

## Forward to The Debate Over Christian Reconstruction

*By Dr. Greg Bahnsen*

The recent “debate” over Christian Reconstruction has been going on for over ten years now. The debate in contemporary Christian circles could actually be pushed back to the early 1970’s with the publication or general recognition of certain probing theological works by R. J. Rushdoony. (Of course, to the extent that Reconstructionist theology is true to God’s Word, the debate has been carried on throughout redemptive history, since the time of the fall!). The active and open criticism of Reconstructionist distinctives as such, however, surfaced about a year following the publication of *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (1977) – and ironically, surfaced within the context of that theological tradition which has given historical impetus to the Reconstructionist perspective: the circles of Presbyterian and Puritan conviction. The school of thought, however, which most conspicuously and naturally stands opposed to Reconstructionist theology is dispensationalism.

Reconstructionism contradicts the dispensationalist view of the Old Testament (which emphasizes discontinuity with Old Testament ethics) as well as the dispensationalist view of the millennium (which emphasizes discontinuity with the present church age). Therefore, dispensationalism most clearly and diametrically opposes Reconstructionist distinctives. The first public debate between a Reconstructionist and a dispensationalist took place at the annual Evangelical Theological Society meeting, held in Toronto in 1981. <sup>1</sup>[1] This was an important and insightful interchange between two trained theologians. But I believe that the debate held seven years later, which is the subject of this book, may prove to be more significant, both because the issues are self-consciously becoming more clear today and because of the broader audience and appeal of the most recent debate.

Of the many pastors and teachers who are publishing materials written from a “Reconstructionist” perspective today, our finest author is, in my opinion, Gary DeMar. His books and articles are clearly written, soundly researched, and politely expressed. For these reasons Mr. DeMar’s publications have proven to be the most helpful summaries of Reconstructionist thought we can offer to those willing to learn about the position. He pursues cogent theological polemics, rather than creative innovations and imaginative interpretations; accordingly, he has gained a reputation for reliability. He expresses himself in a well-tempered fashion, which has brought him a reputation as a Christian gentleman.

Therefore, those wishing to study “Christian Reconstruction” seriously and carefully are advised to read this and other works by Gary DeMar. This particular book, *The Debate over Christian Reconstruction*, arises from a specific

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<sup>1</sup>[1] “The Bahnsen-Feinberg Debate.” Available from Covenant Media Foundation, 4425 Jefferson Ave., Suite 108, Texarkana, AR 71854. (800) 553-3938.

interchange with certain critics of Reconstruction (Dave Hunt and Tommy Ice) at a public debate April 14, 1988. Previous to this occasion, Mr. DeMar (along with Peter Leithart) had already replied to, and interacted extensively with, critic Dave Hunt in the book, *The Reduction of Christianity*. That book is perhaps the best presentation of the transformational world-and-life-view known as "Christian Reconstruction" which has been published to date, and it would do the careful reader well to study it along with (maybe, before) the present work.

It is evident that Dave Hunt and Tommy Ice did not do so adequately prior to their public debate with Gary DeMar and Gary North. This lapse severely crippled any effort on their part to set forth a serious or accurate critique of Christian Reconstruction – which is disappointing, of course, for anyone who wished to see the theological issues competently engaged in the debate. Hunt and Ice did not address the integrated theological perspective (the total worldview) of Christian Reconstruction, but targeted only one element of it: its victorious millennial eschatology. This one *faux pas* alone precluded their winning the debate because the question being debated was whether Christian Reconstruction is a "deviant theology," and millennial eschatology has never in the history of the evangelical Christian church been made a creedal point of orthodoxy which defines heresy or apostasy. All Christians of good will who profess "the holy catholic [universal] church" (the Apostles Creed) recognize that others who hold millennial interpretations different from their own are nevertheless their Christian brothers and sisters in the Lord. They may be mistaken, but to accuse them of "deviant" theology is an altogether different – and very serious – charge. Hunt and Ice were incapable (perhaps unqualified) to substantiate such a grave charge. Heresy-hunters bear a heavy responsibility for theological proficiency, and (like all Christian teachers) will come under greater judgment for their inaccuracies (James 3:1).

Even more, as the present book demonstrates, Hunt and Ice left themselves open to ready refutation on the particular points of eschatology they addressed, from the exegesis of Matthew 24 to the biblical concepts of victory and dominion. Their historical claims were equally flimsy. The reader can explore this general observation for himself. I wish to point out but one particular and conspicuous defect in the argumentation of the Reconstructionist critics and comment upon it: their penchant for misrepresentation of what they were called upon to criticize. It is especially because of this (and not simply the academic shortcomings) that we must judge, ethically, that critics Hunt and Ice lost the debate. Repeatedly we encounter allegations and critical assumptions about Reconstructionist eschatology which are misleading, false portrayals of it – for instance, the suggestion that a preterist interpretation of the Olivet Discourse is essential to it, or that it is an innovation from theological liberalism which claims no Biblical support, or that it has affinity with the positive confession movement or Manifest Sons of God, or that it promotes dominion "over people" (tyranny?), or that it does not allow Christ to rule over His earthly kingdom, etc. None of this is even remotely accurate. And that fact is highly significant if we are sensitive to Biblical ethics.

Of course, this is not the first time by any means that Reconstructionist thought has suffered abuse from those who have not responsibly studied the issues or bothered to be fair in how they depict its distinctives. The faulty scholarship has been witnessed over and over again, from minor points to thundering accusations. Ten years ago at a faculty forum on theonomic ethics at Reformed Theological Seminary (Jackson, Mississippi), one professor publicly criticized the author of *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* for the scholarly shortcoming of failing to interact with Delling's treatment (in Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*) of "fulfill" from Matthew 5:17, only to be informed to his embarrassment that Delling's treatment was rehearsed and rebutted on page 64 of the book he was criticizing! This may seem a minor point, and relative to others it is.

In that same year, Evangelical Presbytery (of the Presbyterian Church in America) publicly declared that ministerial candidates holding a theonomic view were unacceptable to the church. More remarkable than this harsh judgment, however, was the fact that it was *after* the decision to promulgate it that the presbytery determined to appoint a committee to study the matter! A year later the study committee recommended a reversal of the previous judgment, acknowledging that it "was taken without proper study and deliberation." The committee's report said: "We admit that many of our minds were made up before we began this study . . . . The vast majority of us . . . had never seen, much less read a copy of the book [*Theonomy in Christian Ethics*]."

In 1978 Aiken Taylor, as editor of the *Presbyterian Journal*, wrote in criticism of the theonomic (or Reconstructionist) position that it was contrary to the Westminster Confession of Faith,<sup>2[2]</sup> even as others had hastily declared that it was not part of mainstream Reformed theological thinking. Such claims were readily refuted by historical research, however.<sup>3[3]</sup> Indeed, a severe critic of the theonomic ethics, Meredith Kline, subsequently conceded that the theonomic outlook was indeed the position of the Westminster Standards.<sup>4[4]</sup> This concession did not deter Kline, however, from railing against the theonomic view as “a delusive and grotesque perversion of the teaching of Scripture.” Yet in the very place where this thundering condemnation is found, Kline adduced not one exegetical argument against the position, *but* there were no less than fifty places in the book he was criticizing which stood contrary to his representations of the theonomic position!<sup>5[5]</sup> In a circulated but unpublished paper written against theonomic ethics in 1980, Paul Fowler falsely alleged that the position allows nothing unique about Israel’s civil order, and then arrogantly insisted that his characterization could not be mistaken – even though it directly flew in the face of numerous things taught in the book he was criticizing.<sup>6[6]</sup> Critics like Robert Strong,<sup>7[7]</sup> Gary Long,<sup>8[8]</sup> Walter Chantry<sup>9[9]</sup> and others have used epithets like “Judaizing” or “legalism” of the position, when over and over again Reconstructionists have shown as clearly as anyone could expect that they are committed to salvation by God’s grace alone. In a feature article in *Christianity Today*, Rodney Clapp made the outlandish mistake of pitting Reconstructionist political theory against democratic procedures, a portrayal which runs counter to everything in the Presbyterian and Puritan historical background for the position!<sup>10[10]</sup> Examples could go on and on.<sup>11[11]</sup>

Over the last decade I have witnessed more slurs and misrepresentations of Reconstructionist thought than I have the heart or ability to count, and I am thinking here only of the remarks made by Christians in positions of leadership; elders, pastors, instructors, writers – those who bear the “greater accountability” since they lead Christ’s sheep as teachers.

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<sup>2[2]</sup> Aiken Taylor, “Theonomy Revisited,” *The Presbyterian Journal* (December 6, 1978); Taylor, “Theonomy and Christian Behavior,” *The Presbyterian Journal* (September 13, 1978).

<sup>3[3]</sup> See, for instance, Gary North, ed., *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Symposium on Puritanism and Law, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Winter 1978-79).

<sup>4[4]</sup> Meredith Kline, “comments on an Old-New Error,” *Westminster Theological Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Fall 1978), pp. 172-189.

<sup>5[5]</sup> See Greg L. Bahnsen, “M. G. Kline on Theonomic Politics,” *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Symposium on Puritanism and Society, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Winter 1979-80), pp. 195-221.

<sup>6[6]</sup> Paul Fowler, “God’s Law Free from Legalism” (unpublished paper, 1980).

<sup>7[7]</sup> “Theonomy: Expanded Observations” (privately distributed, 1978).

<sup>8[8]</sup> Gary D. Long, *biblical Law and Ethics: Absolute and Covenantal* (Rochester, NY: Backus Book Publishers, 1981).

<sup>9[9]</sup> Walter J. Chantry, *God’s Righteous Kingdom* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1980).

<sup>10[10]</sup> Rodney Clapp, “Democracy as Heresy,” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (February 20, 1987), pp. 17-23.

<sup>11[11]</sup> See the Preface to the expanded edition of my *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, [1977] 1984).

This has forced me as an educated believer to stand back and look more generally at what is transpiring in the Christian community as a whole with respect to its scholarly integrity. And I am heart broken. It is difficult enough for us to gain a hearing in the unbelieving world because of its hostility to the Lord Jesus Christ and its preconception of the lowly intelligence of His followers. The difficulty is magnified many times over when believers offer public, obvious evidence of their inability to treat each other's opinions with careful accuracy. Our "scholarship" is justly ridiculed by those who have been educated in institutions which have no commitment to Christ or His Word, but who have the ethical integrity to demand as a prerequisite to acceptable scholarship that a student represent his opponent fairly before proceeding to criticize or refute him. To use a Pauline expression, "even the Gentiles" know better than to permit imprecision and erroneous portrayals in a serious intellectual discussion. Yet Christians (I include all of us) often seem to care little for that minimal standard of scholarly respectability. How, then, can we be taken seriously? How can we take ourselves seriously?

That holy and inspired Word of God, to which all of us swear allegiance as followers of Christ (whether Presbyterians or Baptists or charismatics or dispensationalists or Reconstructionists or whatever), is *profitable* to us "for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). From it we should learn not to speak carelessly: "See a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a fool than for him" (Proverbs 29:20). We should learn to speak cautiously about others (e.g., Matthew 5:22; Psalm 116:11; James 3:5-18), not wresting people's words or reviling them (Psalm 50:20; 56:5; I Corinthians 5:11; 6:10). We should interpret them in the best light afforded by the facts (cf. Acts 24:8), rather than with evil suspicion (I Timothy 6:4). "He who would love life and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil and his lips that they speak no guile" (I Peter 3:10).

God's Word directs us to study a matter before we presume to speak, critically regarding it: "He who gives an answer before he hears, it is a folly and shame to him" (Proverbs 18:13). Scripture teaches us to avoid slander, if we would dwell with Jehovah (Psalm 15:3). We must then be scrupulous to speak the truth about others, even those we would criticize. "A man who bears false witness against his neighbor is a maul, and a sword, and a sharp arrow" (Proverbs 25:18). When we witness against our neighbors "without a cause," we become guilty of "deceiving" with our lips (Proverbs 24:28). The exhortation of Paul is inescapably clear: "Therefore, putting away falsehood, speak the truth each one with his neighbor, for we are members one of another" (Ephesians 4:25). All of this is an extended commentary on the fundamental command of God's law: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16) – reiterated by Christ (Matthew 19:18), who indicts us further by showing that false witness comes from the heart and defiles us (Matthew 15:19-20).

When we engage in theological debate with each other as fellow believers, then, it is ethically imperative that we honor our common Lord (who is the Truth, John 14:6) by being cautious to speak the truth about each other's positions. We are "members" together of the body of Christ.

Theological correction, of course, must be given where necessary; there is no disputing that. However, before presuming to correct one another, we must give the intellectual and personal effort necessary to portraying each other's views correctly. Only then are we ethically qualified to offer a critique. Only then will our critiques bring theological health and unity to the Christian community. If we refuse to speak accurately of each other, we have settled for uncharitable prejudices and party-spirit, and a watching world has little reason to take seriously our claims to being born again with hearts enabled to love each other as God intends.

Over the last decade we have seen some extremely strong words of condemnation uttered about Reconstructionist theology. Those condemnatory words, however, have repeatedly proven to be tied to gross misrepresentations of the Reconstructionist perspective. When those counterfeit portrayals are laid aside, the cautious student will find that not one substantial line of refutation or criticism has been established against the *fundamental distinctives* of Reconstructionism – a transformational worldview embracing theonomic ethics, postmillennial eschatology, and presuppositional apologetics. These theological underpinnings can be shown to be sound and reliable.

That should not be taken to mean that Reconstructionist *writers* (i.e., those who subscribe to the theological distinctives listed here) can be defended regarding every particular aspect of their own personal theological method or regarding every doctrinal conclusion they have ever drawn. There is continuing need for correction and reform at particular points, and Reconstructionism is not above hearing constructive criticism. This has become evident in recent assessments of particular Reconstructionist writers for their hermeneutical excesses and for their harsh or uncharitable way of speaking. (I have particular examples in mind, but they need not be mentioned here.) It is a mark of spiritual health and wisdom that such examinations of our flaws are issued and heeded. Such criticisms do not, however, belie the underlying strength of the Reconstructionist perspective.

The claim made by Dave Hunt and Tommy Ice that the Reconstructionist position is “a deviant theology” simply inaugurated one more rotation of the polemical cycle which we have witnessed over the last ten years: High rhetoric and harsh criticism met and thoroughly undermined by sober research and theological analysis which shows how critics of Reconstructionist theology have not produced a clear Scriptural refutation, have been led into positions which stand contrary to well-established Biblical teaching, or end up in ambiguity or self-contradiction regarding their own worldview and ethic.

We are grateful to Gary DeMar for one more turn of this wheel. My his fine *Debate over Christian Reconstruction* lead further students of the Scripture to consider the challenge, the cogency, and the benefit of the Reconstructionist worldview.

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