

AN HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF CHRISTIAN RECONSTRUCTIONISM

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Christian Reconstructionism is a complex movement of neo-Puritan scholars and evangelical Calvinist theology. Drawing history and the Scriptures together, Reconstructionists attempt to combine a dominion-oriented, postmillennial understanding of theonomy with various historical examples of anti-Erastian church-state structures. The goal of the movement is to integrate every aspect of American life into a consistent world view based upon the abiding validity of the Old Testament Law in exhaustive detail. Spearheaded by the Chalcedon Foundation of Vallecito, California, proponents of this movement desire to counter the ever-increasing influence of secular humanism in America today.

D. Kelly, former editor of *The Journal of Christian Reconstructionism*, summarizes the position of the movement in America in this way:

Evangelical, conservative Christians are starting to offer an effective challenge to the established secular humanism which reigns in all the major institutions of our time by returning to a new medievalism and a new catholicity of faith and service. We evangelical Protestants have often been so critical... of Medieval Catholicism that we have sadly failed to appreciate some of [its] very great strengths. We have tended to forget that at its best, the Western Medieval Church was a radically caring institution. It built hospitals, orphanages, universities, libraries, and poor houses; it caused legislation and governmental institutions in the countries of Western Europe to be Christianized... We evangelical Protestants in the United States... are now trying to return to some of the best elements of our Medieval Christian and Catholic heritage in order to make the love of God the Father, the uplifting and transforming presence of the Holy Spirit, and the glorious and liberating salvation of the Lord Jesus Christ a powerful reality to the needy men and women in the secular society of our time.¹

This religio-political phenomenon is related intimately with the New Religious Right, yet the two groups are not to be identified as the same movement. Less sensational than the more prominent political organizations, Reconstruction is nevertheless a movement which exerts tremendous influence on the political attitudes of Christians at the grassroots level. Ideas which have been foundational to Reconstruction for three decades are only now emerging in popular periodicals, the pulpits of many "megachurches," and the political rhetoric of most "evangelical" candidates. Reconstruction is a serious attempt to provide intellectuals and activists a "biblical" alternative for cultural reform. Labeled by *Newsweek* as "the think tank of the Religious Right,"² the Chalcedon Foundation has broadcast its message to a growing audience in an attempt to find and prepare Christian leaders who will be qualified to step in and reconstruct the presently collapsing world order of humanistic societal institutions.

With a view toward the Pentateuch as the guidebook for a theocratic society, Reconstruction promotes the optimistic position that Christian principles and institutions have the possibility of earthly victory. The question is one of dominion. Reconstruction is dedicated to the fulfillment of the cultural mandate presented in Gen 1:28—to subdue the earth to the glory of God. Ultimate victory (as seen in Isaiah 2, 65, 66) will come when Christians rediscover their intellectual heritage and reinstitute the Mosaic absolutes which properly structure a harmonious society. The motto of Reconstruction is best expressed in Prov. 29:18, "Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he."

¹ D. Kelly, "The Present Struggle for Christian Reconstruction in the United States," *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 9 (1982-83): 23.

² D. M Alpern, "The Right: A House Divided?; *Newsweek* (February 2,1981) 60.

Philosophically, the movement looks to the presuppositional apologetics of Cornelius Van Til for its understanding of truth and reality. While Van Til was personally opposed to the Reconstruction agenda, his thought and theological contribution is revered by Reconstructionists as "life-transforming and world-transforming" in scope and of "Copernican dimensions" in historical significance.³ The point of this school of thought rests upon ones presupposed understanding of truth. One's faith in ultimate truth is not subject to historical or scientific investigation. Issues of final importance are determined not by empirical deduction but by the adoption of a presuppositional frame of reference. This reference point, for the Christian, is the Bible.

Accordingly, no sense may be made of reality apart from this framework. Isolated facts are observable but ultimately unfathomable in any rational sense apart from the Bible. For the Reconstructionist, "Without the Bible, every fact from atoms to man is unrelated to all others."⁴ When applied to government, education, economics, or any other human endeavor, this principle promotes the Reconstruction mindset that interprets every detail of God's textbook for life, the Bible, as abidingly relevant. Accordingly, every sphere of existence must be brought in subjection to and consistency with the Bible which consists *primarily* of the Mosaic laws and their implications for daily life in this fallen world.

Reconstruction is hardly a new development on the American religious scene despite its seemingly recent notoriety. While its following continues to grow, Reconstructionist thought has been developed by a hardcore intelligentsia, fashioned after several carefully selected historical models, and promulgated by a frustrated faction of theological and political conservatives. An understanding of its historical development is vital to any analysis of Reconstruction as an ideology.

Leaders

Several organizations across America contribute to the advance of Christian Reconstructionism, but the real leadership of the movement rests with three men who provide the inspiration and intellectual framework for the crusade. These men, R. J. Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen, and Gary North, all hold earned doctorates: Rushdoony in educational philosophy, Bahnsen in philosophy, and North in economics. Each one has made a contribution of singular importance to Reconstruction through writings, debates, and organizational development.

R.J. Rushdoony is the white-haired patriarch of the movement. Of Armenian heritage, he boasts an unbroken family line of nearly two thousand years. He stands as the latest minister in a continuous succession of fathers and sons or nephews who have served as pastors from the early fourth century to the present. Armenia was the first nation to accept Christianity as the state religion, about A.D. 300.⁵ This state church broke away from both Roman Catholic and Orthodox branches of Christianity in A.D. 451 because Armenian Christians refused to accept the orthodox Creed of Chalcedon.⁶

When Calvinist missionaries arrived in the nineteenth century, a debate ensued over the doctrine of Christ. Rushdoony's family accepted the Calvinistic view which became a dissenting church. Given this family heritage, one can understand Reconstructions emphasis upon Chalcedonian Christology as the cornerstone of authentic Christianity. Rushdoony argues that the Chalcedon definition of Christology is the "foundation of Western liberty" since, in his interpretation, it places all human institutions under the direct mandates of explicit Christian revelation.⁷

Further insight into the sociological background of Rushdoony's Reconstructionist thought comes from an awareness of the exhaustive literalness characteristic of Armenian biblical exegesis. Even into the modern period

³ R .Clapp, "Democracy as Heresy," Christianity Today (February 20, 1987) 18 .

⁴ Ibid

⁵ R Clapp, "The Armenian Connection," Christianity Today (February 20, 1987) 22.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Clapp, "Heresy: 22.

in Armenia, the Old Testament sacrifices are observed in a Christian form. Animal sacrifices are no longer seen as atoning activities but rather as memorials to the sacrifice of Christ. Even so, the portions are divided biblically between the pastor and the pilgrim.⁸

Born in New York City in 1916, Rushdoony was educated at the University of California (B.S., M.A.), the Pacific School of Religion, and Valley Christian University (Ph.D.). He worked with Chinese youth in San Francisco and was a missionary to the Paiute and Shoshone Indians for about nine years. He then pastored several Presbyterian churches.⁹

Rushdoony currently directs the Chalcedon Foundation, an organization founded in 1965 and devoted to the spread of Reconstructionism through publication of a journal and coordination of the legal and political activities of its adherents. A prolific writer, Rushdoony entered the religio-political limelight in 1959 with the publication of *By What Standard*, an early presentation of Van Til's presuppositional principles. Some thirty other volumes have followed, including his controversial and influential tome *The Institutes of Biblical Law* in 1973.

His first books were not overtly Reconstructionist and earned him a reputation as a thoughtful observer of the American scene. However, *The Institutes*, a massive two-volume work, gave new impetus to Rushdoony's philosophy. As a systematized attempt to apply the Ten Commandments to American society, it arrested the attention of the evangelical scholarly community and marked a turning point in the Reconstructionist movement. A Presbyterian theologian, Rushdoony was and is a self-acknowledged theocrat in the Calvinist tradition. As the spiritual and intellectual inspiration of the entire Reconstructionist movement, Rushdoony's importance may not be overestimated.

Greg Bahnsen is the most scholarly of the three men. He may be characterized as a systematic thinker and a painstaking logician. Considered by some to be the most thoughtful of the Reconstructionists, he reportedly read some of Rushdoony's works as a young boy. He became a candidate for the ministry in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church at age 16, and he was the first student at Westminster Theological Seminary to finish both the Master of Divinity and Master of Theology degrees within three years.

With a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Southern California, Bahnsen taught for a time at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. Said to have been Van Til's most brilliant student,¹⁰ his reputation rests upon the publication of the extensive work *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*. The criticism and controversy of this book may have led to his resignation from Reformed Seminary. A one-time associate of Rushdoony at the Chalcedon Foundation, Bahnsen now pastors an Orthodox Presbyterian congregation in southern California and is dean of the graduate school of a local teachers college.

Gary North may be fairly labeled the most acerbic Reconstructionist of the triumvirate. Another prolific author, he has written on a variety of subjects other than economics. Also a former associate of Rushdoony, North currently heads the Institute for Christian Economics in Tyler, Texas. His zealotry has found expression in several ways. North served on the congressional staff of former Texas Republican Ron Paul during an eight-month interim term in Congress in 1976. Paul went on to become the 1988 presidential candidate of the Libertarian Party.

Further reflecting the extent of his radical political attitudes, North has extensive ties to the "survivalist movement" in America. It has been suggested that North chose the somewhat isolated location of Tyler because of his belief in the eventual downfall of the American economy.

While serving as editor of the *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, he printed several survivalist articles, including a "theology" of survivalism based on the model of Noah preparing the ark to escape the flood.

⁸ R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1973) 782.

⁹ M.D. Philbeck, "An Interview with R. J. Rushdoony," *The Counsel of Chalcedon* (October, 1983) 12.

¹⁰ T. D. Ice, "An Evaluation of Theonomic Neopostmillennialism" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (July-September, 1988) 284, n.17.

In his 1986 book *Government By Emergency*, North advises:

“Every family should try to make the following purchases (starting at top):

- \$500 face value worth of silver US. dimes
- A six month s supply of dehydrated food
- A home water filtration unit
- Water storage facilities (5 gallon collapsible units)
- Chemical toilet
- Kerosene heater and lights
- Survival stove or cooking device
- Fire extinguishers (car and home)
- At least one .45 Colt automatic pistol
- A 30.06 or .308 rifle with at least a 4x scope
- A 12-gauge shotgun (pump action)
- Ammunition for all guns (500 "rounds" [shots] for each weapon)
- .22 long-rifle ammunition (10,000 rounds)
- Air rifle (not B.B. gun)
- Reloading equipment
- A high quality (\$200+) first-aid kit, plus manual
- A battery-operated short-wave radio
- A citizens-band radio (40 channels)
- Lubricants for all equipment (business and personal)
- 50 pounds of one-pound cans (or jars) of coffee (barter)
- 100 6-ounce tins of cigarette tobacco (barter), plus a cigarette rolling machine
- 20 pounds of inexpensive pipe tobacco (barter)
- One case of expensive whiskey (barter)
- One case of other expensive liquors (barter)
- 10 one ounce gold coins (South African Krugerrand)
- 20 quarter-ounce coins (one-quarter ounce Krugerrand)
- 30 Mexican 2-peso gold coins 5 U.S.
- \$20 gold pieces (St. Gaudens)

Whenever possible, make all purchases in cash. This leaves fewer records. It is a good rule of thumb that the fewer records you leave of items to be stored for future use, the safer you are.”¹¹ Furthermore, “[y]ou need a shotgun Get the shortest barrel legal, 20 inches. It is a real crowd subdue”¹²

To say the least, such sentiment is unusual for a postmillennial optimist.

Another North distinctive is the personal invective for which much of his writing has become known. His stinging literary assaults are characterized by a gleeful attacking of his ideological foes. He is up -front, blunt, and generally abrasive. He does not hesitate to suggest severe penalties for those who dare to disagree with his views, once advocating heresy trials for pastors who supported variations of theistic evolution. Writing in the introduction to R. Thoburn s book *The Children Trap*, North likens public schools to "whorehouses" and then remarks: “All right, I am exaggerating. I admit it. Whorehouses really aren't like public schools. There is a fundamental difference between whorehouses and public schools: whorehouses aren't tax-supported.”¹³

¹¹ G. North, *Government By Emergency* (Ft. Worth: American Bureau of Economic Research, 1983) 275-76. Appropriately, North's picture seldom appears in print because he endorses "low profile living."

¹² Ibid, 278

¹³ R L Thoburn, *The Children Trap: The Biblical Blueprint for Education* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1986) xiv.

One additional note must be mentioned. North is Rushdoony's son-in-law, but the two men have not spoken since a disagreement in 1981. Arguing over an article submitted for publication in *the Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, North approved the article's thesis that the Passover blood on the doorpost bore symbolic overtones of virginity. Rushdoony believed that position reeked of a fertility cult. Chronic tensions exploded and the men parted company. While Rushdoony remains the mainstream representative of Reconstruction, North became more militant in both his biblical exegesis and his philosophical tactics for dominion.

While working toward a single goal, each of these men leads a distinct branch of Reconstruction. Generally, all followers of the movement identify with one of these three figures. However, a second tier of leadership is rapidly developing within the Reconstructionist movement. David Chilton, another prolific writer and former colleague of North, is considered the leading spokesman for the cause in the field of eschatology. He has published a major work on Reconstructionist postmillennialism, *Paradise Restored: A Biblical Theology of Dominion*, and a postmillennial commentary on Revelation, *Days of Vengeance*. An outspoken opponent of R. J. Sider, Chilton wrote *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators* as a response to Sider's work, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*.

Other proponents include J. Kickasola, professor of international affairs in Regent University's School of Public Policy, who teaches from a theonomic perspective. J. C. Morecraft III pastored Chalcedon Presbyterian Church in Atlanta and was an unsuccessful Republican Congressional candidate in 1986.

Author and conference leader Gary DeMar has become a visible leader in recent years with a three-volume workbook on Reconstructionism, *God and Government*, and several well-publicized debates with dispensational critics. He heads the Institute of Christian Government in Atlanta. Other ascending lights in the movement include scholar James Jordan, who pastors a Reconstructionist church in Tyler, and R. Sutton, a Dallas Theological Seminary graduate, who was recently elected president of Philadelphia Theological Seminary, a Reformed Episcopal seminary. Sutton's book *That You May Prosper* is viewed by some Reconstructionists as a foundational work on covenants.

Historical Models

An important element of Reconstruction is its dependence upon historical precedents. All church-state teachings of the movement rely heavily on examples of anti-Erastianism. The heroes within this theocratic tradition include Constantine the Great, John Calvin, John Knox, Oliver Cromwell, and the Puritan fathers of colonial New England. Also cited as proper role models are American founding fathers such as John Witherspoon. Rushdoony has outlined this tradition in several books, but especially in *The Foundations of Social Order* (1968) and *The One and the Many* (1971).

The first book traces the concept of liberty as originating in the Apostle's Creed and finding historical expression at Nicea, Chalcedon, and Constantinople through the Millennium and the resurrection of the dead. The second book traces events rather than an idea. Approval is given to historical instances wherein men attempt to follow and politically implement the explicit teachings of Christian revelation. Christian heroes are applauded while heresies are denounced. Occasional historical revisionism is justified as a corrective to the subtle humanism present in traditional explanations of historical events. A "Christian interpretation" of history provides insight into the true biblical heritage to which Reconstruction stands as heir.

The One and the Many is a comprehensive examination of the history of ideas as understood through the perspective of Christian presuppositionalism. This tendency to rewrite the "distorted" accounts of "secular humanist" historians provides Reconstruction with a logically consistent interpretation of historical facts, thereby providing the precedent and rationale for contemporary theonomic actions in the realms of social and political involvement.¹⁴

¹⁴ D. A. Rausch and D. E. Chismar, "The New Puritans and Their Theonomic Paradise," *Christian Century* 3 (August 10, 1983)

Reconstructionists cite with great reverence the progress toward dominion made in Calvin's Geneva. Calvin taught that church and state, although separate and performing different functions in society, must both be accountable to God and serve as His agents. He called for rulers to purge their lands of "idolatrous practices" and said that strife and peril would plague countries that disobeyed this edict. Citing Calvin's words, Reconstructionists argue that problems in American society such as drug abuse, crime, and the spread of AIDS are evidences of God's displeasure with the United States civil government.

The greatest theocratic progress, however, was made by the English and colonial American Puritans. In fact, the Puritan application of the Law to society both fascinates and inspires modern theologians. Many of the articles in the *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* attempt to prove the correctness of the Puritan approach to theocratic government. Claiming "bad press" from "secular humanist" historians, Reconstructionists rehabilitate the questionable aspects of Puritan culture and present Massachusetts Bay Colony as the nearest expression of the kingdom of God to this point in history.

Rausch and Chismar explain:

To theologians the Puritan movement used biblical law as a tool of dominion—an attempt to make the Old Testament case laws the basis of their systematic reconstruction of all areas of life; indeed, to build a Christian (i.e., Puritan) society. Their failures, such as the Salem witchcraft trials, are regarded as mere violations of otherwise sound biblical principles.¹⁵

The demise of the Puritan expression of society and culture is not due to any limitations or shortcomings in the Puritan system itself. Rather, second-generation Puritans fell victim to an incipient Pietism which internalized religion and surrendered dominion of the world to the non-elect. This occurrence explains the necessity for the existence of contemporary Reconstructionism. Pietism is termed "the heresy of the faithful" by Rushdoony, and North writes, "[b]ecause pietism is devoid of a concept of external, Christian social and economic law, it is impotent to reconstruct the world according to God's ethical requirements."¹⁶

Accordingly, Reconstructionists consider themselves to be "neo-Puritans" or the true heirs to the religious and political heritage responsible for the successful founding of this nation.¹⁷ Only the recovery of these lost values will arrest the moral decline and societal demise of modern America. Consequently, Reconstructionists attack all perceived shortcomings of contemporary society with a vengeance, and their involvement in the political and social spheres reflects their conviction that the establishment of the kingdom of God in the world today depends upon the successful reconstruction of a godly political order.

Contemporary Influence

Given their mission, it is to be expected that Reconstructionists would attempt to influence all areas of public policy. This is indeed the case, and their success has been remarkable despite an amazingly low profile. In fact, some of the more visible political activities of fundamentalists today have at their origin the inspiration of Reconstructionist teachings. For example, the publication of *The Genesis Flood* in 1961 by Henry M. Morris and John Whitcomb launched "scientific creationism" as a viable movement. That influential book was published by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, a newly-created Calvinist publishing house with strong ties to the Reconstructionist faction within Orthodox Presbyterianism.

Soon thereafter, the writings of Rushdoony began to influence the thought of leading fundamentalist apologists such as Francis Schaeffer. Schaeffer rarely gave credit to his Reconstructionist sources, but he utilized many of

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ See S. D. Johnson and J. B. Tamney, *The Political Role of Religion in the United States* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986) 104-11.

their ideas, including Rushdoony's charge, made in 1965, that the cause of society's ills was to be found in a humanist conspiracy.

North and fellow Reconstructionist David Chilton argue that Schaeffer relied heavily on Rushdoony's writings in his books but never acknowledged the debt. His son Franky Schaeffer writes books with a similar flavor, including *Bad News for Modern Man*. Unlike his father though, the younger Schaeffer recognizes the theonomic influences in his work.

Other prominent authors influenced by this movement include J. Whitehead and J. Loftin. Whitehead is president of the Rutherford Institute, a Virginia-based legal aid group that often takes up religious rights cases. His popular book *The Second American Revolution* makes the case that the United States was founded as a Christian nation but has now drifted from that ideal. The works of Rushdoony and North are prominent in the notes of this book.

Rushdoony also wrote the introduction to Whitehead's first book, *The Separation Illusion*, an attack on strict separation of church and state. J. Loftin is a Washington-based columnist who occasionally writes for the Chalcedon Foundation. His column regularly appears in *The Washington Times*, said to have been Ronald Reagan's favorite newspaper.

Providing a body of sophisticated political philosophy, theonomists have influenced fundamentalists almost from the beginning of the recent era of political activism. G. North, in fact, takes full credit for the rise of the New Religious Right by claiming that when Rushdoony's "fusion of theology and conservative social and political concerns finally became available, the fundamentalists could then develop the intellectual leadership needed to actualize their movement."¹⁸ Inroads into mainline evangelicalism may be seen in the increased demand for Reconstructionist literature and speakers on Christian college campuses and in the extended hearing being given to their proposals. G. J. Moes, editor of the *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, offered the following evaluation of a worldwide Christian gathering in 1988: One of the most noteworthy and heartening observations emerging from the Lord of the Nations conference was the repeated report that throughout the world key Christian pastors, scholars and change agents are coming to a realization of reconstructionist, theonomic and dominion principles. Many attributed their insights to the work of Chalcedon and its founder, Dr. R. J. Rushdoony.¹⁹

J. Muether, former librarian at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, commented that while doing research on theonomy, he found the movement's influence within Reformed theological circles to be "far more pervasive" than he had anticipated.²⁰ Reconstructionists also have ties to many independent Baptist churches and certain prominent charismatic ministries.²¹ In fact, the increasing involvement of contemporary charismatics in the Reconstructionist agenda is a significant new development.²² Claiming twenty million charismatic Reconstructionists worldwide, Rushdoony points to an optimistic (postmillennial) view of the future as the link between the groups.

Doggedly opposed to Pentecostalism in the early days of the Reconstructionist movement,²³ theonomic leaders are now actively courting charismatics. Leaders from several branches of Pentecostalism have associated themselves with the Reconstructionist agenda. From within the "positive confession" branch, pejoratively labeled

¹⁸ Clapp, "Heresy," 21

¹⁹ G. J. Moes, "The Lord of the Nations," Chalcedon Report (July, 1988) 9.

²⁰ R. Frame, "The Theonomic Urge," Christianity Today (April 21, 1989) 39.

²¹ Clapp, "Heresy," 21.

²² For a more complete discussion, see House and Ice, 367-96.

²³ *Ibid.*, 368. Rushdoony has said, "If the law is denied as the means of sanctification, then, logically, the only alternative is Pentecostalism, with its antinomian and unbiblical doctrine of the Spirit. Pentecostalism does, however, represent a very logical outgrowth of antinomian theology" (Rushdoony, *The Institutes*, 1.307). Further, "In Arminian churches, and especially the so-called 'holiness' churches (Pentecostal and others), sanctification is associated with various emotional binges which are far closer to the methods of ancient Baal worship, which, in its extreme, went into cutting and even castrating oneself... Because of its radical antinomianism, modernism is often congenial to various aspects of Pentecostalism, speaking in tongues in particular. In all these manifestations, man's way is paramount" (*The Institutes*, 1.522-53).

"name it and claim it" by critics, Gary North boasts of support from Robert Tilton. In a critique of Dave Hunt's *The Seduction of Christianity*, North states:

Mr. Hunt understands far better than most observers what is really taking place. Indeed, it has already begun: bringing together the post-millennial Christian reconstructionists and the "positive confession" charismatics. It began when Robert Tilton's wife read Gary DeMar's *God and Government* in late 1983, and then persuaded her husband to invite a group of reconstructionists to speak before 1,000 "positive confession" pastors and their wives at a January 1984 rally sponsored by Rev. Tilton's church. The all-day panel was very well received. Mr. Hunt sees that if this fusion of theological interests takes place, then the day of unchallenged dominance by the old-timed dispensational eschatology is about to come to an end. A new fundamentalism is appearing.²⁴

North defends (and shares) the theology of "positive confessionism" which declares that God does not want his people to be poor and sick. This merger, in his words, "represents one of the most fundamental realignments in US. Protestant church history"²⁵

Another branch of Pentecostalism heavily influenced by theonomy is "kingdom theology" personified in Bishop E. Paulk, pastor of the 12,000-member Chapel Hill Harvester Church in Atlanta. Gary North serves as an outside advisor to one of the church's ministries. Paulk, in his book *Held in the Heavens Until...*, argues that Christ cannot come back to the earth until a certain amount of dominion is achieved by the Church. Tommy Ice points out that this theological perspective "appears to be a blend of postmillennialism with the old Pentecostal error often called the 'Manifest Sons of God' teaching."²⁶

Other key charismatic leaders moving in dominion theology circles include B. Mumford of the shepherding movement and B. Weiner of Maranatha Campus Ministries. Devotedly postmillennial, Weiner was one of the first student leaders to begin taking his college-age charges to Reconstructionist conferences.

The contemporary influence of Christian Reconstruction is related to the existence of a dedicated core of writers and thinkers, a seemingly comprehensive biblical worldview, a growing publishing endeavor, the overwhelming uncertainties of the modern world, and the parallel rise of the charismatic movement. Altogether, Reconstructionist name recognition is minimal, yet the impact of their ideals on the American religious and political scenes has touched inestimable numbers of conservative Christians at the grassroots level of society. As embodied in its three main leaders, Christian Reconstruction is currently exerting an almost unseen influence upon American politics and education. As with any other historical movement, this group deserves the close scrutiny and careful examination of all those for whom personal rights and religious liberty are dear. When any movement offers its viewpoint in the "marketplace of ideas," it expects to be evaluated on the content of its message and the consistency of its reasoning.

Reconstruction is, first, fundamentally unsound at its most basic assumption: the theonomic conviction that the OT laws, more or less as they stand, can be transferred to the present day. The entire Reconstructionist system stands or falls with the acceptability of their biblical hermeneutic and their historical method. Opposing the common interpretation of Israel as a unique theocratic state, Rushdoony and others attempt to prove God's intention that all nations stand in a theocratic relationship to Him. John Frame, professor of theology at Westminster Theological Seminary (California), applauds the Reconstruction affirmation of biblical authority, but he insightfully remarks, "one suspects at times that although to Rushdoony Scripture is not a 'textbook of physics or biology' it is indeed a

²⁴ G. North, *Unholy Spirits: Occultism and New Age Humanism* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1986) 388-89.

²⁵ Quoted in House and Ice, 369.

²⁶ House and Ice, 392, n. 23. Mainstream Reconstruction, however, should not be identified with this heretical teaching.

textbook of statecraft in the sense that it includes all the statutes that will ever be needed for any sort of culture."²⁷

The truth is that the OT orientation of Reconstruction does not provide the clearly defined societal structure that may be supposed. The proper solutions to many ethical questions and the correct applications of certain laws are issues that severely divide Reconstruction's ranks. The notable quality that so attracts conservative Christians to the movement, that is, simple biblical solutions to complex issues, is the very quality which Reconstruction does not possess. For example, Rushdoony advocates and follows kosher dietary laws, a position Bahnsen repudiates.

Christianity Today writer R. Clapp outlines other unanswered questions:

Should illegitimate children and eunuchs be denied the rights of full citizenship? Should grooms resume the payment of dowries to their bride's father? Should Christians allow the use of lie detectors, or should they oppose them, as Rushdoony does, on the basis of biblical hedges against self-incrimination?²⁸

The point is that several hundred other such questions remain, and any attempt to provide answers would create "a second encyclopedic Talmud, and ... foster hordes of 'scribes' with competing judgments, in a society of people who are locked on the law's fine points rather than living by its spirit."²⁹

The letter of the Law then takes priority over the spirit of the Law. Any attempt to bind the Christian conscience to the entire Mosaic system in its exhaustive detail must be considered patently anti-Christian. Such Judaizing tendencies make sanctification a wholly external process which exceeds in legalism even the most rigid Puritan conception of "visible" sainthood. The Reconstructionist union of theonomy and postmillennial eschatology has created an unhealthy expectation that the structure of the Jewish state will be reinstated at some future time. A New Testament Christian, while acknowledging the abiding validity of the moral law (i.e., the Ten Commandments), can never welcome a return of the Commonwealth of Israel.

Historical Weaknesses of Christian Reconstructionism

Criticism of the theonomic perspective leads naturally to an evaluation of "theocratic totalitarianism" as a viable political structure for contemporary America. Theocratic government is a logical step for any Christian who denies the doctrine of general revelation or common grace as expressed throughout Church history since the time of Augustine. Reconstructionists deny that any basis presently exists for constructive political discourse between Christians and non-Christians. The only option is a biblically-based, Christian-operated system of government. The choice presented between two extremes, secular or Christian, is a false one. Surely the Bible must serve as the foundation of the Christian's worldview, but one who accepts an absolute antithesis between Christian and non-Christian thought neglects to acknowledge, first, the degree to which Christians themselves are hindered by sin and error and, second, the degree to which God's common grace allows substantial room for communication and cooperation among all people in daily life.

The goal of Christian Reconstructionism is the inauguration of the Kingdom of God in human history. Historical attempts to accomplish this feat are presented as evidence in favor of Reconstruction. North and DeMar, in a recent survey of the movement's ideas, assert:

²⁷ Clapp, "Heresy; 22-23.

²⁸ Ibid., 23.

²⁹ Ibid. North responds in a published rebuttal in 1987 entitled "Honest Reporting As Heresy." He remarks: Ah, yes: "living by the spirit." A noble goal, indeed. Precisely the goal of the Anabaptist revolutionaries who tore Europe apart in Luther's day.... What Mr. Clapp fails to recognize is that it is judicial complexity that restrains tyranny. It keeps the tyrannical state at bay. It is careful debate that keeps societies from excess in the name of some "simple" ideal. Life is difficult, though not impossible; the Bible is complex though not self-contradictory." The entire text of North's response to Clapp is reprinted as Appendix B in North, *Westminster's Confession*, 317-41. Despite this admission of complexity within Reconstructionist thought, the perception of easy answers and simple solutions remains (and is often fostered in the movement's literature). The result of simple application of Mosaic law is, in fact, a Judaizing legalism.

A steady confirmation of the abiding validity of God's law can be found with the earliest of the church fathers and continuing to our day.... History is with the Reconstructionists as they advocate a return to God's law as the standard for righteous living, for the individual in self-government. Our critics ignore most of this evidence. Why?³⁰

The answer to their query is that the historical evidence is neither overwhelming nor positive, both characteristics regularly assumed in Reconstructionist writings. The revered models simply did not succeed. DeMar, however, attempts to clarify the standards by which the models are to be judged. Speaking of the recurring attempt to implement theocracy throughout Church history, he responds: But was it a failure? Certainly it was if you compare its past results with Utopian dreams of a sinless world. But it was a resounding success if you compare it to today's decadent culture. It is because of the abandonment of Christian Reconstructionist distinctives that our nation is sinking in the moral abyss.³¹

A review of the practical effects of this "resounding success" is in order.

The Genevan experiment under John Calvin represents a continuing attempt to sociologically institutionalize the doctrine of justification by faith. Three inherent weaknesses (which may be recognized in Reconstruction) emerge.

First, the refusal to distinguish between religious discipline and civil law enforcement produces a type of official public piety, an attitude which identifies Christian behavior as a civic duty. Such moral behavior is necessary to the survival of any society, but this conscious fusion of sanctification and citizenship produces cultural Christians as opposed to biblical saints. The Christian life is progressively understood not as a spiritual relationship, but as a moral system of conduct. While assisting the state in the regulation of social behavior, the churches are given over to a perpetual ministry of promoting proper behavior without the necessary regenerative action by God's Spirit.

This effective denial of the need for and power of the Holy Spirit produces the second weakness: the natural decline of evangelistic activity by the churches. Evangelization of the world is sidetracked by an all-consuming this-worldly focus. The kingdom within is displaced by the political structures of the external kingdom. Persuasion is set aside in favor of legislation.

Finally, the success of Genevan government under Calvin's system required the purposeful and systematic decimation of democratic procedures in civil government. North attempts to salve his critic's fears of the anti-democratic sentiment in his writings by promising a postmillennial consensus before democracy is eliminated.³² He even claims to approve of democracy if it is the Genevan or Massachusetts type.³³ Despite such assurances, the evidence from Geneva indicates an inherent tendency within dominion theology to centralize coercive control so as to prevent the depravity of the common man from gaining ascendancy.

While the rationalization behind Geneva included a recognition of man's total depravity, the inherent weakness of Cromwell's Protectorate involves an essential denial of that very doctrine—at least as it related to the ruling saints. Centralization of authority occurs as a safeguard against immature or theologically unacceptable leadership, yet the nature of man afflicts the chosen few as well. The implicit arrogance of Parliament during the *Interregnum* reveals the extent of this inherent debility. Absolute infallibility in biblical interpretation is not a possibility in this life, yet the natural tendency of theonomy is toward an attitude that expresses such presumption. Based on an

³⁰ G. North and G. DeMar, "Christian Reconstructionism: What It Is, What It Isn't" (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991) 152-54.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 183. Also see Bahnsen and Gentry, 61-63. In an attempt to counter the historical criticisms of House and Ice, Bahnsen attacks the prejudices of the authors, the historical generalizations made by them, and the historical "ghosts" of dispensationalism. None of this is a sufficient response to an historical analysis such as is summarized here and provided more completely in M. Gabbert, "An Historical Evaluation of Christian Reconstructionism Based on the Inherent Inviability of Selected Theocratic Models," Ph.D. dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, TX, 1991.

³² North, *Political Polytheism*, 649.

³³ North, Westminster's Confession, 318-23.

invulnerable confidence in theonomic applications to modern life, Reconstruction suffers from an oppressive arrogance.

Examples of this attitude abound in the remarks of the movement's leaders. North has already been recognized as the most radical of the movement's leaders. He also qualifies as the harshest critic of those who disagree with him. For example, concerning the numbers of economists who are Christians but who would not agree with North's viewpoint, he has declared them to be "ostensible Christian scholars, who are in fact outright socialists and Marxists hiding behind a few out-of-context Bible quotes."³⁴ He rationalizes such vitriolic language by claiming polemical license. In an introductory section entitled "Why Are You So Mean?," North surveys the Reformation pattern of verbal abuse as justification for his own rhetoric.³⁵

In the Publisher's Foreword of *House Divided*, he explains:

"I have tried to model my polemical writings after Martin Luther's tracts against his theological opponents had he confined his criticisms to a strictly academic defense of his 95 theses, he would not be remembered by anyone today except a handful of specialists in church history, who would probably be Roman Catholics. Had Luther persisted stubbornly in a purely academic strategy, he would eventually have been burned at the stake. But he understood the possibilities for radical institutional change that were offered by the printing press, and he pioneered the polemical pamphlet. You can find few examples in subsequent history that match Luther's tracts for invective, vitriol, and contempt for one's opponents. I am only a pale imitation of Luther in this regard. Yet the heirs of Luther's Reformation click their tongues and shake their heads at my style, as if they did not owe their very freedom to criticize me to the social and political effects of Luther's pamphlets. They act as though they believe that the Reformation was little more than a scheduled debate in the faculty lounge."³⁶

The most disturbing theological aspect of this attitude is the Reconstructionist predilection to accuse all opponents of being antinomians. The implication is that any person who rejects the Reconstructionist schema stands in opposition to God Himself. Rushdoony dismisses opponents with one broad generalization: A central characteristic of the churches and of modern preaching and biblical teaching is antinomianism, an anti-law position. The antinomian believes that faith frees the Christian from the law so that he is not outside the law, but is rather dead to the law.³⁷

With no distinctions made between the moral, ceremonial, and judicial laws, even the Apostle Paul could be convicted by Rushdoony's standards. This type of fortress mentality will prevent any future dialogue between Christians concerned with influencing their world and Reconstructionists.³⁸

The combination of self-proclaimed infallibility in interpretation and the loss of a sense of man's sinfulness leads inexorably to the creation of a spiritual oligarchy within the theocratic state. This is the lesson of Massachusetts Bay. In founding a new system of government, John Winthrop formulated an exacting socio-political rationale based directly upon the Old Testament. The concrete result, however, was often less than Christian, and weaknesses within the very fabric of the society led to its demise. The fall of the New England theocracy may be traced to the full flowering of certain ideas present from the beginning, namely the individualism inherent in congregational polity and the determination characteristic of Separatism.

³⁴ Rausch and Chismar, 713.

³⁵ North, *Westminster's Confession*, 6-19.

³⁶ Bahnsen and Gentry, xxxviii.

³⁷ Rushdoony, *Institutes*, 2-3. Further instances of Rushdoony's intemperate use of "antinomian" as a sneering epithet are documented in J. J. Frame, "The Institutes of Biblical Law: A Review Article," *Westminster Theological Journal* 38 (Winter 1976) 204, 215-16.

³⁸ House and Ice document internal criticisms of this pervasive Reconstructionist attitude as well (359-61).

As the zeal of the first generation dissipated, the prevalent spirit and method expressed itself in "the multiplication of orthodoxies and [the presence] of uncompromising and militant sects determined either to secede or to conquer."³⁹ Lack of interest in "jots and tittles" conspired with the budding American individualism to produce rampant dissent. As a result, greater coercion was necessary to protect godly society. R. B. Perry explains the resulting dilemma:

So long as agreement is generally prevalent, its enforcement upon the occasional backslider seems neither brutal nor intrusive; the agencies of enforcement are subject to no excessive strain. But when dissent is chronic and wholesale, the difficulties of its suppression become more evident. Careless lapses from faith can be corrected by intimidation, but a resolute conviction cannot be changed by force; it can only be denied outward expression and driven under the ground. Occasional deviations from the norm of conduct can be occasionally corrected, but to impose on a community a code of conduct at variance with its habits requires a perpetual inquisition. The sporadic dissent can be expelled from the community, but large-scale excommunication is self-destructive.⁴⁰

In order to wage this battle, the state requires assistance from the church; and the church invariably usurps the available political authority and presses it to the advantage of the "godly." The unrestrained attacks on religious liberty which result are historically demonstrable and recognizably present within Reconstruction.

Careful examination of the chosen historical models of Christian Reconstructionism reveals that the contemporary efforts of theonomists are severely hindered by inherited flaws: an antipathy toward democracy alongside a separatist mindset; a Reformed perspective of man working against an elitist claim to absolute truth; a zeal for God's law without an understanding of soul competency; a desire for public morality accompanied by a fear of religious liberty; and a millennial optimism paradoxically buttressed by a questionable historical methodology. The presence of these intrinsic defects could not be overcome in the historical antecedents of the movement. What then is the future of present efforts toward theocratic dominion?

Future of the Movement

Never far below the surface within Reconstruction is the millennial optimism which provides the movement's adherents with their sense of assured victory. This eschatological certainty also supplies a protection against despair and a framework by which apparent setbacks to the Kingdom may be interpreted. Accordingly, the strengths of Calvin, Cromwell, and the American Puritans are absorbed into Reconstructionist formulations of the future kingdom, while historical shortcomings are casually discarded as the unsure steps of an immature Church. Indeed, Bahnsen rejects all use of "present historical conditions" as a critique of Reconstruction's end result.⁴¹

House and Ice estimate from Chilton's prophetic time scale presented in *Paradise Restored* that the Reconstructionist agenda will not be completed for 36,000 more years.⁴² With this time frame available, failures in history can have no great significance.

However, one can rest assured that the victory is coming and it will be voluntarily implemented. North answers Clapp's criticisms by saying:

We Reconstructionists do not rely on human compulsion to override the intellectual objections of our opponents; we assume that God will bring His people to the proper view—Reconstructionism—in the same way that He converts sinners: by irresistible grace. The theocratic republic we believe in will be the

³⁹ Perry, 342.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 342-43.

⁴¹ Bahnsen and Gentry, 63.

⁴² House and Ice, 66.

product of centuries of godly labor, preaching, and self-government under God. It cannot be the work of an elitist coup d'tat.⁴³

North states that this long-term project involves current groundwork followed by comprehensive revival, followed, only then, by complete reconstruction of all human spheres of government.⁴⁴ Each step must build upon previous accomplishments. He warns against premature actions, which is apparently the cause of the historical abuses already seen (particularly the Puritan Revolution of 1638-60).⁴⁵

North cautions:

We do not want to create a prematurely revolutionary situation. We must wait patiently for the general public to begin to accept, in theory and in practice, the judicially binding nature of the Old Testament case laws before we attempt to tear down judicial institutions that still rely on natural law or public virtue. (I have in mind the U.S. Constitution.)⁴⁶

Since this is the case, Reconstructionists reject most criticism as unfair, inaccurate, or unnecessarily alarmist. North refers to the critics of Reconstruction as sufferers of "theocrapobia"—the fear of God's rulership.⁴⁷

He declares:

Humanist critics present Christians with a kind of mental image: a scarecrow that is locked in the stocks of Puritan New England. Every time a Christian walks by this scarecrow, a tape recorded message blares out: "Beware of theocracy! Beware of theocracy!" If the critics meant, "Beware of ecclesiocracy," meaning civil rule by the Institutional Church, they would have a valid point what "Beware of theocracy!" really means is "Beware of God's righteous rule!"⁴⁸

Yet, North and the others fail to see that this is the very point of the historical critique. Attempts at theocracy cannot help but devolve into ecclesiocracy. Historically, the fear is not of "God's righteous rule," but of "Gods righteous ones who rule." Theonomy has never been successfully instituted and there is no evidence beyond certain disputed millennial texts that it will ever be so. Based on the critical analysis of selected theocratic models, the historical conclusion is that Christian Reconstructionism will collapse under the weight of its own theological and intellectual presuppositions.

If Christian Reconstruction could be left to a postmillennial judgment in the future, it would not require extensive scrutiny by contemporary evangelicals. But vigilance is called for today. Contrary to the majority Reconstruction opinion, some adherents do, in fact, expect the realization of their goals soon. One Reconstructionist pastor, Everett Sileven, expects Reconstruction to occur in this century. He predicts that by the middle of this decade the economy will fail; soon thereafter, democracy, the IRS, and the American judicial system will crumble.⁴⁹

Bahnsen and Rushdoony downplay such comments and provide assurances that no violent upheavals (such as immediate institution of the death penalty for homosexuals) will occur because the wider society will never allow it. Clapp, with great insight, muses that "it is ironic, then, that [Bahnsen] relies on un-Reconstructed, godless society to curb the potential abuses of the incipient Reconstructed society."⁵⁰

⁴³ North, *Westminster's Confession*, 337-38.

⁴⁴ North, *Political Polytheism*, 610-11.

⁴⁵ North discusses this period in a section entitled "The Risk of Being Premature" in *ibid.*, 19-22.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 133. Cf. 558.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 582.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 583-84.

⁴⁹ Clapp, "Heresy"; 23.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

The first conclusion of anyone who studies Reconstruction should be that the movement is significant and deserves attention. The leaders are not charlatans, but scholars with impressive credentials. They offer a comprehensive theological system which effectively orders every phase of complex modern life. Reconstruction appeals to Christians frustrated by a society seemingly controlled by the "prince of this world." The desire for control is universal, and conservative Christians find in Reconstruction a sophisticated "biblical" program for societal conquest and political dominion. Once this is achieved, the millennium will be in place. Christians will be glorified and the non-elect will be ground under the heels of the righteous ones. This expectation is seldom actually verbalized, but Gary North gives some indication of the ultimate motivation of the movement when he explains the proper understanding of Christ's Sermon on the Mount. He suggests that the message of Matthew 5-7 was intended for a "captive" people, and that when Christians come to dominate a culture, they no longer need turn the other cheek to the aggressor but may "bust him in the chops."⁵¹ With this intention underlying all else that is advocated, Rausch and Chismar are correct in saying that "Christian theonomy ceases to be an illogical fad and becomes a dangerous movement."⁵²

The implications of dominion theology threaten not only non-Christians, but the basic religious liberty of other Christians as well. Christianity is not the monolithic structure that Reconstructionists present. For the theonomic perspective to triumph, all opposition (Christian and non-Christian) must be eliminated. Norman Geisler, former professor of theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, recognizes the pattern used by Reconstruction. The early appeal calls for religious liberty and Christian unity, while the ultimate goal is conformity and dominion. Geisler has stated, "[Reconstructionists] will allow freedom when it's necessary to reach the ultimate goal, but when it's reached there'll be no freedom for anyone except people who believe their way."⁵³ Such a prediction sounds the death knell for religious liberty and even the mere semblance of religious toleration.

Regarding the future, evangelicals should stand with Gamaliel: if Christian Reconstructionism is of God, it will succeed. If it is not of God, Christendom may see a replay of some of the sadder episodes from Church history. The historical signs portend ultimate failure for these neo-Puritans. The immediate future, however, seems to promise increasingly widespread influence for Reconstructionists among American evangelicals. The extent of this influence will depend upon the recognition of this movement's potential dangers by grassroots Americans who possess the power to prevent the steady decimation of treasured constitutional principles of government and church-state relations.

⁵¹ G. North, "In Defense of Biblical Bribery," in Rushdoony, *Institutes*, 846.

⁵² Rausch and Chismar, 715.

⁵³ N. Geisler, interview by B. Movers, *God and Politics: On Earth as It is in Heaven*, produced by G. Pratt and J. Falstad, 60 min., Public Affairs Television, Inc., 1987, videocassette.