

Vocation: Labor and Leisure in Christian Perspective
Beverly Heights Presbyterian Church
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IV. The “Tension” of Jeremiah 29 and Romans 12:1-2: Are Christians culture-affirming or culture-wary (or both)? Can we resist conformity to this age, while praying and laboring for its welfare?

A. The creational order after the Fall.

1. Original “good” order is now comparatively futile, barren, and sometimes ugly.

Gen. 3:14 The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. 15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

Gen. 3:16 To the woman he said, “I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire (*teshuqah*) shall be contrary to* your husband, but he shall rule over you.” (*or “for,” NIV, cf. 4:7; Heb. *el* לָאֵל)

Gen. 3:17 And to Adam he said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; 18 thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. 19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Note that the post-Fall curses are not merely upon our ignoble efforts and purposes, but also upon our noble efforts and purposes, such as reproduction and serving the garden.

2. Curse-banishment

Gen. 3:22 Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has *become like one of us* in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” 23 therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. 24 He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard (*shamar*) the way to the tree of life.

a. Ironical: “has become like one of us, knowing good-and-evil...”

b. Cherubim now “guard” the garden the human ought to have guarded. The cherubim now prevent the entry of unholy serpents or humans into God’s presence (and nearly all of our human folly is due to our idolatrous attempts to find in the creature what only can be found in the Creator).

B. The social “order” after the Fall: Humanity is divided into two camps; those who attempt to submit to God’s order, and those who do not.

1. Cain murdered his (twin?) brother

2. Lamech was vengeful and bloodthirsty

Gen. 4:3 I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. 24 If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold.

3. Some humans pursued their original mandate, pursuing agriculture, music, and manufacturing/industry

Gen. 4:20 Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock. 21 His brother’s name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. 22 Zillah also bore Tubal-cain; he was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron.

4. Humans now often collaborate/cooperate for their own glory, rather than for God’s (Tower of Babel, Gen. 11). They/we are still social beings, but often collaborate for evil. Some children prompt other children to do evil, so that they themselves can avoid/evade being punished for it.

C. Jeremiah 29:1-7: Culture-*building* while in exile: Prophetic oracle in six couplets

Jer. 29:4 “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon:

5 *Build houses*

and live in them;

plant gardens

and eat their produce.

6 *Take wives*
 and have sons and daughters;
take wives for your sons,
 and give your daughters in marriage,
 that they may bear sons and daughters;
multiply there (same verb, *ravah*, as Gen. 1:28),
 and do not decrease.
 7 But *seek the welfare* (שׁלום) *of the city* where I have sent you into exile,
 and pray to the LORD on its behalf,
 for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

While in exile, Israelites could not be a “kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6); but they were still humans, still informed by the creation mandate in Genesis. The apostles describe Christians as being in exile; we, like Israel, pursue the flourishing, well-being, shalom of our culture.

Phil. 3:20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself; 1Pet. 1:17 And if you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout *the time of your exile*...; 1Pet. 2:11 Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul.; Heb. 11:13: These all (Abel, Enoch [the son of Cain, who “walked with God, and was not, for God took him, Gen. 5:24], Noah, Abraham, Sarah) died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were *strangers and exiles on the earth*. 14 For here we have no lasting city (μένουσιν πόλιν), but we seek the city that is to come (τὴν μέλλουσιν).

D. Romans 12:1-2: Culture-wary while in exile

Rom. 12:1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world (Greek, “this age,” τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ), but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

1. “This age” is characterized by its rebellion against God and by its *inversion* of God’s order (so we look for such everywhere).
2. Resisting this requires *mental* effort “by the renewing of your *mind*.”
3. Resisting this conformity requires *discernment* (ESV a tad awkward: “by testing you may discern,” others just “that you may discern/prove/demonstrate, εἰς τὸ δοκιμάζειν”), and a trifold criterion: what is good and acceptable and perfect (τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ εὐάρεστον καὶ τέλειον). Note that the definite article governs all three adjectives, so that the English does not say “what is good, what is acceptable, and what is perfect” but “what is: good, acceptable, and perfect.”
 - a. “good (ἀγαθὸν)”
 - b. “acceptable/pleasing (εὐάρεστον)” to whom? To God.
 - c. “perfect/mature (τέλειον)” ordinarily means mature, or well-developed, as opposed to uncultivated, incomplete, or undeveloped.

1Cor. 2:6 Yet among the *mature* we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away.; 1Cor. 14:20 Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be *mature*.; Phil. 3:15 Let those of us who are *mature* think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. (also Mat. 5:48; Col. 1:28; Heb. 5:14; James 1:4; 1 John 4:18).