

This Present Kingdom: Christian Reconstruction's Complicated Relationship with
the United States Constitution

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the United States Constitution

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Abstract

Christian Reconstruction has received little attention from contemporary political science scholarship. A movement founded in theological principles, its politics begin with the sovereignty of the Bible as God’s Word; therefore, the law of the Bible is the proper law by which to govern society. This produces significant antipathy toward “democracy;” therefore, a natural question to ask is whether or not this movement is compatible in its mindset with the U.S. Constitution. On the level of institutional structures, the Reconstructionist perspective appears to affirm that the institutional structure laid out in the Constitution is appropriate, though few have engaged that question head-on. On the level of political paradigm—Biblical law as the organizing principle of law versus democracy as the organizing principle of law—Reconstructionism appears utterly incompatible with the Constitution.

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INTRODUCTION

What is a “Christian Reconstructionist”? What are they trying to “reconstruct”? Who are these people? What do they want politically? The answers: A Christian Reconstructionist is one who holds that God has promised that His Kingdom is present here and now and shall spread by the work of His church to bring all of reality under His Lordship through His law as delivered in the Bible, one who argues that all areas of life—individual, family, church, and civil—must be reconstructed into a Godly society. These are the Christian Reconstructionists. A niche group even among conservative Christians, these folks have written voluminously in support of these goals. They have influenced the political development (even, resurgence) of Christian conservatism, though “Christian conservative” is a much broader label than “Christian Reconstructionist.” While Reconstructionists have had impacts in different ways on more diverse political sensibilities within Christian conservatives more broadly, Reconstructionists themselves are a breed unto themselves, in virtually all ways. Since others have already done some work analyzing Christian conservatives more generally, including describing the influence of Reconstructionists on that movement, this thesis will not analyze Christian conservatism generally. Few have addressed the first piece of the puzzle on its own: the political theory of Christian Reconstruction. Therefore, this thesis will examine what the political theory of Christian Reconstruction is, especially in relation to the United States Constitution, asking this question: How does the political paradigm of Christian Reconstructionism mesh or clash with the Constitution?

Hewing to a very conservative brand of Calvinist Christianity, Reconstructionists hold to certain theological positions unique even among conservative Calvinists, most

notably their adherence to theonomy. In its simplest rendering, “theonomy” means very simply “God’s law”: *theos*, meaning “god” and *nomos*, meaning “law.”

Reconstructionists use this term to refer specifically to the law of God laid down in the Old Testament and continuing into the New Testament. Politically, theonomy is the tool they maintain will reconstruct society into a Godly society that becomes, through the sanctifying work of the law in each person’s life, the social instantiation of the Kingdom of God.

The first section of this thesis will discuss briefly the intellectual background of Christian Reconstructionist thought, identifying the major scholars responsible for its development. The second section shall describe the four central tenets of Reconstructionist theology, in the process demystifying some of the previous statements. The third section addresses the politics of Reconstruction: what Reconstructionists want to do in respect to the civil state. The fourth section analyzes the politics of Reconstruction in light of the United States Constitution, answering the major question of this study: What sort of compatibilities and incompatibilities does Reconstruction as a political paradigm and in practice have with the Constitution in paradigm and in practice?

The final thrust of this study is to point to the disjunction between Reconstructionist thought and democratic thought inherent to the Constitution. While this is the final analysis, and most specific analysis to the United States system on a practical level, this study analyzes more than just how Constitutional the Reconstructionist paradigm is. It examines Reconstructionism in a critical light in order to open up ground for further analysis where little has occurred yet within political science. My focal point is on the Constitution and Reconstructionism’s relationship with it, but multiple other

avenues of possible analysis are touched on throughout. Even though this study does not follow these avenues to their ends (and is not intended to), those issues are mentioned and are intended to provoke further thought and study into these things, particularly in light of the fact that few have analyzed this movement specifically.

For now, however, the question to consider is this: to what degree is the Reconstructionist project compatible with the U.S. Constitution? To find out, one must understand the theology of Reconstruction and how that theology dictates, in large measure, the politics which Reconstructionists pursue. But first, who are these people?

I: THE WRITERS WHO WROTE A NEW PARADIGM

Just as the basic foundational principles of Christian Reconstruction are theological in nature, the founding writers are (or were, before their deaths) theologians. Rousas John (R.J.) Rushdoony, the “patriarch” of Reconstructionism, was an Orthodox Presbyterian pastor and theologian before his death in 2001. The other notable figures of Reconstructionist literature include Gary North and Greg Bahnsen, both with degrees in theology and doctoral degrees in history and philosophy, respectively. Others who helped to spread the Reconstructionist paradigm include Gary DeMar, who worked particularly closely with Gary North and studied under Bahnsen at Reformed Theological Seminary, James Jordan (also a student under Bahnsen), and Pat Robertson, founder of Regent University and former host of the television talk show *The 700 Club*. This group of theologians, with the occasional sprinkling of activists, developed Reconstruction into the comprehensive paradigm it is.

Because Reconstruction is an obscure movement, few have written extensively on it specifically. Some (such as James C. Sanford and Michelle Goldberg, whose arguments I will cover in the third section of this study) have opined on the totalitarian dangers of the “Christian Right” in general in studies generally both overblown in their conclusions and shallow in their analysis and understanding of the goals of the Christian Right. They touch on Reconstruction along the way, but few have done comprehensive studies of the history and aims of Reconstruction itself. In 2015, however, Michael J. McVicar published *Christian Reconstruction: R.J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism*, a comprehensive, detailed history of Reconstruction centering on

Rushdoony. Because few people have written on Reconstruction and therefore few resources in general exist (much less useful, high-quality ones) much of the information in this section comes from this one major source, in addition to a few other minor ones.

McVicar delivers a detailed history of the movement centered on the work and life of Rushdoony. McVicar notes that he wrote the book based on complete access to Rushdoony's personal library and papers.¹ He describes the history of Reconstructionism through the history of Rushdoony's ministry, documenting the events and thoughts that, as Rushdoony relates them in his journals, shaped his thinking into what became Reconstruction. By this method McVicar introduces the other major figures of Reconstruction as they came into contact with Rushdoony; by describing the mind behind Reconstruction, he tells the story of Reconstruction.

A Man Who Resembled a Modern Old Testament Prophet

Rushdoony was a minister from a long line of ministers; his ministerial pedigree far preceded him. Rushdoony's son, Rev. Mark R. Rushdoony, relates that five generations of Rushdoonys had served the church before his grandfather, Yeghiazar Khachadour Rushdouni, became a minister.² Rushdoony's father trained him well in the Scriptures, and by an early age he had read through the Bible several times.³

¹ Michael J. McVicar, *Christian Reconstruction: R.J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 11.

² Rev. Mark R. Rushdoony, "Rousas John Rushdoony: A Brief History, Part I "I Am Armenian." *Faith for All of Life*. January-February 2016. Accessed June 10, 2016.

<http://chalcedon.edu/faith-for-all-of-life/biblical-faith-medicine-and-the-state/rousas-john-rushdoony-a-brief-history-part-1-i-am-armenian/>

³ *Ibid.*

From early in his life, Rushdoony was raised to understand the Bible as God's revealed "law-word" (as Greg Bahnsen would later call it) which was applicable to every area of life, and his own reading reflected that understanding of Scripture. Bringing this perspective into every part of his life, Rushdoony's work on the undergirding principles of theonomy begins from his childhood. To this point, Mark Rushdoony relates a story his father told him about his seminary days at Pacific School of Religion, a Congregational/Methodist seminary, which illustrates how this idea defined his mentality and personal philosophy: While at Pacific, Rushdoony commented in a discussion over Biblical law that he believed the Bible spoke to all areas of life, a position he apparently thought obvious and generally acceptable. However, he realized then, after "getting clobbered," that his view toward Biblical law was not precisely the commonly accepted one.⁴

Nonetheless, Rushdoony continued to develop his view that the Bible—every part of it, including the law—speaks to every area of life. From years of preaching, writing, and speaking to groups of various sizes and various compositions, Rushdoony's thought culminated in his massive *The Institutes of Biblical Law*, a nine-hundred page tome in three volumes that elucidates in great detail through both exegesis and exposition of the Ten Commandments (the first volume's subject) the validity, soundness, and application of God's law as expressed in the Old Testament. The second two volumes exposit the law by examining Deuteronomy and Leviticus to explore how God applied the principles

⁴ Rev. Mark R. Rushdoony, "Rousas John Rushdoony: A Brief History, Part I "I Am Armenian." *Faith for All of Life*. January-February 2016. Accessed June 10, 2016. <http://chalcedon.edu/faith-for-all-of-life/biblical-faith-medicine-and-the-state/rousas-john-rushdoony-a-brief-history-part-1-i-am-armenian/>

expressed in the Decalogue (the case law and applications of the principles), with the third volume focusing more on applying the law to contemporary culture.

In 1965, several years prior to publishing *Institutes* (not to be confused with John Calvin's *Institutes of Christian Religion*) in 1973, Rushdoony founded The Chalcedon Foundation as a think tank "devoted to research, publishing, and promoting Christian reconstruction in all areas of life."⁵ That institution continues in existence to this day and continues to pursue Rushdoony's vision of a think tank combined with educational institution devoted to spreading and promoting Christian Reconstruction. Indeed, this grew principally out of Rushdoony's belief that the family and homeschooling were the two institutions central to accomplishing the goal of regenerating the world in the image of Christ.⁶ Rushdoony called his foundation "Chalcedon" (pronounced "kal-SEE-dun") after the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, held in the Byzantine city of the same name in A.D. 451. This council affirmed the singularity of Jesus Christ as wholly God and wholly man found in one "*hypostasis*," as the council put it (a Greek word translated roughly as "substance" or "person"—in essence, a single form as understood in the general use of the word "form" and not to be confused with a Platonic form); by this declaration, the council affirmed the Scriptural statements of Jesus's God-man nature and thus recentered the church's focus on proper Christology and soteriology (theology of salvation) The council affirmed that a proper view of Christ's atoning work comprehends that Jesus accomplished two things with His life: First, He fulfilled God's law by obeying it in every detail, and second, He gave Himself as the final sacrifice to cover all sin. To

⁵ "About: Our Ministry & Vision." Chalcedon Foundation. 2010-2016. Accessed June 12, 2016. <http://chalcedon.edu/about/>

⁶ *Ibid.*

Rushdoony, this council's declaration represented a fundamental act against then-current heretical views of Jesus as less than Savior, which led to the conclusion that salvation was something linked to a human institution or human actions and not to Jesus's atoning work.⁷ He envisioned Chalcedon Foundation as performing a similar work in the modern age, for he saw modernism entering both culture and church, wreaking havoc on Christians' and non-Christians' alike understanding of proper salvation, epistemology, and the role of God's kingdom, themes central to Reconstructionist thought.

Of all his work, the three most significant things that Rushdoony did were to found Chalcedon Foundation, write *The Institutes*, and mentor young rising theologians who would go on to further develop and spread the principles and goals of Reconstruction. Two of these in particular became influential in their writing and speaking: Gary North and Greg Bahnsen. *Institutes*, of course, began the theological work of Christian Reconstruction as a movement in earnest with detailed exegesis and pointed analysis; Rushdoony in his previous writing had focused mainly on the inconsistency of modern/postmodern epistemology without focusing directly on Biblical law. Chalcedon provided the longer-lasting institutional grounding-point. It is his mentoring activities, however, that made the lasting impression, for Bahnsen and North each made pivotal contributions to Reconstruction theoretically, theologically, and practically.

Polemicalist and Activist in Chief: The Work of Gary North

⁷ Michael J. McVicar, *Christian Reconstruction: R.J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 87, 88.

North has quite the background and intimate connection to Reconstructionism. Having first met Rushdoony during college while attending a lecture series delivered to the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists (ISI), North began to correspond regularly with Rushdoony on everything from economics to issues of eschatology.⁸ To help support his Ph.D. dissertation, North sought a scholarship from The Chalcedon Foundation (and thus from Rushdoony), which Rushdoony awarded to him. He conducted his dissertation on the economics of the Puritans, earning with it his doctorate in history.⁹ This early support of Rushdoony's therefore shaped the track North took in his scholarship, thereby shaping the future development of a significant portion of Reconstruction.

Much of North's early study focused on conservative economics, particularly that of Ludwig von Mises and others of the same sensibility. Notably, North contributed regularly to *The Freeman*, the currently ongoing periodical of the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), and he worked for Chalcedon part-time, eventually becoming a full employee of the foundation.¹⁰ In later years, North continued to focus his scholarship around economics, eventually founding the second centrally influential Reconstructionist organization: the Institute for Christian Economics, in Tyler, Texas. This built off his original work with Chalcedon. Originally, Rushdoony brought on North to research the Biblical foundations of economics. In that capacity North wrote *An Introduction to Christian Economics*, intended as a companion volume to Rushdoony's

⁸ *Ibid*, 83.

⁹ McVicar, 151-152.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 152.

Institutes.¹¹ This work launched North into his continuing career as a writer on Biblical economics.

North preferred to apply his work concretely to politics rather than teaching it only to families and churches, a bit unlike Rushdoony. Their difference in strategy and outlook turned not on theory versus practice, but on the venue in which one ought to practice the theory. Rushdoony focused heavily on reaching out to churches and groups of individuals—a phrase which, at first gloss, appears a self-contained contradiction, but which defines the basic assumptions of Reconstructionist political theory—whereas North took his work to the trenches of politics. In fact, he even did a stint in national Congressional politics as a staffer for Ron Paul.¹² North remarks in the preface to *Christian Reconstruction: What It Is, What It Isn't* that Rushdoony, in the mid 1970s, attempted to expand the reach of Chalcedon's program by writing books geared more to general audiences, in contrast to his previous denser, more academic style of writing (partly because of time constraints).¹³ A more accessible author, North had always worked to reach a broader, more popular audience with his writing. *Christian Reconstruction: What It Is, What It Isn't*, for instance, is essentially a response to the “FAQs” regarding Reconstruction. Cowritten with Gary DeMar, the book covers all the tenets of Reconstruction, in theology, ethics, and law, answering all the relevant questions through theological arguments principally, without overwhelming detail or density.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 153.

¹² *Ibid*, 154.

¹³ Gary North and Gary DeMar, *Christian Reconstruction: What It Is, What It Isn't* (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), xiv, xv.

North's strategic strength lay in his focus on reaching the "common man." After he left Congressional politics when Ron Paul lost a midterm reelection, most of North's work focused on grassroots political jockeying as the key to the Reconstruction of society. He focused little on complex theological and philosophical arguments and far more on how to actually *reconstruct* things. "While Rushdoony had always been engaged at the local political level, the older theologian's writings and lectures on the subject were hardly practical in a way that activists might distill lessons from them. It is one thing to *assert* that politics and epistemology are intrinsically linked; it is another thing to *demonstrate* how one might translate this assertion into a set of carefully formulated political tactics" that fit within one's theological, epistemological, and political goals.¹⁴ North accomplished the latter.

A prolific writer and editor, North and his compatriots at ICE worked tirelessly to address issues of practical significance related to Reconstruction, writing books, newsletters, and pamphlets to spread as widely as possible the tenets and agenda of Reconstruction. Naturally pugilistic, North also worked continually to combat others who spread teaching he and his fellow Reconstructionists saw as heretical, dangerous, damaging, etc., including by engaging critically and even combatively with other Christians who published work with which Reconstructionists disagreed¹⁵.

¹⁴ McVicar, 155.

¹⁵ For instance, Ronald Sider, an evangelical writer, wrote a book on Christians and economics with which North took serious issue. Therefore, he worked with an associate at ICE, David Chilton (trained at Reformed Theological Seminary under Greg Bahnsen), to write a response within a few months, which they first released at a debate between North and Sider. As their opponent released new editions, they released new responses, often within a few months or even weeks. North and his coworkers did similar projects in other cases as well (McVicar, 176).

While North's style can be caustic in its polemicism, one cannot deny the pivotal impact his work had (even though it led to a schism between him and his father-in-law over tactics) on how the movement developed. Moreover, North's books are far more "user-friendly" than Rushdoony's, making them ideal introductions to the principles, tenets, and arguments of Reconstruction. Although little of Reconstruction relates directly to economics, North managed to use the more applied, concrete nature of economics and economic thought to develop concrete political and survival strategies for Reconstructionists to employ in order to more effectively reconstruct society in every possible way. He did not develop the philosophical and theological principles, but he popularized them and made them easier to grasp.

Rigorous Theologian and Exhaustive Detailer: The Legacy of Greg Bahnsen

A theologian and philosopher by training, Bahnsen's intellectual pedigree is virtually unparalleled by any other Reconstructionist writer, including Rushdoony. Earning the Master of Divinity and Master of Theology degrees from Westminster Theological Seminary simultaneously, and later earning a doctoral degree in philosophy focusing in epistemology from the University of Southern California¹⁶, Bahnsen had a remarkably powerful, rigorous mind that analyzed complex issues in exhaustive detail, yet in a clearly explicated manner. His *magnum opus* *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*

¹⁶ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2002 (1973)), third cover.

(1977), develops in exhaustive detail the principles of Biblical law and the arguments behind its validity.

Of all the books he wrote, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* is by far the most detailed and precisely, rigorously argued. The central thesis of *Theonomy* is this: The law of God as expressed in the Old Testament still stands as completely and exhaustively valid. One who leads a truly Christian life abides by this law as the only sovereign, complete, inerrant, infallible code of ethics. Christian life composes not just individual life, but corporate life in all sense, including family, church, and civil government. Therefore, the law properly applied informs all areas of governance, including civil politics.¹⁷

Intellectual credentials notwithstanding, Bahnsen's personality could tend to be off-putting. McVicar relates that while at Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) in Mississippi, where he taught apologetics, working presuppositional apologetics and theonomy (concepts to be described at length in the next section) into his lectures, Bahnsen created distinct divisions between himself and a good portion of the faculty and between groups of students. Moreover, his defense of his theology during faculty meetings tended to raise conflict as well: "He was the youngest member of the faculty. He was smart and he knew it. One critic observed that he had a tendency to speak 'first, third, and last on all issues' in faculty meetings."¹⁸ Rushdoony, one hardly inclined to shying away from a fight over theonomy, reached out to Bahnsen to offer some wisdom as an older man, cautioning him that he "was so disorderly that he was actually resisting

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 1-40.

¹⁸ Michael J. McVicar, *Christian Reconstruction: R.J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 157.

the legitimate authority of the senior faculty members, a grave sin. ...In particularly harsh words, Rushdoony called Bahnsen a ‘big baby, determined to get your own way.’”¹⁹

Regardless of what he thought of Rushdoony’s advice to calm down and back off where he had little authority, Bahnsen had no opportunity to change his behavior in the longer-term, for RTS refused to renew his employment contract at its expiration in 1978.²⁰

After losing his position at RTS, Bahnsen’s influence was never the same again, for he had trouble finding employment at colleges and seminaries due to his behavior at RTS. Some of his best students, including James Jordan, Kenneth Gentry, David Chilton, and Gary DeMar, became Reconstructionist theologians to their cores.²¹ Had Bahnsen exercised more humility and demonstrated greater willingness to recognize which battles ought to be fought to the death and which not, then perhaps he could have maintained his academic influence and developed a much stronger cadre of future Reconstructionists. However, his continued belligerence cost him his job and the much greater influence he had on rising theologians while he was a seminary professor.

Nevertheless, Bahnsen’s work had substantial impact on the conservative Presbyterian community in particular and the thinking of most Reconstructionists. While he built on foundations poured meticulously already by Rushdoony and North, Bahnsen added a crucially important work to the classic work of Reconstruction in *Theonomy*. Alongside *Institutes*, *Theonomy* is easily one of the most important books for the serious, theologically informed and focused student of Reconstruction to read. Its thesis is simple;

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 159.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 160.

²¹ *Ibid*.

put into one sentence, it is: The law of God expressed in the Old Testament stands forever and can never be abolished.

II: RECONSTRUCTIONIST THEOLOGY

In light of the theological focus of Reconstructionist theory and thought, it is appropriate to examine their theology next. The second section of this paper will describe and analyze the theology central to Reconstruction, and the third section will describe and analyze the politics of Reconstruction. Because the two go together, it is impossible, from a Reconstructionist perspective, to discuss political activity without putting it in the context of theology, for in the Reconstructionist worldview one's understanding of God defines everything else in life. Because of this, Reconstructionist politics cannot be understood when divorced from Reconstructionist theology.

Starting with the politics would paint a picture of fanatical conservatives who only want to take apart everything good and right that American politics has produced; starting with the theology will at least clarify the justifications behind the approach of Reconstructionists, if not quite alleviate the perception of fanaticism, for theology precedes and defines politics for Reconstructionists.

To be fair to Reconstructionists, their view is not exactly a fanatical view, when its premises are understood. It stems from a basic set of relatively common theological premises (specifically Calvinist) that were, at one time, the mainstream views in American religious thought. Nonetheless, Reconstructionism is different. It is different not because of its core theology or premises, but because of the conclusion to which it takes those premises. It is this extension of its theological premises into the realm of living that sets apart Reconstructionist politics from the kind of politics one might see from other Christian groups which ascribe to essentially the same theology in most

respects, but either do not take their theology to quite the same length as Reconstructionists do, or deny the necessity of theology influencing politics outright.

Theology has to come first in Reconstructionist thinking, both in practice and in observation, despite the fact that the two go hand-in-hand. Therefore, if it seems that parts of the analysis to come on the theology are hinting at and then stopping just short of the political implications and moving on to a different aspect of the theology, that's because it is.

Fundamentally Calvinist in their thinking, Reconstructionists present a very conservative brand of theology. Resting on four fundamental tenets, Reconstructionist theology is conservative in a way all its own, for it takes certain basic theological positions that various denominations and churches hew to and extends them to their logical conclusion. Being conservative Christians, Reconstructionists maintain that "The 'goodness' of God and absolute authority of His word are *a priori* presuppositions for the Christian."¹ Reconstructionist theology consists of four essential positions: 1) Presuppositional apologetics (the view that what one presupposes to be true determines how one will treat the acquisition of knowledge and the barometer by which one measures and determines truth); 2) Covenantal theology; 3) Postmillennial eschatology; and 4) Theonomy. These four tenets must be understood in that order, beginning with presuppositional apologetics and finishing with theonomy. The presuppositional view of apologetics defines the philosophical ground of the later premises, and theonomy is the theological conclusion Reconstructionists draw partially from the previous theological

¹ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2002 (1973)), 299.

tenets they establish. Theonomy as the theological conclusion also defines the politics Reconstructionists develop from their theology.

Theonomy as a tenet deserves some special development on its own.

Postmillennialism is not essential to understanding theonomy as a theological tenet, but the other tenets are important to understanding how Reconstructionists develop the argument for theonomy. In terms of the other tenets of Reconstructionism, theonomy relies on covenantalism and, less directly, presuppositionalism to hold theologically. Outside of those tenets, to be theologically valid theonomy relies on a particular interpretation of Jesus's statements in the New Testament regarding the Mosaic law. Taken together, if Reconstructionist arguments regarding the covenantal structure of the Bible, presuppositionalism, and Jesus's statements in respect to the law are all sound, then theonomy as a theological and then political conclusion is sound and the correct approach to life.

Presuppositionalism

That phrase "correct approach to life" defines the importance of presuppositionalism and therefore is absolutely key to Reconstructionist thought. Developed by theologian and seminary professor Cornelius Van Til, presuppositionalism holds that, in the world of knowledge and ideas, "there is no neutrality..."² When choosing how to interpret the world around them, people have two options between

² Gary North and Gary DeMar, *Christian Reconstruction: What It Is, What It Isn't* (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), 89.

which they must choose as the foundation for their epistemology: the Bible or their own human-centered cogitations on the world. To the Reconstructionist, this fundamental dichotomy exists because of the absolute incompatibility between the humanist worldview and the Christian worldview. Gary DeMar remarks,

There is a tendency among evangelicals to assume (1) that there is an area of philosophical neutrality in the areas of law, education, politics, and economics; (2) that knowledge is somehow “neutral,” *[sic]* (3) that facts can be interpreted without any prior presuppositions, *[sic]* and (4) that the facts “speak for themselves. *[sic]* This is an untenable position. All facts are interpreted facts. It is a mistake, therefore, to believe that the world of unbelieving thought has anything to contribute to the Christian worldview when it is based on unbelieving presuppositions.³

This constant critique of the notion of “neutral intellectual space” characterizes presuppositionalism, for it maintains that anything and everything humans observe is refracted through a specific set of philosophical lenses they choose to don.

Reconstructionist presuppositionalism holds that all people know God exists, but non-believers refuse to acknowledge His immanence and instead create their own worldview predicated on autonomous self-rule.⁴ This follows from their premise that knowledge cannot be obtained neutrally and then interpreted; the very process of acquiring knowledge must be done through some interpretive filter.

³ *Ibid*, 90.

⁴ *Ibid*, 89-92.

To understand the significance of adhering to **presuppositional** apologetics specifically, one must contrast it to the method that Van Til critiqued and rejected in the process of developing presuppositionalism. Van Til developed his method from the work of Abraham Kuyper, a nineteenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian, who argued that Christian thought and modern humanist thought actuating the French Revolution were completely opposed and irreconcilable. Taking this idea of the “antithesis”⁵ between Christian and humanist thought, Van Til analyzed it in light of his reading of other modernist European philosophy, influenced especially by Immanuel Kant’s basic argument that everyone observes the world through colored glasses, so to speak. While Van Til did not share Kant’s philosophical conclusions, he did recognize and leverage the significance of some of Kant’s arguments, and he concluded and argued that the presuppositions one held philosophically would determine how one acted in pursuance of that philosophy.⁶ Put simply: People will see what they want to see, and therefore arguing from so-called “neutral evidence” for God’s existence is futile. Instead, one must begin

⁵ This reference evokes the Hegelian dialectical method of discourse in philosophy, in which one position (“thesis”) is opposed by another position (“antithesis”), and the thinker employing the dialectic attempts to discern a synthesis that develops another position out of the thesis-antithesis conflict. Judging by the direction of Kuyper’s thought, I think it probable his thought was influenced by Hegel’s arguments and used dialectic to his own purposes, employing his own presuppositionalist thought within Hegel’s system. To see the impact of presuppositionalism, consider these two uses of dialectic and presuppositions: Presupposing the existence and infallibility of God as the grounding point of his dialectical argument, Kuyper developed a powerful apologetic method that later spurred a movement, Christian Reconstruction. Karl Marx also employed the dialectical method, but he presupposed the non-existence of God, and in part from this philosophical position, he developed a new, remarkably powerful brand of communism.

⁶ Michael J. McVicar, *Christian Reconstruction: R.J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 38-39.

paradigmatically from the one right philosophical perspective and then look at the world, for only then will one see things correctly.

To Reconstructionists, the impact of this position is that how one thinks from the outset determines in hugely important ways how one acts. Consequently, to them, one's view of the facts will either produce hugely beneficial results, or it will end in a contradiction and self-destruction.

Covenantalism

Standing on the presupposition of the truth of the Bible and the supremacy of God, Reconstructionists operate entirely on the structure and paradigm laid down in the Bible. The question then becomes, how does one interpret the content of the Bible? Calvinists in general tend to hew to a hermeneutic known as covenantal theology, which is one of two major hermeneutical approaches: covenantalism and dispensationalism.

The crux of dispensational theology is that God organizes His relationship with humanity (referred to by dispensationalists as an "economy," in the spirit of the concept of household management expressed in the Greek *oikonomia*) differently depending on the age in which humanity is placed, and therefore God's promises to and relationship with His people change over time. As Paul Enns puts it, "A dispensationalist is simply one who recognizes that God deals differently with people in different ages or economies." Especially notable in this context is that dispensationalists argue that God gave the law as a dispensation of salvation by works with ancient Israel (the third dispensation), but God has since instituted the dispensation of grace in the current age,

and therefore the present church is not bound by the law in any way. Further, the law was established during the Mosaic dispensation in order to demonstrate the sin in which man lives due to the Fall of Adam (the second dispensation, according to most dispensationalists) and point to Christ, the dispensation of grace.⁷

Unlike dispensationalists, covenantalists read the Bible in light of the covenants God enters into between Himself and humanity and (in some systems of covenantal theology) covenants implied by situations and times, even if God does not explicitly state that a covenant is entered into. Broadly, the two covenants between God and the whole of humanity are, in covenantal thinking, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Enns explains the covenant of works as a situation in which “God enter[s] into a covenant with Adam as the federal head (representative) of the human race in which God promised to bless Adam with eternal life if he would obey; if he disobeyed God, Adam would be judged with death.”⁸ In other words, Adam (and through him all of humanity) was tasked with living righteously as God commanded him; if he didn’t, he would face death as the natural consequence of disobeying God.

These two covenants, as read by covenantalists, are plainly analogous to the dispensations, though unlike the dispensations, the covenants are fewer in number (though various covenants are seen in the Bible between God and specific persons or peoples, such as the covenants between God and Noah, Abraham, Moses, etc., and the whole nation of Israel) and are not predicated on differences in how God deals with humanity throughout time. One of the fundamental premises of covenantal theology is

⁷ Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 513-520.

⁸ *Ibid*, 507.

that salvation has always been by grace through faith and not by works; this distinguishes it significantly from most dispensational thinking, for it holds that grace stands eternally as the mode of salvation—including and especially in the covenant of law—whereas some dispensationalists tend to argue that while grace has been the overriding characteristic of salvation for all of time, the Mosaic dispensation (covering the periods where the law was revealed, the kings were instituted, and the prophets were instituted) was characterized by focus on obedience to the law as the conduit of grace, one might say—leading to the position that in the Old Testament economy, grace was given only as a reward for works, which the covenantalist rejects outright.

Reconstructionists argue that the truly Biblical hermeneutic is the covenantal approach. Bahnsen in particular emphasizes the importance of understanding the Bible in its covenantal structure, devoting twenty pages to it in *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*. Covenantal reading of the Bible is absolutely key to understanding Reconstructionist theology, for covenantalism forms an essential part of the argument in favor of theonomy.

According to Reconstructionists, dispensationalism maintains that the two Testaments of the Bible are discontinuous—that is, only what of the Old Testament God repeats in the New Testament revelation still applies. For what dispensationalists do hold this position, the argument develops from the view that God's means of revelation and dealing with man changes from dispensation to dispensation, and therefore revelation is discontinuous (cf. previous brief description of dispensationalism)—in other words, only what is given in that period of revelation applies, and if anything from the previous dispensation and revelation applies in the current dispensation of revelation, then God

will specifically reveal that. Covenantalists, at least of the Reconstructionist breed, reject this argument, holding, “Orthodox theology, with its dogma of the immutability of God, should recognize as an interpretative principle the unity and continuity of all God’s inscripturated revelation; only the Author of Scripture can discontinue what He has said previously.... We must live by *every* Scripture unless God explains otherwise...”⁹

Therefore, under the covenantal structure of the Bible, every part of Scripture applies to all of life, and what applies when changes only if God changes it.

Toward this point, Bahnsen argues that salvation by faith—and not by the law—has always been universal to God’s scheme of salvation, for “...fundamental to the keeping of the law was faith (Deut. 1:32; 9:23; 10:12; especially 6:2). Even the ceremonies of the Older Testament were effective only when they were a manifestation of faith.”¹⁰ He goes on to point out, “Jesus Himself states that *law* had as its *weightier* matters mercy and faith (Matt. 23:23)! Because dispensationalism fails to see this [*sic*] it characterizes the Mosaic period as law in contrast to grace, and the gospel period as grace in contrast to law; the inevitable result of such a false antithesis is that dispensationalism is led into a false view of the law’s place in the sphere of grace.”¹¹ Here Bahnsen critiques the dispensational disjunction between the Testaments and therefore ultimately between the law and grace on the basis of the “interpretative principle” that all revelation by God is continuous, and only God can modify the applicability or relevance of previous revelation; since Jesus—being God—did not repudiate the law or its concern with mercy

⁹ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2002 (1973)), 183.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 186.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 186-187.

and faith, then one can see, logically, that the law applies still. This example illustrates the interpretive framework that Reconstructionists operate from and gives a foretaste of its importance to the development of the argument for theonomy.

Reconstructionists often critique dispensationalism in the course of defending their approach to covenantalism, so it is helpful to understand the former when reading their defense of the latter. In the end, the differences between dispensational and covenantal theology are quite simple. The core differences come down to this: Dispensationalists segregate different periods of revelation and the responsibilities God assigns to humanity, and they segregate the applicability of certain parts of God's revelation depending on the structure of the relationship between God and humanity; covenantalists argue that the same basic relationship has existed all along, but God illustrated different portions of that relationship at different times through one complete, unified revelation.

Postmillennialism

Reconstructionists hew to a particular strain of eschatology (theology of the end-times) called "postmillennialism." Most basically, eschatology works through the question of how the future will look. Reconstructionists argue that the proper perspective on the future focuses on Biblically mandated work of the church to spread God's kingdom across all the world. Postmillennial eschatology holds that God will remake society through the work of Christians to spread His kingdom, ruled by Jesus from Heaven. Postmillennialism serves a key role in Reconstructionist thinking because it

defines—indeed, dictates—their hope for the world, and especially their view of the role of the church in spreading the kingdom of God throughout the whole Earth.

The defining aspect of postmillennialism is the belief that God’s Kingdom (God’s definitive, total rule over all the Earth by His law) will grow in the world progressively: “...although the Kingdom was established *definitively* in the finished work of Christ, it is established *progressively* throughout history... growing stronger and more powerful as time goes on. ... We can experience *progressive* triumph *now*, because Jesus Christ *definitively* triumphed over Satan in His life, death, resurrection, and ascension.”¹² Most eschatologies begin from the position that the Kingdom of God has already come in some respect and will be consummated when Jesus returns to the Earth finally. Indeed, the only real difference among most doctrines of eschatology is in how the adherents interpret the Scriptures surrounding Jesus’s Second Coming to Earth. This view of the Kingdom is, as Gary DeMar puts it, an “already–not yet” perspective which says that God’s Kingdom has come but has yet to be consummated, though Jesus rules from Heaven.¹³ DeMar points out, “‘Of this world’ does not have reference to *where* Jesus’ kingdom operates but only the source of His kingdom’s power. ... Reconstructionists view the present-operating kingdom as a *decentralized* social order where no individual or group of individuals has absolute power. Jesus rules from heaven and delegates *limited* authority to individuals and institutional governments such as families, churches, and civil governments.”¹⁴ In other words, the Kingdom of God is not an earth-bound kingdom, nor a kingdom that

¹² *Ibid*, 73.

¹³ Gary North and Gary DeMar, *Christian Reconstruction: What It Is, What It Isn't* (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), 96.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 98, 99.

relies only on the power of the church on Earth, but a kingdom of spiritual power, ruled from Heaven, operating through the church on Earth. David Chilton summarizes in a sentence the thrust of this interpretation of God's Kingdom and Jesus's reign: "From His throne in heaven, Christ is already ruling the world."¹⁵

By comparison, this sets postmillennialism apart from the seeming arch nemesis of the Reconstructionists, premillennialists (who are also purveyors of that hated hermeneutic dispensationalism), in the respect that premillennialism holds that God's Kingdom comes at Jesus's Second Coming, and therefore the Kingdom of God is not fully established until after the church is removed and the Earth endures the Tribulation. (Different strains of premillennialism hold to somewhat different perspectives on the timeline and order of events, but that sketch gives the basic outline of the events premillennialist eschatology holds will occur in the end times.) Postmillennialists argue that the Great Commission—Jesus's command to His disciples in Matthew 28:19-20 to "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them all these things I have taught you here today" (NKJV)—is a command to go and spread the Kingdom of God, for at that time Jesus ascended to Heaven and took His seat on His throne at the right hand of God, thereby fulfilling the prophecy of David and taking up rule over His Kingdom from Heaven (cf. Chilton's remarks on David's prophecy already quoted).

The progressive view of history and Christianity implied in Reconstructionist postmillennial doctrine is absolutely central to Reconstructionist thought. Without it, they cannot claim the progressive victory of Christ that they assert, as predicated on Christ's

¹⁵ David Chilton, *Paradise Restored* (Tyler: Dominion Press, 1994), 71.

definitive victory over sin and Satan through His life, death, resurrection, and ascension to Heaven. Put another way, Reconstructionists take on the responsibility to spread the effects of Jesus's work to all the Earth, regenerating all of society under the reign of Christ, a work to be consummated and made complete when Jesus returns to judge the whole world under His law.

Theonomy

“His law” is the next tenet to discuss, for that is theonomy. Theologically, theonomy is the conclusion of covenantal unity and presuppositional apologetics together, and the mechanism of the worldwide regeneration countenanced by postmillennialism. Theonomy as a doctrine states that the law is eternal and universal. Theonomy is the genesis, cornerstone, and conclusion of this whole system of thought. Without it, Reconstructionism cannot exist, for it is the organizing principle of Reconstructionist theology, politics, and sociology.

Standing contrary to the beliefs of most evangelicals (and most other brands of Christianity, for that matter), the Reconstructionist maintains that the law still stands as mandatory in the present age; it is complete and flawless in every detail, covering all aspects of life. Consequently, a truly Christian life abides by these laws and brings them to bear on society, as they do already and have for all eternity; the Christian brings their eternal authority to bear concretely on all of life. The way to live well, then, is to address all issues and answer all questions through the application of God's Word, which is defined first and foremost by His law. Bahnsen summarizes this well when he writes,

“The Older Testament commandments are not mere artifacts in a religious museum, nor are they ideals suspended over an age of parenthesis and appropriate only for the coming day of consummation. They are the living and powerful words of God, directing our lives here and now.”¹⁶

It is important to keep something clear: Ascribing to theonomy does not necessarily make one a Reconstructionist. As a doctrine, one can arrive at theonomy from a variety of angles. The ones described here are the specifically Reconstructionist approaches, though some subscribe to theonomy using the same arguments Reconstructionists advance in support of that particular doctrine, without accepting the other doctrines that compose specifically Reconstructionist thought. Therefore, it is possible to be a theonomist and not a Reconstructionist. However, it is impossible to be a Reconstructionist while rejecting the doctrine that theonomy applies to contemporary society.

This portion on theonomy will take three parts. The first will discuss Reconstructionists’ interpretation of what Jesus specifically said about the law, particularly in Matthew 5:17-20, the key passage in which Jesus addresses the law’s validity. The second part will discuss theonomy as justified under Reconstructionists’ covenantal approach to theology. The third and final part will discuss how the Bible treats the law in respect to non-Jewish nations. These three parts will cover the last few relevant aspects of Reconstructionist theology and set up fully the discussion to follow of Reconstructionist politics as defined and determined by their whole theology. Almost all

¹⁶ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2002 (1973)), 36.

of the Reconstructionist work cited in the following parts will come from Greg Bahnsen, because he does so the most clearly and systematically, not because other Reconstructionist writers do not develop these themes. For other writers, the themes and premises are implicit or mentioned in the course of developing another argument.

Part I: Jesus's Project In Respect to the Law

For the Biblical scholar, how Jesus treats the law defines how the Christian, being a follower of Jesus's commands, ought to treat the law. It is relevant, then, to examine in some detail what Reconstructionists, as Christians, argue Jesus's stance is in relation to the law so that one may understand their theology of the law. Bahnsen analyzes this issue in exhaustive (and sometimes exhausting) detail. He addresses two basic questions: 1) How did Jesus treat the law in Matthew 5:17-20, when Jesus addresses the law in the Sermon on the Mount, His most direct treatment of the law; and 2) How do other commenters treat this passage? The second question gives light to how Reconstructionists work to dispel views on the law they deem incorrect, indicating as well how they develop their own view.

From the outset, Bahnsen argues that the statements of Jesus regarding the law in Matthew 5:17-20 are not a repudiation of the law in any way¹⁷, but a wholehearted, unconditional affirmation of the law and its binding nature. In verse 17, Jesus states, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to

¹⁷ Bahnsen summarizes the various approaches to this passage in pages 41-44 of *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*.

fulfill” (Matt. 5:17, NKJV). Bahnsen makes especial note of the fact that Jesus in verse 18 “assumed the very most authoritative teaching stance (e.g., ‘*truly* I say to you’) and could have abrogated the law if that had been His divine desire. The explicit and emphatic affirmation of the law’s authority [in verse 18] does not allow one to take ‘fulfillment’ in verse 17 as any sort of euphemism for ‘relaxation’ or ‘invalidation’” (internal footnote omitted).¹⁸ Furthermore, he argues that the thrust of Matthew 5:17 is not that Jesus intended to remove the law in its entirety, or even partially; therefore, Jesus—the God-incarnate Messiah sent of God the Father, holding divine authority—never intended to remove the law’s applicability in His sovereign teaching, and He enjoins His listeners strongly against thinking so.¹⁹

Bahnsen critiques other commenters who maintain that Jesus meant merely that by how He lived and obeyed the law, He would set an example to other believers in how to obey the spirit of the law, but He did not affirm that the law in its details bound His followers. Bahnsen responds that Jesus establishes His intention toward the law at the outset, for after affirming the law in His teaching (verse 17), Jesus goes on to “correct misinterpretation of the divine demands [contained in the law]. . . . most telling is the fact that verses 18 and 19 following, which explain and apply verse 17 of Matthew 5, mention only the *law*” and nothing else, not His life as example or the attitude one has toward the law. To Reconstructionists, then, the law is inescapably affirmed by Jesus in every detail (“one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled”). Jesus opens His statements by affirming the law’s relevance and reinforces this initial stance.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 49-51.

Jesus states that He came to “fulfill” the law. What does it mean for the law to be “fulfilled”? And how did Jesus do so? Bahnsen examines several major approaches to answering those questions and responds to each one in turn. The first possible interpretation holds that Jesus meant by “dismantle” that He would end certain pieces of the law, especially the ceremonies, to get at the real point of the law without getting caught up in the details.²⁰ The second interpretation holds that Jesus vitiates the importance of the letter of the law and instead emphasizes a “law of the Spirit,” and thereby institutes an attitudinal approach instead of an approach based on codified statutes. The third interpretation holds that Jesus “fulfills” the law by rendering it complete spiritually, an interpretation which rests on the premise that the law was incomplete as God gave it to Moses. Bahnsen’s responses to these approaches rest on this statement: “Matthew 5:17 must be interpreted on the principle of *continuity* with the Older Testament, for Jesus authoritatively affirms the eternal validity of the law in verse 18.”²¹ In light of this premise, his responses come down to three points: First, Jesus affirmed the law as it stood, without qualification or modification. Second, nothing He said in relation to the law could be taken as ending any part of the law; indeed, He specifically enjoined His listeners against thinking He intended to render invalid any part of the law. Third, He affirms the law as complete in the way God the Father revealed it, needing no spiritual completion or attitudinal emphasis, for “the Holy Spirit inspired the Psalmist to write that the law (in his own day) was ‘perfect, complete’ (Ps. 19:7 f; 119:128),”²² and further to this point Bahnsen cites several examples from the law

²⁰ *Ibid*, 57-58.

²¹ *Ibid*, 59.

²² *Ibid*, 60.

demonstrating that God's concern in it was just as much the internal, spiritual condition of man as it was the external life of the law's statutes.²³

After examining and rejecting each of these interpretations, Bahnsen concludes with fellow theologian Ernest Kevan, "Jesus was not adding new laws but simply expounding a proper understanding of the old laws. Jesus did not need to perfect the law, although He did have to remind His hearers and restore (or reassert) the demand for inward purity from the Old Testament. ...Jesus does not add to the law, nor does He delete from the law; rather, He gives that law the rightful measure, use, and understanding which it had demanded all along."²⁴ Thus, in the Reconstructionist view, Jesus affirms the current relevance of the law as God had written and intended it.

Upon reaching this conclusion, he moves on to examine what, precisely, Jesus meant by "fulfilling" the law. He examines two possible interpretations that he argues are both relevant but not sufficient to explain the full meaning of the passage. The first is that Jesus was referring to His own personal obedience to the law; Bahnsen remarks that this is relevant, yes, but it is insufficient to explain the language Jesus uses and the context in which he uses it and thus show fully Jesus's purpose in making this pronouncement.²⁵ He goes on to examine the suggestion that Jesus meant to communicate that His goal was to encourage and facilitate better obedience to the law by His disciples and the other people whom He taught; once again, Bahnsen argues, through detailed word study, that the kind of language Jesus uses indicates that He is speaking of an action directly contrary to the term "abrogate" (or, in some translations, "destroy," carrying the same significance).

²³ *Ibid*, 60-61.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 61, 62.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 62-64.

Since “obey” is not directly contrary to “abrogate,” the grammar of the passage indicates that this interpretation is not precisely correct, either.²⁶

Instead of these approaches, Bahnsen argues that Jesus confirmed the law’s complete validity:

The Pharisees had reduced and cheapened the law to mere externalism; however, Jesus gave it back its proper measure. Hence He did not merely ‘establish’ the law (in a pioneering sense) but confirmed and restored it to full measure. ... And far from undervaluing the precise details of the Older Testamental law, Christ heightens their importance by affirming that they are as crucial to the law and as abiding as are the general standards.²⁷

Put simply, in the Reconstructionist view, Jesus had not given up on the law, and indeed He reasserted its validity strongly and forcefully. On that ground alone, then, the Old Testament law carries absolutely binding force in the present to the Reconstructionist, just as much as it did in the past for ancient Israel, for Jesus taught with divine authority; since not even He repudiated the law, the Reconstructionist says no human can dare to repudiate it.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 64-69.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 74, 75.

Part II: Covenantal Theology and Theonomy

Bahnsen uses his previous arguments, especially those detailed in the previous part to this section, as the launching point for the argument he presents that the covenants are continuous, and therefore the law still applies with full and complete force in the present. Bahnsen opens his discussion of the unity of the Old and New Covenants with this statement: “Orthodox theology, with its dogma of the immutability of God, should recognize as an interpretative principle the unity and continuity of all God’s inscripturated revelation; only the Author of Scripture can discontinue what He has said previously.”²⁸

Early on, he notes that, “One could anticipate that the law of the Mosaic covenant would have permanent validity from the fact (1) that the *other* Older Testamental covenants have continuing significance in the New Covenant...and (2) that God has such a character that He does not alter the covenant words which have gone forth from His lips (e.g., Ps. 89:34).”²⁹ He reinforces this presumptive conclusion: “The New Covenant presents no new covenantal law or moral order, just as the Older Testament predisposes one to expect: ‘He is the Lord our God; His judgments are in all the earth. Remember *His covenant forever*, the word which He commanded to a thousand generations, the covenant which...He confirmed to Israel as an everlasting covenant’ (1 Chron. 16:14-17). The perpetuity of God’s commandments follows from the eternity of His covenant of

²⁸ *Ibid*, 183.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 184.

which they comprise an inalienable part” (italics and ellipses within the quotation author’s original).³⁰

To demonstrate this position conclusively, he identifies two key continuities between the two major covenants (Old and New), both of which had at their core God’s law: 1) “Both the Older and New Covenants have the *aim* of constituting a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:5 f.; 1 Peter 2:9)” organized around the principle that to sin is to break God’s commandments, found in His law³¹; and 2) That both covenants were founded on and could only be fulfilled through God’s grace, as evinced throughout the entire Old Testament.³² The impact of these two continuities is to demonstrate that the goal and basis of the Old Testament covenant is not in conflict with the New Testament covenant; this, then, rebuts the argument that the project of the New Testament is in fundamental conflict with the Old Testament and therefore that one cannot hew to the Old Testament law and to the Gospel at the same time. Consequently, Bahnsen notes that the two cannot be in conflict because the grounding principle of the Old Testament law—to provide the ethical framework necessary to recognize sin and emphasize that God saves only by grace through faith—does not conflict with the grounding principle of the Gospel—that salvation from sin, understood as transgressing God’s commandments, comes only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, who lived out the law fully.

In pursuit of this point, Bahnsen goes on to note two significant points: First, Jesus’s statements in Matthew 5:17-20 fit the structure of a renewal of the covenant between God’s people and Himself, since Jesus reasserts the binding nature of the law, in

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

³² *Ibid.*, 185-188.

the same pattern as God the Father did at various times in the Old Testament. Second, “Forgiveness from God, of course, was not a new thing...and the extent of His forgiveness, which the New Covenant mentions, had already been stated in the Older Testament (Isa. 43:25). What the New Covenant brings is the *assurance* of redemption’s *accomplishment* and the *power* to justify.”³³ Put simply: Jesus was following the pattern of God the Father and renewing—even, reasserting—the covenant between God and His people in the context of the New Covenant. This had the impact, to Bahnsen, of formally reminding the people with whom Jesus spoke, and with them all of humanity, of the necessity of obedience to the law. On top of this, Jesus fully consummated the requirements of the law to give effect to the grace God gave in salvation, for “under the old order [the sacrificial laws] there was continual reminder of sins and the necessity of sacrificing over and over again, *but Christ accomplishes* salvation once for all. Hence God can give the assured word of pardon to His people” (italics original).³⁴ All of this reinforces Bahnsen’s argument that the covenantal structure of the law as affirmed and renewed by Christ’s words and actions emphasizes the law’s force in the present period. Thus, applying the law does not conflict with the message and basis of the Gospel, for the message and basis are the same in either case and “Without Christ the Older Testamental law is empty.”³⁵

Put into a nutshell, this entire argument rests on this theological statement: God has made two separate major covenants with humankind united by a common theme: grace. This grace as mercy, forgiveness, and redemption offered to those who follow God

³³ *Ibid*, 193.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 194.

by faith in Him is not antithetical to the law and does not void it, for “the *law primarily and functionally rests on the foundation of grace* as the principle of the covenant between God and His chosen people... Grace requires lawful obedience. The meaning of the commandments is redemption and sanctification (Deut. 6:20-25)...” (italics original).³⁶ Thus, the unity of the two covenants in the character of God mandates His law’s eternal validity and application. From this, the sovereign imperative of the law of the Old Testament might certainly be inferred, given the Reconstructionist perspective on the infallibility and perfection of the Scripture. The unity of the covenants God makes between Himself and humankind is key to the argument in favor of the present validity of theonomy.

Part III: The Law and Non-Jews

The final key aspect of the theology of theonomy is how the Bible treats the law in relation to non-Jewish nations. If the Bible constrains theonomy’s relevance to only the Jewish nation back during “Bible times,” then it would be illogical and unbiblical to assert that the law applies to non-Jewish people in the present age. In the Reconstructionist view, however, because God is eternal and universal, His law, too, is eternal and universal, and therefore applies to all people in all places at all times. His law carries its force because all things, all people, all places, and all times are subject to His rule, and He rules through His law. Therefore, His law applies to the present age and to all people with full force (so goes the argument).

³⁶ *Ibid*, 235.

Bahnsen's arguments in pursuit of this point rest broadly on this premise: "Since God is the living Lord over all creation and immutable in His character, and since all men are His creatures and morally accountable to Him, we are led to believe that God's law (as reflecting the righteousness of God) applies to every man irrespective of his position in life, situation in the world, nationality, or place in history."³⁷ By God's immanence alone, the Reconstructionist argues, we can conclude that God's law applies universally. He goes on to note and analyze the portions of Scripture relating to how God revealed His law to mankind and the universality thereof, which are the two relevant categories of Scripture for this argument. To the first category, Bahnsen notes that God gave His law to the Jewish nation by specific, direct revelation, whereas He gave it to the Gentile (that is, non-Jewish) nations by general, indirect revelation, for non-Jews "have the works of the law written on their heart (Rom. 2:14-15). Even though they do not have the advantage of a *written* (and hence, redemptive) revelation of this law as Israel did, nevertheless no Gentile can claim they were wholly ignorant of or not responsible to God's law."³⁸ Some might be inclined to call this innate understanding of right and wrong simply "innate human solidarity," "the conscience everyone just has," or "natural law," but the Reconstructionist would argue that all of these names are simply attempts to describe what the Bible tells us is the work of God in the heart of man, so that no one may have an excuse; after all, ignorance of the law is never a defense. In this way, God reveals the law to everyone in a general way by imbuing it into each person's heart (thus, "general revelation"). By contrast, the Jews had the law given directly to them ("direct revelation"),

³⁷ *Ibid*, 331.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 332.

which they were also to share with the whole world: “Attend unto me, O my people; and give ear unto me, O my nation; for a law shall go forth from me, and I will establish my justice for a light of the peoples’ (Isa. 51:4, ASV; cf. Matt. 5:14). Such a blessed lamp as God’s law (cf. Prov. 6:23) should not be put under a bushel but allowed to shine into the world so that other men would come to glorify God and serve Him.”³⁹ To the Reconstructionist, then, the Bible indicates without confusion that God intends to judge the acts of all peoples under the standard of His law, and therefore to claim that His law cannot and does not apply now is spurious and starkly contrary to what God Himself says. This, then, accounts for the second category, for the revelation of the law to all peoples demonstrates its universality, and God commands the Jews to spread His law to all the nations, for His judgment and rule are universal.

To reinforce this conclusion, Bahnsen examines how God treats the rulers of various nations, for if God’s law is to be applied universally by all peoples, then one must presume that God has authority over all nations. To this point, Bahnsen remarks, “Jeremiah declares that God tells the local kings that He is the one who gives them power, for He gives the earth to those unto whom it seems right to Him (27:5),” citing the example of King Nebuchadnezzar of Persia, whom God deposed and made to think and act as an ox to punish him for his pride in thinking that **he** was the one who had gained his kingdom’s prosperity by his own autonomous effort, only returning the kingdom to Nebuchadnezzar’s rule once he recognizes God’s absolute sovereignty over all peoples and rulers.⁴⁰

³⁹ *Ibid*, 333.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 335-336, 337.

In effect, God is seen as the king over all nations; no civil government is the final sovereign, and it is subject to the law of the absolute Sovereign, God. Therefore, the civil magistrate is responsible to enforce God's law in the provisions to be dealt out by the civil state acting under God's authority. The state was "to be the avenger of God's wrath...[and] represents God's vengeance when He punishes law violations in society. ...as He judges in righteousness, according to law, so also they are to judge the people by means of God's righteous law."⁴¹ This was the role of the magistrate in Old Testament Israel; it was (and is, according to Reconstructionist thought) the role of the non-Jewish nations as well: "...He is heralded in the Older Testament as King over *all* earthly kingdoms. 'He is a great King over all the earth. ...God is the King over all the earth. ...God reigns over the nations; God sits upon His holy throne' (Ps. 47:2, 7, 8). Consequently all earthly kings must be thought of as God's delegated authorities; their rulership and authority is subsumed under the Kingship of God."⁴² Since, in the Reconstructionist view, God exercises His rule as King through His law, then civil governments on Earth can only rule justly and rightly when they rule by His law, and in so doing fulfill their holy role as God's "vicegerents" on Earth; the corollary to this is that no civil state rules justly if it rules by any standard other than God's law.

In summary: God's law is universal. All nations are subject to it, for it is written on the heart of every person; God rules sovereignly over all nations, giving and taking authority from rulers as He sees fit, charging the civil government with carrying out justice as defined and dictated by His law.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 320, 322.

⁴² *Ibid*, 341.

As laid out in detail above, the Reconstructionist sees theonomy as central to life. Theonomy theologically follows from the unity of the covenantal structure of God's revelation; because it is central to God's covenants with humanity, it is also central to life. Resting on the presupposition of God's existence and immanence over the world as described and communicated to humans by His revealed Word, theonomy must be applied to all places, all peoples, all eras. The eternity and universality of theonomy means that theonomy touches all of life, in every aspect. Jesus affirmed and reasserted theonomy; the covenants of God are founded on it; and God has declared His eternal, complete rule over all things and all people.

III: THE POLITICS OF RECONSTRUCTION

Theology, often seen as a practice confined to personal development and church practice, carries practical, concrete implications as well, and under the Reconstructionist paradigm that the Bible speaks to all areas of life, the politics and theology of theonomy are inseparable. Politically, Reconstructionists develop their views from their interpretation of Biblical law in a practical sense.

At the theoretical level, Reconstructionists argue that all law is religious, and therefore anyone who promotes a legal/political order must deduce that order from absolute, religious principles. Consequently, Reconstructionists attempt to develop a political theory and an institutional framework from Biblical statements. Moreover, they argue that any system of thought or institutional structure which runs counter to (their interpretation of) Biblical principles is illegitimate and tyrannical.

This conclusion comes with a caveat, however. Certain questions of structure and ideology Reconstructionists have discussed at length and answered clearly, but certain other detailed issues of governmental institutions, structure, social organization, and social policy Reconstructionists have discussed but do not necessarily agree upon, and some other questions they have not answered yet or discussed fully (such as a lot of details about certain penological issues). The devil is in the details, and Reconstructionists have not fully worked out the details themselves.

Nonetheless, their paradigm is clear. The question, then, is what sort of consequences this paradigm produces. This section shall treat in detail the political

paradigm Reconstructionists hold and what kind of political structures and consequences this paradigm produces.

Reconstructionist Political Paradigm

“Men will be ruled by God, or else they will be ruled by men who imitate God.”¹

Gary DeMar, former president of American Vision, captures the essence of Reconstructionist politics in this statement. Reconstructionists argue that all spheres of government are unified under the law of God. Therefore, while each sphere has different responsibilities, all are unified under God’s law. God, then, is seen as the first, final, and ultimate ruler over humanity, who delegates authority to different institutions on Earth as part of his rule. DeMar’s book *Ruler of the Nations* expands upon the nature and structure of government in this sense by examining government in light of nine principles, one to each of the first nine chapters of the book. These principles rest on central precepts of Reconstructionist theology and are: first, God is sovereign; second, God established in His law a hierarchical, decentralized political order; third, His law is the standard of righteousness; fourth, God judges those who violate His law; fifth, God is Father and Provider, not the state; sixth, Jesus’s lordship is universal; seventh, rulers in the civil sphere rule as God’s representatives; eighth, government cannot rest on “neutral” laws, only on God’s laws; and ninth, the jurisdictions of different governing institutions are established and limited by God. Summarized, these principles establish that God is the

¹ Gary North, “Editor’s Introduction,” in Gary DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), xviii.

ultimate ruler, He rules by His law, and He has established earthly institutions to rule by His law within specific jurisdictions.

To understand Reconstructionist politics, one must understand first what Reconstructionists mean by the term “government.” When most people hear or use the word “government,” they understand that word to refer to the civil state: “the national government,” “the state government,” “the body that makes and enforces the laws.” All of these ideas implicitly limit the scope of the term “government” to the state, although some will use the term in reference to individuals: individuals are to “govern themselves,” referring typically to exercising personal self-control in, say, alcohol consumption, or in employing common sense; it is not typically in reference to normative or legislative decisions, in the sense of determining for others what they must do. In discussing politics, the Reconstructionist uses the term “government” to refer to every institution of authority. Therefore, while the Reconstructionist agrees with the “common man” referenced just now who understands the term “government” to refer to the state, the Reconstructionist does not agree with the “common man’s” limitation of that term to the state only. The scope of reference of the term “government” entails obedience to law at all levels, not merely the state; as a result, when a Reconstructionist talks about “government,” he or she could refer to any one of several authoritative (in their view) institutions that are all subject to the same law. These institutions are the individual, the family, the state, and the church. To the Reconstructionist, “law” and “government” go together in all areas and all levels of society, not merely the state. Put another way, the Reconstructionist sees government as more comprehensive an idea than just the state.

Understanding government as that entity which enforces law, the Reconstructionist argues that "...God rules every area of life..." and man is to submit himself to God's will; when he does so, then he has submitted to "...Biblical theocracy. ...A theocracy is what God has *already* set up: He already rules in the affairs of men. To the extent that any God-established institution of lawful government, self-government, family government, church government, or civil government conforms itself progressively to God's standards, it steadily reflects *this already existing theocracy*."² This term "theocracy" strikes fear into the heart of any good American Constitutionalist, for at first gloss it appears to mean that the church would take the place of the state, which is not quite right: "This does not mean the rule of the institutional church. That system would be an *ecclesiocracy* (church = *ekklesia*). The Bible is opposed to ecclesiocracy" (italics original).³ Instead, theocracy here reflects the principle that God subjects all governing institutions to His law and thus to His rule. God, then, is the original ruler of society and continues to rule through His law. Using this foundational premise, DeMar states, "The Bible's definition of government is comprehensive. It includes self-government, family, government [*sic*], church government, and civil governments at all jurisdictional levels."⁴

Notice the initial element of that sequence: self-government. This element carries pivotal importance in Reconstructionist politics. DeMar argues, "Without self-government, all institutional governments will be corrupt, reflecting the corruption of the

² Gary North, "Editor's Introduction," in Gary DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), xiv, xv.

³ *Ibid*, xiv.

⁴ Gary DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), 6.

individual.”⁵ Similarly, Joel McDurmon remarks, “Theonomic ethics calls for widespread self-government... When we speak of obedience, and obedience according to the law, we are necessarily talking about changes in behavior.”⁶ Similarly, Rushdoony emphasizes that the law begins with individuals: “God, in creating man, ordered him to subdue the earth and to exercise dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28). ... The law remains central to God’s purpose. Man has been reestablished into God’s original purpose and calling. Man’s *justification* is by the *grace* of God in Jesus Christ; man’s *sanctification* is by means of the *law* of God. ... Man is summoned to create the society God requires” (italics original).⁷ From the outset, Reconstructionists understand God’s statements in the Bible regarding government as establishing it first and foremost in the individual.

This emphasis on government beginning with the individual is pivotal, for Reconstructionists rely on the sanctifying nature of the law. Bahnsen explains this concept: “To be sanctified is to be ‘set apart’ *by* and *unto* God, so that the Christian is recreated after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness and empowered by the Holy Spirit to die progressively unto sin and live more and more in conformity with God’s will.”⁸ This standard of righteousness as Bahnsen explains it refers to the continual growth of the Christian in the pattern of law obedience that Jesus set by paying the juridical penalty of sin (being violation of God’s law) before God through His death on

⁵ *Ibid*, 7.

⁶ Joel McDurmon, *Bounds of Love: An Introduction to God’s Law of Liberty* (Powder Springs: American Vision Press, 2016), 109.

⁷ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law: Volume One* (Vallecito: Chalcedon Foundation, Inc., 2012 (1973), Kindle Version 1.0), 11, 12.

⁸ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 3rd ed (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2002 (1973)), 157, 160.

the cross, thereby bringing man back into the condition of righteousness before God. Jesus, therefore, in His life, death, resurrection, and ascension, not only fulfilled the law in the legal sense, but also patterned in His life proper obedience to the law, in every detail, so that the Christian may know how to live righteously. This point is the corollary to the larger point of Reconstructionists that the law of God necessarily changes the nature, thought, and actions of man to make them more like God and therefore more just.

These regenerated, self-governed individuals take this government (the rule of God's law over and through all worldly institutions) and bring it to the institutions by which they rule for God's dominion. Rushdoony, in the passages quoted above, refers more than once to the concept of dominion, either by name or by reference to its effects: dominion means to govern all the Earth by God's law. DeMar argues that the hierarchy of government begins with and is predicated upon God's "Independent and Unlimited Governing Authority," with all other institutions under the authority of man, authority limited by and dependent upon God's authority. Thus, God grants limited governing authority to man in order to make him, in Bahnsen's word, God's "vicegerent" on Earth.⁹

Since God holds first authority and has the only total authority, Reconstructionists argue that each of the earthly institutions of government stands equally with the other ones. Therefore, DeMar argues, "We owe no single earthly authority our total allegiance. ...God's design in establishing multiple authorities means that no one government should cancel the authority of any other government. Ideally, all legitimate governments cooperate. ...Each exercises real power in its limited sphere of operation."¹⁰ DeMar's

⁹ Gary DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 32.

further conclusions regarding the nature of political structure and thought and how people ought to respond in light of how God has ordered the political sphere warrant some examination s:

...no one institution, group, nation, or society is ultimate. This opposes the idea that the one should be ultimate. If the one becomes ultimate, an institution, group, church, nation, or society can claim to be the final arbiter of truth and power, putting all diversity under its rule. Only God is ultimate... Thus, the one and the many in society are balanced under the one authority of the Triune God.

Many delegated governments decentralize the centers of power. ...

Reclamation of multiple authorities comes about when the individual assumes his responsibilities under God and thoroughly transforms his family, and working with other like-minded individuals, transforms his school, church, vocation, local community, state, and national civil government. ...Regeneration, the basis of all godly authority, begins with God working in the individual, and it extends into every facet of life.¹¹

This passage presents several remarkable features. First to note, and probably most important, is the emphasis once again on individual submission to God first, and then submission of institutions to God. This employs again DeMar's earlier remarks on individual self-government and Bahnsen, Rushdoony, and McDurmon's remarks on the necessity of regeneration and sanctification in people to produce wider change. Second, this passage rests on the principle of totality: God's Law governs totally. Later analysis

¹¹ *Ibid*, 33.

shall examine some external critiques of Reconstruction that assert Reconstruction is a latently totalitarian movement; while some of these critiques are off-base, it is undeniable that Reconstructionism is a totalizing worldview. For now it is sufficient to remark that the totalizing factor is there, but the relevant question is less, “Is it totalizing?” than it is, “What will this totalizing view produce? Tyranny or freedom?” This question will be treated in detail later. Third, the concept of “the one and the many”: Typically, this phrase as used in the context of political science refers to the conflict between the political value of order through centralized authority and decision-making and the political value of freedom through collective, democratic decision-making, usually in a decentralized structure of authority. DeMar does not exactly ignore this meaning in his use, but he puts a somewhat different spin on the phrase. In his use, that phrase refers to the idea that a society should not—indeed, must not—place full governing authority in one single institution out of the three major governing institutions (family, church, state), for to do so would be to establish that institution as the fully sovereign institution. This is in direct conflict with modern democratic sensibilities that center the creation and administration of law in the state. Fourth, in the same vein, multiple authorities are necessary to freedom under God’s law, for division of authority among different spheres of government prevents tyranny and corruption from developing. Fifth, development of diverse authorities which protect society’s freedom under God progresses only when men are regenerated under God and are thereby enabled to carry out their holy responsibility to the law.

These features play into Reconstructionist views on democracy and the proper *locus* of governing authority. It should be quite clear that Reconstructionists do not favor

centralized human authority. Neither, however, do they favor democracy, even referring to democracy as heresy, along the way condemning natural law theory. Predictably, these positions hardly boost cooperation between Reconstructionists and the broader culture. Interestingly (and, to the contemporary proponent of democracy, strangely), Rushdoony critiques democracy as another kind of tyranny: “In the 20th century, the popular myth of democracy has convinced many that it is rule by the people when in practice the triumph of democracy has meant a radical concentration of power at the top in the name of the people.”¹² Rushdoony does not offer any warrant or evidence for this position, but it defines nonetheless the general position of Reconstructionists in respect to contemporary democracy. Radical concentration of power is hardly the Biblical model, to the Reconstructionist; moreover, democracy rests on the principle that people make the law, which is wholly antithetical to the Reconstructionist paradigm, especially in relation to DeMar’s “one, many” concept.

Given this position, it is hardly surprising to hear a Reconstructionist condemning democracy as a heresy, especially in light of Reconstructionist views on natural law theory, a core component of modern arguments for democracy. Natural law holds that the very order of nature necessitates certain laws protecting the natural rights of people. Often, this position is employed to refute the idea that one needs a specially revealed law in order to justify respecting people and protecting human life, among other worthy and notable projects of the state. Rushdoony in particular critiques this position: “The natural world around us is totally governed by God and His law. There are laws operative in and

¹² Rousas John Rushdoony, *Volume Three: The Institutes of Biblical Law: The Intent of the Law* (Vallecito: Ross House Books, 1999), 112.

over the natural world...but never as closed systems. When and where God's revealed law is denied, God's absolute decree and law in the natural world is also ultimately denied. It is impossible to create a natural law-philosophy: it vanishes into nothingness."¹³ He goes on to remark that most purveyors of natural law theory in the church attempted to use it to generate common ground with non-Christians so as to foster cooperation. He critiques this approach on the ground that "This natural law philosophy rests itself on the ultimacy of man's mind and [*sic*] it appeals to a common rationality in all men. But the fallen man uses his reason as an instrument of his warfare against God, and thus the common aspect of the rationality of apostate men is the determination to exclude the sovereign God of Scripture."¹⁴

Reconstruction's antipathy to democracy and natural law develops directly from presuppositional apologetics, under which the absolute supremacy and justice of God's law is presupposed. Moreover, Rushdoony critiques strongly natural law's reliance on autonomous human thought, on the ground that man uses his mind to war against God. Paradigmatically, then, it is unsurprising to see a harsh critique of democracy and democracy's usual philosophical grounding in Reconstructionist thought. Instead of hewing to natural law-based democracy as their organizing principle for government, Reconstructionists rely on what the Bible says about government.

In discussing how a theonomically governed society would look, Joel McDurmon remarks, "...in general, theonomic standards would simply require a radical reduction in the size and scope of civil government. It would require a stronger sense of law being a

¹³ Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law: Volume One* (Vallecito: Chalcedon Foundation, Inc., 2012 (1973), Kindle Version 1.0), 760.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 762.

restraint *upon* government rather than a burden imposed by it.”¹⁵ This captures the ideological conclusion of Reconstructionist politics: law is not something government-generated, and certainly not democratically decided. Law is given to government of any sphere, and law limits both the individuals under the authority of that government *and* the governing institution itself, for God commands it to rule a certain way within certain parameters—and not to exceed those parameters; if it exceeds those parameters, the people working in that authoritative capacity have broken the law in their official capacity and are to be held accountable. In contrast to other forms of government, including democracy, Reconstructionists argue that Biblical law operates through one law order by which diverse governing structures govern, instead of one structure governing through potentially diverse laws. By restoring one sovereign law order, the Reconstructionist aims to bring back rule of law instead of rule of men.

Political Structure

Reconstructionists emphasize strict limits on governing authority in every sphere. Therefore, the civil state (the focus of this next portion) would be a heavily restrained organ of government. DeMar’s comments in *Ruler of the Nations* on the principle of the “bottom-up hierarchy” under God’s unified sovereignty are essential to understanding Reconstructionists’ envisioned political structure. So, too, is McDurmon’s succinct ordering of political authority: “Without the self-government of the Christian person,

¹⁵ Joel McDurmon, *Bounds of Love: An Introduction to God’s Law of Liberty* (Powder Springs: American Vision Press, 2016), 86.

there can ultimately be no liberty or prosperity. . . .the civil applications of God’s law are secondary, or at least only complimentary [*sic*], to the vital need for the individual conversion of the soul to Christ. . . .”¹⁶

Understanding those principles, one can move on to discuss the probable structures of civil government envisioned by Reconstructionists, with one last caveat: Not all questions of government structure and how to apply the law under the New Covenant have been answered by Reconstructionists. Some holes in how Reconstructionists would structure the state and society will become evident due to this as-yet incomplete analysis by Reconstructionists of how to structure society under theonomy.

Those holes notwithstanding, Reconstructionists give some description of how a state would be structured and operate in modern society. Gary DeMar addresses this question in *Ruler of the Nations*, building off his discussion of the separation of jurisdiction among the different institutions of government. He describes how, in Old Testament Israel, elders and judges were selected by the people at different levels to create what he describes as a system of representative government, characterized particularly by layers of courts. Working from the premise that God grants authority to people in general and to specific classes of rulers to govern within different jurisdictions, DeMar states, “The people are sovereign, but they are not *originally* sovereign. A constitutional republic best reflects this dual grant of civil authority: from God to men in general and to specific rulers.”¹⁷ This argument reinforces Reconstructionist rejection of democracy, for democracy relies on the idea that the people are absolutely sovereign. In

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 89.

¹⁷ Gary DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), 35, 36.

name at least, the preferred structure is a “constitutional republic.” What, exactly, does DeMar mean by this statement? In leading up to this statement, he argues that because each individual has received the law and is required to govern himself by it, then

Only when people disagree about the legal boundaries between them do they call in the judges. Thus, there is liberty at the individual level, but there is also a court system for achieving peaceful settlements of disputes. . . . The representative is under God and sworn to uphold God’s law. He represents men before God and God before men. He speaks in God’s name. This is the meaning of all government.

The system of elders and judges he references here involves two important points regarding Reconstructionist political theorizing. First, this system is built around the judiciary principally. This much, at least, is unquestionably clear about Reconstructionist thought in this area: the judiciary would play a key role in governing society, even the dominant role.¹⁸ Second, individuals only appeal to the state when they cannot resolve a conflict themselves, the ultimate impact of the principle of self-government; moreover, this principle reinforces the strongly libertarian sensibility of Reconstructionists regarding state power.

¹⁸ This is in contrast to, say, the position of John Locke, who argued in his *Second Treatise on Government* that the important institution for maintaining civil order was the “neutral umpire” the legislature, which existed to make laws prohibiting people from doing what was not reasonable in light of their fellow man’s natural rights. (John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*, 1690, in *Free Government in the Making*, 4th ed. Alpheus Thomas Mason and Gordon E. Baker, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 33-35.)

Rushdoony echoes this emphasis on a judiciary-centric civil order. In developing his critique of democracy, he emphasizes the system of elders, noting, "...the function[s] of the elders of the people were, *first*, to represent the people in the covenant with God, and in the proclamation of the law...*Second*, to appoint a leader, military or civil, to rule over the people (Judges 11:5-11; 1 Sam. 8:4). ...Elders were chosen over each group [of the people within tribes and families] from the tens on up, and they were judges in all cases within their jurisdiction, or, on appeal, to their higher court."¹⁹ Two significant features appear in this passage. In the first place, the elders represent the people in general before God, a significant function of which representation is to choose a leader for the whole nation. Thus, the overall leader was chosen by the whole people through their representative elders, to DeMar's argument that this structure of government was a representative one. Second, the elders not only represented the people in various state aspects, but they judged disputes. Indeed, this function was their principle one: elders were established under Moses for the express purpose of judging cases among the people so that he would not be exhausted by an overwhelming case load.²⁰

Most of the Reconstructionist discussion of civil government involves the judicial nature of the elders and the institutions of civil government in general. To the modern reader, however, this sketch seems woefully incomplete. What about the legislative and executive? Don't these institutions have their place? To that (quite valid) point one must direct the inquiry back to what McDurmon says: Reconstructionists haven't answered all the questions. To be sure, this appears a cop-out to excuse poor scholarship; cop-out or

¹⁹ Rousas John Rushdoony, *Volume Three: The Institutes of Biblical Law: The Intent of the Law* (Vallecito: Ross House Books, 1999), 111, 112.

²⁰ Gary DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), 27-28.

not, this point is important to keep in mind when reading Reconstructionist writing. It is unclear just yet how a Reconstructionist-led government would look and how it would operate. Nonetheless, one feature is quite clear: the judiciary would play a key role in ordering and governing society.

Naturally, this raises the question of how to select judicial officers; after all, the original elders came from among the families and tribes and represented those entities, as opposed to representing a section artificially divided out of a single body of people otherwise undifferentiated formally. Rushdoony hints at a possible answer to this question, casting it in the context of contemporary America: “Prior to 1940, the major activity in American legal system was in the hands of the local justice of the peace. . . . He was someone from the area, at one time from the landed gentry, and the cases he tried were not of great financial consequences and yet were important in maintaining law and order within the community.”²¹ The important feature in this point is that he refers to a system where the community elected the judge. One might analogize this to the elders who ruled over the small groups of families in Israel: this judge, elected by his peers in the community, would handle cases of petty consequence and keep small issues from blowing out of proportion. Moreover, this approach, to Rushdoony, emphasized community and simplicity. He argues also, “Given the more Christian character and standards of earlier America, serious crimes like murder were less common, and most cases were within the jurisdiction of the justice of the peace.”²² While his statement that the lower rate of serious crime was due to the application of Christian law will certainly

²¹ Rousas John Rushdoony, *Volume Three: The Institutes of Biblical Law: The Intent of the Law* (Vallecito: Ross House Books, 1999), 115.

²² *Ibid*, 116.

put off most modern readers, it follows from his argument that Biblical law is paramount; therefore, returning to Biblical law on a social and state level would promote better social order and simplify the process of governing, by his reasoning. Consequently, this idea of small, decentralized governance would be reasonably achievable and indeed preferable, in his eyes, for it allowed the community to govern itself more easily, and since the standard of law would be apparent to all already, since God has made it available to all, governing would be relatively simple.

This approach is all fine and good, of course, until one comes across the difficulty of determining what laws continue from the Old Testament in the New and how to apply them. Here we come to the question of the legal code's structure and penology, implicating questions of legislative and executive responsibility. McDurmon analyzes these questions in more detail than most of the other writers, although DeMar lists briefly some of the functions of the state in a theonomical system. Rushdoony and Bahnsen both focused on the law in a more general sense, on theonomy as theology, even at times explicitly leaving aside the questions of how to apply the law contemporaneously in favor of focusing on the first question of the law's validity. To fill this hole, McDurmon devotes a good portion of his work, though DeMar begins the process in *Ruler of the Nations*.

DeMar outlines the basic functions of the state, as he views them, in *Ruler of the Nations*, summarized here: 1) Civil governments at all levels are to establish judicial systems to resolve disputes; 2) Civil governments are to maintain "just weights and measures," which DeMar (and most other Reconstructionists) take to mean an uninflated currency of gold and silver, though without offering much warrant for this position; 3)

The state at all levels is to defend Christianity as the one true religion (for reasons to be discussed in detail later); 4) The national civil government provides for national defense against national and international enemies, one of its central duties; 5) Civil governments are to provide for quarantine laws to prevent disease epidemics; and 6) Civil governments are to protect private property.²³ In the same section DeMar argues that citizens would be responsible to help the civil government where possible by educating themselves in self-defense and maintaining the security of their own property as much as reasonable. He uses the term “self-policing,” which is somewhat misleading, since he refers principally to common sense measures of self-education in self-defense. However, he does place the citizen’s arrest among these “limited measures of self-policing,” without explaining where the limits are to some of these measures. Since the state carries the primary responsibility to enforce the law, it is reasonable to assume these responsibilities of the individual would be limited, but DeMar neglects to describe those limits.

McDurmon examines in greater detail how a theonomical society would look. He joins other Reconstructionists in a vision of government dramatically reduced in size, which in his view is reminiscent of classical liberalism (to which modern libertarianism is heir in many respects of their view of how the state would function).²⁴ To discuss the specifics of how the civil state and society would be structured, he starts by echoing DeMar’s argument that the state is responsible to protect the Christian religion. However, “Religious liberty would be protected. Those who do not wish to worship Christ may hold private opinions and even practice other religions. Freedoms of assembly and speech

²³ *Ibid*, 77-81.

²⁴ Joel McDurmon, *Bounds of Love: An Introduction to God’s Law of Liberty* (Powder Springs: American Vision Press, 2016), 86.

would continue, and public debate and dissent would certainly be tolerated. Only purposeful, open disgrace and defiance would be prohibited. Traitors and revolutionaries would be banished or even executed in extreme cases.”²⁵ Whether he means treason and revolution in the commonly understood meaning of working to undermine or overthrow the state he does not make clear; his statements seem to leave a bit of space for blasphemy to become or be interpreted as a treasonous or revolutionary statement since the state is to rule by God’s law and protect Christianity as society’s foundation. McDurmon’s sketch would continue to protect some of the basic “democratic” rights that modern readers would want to see protected, covering in basic form the First Amendment, but he appears to leave room for a potentially troubling interpretation of what sorts of statements might be considered “blasphemous” and what kind of consequences apparently blasphemous speech would incur.

McDurmon also assigns to the state the function of maintaining national security (p. 90), though he stresses that the state would pursue war only after prayer and certainty that the war was necessary (“assurance of a just cause,” as he puts it), and only after working to settle the issue peacefully. One intriguing remark in that paragraph is, “This would forbid entanglements through international alliances, especially [*sic*] with anti-Christian nations (Ex. 23:32; 34:15-16).”²⁶ It would appear from this statement, and especially the citation from Exodus, that in McDurmon’s view, the state ought to avoid international alliances, particularly those requiring the United States to fight on behalf of

²⁵ *Ibid*, 89-90.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 90.

another nation; this position, if acted upon, would change fundamentally how the United States acts on a global scale and its relations with what are currently allies.

Further to this point on national defense, he states, “Standing armies and military drafts are outlawed. Militias could only be mustered in response to an imminent threat or attack from an enemy. The law provides several exceptions to militia service, including an exception for those who are merely fearful.”²⁷ Thus, the state is required to maintain national defense, but it cannot keep a military force standing around indefinitely. These requirements would be designed to protect conscientious objectors and also to restrict the use of the military forces to only protect the nation, not to “police the world looking for monsters to destroy.”²⁸ National defense is a priority, but the militia would be gathered only for defense, in his view.

Among the other functions of the state he describes is protecting the foundations of social order, found in the family. McDurmon’s approach would strip the state of authority to intervene in family matters. In his words this means, “Government agencies such as Child Protective Services or Departments of Family Services would be abolished or stripped of power to remove children, divide families, or otherwise impose penal actions through civil or administrative courts.” Moreover, “. . .all government schools [would be] privatized, and the primary responsibility for education would return to the family. Home and private education would reflect the worldview of the parents, and thus would normally be explicitly Christian and express God’s foundations of social order (Deut. 6:7-9; 11:19-21).” He argues that removing the public education system would

²⁷ *Ibid*, 93.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 93, 94.

also necessitate abolishing property taxes, since property taxes go to fund the public education system that would no longer exist.²⁹

Of especial interest are the projected laws on respecting parents. Under McDurmon's vision, those who curse or attack their parents would be exiled on the ground that "Those who attack parents have committed more than simple assault and battery, they [*sic*] have attacked the foundation of social authority itself. ... This law is not applied to *children*. Jesus upheld this law... and applied it to adults who curse their parents... The principle of honoring parents extends in certain ways to other positions of honor or authority. Cursing (not merely criticizing or challenging) government officials or other authorities is prohibited (Ex. 22:28)."³⁰ Thus, civil government and family government are granted very high respect, which is in line with the general Reconstructionist perspective of not allowing the different spheres of government to interfere in each other's jurisdictions.

More broadly, McDurmon sketches a state required to punish basic crimes such as murder (punished by execution), which would include abortion. The principle of liability would apply generally, McDurmon mentioning specifically the law in Exodus 21:29-30 against leaving dangerous animals unchecked, reflected also in the law in Deuteronomy against criminal negligence. Life would also be protected against wrongful prosecution: "Two or three witnesses are required to bring any conviction (Deut. 17:6; 19:15). Upon any conviction, the accusers must be the first among parties to an execution (Deut. 13:9; 17:7). Malicious witnesses, however, when discovered, [would] receive for themselves

²⁹ *Ibid*, 90, 91.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

whatever penalty they wished to execute upon the falsely accused, up to the death penalty (Deut. 19:16-21).³¹ These provisions would be designed to promote “law and order,” with significant deterrents against wrongfully accusing someone of a crime. Killing in self-defense would be permitted without punishment, if the one defending himself were in fear of his life (McDurmon makes this remark in the context of discussing the laws against theft and that a burglar who is a threat to life may be killed by the person threatened).³²

In the context of punishing theft, McDurmon addresses the piquing issue of prisons. McDurmon argues that the Bible gives no sanction to the mass prison system current in the United States’s penological system, whereas the Bible gives a scheme for correctional rehabilitation programs. In this scheme, custodians run programs “designed for training in work, discipline, skill, self-confidence, morality, productivity, and community.” This program is associated with a most noisome word: slavery, as compensation for theft where a person cannot afford to pay the required restitution.³³ Explaining what, exactly, this provision means, McDurmon makes an important distinction: “It is indentured servitude, often simply translated ‘slavery’ in the Old Testament. ...Biblical ‘slavery’ is not slavery in any sense we have understood the word in American history. It is not ownership of a person, has nothing to do with race, protects the rights of the servant, and imposes specific checks and duties upon the custodian.”³⁴ As a penological construct, “slavery” in the theonomical way of handling it is more akin

³¹ *Ibid*, 92, 93.

³² *Ibid*, 95.

³³ *Ibid*, 96.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

to current structures of rehabilitation current now. To the point of the requirements placed upon custodians, McDurmon states,

Under biblical servitude, custodians do have a right to corporal punishment...but are held to strict standards of liability. If a scourging leads to an injury, medical care is the master's duty and the convict's right. Any permanent injury, even as slight as a tooth, results in the servant's freedom from their bonds. When a term of servitude is over, the custodian is required to provide the servant with capital for his future (Deut. 15:12-18).³⁵

Thus, the master of the servant is subject to restitution for any injury he causes to a servant, just as the servant is paying restitution for his crime; furthermore, the custodian must assist the now-released servant to rebuild his life, preventing recidivism by this measure.

Further along the lines of protecting property, the state would be responsible to protect private property as a

sacred right which would remain inviolate from neighbor, state, and enemy alike.

...the penalty for a convicted thief is restitution...specifically, the standard punishment for theft is double restitution (Ex. 22:4) *if* the property is recovered.

This involves one times the value for replacement of the stolen property, and a second times value as a punitive measure (thus the thief loses exactly what he

³⁵ *Ibid*, 97.

sought to gain from his victim). If the property is not recovered, the restitution will include any lost production value—four or five times, or possible more (Ex. 22:1; Prov. 6:30-31). In the rare case a thief comes to his senses and returns the property before he is caught, he is liable only for full restitution plus twenty percent (Lev. 6:1-5).³⁶

Under this structure, property would be virtually inviolate, from theft by private persons with devious motives—and from government taxation. Arguing that “All government taxation is theft,” McDurmon holds that all welfare schemes of wealth redistribution would be abolished, requiring abolition of “property tax (real and personal), sales tax, income tax, payroll taxes (Social Security and Medicare), import and export tariffs, transportation and gas tax, all excise taxes, so-called ‘sin taxes’ on tobacco and alcohol, poll taxes, luxury taxes, ad valorem taxes, all license fees and other fees, and value-added tax schemes. And all others. All of them. Gone.”³⁷ In this respect, McDurmon somewhat stands alone, as James C. Sanford points out in his analysis of Reconstructionist taxation schemes: Rushdoony, according to him, favored maintaining a poll tax to fund the government, this being the method under the Old Testament scheme of organization, and others have entertained the possibility of county income taxes, with the national government taxing the state and local governments for its fiscal sustenance.³⁸

³⁶ *Ibid*, 95.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 97.

³⁸ James C. Sanford, *Blueprint for Theocracy: The Christian Right’s Vision for America, Examining a Radical “Worldview” and Its Roots* (Providence: Metacommet Books, 2014), 111.

In this same vein, of privatization, McDurmon argues for privatization of all currently public services, even law enforcement and emergency medical services and public transportation infrastructure. This includes even immigration enforcement, for private property being inviolate, property owners could decide whom to allow onto their property, including whether to allow immigrants into the United States via their land.³⁹ Note also the above discussion of indentured servitude in contrast to imprisonment: instead of locking away criminals for their crimes, punishment would become a (more or less) private affair of paying restitution for crimes.

Some of what has preceded has involved various issues of social organization (immigration and family laws, as examples), but one that has not fit into any of the other categories but warrants discussion is marriage. Not exactly related to the family in the way the other laws regarding respect of authority are, marriage relates to social organization, in the Reconstructionist approach, because families are structured through marriage, and families define a great deal of social order. In McDurmon's vision of a theonomical society, the state would have virtually no authority over marriage or divorce: "The state would no longer issue marriage licenses. Marriages would be treated as private contracts. Divorces would be handled through private or church courts. Civil government would only enter the picture if necessary to enforce terms of divorce."⁴⁰ In this order of things, marriage would be almost solely governed by the church, not the state. Thus, a law such as the Defense of Marriage Act would not have existed in the first place, nor would *Obergefell v. Hodges* have come before the Supreme Court.

³⁹ Joel McDurmon, *Bounds of Love: An Introduction to God's Law of Liberty* (Powder Springs: American Vision Press, 2016), 97, 98.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 94.

Notably absent from his sketch is a scheme of penology for executing adulterers, fornicators, or homosexuals. Often these laws are held up as principal reasons why even Christians should not support a theonomy, ostensibly to prove it as cruel and barbaric. In summary, McDurmon argues that these laws are ended under the laws pertaining to separation of land and bloodline. His interpretation of the prophecy given to Abraham that his seed would save the nations holds that this prophecy is one of Christ coming, and therefore the laws of separation prohibiting selling land among families of different tribes, using fabrics with mixed fibers (say, cotton and flax mixed), adultery, fornication, incest, homosexuality, and intermarriage among the tribes were all instituted to keep the bloodline of Christ pure, symbolically and literally. Once Christ came, these laws were fulfilled and terminated in their application. Thus, the penalties terminated as well, and the laws requiring the death penalty for sexual crimes no longer carry that penological weight.⁴¹

Similarly, the penalty of death for religious laws no longer applies, in his view, under the “*cherem*” (pronounced “KHE-rum” with a glottal stop on the “ch”) principle, which holds that certain crimes set offenders apart for special destruction by God. Things, such as objects of sacrifice, set aside as *cherem* were set aside “primarily as a substitutionary recipient of God’s wrath. When in the context of a punishment for a crime against God’s holiness (idolatry, paganism, etc.), it meant to be put under the curse of immediate death.”⁴² The crimes listed as *cherem* were apostasy (abandoning the faith), blasphemy, idolatry, requirements of holy war (e.g., the command to destroy the

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 42-50.

⁴² *Ibid*, 50.

Canaanites: under McDurmon's approach to *cherem*, no longer would God command special warfare for His purposes of judgment on a nation), cursing of parents, and the sexual laws (including prostitution, homosexual acts, and bestiality), because all of these laws had either to do with worship (crimes commuted, to him, to the sole judgment of God under the new economy of worship brought in by Christ) or keeping the bloodline to Christ pure. Under his interpretation of the *cherem* principle, none of these crimes falls within the jurisdiction of the state in the New Testament. He argues that certain of these crimes can still warrant church actions, such as divorce for sexual infidelity, but these options are limited and certainly don't involve the state.⁴³ As a matter of politics, then, these laws are a non-issue in organizing the state, at least in McDurmon's perspective. Others, such as Bahnsen, have developed arguments that state, in the abstract, that whatever penalty God assigns to a crime, that is the just penalty, based on the presupposition that God's law is wholly righteous and complete as it stands; the later question, which Bahnsen states applies to the concrete application of this principle as a whole, not just in the area of penology, is whether or not these penalties apply still under the New Testament, and McDurmon's analysis of the theology concludes they do not. Whether others would agree is not entirely clear from the present literature, though it is probable that other Reconstructionists would raise arguments in favor of the death penalty for those crimes. It would remain to be seen which side would win the theological battle, and that battle has not yet been waged among the writers.

On the subject of penology, the standards for evidence are an important aspect of adjudicating cases under the law. Referenced earlier, these standards appear under the

⁴³ *Ibid*, 50-66.

laws in Deuteronomy 17 regarding murder and later in Deuteronomy 19, wherein God says simply that ““One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established”” (Deut. 19:15). Therefore, only by at least two witnesses shall a conviction for any crime be passed, and God emphasizes this particularly against putting to death someone on the basis of one witness’s testimony (Deut. 17:6); testimony pointing to conviction must be corroborated, in other words. To prevent disastrous consequences from perjury on the part of a witness leading to a conviction, the law requires that the false witness face the same punishment that the convicted faced (Deut. 19:16-21). In this scheme of judicial procedure, circumstantial evidence was insufficient for a conviction, setting a high standard for the evidence necessary to convict someone of a crime. This point is especially poignant in relation to the death penalty crimes, since the stakes are incredibly high, and the consequences of a wrongful conviction most dire. The judicial standards of the Old Testament, however, were rigorous and foreclosed much danger of false conviction.

In the end, the structure of a Reconstructionist state appears to maintain some of the same basic institutional features of the current system the United States employs. The laws of a theonomically-governed society would certainly be significantly different from the current order of government, even though the basic institutional structures would remain essentially the same. However, a move toward theonomy would also require significant changes in the bureaucratic organization of the state, not to mention a dramatic shift in how people more generally think about the state’s role in society.

Whether to call this shift an utterly revolutionary one that upends the current order is not clear, but society would certainly look significantly different under theonomy.

The (Potential) Consequences

“Utterly revolutionary” or not, it is indisputable that any approach that changes significantly the legal and political order of things is bound to have significant consequences on how society functions. This next portion of this overall section on Reconstructionist politics will analyze the potential effects of switching to a theonomical society. Two general sets of consequences appear possible. The first set contains the practical consequences on procedural, practical matters of governing over civil society. The second set involves the ideology of Reconstruction more broadly and therefore comprises more of the theoretical consequences of Reconstruction. Especially when reading the portion examining the practical consequences, one must understand that most of these consequences are not consequences specifically analyzed against Reconstruction by outside authors; most of these are the conjecture of the author, developed from working knowledge of disciplines outside of (but related to) political science.

The Practical Consequences

Some of these consequences are fairly obvious: smaller civil government, much greater family autonomy, and much more responsibility for citizens and citizen organizations (and churches) to provide what were before publicly-run services. Most of

social welfare/justice work would devolve onto society at large, the church in particular. By denying that the state has power or jurisdiction at all over, say, welfare, the Reconstructionist/theonomist would privatize those programs, putting responsibility back into the proper jurisdiction of government, as their view dictates. Further, the radically changed taxation regime would limit as a practical matter what the state could undertake, since its revenues would be severely reduced. In other ways the state's reach would be reduced by the overwhelming protection of property rights; without any access whatsoever to private property to build roads, sewers, and other "public" utilities, under McDurmon's sketch, the state would have no way to pursue those projects, and those functions would be privatized anyway. Similarly, by "privatizing" marriage the Reconstructionist would put another area of what has become social policy of the state back into the jurisdiction of the church.

The greater question when one analyzes the consequences of a plan, though, is not what the immediate action is, but what the costs would be. The undeniable cost in certain areas currently under public management would be in uniformity and breadth of service. Public infrastructure and utilities are the most obvious examples. Currently, utilities such as electricity and sewer service are considered public needs so that all people have the minimum services judged necessary to maintain the quality of life considered acceptable. Privatization would necessarily lead to managing these services on a profit-based system, which would permit the managers of utility companies to cut service depending on whether or not a certain service area generated sufficient revenue to keep it in business. The fundamental question here is whether or not privatizing a service and therefore shifting it from a public need management system, where a service is extended to an area

regardless of its profitability, to a profit-based management system would lead to greater efficiency while providing the same scope of service, or whether it would lead to greater efficiency by cutting service to inefficient areas and thus denying necessary services to people who need them purely on profit considerations.

Without having a contemporary example to examine, it is hard to say definitively. Knowing the tendency of the free market, one might easily guess that restriction of service could occur and under the new private model of management people who would have had service from a publicly managed service would lose it. This question applies broadly across all the different currently public services that would be privatized, not just something like utilities. A similar question could come forward about police and emergency services: how effective would this system be? Given examples of people self-policing their neighborhoods and performing rescue operations on their own power during natural disasters, it seems not so far-fetched that a private system could accomplish this. Indeed, private security firms contract with government to provide more localized policing forces at times, especially for special events. Privately-managed police forces are certainly not out of the question, but the greater issue is how efficient this method would turn out to be, and what sort of trade-offs are involved. One potential trade-off of private police and emergency services is capacity. Because these would necessarily be operated on a profit-loss basis, the capacity of response from a fiscally limited organization would be proportionally limited because of lack of available equipment and resources from the state's coffers. Moreover, diverse methods and qualities of training could lead to inconsistent standards of and even ineffective policing among different areas.

Then again, the privatization of public services of all types comes virtually entirely from McDurmon's sketch; most other older Reconstructionist writers, even DeMar, are pretty well silent on these issues, because they were concerned with the more basic project of defending their position from a Biblical and reasonable standpoint. Since they all agree a civil government is necessary, and that the civil government has the specific role to enforce the law and punish violators, most others might agree that a state-run police force with explicitly, carefully limited power would be justifiable. DeMar, for instance, remarks that "the State probably has legitimate jurisdiction to build and keep up roads (Deuteronomy 19:3) and enforce local land use contracts (Numbers 35:1-8)." His greater issue is with a centralized government taking tax money in order to give it to those who have not worked for their keep, and thus steals from the citizens to give to those who do not deserve that money.⁴⁴ To his mind, then, and from the Deuteronomy text he references, one might reasonably infer a limited system of state-developed infrastructure and law enforcement. The text deals with establishing boundaries and highways among the cities of the different tribes so that a man accused of murder may flee to a sanctuary city to avoid being killed by a vengeful family member of the dead person before the elders have tried him properly. Interpreting that passage broadly, then, and drawing the inference that the state was responsible to build some sort of highway by which boundaries may be known and to open up thoroughfares of travel, one might conclude also that the state could justify managing basic infrastructure and law enforcement agencies in order to provide these basic services to the whole community. However, Reconstructionists don't tend to agree on all of these things, and even where

⁴⁴ Gary DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), 76.

they do, few have undertaken carefully detailed, precise analysis of how things might or could look under a theonomical society, leaving this question still somewhat open.

In other areas, the actual impacts are easier to analyze. Economics is a significant area impacted by theonomical ethics, in how Reconstructionists analyze it. Since they agree universally that a free market, minimal government economy is the most Biblical model, those approaches are more detailed and understood. McDurmon acknowledges his debt to Gary North, the Reconstructionist who has done the most work on economics of any of the major writers. While North's work, if treated in detail, would warrant a separate research project all its own, McDurmon summarizes it quite well, and his summary is enough for this purpose. The summary is mentioned earlier: return to specie, remove virtually all state involvement in managing the economy, most especially nefarious entities like the Federal Reserve, and remove as much taxation as practically possible. In essence, North adopts Austrian free market economics and argues that what the Austrian theorists describe are Biblical principles, and he argues to this effect in his work, as evident from McDurmon's sketch. A dream system for economic libertarians, it would give a hardcore Keynesian a myocardial infarction to contemplate such a system.

The arguments for it are simple: fewer taxes, less regulation of business enterprises, and greater competition drives businesses to build the better mousetrap more effectively, promotes innovation, and discourages business from building a kind of mousetrap no one wants. Similarly, if a business cannot sustain itself because not many people (or no people) want what it sells, then it fails, and a more effective business takes its place. This pushes the marketplace to prioritize quality and demand over "giving someone a chance" when they don't have something worth contributing. Moreover,

removing the financial system from the state's control (though not outside of regulatory jurisdiction under the laws against fraud, dishonesty, and contracts, among others) allows the financial market to fluctuate naturally with the market. Furthermore, the laws against loaning money at interest ("usury") would eliminate the kind of extortion that banks and governments can carry out through adjusting interest rates; additionally, this would prevent businesses and the state from manipulating the market in their favor, much less creating artificial bubbles in an industry through manipulating loans.

On the flip side, according to a more liberal (in the modern sense) theory of economics, this sort of system of free enterprise with little state oversight would tend to allow monopoly. Moreover, businessmen tend to be or become rapacious, seeking to make a profit as easily and effectively as possible; allowing business to approach seeking a profit more or less how they like, outside of minimal regulation on contracts and "honest practices", seems like an invitation to manipulators to control the market as they like. A metals-based currency is inflexible, and sometimes currency levels and loan interest rates need to adjust so that the economy can normalize from a spike or drop without hurting too many people. To facilitate this goal, something akin to, if not precisely like, the Federal Reserve system seems very attractive and even necessary to protect the stability and predictability of the market, the financial market in particular.

This point raises the question of how the laws on honesty and contracts, especially, would be applied in a modern context. Do these laws exclude something like antitrust laws? In order to keep the market truly free from the deleterious effects of monopolies and "big business," could it not be necessary to maintain some kind of regulatory scheme developed out of the honesty laws in order to protect against

dishonesty developing in the first place? These are legitimate questions about this economic scheme. The simple point to draw for now: Reconstruction is not a fully developed economic/social theory in many practical respects. Granted, Gary North has written extensively on Christian principles of economics, developing strongly free market arguments in his research, and he tackles many of these questions. However, the point remains that the practical impacts are not fully clear, in large part because Reconstructionism has no contemporary counterpart to which one may compare it. Thus, tentative answers may be given to some of these questions, but until they are faced in actual practice, the answers are far from clear.

Reconstructionists have developed one position that could easily serve as a premise in formulating answers to these questions: “Reclamation of multiple authorities comes about when the individual assumes his responsibilities under God and thoroughly transforms his family, and working with other like-minded individuals, transforms his school, church, vocation, local community, state, and national civil government.”⁴⁵ This is the principle of self-government by Spirit-regenerated individuals who work out their own sanctification and bring that sanctification to every sphere in which they participate. Easily used as a cop-out in an argument though it be, this principle is important to understanding how a Reconstructionist would answer these questions. To a Reconstructionist, the proposed system may not turn out perfectly in practice all the time, but because it is the system God lays out in His law, then one should never blame the system but the imperfect man working within the system. No Reconstructionist ever denies that people are imperfect beings who will fail to abide by God’s law; instead, it is

⁴⁵ Gary DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), 33.

a system in which people are told what is right and expected to abide by it, with consequences, temporal and eternal, for disobedience. With this position in view, one might reasonably argue that the impact of self-government is that the man in business would operate more honestly as a matter of principle, obviating the necessity of these laws. While history seems to speak otherwise, this is not an unreasonable argument from the Reconstructionist view that the law sanctifies, and the regenerated man will bring his sanctification—including greater honesty—into his business practices. Whether a theonomical society would pan out that way is another (unanswered) question. One point is clear, however: Reconstructionists appear to offer practical actions that are remarkably naïve in how they anticipate the consequences working out.

More clear are the probable impacts on international relations, national defense, the family, immigration, and criminal penology. With virtually no international alliance or cooperation under McDurmon's approach, the United States would surely lose its global hegemony. Economically and defensively, this would leave the United States woefully vulnerable, for it would lose its competitive advantage in other nations' markets by withdrawing from international trade alliances and refusing to offer reciprocal advantages to other nations. United States global commerce would change radically, and almost certainly for the worse. Similarly, eradicating the standing army and only calling up an army once a threat is imminent would leave the United States widely vulnerable to attack by a preemptive aggressor. Of course, continuing diplomatic tensions between the United States and another country might give clues that raising an army in the case that defense was necessary would be advisable, but McDurmon makes no provision for time

to gather the fighters, much less train them sufficiently. This plan, then, would leave the United States a sitting duck militarily.

Along the same point, McDurmon's immigration regime would wreak havoc on immigration regulation and border security, which are vital to national security. While his idea does not amount to open borders, he certainly precludes the state from taking on any border protection whatsoever. By his own statement, this responsibility would rest with individuals, who could then hold whatever standards they chose to determine whom they would deny entrance to the United States, resulting in inconsistent standards and blatant discrimination against those considered undesirable. Naturally, this would certainly lead to widespread racism in immigration standards. Therefore, not only would McDurmon's view lead to horribly inadequate immigration enforcement, but it would enable unfair racial and ethnic discrimination, leaving the state powerless to regulate these areas to provide greater uniformity and protection to injured individuals.

This same problem inheres to his view on the state's regulatory power over the family. It is undeniable that child abuse and domestic violence occur. By rendering the family a virtually inviolate sphere of government, McDurmon appears to place it outside the reach of the state. Surely he would not condone child abuse or spousal abuse—yet the system he advocates appears to render the state absolutely powerless to remedy such problems. Perhaps he would argue that such actions would be punishable by the state under laws against assault and battery or rape, among others protecting individuals from each other, but if he would so argue, he fails to make this clear, leaving this problem unresolved. As his formula of government stands, it appears that the state would be utterly powerless to punish or prevent abuse within families, a grave flaw in his approach.

In the area of penology, and especially penal institutions, his approach, for once, follows a more contemporary trend. Ignoring the fact that his approach to penal rehabilitation would proceed within private structures, not through state sponsorship, his system of servitude to pay off debts and cultivate more responsible citizens echoes current calls for penal institutions to focus on rehabilitating individuals. By privatizing this system, however, he leaves open the possibility for people running such programs to manipulate the people over whom they have charge. How exactly that would look is not clear, since it has few contemporary analogues, but it would not tend toward transparency, enabling the devious and rapacious.

Reconstructionists have yet to answer all the questions pertaining to practical consequences, and thus some of them are difficult to analyze. Nonetheless, certain of these consequences are obvious, and they are troubling. Later generations of Reconstructionists may offer more detailed, nuanced answers to how to carry out these ideas for government, but so far the offerings appear naively developed and tending toward messy application.

Theoretical Consequences

Despite some of the potentially messy practical consequences obvious from Reconstructionist idea, critics rarely raise such practical critiques against Reconstructionism. Instead, the more common critiques are either theological or ideological, alleging totalitarian tendencies. The principle political critique amounts to either stating explicitly that Reconstructionism is totalitarian or hinting at that conclusion.

Most of these critiques address the “Religious Right” or “evangelical right” in general, not Christian Reconstruction specifically. However, most, such as Michelle Goldberg and James Sanford, lump the two together, especially since notable leaders of the religious conservatives in the United States have cited Reconstructionists as influences (such as Francis Schaeffer, Pat Robertson, and John Whitehead). While the vast majority of Christian conservatives in the United States are not even theonomists, much less Reconstructionists, their practical political goals often look similar: outlawing abortion, limiting gay marriage, reducing the size of government, and freeing the market for business, among other sundry political goals. None of these goals is particularly frightening or earth-shattering, or even all that new in terms of conservative ideology; what, then, is the serious problem the few commenters who have written on Reconstruction and religious conservatism in general see with the movement?

The answer lies in the prevalence of ideology. Even though most religious conservatives are not theonomists and probably haven’t even heard of Rushdoony outside of knowing vaguely that he was crucial to winning the homeschooling battle of the 1960s-1980s, they and Reconstructionists share a key point of worldview: They want to promote a “more Christian” society. What, precisely, this sentiment means is often unclear. Nonetheless, the concern over religious conservatism generally, and especially Reconstruction, develops in response to this explicitly Christian ideology that wants to create a more Christian-based system of law and thereby generate a more Christian society in the long run.

These critics spend a good deal of time talking about the “totalitarian” tendencies of the religious right and Reconstructionists in particular, as a set within the larger set of religious right folks. What does it really mean to call something “totalitarian,” though?

Any totalitarian state must develop out of a movement, a movement of a whole mass of people behind a singular, universal worldview that purports to answer all questions about reality. Though totalitarian movements have other important features beyond this one of “a totalizing worldview,” this feature is fundamentally important. Indeed, on this basis Hannah Arendt, considered one of the preeminent political scientists of the twentieth century in part on the basis of her work analyzing totalitarian regimes, argues that a totalitarian movement operates on the basis of propaganda. The movement designs this propaganda to instill in the listener the opinion that reality develops toward an inevitable end in a scientifically substantiated way. Thus, the propagandist can persuade the listener to accept certain conclusions regarding the nature of reality.⁴⁶ Moreover, this propaganda is directed at people isolated from a broader community, who want something to which they may attach themselves to find a grounding point again, and this ideological propaganda allows them to ground themselves—while also insulating themselves from reality inside a false reality they choose to believe, under the assumption that it is scientifically—and therefore realistically—inevitable.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ The two classic examples of this are Karl Marx’s historical materialism and Adolf Hitler’s justification of an Aryan eugenic project. Marx in developing his theory of historical materialism, who, not himself a totalitarian, argued on the basis of the material development of history that communism was the inevitable conclusion of history. Similarly, Hitler argued that science and history proved that the Aryans were superior in all ways to all other races, especially the Jews.

⁴⁷ Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism: Part Three of the Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando: Harcourt and Brace Company, Inc., 1979 (1951)), 43-51.

As important to totalitarianism as propaganda is the reliance on a demagogical leader who serves as the movement's figurehead. Arendt notes that the demagogue is necessary to provide the movement with a concrete mooring point. The demagogue becomes the embodiment of the movement's ideology, whom the movement follows in all ways. Without this unifying feature, a totalitarian movement has no direction or guidance and fractures, but the leader keeps the movement cohesive; he directs it toward the goal determined by the scientifically-developing reality the ideology promises. Moreover, totalitarian propaganda fixes on the leader to give their message cohesion and embodiment, so that the converted followers have someone in whom to place their faith.⁴⁸

Totalitarian movements, then, must rely heavily on the use of ideology to accomplish their goals, for without a following of zealously devoted masses, a totalitarian movement cannot survive. To that point, no analysis of a totalitarian or potentially totalitarian movement would be complete without studying and understanding how a mass movement develops from this totalizing belief. Arendt discusses certain of these features in light of how a mass movement already turned totalitarian operates. Eric Hoffer, in his book *The True Believer*, devotes himself to mass movements generally.

He argues that mass movements are composed of those who despise themselves and want to lose their despicable, unworthy selves in something worth pursuing. Tellingly, Hoffer casts an aspect of this point in religious language: "An effective mass movement cultivates the idea of sin. It depicts the autonomous self not only as barren and helpless but also as vile. To confess and repent is to slough off one's individual

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 47.

distinctness and separateness, and salvation is found by losing oneself in the holy oneness of the congregation.”⁴⁹ To him, then, a mass movement succeeds by offering people escape from themselves. Thus, it would stand to reason that a mass movement would pursue those who hate themselves and wish to lose themselves. To this point, Hoffer remarks, “. . . a mass movement, particularly in its active, revivalist phase, appeals not to those intent on bolstering and advancing a cherished self, but to those who crave to be rid of an unwanted self. A mass movement attracts and holds a following not because it can satisfy the desire for self-advancement, but because it can satisfy the passion for self-renunciation.”⁵⁰ To Hoffer, a mass movement has clout and maintains currency because it opens to the self-hating, insecure individual a door to a world in which he no longer has to contemplate his ugly, worthless self—a mass movement offers, in a word, salvation. A mass movement’s power, then, is in its ability to offer “a sense of purpose and worth by an identification with a holy cause.”⁵¹ The singular mass takes the place of the singular individual, giving him worth in how he contributes to the progress and momentum of the whole.

Put simply, Hoffer tells us that a movement arises because it offers a “way out,” where the individual subsumed in the movement is immersed so deeply that when he looks in the mirror, he sees not himself but the movement, having left himself behind. In turn, this leads to the inevitable conclusion that he has committed himself to another way of looking at reality, if not a wholly different reality altogether. Not only this, but he

⁴⁹ Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (New York: First Perennial Classics, HarperRow Publishers, 2002 (1951)), 54.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 13.

looks to the future for his hope: “What seems to count more than possession of the instruments of power is faith in the future.” But not just any faith in the future will do. This faith is of a particularly potent kind. Borrowing again Christian language, Hoffer argues that this particularly poignant faith “has a millennial component. So, too, an effective doctrine: as well as being a source of power, it must also claim to be a key to the book of the future.”⁵² By invoking the image of the Millennial kingdom prophesied in the Bible, Hoffer implies that any mass movement worth its salt will present a rosy, idyllic view of the future attainable through the victorious reign of that movement’s ideology.

This sketch of mass movements in general meshes well with Arendt’s analysis of totalitarian movements, for the two share the same basic techniques: appeal to the frustrated and insecure, offer a salvific hope in exchange for total obedience, and promote a totalizing view of reality that is a touch off but offers what the potential convert wants to hear: that it’s not his fault.

A totalitarian movement, then, might be characterized as one in which a leader offers hope to discontented, isolated, insecure masses by painting a dismal, horrid picture of the present reality, juxtaposed to a new reality envisioned in the future as brought into existence by the movement. Necessarily, this new reality is in some significant part a spurious one based on a fabricated state of things as they stand: if the converts to the movement are not insulated from the actual facts of reality, then they will see the movement for what it is: a power-hungry farce.

Hoffer was no fan of organized religion, as his other references throughout his work make evident. It is reasonable to suppose, then, that Hoffer, could he observe

⁵² *Ibid*, 9.

Reconstructionism, would probably characterize it as a movement with fanatical aspirations. After all, Reconstructionism, in keeping with its conservative Christianity, seeks to win all people on the ground that all people without God's Spirit indwelling them and sanctifying them in God's law are lost and without hope, stuck in their sin. Reconstructionism appears to fit this mold rather well, especially as its critics have painted it, for it offers a millennial hope of a prosperous, peaceful, Godly future to insecure, isolated, frustrated people who have no hope in themselves.

One of the more major writers who has critiqued Christian conservatism generally, and in that Reconstructionism, as totalitarian, Michelle Goldberg wrote *Kingdom Coming*. It is essentially one long description of the "Christian Right" focusing in different chapters on different areas of the political agenda of religious conservatives, bringing out always the aspects in which the religious right intends to change fundamentally the state of American society to better match their view of Christian religion. In her view, Christian conservatives approach politics with a paradigm that rests on the premise that it is the solely complete worldview, and therefore all must submit themselves to it. She argues that Christian conservatives have attempted to take some modicum of control over major political and cultural centers by installing teachers, judges, members of Congress, and others who hold religious right views or are sympathetic to them, thereby leveraging the institutions of government to their ideological purposes. Therefore, she concludes that the religious right in general has totalitarian elements to it, and she includes in some of her analysis Christian Reconstruction as a fundamental element in that shift among conservatives. While this summary hardly does justice to the various subjects which she covers in her work, it is

sufficient to get the gist: she maintains that the religious right generally, including Reconstruction, desires to attain some level of totalitarian control through control of worldview. Similarly, James C. Sanford argues in *Blueprint for Theocracy: The Christian Right's Vision for America; Examining a Radical "Worldview" and Its Roots* that the religious right is essentially totalitarian in the respect that it seeks to obtain control over all aspects of society, both by imposing its totalizing worldview on all people and by using the structures of the state to disseminate its worldview.

These critics, and others like them, are not wrong about the totalizing nature of Reconstructionist ideology. Francis Schaeffer writes in the first chapter of *A Christian Manifesto*, "When I say Christianity is true I mean it is true to total reality—the total of what is, beginning with the central reality, the objective existence of the personal-infinite God. Christianity is not just a series of truths but *Truth*—Truth about all of reality. And the holding to that Truth intellectually—and then in some poor way living upon that Truth, the Truth of what is—brings forth not only certain personal results, but also governmental and legal results."⁵³ Schaeffer, although not a Reconstructionist, argues for the totalizing nature of the orthodox Christian faith that Reconstructionists share. This, he argues in concert with Reconstructionists, produces certain political impacts when acted upon, as any true believer ought to do. In this respect, Reconstructionism certainly appears totalitarian, and it shares this aspect with totalitarian movements.

To be totalitarian means more than just to offer millennial hope to frustrated, insecure people through a totalizing worldview. To be sure, those elements are crucial to

⁵³ Francis Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1981), 19-20.

totalitarianism, but though they be necessary conditions of totalitarian movements, they are not sufficient conditions. To be truly a mass movement, much less a totalitarian one, a movement must seek to offer salvation through *loss of oneself*. That salvific element is absolutely key to understanding a totalitarian movement and to identifying which movements are totalitarian and which are not. In this central respect, Reconstructionism differs fundamentally from a mass or totalitarian movement. The goal of Christian salvation as expressed by Reconstructionism is, instead, to be rendered complete, not to offer a black hole in which the convert loses his individuality.

In one sense, this does require losing oneself: the person who contemplates the salvation of Christianity must be willing to let go of his self-saving aspirations and allow the Holy Spirit to remake him into the fullest version of himself. That, right there, is the key to Christian salvation of the kind to which Reconstructionists hew. No one becomes a Christian to lose himself in the general mass of “Christianity”: one becomes a Christian to learn who he really is and not find his security in what he is able to do, but in what perfect calling Christ gives him. This is the salvation message of Reconstructionism: self-realization, not self-immolation.

To understand the warrant behind this argument and the fundamental difference between the two messages, consider these statements: Hoffer says, in essence, “The true believer is eternally incomplete, eternally insecure.” The Reconstructionist says, in essence, “The true believer is eternally secure, growing into completeness.” The Reconstructionist, either as an individual or collectively as a movement, cannot be reasonably said to seek the dissolution of the individual into the whole, and therefore does not quite fit the mold of a mass movement in this respect.

Indeed, the Reconstructionist core political principle that “government begins with the self-governing individual” reflects this emphasis on individualism. Of course, this individual is within a larger whole, but he must exist as himself for the Reconstructionist political paradigm to even begin to succeed. The individual is not lost within Reconstructionism; he is emphasized as the key institution with which to begin the process of government.

Reconstructionism, in its current form, gives no countenance at all to the controlling influence of demagoguery. To a Reconstructionist, setting up a human as all but the god of a movement would be the worst kind of idolatry, for the totalitarian treats the pronouncements of the leader as all but canonical words of guidance. Instead, the Reconstructionist bows to God as the ultimate governing authority and source of revelation. From the outside, this looks suspiciously like demagoguery of an even worse kind, for not only does the follower claim that the leader is infallible, but the leader’s very existence must be taken on faith. In this way, the secularist might find even greater ground on which to charge Reconstructionism with totalitarian tendencies, for the Reconstructionist attempts to convert others to a cause defined by a worldview that claims to answer all questions about reality on the basis of words supposed to have come from an infallible leader who cannot be sensed in any way and therefore not confirmed. To the committedly secular observer, this sort of divine leadership is deeply troubling in a way more nefarious than other totalitarianisms that rely on the existence of a human leader.

Notwithstanding, Reconstructionism (as it stands now) has no demagogue or attitude of demagoguery inherent to it, and so in its pure form cannot be a totalitarian

movement. Without a central leader (usually of the human variety), a totalitarian movement cannot survive. Perhaps a unifying, electrifying leader could come along to take the role of demagogue for Reconstructionists—but to accomplish this, he would have to abandon the strong denunciations of reliance upon human leaders as absolute inherent to Reconstructionist thought and persuade the great bulk of Reconstructionists to join him in abandoning that tenet, no easy task given how central this view is to Reconstructionists' opposition to idolatry.

Related to the aspect of leader worship is the aspect of totalitarian movements where the leaders create an insulating false reality to trap their followers within a hermetically sealed bubble. Depending on one's views in relation to the infallibility of Scripture and Reconstructionists' perceived tendencies toward historical revisionism, this particular aspect poses a more difficult obstacle to the conclusion that Reconstruction lacks any totalitarian elements. When differentiating between totalitarian and non-totalitarian movements, the question to ask is not whether or not the members of the movement purvey a certain view of the world (any movement does), but whether or not that view is intended by the leaders to bamboozle unsuspecting, significance-hungry potential converts into accepting a false view of reality. Put more simply: are the leaders of the movement trying to hoodwink the followers in order to retain power? If the answer is yes, then that movement is at least moving toward totalitarianism. If the answer to this question is no, that the leaders of the movement disseminate this view with the honest intention of enlightening their followers—especially with willingness to change their own view in the future, given compelling new evidence and reasoning—then this movement, though it be a movement, cannot be said to be totalitarian. In the case of

Reconstructionism, the fact that their positions in certain areas are, by their own admission, incomplete and still developing (showing their willingness to change their perspective, if change be warranted), it seems somewhat far-fetched to call it deceptive in its aims. However, the fact that Reconstructionists (and other Christian conservatives more generally) have a disturbing tendency toward historical revisionism and insistence upon a black-and-white landscape of reality ought to give the serious observer pause, although that tendency is not an immediately totalitarian one.

The final key aspect to whether or not Reconstructionism is totalitarian is its view of the state once in power. Arendt remarks, “Totalitarianism in power uses the state administration for its long-range goal of world conquest and for the direction of the branches of its movement...”⁵⁴ This points to the intention of a totalitarian movement to use the state as a tool for its self-advancement. This aspect is frustratingly difficult to define and analyze in a movement that has not attained power yet, for how, precisely, it shall handle political power, and to what end, is far from clear. Despite this difficulty, one can draw tentative conclusions about how a movement would probably handle state power based on what the movement’s ideology says about the state. Reconstructionists argue that the state is a necessary institution established by God to carry out His law, and subject to God’s law just as much as any other God-ordained institution. However, the state exists, in their view, to enforce specific parts of God’s law to maintain social order. While this purpose does advance the goal of reconstructing society into a godly society, Reconstructionists deny staunchly that the state has the purpose of preaching the gospel

⁵⁴ Hannah Arendt, *Totalitarianism: Part Three of the Origins of Totalitarianism* (Orlando: Harcourt and Brace Company, Inc., 1979 (1951)), 90.

to people. To them, that is the function of the church. Could someone persuasive turn Reconstructionism into something else and turn the state into a tool of evangelism, employing totalitarian coercion? Perhaps, though certainly not while remaining true to Reconstructionism.

History has shown that a powerful leader may turn what an ideology says originally about the state away from its original intention in the name of furthering the goals of the movement more forcefully. For instance, Marxist communism is not a totalitarian movement on its own merits; yet in the hands of Lenin, major aspects of Marxism were put to totalitarian use. one can argue that a movement which does not state a desire for state power as a tool to its own ends is not inherently totalitarian. However, to argue from this basis that such a movement will never become totalitarian is a woefully short-sighted view disproven by history in at least one instance. In the same way, it is not out of the question that a persuasive, charismatic leader who presents a definite, compelling vision that appears consistent with the rest of Reconstructionism, but that uses the state more actively as a tool for spreading Reconstructionist ideology, may turn Reconstructionism to a more state-driven approach. This would carry the potential to have the same effect on Reconstructionist theory as Lenin had on Marxism.

Theological critiques put aside, the greatest theoretical critique leveled at Reconstructionism is the charge of totalitarianism. This critique has merit in certain specific, closely limited areas. On the whole, this critique seems short-sighted, and it evinces a lack of understanding on the part of the person delivering the critique of both Reconstructionism and totalitarianism. However, it can never be discounted that someone with exceptional political skills could turn Reconstructionism to his own devices and

render it totalitarian, were the vast majority of Reconstructionists to become obsessed with political power. Nevertheless, it is ever so important to keep in mind the tenets of Reconstructionism that present formidable, perhaps even insurmountable, obstacles to such a shift: emphasis on God's absolute, complete sovereignty and status of only God and thus only one worth worshiping; emphasis on the decentralized nature of government; and the high emphasis on individual self-government as the foundation for politics. These three aspects render a totalitarian shift exceedingly difficult and improbable. Were Reconstructionism to become totalitarian, it would no longer be Reconstructionism.

IV: RECONSTRUCTIONISM VIS-À-VIS THE U.S. CONSTITUTION

The final question to ask about Reconstruction in America is whether a Reconstructionist-dominated government would be compatible or incompatible with the United States Constitution. Since Reconstructionists have not developed their politics fully, it is difficult to analyze how a Reconstructionist government would treat the existing state structure. However, in three key areas of political organization the results are reasonably clear. Specifically, these three areas are the movement's proposed institutional structure, its theory of law, and its theory of authority.

Every government must operate through institutions, must take some view of what function law serves and how one develops it, and what kind of authority the state is to have and how to exercise it; this last aspect includes also the limits upon authority, especially in light of the institutions of government. Institutionally, Reconstructionism appears to conflict only minorly; Reconstructionism's proposed institutional structures do not differ significantly from the Constitution's. However, Reconstructionist theories of law and authority, which generate from the same foundational premise that God holds all authority and grants it in limited measure to human governing institutions, conflict fundamentally with Constitutional principles of democratic sovereignty. This section will develop these conflicts in greater detail, beginning with the institutional comparison.

Institutional Effects of Reconstructionism

The practical institutional structure of a Reconstructionist government is less than wholly clear. The theoretical structure is quite plainly put: God reigns in absolute authority and sovereignty over everything, and He has instituted earthly institutions by which mankind must govern on Earth by His law. These institutions are the civil state, the family, and the church, and all government of any kind must begin with the first institution of humanity: man himself, through self-government. While these institutions are not the institutions political scientists mean by that term, they are, nonetheless, important to understanding how the civil state would work. Because much of what the civil state administers in the modern age would descend back to the individual, church, or family under theonomical government, the civil state as an institution in itself would become much smaller and have less complete sway over all of life.

But what of the components that make up the civil state, the classic three branches of government that American Constitutionals learn almost from birth: legislative, executive, and judicial? Because Reconstructionists emphasize the need for judicial authority to decide the appropriate legal boundaries between people (to paraphrase DeMar), the judiciary system would certainly remain a core state institution. However, Reconstructionists would probably seek to curtail the importance of precedent in jurisprudence, on the ground that the law is given by God intact and complete; a judge merely applies the law as written and does not bend interpretation to different circumstances. This could raise theological issues of Scriptural interpretation, especially since not all Reconstructionists agree on which laws have continuity into the New Testament Covenant and which do not, excluding the obviously discontinued (in their original form, at least) dietary and sacrificial laws (also known as the “ceremonial laws”).

Thus, it is not inconceivable that the courts could have a role in determining how the law continues into the present era from the Old Testament economy of rule on a theological basis, although juridically the judge would be constrained to only apply the law as given.

Following that thread, we come to face the question of the Congress. It is held in Reconstructionist theory of law that the law as given by God is wholly just, right, and complete on its face. Congress as an institution exists in the Constitution as the mouthpiece of the people through their representatives. To justify this sort of institution, one must accept the primacy of democratically-created law as necessary to developing a just society with respect for the rights and interests of everyone, especially where one man's exercise of his right may conflict with another man's right. Naturally, the Reconstructionist hardly takes kindly to this approach to law, even dubbing democracy totalitarian.¹ Wildly amusing as the contemporary political theorist may find that suggestion, it is the position of at least Rushdoony, and to a somewhat lesser extent Reconstructionists as a whole. Whether they find it truly totalitarian or not, Reconstructionists and other theonomists in general agree hardly favor a democratic method of making law, since it stands on the (to their minds) fatally flawed premise of natural law theory. So, to the original question implicit in this portion: Would a Reconstructionist government have a Congress with checking power on other institutions?

The answer to this question is less clear, and more complex than is the answer to the question of the judiciary. One could argue, quite reasonably, that a Congress would

¹ Rousas John Rushdoony, *Volume Three: The Institutes of Biblical Law: The Intent of the Law* (Vallecito: Ross House Books, 1999), 112.

be necessary to help adapt the laws of the Old Testament that still abide into contemporarily relevant laws. One might take as an example the law in Deuteronomy 22:8 requiring those who build houses to include a fence around the rooftop in order to protect the owner from liability for injury: this law protects persons sleeping on the owner's roof, since people in that day commonly slept on their rooves. Given the general tendency of people in the contemporary United States to sleep in their bedrooms, and to not be on the roof in general, this law hardly seems necessary, but it does not fall among the different categories of laws that are held by most Reconstructionists to be discontinued (e.g., the owner of a house is not put under a *cherem* condemnation for not building a fence around his roof). Therefore, it must still continue, but how silly is this? To the Reconstructionist, the broader principle evident in this law is the principle of liability, expressed in numerous other laws as well. Consequently, a Congress might have room to examine this law and adapt it to situations found contemporarily, depending on what kind of situation arose seeming to warrant applying that law's principle within its more particular context of the owner's responsibility to make his house safe.

In short, the answer to the question, "Would a Reconstructionist civil state have an institution resembling Congress?" is, vaguely, "Maybe." The answer simply isn't totally clear. Now, the existence of the elders over Israel at different levels does appear to corroborate some kind of representative scheme of government, as DeMar argues. (Whether one buys his argument that the Founders got their idea for representative government from the Bible is another story altogether.) To say that the "elders" could be extrapolated into a broader principle of representative government is not unreasonable;

DeMar, at least, takes this position, and other Reconstructionists don't contradict him on it, even though they don't speak to it specifically themselves.

The further question to answer is whether a Congress constructed on the Reconstructionist model of representative government would totally contradict the Constitutional model of the Congress Americans know today. Rushdoony gives some insight into this with his outline of the duties of the elders: They represented the people before God and proclaimed the law to the people; they appointed a military or civil leader to rule over the people (this function they adopted during the time of the kings); they declared war; they negotiated treaties; certain of them carried out religious ceremonies (a function that would now cease since religious ceremonies are the sole responsibility of the church); and they acted to protect the nation in times of crisis.² Proclaiming the law, helping to appoint leaders (reminiscent, perhaps, of the Senate's responsibility to confirm or deny presidential appointees to various offices), and handling declarations of war and political negotiations with other countries are all functions of the modern Congress. "Proclaiming the law" involved laying out to the people's understanding the laws regarding commerce, fair trade practices, currency, and providing for certain aspects of infrastructure, functions all analogous to Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution, along with laws regarding crime and social regulation. If Reconstructionists were to create a Congress to carry out the elders' responsibilities, it probably would not differ too significantly from the modern Congress in its responsibilities.

The third and final institution to consider is the executive. In this respect the Old Testament in general is slightly confusing, and Reconstructionists have spent little to no

² *Ibid*, 111.

time discussing how to organize executive power. To carry out the law's requirements and enforce them, some part of the general institution of civil government must have some executive power, so the better question for this study than "Does the Old Testament law include some executive authority?" is, "Does the Old Testament indicate that executive authority is vested in one particular branch of the civil government?" Some would point to the example of the kings, but DeMar points out that in 1 Samuel 8, God rebukes the Israelites strongly for demanding a king to rule over them like every nation around them had, for this was a "rejection of Him..."³ Centralized executive authority was not looked kindly upon since it was a rejection of God; this did not mean, of course, that God's law was any less binding upon the civil state and the rest of society in general, but it was clear that the Israelites' choice was hardly the preferable one. However, the elders did possess some executive authority, at least as delegated under the Constitution. Would this authority remain with an executive office, or would it devolve back onto some kind of council body (not unlike the executive council of magistrates advocated by James Harrington)? The answer to this question is unclear, though it is fully evident that an executive of some kind would be necessary.

Institutionally, the Reconstructionist model does not oppose the Constitutional model in every way; however, it is certainly not entirely congruent with the Constitutional model, either. Certain shifts would be necessary. Whether those shifts would be seismic is less clear.

Reconstructionist Theory of Law

³ Gary DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), 73, 74.

Reiterated time and again in Reconstructionist literature, the organizing, foundational, fundamental principle to Reconstructionist theory of law is the supremacy and absolute rectitude of God's law. "Man's law" is worth nothing, for man's word, generated by fallen reason and sin, means nothing on its own in this view, for laws purveyed and enforced by human institutions are not law unless they conform to God's law. This particular point would require a significant shift in thinking about the law in the United States. While this perspective, if it gained sufficient traction and support among the general population, could easily be worked into the Constitutional structure and made simply the grounding principle of all pronouncements from Congress and the judiciary, the openness of the democratic structure of those institutions would allow too easily for people who did not share the Reconstructionist perspective to come in and change the law from the righteous foundation of God's law (in the Reconstructionist paradigm). Indeed, this issue is the key feature of Reconstructionists' condemnation of democratic governance.

The nature of Reconstructionist law, then, is quite clear: it is God-given and complete as first given, not democratically evolved. Because people cannot effectively reason their way to truth (cf. Rushdoony's critique of natural law), no democratic government can ever succeed fully at governing justly. Law under God is comprehensive and complete, but it is not overbearing, nor is a terrible amount of enforcement authority granted to the civil state. In general, by the Reconstructionist sketch, the state is responsible to enforce terms of trade, maintain just trade, and punish crimes against life and property. Those few areas of regulation are all that fall within the authority of the civil state in this formula.

Reconstructionist theory of law is incredibly simple: Look to how theology of continuity and discontinuity dictates how one treats the law in the New Testament covenant, and then apply it through the state, through the family, and through the church. In all cases, look first to how the individual is to govern himself in light of the state, family, and church prescriptions, and then society shall run much more smoothly as the regenerated, Spirit-sanctified man governs himself in relation to others. Law is simple and straightforward. Just do it. (One can almost hear Joel McDurmon's baritone voice deadpanning those statements.)

Reconstructionist Theory of Authority

Key to understanding how Reconstructionists seek to apply the law is understanding how they view authority. First and foremost, Reconstructionists maintain that authority is limited: each sphere of government rules on aspects of the law entrusted only to its sphere. No sphere is permitted to interfere in the lawful governance executed by another sphere. DeMar argues, in interpreting Romans 13:1, "When judgment is brought in God's name, it must be within a lawfully designated jurisdiction. Churches do not physically punish evil doers, and civil governments do not excommunicate people..."⁴ Notice the operative term: *lawful*. The law, according to Reconstructionist interpretation, defines strictly the proper jurisdiction of each institution of government. DeMar remarks that, because the father as essentially the governor of the family is not ordained formally as such by anointing with oil (or any similar modern rite of ordination

⁴ Gary DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), 131.

as an authority except by his status), then the family does not have the same relationship to the state as the church does, but the family is governed and directed by the church.⁵ DeMar argues from this point that the family as its own sphere of government cannot lawfully resist the state.

Pausing there, consider the implication of that statement. It is that the church must have some authority to resist the state in some way, and perhaps it could grant the family authority to resist the state in a church-sanctioned or church-sponsored way. In fact, this is the argument that DeMar propounds: “The church is the protector of the family. It is the God-ordained government that alone can lawfully authorize and therefore legitimize family resistance to the State.”⁶ On its face, this is a bizarre (and in certain aspects disturbing) argument that he fails to support with a citation from the Scripture. Since it does not appear that any other Reconstructionist writer features this argument among his analysis, one cannot take this as the standard position of Reconstructionists. Nonetheless, it is one worth noting and understanding, since it does appear among the literature, and it might give some explanation for the bizarre activities of some churches that have attempted to resist the state in some way on their own power.

To be fair, in explaining this argument, DeMar lays out three limited actions the church can take: preaching in general, administering the sacraments, especially communion, and preaching “imprecatory psalms”: psalms in which the psalmist discusses some aspect of God’s judgment for particular sins and apostasy; all these functions are strictly church functions. In another sense, though, this implicit limitation of the church’s

⁵ *Ibid*, 135-136.

⁶ *Ibid*, 136.

scope of action seems to obviate the initial implication that the church could act in a political way to counter what the state does in violation of its proper lawful responsibilities and limitations.

To make more sense of this point, consider what DeMar argues a few pages later regarding “Church/State Cooperation” (a point implying non-separation of church and state, which is disturbing to the Constitutionalist). Citing Deuteronomy 17:18-20, where the king is commanded to come before the priest at the time that he takes the throne and write for himself a copy of the law for him to study while he reigns, DeMar argues, “While church and State as *jurisdictions* are separate, religion is not. Both priests and kings are commanded to follow the same standard of government, even though not all laws apply to each in the same way. We can go so far as to say that the presence of the priests was a reminder to the king that they were to help him interpret the law as it related to civil affairs.”⁷ The most obvious and central point to this remark is that both church and civil state are subject to God’s law, and therefore law is inherently religious and cannot be understood outside of religion. The more important feature of this argument is the implied conclusion: the priest (representing here the church, or religious authority *generale*) had a certain level of authority to exercise influence over how the state carried out its functions, since the state has an inherently religious function in carrying out its functions under the law. Therefore, in DeMar’s reading, this passage points to some authority of the church to advise the rulers, and advice can involve also chastisement.

Before leaping to unwarranted conclusions about how the Reconstructionists arrogate to the church the responsibility and authority to march into the president’s office

⁷ *Ibid*, 139.

and slam down a weighty set of theses against the current government, one must recall that DeMar also maintains that the tools of the church by which it may call out the government, so to speak, are limited to functions of preaching and religious rite, not to policy-making. The basic point here is relatively simple: The church, while assigned a different jurisdiction of government, must still chastise rulers who deviate from enforcing God's law and therefore deviate from their responsibility as rulers.

To call this approach "resistance" against the state by the church seems a bit strange, since it permits nothing but political sermonizing, to all appearances from what DeMar argues. Resistance at the individual level, however, can take other forms according to other Reconstructionists. Gary North compiled a symposium of different writings on Christian political imperatives titled *Theology of Christian Resistance*, including a piece by John Whitehead.

Whitehead argues that Christians are justified in resisting the civil state when the state requires someone to violate God's law. He argues from Romans 13, "...the Bible recognizes no power independent of God (Rom. 13:1). For any delegated sphere of authority to speak of itself as a power independent from God is rebellion against Him."⁸ Romans 13 says at the beginning (in paraphrase) that God institutes governing authorities in order to reward good and punish evil, and therefore they should be obeyed. By Whitehead's argument throughout his whole essay, this refers to following God's law: a government can only be said to be good if it fulfills its responsibility under God's law. Where a state does not do so and "becomes totally hostile to the ends for which God has

⁸ John W. Whitehead, "Christian Resistance in the Face of State Interference" in *The Theology of Christian Resistance*, ed. Gary North (Tyler: Geneva Divinity School Press, 1983), 5.

ordained it, then it becomes lawless.”⁹ Where a state has become lawless, Whitehead argues, it has become illegitimate, and where it would compel a citizen to do something ungodly, then the Christian is to resist the state, but, “By Christian resistance is not meant that Christians should take to the streets and mount an armed revolution. . . . Moreover, there is no example in the Bible of any man of God who set out with the design to overthrow his government by violence. The emphasis in Scripture, as illustrated by Peter and Paul, is that by fulfilling the law of God, without regard for the consequences, a true cultural revolution will occur.”¹⁰ Whitehead comments later that a time for physical force may come, when the Christian must act in self-defense against a physically tyrannical government, but the most appropriate response for Christians to take is to speak out against a tyrannical government’s overreach wherever possible and thereby resist the overreach of a government gone outside of its proper jurisdiction.

Whitehead describes, in short, a mindset in which a person has respect for God and His law first, and then for the state as an institution established by God for a Godly purpose, leading to the conclusion one must resist at least by protest and even civil disobedience unlawful actions by the state, but never by revolution. Bahnsen stresses that the primary responsibility of all people, rulers included, is to uphold God’s law: “Verse 2 of Romans 13 represents the civil magistrate as a substitution instance for God; that is, to resist the former is to resist the latter. ‘The one resisting the authority has opposed the ordinance of God.’ Here the magistrate represents the rule of God, and an offense against

⁹ *Ibid*, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 11.

God's representative is an offense against the rule of God."¹¹ Thus, one who rebels against lawful authority has rebelled against God at the same time.

To the Reconstructionist, a godly citizen conditions his obedience to the state on whether the state abides by God's law and therefore retains legitimacy: "The magistrate is far from wielding arbitrary power, then, but must follow the norm of God's law (as the standard and source of information on justice and penology)."¹² Bahnsen remarks earlier in the relevant chapter, "The fact that the magistrate has been ordained by God places stress upon the supremacy of God, not that of the state. ... The subjection of the Christian unto the state's authority, then, should suggest the corresponding appropriateness of the state being subject to God's authority."¹³ Where a ruler violates his responsibility under God's law, believers are responsible to call out rulers for their wrongdoing, effectively indicting them (in a figurative sense) under the law, as Bahnsen implies in his example of John the Baptist preaching against the governor Herod's incestuous marriage:

In his preaching against sin John indicted the illegality of the magistrate's behavior, specifically mentioning Herod. The summary of his indictment is given in Mark 6:18: 'it is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.' One must not think that John's word was tempered to the point of mere advice or casually spoken on one occasion; apparently his political excoriation was adamant enough that world actually came to Herod and Herodias of it.¹⁴

¹¹ Greg L. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, 3rd ed. (Nacogdoches: Covenant Media Press, 2002 (1973)), 369.

¹² *Ibid*, 373.

¹³ *Ibid*, 364,

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 380-381.

Put simply, Christians are to resist unlawful actions by the state, even using force in self-defense if necessary, but only in self-defense, not in aggression against the state to overthrow it. “Resistance” in the Christian way is to only take place by continuing to follow God’s law, even if in the context of the state’s civil law this requires civil disobedience.

Citizens may not revolt against the state, but neither may the state exceed the bounds God’s law places upon it. Within Reconstructionist thought, respect for authority receives high value, but that respect is given first to God and then to the institutions God establishes. The governing authorities God establishes always deserve respect, but if obedience to those authorities would require disobedience to God, then obedience to the first and absolute authority is required under His law. The church, as a fellow institution of religious governance, carries responsibility to speak out against unlawful actions by the state, as does the individual. Resistance against authority may happen only in very serious circumstances, and only within tight limits. One might put it this way: To a Reconstructionist, the calculus by which one determines how to resist the state rests on the answer to this question: What actually promotes obedience to God? If obeying the state is equivalent to obeying God, then obey the pronouncements of the state. If obeying the state requires disobeying God, then obey God and carry out one’s responsibility of self-government under God.

Authority is an incredibly important aspect of Reconstructionist thought, and citizens are to respect their governing authorities, whether in family, state, or church. Those authorities hardly could be said to enjoy limitless authority, even within their

spheres: all of God's governing institutions, from individual man to state, are subject first, foremost, and last to God's law, to the Reconstructionist. Where they attempt to shirk that subjection, they deny God. The family as a governing institution has no right to attempt, on its own authority, to resist the state. The church as a governing institution has the responsibility to rebuke wayward civil rulers. The individual as a governing institution—for so he is, even the first of the governing institutions God has created—is responsible to rebuke civil rulers and to disobey the ruler's laws where they conflict with God's law to which all are subject. Put in a sentence: Earthly authority is important, but unlike God's authority, it is far from absolute; indeed, it is wholly dependent on God's authority expressed through His law.

In Summation: Reconstructionism in Light of the Constitution

The short conclusion is pretty simple: Reconstructionism is not so incongruent with the Constitution in terms of institutional structures as one might think. How that would look in concrete practice is a somewhat different question, and since most Reconstructionists have not analyzed comprehensively the institutional structure they envision, outside of being highly judiciary-centric, it is difficult for the outside critic to answer this question either. In terms of the civil liberties laid out explicitly in the Constitution that most American Constitutionalists champion, Reconstructionists are not enemies to these ideals. After all, McDurmon, the most detailed and comprehensive in his treatment of social organization among the Reconstructionist writers, argues that in a theonomical society, freedoms of speech, assembly, and religion would continue. This

might seem a touch difficult to take seriously in light of DeMar's transparently asinine assertion, "Even our Constitution assumes the protection of the *Christian* religion. The First Amendment had the specific purpose of excluding all rivalry among *Christian* denominations,"¹⁵ that no conscientious historian of American Constitutional thought could take seriously, but this remark seems solitary among Reconstructionists, even though DeMar, McDurmon, and the whole cadre of Reconstructionist writers agree uniformly that theonomical ethics dictates that a theonomical state protect the Christian religion specifically. This historical absurdity aside, it appears that free religious exercise would continue.

On the other hand, such things as gay marriage and abortion that have come to be considered civil liberties through Supreme Court decisions would no longer stand as civil rights due to their conflict with God's law. Abortion would be outlawed as murder, and gay marriage would be relegated back to the sphere of church government, where in a theonomical society it would become impossible, presuming that churches abided by their responsibility under God's law to not permit gay marriage. But then again, one must ask: Are these positions inherent to the Constitutional structure of our nation, or are these things imputed to it in court decision? Has the Supreme Court looked at the Constitution's words and decided that the words themselves protect abortion and gay marriage (as examples) specifically, or has it taken the existence of a vague, general right protected within the Constitution and extrapolated from that right, using outside sources of reasoning and interpretation, the existence of that right?

¹⁵ Gary DeMar, *Ruler of the Nations* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987), 78.

This sort of question, of course, raises other questions of interpretive method and how the Court ought to approach its decisions. The real point to be understood here is this: Whether or not one maintains that those supposed civil rights are indeed inherent to the spirit, letter, or “jiggery-pokery” of the Constitution is subject, to a great extent, to one’s perspective. In its turn this points to the fact that it is not certain exactly whether or not Reconstructionist condemnations of abortion and gay marriage amount to a renunciation of a true Constitutional principle.

In the end, lots of things are uncertain about Reconstructionism’s relationship to the Constitution. It is reasonably certain that their institutional theories do not conflict with the institutional structure of the Constitution. The same might be said of Reconstructionism’s theory of authority: Revolution is not permitted, but peaceful resistance to unjust laws is. This is not a contra-Constitutional paradigm. But institutional approach and theory of authority is less important to understanding the political theory of a movement than is understanding its paradigm. In this regard Reconstructionism parts ways with the Constitution in dramatic fashion. Predicated on the idea that the people are ultimately sovereign and make the law, the Constitution rests on the principle of democracy—a principle Reconstructionists virulently reject. One might reasonably argue that this rejection of democracy amounts to a total rejection of the entire Constitutional structure, for the whole structure rests, at bottom, on a democratic sensibility totally alien to Reconstructionism.

The degree of incompatibility one sees between the Constitution and Reconstructionism depends on whether or not one holds that a new movement with a different political paradigm that argues eventually for the same or similar institutional

structure as the old paradigm did can merely remove the old way of thinking and install the new way of thinking, without changing the institutional mechanisms by which the state governs. In the context of the Constitution, this question asks whether one can keep the Constitution's governing structures (executive, legislative, and judiciary) while substituting theonomy for democracy as the energizing principle of law.

At its core, that is the real conflict between democracy and Reconstructionism, from a political standpoint. The two are diametrically opposed ideas of law. In the Reconstructionist paradigm, this means that the two are diametrically opposed religions as expressed through law, for Reconstructionists hold that all law is religious in some way. Viewed from this angle, the Constitution and Reconstructionism appear fatally incompatible.

In the end the answer to whether or not Reconstructionism can be reconciled with the Constitution is no, for the organizing principles of each are worlds apart and in fundamental conflict with each other. The two share similar visions of institutional structure and to a lesser extent civil liberties. After that, the similarities end and the conflicts begin. Would Reconstructionists use similar institutions? Almost certainly. Would Reconstructionists use the Constitution as it is? Absolutely not.

CONCLUSION

For Reconstructionists, authority carries central importance. Their worldview rests on the absolute authority of God, the absolute authority of theonomy as an expression of His ruling character, and the limited authority under theonomy of the state and other government spheres. Every institution has a certain authority structure to it. The individual answers to all other government spheres and always to God; the family is subject to parental authority, particularly to the father; the church answers to its elders; the state answers to its elders and judges. All authority ultimately answers to God.

Because authority structures and the very concept of authority are fundamental to Reconstructionist thought, Reconstructionism appears authoritarian quite easily. In certain respects, it is; authority has the final say, and where the state authorities operate on the basis of theonomy, they are not to be disobeyed, and the body of the people does not make the law; the law is handed to them. This is an essentially authoritarian system.

One key feature differentiates Reconstructionism from most authoritarian models, and that is the heavy emphasis on the limitations of human authority. Human authorities answer to a higher authority, and they may not exceed the boundaries within which that authority, God, places around them. When they do, they act tyrannically (in the Reconstructionist mindset). Like any other system of state government predicated upon written boundaries, these boundaries are susceptible to violation. Thus, a Reconstructionist system faces the same array of challenges that any other system does, in respect to what abuses its state may commit against the law which constrains it. Nevertheless, were Reconstructionism to gain significant political clout in the United

States, this emphasis on limited authority would serve it well; moreover, the Reconstructionist view of the church and individual's responsibilities to rebuke a wayward state would serve as checks upon abuse of state power much like the democratic process works in the contemporary Constitutional system. This rests on the assumption that the Reconstructionist emphasis on self-government produces the effects they maintain it will; if that restraint fails to answer its purpose, then the whole Reconstructionist system is in jeopardy.

Checks or no checks, Reconstructionism still stands irrefutably opposed paradigmatically to the Constitutional structure. This fundamental incompatibility sets Reconstructionism irredeemably at odds with the Constitution, and in the contemporary context, this renders Reconstructionism a problematic political entity.

Reconstructionism is a difficult animal for political science to study for a variety of reasons. One of them is that most of the literature from its principal proponents buries the political points under other content, such as economic analysis or Scriptural exegesis; most of those writers had a theological goal to accomplish, for they were writing to other academic theologians and to laymen Christians for an expressly theological purpose. As the opening comments to the sections on the theology and the politics in this study aver, however, the theology of Reconstructionism leads necessarily to certain political impacts, and the politics cannot be understood outside of that theology. Perhaps it is for this reason that few political scientists have studied this movement: it is steeped in theology and other non-political science concerns, and so it seems as though it is outside of the discipline. Understandable though this perspective is, it tends to lead scholars to push it aside, when this movement is a bit understudied within political science.

Given its small, insular condition, it is unlikely that Reconstructionism will have far-reaching effects in the near future. Notwithstanding, it is still significant in some areas of Christian conservatism—albeit small, self-contained ones—and has potential to exercise influence later, though not to dominate Christian conservatism. It is not totalitarian, though it most certainly has its authoritarian bents, and the committed Constitutionalist would do well to know about and understand it in order to better understand the development of wings of American conservatism.

As an approach to theology, a political movement, and a political paradigm, Reconstruction is a much larger beast than the scope of this study, and studying it in relation to the Constitution only touches one area in which Reconstructionism has the potential to bring about change. Even though Reconstructionism has little present potential to actually accomplish change because it is such a small movement and is very poorly known, both in the sense that few people actually know about it and even fewer truly understand it, it is one worth studying both because it by itself is fascinating and because its effects have carried much farther than it has managed to go on its own. While I disagree with most of the conclusions of the few who have spent time analyzing it politically, in part because they critique it in the broader context of Christian conservatism without giving it its due diligence as its own creature, it is commendable that someone at least has given it some study.

For the Christian who wants to understand further the theology behind some of the seemingly more virulent political theology bandied about at times, look no farther than Reconstructionism, for it is more than likely that the answers to your questions lie within this movement. For the political scientist who wishes to conduct some study on

political religion that is off the beaten path, this movement offers fertile, mostly unstudied ground.

It may not be totalitarian (it is not), it may not be typical, and it most certainly is not democratic, in the paradigmatic sense. At odds with the Constitutional system and lacking influence now, it has had influence, and could develop further influence again. If for no reason other than to understand the influence it has had and how later influence could impact the current system, it is an area of thought worth studying on a broader plane.

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