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10-1-1995

## Christian Reconstructionism and the Christian World Mission

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### Recommended Citation

Poston, Larry, "Christian Reconstructionism and the Christian World Mission" (1995). *Bible & Religion Educator Scholarship*. 21.

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**CHRISTIAN RECONSTRUCTIONISM AND THE CHRISTIAN WORLD MISSION**  
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Controversy has been the hallmark of Christian Reconstructionism since its inception in the early 1960s. Although the movement claims no specific founder or central leader, most observers trace its original concepts to Rousas John Rushdoony, a California university professor who authored what has for many become the group's major working document, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*. Called by some "Theonomy" and by others "Dominion Theology,"

Reconstructionism is distinguished by the following beliefs:

1. Regeneration as humankind's only hope in both this age and the age to come, since social change must follow personal change, and personal change can only come through regeneration. With this point all biblically-oriented Christians would be agree.
2. "The continuing validity and applicability of the whole law of God, including, but not limited to, the Mosaic case laws [as] the standard by which individuals, families, churches, and civil governments should conduct their affairs." In other words, Reconstructionists maintain that the precepts of the Old Testament moral law have never been abrogated and are therefore to be obeyed by all of humankind in all places and in all times.
3. "A victorious view of the future progress of the Kingdom of God prior to the return of Christ ..." Reconstructionists are postmillennialists, believing that Jesus inaugurated the Kingdom of God during his first advent and is currently expanding this Kingdom in and through the institutional Church until it reaches a maximum size, at which time he will return from Heaven to earth.
4. Presuppositional apologetics as opposed to evidentialism. Reconstructionists do not admit the existence of "neutral" knowledge but instead hold that "all facts are interpreted facts." Unbelievers, therefore, have nothing to contribute to a

Christian worldview because their ideas are based on humanistic presuppositions. Consequently, secular democracy and its concomitant religious pluralism are unacceptable to Theonomists since these concepts are founded upon these same humanistic presuppositions. Only the Christian religion is true; the expression of other religious beliefs should be prohibited (see North 1989 *passim*).

5.A decentralized social order in which civil government would be strictly limited and would share power with both family government and ecclesiastical government. Reconstructionism seeks to reduce the power of the state to educate and to tax its citizenry and to elevate the institutions of family and church so that there will be a more balanced set of influences in the life of the individual (North and DeMar 1991:81-82).

Because many Christians have heard little or nothing regarding the movement or its advocates, there is a tendency to dismiss it as yet another of the plethora of Protestant interpretations of Christianity that have appeared since the Reformation and relegate it to a position of insignificance. But in 1989 Randy Frame wrote in *Christianity Today* that "one point on which both advocates of and detractors from Christian Reconstructionism agree is that the movement's influence is rapidly on the rise" (1989:38). Frame cites evidence that the movement is currently gaining adherents within Reformed theological circles, among charismatics, and among Evangelicals, all of whom are attracted to the prophetic candor and authority with which Reconstructionists speak. The helplessness and frustration that many Christians feel in the midst of burgeoning social legislation which undermines Christian principles has made the call for a "Reconstructionist Revolution" highly appealing.

The writings of Rushdoony and his colleagues Gary North, Greg Bahnsen, David Chilton, Gary DeMar, and Kenneth Gentry (to name but a few) have been and continue to be voluminous, and attempts by Evangelicals and others to respond to them have usually become

bogged down in trying to address the entire spectrum of their beliefs. I would like to interact only with the missiological implications of the Reconstructionist platform; implications which I find to be particularly significant given the current struggle of the Christian laity to remain faithful to a truly biblical missiological paradigm.

North and DeMar, for instance, maintain that before Christ returns, by the power of the Spirit, the kingdom of Jesus Christ will grow to enjoy a period of prosperity and growth throughout the world through the church's faithfulness in fulfilling the Great Commission. In general, the nations of the world will be converted ... Reconstructionists go a step further to say that the converted nations will seek to order their common social and political life according to the Word of God in Scripture (1991:127).

Specifically, I wish to deal with the lines from the above quotation which speak of "the Church's faithfulness in fulfilling the Great Commission" and "the conversion of the nations of the world." What do these phrases mean from the perspective of Reconstructionism? Can Christians who are committed to a biblical worldview be as optimistic as the above statement implies that they should be?

Strategies utilized for the expansion of any religious faith may be plotted on a spectrum that has as its poles the concepts of "internal-personal" approaches to the matter of salvation and "external-institutional" approaches. Outreach that utilizes an external-institutional methodology emphasizes the expansion or multiplication of institutional structures, such as church buildings, synagogues, mosques, and temples; organizational structures, including hierarchies of administrative offices; and creeds, rituals, ceremonies, and propositional tenets. Religious groups whose philosophies of outreach lie near this end of the spectrum believe that membership in an institutional structure along with conformity or submission to the organizational and creedal aspects of such a structure unite an individual with the spiritual realm, however this may

be conceived.

Advocates of the internal-personal approach do not deny that the external trappings of religion play a role in the spiritual life, but they do not see these trappings as essential or fundamental to religious faith. Membership in an institution or conformity to a creed or behavior are not considered salvific in and of themselves. True religion is a matter of "the heart," of an inner "relationship" with the divine, of "prayer," "meditation" or similar emotive ideas.

Historically, persons claiming to be Christians have been found all along this spectrum, from the extreme external-institutionalism of the Holy Roman Empire to the internal-personalism of the mystics and Pietists. Generally speaking, Reconstructionist missiology must be located at the external-institutional end of the scale. Although regeneration--which is essentially an internal-personal concept--is listed as the first of the distinctives of Reconstructionism, and Gary North places "personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior" first in the slogan of what he calls the "Reconstructionist Revolution" (North 1989:539), such an emphasis is not what strikes the objective observer who views the movement as a whole. Individual observance of and conformity to the Law of God as expressed in the Mosaic Covenant, along with promotion of obedience to that Law on the part of Christians and non-Christians alike, are the central tenets for which the movement has become known. Thus the fulfillment of the Great Commission that North and DeMar speak of is not so much the eliciting of an internal and personal commitment to Jesus that Evangelicals have traditionally taught as essential for the "new birth" spoken of in John 3:1-6, but rather the bringing of individuals' lives into conformity to those aspects of the Mosaic Covenant still deemed applicable to humankind today. Greg Bahnsen speaks plainly to this issue: "It is quite clear that if the Christian is not exhorting others to obey the law of God and promoting such obedience in every way he can, then he is not fulfilling the great commission delivered to him by his Lord and Savior" (1984:477-478). And

Gary North holds that "evangelism means teaching people to obey God's law, through the empowering of God's Holy Spirit. Evangelism means *obedience*" (Gentry 1990:x).

While at first glance these sentiments might be construed as nothing more than a somewhat severe rendering of Jesus's requirement that his followers teach new or immature Christians to obey everything he had commanded, the fact that the "others" to be exhorted include non-Christians as well as Christians lends an entirely different thrust to Reconstructionism's missiological strategy. Bahnsen claims that

The Law was never viewed as defining justice exclusively within the narrow confines of Israel.

"All of the statutes" revealed by Moses for the covenant nation were a *model* to be emulated by the *non-covenantal* nations as well ...

David would make the surrounding nations surrender to his own theonomic rule (2 Samuel 22:21-25, 44-50, Ps. 18:43-50) ... the rulers of the earth need not be Jews to come under theonomic dominion. God's law was not meant to be restricted to the Hebrew nation but had international application (1984: xviii, 353).

Consequently there is found in Reconstructionism an emphasis on an external-institutional approach to the fulfillment of the Great Commission that advocates the same philosophical and theological concepts that produced the Holy Roman Empire. Utilization of this particular model expanded Christendom by means of an imposition of Christian practices and institutions upon the peoples of central and northern Europe in the same way that Bahnsen in his interpretation of certain Bible passages indicates that David sought to subjugate the nations that surrounded the kingdom of Israel. But the nominal spirituality produced in each of these instances should serve to make one extremely wary of such an approach.

Of course, if Bahnsen's interpretation of David's missiological strategizing is correct, then his model should be adopted because of its biblical support, whether historical applications

vindicate or disparage its use. But one must ask whether this Old Testament model, predicated upon the existence of a covenant people strategically located at the confluence of three continents and charged to function according to a centripetal paradigm, remains valid for New Testament believers who have no geographical center and who have been charged to function centrifugally. In his work *The Greatness of the Great Commission: The Christian Enterprise in a Fallen World*, Kenneth Gentry recognizes the centrifugal force of Matthew 28:18-20 as opposed to the centripetalism of Old Testament Judaism. But for Gentry centrifugalism does not imply an apostolic ministry such as that espoused in the history of the Church or in the modern missionary movement. Rather, he says, "cultural influence and change are to be promoted by God's people ... at large in their callings, not by the institutional church as such" (Gentry 1992:259). The Church does not send missionaries; the members of the Church are to *function* as missionaries where they are. But nothing is said concerning how non-Christians are to be reached in geographical locations where Christians do not live.

Gentry's analysis of the etymology of *ethne* (plural of *ethnos*) leads him to believe that Jesus was directing his disciples to reach "collected masses of individuals *united together* by a common bond." Such cultural unity forms an important aspect of Reconstructionist missiology, because "as the numbers of converts increase, this providentially leads to the subsuming under the authority of Christ whole institutions, cultures, societies, and governments" (Gentry 1990:54). Such statements reveal at least two significant difficulties with Reconstructionist thinking.

First, the goal of subsuming whole institutions and societies under the authority of Christ does not conform to the missionary paradigm seen in the New Testament. Paul, the primary apostolic example for the Church, operated almost exclusively according to an internal-personal approach. No evidence is found that he sought to transform an increasingly corrupt and antagonistic Roman Empire into a Christian kingdom founded upon Mosaic principles. On the

contrary, he used his Roman citizenship to his advantage whenever he found it necessary (see, for example, Acts 22:23-29); otherwise he ignored the Empire and its social conditions as external forms that were without lasting significance. Thus in his first letter to the Corinthians he could advise slaves to remain outwardly as they were, focusing instead on the inner reality of their freedom in Christ (7:21-23). In his view, the time was "short" and the "world in its present form was passing away" (7:29-31). Even the institutions of marriage and personal economics were not to be accorded ultimate significance, not to mention the larger issues of politics and government. Paul proposed neither a theocratic nor a theonomic "revolution." Had he done so, one would expect to find detailed directives regarding the establishment of alternative and specifically Christian political, economic, judicial, and social systems, but one searches in vain for such directives.

Admittedly, such an interpretation of Paul's philosophy of ministry has not been without its problematic aspects. Historically, many Christians have struggled with the seeming naivete of a ministry conducted wholly in light of a belief in the imminent return of Jesus, a naivete that appears to allow what in the modern world are such socially significant matters as slavery and marriage to become essentially non-issues. And since Jesus did not return in Paul's lifetime--as Paul plainly expected that he would--one is seemingly left with only two choices as to a stance regarding the missionary philosophy of the New Testament. One could reject Paul's life and ministry as paradigmatic for Christians today, due to its essential impracticality (i.e., what would be the effect if every generation of Christians lived with a conviction of eschatological imminence, rejecting marriage and refusing to confront social evils such as slavery?). Christians would then be free to design their own strategies for mission without the restrictions of biblical revelation. But this is certainly troublesome from the standpoint of the Evangelical's beliefs regarding the inerrancy and supra-cultural applicability of the Scriptures. A second alternative would be for the Christian to seek to retain the eschatological urgency of the apostle's



life, relegating political, economic, and sociological matters to a strictly secondary position. The latter is precisely what pietistic and premillennial evangelicalism has done, and this fact elicits harsh criticism from Reconstructionist writers. North, for instance, believes that modern evangelicals "look at the gospel as if it were some kind of gigantic chain letter scheme. Nothing is of value in God's sight ... except keeping the chain letter alive" (Gentry 1990:x). In another work he states that

Pietism preaches a limited salvation: "individual soul-only, family-only, church-only." It rejects the very idea of the comprehensive redeeming power of the gospel, the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, and the comprehensive responsibility of Christians in history. In this rejection of the gospel's political and judicial effects in history, the pietists agree entirely with modern humanists (North and DeMar 1991:32).

The allegation of the final sentence in this quotation appears to be that (by implication) a majority of contemporary Evangelicals have no plan for institutions within culture because they do not believe that the Gospel has political and judicial implications for earthly society, at least not in a primary sense. Reconstructionists see this lack of a cultural strategy as essentially equivalent to secular humanism's rejection of any and all religious influences upon society in general. But *lack* of a plan due to the absence of a biblical paradigm and *rejection* of a plan based on an atheistic philosophy are two different things; therefore the accusation concerning agreement between pietists and humanists is a dubious one at best. Ironically, a case could be made for the claim that it is actually Reconstructionism that agrees with humanism in at least one very fundamental area: that of *time*. Humanistic goals and objectives presuppose and require enormous amounts of time, both in the past and in the future. With regard to the future, at least, Dominion Theology posits a similar concept of time, and there is no escaping the fundamental contradiction between the urgency of the apostle Paul's ministry conducted as it was in an

atmosphere of eschatological expectancy and the Reconstructionist conviction that thousands of years of earthly history still lie ahead. Paul claimed that "the night is nearly over; the day is almost here" (Romans 13:12) and that "the time is short ... for this world in its present form is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:29-31). The writer to the Hebrews added that "in just a very little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay" (Hebrews 10:37). And James claimed that "the Lord's coming is near ... the Judge is standing at the door!" (James 5:8-9). Gary DeMar, however, states that "Reconstructionists generally believe they have time, lots of time, to accomplish their ends ... Biblical postmillennialists can afford to wait for God to judge ungodly regimes, bide their time, and prepare to rebuild upon the ruins" (North and DeMar 1991:141).

It is precisely this idea of "rebuilding upon the ruins" that leads to a second major criticism. This concerns the problem of identifying the model according to which such a "rebuilding" is to take place. Even if one grants Reconstructionism's fundamental presupposition that the Kingdom of God is essentially an external and institutional concept with political, economic, judicial, and social implications, who will decide what this Kingdom is to look like and how it is to function in today's world? Is there in Scripture or in history a specific model designated by God as the paradigm toward which Christians should work? Various proposals have been forthcoming throughout Christian history: The Holy Roman Empire, Calvin's Geneva, and Puritan New England, to name but three. Each of these functioned, for a time and after a fashion. But an inability to flex and accommodate changes arising out of human progress within particular cultural contexts doomed all three to eventual failure. As of yet no one has proposed a Kingdom model that is both external-institutional and, at the same time, sufficiently fluid to adapt to such changes.

Because of their commitment to an internal-personal view of salvation, modern Evangelical missions have, for the most part, operated according to a paradigm founded on the

concepts of indigenization and contextualization, the flexibility of which have enabled the Church to become solidly rooted and thrive in a variety of cultures. Indeed, Lamin Sanneh claims that one of the apostle Paul's major achievements was "disentangling the gospel from any exclusive cultural definition," while at the same time retaining "the particularity of culture as the necessary saddle for launching Christianity in the world" (1989:34). The Gospel and the essential elements of Christian discipleship will always wear a cultural garb, but the precise form of that garb is--within fairly broad parameters--highly variable. There are, to be sure, numerous risks inherent in such a philosophy of ministry. Supra-cultural aspects of the Christian faith may become compromised by cultural concerns, resulting in syncretistic amalgams that bear little resemblance to New Testament images of Christianity. But early Christians were apparently content to live with such risks, for the flexibility of the early Church is readily seen in the differences that one finds in the institutions that appear from province to province and the evolution of these institutions one sees even in the relatively short course of the New Testament period. The structure of the church in Jerusalem as recorded early in Acts was heavily Jewish and law-oriented, and thus it differed fundamentally from the model evident in the churches of Galatia, which were characterized by a much "looser" and Gentile-oriented structure. By the same token, the Galatian model differed from that seen in neighboring Ephesus, which appears to have developed as an evangelistically oriented "Bible Institute" concept (the lecture hall of Tyrannus--see Acts 19:9-10). Paul's usage of the different terms *elder*, *bishop*, and *presbyter* to address the single topic of church leadership, the requirements for overseers at the end of the first missionary journey (Acts 14:23) as compared with those laid down for Timothy while he was in Ephesus (1 Timothy 3:1-7), the paucity of the restrictions for Gentile believers mandated by the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), the freedom (within parameters) granted to the Corinthians regarding corporate worship (1 Corinthians 14:26-40), and the treatment of moral and ethical "gray areas" as recorded in Romans 14 all point to a highly flexible concept of the institutional

Church and Christian lifestyle.

Rushdoony, North, Bahnsen and their colleagues are aware that at least some adaptation of Old Testament principles would be necessary to accomplish their revolution. But the tone of their writings suggests that changes would be kept to a minimum. Is it realistic, however, to believe that the Mosaic Covenant--designed insofar as its details are concerned for an agrarian and pastoral Middle Eastern society--can be imposed upon any and all cultures, with only minimal adaptation? Such an approach may be attractive due to its essential simplicity; in theory it would seem to provide a means for dispensing with the agonizing questions and struggles that inevitably accompany attempts at indigenization and contextualization. But it is not a biblical approach. It is much more akin to Islamic methodology, and, indeed, Sanneh notes that some missionaries "who viewed mission as the 'white man's burden' came to hold an envious esteem of Islam, a religion that gives short shrift to vernacular pretensions" (1989:178). As adherents of the ultimate external-institutional religion, Muslims seek to perform missionary activity precisely as Reconstructionists recommend, expanding the Dar al-Islam ("The Abode of Islam") politically, economically, judicially, and socially. Questions of contextualization are of little or no interest in Islam; "from its lofty position of a universal, untranslatable sacred Scripture and a militant monotheist creed, Islam is engaged with the question of indigenization only as a handicap" (Sanneh 1989:178). But history shows that Muslims have struggled ceaselessly with the question of a proper Islamic model and the working out of the Kingdom of Islam on earth. Muslims, too, have found culture to be a highly slippery concept, and the logical conclusion of their frustrations is clearly seen in the frightening simplicity of contemporary fundamentalism. Reconstructionists would meet with similar difficulties, and these difficulties would be compounded by the fact that even the members of the "inner core" are divided as to which aspects of the Mosaic Covenant are still applicable to modern society. Bahnsen himself admits that "many (like myself) do not affirm R.J. Rushdoony's view of the dietary laws, Gary

North's view of home mortgages, James Jordan's stance on automatic infant communion, or David Chilton's attitudes toward bribery and 'ripping off' the unbeliever" (1984:xix).

Perhaps a Reconstructionist Council could be convened--similar to the Jerusalem Council seen in Acts 15--to iron out such differences. But who would appoint the Council, and how binding would its decisions be? Who would enforce them, and how would they be enforced? Students of the history of the Church will immediately recognize that these questions are not new. They were asked, for instance, in medieval times, and answers regarding enforcement, for instance, included such concepts as the Roman Catholic Inquisition; an solution that, it is to be hoped, no one seriously contemplates reviving.

We conclude, then, that the Reconstructionist interpretation of the Great Commission is untenable for a variety of reasons. First, Reconstructionist missiology, operating as it does on the basis of an external and institutional paradigm, is without New Testament support. Neither Jesus nor Paul sought to transform their external circumstances in any more than a limited, local way. In our fulfillment of the Great Commission we are called first and foremost to effect internal and personal change in individuals, and to recognize that whatever external and institutional effects this approach may have at a local level are incidental rather than fundamental to the Christian world mission.

Secondly, the postmillennial eschatology espoused by Theonomists with its concomitant view of the longevity of history clashes with the New Testament's many solemn exhortations regarding the brevity of time. Our call is to function with the same eschatological urgency that motivated Paul and the original apostles, and, contrary to an expectation of a long-term progress of the gospel, we are to "work while it is yet day," knowing that "night is coming when no one can work" (John 9:4).

Thirdly, the proponents of Reconstructionism fail to deal adequately with issues of

culture. Despite acknowledgement of the need for internal regeneration, a commitment to external and institutional transformation of entire nations appears paramount in theonomic strategizing. Rejection of democratic and pluralistic principles of government in favor of an autocratic Christianity undermines the voluntary aspect of the New Testament's emphasis on internal and personal decision making. Establishment of "Christian nations" modeled upon an adaptation of Old Testament Israel will certainly not produce an environment in which becoming a Christian will in some way be "easier." If this were the case, there would be no rebellion of "Gog" and "Magog"--comprised of so many people that they are said to be "like the sand on the seashore"--at the conclusion of the millennial reign of Christ (see Revelation 20:7-10).

Reconstructionist missiology is thus flawed, and Evangelical Christians would do well to prepare themselves to defend the more biblical view of missions that they have espoused since the days of William Carey's *Enquiry*. To adopt the Theonomic view of the Great Commission would only serve to sidetrack Christians from the true task left to them by Jesus, a task that is already sufficiently daunting without the addition of sub-biblical requirements regarding external and institutional matters.

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