, so we would expect that the parallel language of 1:28 should also express a blessing.

The second clue is even more compelling, and it is found right in Genesis 1:28. As in verse 22, the opening words of verse 28 state, “And God blessed them.” It is as if God, realizing the limited interpretive capacities of human beings and pondering how He could clarify the verse, finally decided just to put a label on it. The verse might as well come with a big yellow tag stating, “THIS IS A BLESSING.” Of course, some people don’t read labels.

Genesis 1:28 does not contain a mandate, cultural or otherwise. It expresses a blessing. It does not give humans a series of orders to obey; rather, it describes certain capacities with which God has bountifully endowed the human race. Human beings have been fruitful and multiplied. They have filled the earth. They have subdued it. They have exercised dominion over the created order. Because they are now sinful, they have done these things imperfectly, but even their sin has not been able to drive out these innate capacities with which their Creator has blessed them.

So, even though braced for incredulous stares and derisive snickers, I insist that there is no cultural mandate. I have no doubt that many, and perhaps most, evangelicals will disagree with me. They will insist that an imperative must connote a command. To them I can only say, “Read the label.”

Have a nice day.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
