

Subduing the Earth

By David Feddes

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it." (Genesis 1:28)

I was driving down a country road one Sunday morning with a friend. We were on our way to a town where I was to be the guest preacher. As we drove, we came upon a number of black buggies pulled by horses. Inside the buggies were men, women, and children, all dressed in black, on their way to church. My friend told me that these people were part of a religious group that didn't believe in using modern technology.

As we continued driving, we went past a rather plain-looking church building. The parking lot was full of cars, but there was something unusual about them. Every last car was black, and there were no hood ornaments or chrome or other accessories, just a whole parking lot of plain black cars. My friend explained that this church was once part of the same basic group as the horse-and-buggy people. Both factions agreed on the color black, both agreed that any fancy frills were improper, but there had been a split over the use of modern technology.

A bit further down the road, we saw another church. In the parking lot were cars of every color and model and style. My friend told me that this church was of the same stock as the horse-and-buggy people and the black-car people, but they'd split from the black-car group when they started driving colorful cars and wearing colorful clothes.

Now, to those of us who weren't raised in that particular tradition, this all seems pretty silly. But before we laugh too hard at those people, we'd better look at ourselves. We face issues that are much the same, and we're no better at dealing with them. How many of us don't make a big deal of our cars and our clothes? We turn them into status symbols. We rate ourselves and others by what we wear and what we drive.

And how often don't we let our disagreements turn into divisions? Business partners disagree over something and end up dissolving the partnership. Husband and wife can't see eye to eye, so they split up. And churches? Most churches don't divide over what color of car is acceptable, but they're mighty quick to split over other matters of style. One likes classical music, another likes contemporary. One likes organs and orchestras, another wants guitars and drums and synthesizers. One likes peace and quiet, another likes clapping and dancing. And what happens when they disagree? They split. Local churches these days are more likely to split over musical styles than over the substance of what they believe about God. Is it any smarter to split over musical style of music than over automotive style?

Faith and Technology

But enough on that. What I really want to talk about is the relationship between faith and technology. And here too, we're not much wiser than people who split into a horse-and-buggy faction and a black-car faction and a multi-color faction. Many of us have a hard time seeing how religion has anything to do with scientific research and business techniques.

It's easy to fall into a kind of dichotomy, where you have two minds, two different ways of relating to reality: You depend on religion to deal with private, inner feelings, and you depend on technical know-how to deal with day-to-day realities. There's no connection between the physical world and the spiritual world. They're two separate compartments. Sundays and prayer

times, you're all religion. The rest of the time, you're all business and technique. Many of us have this kind of schizophrenia.

But sometimes it's pretty tough to live this way. It's hard to keep putting your life in two different compartments, to live as a divided self. So why not simplify matters? If you can't relate faith and technology to each other, why not just get rid of one and base everything on the other?

One possibility is to reject God and see everything in a strictly physical and mechanical way. Just write off anything spiritual and put your faith in the latest techniques. Let's call this approach *technolatry*. Technolatry is a form of idolatry. You make technical know-how your ultimate reality instead of God. But there's a big problem. The Lord won't resign and go away just because you pretend he's not there. God is real, and we all have to reckon with him, whether we want to or not. So technolatry isn't much of an option.

But what about the opposite approach? Instead of rejecting God, why not shun modern science and inventions and hold on to your religion for all you're worth? Let's call this approach *technophobia*: a fear, even a hatred, of technology. You try to focus on spiritual things, you cling to a simpler, idealized past, and you resist as much as possible any scientific discovery or new invention or business innovation.

But technophobia puts you in a pretty awkward position. It's impossible to reject all inventions. Just look at the horse-and-buggy folks. Their choice of transportation may not have any engines or radios or microchips, but it still depends on inventions: the invention of the wheel, the invention of the harness, the invention of the bridle, the invention of the buggy, the historic innovation of training horses, and who knows what else. So even people who are technophobic can't avoid technology. They just end up using the technology of the past instead of the technology of the present.

I think I've said enough to show how urgent it is that we relate faith and technology. We can't shove them into separate compartments; it's not healthy to have a divided mind. But we can't simplify matters by shunning one of them, either. Technolatry is a mistake, and so is technophobia. We've simply got to learn what it means to live in a world where God is the supreme reality and where technical progress is also very important.

Be Fruitful and Subdue

A good place to begin is with the very first things God said to the very first people. According to Genesis 1:28. "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'"

This blessing from God is full of power. God designed humanity to reproduce and spread out and populate the earth, but that's not all. He designed us to be fruitful in another sense, to be productive as well as reproductive, to discover and invent and create--not only to fill the earth but to subdue it and take charge of its creatures and resources.

And that's exactly what's happened. Today billions of people populate the earth, and we're constantly making new discoveries and coming up with new inventions that give us greater and greater power to subdue the world around us.

We've discovered which plants are good to eat, and we're constantly finding ways to grow them in greater amounts than ever. We've turned common herbs into medicines, molds into antibiotics. We've taken oil--which was once nothing but sticky black gunk in the ground--and turned it into something that powers our cars and heats our homes. We've taken the most

common item in the earth's crust--plain old sand, or silicon--and turned it into microchips and computers.

We've harnessed fire and electricity. We've invented lights that make our houses as bright as day long after the sun goes down. We've gone from walking to riding, from swimming to sailing to steamboats to ocean liners, from horse-drawn carriages to locomotives to cars, and now we can even fly. We've discovered electromagnetic waves; we've sent satellites into space; we use telephones to talk with far away people and televisions to watch far away events.

We've invented clocks to measure time, and so we're able to coordinate meetings, assembly lines, airline schedules, and who knows what else. We've devised something called money which helps us to trade goods and services; we've created banks and stock exchanges and other ways to raise capital. Our business people are always looking for new things that people might want and developing effective ways to provide them.

All of this flows from God's powerful word to our first parents to be fruitful and subdue the earth. He made a rich creation, he gave us power over that creation, and our power is constantly growing. I'm not saying we've always used that power properly, but the fact remains that we have it, and we have it because God has given it to us.

God-Given Resources and Abilities

I mentioned earlier the problem of technolatriy, of becoming gadget worshipers instead of God-worshippers. Technolatriy is wrong, but it's not all wrong. At least it sees the power of human reason and creativity. It promotes science and invention and economic development, and that's okay. God intends for us to be fruitful and subdue the earth.

The problem with technolatriy is that it makes these things the ultimate reality instead of God. And that's not very smart. As I said earlier, God doesn't go away just because we refuse to think about him. And there are other reasons we can't treat our technological progress as the supreme reality.

Think about it. God is the only reason we have a world to explore and subdue in the first place. We didn't create matter and energy, we didn't invent gravity or electromagnetic energy, we didn't design atoms or molecules or chromosomes, we don't make the sun shine, we don't make the wind blow, we don't make the world go round. God does all this. All we're doing is trying to understand and harness what's already there.

What's more, God is the only reason we have the ability to do what we do. If we try to leave God out of the picture, we don't have much reason to suppose that the concepts in our minds have any meaning at all.

Charles Darwin knew this. He tried to explain humanity purely in terms of random evolution from animals, but he was too smart not to see the problem. Near the end of his life, Darwin wrote a friend: "The horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would anyone trust the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?"

Good question! How can we claim to be experts on what happened millions of years ago or billions of light years away, if we can't state one good reason for trusting even our most basic convictions about the here and now? "Would anyone trust the convictions of a monkey's mind?" Scientists who try to cut their theories off from the biblical worldview are cutting off the very branch they're standing on.

The Foundation for Science

Let's not forget where modern science began: in a society dominated by the biblical worldview. We know that scientists and theologians haven't always agreed on how to fit certain details of scientific theory with certain details of biblical interpretation. But what we often forget is that, for the most part, the history of science isn't so much a story of Christianity *against* science but Christianity *providing the foundation* for science.

Philosopher of science Del Ratzsch is helpful here. He points out that among ancient peoples, some believed that matter was evil or unreal, so they saw no value in studying the physical world. Other cultures saw nature as divine, so it was taboo to experiment with it or try to subdue it. Some cultures saw all things as part of inevitable fate, so there was no use trying to understand or control anything. The best you could do was resign yourself to fate. Others saw chance or chaos as the ruling principle, so it was pointless to look for any sort of uniform patterns in the world. All these worldviews stifled our created tendency toward scientific and technical development.

But the biblical worldview was different. The physical world wasn't evil but good. God created it, so it was very much worth investigating and developing. At the same time, the creation wasn't itself God--it was made by God--so it was okay to experiment with it and make the most of it. Nor was the world just a matter of fate that we couldn't change but only endure; Christians knew that the Creator empowered them to subdue creation and rule over it. Also, the world wasn't mere chaos; it was designed by a supremely intelligent Creator, so it made sense to look for patterns and designs. And, once again, Christians knew that the God who made the universe also created the human mind, so there was good reason to think their minds could grasp at least something about the physical world.

It's no accident, then, that science has made the greatest strides in a culture where the Christian worldview has had the most influence. Even those scientists who turn against biblical faith still have to depend on basic principles of a structured universe and the power of human reason to discover those structures, principles that rest on the biblical worldview--even if these people don't want to admit it.

Abusing Technology

Beyond the intellectual and theoretical problems, the worst thing about technolatriy is the practical outcome. We do untold harm when we try to subdue the earth as an end in itself, rather than doing it in submission to God. There's no vision of purpose or of right and wrong. We just pursue technology for technology's sake. At that point, technology becomes more of a curse than a blessing.

We can't get along with out God. We need him in all things, and we surely need him to direct our efforts to subdue creation. We need God's Word to show the basis of science and technology; we need God's Word to provide moral guidance and ethical limits; and we need God's Word to hold us accountable. Otherwise, we'll use our power in ways that do more harm than good.

The Bible says in Genesis 1:28 that God empowered humanity to be productive and subdue creation. Genesis 2 expands on this. In verse 15 it says, "The Lord God took the man and put him the the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it" (2:15). We've been working and

taking care of things and harvesting the results ever since. A bit later in Genesis 2, we read how the first man studied and named the animals. We've been studying and naming things ever since.

But then something else entered the picture. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, fell into sin, and we've been sinning ever since. One of the many aspects of sin is that we tend to ignore God and abuse the power he's given us over creation. We stop treating creation as God's garden filled with God creatures.

Ever since that first fall into sin, the power to subdue creation has been a mixed blessing. We've done some wonderful things, but we've also done horrible things. We develop vaccines that save millions of lives, but we also invent horrifying weapons that could wipe out everybody. We plant gorgeous gardens and cultivate fertile fields, but we also pollute creation and destroy entire species of creatures. We use our business skills to expand economic opportunities for others, but we also use those skills to exploit others. We desperately need God's help and guidance to avoid these abuses.

Avoiding Technophobia

The abuses and misuses of technolatri should drive us back to God, but they shouldn't drive us into what we earlier labelled "technophobia." It's tempting, when you see all the damage done in the name of science and technology and economic development, to conclude that these things are wrong and destructive by their very nature. Some of the more radical environmentalists talk this way, and so do a number of Christians and church leaders.

It's easy for preachers to make it sound like science does nothing but spin anti-God theories, technology does nothing but destroy the creation, business does nothing but exploit people and give the rich more than their share of the pie. And it's true that there are enough sins and abuses to provide targets for sermons without end. But we can't lose sight of the positive side. When's the last time you heard a sermon that said anything good about God's purpose for science and technology and business? How often do you think about the positive biblical blessing which empowers our intellectual and technical progress?

If we're not careful, we preachers can end up attacking scientists just because they're scientists, inventors just because they're inventors, entrepreneurs just because they're entrepreneurs. If such people don't know God at all, our technophobic sermons may drive them further away from him than ever. And if they do believe in God, our technophobia may drive them to ignore us when it comes to their professional life. They may see no hope of integrating their faith with their life's work, and so they become schizophrenic. They put their relationship to God in one compartment and their professional life in another.

Churches don't help anyone by saying that science and technology and business are of themselves bad. It won't work to say that, and, more important, it's just not true. A bad theory doesn't make science bad, any more than a bad sermon makes preaching bad. Science is good. Technology is good. Enterprise is good.

Let me say it again: it is God himself who designed us with the power to be fruitful and subdue the earth. It is God who joined us to this creation; it is God who joined technical skills to a spiritual identity when he made us. What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.

I'm sorry if all this seems too theoretical, or if you're getting brain strain from hearing all this. But it's urgent that we hear God's Word about this and get these things straight in our minds. Then we can give God the honor he deserves for his marvelous creation, and we can use the powers he's given us to build up rather than destroy.

Let me close, though, with something very simple. To really understand this creation and find our place in it, we need Jesus. Jesus isn't just a source of religious ideas and spiritual feelings. He is the wisdom, the creative word, that gives the entire universe its being. "All things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). Jesus is the king of creation, and so you need to know him in order to find your place in the world--both this world and the world to come.

PRAYER

O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You've made such a vast and splendid universe, and you've given us in such a high position in it. Thank you, Lord, for this earth and for all its creatures, and thank you for giving us such marvelous powers to explore your creation and make use of its resources. Forgive our many abuses, renew us in Christ through your Holy Spirit, and help us to use our power over creation for your honor and for the good of your world. Amen.