

THE DOMINION MANDATE: GOD'S PURPOSE FOR MAN

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on important scriptural foundations, the study highlights how passages like Genesis 1 and 2 establish humanity's identity in the *Imago Dei*, affirming dignity, responsibility, and the calling to steward creation. These chapters reveal that work, creativity, and community were part of God's original design, situating human purpose within both relational and vocational dimensions. This article examines the biblical concept of purpose as a theological framework that transcends secular understandings of self-fulfillment and achievement. Next, the requirement of dominion in Genesis 1:28, which is explained to mean stewardship and accountability rather than exploitation, is examined. God's nature is reflected in true dominion, which demands leadership characterized by kindness, justice, and service. The essay goes on to discuss how sin caused a disruption in purpose, severing humanity's relationship with God, and how Christ made it possible for things to be restored. Since closeness to the Creator enables believers to align with His eternal design, a relationship with God is demonstrated to be essential to regaining significance. Furthermore, identification in Christ is explored as the basis for negotiating human systems, allowing Christians to participate in politics, economy, and culture without being influenced by distortions from the outside world. In the end, the dominion mandate is recast as a spiritual and cultural mission that includes global discipleship and stewardship of creation. As part of God's redeeming mission, believers are called to live in obedience, creativity, and service, according to the article's conclusion. Biblically interpreted purpose is relational, communal, and transformative.

Keywords: Dominion Mandate, God's Purpose, Man

Introduction

The question of human purpose remains one of the most enduring themes in philosophy, theology, and cultural discourse. Secular perspectives often frame purpose in terms of self-fulfillment, achievement, or recognition, whereas the biblical tradition grounds it in the intent and design of the Creator (Ruse, 2017). Scripture presents purpose not as human invention but as divine assignment, discovered through relationship with God and lived in obedience to His will (Niebuhr, 2021). Within this framework, identity and vocation are situated in God's redemptive mission, affirming that true purpose transcends individual ambition and aligns with His eternal plan (Warren, 2012).

Genesis establishes this foundation, portraying humanity as created in the image of God (*Imago Dei*), endowed with dignity, responsibility, and relational capacity (Roberts, 2015). Here dominion is revealed as stewardship a mandate to cultivate and protect creation in ways reflecting God's justice and love (Wagner, 2012; Shelton, 2015). Yet sin disrupted fellowship, distorting purpose and corrupting human systems (Tagore, 2015). Through Christ, believers are restored to relationship with God, rediscovering identity and mission (McGraw, 2014).

Christians are therefore called to live as salt and light, reforming structures while resisting conformity (Tanner, 2022). Purpose thus encompasses worship, stewardship, and cultural engagement, culminating in the dominion mandate to extend God's reign through creativity, justice, and service.

Purpose in the Biblical Sense

In the biblical sense, purpose is not merely an abstract idea or personal ambition but a theological truth rooted in the intent and design of the Creator (Ruse, 2017). Scripture frames human existence within God's sovereign plan, presenting purpose as something to be discovered rather than invented. This contrasts sharply with secular notions of purpose, which often emphasize self-fulfillment, achievement, or happiness. Contemporary psychology sometimes defines purpose as a framework for coherence and direction (Bronk, 2013; Weinstein et al., 2013), but the biblical understanding goes further, locating human purpose in the eternal will of God.

From the beginning, the Bible depicts God as an intentional Creator. Jeremiah 29:11 affirms His purposeful design for humanity: "For I know the plans I have for you ... plans to give you a hope and a future." Similarly, Romans 8:28 teaches that God works "for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose." These verses underscore that purpose is not incidental but tied to God's broader redemptive mission. Human purpose, therefore, is a divine assignment, demanding faith, obedience, and submission to God's will (McGraw, 2014; Niebuhr, 2021).

Theologians emphasize the communal and eschatological character of biblical purpose. It is not limited to personal ambition but woven into God's overarching plan for creation. Wright (2013) explains that Scripture unfolds as God's mission to redeem the world through Christ, and believers participate by aligning their lives with His will. Purpose is relational and participatory, discovered in intimacy with God and lived out in service to others.

Within this framework, purpose shifts from self-actualization to Christ-conformity. Tagore (2015) notes that the call of Scripture is not to “find oneself” but to find life hidden in Christ (Colossians 3:3). This reorients believers from self-centered ambition to God-centered mission. Life is not shaped by chance or cultural definitions of success but by a divine calling to reflect God’s character, bear witness to His kingdom, and serve the community of faith (Roberts, 2015).

This theological vision critiques cultural assumptions equating purpose with material success or social influence. Whereas the world often ties meaning to careers, happiness, or legacy, the Bible anchors it in glorifying God and advancing His kingdom (Warren, 2012). Bronk (2013) observes that secular purpose, though useful for psychological well-being, lacks the transcendent anchor of faith. Without grounding in God, purpose becomes fragile, shifting with circumstances. Scripture, by contrast, provides an enduring foundation that transcends cultural trends and personal achievements.

Biblical purpose also has moral and ethical dimensions. It is tied to obedience, holiness, and love. Weinstein et al. (2013) note that even in developmental psychology, purpose aligns with resilience and prosocial behavior. The Bible similarly links purpose with service, sacrifice, and stewardship. Jesus summarized it as loving God and neighbor (Matthew 22:37–40), making clear that true purpose involves relational faithfulness and community impact rather than selfish gain.

The concept of vocation reinforces this. Theologians often frame vocation as a summons from God to live faithfully in every sphere of life. Luther’s doctrine of vocation suggests that purpose extends beyond religious tasks to include ordinary work performed in faith. This holistic view integrates labor, relationships, and spiritual devotion, affirming that all of life can serve God’s kingdom (Keller, 2012; Wirzba, 2015).

Modern scholarship affirms the transformative effect of this biblical model. Jacobsen (2021) argues that Christian identity provides resilience amid modern anxieties such as instability or relativism. Anchored in God’s eternal plan, believers are freed from reinventing themselves according to shifting cultural expectations. Instead, they are guided by God’s Spirit and rooted in His truth.

A critical implication is that purpose cannot be detached from relationship with God. Meaning originates in connection, not autonomy. Ruse (2017) points to Adam’s communion with God in Eden as proof that purpose flows from intimacy with the Creator rather than mere tasks. Even today, clarity emerges through prayer, worship, and obedience. Sin fractured this connection, producing confusion and brokenness, but Christ restores it, enabling believers to rediscover their true calling (Wright, 2013; McGraw, 2014).

Genesis 1 and 2 as the Foundation of Human Purpose

Genesis 1 and 2 provide the foundational narrative for understanding human purpose. These chapters define humanity’s identity, dignity, and calling within creation. In Genesis 1:26–27, God creates humanity in His image and likeness, a declaration of inherent worth and intentionality. This *Imago Dei* remains one of the most profound affirmations in Christian thought, demonstrating that humanity is not accidental but divinely purposed (Roberts, 2015; Warren,

2012). The creation of man at the climax of God's work highlights a special role: to reflect His character and steward creation.

The *Imago Dei* carries theological, philosophical, and practical dimensions. Theologically, it signifies humanity's unique capacity to relate to God, exercise moral judgment, and embody love (Migliore, 2014; Wirzba, 2015). Philosophically, it establishes dignity as intrinsic, countering views that reduce humanity to mere biological or economic function (Jacobsen, 2021). Practically, it affirms equal worth regardless of race, class, or ability. Modern ethical debates on biotechnology or human rights still appeal to this principle as the anchor of human sanctity (Kilner, 2015; Middleton, 2014).

Genesis 2 extends this identity by assigning humanity its first vocation: to work and keep the Garden (Genesis 2:15). Work is presented not as curse but calling. Before sin, humanity was entrusted with cultivating and protecting creation. Thus, productivity, creativity, and stewardship are integral to human purpose. Roberts (2015) notes that work was intended as co-labor with God in bringing order and flourishing. Theology today affirms that vocation extends beyond "religious" roles to include every sphere of life where humans serve the common good (Keller, 2012; Volf, 2011).

Humanity's placement within creation is deliberate. Positioned between God and the natural world, humans function as intermediaries who reflect divine glory while exercising care. Niebuhr (2021) highlights that this dual role demands humility: humans are not autonomous rulers but stewards under God's authority. Genesis therefore rejects nihilism, which denies meaning, and hubris, which exalts humanity to divine status. Purpose is grounded in dependence on God and responsibility for creation.

The *Imago Dei* also has a relational dimension. Genesis affirms that "it is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2:18). The creation of woman demonstrates that humanity was designed for community. Purpose is not lived in isolation but through fellowship, mirroring the communion of the Triune God. As Tanner (2022) notes, this resists modern hyper-individualism by rooting vocation in interdependence. True human flourishing comes through loving relationships and communal responsibility.

Genesis further challenges utilitarian views of nature by declaring creation "very good" (Genesis 1:31). Creation has value beyond human use, and humanity's purpose includes ecological stewardship. Bouma-Prediger (2019) argues that the mandate to "work and keep" the earth forms the theological basis for Christian environmental ethics. This frames dominion as responsibility, not control especially relevant amid climate change and ecological crises.

The creation account also situates purpose within worship. To be created in God's image is to be oriented toward Him, reflecting His glory in every sphere of life. Worship is not confined to ritual but encompasses work, relationships, and stewardship. Wright (2013) stresses that humanity's ultimate purpose is doxological: to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Genesis presents the Garden as both sanctuary and workplace, intertwining fellowship with God and stewardship of creation.

Moreover, Genesis speaks against reductionist accounts of human origins. Secular narratives often portray life as accidental or biologically determined. While theology acknowledges scientific insights, it insists that human purpose transcends survival. McGrath (2016) argues that Genesis offers a richer account, grounding identity in divine will and affirming that science does not negate but complements theological meaning.

The ethical implications of Genesis 1–2 are wide-ranging. The *Imago Dei* provides the foundation for justice, equality, and compassion. Warren (2012) emphasizes its universality, challenging oppression, racism, and exploitation by affirming humanity's shared origin. Smith (2024) similarly argues that reclaiming this theological basis for dignity is essential in an era of inequality and polarization. Purpose, therefore, is not abstract but calls for justice and mercy embodied in societal structures.

Ultimately, Genesis 1 and 2 present a holistic, relational, and enduring vision of human purpose. Humanity is created with dignity, entrusted with responsibility, designed for community, called to stewardship, and oriented toward worship. These chapters affirm that human beings are not accidents but purposeful reflections of God's image. The divine commission to work, protect, and cultivate creation requires intentional engagement in every sphere of life. Genesis thus provides the theological foundation for understanding purpose as flowing from God's eternal blueprint, grounding human existence in dignity, accountability, and communion with both God and creation.

Dominion and Stewardship

Dominion, as articulated in Genesis 1:28, is central to the biblical vision of human purpose. God's command to "be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and every living thing" establishes humanity as rulers and caretakers of creation. Yet this dominion is not a license for exploitation but a mandate for stewardship that reflects God's just and compassionate rule (Wagner, 2012). The Hebrew term *radah* ("to rule") implies responsibility and care rather than oppressive control. Dominion, therefore, is the delegation of God's authority to humanity for the flourishing of creation.

Misinterpreting dominion as domination has historically fueled exploitation of people and nature. Colonialism, industrial excess, and ecological harm have often appealed to a distorted reading of Genesis 1:28. Biblical theology, however, insists that true dominion mirrors God's character, marked by justice and mercy (McCammon, 2015; Kinna & Prichard, 2019). Psalm 24:1 reminds us that the earth belongs to God, underscoring that human authority is derivative and accountable.

Dominion spans all areas of life: agriculture, governance, education, industry, and culture. Human creativity and innovation are expressions of stewardship, not independence. Shelton (2015) stresses that dominion requires balance between productivity and preservation. This is critical in an age where technology advances faster than ethical reflection. The mandate challenges Christians to harness creativity for the common good without neglecting justice or sustainability (Cavedon, 2013).

Ecological crises highlight the urgency of responsible stewardship. Climate change, deforestation, and pollution reflect dominion distorted into exploitation. Bouma-Prediger (2019) argues that Christian stewardship offers a framework for ecological ethics, grounded in the original vocation of humanity. Genesis 2:15 reinforces this calling with the verbs *abad* ("work") and *shamar* ("keep"), which imply cultivation and protection. Environmental care is thus a central dimension of human purpose, ensuring that resources are preserved for future generations while meeting present needs.

Dominion also encompasses social and cultural life. It calls for institutions that embody God's justice and mercy, protecting the vulnerable and promoting flourishing. Wagner (2012) observes that dominion is not limited to political leaders but extends to everyday decisions in business, education, and family. A teacher who acts justly, a business leader who prioritizes ethics, or a parent nurturing children in godly values all reflect dominion in action.

The ethical thrust of dominion becomes sharper when contrasted with worldly notions of power. Societies often equate power with control, wealth, or self-interest. The biblical model emphasizes servant leadership. Jesus redefined authority through service and sacrifice (Mark 10:42–45). Scholars such as Fast et al. (2012) and Wink (2017) warn that unchecked power breeds corruption, while Christ's example reframes dominion as humility and restorative service.

Practical expressions of this principle are evident in business ethics. Dawson (2013) and Berkovitz (2020) argue that dominion in commerce involves more than profit—it includes fair wages, job creation, and societal benefit. Holland (2019) notes that dominion in family life includes shaping children with values that honor God. These examples show that dominion democratizes responsibility, extending it beyond elites to all people as bearers of the *Imago Dei*.

Cultural stewardship is another essential dimension. Humanity is called not only to care for nature but also to cultivate culture. Keller (2012) explains that culture-making extends God's creativity into new forms of art, music, and institutions. Marchant (2019) cautions, however, that culture must be tested against biblical values to avoid idolatry or injustice. Properly aligned, culture becomes a vehicle for truth and beauty; distorted, it can perpetuate violence and moral decay.

Dominion also entails accountability. Humans must give an account to God for how they use authority and resources (Niebuhr, 2021). Dominion is covenantal, not autonomous. Lasswell (2017) stresses that power divorced from accountability leads to destruction, but integrity in leadership nurtures flourishing. This truth challenges modern assumptions of ownership and autonomy, reframing stewardship as sacred trust.

Dominion is lived out in daily faithfulness. A homemaker nurturing children, a farmer cultivating responsibly, a student pursuing knowledge with diligence, or a leader promoting justice all contribute to God's purposes. As Wagner (2012) observes, dominion is entrusted to all, not just the powerful. Ordinary tasks, when carried out in obedience, become sacred acts that reflect God's order in a broken world.

Relationship with God and Restoration in Christ

Human purpose cannot be fully understood apart from relationship with God. Genesis portrays humanity as created not only for labor and stewardship but also for communion with the Creator. In Eden, Adam and Eve enjoyed direct fellowship with God, receiving identity and instruction from Him. This relational dimension reveals that purpose flows not simply from tasks but from intimacy with God Himself (McGraw, 2014). To be human is to walk in covenant with God in love, obedience, and dependence.

This fellowship, however, was disrupted by sin. The Fall fractured humanity's relationship with God, producing alienation and confusion. Niebuhr (2021) notes that once intimacy with God was broken, human purpose became distorted, turning toward self-interest and idolatry. The consequences of sin highlight that true purpose is inseparable from fellowship with God; without Him, life becomes fragmented and directionless (Tagore, 2015).

Yet God did not abandon humanity. Through His covenant with Israel and ultimately through Christ's redemptive work, reconciliation became possible. Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection restore intimacy with God, enabling humanity to rediscover divine purpose (McGraw, 2014; Wright, 2013). Paul affirms that believers are "new creations" in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17), signaling renewal of both identity and calling.

Restoration is transformative. Through Christ, believers receive the Holy Spirit, who guides them in discerning God's will. Purpose is no longer a human construct but a Spirit-enabled response. Prayer, worship, and obedience become lifelines to divine direction. Ruse (2017) emphasizes that meaning originates from connection, not autonomy. This relationship empowers believers to hear God's voice and align with His eternal blueprint.

This framework contrasts sharply with secular understandings. Secular purpose often focuses on personal goals or recognition. Though valuable, such pursuits lack the transcendence faith provides. Weinstein et al. (2013) observe that secular purpose fosters resilience, yet it cannot provide the enduring anchor offered in Christ. In Him, purpose is elevated to participation in God's redemptive mission. Believers live as ambassadors of reconciliation, embodying God's truth in a broken world (2 Corinthians 5:18–20).

Ultimately, relationship with God redefines responsibility. Identity and mission become inseparable: to know God is to be sent by Him (John 17:18–21). As Wirzba (2015) argues, faith must be expressed in transformative action for others. Purpose is therefore relational and missional, a restored intimacy with God that inspires service, obedience, and participation in His kingdom.

Identity in Christ and Human Systems

Identity in Christ forms the foundation of a believer's life and purpose. The New Testament consistently teaches that those who belong to Christ are no longer defined by past failures or societal standards but by God's declaration of who they are in Him. Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17). This identity provides security and clarity, freeing believers from destructive labels of inadequacy or pride (Jacobsen, 2021). In Christ, they are forgiven, adopted as children of God (Romans 8:17), and recognized as God's workmanship created for good works (Ephesians 2:10).

This identity is vital because it is not rooted in temporary cultural markers such as wealth, ethnicity, or career. Migliore (2014) observes that when identity depends on fragile categories, insecurity results. By contrast, identity in Christ anchors the believer in eternal truth, equipping Christians to resist worldly pressures and remain steadfast in their calling. This grounding transforms how believers engage challenges and relationships, empowering them to live purposefully as ambassadors of God's kingdom (Wirzba, 2015).

Living from this identity reshapes interaction with human systems the social, political, economic, and cultural structures designed to manage life (Clarke, 2024; Rzevski, 2014). At their best, such systems promote justice and human flourishing. Yet when disconnected from God's values, they can become corrupt and oppressive (Niebuhr, 2013; Tanner, 2022). This dual reality creates both opportunity and tension. Believers are called to be salt and light within these systems (Matthew 5:13–16) while resisting conformity to worldly values (Romans 12:2). Jacobsen (2021) notes that identity in Christ acts as a compass, enabling Christians to engage constructively without losing spiritual grounding.

This identity also empowers prophetic critique of distorted systems. Since human institutions often reflect sin's influence, Christians are called to challenge injustice while embodying alternative values. Willis (2020) stresses that this requires courage, as resistance may bring opposition. Yet identity in Christ secures believers in God's approval, freeing them from the need for social validation.

Practical examples illustrate this. In the workplace, believers may reject unethical practices at personal cost because their worth is anchored in God, not career advancement. In family life, Christians prioritize sacrificial love over cultural definitions of success. In governance, identity in Christ inspires integrity where corruption prevails. Bass (2019) emphasizes that Christians are placed purposefully in such contexts as witnesses to God's kingdom.

The communal nature of Christian identity further shapes engagement with systems. Believers are not isolated individuals but members of the body of Christ, called to collective witness. Ammerman (2013) highlights how faith communities provide accountability and support for navigating complex systems. Together, Christians can advocate for justice, model ethical practices, and care for the marginalized.

Nonetheless, tension between God's kingdom and worldly systems remains profound. Jesus declared, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), acknowledging the clash between divine and human values. Altini (2013) and Tanner (2022) note that entrenched systems often resist transformation, leading to marginalization of faithful believers. Yet identity in Christ calls for perseverance, loyalty to God's eternal reign, and engagement without compromise.

Ultimately, identity in Christ transforms believers into active agents within society. Secure in God's truth, they can challenge injustice, embody integrity, and contribute to human flourishing. Smith (2024) argues that Christians must view their placement in families, workplaces, and communities as purposeful, part of God's broader plan to redeem and reshape society. Identity in Christ therefore extends beyond personal fulfillment, equipping believers to influence systems with justice, mercy, and truth.

The Dominion Mandate

The dominion mandate, first given in Genesis 1:28, represents God's initial commission to humanity: "Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion." This fourfold charge fruitfulness, multiplication, subduing, and governing extends beyond reproduction to encompass education, governance, technology, art, agriculture, and spiritual leadership. Humanity is called to co-labor with God in shaping creation, bringing order, beauty, and justice in alignment with His design (Wagner, 2012).

At its heart, dominion is stewardship rather than ownership. Psalm 24:1 declares, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it," reminding us that human authority is derivative. People are caretakers entrusted with God's resources and accountable for their use (Cavedon, 2013; Shelton, 2015). When dominion is distorted into exploitation, it produces ecological harm and social injustice (McCammon, 2015). Grounded in God's character, however, dominion fosters flourishing societies and preserved ecosystems. Jesus' parables reinforce that stewardship carries eternal accountability, as servants must one day give an account (Matthew 25:14–30). Exercised with humility and integrity, dominion becomes transformative (Lasswell, 2017).

A key corrective is distinguishing dominion from domination. Historical abuses of Genesis 1:28 justified oppression and environmental destruction. Kinna and Prichard (2019) note how misreadings of this text sustained inequality. True dominion mirrors God's justice and mercy. Jesus embodied this vision through servant leadership, healing, and restoration. Fast et al. (2012) emphasize that leadership rooted in humility prevents abuse of power, aligning with Christ's model.

The scope of dominion is practical and democratized. A homemaker nurturing children, an entrepreneur creating fair employment, or a student pursuing diligent study all exercise dominion (Berkovitz, 2020; Dawson, 2013). Holland (2019) highlights that dominion is not limited to elites but entrusted to every image-bearer. Likewise, cultural creation, art, music, institutions is part of this calling. Keller (2012) stresses that culture-making reflects divine creativity, though Marchant (2019) cautions that cultural expressions must be tested against Scripture to avoid idolatry.

In today's world, dominion intersects with global issues like sustainability, justice, and technological ethics. Bouma-Prediger (2019) shows that stewardship offers a theological foundation for ecological care. Smith (2024) adds that civic and professional roles are sacred opportunities to model kingdom values. Ultimately, the dominion mandate is an invitation to join God's unfolding mission. It transforms ordinary life into sacred service, aligning work, culture, and stewardship with His eternal plan, reflecting God's glory in a world longing for redemption.

Conclusion

The biblical concept of purpose offers a holistic vision of human life that transcends the narrow boundaries of self-fulfillment or worldly achievement. Rooted in God's creative design, purpose is not an invention of human ambition but a discovery made through relationship with the Creator. From the opening chapters of Genesis, humanity is portrayed as bearing the image of God,

entrusted with dignity, responsibility, and stewardship. Dominion is not exploitation but a sacred calling to reflect God's justice, mercy, and love in every sphere of existence.

Though sin disrupted the fellowship between God and humanity, Christ restores that relationship, enabling believers to rediscover their identity and calling. Living with purpose requires intimacy with God, expressed through worship, obedience, and service. It also demands engagement with human systems, where Christians are called to be salt and light, reforming structures and promoting justice while resisting conformity to worldly distortions.

Ultimately, purpose is both personal and communal, both earthly and eternal. It anchors individuals in God's eternal blueprint while empowering them to shape culture, care for creation, and serve others. To live with purpose is to align one's life with God's will, ensuring that every act, ordinary or extraordinary, becomes an expression of His glory.

Recommendations

1. Churches and Christian communities should intentionally teach and model dominion as stewardship rather than domination. This involves reinterpreting Genesis 1:28 in ways that emphasize care, responsibility, and service.
2. Believers must be continually reminded that identity in Christ is the foundation of purpose. Ministries and discipleship programs should help Christians resist defining themselves by societal standards of success and instead ground their value in God's truth.
3. Christians should not withdraw from societal structures but actively engage them as witnesses of God's kingdom. Whether in politics, business, education, or culture, believers are called to challenge injustice, advocate for integrity, and model ethical practices.
4. Churches should equip members to cultivate these disciplines consistently, ensuring that believers draw strength, guidance, and renewal from God.

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