

**Moses' Law for Modern Government:
The Intellectual and Sociological Origins
of the Christian Reconstructionist Movement**

A paper presented to the Social Science History Association
Atlanta, Georgia, USA
Saturday, October 15, 1994

by J. Ligon Duncan
Department of Systematic Theology
Reformed Theological Seminary
5422 Clinton Boulevard
Jackson, Mississippi 39209
USA
©1994 2nd edition ©1996

FOREWORD

This paper was originally prepared for a meeting of secular social and political scientists, and historians, all of whom shared some interest in the phenomenon of the "Christian right." I was invited by Roland Gunn of Georgetown University to participate on this panel at the SSHA. The paper is "generalist" in nature and attempts to help the secular social scientist understand what must seem to him like a bewildering world of civil thought. Much elaboration was required in the question and answer session following to explain, interpret, and elucidate points made in the presentation (particularly theological issues).

This paper is not a critique of Reconstructionism (although it contains critical interaction with the theory at points for the sake of comparison and contrast). I went to the panel viewing myself as a member of "the Christian Right" (from their perspective) trying to explain to them, as fairly and dispassionately as possible, the convictions of another branch of "the Christian Right."

This paper is unfortunately incomplete: missing the material which I presented orally on the sociological influences on Reconstructionism. As soon as that section is in orderly form and properly annotated, it will be made available to the general public. Nevertheless, the favorable response to the first edition of the paper suggested to us that we should press on with the publication of a second edition, even without the part on sociological influences. "On-Line" readers should note that this paper is available (sans notation) on the Internet's World Wide Web (**Premise II.5** [January 1995]:4. Uniform Resource Locator <http://www.usit.net/public/capo/premise/archive.html> or **Premise II.10** [December 1995]:4. Uniform Resource Locator <http://www.usit.net/public/capo/premise/archive.html>). Complete copies can be purchased from the Reformed Theological Seminary Bookstore, 5422 Clinton Boulevard, Jackson, MS, 39209, USA (Phone: 601-922-7382 or within the US 800-749-5770) or directly from Reformed Academic Press (Phone 864-233-8355 or FAX 864-271-1008).

I have elsewhere criticized Reconstruction in papers given at the Free Church College (Edinburgh, Scotland), Greenville Seminary (Greenville, SC) and Reformed Seminary (Jackson, MS and Charlotte, NC). These criticisms will, the Lord willing, be pulled together, and made coherent and available by the end of summer 1996 in the form of a book: *What About Theonomy?*. I have now had opportunity to interact with some criticisms from the late Dr. Greg Bahnsen who graciously reviewed the material some months prior to his death. Still, the paper you have before you is only being distributed at the request of interested parties.

Incidentally, for those who may be interested, my own position on Christian political theory is the historic, Reformed, Scottish, Puritan view found in the Westminster Confession and faithfully preserved to this day in the Free Church of Scotland. Since discussion of this matter has now occupied the church courts of the Free Church, I send out this revised edition of the paper in hopes that my esteemed brethren in that communion will "hold fast their confession" rather than opt for a distinctly post-Kantian and, frankly, American view of Christian engagement with society.

Any words of criticism or suggestions for improvement of the paper will be greatly appreciated, and may be sent to the author in care of the Seminary.

J. Ligon Duncan, PhD
John R. Richardson Professor of Systematic Theology
Editorial Director, Reformed Academic Press
April 16, 1996

Introduction

For many years now, students and professors in seminaries affiliated with evangelical denominations,¹ as well as church members and pastors have puzzled over the Christian Reconstruction movement. Sometimes Reconstruction has been a matter of heated controversy: causing division in faculties, student bodies, and congregations. Other times it has merely been a matter of curiosity--a novelty which people do not quite understand, but are either attracted to or suspicious of. One common denominator, however, has been the generally fuzzy conception of just what Reconstruction is. The situation has been much the same amongst many of the theologians, journalists, political scientists, and sociologists. Reconstructionism has been labeled as anti-democratic, anti-Semitic, and extremist.² This has led to a proliferation of misunderstandings by supporters, detractors, and analysts of the movement. And, needless to say, it has prevented clear, cogent appraisal of the Reconstructionist program. Since the

¹ Denominational and non-denominational schools like Covenant Theological Seminary, Dallas Theological Seminary, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Reformed Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and Westminster Theological Seminary have all been involved in the discussion of and response to the Reconstructionist movement, either through faculty publications, institutionally-sponsored debates, or student body-instigated exchange. The issue of Christian Reconstructionism has also been debated in most of the conservative Reformed denominations in North America such as the N.A.P.A.R.C. (North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council) churches, e.g., the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, Christian Reformed Church, Orthodox Presbyterian Church, and Presbyterian Church in America.

² See the various charges of Hal Lindsey, The Road to Holocaust (New York: Bantam, 1988); M. Cromartie, No Longer Exiles: The Religious New Right in American Politics (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1993), 72; and H.W. House and T. Ice, Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse? Portland: Multnomah, 1988), 16.

movement has recently gained wider notoriety through Bill Moyers' documentary series God and Politics,³ and an exposé-style review in Christianity Today,⁴ and has exercised no insignificant influence on the Christian Right,⁵ it behooves us to devote some attention to the main points of this religious socio-political agenda.

It is not our primary purpose here to provide analysis, but to describe and define, and to supply a preliminary sketch of the theoretical and environmental origins of the Christian Reconstructionist movement. First, we will explain specifically what Christian Reconstruction is. The goal here is to delineate the distinctive tenets of the movement more clearly than they have been heretofore. Opponents of Reconstruction have generally failed to identify what is truly distinctive about its position, preferring (uncharitably) to caricature it rather than define it. While proponents of the movement often vacillate between ambiguity and dogmatism when asked about the distinguishing characteristics of their position. As we have noted already, this is an impediment to critical discourse. Second, this paper offers an initial suggestion of the intellectual and sociological origins of the Reconstructionist movement. This paper is purposely brief and necessarily technical in places, though it strives for clarity and simplicity. Of course, this author has no pretensions of having provided an exhaustive treatment of a subject which has attracted

³ Bill Moyers, "On Earth as It Is in Heaven," God and Politics, 60 minutes (Films for the Humanities and Sciences, n.d.), videocassette.

⁴ See Rodney Clapp, "Democracy as Heresy," Christianity Today 20 (February 1987) 17-22.

⁵ See G. North's comments in "The Intellectual Schizophrenia of the New Christian Right" in Christianity and Civilization: The Failure of American Baptist Culture 1 (Spring, 1982) 1-12, and those of House and Ice in Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?, 22-23. Even if the claims of North and Rushdoony are exaggerated as to the extent of Reconstructionist influence, there is

much written attention and stirred considerable ecclesiastical and political controversy in recent years. One trusts, however, that this will prove a useful contribution to the ongoing evaluation of Christian Reconstructionism by social scientists and historians.⁶

I. What is Christian Reconstructionism?

Since reversing the "Great Reversal"⁷ in the 1970s, evangelical socio-political thought has fallen broadly into three categories: evangelical liberals, conservatives, and reconstructionists. The later two categories are differentiated by the superadded distinctives of the reconstructionists. Broadly speaking, a reconstructionist is "a Christian who believes it is his or her responsibility to challenge the anti-Christian character of society and culture. The reconstructionist sees it as an obligation to seek to change society in ways that will bring it into conformity with the teaching of Scripture."⁸ To further specify, we may quote popular Reconstructionist author Gary DeMar who says:

Reconstructionism is a distinctive blending of certain biblical doctrines. They are (1) personal regeneration, (2) the application of biblical law to all areas of life, and (3) the

considerable evidence of widespread impact of the movement.

⁶ Some of the content of this paper was presented in original form as a lecture at the Free Church of Scotland College, Edinburgh, Scotland in May, 1990 and in a revised form *ex tempore* and *memoriter* at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Greenville, South Carolina in April, 1992.

⁷ The name given by social historians to the fundamentalist retreat from political and social activism which occurred, roughly, from 1900-1930. See G. Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 86.

advance of the already-present kingdom in history through the preaching of the gospel and the empowering of the Holy Spirit.⁹

Individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds and ecclesiastical communions are influenced by and committed to these ideals, from conservative Roman Catholics to Episcopalians to Presbyterians to Pentecostals. Arminian and Calvinist, charismatic and non-charismatic, high Church and low Church traditions are all represented in the broader umbrella of Reconstructionism (often in the form of the "Christian America" movement).

A. Names or Labels

Not surprisingly then, many labels are associated with the Christian Reconstruction movement. It has been called: "Dominion Theology," "Theonomy," "Christian Reconstruction," or merely "Reconstructionism" among other things. Oftentimes these labels are employed more or less interchangeably (by both those within and without the movement). Nevertheless, each of them point to a distinctive element of Reconstructionist theory, elements not held to by all who are influenced by the movement. "Dominion" intimates the reconstructionist belief that the cultural mandate (Genesis 1:26) obligates all Christians to work for the bringing of human society under the dominion of God's Word. "Theonomy" which simply means "God's law" indicates the belief that all of the non-ceremonial Old Testament civil code is meant to be obeyed by all nations. "Reconstruction" betokens the conviction that American society and public policy are in a

⁸ R. Nash, Great Divides (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993), 157.

⁹ The Debate Over Christian Reconstruction (Fort Worth: Dominion, 1988), 62.

desperate state, salvageable only by a radical effort to bring the nation in line with norms of Scripture.

B. Types and Groups

In light of this exegesis of various labels used in the movement it becomes apparent, for instance, that one may be a Christian reconstructionist without being a "theonomist" (though not vice versa). Hence, there are two major types or classes of reconstructionists: theonomic and non-theonomic. T. David Gordon is absolutely correct when he says:

As socioreligious phenomena, Theonomy and Christian Reconstruction are closely related. The individuals involved in the one are ordinarily involved in the other. However, theologically and religiously they can be distinguished. Christian Reconstructionists exist in a variety of forms, and are ordinarily united in their belief that the Western world, and especially the United States, has departed from the Judeo-Christian ethical basis that once characterized its public discourse, with devastating results. Positively, Reconstructionists wish to see the United States return to a more *biblical* approach, or even a more *Judeo-Christian* approach, to the issues of civil life. Theonomy is more specific than this, though it does not disagree with it. Theonomy wishes to see *every* nation conform its civil practices to those revealed in the Mosaic legislation. Thus, Theonomy is more comprehensive than Reconstruction (theoretically concerned that all nations observe the Mosaic legislation) and much more specific about the legislation that it believes is to be observed. Theonomy does not wish merely a return

to a biblical ethic, or a Judeo-Christian ethic, but to the ethic of the Sinai covenant.¹⁰

It is important, however, to note that the intellectual origins and leadership of the movement emanate from the "theonomic reconstructionists." Even within this more narrowly defined group we find significant differences of emphasis and opinion in the writings of Rousas J. Rushdoony (The Chalcedon Foundation), Gary North (Institute for Christian Economics), and Greg Bahnsen (Southern California Center for Christian Studies). Nevertheless, it is from these sources that the ideology of the movement has flown.

II. Theonomic Christian Reconstructionism

A theonomic reconstructionist may be succinctly and fairly defined as "someone who believes that none of the non-ceremonial law of the Old Testament is set aside in the New and that all people, rulers and ruled alike, are under obligation to follow such law personally, and to enact it where appropriate in legislation."¹¹ Christian Reconstructionism is a theoretically positivist, fundamentalist, Calvinist response to the moral-political forces unleashed by modernity in late

¹⁰ T.D. Gordon. "Critique of Theonomy: A Taxonomy." Westminster Theological Journal 56 (1994): 23.

¹¹ Paul Helm, review of House Divided: the Break-up of Dispensational Theology, by G.L. Bahnsen and K.L. Gentry, Jr, The Banner of Truth 329 (February 1991): 29. Of course, technically speaking, not even the ceremonial law is "set aside," according to Bahnsen. Rather, it is "confirmed" or "fulfilled" by Christ and therefore is not to be performed by the individual believer. For a discussion of this point see Greg L. Bahnsen, Theonomy in Christian Ethics, 2nd ed., (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984), 207-216, esp. 207, 213 and 215. K.L. Gentry, Jr, offers this more popular (and ambiguous) definition: "A 'Reconstructionist' is one who holds to the applicability of God's Law to modern society and government, while holding at the same time to the postmillennial hope that promises that Christianity will win the world to Christ through the gospel..." God's Law in the Modern World (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian

twentieth-century United States. That is, Reconstructionism views all legitimate law as divine positive law (or an application thereof) and thus rejects natural law and social contract theory. It is also positivistic in its insistence on Scripturally-derived social, political, and economic theory (since it asserts that there is no true knowledge apart from the Bible).¹² It is "fundamentalist" in its stress on the necessity of vital personal religion and biblical inerrancy, and it is Calvinist in its insistence on the sovereignty of God. To define the rationale behind these beliefs and the implications of them is a little more difficult.

A. People and Books

To answer in detail the question "what is [theonomic] Christian Reconstruction," it may be useful to note some of the movement's¹³ leading authors. Rousas John Rushdoony is the father of the movement.¹⁴ Greg L. Bahnsen is the best-known exegetical proponent of Reconstruction. Gary North appears to be the most prolific of the Reconstructionist authors (though he is

and Reformed, 1993), 11.

¹² See the quote from Cornelius Van Til in North's (ed.) Theonomy: An Informed Response, viii.

¹³ Of course, as we have already noted, even the theonomic reconstructionists are not homogeneous and so one must be careful to avoid "pigeon-holing" or treating one author as if he held to all the positions advanced by another. Greg Bahnsen, for instance, would not concur with certain views held by Rousas John Rushdoony (see G.L. Bahnsen, Theonomy, xix). All of the authors mentioned however share in common an optimistic eschatology, the commitment to work for the implementation of Biblical law in modern society and the willingness to be identified with Recons

¹³ tructionism as a distinct movement within the Reformed community.

¹⁴ For an insider's version of the movement's history see G. North "Intellectual Schizophrenia," 1-40, and Theonomy: An Informed Response (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics,

certainly not unique in his prodigious production, for the movement has evidenced a number of extremely fruitful writers). He has devoted his talents to popularizing the movement (and in so doing has shown an inclination to considerable displays of verbal pyrotechnics!) and to developing the economic implications of the thesis, among other things. Other authors who are actively involved in promoting the movement include David Chilton, Gary DeMar, and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr.¹⁵

Three book's in particular may be noted for their influence and/or notoriety. First, there is Rushdoony's seminal Institutes of Biblical Law, which is of moment as an early reference work for the movement. Second, Bahnsen's Theonomy in Christian Ethics, may be identified as the standard exegetical presentation of the Reconstructionist position on the role of the Law in the Christian life (his By This Standard serves as a more popular treatment of the same subject and No Other Standard as a detailed response to his critics). Third, we may mention David Chilton's Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators (written in response to Ron Sider's Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger). Unlike the two previous volumes, this tome is not integral for providing the theological rationale of the movement but is mentioned because it achieved some renown on college and seminary campuses. It is a rather typical example of Reconstructionist rhetoric, and reflects the Reconstructionists' desire to formulate a right-wing alternative to more liberal evangelical social ethics.

1991), ix-xx, and 15-23.

15 A brief bibliography of theonomic literature, and related non-theonomic material is included at the end of the paper.

B. The Christian Reconstructionist Agenda

Before looking at the rationale behind the distinctive tenets of Reconstructionism, it will be appropriate for us to consider a few aspects of their program. First, Reconstructionist writing champions the present-day relevance and applicability of Old Testament civil ethics and shows strong antipathy for theological systems which do not. Much of its polemic has been directed at the evangelical movement known as Dispensationalism because of its insistence on an exclusively "New Testament ethic." Reconstructionism is in large measure a response to this movement on the one hand, and to mainstream Liberal views of Old Testament ethics (in which the Old Testament is dismissed as primitive, sub-Christian, even anti-Christian, and at any rate irrelevant to contemporary Christian ethics) on the other.

Second, reconstructionists are challenging evangelicals, who have tended to be isolationists since the 1920's and 1930's, to reengage in social ethics. They are laying emphasis on the church's "salt and light" functions in society and calling the church to repentance for her neglect of these God-given duties. In this call for Christian political and social action Reconstructionism is heralding a message which has been and is being sounded in many quarters of evangelical Christianity.

Third, Christian Reconstructionism is determined to expose what it calls "the myth of neutrality." Following the presuppositional epistemology of Cornelius Van Til, the reconstructionists argue that no one can approach an field of knowledge neutrally, objectively, or a-religiously. We must approach all study with either theistic or anti-theistic premises. There is no other alternative, for claimed neutrality or objectivity is actually negation. This view of knowledge obviously necessitates a distinctively Christian view in every field of human

educational enterprise (including economics, law and politics), which for the reconstructionists means an explicitly Scripturally derived view.

Fourth, in keeping with the previous point, Reconstructionism is attempting to make a systematic and exegetical connection between the Bible and the conservative ideology of limited government and free market economics.¹⁶ For instance, Gary North has written volume after volume deriving principles of economics from his studies of the Pentateuch.¹⁷

Fifth, Reconstructionism has sharply questioned the legitimacy of State-financed education and has been a major factor in the rise of the Christian school movement. According to North, "The government schools are established as a humanist religion aimed at stamping out Christianity."¹⁸ Indeed, one of Rushdoony's early books was a critique of state education entitled The Messianic Character of American Education (1963). North candidly sets forth his view of the proper Christian agenda in our current societal situation:

we must use the doctrine of religious liberty to gain independence for Christian schools until we train up a generation of people who know that there is no religious neutrality, no neutral law, no neutral education, and no neutral civil government. Then they will get busy in constructing a Bible-based social, political, and religious order which finally

16 See North, "Intellectual Schizophrenia," 11.

17 See North's The Dominion Covenant: Genesis (Tyler, TX; Institute for Christian Economics, 1982/7); Moses and Pharaoh: Dominion Religion vs. Power Religion (Tyler, TX; Institute for Christian Economics, 1985); The Sinai Strategy: Economics and the Ten Commandments (Tyler, TX; Institute for Christian Economics, 1989); and Tools of Dominion: The Case Laws of Exodus (Tyler, TX; Institute for Christian Economics, 1989); and also Ray Sutton's That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant (Tyler, TX; Institute for Christian Economics, 1987).

denies the religious liberty of the enemies of God.¹⁹

Finally, and most controversially, the reconstructionists advocate the implementation of the Mosaic penal sanctions in modern society. Let it be said that, contrary to much criticism of Reconstruction, there is a good deal of discussion about the manner of application of the case law in a different nation-state context. That is, most reconstructionists argue that we must make allowances for the circumstances and the conditions in the modern nation-state as we apply the Mosaic casuistry. However, this very willingness to discuss flexible applications of the case law actually detracts from the popular appeal of Theonomy, which lies in its (apparently) straightforward biblicism and simple theological solution to complex socio-economic and political situations.²⁰

What would a "reconstructed" America look like, K.L. Gentry suggests the following elements of a theonomic approach to civic order:

1. It obligates government to maintain just monetary policies ... [thus prohibiting] fiat money, fractional reserve banking, and deficit spending.
2. It provides a moral basis for elective government officials. ...

18 North, "Intellectual Schizophrenia," 19.

19 North, "Intellectual Schizophrenia," 25.

20 For instance, Gentry asserts that "having a revealed and objective standard takes the guesswork out of righteous living," God's Law in the Modern World, 69. This seemingly straightforward view applied to the arena of modern socio-governmental ethics undoubtedly holds great appeal to evangelical Christians long trained in a Bible-based ethic. What kind of laws should we have in our country? "Well, just thumb through the Pentateuch" is the Theonomist's response. It looks simple but when more difficult and detailed issues are raised the apparent simplicity begins to break down. Can the State make laws not found in the Law of Israel? If so, on what positive exegetical basis? How are the case laws to be applied? The enthusiastic debates within Reconstructionist circles on the proper application of certain of Israel's laws belie their claims that Theonomy simplifies the work of civic legislation.

3. It forbids undue, abusive taxation of the rich. ...
4. It calls for the abolishing of the prison system and the establishing a system of just restitution. ...
5. A theonomic approach also forbids the release, pardoning, and paroling of murderers by requiring their execution. ...
6. It forbids industrial pollution that destroys the value of property. ...
7. It punishes malicious, frivolous malpractice suits. ...
8. It forbids abortion rights. ... Abortion is not only a sin, but a crime, and, indeed, a capital crime.²¹

III. The Origins of Reconstructionism

When one speaks of the philosophical and sociological origins of Reconstructionism, one may give the impression that a covert argument is being manufactured against the claims of the Reconstructionist movement to be biblical in its foundation. I am anxious to avoid so ambitious a project in the following surmise. The aim is more to detect influences on how leading Reconstructionists have read Scripture, and why they have focused on or emphasized certain things.

A. Philosophical: Kuyperian/Van Tillian Calvinism

Abraham Kuyper's development of Calvin's thought, and formulation of a distinctively Christian approach to education and society, has exercised formidable influence on twentieth-century Calvinism. Post-Kuyperian Calvinism has thought in an emphatically "worldviewish" fashion, that is, there is a regular stress on thinking and living Christianly in all areas of life. This pattern of thought was decisive

²¹ Gentry, God's Law in the Modern World, 61-64.

in the so-called Dutch school, and influential upon Dooyeweerd and Van Til in turn. Kuyper argued for an over-arching philosophy of life resting upon God alone as the epistemological foundation. "There is not an inch in the whole of temporal life which Christ, as Lord of all men, does not say, 'Mine,'" said Kuyper.

Van Til took up and refined Kuyper and Dooyeweerd's thinking. One of his customary emphases was that there is no such thing as neutrality. A person cannot be neutral about God, nor can he be neutral in his thinking or living. There are only two options: for or against, God-centered or man-centered. Van Til said: "There is no alternative but that of theonomy and autonomy." Van Til meant that in the sphere of human thinking and behaving one has only two options: God's way or self's way.

The combination of Kuyper's concern for a distinctly Christian approach to the whole of life, and Van Til's insistence that one is always either theonomous or autonomous, when applied to the area of civil law and government provided a critical platform for the theonomic theory as we shall illustrate later.

B. Theological: An Evangelical Reform Movement

Theologically, Christian Reconstructionism may also be viewed as a reaction (and in the author's opinion, a well-meaning, but misguided, overreaction) to four prevalent tendencies in American Evangelicalism, and to what most traditional Christians would regard as general Western social decadence.²² First, Reconstructionism constitutes a challenge to *the widespread*

22 For an estimable, suggestive, and more extensive discussion of the sociological impetus behind Reconstructionism, see John Muether, "The Theonomic Attraction," in Theonomy: A Reformed Critique (Grand Rapids: Academie/Zondervan, 1990), 245-259.

peripheralization of the Old Testament in forming the Christian mind *in the sphere of personal and social ethics*. The peculiar view of biblical history taught in many evangelical churches reduces the Old Testament to a shadowy, pre-Christian, even sub-Christian form of the New Testament, rather than the very foundation of God's revelation. Hence, the Old Testament is valued only for end-time prophecy, moral tales, types of Christ, and if its teaching is not reconfirmed in the New Testament, it is regarded as outmoded. Reconstructionism is deliberately contradicting this pattern.

Second, Reconstructionism wishes to rebuff *the general evangelical tendency to disengage from societal responsibilities*. The sacred/secular dichotomy and the suspicion of any form of "social gospel" has led most fundamentalist-influenced church members to abandon any sustained or regular attempt to impact government and society. This continues to be the norm today, with the exception of so-called "family issues" like abortion, school prayer, home-schooling, "family values," and homosexuality, but even then rarely is a Christian voice heard except in protest. Theonomy wants to dump the sacred/secular dichotomy for a Kuyperian view of vocation and explore the long-ignored civic "salt-and-light" responsibilities of Christians.

Third, Reconstructionism is a reaction against *the tendency to (totally) subjectivize and individualize the Christian faith*. There is, of course, a vital subjective side to the Christian faith as all Christians would agree. The Puritans, for instance, would have called this "experimental religion" while Roman Catholics call it "spiritual formation" and it is an essential element to vital Christianity. If it is not there, faith is dead. But when personal piety is substituted as a part for the whole, it becomes an "ism." In other words, when Christianity is reduced to purely individual, personal spirituality (and this has been a characteristic error in much evangelicalism) an

important aspect of historic Christianity is being disregarded or lost. The Reconstructionist movement wants to redress this imbalance (though it seems overly non-experiential at times) and remind the Christian of the outward demands of true Christian piety.²³

Fourth, Reconstructionism is a response to *the anti-law spirit which pervades Christian circles* where cheap-grace teaching is the norm. No one who has followed the Lordship controversy, even at a distance, can doubt that antinomianism has achieved almost confessional status in Dispensational circles. In many churches, any suggestion that Christians have an obligation to keep the Law is considered an attack on the Pauline teaching on grace. Theonomy challenges the church to return to Reformational teaching on the grace of law, the role of the law as standard in the Christian life, and the consequent relevance of Old Testament law to Christian ethics.

These four trends are readily apparent in American Evangelicalism in general and particularly in churches which have been influenced by the theology of Dispensationalism, with its emphasis on the antithesis between law and grace (in an unfortunately eccentric form), its curious version of the history of redemption, and its peculiar eschatology. Theonomy is, among other things, a rebuttal of Dispensationalism.²⁴

23 Bahnsen makes this clear when he says: "The Christian is remiss if he, retreating into a quietistic, pietistic ecclesiology which will not give God's directives to the world, refuses to heed the whole law of God with its extra-personal, extra-ecclesiastical content." *Theonomy*, 36. Elsewhere he comments: "All Christians must do whatever they can to facilitate the keeping of God's law in his society. If the believer simply accepts the antinomian situation surrounding him without any recourse, he has willingly subordinated himself to the Satanic power and direction of that environment." *Theonomy*, 477.

24 Bahnsen complains that "fundamentalism's dispensational approach to the Scripture and its

IV. The Fundamental Distinctives of Reconstructionism

A. Presuppositionalism

Now, having given some preliminary background information on Christian Reconstructionism and having suggested a rationale for its development, we turn to a consideration of the distinguishing characteristics of Reconstruction. The following three distinctives reflect a depiction which is promoted by Reconstructionist authors themselves and not by the misunderstandings of their critics.²⁵ First, a commitment to the Presuppositionalism of Cornelius Van Til is essential to the theonomic thesis.²⁶ The importance of this is found in the rejection of

parenthesis view of the church was tied to a withdrawal into individualistic, reactionary moral rules which produced, in overall cash value, socio-political impotence...." Theonomy, 11. See also Theonomy 19-22 and Bahnsen and Gentry, House Divided: The Break-Up of Dispensational Theology (Fort Worth: Dominion Press, 1989).

25 I draw these distinctives directly from Greg Bahnsen who enumerated the "fundamental distinctives of Christian Reconstructionism" as "a transformational worldview embracing theonomic ethics, postmillennial eschatology, and presuppositional apologetics" in the foreword to Gary DeMar's The Debate Over Christian Reconstruction (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press/Atlanta: American Vision, 1988), xvi. It should be further added that there may be those who identify themselves with the stated objectives of the Reconstruction movement yet disavow one or more of these distinctives. Nevertheless, the denial of any one of these elements compromises the integrity of the thesis. Reconstruction can neither be substantiated nor defended apart from these basic axioms.

26 As will be indicated later, there are some who openly reject Van Tillian apologetics and epistemology who yet call themselves Reconstructionists. Nevertheless, this seems to this writer (and to many Reconstructionists!) to be a real inconsistency. For instance, Van Til's denial of traditional Reformed opinions of natural law is fundamental to his system and is a distinctive of the Theonomic/Reconstructionist view of civil law. Indeed Van Til's view seems to necessitate Reconstructionism (or, at least, something like it). So for a non-Van Tillian to adopt Reconstructionism, is to adopt a Van Tillian solution to an issue which is not a problem in a non-Van Tillian system. Most non-Van Tillians (of whatever stripe) agree that all law is *not* divine *positive* law, and that there exists divine natural law in this universe which may adequately

the idea of natural law and especially in the espousal of the concept of non-neutrality. Popularly speaking, in the ethical sphere we do not have seven options, or five options, or three options.

We may do one of two things. We may be "autonomous" or "theonomous." We make up our own law, or obey the law of God. Either self or God is legislating. Those are the only options.

So when a Reconstructionist asks other Christians the questions "How should a society be governed?" or "What kind of laws are best for the society?," he goes on to say to them "you only have two options. You may follow man's plan and man's law, or you can follow God's plan and law." Then the Reconstructionists inquires: "And where does one find God's will for society expressed? Why in the Bible, of course! Just read your Old Testament and you will find God's perfect law for all human societies recorded in the law of Moses."

B. Postmillennialism

Second, postmillennial eschatology plays a significant role in driving theonomic ethics.²⁷ Without diverting into a lengthy discussion of the particular brand of postmillennialism prevalent in Reconstructionist circles, suffice it to say that eschatology is of first importance to theonomic authors²⁸ and to the defense of the thesis from attacks at critical points. This is a major point of

provide a moral rationale for human civil structures without recourse to a Mosaic special revelational foundation. Hence, there is no need for a non-Van Tillian to adopt Theonomy in order to avoid the charge of favoring "autonomy."

²⁷ We will note later that there are many Reconstructionists who do not identify themselves as postmillennialists. We are not arguing the fact of their existence by asserting the essential role of postmillennialism to Reconstructionism. We are arguing that their position is untenable and incoherent apart from postmillennialism.

²⁸ See for instance, Gary North's Millennialism and Social Theory (Tyler, TX: Institute for

contention with the Reconstructionist's evangelical antagonists, the Dispensationalists. Hence, Reconstructionist presses crank out a steady stream of popular and academic treatments of postmillennial and preterist eschatology.

Among the areas in the theonomic thesis where postmillennialism plays an important role are: 1) challenging prevalent Christian eschatological pessimism (in both premillennial and amillennial circles) which robs an important motive force for Christian societal labor in the here and now; 2) addressing Christian preoccupation with the heavenly consummation of Christ's kingdom (or an earthly millennium) which diverts focus from the present responsibilities and blessings of kingdom life; and 3) explaining why the Reconstructionist agenda will not have to resort to the use of force to see its hopes for the nations realized. Often the Reconstructionist is accused of being anti-democratic and of plotting to impose his societal vision on the unwilling masses. However, because of his postmillennialism, he can explain that the nation's will be willingly reconstructed as the gospel itself advances.

C. Transformational Worldview (embracing theonomic ethics)

Third, what might be called a "macro-transformational worldview" is essential to Theonomy. The terminology of "reconstruction" and "dominion," common to theonomic literature, comes from this idea. The Reconstructionists are arguing for impacting the *structures* of society (government, economic system, educational system, etc. [hence, *macro-transformational worldview*]) with the law of God. In the words of Rushdoony, "as the new chosen people of God, the Christians are commanded to do what Adam in Eden, and Israel in

Christian Economics, 1990).

Canaan failed to do. One and the same covenant under differing administrations still prevails. *Man is summoned to create the society that God requires*" (italics mine).²⁹ The Christian's calling to be a transformer of society is what Rushdoony is accentuating, here and elsewhere. Now, of course, the idea of "transformation" is not unique to Reconstructionism. It is standard in Reformed theology as a quick review of the writings of Calvin, Knox, Dabney, Henry, Schaeffer and others will reveal. Every believer has been given the charge to be salt and light in society. Reformed theology has always taken those salt and light functions seriously. Whether the Reconstructionists are disproportionate in their emphasis on societal (as opposed to personal) transformation is, of course, open to question.

This same concern for societal impact as part of every Christian's vocation is echoed in Bahnsen's writings where he stresses that this involvement and transformation must entail the supreme criterion of God's law. He writes:

The Christian's ethical responsibility to the law of his God extends beyond the simple personal observation of those stipulations. More than just obeying God's commandments personally, the Christian is expected to promote the keeping of God's law (and every detail thereof).³⁰

Elsewhere, he adds: "Christian involvement in politics calls for recognition of God's

29 R.J. Rushdoony, Institutes of Biblical Law (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973), 4.

30 Theonomy, 475.

transcendent, absolute, revealed laws as a standard by which to judge all social codes."³¹

So far, about all that has been argued in the above quotations is that the Christian has social as well as personal obligations which are entailed in his sanctification, and that God's law provides the touchstone by which his civic involvement is to be evaluated.³² The eccentricity of the Reconstructionist program for transformation is found in its appeal to the Old Covenant judicial case law as binding for the New Covenant era nation-state (hence, it is a "transformational worldview *embracing theonomic ethics*"³³). For example, Bahnsen says:

We have observed that a distinctively Christian position with respect to law and politics will call for promoting of the comprehensive Gospel advocated by the Reformed Faith--a Gospel which has political implications because Christ has established God's kingdom (with its influence in every area of life) and now rules as the King of Kings over all mankind. ... Study of Scripture has shown that God's will for public justice and politics has been revealed in the permanent standards of God's law. Therefore, Christians ought to work to persuade others of their obligation to the commandments of God, *including the civil magistrate of his duty to enforce the penal sanctions of God's law against criminal activity in society* (emphasis mine).³⁴

Reconstructionism's particular version of transformationalism is linked to both its presuppositional and postmillennial commitments. It is easy to see how one could argue that if there is no such thing as "natural law" (in the Calvinian sense³⁵), and if there are only two

31 G.L. Bahnsen, By This Standard (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985), 346.

32 Of course, Bahnsen's terminology ("every detail thereof") implies the inclusion of judicial case law statutes as part of God's absolute, perpetual, societal requirements. This constitutes the peculiarity of the Reconstructionist thesis, as will be shown below.

33 This is Bahnsen's phrase, see DeMar, Debate over Christian Reconstruction, xvi.

34 By This Standard, 285-286.

35 See for instance, Calvin's Institutes, trans. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 4.20.16*, 2:1504* [*Note to reader: The first set of numbers refers to the book, chapter,

ultimate sources of law (God or self), and if God intended the Old Testament case law as "a model of social justice for all cultures,"³⁶ and if Christ is going to return after a golden age on earth characterized by godly rule and peace, then surely the kingdom in the millennium will be ruled on the basis of God's own revealed law in the Old Testament (including case law and attendant penal sanctions), and Christians should be actively working to bring about in their own countries observance of the law which God intended for all nations and which He will establish in the millennium.

D. Highlights of the Theological Justification of theonomic ethics

These three distinctives are identified by Theonomists themselves as essential to their position. However, the last one (a transformational worldview embracing "theonomic ethics") entails at least five propositions necessary for its own justification. What are "theonomic ethics?"

Theonomy simply mean's "God's law." So what is unique about the Reconstructionist approach to it? "God's law *in exhaustive detail*" is a battle cry for the movement.³⁷ What exactly does a Theonomist mean by that and what is its significance?

These queries may be answered by recourse to Bahnsen's case for Theonomy. Key points

and section in the Institutes in which the quotation is found. The second set refers to the volume and page number in the Battles translation. When quoting from the Institutes, the author will include both for reference]. The role of natural law in Calvin's political thought is, of course, a hotly debated issue. For a cool survey and restrained conclusions on the matter, see William Klempa's "Calvin on Natural Law" in John Calvin and the Church: A Prism of Reform, ed. Timothy George (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 72-95.

36 By This Standard, 347.

37 Note Bahnsen's chapter title "The Abiding Validity of the Law in Exhaustive Detail,"

of his argument may be briefly outlined as follows. First, the law of God (in its entirety) is binding in the New Covenant as well as the Old. Second, there is no explicit Scriptural recognition of the common distinction between the moral and civil law. Third, there are two types of law in the Mosaic code: moral and restorative. What has traditionally been called the civil law is part of the moral. This is justified by the identification of an "underlying rationale" in God's law. Fourth, the restorative (or ceremonial) has been confirmed by Christ and therefore is no longer kept by believers. The moral law remains perpetually binding, including the case laws and attendant penal sanctions (though not necessarily retaining their precise wording). Fifth, the fact that civil law is still binding is confirmed by New Testament citation of case law as authoritative for the New Covenant era. Therefore, the Christian ought to be obedient to the Old Covenant civil laws, encouraging others to obey the civil law, and working in one's own country to realize the enactment of the Old Covenant civil code (with appropriate modifications) as part of the law of the land. Hence, the appeal to "the abiding validity of God's law in exhaustive detail" means for Bahnsen that the moral law is not really kept until the Mosaic civil code (which is part of that moral law) is honored.³⁸

In order to elucidate the main points of the above-outlined justification of the theonomic theory, it will be profitable to survey and critique five more important assertions in Bahnsen's argument. After which, we will offer a concise summarization of the essential marks of a

Theonomy, 39.

38 Bahnsen explains in his introduction: "In the pages that follow, my concern will be to show from God's word that the Christian is obligated to keep the **whole law** of God as a pattern of sanctification and that this law is to be enforced by the civil magistrate where and how the stipulations of God so designate [emphasis mine]." Theonomy, 34.

Theonomist.

1. Espousal of Twofold Division of the Law (or the Unity of the Law)

Reconstructionists identify the most significant distinction between Old Covenant laws as twofold: moral and ceremonial. Historically speaking, this means a functional denial (most commonly in the form of a reinterpretation) of the traditional Reformed threefold division of the law--moral, civil and ceremonial-- (cf., *Westminster Confession of Faith* 19:3-5) and, alternatively, the espousal of a twofold division--moral and ceremonial (or restorative).³⁹

Theologically, it involves an attempt to identify all non-ceremonial Old Covenant law with the moral law (summarized in the ten commandments) in such a way that they constitute a unity. Hence, if one accepts this identification, and grants that the moral law remains authoritative in the New Covenant era, so also must one grant that the enduring validity all other non-ceremonial law. This is very important to the theonomic "exegetical" argument. Bahnsen says:

The most fundamental distinction to be drawn between Old Testament laws is between *moral* laws and *ceremonial* laws. ... This is not an arbitrary or ad hoc division, for it manifests an underlying rationale or principle. Moral laws reflect the absolute righteousness and judgment of God, guiding man's life into the paths of righteousness; such laws define holiness and sin, restrain evil through punishment of infractions, and drive the sinner to Christ for salvation. On the other hand, ceremonial laws--or

³⁹ Of course, most Reconstructionists do not intend to positively deny the Westminster Confession's threefold division, but do so by neglecting to understand the historical origins of the Assembly's threefold formulation, ignoring the context of 19:4 (see phraseology of 19:4 and cf., 19:3), abstracting the meaning of "general equity" from its historic legal and theological context, and failing to appreciate the biblical, theological genius of the Assembly's categorization.

redemptive provisions--reflect the mercy of God in saving those who have violated His moral standards....⁴⁰

He goes on to say elsewhere, "The *ceremonial law* can be seen to have sub-divisions: (1) laws directing the redemptive process therefore *typifying Christ*...and (2) laws which taught the redemptive community its *separation from the unbelieving nations*...."⁴¹ He continues, "The *moral law* of God can likewise be seen in two subdivisions, the divisions having simply a literary difference: (1) general or summary precepts of morality... and (2) commands that specify the general precepts by way of illustrative application...."⁴²

It should be noted that this is a critical point to Bahnsen's exegetical argument for the continuing validity and binding authority of the Mosaic civil legislation in the New Covenant era. If Bahnsen's thesis is not sustained at this point his entire proposal fails, even if he were able to support every other major *locus*. It is also built on weak evidence. The importance, may I say, the genius, of this point is that Bahnsen attempts to link the civil ordinances to the moral law in such a way that any evidence for the continuing validity of the moral law in the New Covenant era becomes an argument in favor of the continuing validity of the civil code. Thus, standard Reformed arguments for the abiding authority of the moral law are marshalled by Reconstructionists as material to buttress their distinctive position.

However appealing Bahnsen's argument is here, it is not insurmountable. First, it may be

40 By This Standard, 135.

41 By This Standard, 136.

42 By This Standard, 137.

observed, his argument is descriptive rather than exegetical. Though he chastises "latent antinomians" for "multiplying distinctions and qualifications which are not enumerated in God's word"⁴³ his own categories are based not on explicit Scriptural testimony but on what he calls an "underlying rationale or principle." In other words his classification of "moral" and "ceremonial" is determined by his (however plausible) speculation on the purpose for which God gave particular laws.

Second, it should be noted that the designation "ceremonial law" is not employed in the Bible, nor is there anything like a comprehensive list of what might fall into such a category of laws. Is it as easy to distinguish civil and ceremonial law in the *Torah* as Bahnsen seems to suggest? Yet Bahnsen's argument assumes and proceeds on a readily identifiable set of "ceremonial laws." How does he recognize these?--by his assessment of their character, not by exegetical directive. What is the basis of the category "ceremonial law" then? It is determined descriptively. Even then, crucial questions remain. For instance, grant Bahnsen's descriptive distinction and answer the question "Is ceremonial law *amoral*?" For an interesting treatment of Old Testament civil law which does not avoid the complexities of categorization see Christopher J.H. Wright's *Living as the People of God*.⁴⁴

Third, though he insists that the New Testament allows for no distinction between moral and civil laws, the fact is that the New Testament does indeed make much of the distinction between the Old and New Covenant structure of the kingdom of God. Under the Old Covenant

43 Theonomy, 310.

44 C.J.H. Wright, Living as the People of God (Leicester: IVP, 1983). See also Wright's God's

the institutional form of the kingdom of God was the nation-state of Israel. The New Covenant institutional form of the kingdom of God is the church (which is non-national and trans-national in its embodiment). This shift provides an important, simple and obvious rationale for the expiration of the judicial law. The civil law of Israel (as the application of God's eternal standards to a particular situation in the history of his kingdom) has now (in the progress of his redemptive economy) passed away with the demise of that state (in its unique role as earthly representative of the rule of God) and the advent of a superior institutional expression of God's rule.

Fourth, Bahnsen criticizes those who distinguish between moral, civil and ceremonial law on the basis that they are arguing without positive biblical warrant for a threefold distinction. However, as we have already observed, he cannot offer any positive biblical warrant for his own argument for the twofold moral/ceremonial distinction. He identifies these categories by his hypothesis on their function and purpose (in a way not dissimilar to those who identify a classification of moral, civil, and ceremonial law) yet accuses his opponents of holding a position without positive scriptural justification.

2. Hermeneutic of Assumed Continuing Validity

A fundamental hermeneutical principle, frequently repeated by the Theonomists, is that if the New Testament does not explicitly abrogate a law then it is still in force. It is reminiscent of standard Reformed argumentation for the continuing validity of the moral precepts of the Mosaic code but also assumes the peculiar Reconstructionist two-fold distinction in the law. Bahnsen puts it this way: "We should presume that the Old Testament standing laws continue to be

morally binding in the New Testament unless they are rescinded or modified by further revelation."⁴⁵ In order to support this argument, he spends a great deal of time in exegesis of Matthew 5:17 arguing that the word "fulfilled" there is to be taken with the force of "confirmed."⁴⁶ According to Bahnsen, Christ has "confirmed" the entire law of the Old Testament and hence anything not personally fulfilled by Christ on behalf of the believer is still required of the faithful in the New Covenant period. In other words, though Christ's saving work has made obsolete the ceremonial code,⁴⁷ Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17 are taken to prove his confirmation of the believer's duty to keep the civil law (as part of the moral law). Bahnsen's exegesis is directly opposed to the dispensational formula here ("if an OT command is not repeated in the NT, it is no longer binding"), and probably derives from that conflict. Hence, we observe that this axiom is the inverse of the dispensational premise of dealing with Old Testament law. Whatever positive or negative response one has to Bahnsen's principle, it can be granted him, and his case for the binding authority of the case law still remains inconclusive--*if his argument for the twofold division of the law is not conceded to be compelling*. In other words, if one grants Bahnsen his argument on Jesus' "confirmation" of the law, and his hermeneutic of continuing validity, and yet continues to hold to a threefold rather than a twofold division of the law, then all Bahnsen's argument proves is the continuing validity of the moral law. His argument cannot be sustained apart from the rectitude of his twofold division.

45 By This Standard, 345-346.

46 Theonomy, 52-72.

47 Theonomy, 213.

At this point, we may say in passing, that Bahnsen's case is often dependent upon a sort of fundamentalist, proof-texting approach to exposition (not unlike some of the dispensational exegesis to which he is responding). He finds no passage which specifically identifies a class of civil laws in the Mosaic code and so he postulates that no such thing exists. He finds no explicit New Testament abrogation of such a class of civil laws and, again, decides that the civil code must still be in effect. Meanwhile, he manages to ignore a great weight of inferential Scriptural evidence both for the existence of such a class of laws and its subsequent termination. Examples of this include: the obvious socio-governmental character of parts of the Mosaic code, the unique historical and redemptive-historical circumstances in which the civil code was given to Israel, the accommodational character of the legislation,⁴⁸ the change in the institutional form of God's kingdom from Old Covenant to New, the demise of the nation-state of Israel, and the peculiar New Testament pattern of case law application (which we will review later).

Of course, this wooden approach to interpretation does not prevail consistently but only when he attempts a defense of the peculiar portions of his thesis. For instance, take the matter of his approach to the Mosaic ceremonial ordinances. The ceremonial law, as a class, is not explicitly abrogated in the New Testament. The passages that Reformed theologians (including Bahnsen) rely on to prove the abrogation of ceremonial law in the New Covenant era refer to particular cases in which Christ abrogated or fulfilled specific ceremonial ordinances: unclean food laws (Mark 7:19; Acts 10:15), and tabernacle furniture and ritual typology (Hebrews 9:1-14). Bahnsen and Reformed theologians in general argue from the abrogation of a specific

48 See for instance, John Murray's comments on Mosaic legislation on divorce in Principles of

ceremonial ordinance to the abrogation of a class of ceremonial ordinances (assuming, all along, that such a class exists). Such an argument is legitimate and very much like the argument of Reformed theologians for the existence and subsequent termination of a class of civil laws. Bahnsen employs it when arguing for the confirmation of the ceremonial law, but decries it when it is used to argue for the abrogation of the Mosaic civil code.

3. Appeal to New Testament Citation of Mosaic Case Law

One argument which is employed to show (in contrast to the ceremonial code) that the civil laws of Israel are still binding on Christians is drawn from the New Testament's authoritative citation of Mosaic case law. Theonomists assert that the New Testament appeal to the Old Testament case law proves that Old Testament case law is normative for the civil magistrate in the Christian era. Bahnsen says:

There is abundant evidence that the New Testament authoritatively cited and applied these case-law illustrations to current situations. To use examples mentioned above, the New Testament echoes the Old Testament law in prohibiting incest (1 Cor. 5:1), homosexuality (Rom. 1:26-27, 32), defrauding employees (Mark 10:19), and muzzling the ox as he treads (1Tim. 5:18).⁴⁹

Now, the fact that the New Testament applies case law is no surprise. The question is *how* it applies the case law. For instance, in one of the examples which Bahnsen cites in the quotation above (1 Timothy 5:18), Paul applies a civil law statute clearly intended for enforcing responsible treatment of domestic animals to the question of the church providing an equitable

Conduct (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 57.

salary for a minister! This raises a very serious question. On Bahnsen's hermeneutical principles, how can the New Testament authors legitimately do that? How can they apply a case law patently intended for the state of Israel to an issue concerning the church?

One possible explanation entails recognizing that the New Testament authors had a profound understanding of the difference in the institutional form of the Old Covenant community (nation-state of Israel) and New Covenant community (church). Without going into the debate about Old and New Covenant church-state relations, at the very least, it can be said that under the older dispensation, the church was established by and closely tied to the nation-state whereas under the new dispensation, the church is trans-ethnic and trans-national.⁵⁰ This external, structural, administrative change may find witness in the New Testament's modified application of civil case law to the ecclesiastical community.

Whatever the case may be, it is clear (even from this brief discussion) that mere appeal to the fact that the New Testament cites Old Testament case law does not provide, of itself, any positive evidence for Bahnsen's case. Indeed, the New Testament's employment of case law seems to provide *prima facie* evidence against the views of Theonomy. It always applies the Old Testament civic legislation to ecclesiastical issues and never even hints that Christians ought to seek a civil fulfillment for the peculiarly Mosaic case statutes.⁵¹

49 By This Standard, 138.

50 Of course, to borrow Murray's phrase, there is "a relative contrast in absolute terms" here.

51 Dan G. McCartney observes: "Not once in the New Testament is the civil aspect of the Old Testament law applied to the civil authority as an ideal." From "The New Testament Use of the Pentateuch" in Theonomy: A Reformed Critique, 145.

4. Non-Arbitrary, non-Circumstantial Design of the Old Testament Case Law

Fourth, Reconstructionism postulates that Old Testament case law was not merely intended for the particular circumstances of Israel. In other words, they were not *ad hoc*--meant simply for a definite stage and circumstance of redemptive history. For example, Bahnsen says:

God's revealed standing laws are a reflection of His immutable moral character and, as such, are absolute in the sense of being non-arbitrary, objective, universal, and established in advance of particular circumstances (thus applicable to general types of moral situations).⁵²

One could affirm this whole quotation, with the exception of the word "universal" (if one understands Bahnsen's usage of it) and still reject Bahnsen's thesis. His basic argument is this: because the civil law of Israel is non-arbitrary, objective, and universal, it cannot be exclusively intended for the situation of ancient Israel. Therefore the civil laws must be applied today.

Now let us grant that the civil law reflects the character of God and that the civil law of Israel was non-arbitrary. Even if we concede these points, the intimation that God did not take into consideration the particular and temporal needs and circumstances of the nation-state of Israel is mystifying. The classical Reformed view differs from Bahnsen at this point. The Theonomist says that the civil law is neither arbitrary nor circumstantial. The general Reformed consensus holds that the civil law was not arbitrary, but was circumstantial. If this latter view is correct, then there may be things peculiar to the Mosaic code which are inappropriate for the modern nation-state.

⁵² By This Standard, 346.

This is an area where Theonomy, in gross violation of biblical patterns and common sense, is ignoring the context of the giving of the law to the redemptive community of the Old Testament. This constitutes an approach to the nature of the civil law very different from Calvin and the rest of the Reformed tradition, which sees the civil law as God's application of his eternal standards to the particular exigencies of his people.

5. Mosaic Case Law a Model of Social Justice for All Cultures

Fifth, and following on the last point, Theonomy asserts that the Old Testament case law is a model of social justice for all cultures, including the penal code. To quote Bahnsen again: "The civil precepts of the Old Testament (standing 'judicial' laws) are a model of perfect social justice for all cultures, even in the punishment of criminals."⁵³ This point [the continuing validity of Mosaic penology] is clearly important in the Reconstructionist ideology. It has also occasioned some of the most vehement reactions of non-Theonomists. Abusive *ad hominem* and sensationalism have reigned in most responses to this issue, hence a more restrained approach and thorough reply is still needed.

Without question, none should underestimate the value of having God's own revealed applications of his eternal character and the principles of his moral law to the civil situation in Israel. These laws may indeed give us guidance in making equitable laws and even suggesting appropriate punishments.⁵⁴ Calvin and the Puritans acknowledged this, as has the whole of the Reformed tradition in general. However, we must not forget that the circumstances in God's

⁵³ By This Standard, 347.

⁵⁴ Charles Colson has taken a cue from the OT case law sanctions in his arguments for

redemptive purposes may have dictated both the form and even the content of the case law at certain points. This Calvin, and the Puritans following him, clearly recognized.⁵⁵

E. The Marks of a Christian Reconstructionist (Theonomist)

What, then, qualifies a person to be a Reconstructionist? How do you identify a one? We will summarize the preceding discussion by pointing to nine distinctive marks of a Theonomic Reconstructionist. *First of all*, the Theonomist opposes a dispensational/antinomian view of the law in Christian life. *Second*, the Theonomist endorses presuppositionalism (especially in its rejection of natural law and emphasis on non-neutrality).⁵⁶ *Third*, the Theonomist is postmillennial in his eschatological platform.⁵⁷ *Fourth*, the Theonomist espouses a Kuyperian transformational worldview, emphasizing the law as the Christian's tool of dominion. *Fifth*, the Theonomist argues that the civil law is a sub-set of the moral law. *Sixth*, the Theonomist insists that the Old Testament civil case law is normative for the civil magistrate and government in the

restitution, community service sentences, and prison reform.

55 John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 4.20.16 (2:1504-1505); see also Patrick Fairbairn, The Revelation of Law in Scripture (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1869), esp. 94-134.

56 The author is well aware that there are persons who openly identify themselves as reconstructionists who are (emphatically) not Van Tillian presuppositionalists in their epistemology. I here assert only that this is inconsistent, and that theonomic reconstructionists are correct in their assertions of the significance (indeed, the necessity) of Van Tillian presuppositionalism to the motivation, coherence, and justification of the theonomic reconstructionist thesis.

57 Again, one is acutely aware of the host of people who are associated with Reconstructionism who are non-postmillennialists (the most common being those who identify themselves as "optimistic amillennialists"[!]), nevertheless my inclusion of this point recognizes the crucial is/ought distinction. It does not follow that what *is*, necessarily *ought* to be. The thesis is

New Covenant era. *Seventh*, the Theonomist maintains, on principle, that the state is obligated to apply the Old Testament case laws' penal sanctions. *Eighth*, the Theonomist asserts that it is the Christian's duty to obey and work for the enactment of the Old Testament civil law and its penal sanctions in the modern nation-state. *Ninth*, the Theonomist is willing to label as antinomian (or latent antinomian) fellow Christians who do not share his particular views of the present-day application of the Mosaic code, because indifference to the theonomic thesis is impossible.

Conclusion

This preliminary sketch of Reconstructionism has revealed a number of identifiable traits of and influences on the movement. For instance, 1) it is apparent that Reconstructionism is sub-category of Calvinism. One may be a Calvinist and not be a Reconstructionist, but one may not be a Reconstructionist and not be a Calvinist (consistently). Reconstructionism borrows heavily from the Calvinistic legacy not only in its high view of Scripture, but also in its views of Church-State relations, and the complementarity of law and gospel. 2) Reconstructionism is heavily indebted to Kuyperian (and/or Dooyeweerdian) thinking about common grace and antithesis. The Reconstructionists' "worldy-minded Calvinism" draws strongly on nineteenth and twentieth century Dutch Calvinist philosophical traditions, notwithstanding points of contact with older British precedents. 3) In terms of redemptive historical approach, Theonomists tend to stress continuity of redemptive history more or in a different way than have mainstream Calvinists. 4) Reconstructionism also rejects the older Reformed views of divine natural law and promotes a

crucially dependent on postmillennialism far beyond the "reward of duty" motivation.

positivist view of law. 5) A tendency to supralapsarianism and mono-covenantal thought can also be found in Reconstructionist circles. That is, Theonomists are predisposed to "high Calvinism" in their view of the decrees but also to deny (wittingly or unwittingly, explicitly or implicitly) important aspects of classical, federal, bi-covenantal theology. There is much evidence of a reticence to speak about a covenant of works/covenant of grace framework, and even a hesitance to talk about distinctive stages in the covenant of grace. 6) Reconstructionists are inclined to downplay or deny (theoretically and/or functionally) "common grace insights" in the Christian's formation of a distinctively Christian approach to his culture. Theonomists are suspicious of general evangelicalism's exaltation of general revelation over special revelation, and its frequent capitulations to unbiblical patterns heralded as wisdom gleaned from God's revelation in nature and providence.

A Selected Bibliography

- G.L. Bahnsen. No Other Standard. Tyler, TX; Institute for Christian Economics, 1991.
- G.L. Bahnsen. Theonomy in Christian Ethics. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977.
- W.S. Barker and W.R. Godfrey, eds. Theonomy: A Reformed Critique. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.
- M. Cromartie. No Longer Exiles: The Religious New Right in American Politics. Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1993.
- G. DeMar. The Debate Over Christian Reconstruction. Fort Worth: Dominion, 1988.
- G. DeMar. "You've Heard It Said." Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991.
- K.L. Gentry. God's Law in the Modern World. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1993.
- T.D. Gordon. "Critique of Theonomy: A Taxonomy." Westminster Theological Journal 56 (1994): 23-43.
- H.W. House and T. Ice. Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse? Portland: Multnomah, 1988.
- J.B. Jordan, ed. Christianity and Civilization: The Failure of American Baptist Culture 1 (Spring, 1982).
- God and Politics. "On Earth as It Is in Heaven." Produced by Bill Moyers. 60 min. Films for the Humanities and Sciences, n.d. Videocassette.
- R. Nash. Great Divides. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993.
- G. North. Political Polytheism: The Myth of Pluralism. Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989.
- G. North. Theonomy: An Informed Response. Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991.
- G. North. Westminster's Confession: The Abandonment of Van Til's Legacy. Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991.

R.J. Rushdoony. The Institutes of Biblical Law. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973.