

An Interview with Greg L. Bahnsen

Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen is a leading light in the Christian Reconstruction or theonomy movement and author of *Theonomy in Christian Ethics, No Other Standard, By This Standard, Homosexuality, a biblical View*, and co-author of many other books written from a theonomic perspective. As the Scholar in residence at the Southern California Center for Christian Studies he travels widely lecturing and teaching in universities, colleges and churches. Last October he was here in Britain, and *CT* took the opportunity to interview him. The following is a transcript of that interview.

Calvinism Today. Dr. Bahnsen, would you give us a brief assessment of where the Christian Reconstruction movement is in America today?

Greg L. Bahnsen. I think it's helpful to look at Reconstruction going back twenty years because, while there are discouraging things that we would note in the Reconstruction movement in our day, the fact of the matter is that God has greatly blessed us in the last two decades. There was a time when R. J. Rushdoony virtually stood alone for these convictions that we hold dear, and now there's a whole handful of pastors and scholars, writers who hold these views.

The down side obviously is (especially in America) that there is not complete unity but a lot of infighting. There have been some people who at one time were considered Reconstructionists that have removed themselves from the movement. And yet there is the Lord's blessing to be seen even in that situation. As people have gone their separate ways we have not been left with just one Reconstruction organization. We have found that a number of Reconstructionist teachers are able to sustain ministries. So there are quite a few more people out there willing to hear and support these sorts of ministries than we might have first imagined. And it's also true that the movement cannot be easily smeared with the accusation of being cultic, having one leader whose "papal" opinion everyone kowtows to. There is a lot of healthy ferment within Reconstructionist circles which I think is eventually going to strengthen and advance the movement. And so I believe, looking back over a twenty-year period, the Reconstructionist movement is looking good today.

CT. One of the better known books opposing Reconstruction is the symposium by members of the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary, *Theonomy, A Reformed Critique*. Would you comment on Sinclair Ferguson's critique of your own position as he sets it out in his chapter on the Westminster Assembly?

GLB. Hopefully, readers will pick up the October issue of *Penpoint*† from our Southern California Center for Christian Studies, because I give something of a response there as well. Let me begin by observing something ironic. Years ago when I was at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, in those days the question people had was “How do you square theonomy with Chapter XIX section IV of the Westminster confession about the judicial law expiring?” It has come about over the years, as Reconstructionists have written and defended their views and interpreted the Confession, that no when Sinclair Ferguson gets around to writing, it’s not a question of whether theonomists can justify themselves in the light of XIX.IV but rather of whether this absolutely *demand*s theonomy, – whether non-theonomists can ward off the onslaught of the theonomic argument that says XIX.IV commits you to theonomy. So there has been a real reversal on this question about the Confession.

When Meredith Kline conceded in the *Westminster Theological Journal* that the Confession of Faith was theonomic, I think that was a great help to our movement. He intended to say some very hard things and hopefully to destroy our credibility but when he told us that the Confession actually holds this view, I think many people had to admit – this coming from a critic of our position after all – that there might really be something to it.

Now, specifically on Ferguson’s arguments. Essentially Ferguson tells us that the Confession is consistent with theonomy in his view, but that is not necessarily the case that it *demand*s theonomy. At the Assembly you had some men who upheld views very similar and some men who upheld views that were contrary to what we call theonomy today. And so he tries to make chapter XIX.IV out to reflect a consensus approach, and he makes a plea for the church today to do the same thing, -- to allow differing views on the specific application of the civil law in our day. My opinion is that this is a weak argument. Ferguson notes that Baillie and Gillespie differed over the use of certain penal sanctions; and so, since Gillespie is closer to what many theonomists today would teach, Ferguson turns this into a theonomist and non-theonomist arguing. My opinion is that Baillie and Gillespie were committed to the same fundamental premises about civil law and the use of the Old Testament, and they differed over how to interpret and apply it in their own day and age. So I see this as an inter-house or intra-mural debate *among* theonomists. I think Ferguson is fundamentally wrong on the matter.

Secondly, I do not believe that Sinclair Ferguson has properly understood the Confessional use of the expression “general equity” pertaining to the law. He tries to turn it into a technical notion of equity – notice *not* the expression “general” equity. And he also looks for an equity which is found *in* the law, somewhat like a Platonic form of justice that is found diffused throughout the laws, whereas, as I see it, the Puritans were speaking of the general equity “*of* the law.” You can go back in Puritan literature, which unfortunately he didn’t do, and cite that very expression, where the puritans treated the general equity as the “marrow,” as it were, of that law, – the inner principle.

I think those are two fundamental mistakes that he has made. The significance of his article is that he doesn’t think the confession condemns theonomy; he thinks, however, that it is not all that favorable to theonomy either. But as I’ve shown in our October *Penpoint*, if you look at Gillespie’s writings you find that he uses this very language and *clearly* thinks it calls for the use of the penal sanctions of the Old Testament. When you

† *Penpoint* is the free monthly newsletter of Southern California Center for Christian Studies. If you wish to receive it just send a request along with your address to P.O. Box 18021, Irvine, CA 92713, USA.

consider Gillespie's influence at the Assembly, I think that is perhaps the most helpful hermeneutical guide for what the original Puritans had in mind.

CT. Another area of criticism has been your hermeneutics, particularly in relation to Biblical Theology and the flow of redemptive history in Scripture. Some argue that you haven't taken that into account sufficiently in your theonomy thesis.

GLB. In my book *No Other Standard* I respond to this criticism by calling on the critic to bring forth these factors found in the flow of redemptive history that theonomists have overlooked. My conviction now after many years of waiting for people to flesh-out that criticism is that it's a bogeyman, that it's the sort of thing you can throw out as a general, highly ambiguous and vague expression. Then people say "Oh! We don't want anyone to suppress the flow of redemptive history." But when you ask people "*What* is it that we're suppressing *in particular*?" you get no answer whatsoever. The fact of the matter is I take very seriously, and I believe I am quite sensitive in my biblical interpretation to, the flow of redemptive history. In my preaching and in my evaluation of other preachers, I find it important that people look at redemption and how God has brought it about historically. I think when we go to do ethics it is important that we take account of changes in redemptive history. Again, when you ready my colleagues who are theonomists, as they go to do more detailed exposition of the law than I have done, it seems to me they take into account a great deal of qualifications and factors and so forth having to do with the flow of redemptive history. If they didn't they wouldn't write such long books.

So I think this is an accusation which is easy to utter and very difficult to substantiate. My guess is that when the critics utter it they *don't* have anything in particular in mind. They have their own preconceived idea of where we should end up with the law today. They know how things began with Moses, they know where *they* want to end up today, and they call *that* the "flow of redemptive history." So if I come along, or R. J. Rushdoony comes along, or Gary North, and we argue that we don't end up where the critic thinks we should with respect to the law, then the easy way out is to say "Oh! Well then, you don't take account of the flow of redemptive history." Well, we *do* take account of it, but differently than the critic.

CT. But they don't then find a substitute standard to put in its place.

GLB. Yes, we can then go on beyond this to say that it's not just those who use the "redemptive history" argument, but virtually all anti-theonomists have had plenty of time (it seems to me) not only to criticize our theology and our exegesis but also to show what the correct answer is, -- what we as Christians should do about this or that, or what our civil attitude and perspective should be. But we don't get much by way of an alternative.

CT. One of the ill-conceived criticisms of Reconstruction is that it downplays evangelism and replaces it with social action (and this kind of thing). While you've answered that in your books, and other Reconstructionists have answered it in their books, would you say that Reconstruction has perhaps even in a limited way reinterpreted or deepened our understanding of the Great Commission?

GLB. I actually believe that the answer to this question – and it's similar to what we would say on a number of other points – is that Reconstructionism, is if anything old fashioned. I don't think that it has reinterpreted the Great Commission. I think anyone who understands what Reconstructionists say about the Great Commission and is familiar with the history of theology and Puritan writings and the Reformed faith, would say "Well, this has all been said before," – almost like "How dare you think you're offering us something novel and unique." It has all been said before. The Great commission has been seen in a much broader light and application in the past than is popular in evangelical and most Reformed churches today. I just think Reconstructionists have been restoring the older perspective.

CT. Looking now at some specifics of the law, perhaps people find it easier to accept the death penalty for murder and rape, and certain other crimes, but then Scripture seems to teach that the death penalty applies to idolatry – for example, Ex. 22:20, besides others places. How would you see that law's application today?

GLB. Well, there's more than one law to do with the civil redress of idolatry, and so it's difficult to answer about just one particular text. I think the most important thing to say for those who read this interview is that once you come to the conclusion that the law of God is binding and needs to be applied, that doesn't mean we have easy and readily accessible answers to all the tough questions of interpretation and application. And this is an area that I think needs a great deal of discussion and investigation. The answer here is not as readily available, not as easy to discern, as maybe some other issues. I would not want anything I say to be taken as the studied and definitive, virtually "papal" answer to what we should do in the law about idolatry today.

My own conviction at this point (I am teachable and may change my mind with correction that comes) is that the civil society has a right to protect its fundamental authority. When someone comes and proselytizes for another god or another final authority (and by the way, that god may be man) – when some one tries to undermine the commitment to Jehovah which is fundamental to the civil order of a godly state – then that person needs to be restrained by the magistrate. However, this does not mean that individuals should be punished for holding heretical views, the views that Baptists think are heretical or Lutherans think are heretical and so forth. It simply means that those who will not acknowledge Jehovah as the ultimate authority behind the civil law code which the magistrate is enforcing would be punished and repressed. You would, therefore, be open, I believe, to hold Muslim views or Hindu views in the privacy of your home, provided it was not a Christian home that you've now come into to subvert and draw away from Jehovah. You would be able to hold these views as a *private* conviction. But you would not be allowed to proselytize and undermine the order of the state.

Before people who are non-theonomists get too terribly upset about this view, I would at least ask them to reflect on this fact: *every* civil order protects its foundations. In the United States you are allowed to do anything except foment rebellion or revolution against the government. For instance, a public school teacher would be permitted to hold all sorts of views which might be controversial or radical, but that teacher may not encourage students to go out and engage in revolution. Every civil order has *some* such final point beyond which you cannot push. What we are saying as Christians is, that point ought to be that you don't dispute the authority of Jehovah publicly and call people to follow other gods.

I would add that none of us believe that such laws can be put into place *unless* the culture at large is favorable to them, which is to say that the culture at large is a Christian culture. Our opponents' greatest fear, it seems to me, is that laws like the one we're talking about are going to justify our taking up weapons to "impose" Christianity on a culture that doesn't want it. But nobody in this movement has written anything as absurd as that. We all believe evangelism is foundational – that you need to have church nurture, people have to be educated, and then eventually the culture as a whole wants to protect itself against idolatry. That's how it

would come about. These laws would not justify violent imposition of theonomic standards where you don't already have (for the most part) hearts that want to follow the law to begin with.

CT. Concerning the death penalty: there has been some discussion over the mode of execution. Gary North has said that stoning is mandatory, whereas most other Reconstructionists think that the mode of execution is not the important thing, that stoning was the form of execution appropriate to Israelite culture. How would you approach this question?

GLB. That's a good example of how, when you get around to interpreting the law, it's important for everyone to distinguish between the underlying principle and what is just part of the cultural trappings and expression of the times. When Jesus tells us the story of the good Samaritan, and then says "Go and do likewise," we have to figure out what that "likewise" is which we are to do. Does he mean that we are to get a donkey and be on the Jericho road with oil in our flask and denarii in our pocket? Most people say no; that's the cultural illustration and has nothing to do with the moral obligation. But sorting out the cultural from the underlying moral principle with some Old Testament laws is not always easy.

There are some theonomists – intelligent men of good faith – who have argued that the specific method of execution is part of what God was morally requiring in the law. Others (myself included) feel that that is part of the day and age, the culture, in which the death penalty was then practiced. Those who have argued contrary to my conviction have reasons which they set forth, and I would encourage people to look at those reasons. All I can say is that, at this point, I have not been convinced that those reasons in themselves require stoning – even if there are advantages to stoning because stones are readily available and inexpensive and it requires community involvement and so forth, because you still have methods which are readily available and inexpensive and include community involvement, which would not involve stoning. But I have high regard for those who are making the effort to interpret the law very specifically. I am just not won-over on that point.

CT. Moving on to the church, many readers of *Calvinism Today* will have read various works, perhaps by James Jordan and others in the Tyler group as it is sometimes called. What do you see as being the effect of their emphasis on the sacraments and a high church theology for Reconstruction and for those who have got involved and followed in that direction?

GLB. Let me reply with a number of observations. I believe that the essence of theonomy and postmillennialism and so forth may be adopted by many people who go on in *other* areas to have distinctive views, in this case say a distinctive view about the liturgy of the church. It would be good if the opponents of Reconstruction would separate out those things which are *essential* from those things which happen to go along with certain *individuals* who believe those things. If it were the case that certain Calvinists came to charismatic views about the work of the Spirit in our day, it would not be fair for people therefore to criticize Calvinism or a predestinarian soteriology because they allege that charismatic views are tied in with that. It just so happens that some people who hold to a Calvinistic soteriology also hold to a view of the gifts of the Spirit which is contrary to Calvin's actually. You have to be careful here. Many times the critics of Reconstruction have not done that. I do not believe that views of worship, church government and so forth are really distinctive to what we have over the last two decades come to call "Reconstructionism." It may be that a majority of Reconstructionists hold to this or that approach. This in itself doesn't mean that being committed to the law of God or postmillennialism would logically commit you to a particular view of church government or liturgy. So let's draw distinctions.

Secondly, my own opinion is that the people who have gone into what is called high church liturgical practices or a more "sacramental" theology are wrong theologically. I believe that works have been written previously, and there are people today who are willing to argue as well, that Scripture would not lead us to use vestments, would not lead us to place the sacraments in a more important role in worship than the preaching of the word of God. I do not believe that the view of church government that allows for monarchical bishops can be justified by the word of God. So I personally stand opposed to those things. I am a Presbyterian. I wouldn't want the views of *certain* theologians to come into our churches. But I would be willing to discuss that, I hope, in a gentle and firm way and appeal to Scripture and so forth. I wouldn't want to just say "Well, you've got your team, and I've got mine" and then do cheerleading for our Presbyterian side of the Reconstructionist movement. I would like to see us discuss such things as a side issue.

Thirdly, (if I didn't believe that these people were wrong in those points I wouldn't be led to say this as well) we have to acknowledge that a great deal of the disruption within the Reconstructionist community has arisen from people who hold these views, who want to maintain that this is the way to go and everybody else is wrong. In a sense they have tried to ride the coat-tails of the distinctive convictions of Reconstructionism and tag church government and liturgy in with them. It's not only that insistence which has created part of the disruption within the Reconstructionists community, but on top of that, much of what has given us a bad reputation is tied to the sacramental polemics of certain Reconstructionists. It seems to me many people are saying "I don't want to move toward Reconstruction because I don't like sacramentalism" and that sort of thing. At this point I would defend such Reconstructionists with my first comment, by telling people that such views are not essential to Reconstruction, so let's discuss them in a different arena. But we do have to recognize that most people do not draw these distinctions in our day and age. So I believe those people pushing a more episcopal form of government and a more sacramental theology are bringing disrepute to Reconstructionism.

CT. One of the proponents of this sacramental theology has been James Jordan. At the same time he's developed a method of interpreting the Bible or hermeneutics which I know you're not happy with. Is there a connection between the two?

GLB. First of all, let me remind everybody that James Jordan has publicly said he is *not* a Reconstructionist any longer. I'm glad he has done that because it saves us a lot of time in having to tell people his views are not Reconstructionist convictions. Jordan has been good and honest enough to confess that, – that he is not within the circle of Reconstructionism.

Secondly, you're right that I believe the "interpretive maximalism" that he promotes – to the degree you can get any clear sense from him as to what that objectively entails – is *extremely* dangerous. I believe that it is one of the most dangerous things in the theological world today that might entice otherwise evangelical and Reformed people. Obviously, denying the deity of Christ and the virgin birth are much worse. But of those things that evangelicals might look at and be drawn aside by, this is one of the most dangerous things available. My academic specialty is philosophy, and particularly methodology – epistemology: the theory of knowledge, logic and so forth. One must always be concerned when a certain method is so ambiguous as to allow for conflicting conclusions or arbitrary conclusions to be drawn from it. I have maintained for quite a long time that Jordan's approach to the Bible is a matter of rhetorical and creative flourish on his part and does not reduce to principles of interpretation which are public or objective and predictable, and for that reason you can go just about anywhere once you try to interpret the Bible in the manner observed in his publications. It's just a matter of *whose* creativity you are going to follow this week. That really concerns me as a theologian.

And then thirdly, to get to the answer to your question, once you have a method of biblical interpretation which, as long as you're creative enough, permits you to go just about anywhere you wish, then yes I do think that

his interpretive maximalism is tied to his rather bizarre views that have been tagged “sacramental” and “high church” and so forth.

CT. Moving back to the evangelical church, what’s your assessment of the modern evangelicalism? Obviously you can only speak for the United States. It has been said that while evangelicals are opposed to liberalism, they are themselves liberal in their particular approach to Scripture – that while they stand for the inerrancy of Scripture, when they come to the authority of Scripture in all areas of life and thought, they become operationally liberal in that they attempt to limit its authority. Would you say that is a fair evaluation?

GLB. I think that is generally a fair evaluation. There are a lot of ways in which you can boil liberalism down to this or that approach to the Bible, but one that I’ve always found helpful is that you can think of the liberal as a man who reads things which are embarrassing or objectionable, and then he cuts them out and re-pastes the Bible together to fit his preconceived ideas. I think we have to be charitable, and I think we have to be honest about this: evangelicals would, when presented with that idea, dispute it. They would say “Oh No! We must not do that. We must take the bible from cover to cover.” But then in their *practice*, in their preaching, in their particular policies, you find that they act *like* liberals. They have the scissors and paste as well so that preconceived notions are not upset.

On top of that, evangelicals in our day are very selective about the portions of Scripture or the whole counsel of God that they think Christians should emphasize. There’s a great deal of nervousness when anyone says “I think God may be calling me to a work of reform in education” or politics or something like that. Totally apart from whether you think that task should be theonomic or postmillennial in emphasis, you would think evangelicals would say “Well of course, we want people to do that.” But there’s a real nervousness about people getting away from (say) what the pastor or the elders think is the central work of the church. So over and over again people say “Well, are you forgetting evangelism?” That betrays something in terms of the evangelical view of the Christian life and the full authority of Scripture.

Moreover, evangelicals (if I can generalize) have a very poor hermeneutic. A moment ago I was criticizing someone who was once a Reconstructionist and who has gone off (I think) the deep end hermeneutically. On the other side, however, evangelicals in general don’t have a well thought-out hermeneutic. And you’ll find them using *conflicting* principles from one sermon to another. Often enough evangelical preaching amounts to finding a text which is a “pretext” for what you wanted to say in the first place. So an evangelical comes up with what he’d like to talk about this week, and then he finds the Bible saying something like that or which he can allegorize or moralize into that kind of conclusion, and then he preaches it. I think we need to be not just evangelical but Reformed as well. We need to be called to a more thorough understanding of the authority of Scripture, of covenant theology, and a proper use of Scripture and the principles of interpretation. ‡

‡ Dr. Bahnsen has compiled a draft for a confessional statement on hermeneutics for the Alliance of Reformed Churches. It may be obtained from CMF, (800) 553-3938, 4425 Jefferson Ave., Suite 108, Texarkana, Arkansas 71854.