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Interview with Dr. Greg Bahnsen

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

Dr. Greg Bahnsen is this generation's foremost apologist, whose work has consistently underscored the abiding authority of the Word of God and the need to apply it to all of society. His seminal but controversial *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* is one of the foundations of the Christian Reconstruction movement. Dr. Bahnsen is an ordained minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, has taught at Reformed Theological Seminary and Ashland Theological Seminary, and is currently the Scholar-in-Residence at the Southern California Christian Study Center. *Contra Mundum* interviewed Dr. Bahnsen while he was on a tour of the eastern United States, which included a speaking engagement at the ACTRA conference in Johnson City, Tennessee.

CM: Your *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* first appeared in 1977. What is the main thesis of the book?

Bahnsen: I argue in *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* that the moral standards revealed in scripture have an absolute, unchanging character because they reveal God's character, which is unchanging. The book was directed against Dispensational ethics which sees different standards for different eras of time. My intention was to uphold the principle of Covenant Theology, which assumes continuity between the Old and New Testaments unless scripture teaches otherwise (e.g., infant baptism).

CM: *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* has gone through two editions and four printings. Are there any changes in the basic thesis?

Bahnsen: No; the basic thesis is the same. There are a couple of minor changes in outlook. I was persuaded, for example, that Dan Fuller had a better approach to Romans 10:4. But the substance of the book is unchanged.

CM: *Theonomy* was a controversial work. Why do you think there was such a strong reaction to your book, especially in conservative and Reformed circles otherwise committed to the authority of scripture?

Bahnsen: I never expected the kind of attention that *Theonomy* received, much less the negative reaction in Reformed circles. I would have expected critical reaction from Dispensationalists, of course. But without my intending it, *Theonomy* touched a nerve in Reformed circles. Allen Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* documents how our culture has endorsed relativism and opposes all

types of absolutes. This cultural mindset has apparently affected the Christian church as well. The idea of moral absolutes that cover all of life does not appeal to contemporary Christians. Christians, without self-consciously admitting it, say that the Bible speaks to their private, devotional, and religious lives, but has nothing to say in the public sphere of politics, economics, etc. *Theonomy* stresses that there are moral absolutes and that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, applies to all areas of life. And that is what the Reformed faith has always proclaimed. It is not a novel thesis - it is an old thesis which is now in disrepute in modern culture. Let me add that the controversy has been fueled for years and years by misrepresentation. There is often greater scholarly integrity *outside* of Christian circles. If critics in secular circles has so misrepresented a book's thesis, they would lose their jobs and/or credibility. I have had the happy experience - but one twinged with pain - of talking to people who finally read *Theonomy*, after hearing all about it. They admit that as they read, they waited for the really bad stuff, but never found it. *Theonomy* is not a controversial thesis; it is a reasonable, Biblical development of a world and life view.

CM: You have had considerable experience in academia. If you were beginning a seminary education now, would you attend, and why?

Bahnsen: That is a sad question. All things being equal, I would not encourage anyone to attend seminary right now. Most seminaries are either very poor academically or theologically unhelpful. It would be a dreadful waste of three years and a lot of money - not to be taught the Reformed faith in an adequate way. In the smaller schools, there are problems with deficiencies in scholarship or theological prejudices, and that has not been characteristic of our Reformed fathers or Reformed education. Having said that, I realize and acknowledge that there are better and worse schools.

The Southern California Study Center was founded because of these concerns. We felt the need to offer, in a convenient way, a competent Reformed education. We offer an M.A. which covers everything treated in the traditional M.Div. degree except for practical pastoral courses (which should be done "practically" - in the church). It is convenient because students can stay in their home area and study at their own pace. Secondly, SCCSC offers a competent theological education, with instruction that is fully committed to Reformed confessional standards. My recommendation to anyone contemplating seminary or theological training is to study at the Center, or study with a local pastor. Such a method of learning is, I believe, the wave of the future.

CM: You have a Ph.D. in Philosophy from University of Southern California. How can a Christian with such strong commitments to the scriptures and the Christian faith survive in a modern university?

Bahnsen: First, you need to be well-grounded in the scriptures and have a consistent, clear world-view. Second, it helps to be in a department with a Christian instructor, even if he does not share all your theological distinctives. And third, the modern university has its own problems. It is ideologically disintegrating. Though there is certainly political hostility to Christianity, the Christian can offer a distinctive point of view which challenges the inadequacy of humanistic thinking.

CM: *Theonomy* is a central aspect of the Christian Reconstruction movement, of which you are considered a founding father. Do you consider it a "movement", and what reflections do you have on "Christian Reconstruction"?

Bahnsen: I don't consider Christian Reconstruction a "movement", but rather a school of thought. Christian Reconstruction includes people from a number of denominations and traditions. It has no central authority, or chain of command, or any other sociological marks of a "movement". But it *does* have fundamental theological distinctives: the authority of scripture, with a presuppositional approach to apologetics, the idea of moral absolutes where all the Bible is ethically relevant, and an optimistic view of redemptive history. In short, while it is not a movement, Christian Reconstruction is a distinctive and challenging school of thought.

CM: Some Reconstructionists have been very interested in symbolical interpretations of the Bible - what has been called "hermeneutical maximalism". You once addressed this in a review of David Chilton's *Days of Vengeance* in *Journey* magazine. What do you think of this movement?

Bahnsen: I believe that what has been called "hermeneutical maximalism" is very dangerous. It is not sufficiently controlled by the text of scripture, but depends on the imagination and creativity of the interpreter. People can come to peculiar conclusions through this stream of consciousness approach. But even when they arrive at orthodox conclusions, their methodology is not governed sufficiently by the Word of God. We need faithful conclusions - arrived at *faithfully*.

CM: Some Reconstructionists have been very interested in liturgical renewal, seen particularly in the movement to Anglican communions and the use of vestments. Any comments?

Bahnsen: Reformed theology has insisted on the regulative principle of worship because the Bible requires it. The stress on liturgical forms and significance goes beyond the scripture's teaching. I endorse the regulative principle, and thus the simplicity of New Testament worship. The days of symbolism and ritual (Old Covenant) have given way to the appearance of the Son and emphasis on the *Word* (New Covenant).

CM: The Reconstructionist moment today seems badly fragmented. Does it seem so to you? And if so, do you have any ideas as to why, and any suggestions for restoring unity?

Bahnsen: The fragmentation is hard to miss, and it is a very sad thing to see. The first generation of Reconstructionists - especially since it has had to struggle so hard against opposition - has produced leaders with very forceful personalities. And leaders with forceful personalities find it hard to get along. To restore unity, we should focus on the whole Word of God. That means going to Proverbs and learning about wisdom and humility. That means learning about the fruit of the Spirit - patience and gentleness - from Galatians 5. We need to be faithful - personally and interpersonally - to the whole Bible for the whole of life. And we need to be an example to the world of the consistent application of the Word to our own lives.

CM: Tell us about your work. Do you have any books in progress?

Bahnsen: *No Other Standard*, due out shortly from ICE, is my answer to the critics of theonomy, particularly the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary. [Ed.: Published 1991, xv, 345 pages, scripture and general indexes. Michael Kelley is preparing a review of this book for the spring issue.] I am also working on a book on Van Til's apologetics, including readings from his works, interpretations, and answers to his critics.

CM: Tell us about the function of the Southern California Christian Study Center.

Bahnsen: We are celebrating our first anniversary. The center was begun by the church I pastored as an educational ministry of the church - it is not a "parachurch" ministry. The Center provides an opportunity to all believers to receive a convenient, competent, and challenging Christian education. We focus on Systematic Theology, Ethics, and Apologetics. There are three outlets for the center: 1) Writing and Publications; 2) My conference speaking and debating [Ed. : Dr. Bahnsen spent September lecturing and preaching on the East Coast; he was scheduled in October to debate with a Muslim leader]; and 3) Academic courses. Courses can be taken in residence (current and recent offerings include "The Incomprehensibility of God" and "Calvin's Institutes"), by correspondence (using tapes, guided readings, and telephone conferences), or through specialized tutoring.

CM: I understand that the center distributes a helpful tape of a debate between you and an atheist at the University of California-Irvine, as well as other material. How could people order that material and receive other information?

Bahnsen: People can receive our monthly newsletter, *Penpoint*, free of charge. A catalog of publications, tapes, and course listings is also available from the Center. [Ed.: For more information, write Southern California Center for Christian Studies, P.O. Box 18021, Irvine, CA 92713-9916. The debate with an atheist, Gordon Stein, is available for \$10 from Covenant Tape Ministry, 24198 Ash Court, Auburn, CA, 95603.]

CM: Can you tell us about the progress of Christ College in Virginia? Are you still involved with the school?

Bahnsen: Yes I am on the Board and also teach there. This year we will have ten students at second semester. I realize that this is not very many students, but the school provides a very close, family atmosphere. It also offers a fine, thoroughly Reformed, undergraduate education and training in the liberal arts.

CM: You have had some serious health problems in the past. Can you tell us how you are doing now?

Bahnsen: I have had open-heart surgery twice in the last 13 years. And I have had emergency surgery for a bleeding ulcer in 1987. With proper rest and medication, and by God's grace, I am doing well now. And I give Him all the praise for it, and for the ministry of His Word to which He has called me.