

***Discipling The Nations***  
**A Sympathetic Critique of Darrow Miller's Book**

**Part One**

When I first heard the title of Darrow Miller's book, "Discipling the Nations: The Power of Truth to Transform Cultures" (1998, 2001), something within me cringed. To me, "discipling the nations" communicated theological and scriptural dissonance. I did not follow up on this sensation at the time, but my concern lingered. In November of last year I attended a conference where Miller was a featured speaker. He taught about discipling the nations and I was troubled once again. I decided that it was, indeed, time to yield to my disquiet and investigate further.

After further reflection and study, I believe there are several weaknesses in his book and a serious conceptual flaw in his proposal. These should be acknowledged, investigated, and necessary adjustments implemented, for the sake of the church in Argentina -- despite all the positive elements of his message. (If you are a Miller enthusiast, I ask that you assume an open mind, while we think about the phrase "discipling the nations" together.)

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According to the author, "Discipling The Nations," provides a "wholistic framework" for ministry to "the poor and hungry," as well as to "redeem culture and see nations disciplined" (Preface, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition). His text is a manifesto for change and action. It is useful for laymen as an introduction to worldview, poverty, and development (though there are recent texts that are also helpful). He contrasts and critiques other perspectives from the biblical worldview. He urges Christians to "think independently, governed not by today's current fad or trend but by reason" (109). He confronts the sacred-secular division, subjective spirituality, and anti-intellectualism prevalent among evangelicals today. He encourages Christians to "integrate their Judeo-Christian worldview into their professional lives" (107). All these features are very positive.

I do not know Darrow Miller personally. My impression is that he has great compassion and a broad vision. Friends who know him testify to his humility. He clearly has gifts of leadership and communication. He seems to be a pragmatic thinker, a man in search of solutions, particularly for poverty and development. Loren Cunningham (founder of Youth With A Mission) described Miller and his program in a way that reveals his priorities (27):

Darrow is not an intellectual; he is a Christian who is busy making a difference worldwide, and committed to seeing the minds of Christians renewed by God's truth in order to more correctly and effectively reflect and initiate His truth into every realm of society, and thereby "disciple the nations"—which is the key to solving the world's problems.

Miller describes himself as a "social activist" (27) and Cunningham says that he is "not an intellectual." Yet, his book deals with very important theoretical concepts, such as, the relationship between the church and the world, worldview, God's purpose in creation, and the role of the intellect. This is significant, because in reality his study is very broad, but not very deep. Sometimes, it is quite simplistic, confusing, or reductionistic. I will provide several examples.

First, Miller cites few biblical scholars or theologians, though he deals with theology and worldview throughout his book. The majority of those quoted are social commentators and other activists, such as himself. On the research portal, EBSCOhost, I found only one review of his book (partially negative). He does not appear to have written any peer-reviewed articles, except a brief expose about his book in 1997 in the International Journal of Frontier Missions. This is important. His entire project is based upon a biblical-theological hermeneutic that is subject to criticism (below). In other words, he is clearly a “how and when” thinker, but has not provided and in depth “what and why” biblical analysis to justify his program.

Second, his depiction of how cultural transformation actually occurs is confusing. On the one hand, he stresses the role of ideas and criticizes the pessimistic and rudimentary “last days evangelicalism” (72) and “diluted pietism” (73) in the church today. He also declares: “The gospel is much more than evangelism.” Yet, he often repeats the notion that societies change “one person at a time” (74) as they are converted. (See also 22, 136, 191, 271). However, is cultural change a mathematical formula based on true belief? Can social progress be equated with conversions? There are examples in history and “Christian” countries today, like Guatemala and the United States, that belie this idea. Miller knows this, of course, but his text is not clear.

Third, Miller is sometimes reductionistic. For example, he roots the “record of despotism” in the modern West to Charles Darwin and the theory of evolution (108). He credits the descent into secularism today to the philosophy of René Descartes (with a little help from Frederick Nietzsche and Thomas Malthus, 151-152). On the other hand, he wrote about God’s “best” purposes for mankind (175), which is a dubious theological concept in light the Bible’s teaching about God’s sovereignty and holiness. Does God really have “good, better, and best” intentions for the cosmos and mankind?

Fourth, Miller credits humans with enormous power and determination. He expressed the idea that “man is the proactive creator of history” at least seven times (130, 225, 230, 250, 266, 275, 277). He is quite optimistic about human potential to improve societies: “We can dream of a better world and then make it happen.” But, this notion appears to underestimate divine providence, as well as human finiteness and fallenness.

Fifth, his interpretation of scripture is questionable. He says, for example:

Our mandate includes bringing substantial healing to nature, standing against the decay, and causing deserts and gardens alike to bloom (163, 165).

We transform the world...to discover the design behind nature (science) and to apply those laws (technology) to attack the ravages of natural evil, the “thorns and thistles” (228).

In both cases his proof text is Romans 8:19-22, which is an odd theological interpretation of the text in its context or within the broader biblical narrative:

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

Surely, a more serious error is Miller's use of the term, "nations," predominantly in its literal, English sense as a political-social-economic entity or as "a people in a land under single government." Here is the relevant text, the Great Commission of Jesus:

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and *make disciples of all nations*, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The social-political meaning of "nation" (208) seems clear when he describes what "discipling" the nations actually signifies, apart from the message of salvation: "the reformation of culture and the rebuilding of societies," "transformational development, which impacts both man's spirit and body," "help the poor," "restore the world," "end hunger," "transform poverty to bounty," "nation building," "the development ethic," "just, responsible, healthy society," "cultural optimists," and "democratic political structures and free-market economics" (in the Kindle edition).

However, Matthew 28:19 presents a different picture. Frank Gaebelin in his commentary on Matthew states: "The Greek phrase, *panta ta ethnē* ("all the nations"), is used four times in Matthew's gospel (24:9, 14; 25:32; 28:19) and means 'tribes, nations, peoples...all peoples [without distinction] or all nations [without distinction].' He adds: "The aim of Jesus' disciples, therefore, is to make disciples of all men everywhere, without distinction." Craig Keener in his commentary notes: "All 'nations' probably signifies 'all peoples'...people-groups" and suggests that "Matthew lays the emphasis here on Gentile peoples, whom his predominantly Jewish-Christian community needs to be encouraged in evangelizing."

John Piper in his book, "Let The Nations Be Glad: The supremacy Of God In Missions," provides an extended and detailed analysis of the term, *ethnē* (nations) and the phrase, *panta ta ethnē* ("all the nations"). He concludes that the phrase refers to "people groups outside Israel." Moreover, he writes: "The blessing of Abraham, namely, the salvation achieved through Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham, would reach to all the ethnic people groups of the world...This event of individual salvation as persons trust Christ will happen among 'all the nations'." (Piper is surely no eschatological "pessimist," nor does he embrace a "diluted pietism." [More below]).

This is the emphasis of Matthew 28:19, the book of Acts, and, indeed foreshadowed in the Old Testament through promises like: "Nations will fear the name of the Lord, and all the kings of the earth will fear your glory" (Ps 102:15) and the extension of the gospel "to the ends of the earth" (Ps 2:8). A principal theological trajectory of the Old and New Testament promises is the extension of the message of salvation to *every* ethnic and geographical group, not just Jews or Israel.

Miller, no doubt, affirms preaching the gospel to all people groups without exception. However, he appears to misinterpret the meaning of the term, "nations," and the significance of the "commission" beyond its immediate context, or Matthew's gospel, or the broader redemptive narrative.

## Part Two

While many Christians affirm Miller's important stress upon ideas and the repudiation of the sacred-secular division, as well as the need to influence societies with the biblical worldview (I certainly do!), his eschatology is problematic. These statements are most revealing:

Our job is to help people see the big picture of what God is doing in history to restore the world, end hunger, and build his kingdom (117).

We are to tend the garden, build the city, fill the earth with the knowledge of the Lord, and bless and disciple all the nations (137).

The task given to the church in the Great Commission was nothing less than to disciple nations. If the church does not disciple the nation, the nation will disciple the church (192).

Note the close parallel between God's covenant with Abram to be a blessing to all the nations (see Genesis 12:1–3) and the Great Commission of the Church by Christ to make disciples of all the nations (see Matthew 28:18–20) (225).

And why is the blessing to be extended to all nations? Why are we to disciple nations? So that when the King returns, the glory of the nations will be brought by the kings of the nations into the City of God (263).

Man is to participate in and help hasten God's unfolding consummation of history...the transformation completed. And the blessing of the nations fully extended – this is our *telos* (277).

On that day, with the discipling of the nations complete, the kings of the earth will bring the glory of the nations to the Lamb—our King, Jesus Christ (see Revelation 21:24–26). Until that ultimate day, we all have work to do! (279)

Miller seemingly fails to discern deeply the two “commissions” (the cultural mandate, Genesis 1:26-28, and the Great Commission, Matthew 28:19) in light of our messy, complex world “under the sun” (Eccl 1:9) and in the “present evil age” (Gal 1:4). In this *present* epoch, the ideal state will *never* be achieved through *any* ideology or worldview: communism or socialism, democracy, capitalism or consumerism, Islam or any of the myriad alternative spiritualities. Never will there be a true “Holy (fill in the blank) Empire.”

Miller appears to embrace an overly optimistic, post-millennial, triumphal outlook that envisions progressive, Christian cultural development and dominance of the world in preparation for the Lord's return. According to Miller's vision, the church should be centrally involved in nation-building. Interestingly, the one culture that appears to best fulfill his “development ethic” is North America, for he declares, “democratic capitalism is significantly better than any other system” (Kindle edition). (See more nuanced comments in the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition: 119, 138-139, 158.) As Cunningham said regarding Miller's vision: “discipling the nations” is “*the* key to solving the *world's* problems” [emphasis mine] and Miller said *we* “build the city of God” [emphasis mine] (137, 225). While he may not intend to affirm that humans construct God's City in this age, his form of expression and eschatological scheme are not clear. This is problematic for the non-discerning reader of his text.

It seems, therefore, that Christians construct the church, so that it can build the nation and develop culture, and thereby resolve the world's problems – all of this to prepare the earth for the Lord's return. However, solving, for example, Argentina's many social-political-economic problems and building the local branch of the City of God imposes an onerous burden upon the local church.

In support of his optimistic eschatology Miller mentions the “debate between the pessimists [“last days evangelicalism” and “diluted pietism”] and the optimists” (161). He is definitely on the side of the optimists and comments: “Both sides can't be right, however. How do we decide between them?” In support of his *theological* position he then cites various *economic-demographic* data (161-162).

But, could there be a viable third alternative, a theological perspective between the two, mutually exclusive positions: between a “pessimistic” pre-millennialism and an “optimistic” post-millennialism? Yes. There is the classic eschatology embraced by many respected Bible scholars and theologians – amillennialism, what might be called the “realistic” perspective (based on Miller's scheme, but this is a theme for another blog ☺).

Sadly, Miller appears to utilize passages as proof texts for an imposed theological-social agenda that distorts the continuity/discontinuity between Eden and the “present evil age” (Gal 1:4), as well as the continuity/discontinuity between “this age” (1Cor 2:6) and the “age to come” (Eph 1:21). He seems to naively impose the pre-fall cultural mandate (Gen 1:26-28) upon the post-fall Great Commission (Matt 28:19) without any serious qualifications. He “reads into” the text, rather than “out of” the immediate context or broader historical-redemptive narrative.

I fear, as a result, that his project could transform the church, as “sojourners and exiles” in this world (1Pet 2:10-12), into immigrants and perhaps even colonialists.

I suggest, therefore, that an urgent, deeper analysis of the important and worthy issues that Miller raises be undertaken by ministry leaders, those who desire to “love God with all of their mind” (Mark 12: 30). A thoughtful review must also occur to prevent *false hopes, expectations, and unnecessary burdens*, based upon an inflated vision for the people of God in Argentina. This is the serious conceptual flaw – and great concern – I mentioned before.

Below, I propose some questions for discussion related to Darrow Miller's book and some other resources that offer more balanced and nuanced reflection.

*Note: My view concerning Christian political and social engagement can be found in my recently published article, “A Place at the Table: Christian Political Engagement in a Post-Christian Context.”*

### **Questions**

What does Miller envision: a theocracy, Christian utopia, “Christian” republic, democratic capitalism or social reform movement?

Would the Roman Empire under Constantine (after his conversion), the Holy Roman Empire, Luther's Germany, Calvin's Geneva, Cromwell's puritan commonwealth, North America's puritan New England, Victoria's England and the British Empire, or Kuyper's Holland provide good models? (And, how pure were those societies and how long did they last?)

Is he prepared to seek the *common* good based on common grace and general revelation with those of differing worldviews?

What did Jesus mean when He said to Pilate: “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36)?

How does Israel’s Babylonian exile parallel our own experience as we await the “new heavens and new earth” (2Pet 3:13) and as we “wait for his Son from heaven...who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1Thes 1:10)?

What does it mean to be “sojourners and exiles” (1Pet 2:10-12) or “ambassadors” (2Cor 5:20) in this world?

How much continuity/discontinuity is there between Eden and human history after the fall into sin, between Genesis 1-2 and Genesis 3?

How much continuity/discontinuity is there between the “present evil age” (Gal 1:4) and the “new heavens and new earth” (2Pet 3:13) with respect to “discipling the nations”?

How does “discipling nations” really work in post-Christendom, secularity, consumerism, pluralism, post-modernism, and naturalism – not to mention radical Islam?

How does “discipling nations” work when the Christian worldview is both intellectually implausible and existentially unattractive?

How does “discipling nations” work when Christians are excluded as cultural gate-keepers, lack political power and higher education, or economic resources?

How does “discipling nations” work when many Christians embrace an anti-intellectual spirituality and lack even basic theological-biblical-cultural literacy?

### ***Resources In Spanish Available On This Site***

Keith Campbell	Cómo influenciar la cultura para Cristo (video)
Bill Edgar	Ni utopia ni indiferencia (artículo)
Brian Fickert	¿Qué es la pobreza? (video)
Os Guinness	La fe cristiana y el próximo siglo (video)
Tom Johnson	El protestante, el disidente y el Cristiano (artículo) El trabajo dual de Dios en el mundo (artículo)
Tim Keller	La humildad en nuestro compromiso cultural (video) El Gran desmitificador: el evangelio y la idolatría (video)
Daryl McCarthy	Reforma o revolución: Los Cristianos académicos y una cosmovisión Cristiana en la universidad (artículo) Corazones y mentes se inflaman por Cristo (Monjes Irlandeses -- Un modelo para hacer todas las cosas nuevas en el siglo 21) (artículo)
Richard Smith	Un lugar en la mesa: la participación del cristiano en la política dentro de un contexto poscristiano (artículo) El Evangelio en tres dimensiones (artículo) La misión de Dios y la prosperidad económica (artículo)

Ted Turnau            Teoría de la Cultura Popular desde una visión cristiana del mundo  
(artículo)

***Books In Spanish and English***

Brian Fickert            Cuando ayudar hace daño: Cómo aliviar la pobreza, sin lastimar a los  
pobres ni a uno mismo

Os Guinness            Renacimiento: El poder del Evangelio en tiempos de tinieblas  
Amarás A Dios Con Toda Tu Mente

Tim Keller                Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God's Work  
Dioses Falsos: Las huecas promesas del dinero, el sexo y el poder, y la  
única esperanza

John Piper                Justicia Generosa: Cómo la gracia de Dios nos hace justos  
Piense

Ted Turnau                Pop-ologética: Cómo acercarnos a la cultura pop desde la fe cristiana