

## **“RELIGION IS WHAT A MAN CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT”: THE ROLE OF MISSIONS WITHIN CHRISTIAN RECONSTRUCTIONISM**

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### **THESIS**

In this paper, I will examine the role of missions within the Christian Reconstructionist movement. Not only will I provide an account of their missiology, but I will also summarize what Reconstructionists believe. I contend that the Christian Reconstructionist theology of missions is directly related to their desire to exercise dominion and establish a theonomy—a sociopolitical order ruled by the totality of relevant biblical law. To Reconstructionists, missional work is not merely, or *even primarily*, about conversion. Rather, the goal and function of a mission is to bring both the individual and the extra-ecclesial culture (starting from the church and working outward) into obedience to biblical law for the purpose of creating a theonomic society.

### **THE CHRISTIAN RECONSTRUCTIONIST PARADIGM**

There has been a small, but noticeable surge in the academic analysis of the Christian Reconstruction movement. While, since the 1980s, there has been much public and editorial clamoring about the supposedly serious threat of Reconstructionism to our secular body politic—including, but not limited to, the work of Chris Hedges, Michelle Goldberg, and even evangelical writers such as Hal Lindsey—critical engagement with the theological writings of Rousas John Rushdoony, Gary North, Greg Bahnsen, et al. has been absent from the academic arena in that same timeframe. Partially beginning with Molly Worthen’s 2008 article for the journal *Church History*, “The Chalcedon Problem: Rousas John Rushdoony and the Origins of Christian Reconstructionism,” several titles from high-profile university presses have attempted to document and scrutinize the movement. Two important titles were both released in 2016; Michael J. McVicar’s biography of Rushdoony *Christian Reconstruction: R. J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism*, and Julie Ingersoll’s sociological study *Building God’s Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction*.

Yet, what do Christian Reconstructionists actually believe? As mentioned, there have been various types of analyses on the movement, some emphasizing the infamous call for the re-imposition of Mosaic civil and judicial law in contemporary society (this is called *theonomy*),<sup>1</sup> while others point to the distinct,

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<sup>1</sup> See Hal Lindsey, *The Road to Holocaust* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990). Lindsey makes the scandalous accusation that Reconstructionism, or what he calls “Dominionist theology,” will lead to a Nazi-esque theocracy.

politically libertarian understanding of postmillennialism.<sup>2</sup> Ingersoll defines Christian Reconstruction as possessing three distinct theological positions: presuppositional epistemology, theonomy, and a postmillennial eschatology.<sup>3</sup> Even in the highly factious debates of Reconstruction, this trifold understanding appears to encapsulate the theological positions of the major figures and institutions of the movement.

Presuppositionalism, a radically biblicist epistemology developed by Presbyterian meta-theologian<sup>4</sup> Cornelius Van Til,<sup>5</sup> contends that all reasoning begins from particular normative premises. The most foundational of all premises is that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God, which must ground all of our thoughts and actions. The fall, starting from Adam on, has corrupted all human beings, including their *noetic* functions, and via God's grace are we able to think properly, so as to glorify "Him."<sup>6</sup> Those who reject God's grace, willingly or not, have defective mental functions<sup>7</sup> and thus cannot *truly* know anything. All reasoning, to Van Til, is *circular* reasoning: "the starting point, method, and conclusion are always involved in one another."<sup>8</sup> Thus, the truth claims of the Bible can be adequately derived from the text itself, most importantly its assertions about being completely "God breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16).<sup>9</sup> To the philosopher, Reformed, biblical Christianity is the most consistent presuppositional worldview for it brings every thought into obedience to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). To presuppose our thinking means, as per Van Til protégé John Frame, "we must regard [God's] revealed truth as more important and more certain than any other, and find in it the norms or criteria that all other knowledge must meet."<sup>10</sup> Atheism, Roman Catholicism, and even evangelical Arminianism are all faulty for they are epistemically disobedient— they place man (the

<sup>2</sup> See Michael J. McVicar, "The Libertarian Theocrats: The Long, Strange History of R.J. Rushdoony and Christian Reconstructionism," *The Public Eye* (Fall 2007), 3-10.

<sup>3</sup> While Ingersoll claims there are only "two key aspects of Christian Reconstruction" this is because she differentiates between the theological and the sociocultural. For her, theonomy is Reconstructionist appropriation and application of presuppositionalism out of theology. I find this implicit distinction unnecessary: to the Reconstructionists, I believe, conceptualizing theonomy is just as theological as utilizing presuppositional reasoning when debating another a/theist. Julie J. Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom: Inside the World of Christian Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9.

<sup>4</sup> I use this term "meta-theologian" to demarcate the type of theology Van Til engaged with (theological prolegomena, the proper method by which theology can be *done*) and not as a label for his influential status within the Reconstructionist movement.

<sup>5</sup> It must be noted that, while Van Til did write several articles for the *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, provided many of the core theoretical conceptualizations of the movement, and served as mentor and/or teacher to the movement's founders, he did not consider himself a Reconstructionist and generally avoided the controversies it brought. See John R. Muether, *Cornelius Van Til: Reformed Apologist and Churchman* (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 217-219.

<sup>6</sup> The Bible is thus an instrument of God's grace in the transformation of our minds (Rom. 12:2).

<sup>7</sup> Epistemically, not psychologically or biologically. Although, there are many grim stories of a pleasant Van Til visiting scholars of different Christian traditions and, in the midst of a happy conversation, assured the latter of their eventual damnation. Van Til firmly believed that those who did not properly follow his epistemology, which he claimed was merely a reiteration of the epistemology of the Reformers, was depraved and hell-bound.

<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing co., 1976), 62.

<sup>9</sup> Yet, Van Til seems to have another means to justify his biblical epistemology: it can solve the perennial, and most important, problem in the philosophy: the one and the many. To Van Til, "the so-called problem of the one of the many receives a definite answer from the doctrine of the simplicity of God...[whom] exists in himself as a triune self-consciously active being." Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics* 5, 8. This is the God who provided the Bible to humanity and thus the Bible is trustworthy to place all predicated knowledge upon it.

<sup>10</sup> John Frame, "Cornelius Van Til," in *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* edited by Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 163.

creature) above God (the creator),<sup>11</sup> believing their unregenerate creaturely knowledge is enough to reason through life. Non-Calvinist Christians, when engaged especially in apologetics, will attempt at discourse grounded in epistemic neutrality, which “assumes the essential correctness of non-Christian and non-theistic conception of reality.”<sup>12</sup> When the humanist or non-Reformed apologist embraces human cognition, wholly or in part, as the starting point for intellectual reflection, one is “leading away from Christian theism [which in turn] leads to the destruction of reason and science as well.”<sup>13</sup> Only by presupposing the inerrant Scriptures *in all ventures* can a Christian correctly understand reality and live in obedience to God.<sup>14</sup> There is thus no neutrality of knowledge: no individual can impartially reason to an unbiased conclusion. A scientist working with naturalist assumptions about reality, according to Van Til and his intellectual progeny, will come to a naturalistic conclusion about the facts he is examining. A Christian, working from a wholly different presuppositional system, will come to a very different conclusion.<sup>15</sup> In light of this, the only source by which orthodox, God-centered Christians can establish a proper ethic for society—at any time in history, at any point in the world regardless of context—is the Bible *in totum*.

Theonomy is the paradigm for societal arrangement based on the above biblicist perspective. Reconstructionists, following Van Til, believe that there is a consistent duality in human behavior: between autonomy and theonomy. The autonomous man abides by his own ratiocination and other faculties in order to think, act, and behave in this world. The theonomous man follows God’s complete law as revealed in Scripture and reasons presuppositionally from there. The former is inherently disobedient to God: it casts aside the true foundation of knowledge and utilizes cognitive capacities that are corrupted by sin in order, most importantly, to determine what is right and wrong. To create a society that is biblically faithful, there can be no appeal to extrabiblical standards. To Reconstructionists, this means that the biblical laws and mandates for a political, legal, and social order are more than relevant, they are necessary to implement, lest one become disobedient. As Bahnsen puts it,

Theonomy teaches, then, that in regard to the Old Testament law, the New Covenant surpasses the Old Covenant in glory, power, and finality. The New Covenant also supersedes the Old Covenant shadows, thereby changing the application of sacrificial, purity, and "separation" principles, redefining the people of God (e.g., Matt. 21:43), and also altering the significance of the promised land (e.g., Rom. 4:13; 1 Peter 1:4)... Theonomy...teaches that we should presume that Old Testament laws continue to be morally binding in the New Testament unless they are rescinded or modified by

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<sup>11</sup> I use gendered language in portions of this section because it is the exact language utilized by Van Til. I have tried to be inclusive everywhere else.

<sup>12</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 63.

<sup>13</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *Christian Apologetics*, 63.

<sup>14</sup> “This means that in the totality picture that man must seek for himself, he must go to Scripture as the final court of appeal.” Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of Reason* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 35.

<sup>15</sup> If a secular scientist and a Van Tillian scientist were looking at a cellular organism, for example, the latter’s conclusion would be informed by the Bible: the cell was made by God, its mechanisms which are observable are providentially ordered by God, and any notion that the cell “evolves” or “acts” (some Van Tillians, being Young Earth Creationists eschew any terminological similarities to evolutionary science) independently of God is derived from humanistic presuppositions which are disobedient to God.

further revelation. Theonomy's methodology stands squarely against that of dispensational theology which maintains that all of the Old Testament commandments should be deemed -- in advance of exegesis -- to be abrogated, unless they are repeated in the New Testament.<sup>16</sup>

The Old Testament law is still binding, to Reconstructionists, because there is no explicit indication that it has been wholly fulfilled or covenantally revoked. Bahnsen writes elsewhere that “we should presume continuity between Old and New Testament moral principles and regulations until God’s revelation tells us otherwise . . . the Old Testament law continues to offer us *an inspired and reliable model for civil justice or socio-political morality*...”<sup>17</sup> Rushdoony makes a similar point, “The God of Scripture... [has] grace and law remain the same in every age.”<sup>18</sup> The position of the Old Testament legal code having continual binding authority to all peoples (covenant members or not) is the source of much of Reconstructionists’ controversy in the public and ecclesial spheres. The notion of a top-down Church-led judicial system fully applying the strict codes found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy (along with any additional pre/proscriptions found in the Prophets) is understandably repulsive to many. If the theonomic system was implemented, homosexuals, adulterers, and even children who talked back to their parents would be executed by stoning. To Reconstructionists, they believe that the above discomfort with their sociopolitical ideal<sup>19</sup> is evidence of autonomous reasoning: of course, an individual working under humanistic presuppositions would disagree with theonomy because it presents to them a social order that is totally anti-humanistic.<sup>20</sup>

Living according to theonomic social ethics is not merely an isolated practice for churches or families, outside the confines of secular modernity (ala Anabaptist primitivists). Reconstructionists believe that theonomy must reign globally. As Ingersoll puts it, the goal of Reconstructionists is “a complete transformation of every aspect of culture (including, but not limited to, politics). Every aspect of culture is to be brought into conformity with Biblical law.”<sup>21</sup> This is called, mostly by critics, *dominionism* or, merely, *dominion*.<sup>22</sup> It is up to epistemically self-conscious Christians (those aware of their presuppositional reasoning) to go out and bring all life under the authority and precepts of biblical law. Unless this wide-

<sup>16</sup> Greg Bahnsen, “What is ‘Theonomy?’” *New Horizons* (April 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 23. Emphasis mine.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 40.

<sup>19</sup> Some Reconstructionists would say theonomy is ideal for it has been historically implemented with great success: in ancient Israel and in 17th-century New England. Bahnsen writes that “the Puritans strove to let God’s word form their lifestyle and regulate their behavior in every sphere of human endeavor . . . The Puritans even took God’s law as their yardstick for civil laws in the new land to which they eventually came, and we have enjoyed the fruits of their godly venture in this country for three centuries now.” Quoted in Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 25-6.

<sup>20</sup> What humanistic presuppositions exactly *are* to Reconstructionists is varied, depending from author to author. Generally, having humanistic presuppositions amounts to 1) believing that human beings can truly *know* without founding one’s epistemology upon the inerrant Bible (i.e. autonomous reasoning), 2) that there is any epistemic source of agreement to facilitate discourse between believer and non-believer (i.e. epistemic neutrality) and/or 2) believing that human beings have any role in salvation (i.e. soteriological synergism). Hence, to the Reconstructionist, even a fundamentalist Wesleyan can be charged with utilizing humanistic presuppositions.

<sup>21</sup> Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> To Reconstructionists, “biblical authority is God’s authority delegated to humans, who exercise dominion under God’s law in three distinct God ordained institutions: the family, the church, and the civil government. Each of those institutions has carefully delineated and limited responsibilities. When humans decide that those institutions should serve any functions beyond the ones ordained by God, they presume the autonomy and supremacy of human reason and thus violate biblical law.” Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 41.

ranging program is undertaken, the earth will fall deeper and deeper into the evils of secularism. Yet, a Satanic-secular domination of the globe would not be everlasting, claims the Reconstructionists. While there will surely be setbacks, God, says Gary North, “promises us victory” in the offensive against autonomy and its discontents.<sup>23</sup>

However, Reconstructionists do not argue for a quick overthrow—violent or not—of the prevailing, contemporary order. They prefer to slowly and methodically wither the current system and replace it with theonomy. Gary North writes, “Our job is not to ‘throw the rascals out’ in one glorious national election. Our job is to replace them steadily by our own competence.”<sup>24</sup> Reconstructions envision a bottom-up, grass-roots, church-led campaign at “every level of politics, economics, and institutional influence, in every region of the country—indeed every region of the world.”<sup>25</sup> In light of this vision, Reconstructionists have constructed an entire subculture for their ideas to proliferate and, hopefully, spread. Homeschooling curriculum, large tomes published at a rapid pace, missionary programs (to be discussed below), etc. Reconstructionists recognize this will be a very long process of “theonomizing” the world, one potentially spanning several generations, but they know that victory is guaranteed and thus continue constructing a lasting ecclesial, publishing, and institutional infrastructure.

Reconstructionists desire theonomy, most importantly, because they believe that adhering to the right biblical ethics, will usher in the Kingdom of God and the return of Christ. Reconstructionists are avowed postmillennialists—to them, “the Kingdom of God is a present, earthly reality and ... the second coming of Jesus will mark the culmination of the Kingdom...it is the work of Christians to restore the damage done by the Fall; to bring the blessings of the Gospel to the whole earth.”<sup>26</sup> The Reconstructionist formulation of postmillennialism is distinct from prior variations, primarily due to the emphasis on theonomy and dominion. Bahnsen writes that the millennium represents a period “which will see growth and maturation of righteousness, peace, and prosperity for Christ’s kingdom on earth (visibly represented by the church) through the gradual conversion of the world to the gospel, as well as a period for the glory and vindication of the saints in heaven.”<sup>27</sup> After this period, Jesus will return, synchronized with the “the general resurrection and general judgment at the end of the church age.”<sup>28</sup> This growth and maturation of the kingdom can only occur when the totality of the biblical gospel is being fulfilled via a theonomic social praxis. Bahnsen and other Reconstructionists emphasize the gradual conversion and dominion of the world under theonomy. Conversion is not merely a verbal affirmation that “Jesus is Lord,” or the application for church membership. The conversion truly occurs when the culture has been reformed away from the precepts and principles of secular humanism and towards a complete application of theonomy. Bahnsen notes that “it is quite clear that if the Christian is not exhorting others to obey the law of God and promoting such obedience

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 33.

<sup>24</sup> Gary North, *Conspiracy: A Biblical View* (Ft. Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1986), 141.

<sup>25</sup> North, *Conspiracy: A Biblical View*, 141.

<sup>26</sup> Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 27-28.

<sup>27</sup> Greg Bahnsen, “The Prima Facie Acceptability of Postmillennialism,” *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, vol. 3, no. 2, (Winter, 1976-77), 63.

<sup>28</sup> Bahnsen, “The Prima Facie Acceptability of Postmillennialism,” 63.

*in every way he can*, then he is not fulfilling the Great Commission...<sup>29</sup> North reiterates an identical claim elsewhere, “evangelism means teaching people to obey God’s law...*evangelism means obedience*.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, the correct spread and proliferation of the gospel is of utmost importance to Reconstructionists. Without a global dominion of the church and obedience to biblical law, then the millennium has not properly begun, and Christ’s return is delayed. Correct missional activity is thus, not a soul-winning enterprise, but behavioral and cultural reformation.

## RECONSTRUCTIONISM AND MISSIONS

It must be noted that R.J. Rushdoony’s career began as a Presbyterian missionary to the Shoshone and Paiute tribes in Northern Nevada. In fact, it was during this brief vocational excursus that Rushdoony began to formulate ideas that would, eventually, develop into his distinct Reconstructionist theology. In his first article ever published “Christian Missions and Indian Culture,” Rushdoony bemoans the failure of contemporary American ecclesial outreach to indigenous peoples. Missions adopted an evangelistic approach that made Christianity a non-existent cultural or social force within the reservation, “the weakness of...evangel[ism]...was and is its total neglect of the cultural problem. *It limited its works to ‘winning souls for Jesus!’*”<sup>31</sup> There is “no cultural world...for [the indigenous person] to live in between baptism and burial.”<sup>32</sup> The transformative power of the Christian faith towards building a biblical civilization is untapped when a mission cares little about what occurs beyond the church walls. Conversion becomes “an arid limbo lying between heaven and hell.”<sup>33</sup> Rushdoony, further, sees the church relying too much on the New Testament for worship and study—it presents a one-sided picture of the faith. Instead, “a full biblical emphasis is...paramount,” it presents the “conviction of the total depravity of human nature and failure of human history...”<sup>34</sup> Rushdoony’s early, non-Reconstructionist, experience and thinking has nonetheless shaped how future Reconstructionists leaders approached the overall failure of contemporary mission work.

In keeping with Rushdoony, Reconstructionists find modern missions to be more than just inadequate—but methodologically and epistemically flawed. Contemporary Reconstructionists, in the same vein as Rushdoony, believe the American mission is focused exclusively on “short-term activities like ‘converting souls’ and church-planting.”<sup>35</sup> In Bojidar Marinov’s *Faith for All of Life*<sup>36</sup> article “Don’t Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities,” the author lambasts the cultural anemia of contemporary

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<sup>29</sup> Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*. (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1984), 477-478. Emphasis mine.

<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. *The Greatness of the Great Commission: Christian Enterprise in a Fallen World* (Tyler, TX: Institute of Christian Economics), x.

<sup>31</sup> Rousas John Rushdoony, “Christian Missions and Indian Culture,” *The Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 12, no. 1 (May 1949), 9. Emphasis mine.

<sup>32</sup> Rushdoony, “Christian Missions and Indian Culture,” 9.

<sup>33</sup> Rushdoony, “Christian Missions and Indian Culture,” 9.

<sup>34</sup> Rushdoony, “Christian Missions and Indian Culture,” 10.

<sup>35</sup> Bojidar Marinov, “The New Missionary,” *Faith for All of Life* (September/October 2010).

<sup>36</sup> *Faith for All of Life* is the bi-monthly publication of the Chalcedon Foundation, the Reconstructionist think-tank founded in Rushdoony in the 1970s.

missions. One missionary organization, he relates, “believe[s] that the cultural practices of a convert don’t need to change according to the requirements of his new faith. Christianity, in their view, requires no change of behavior, and therefore it requires no change of culture... Christianity cannot and should not build a culture, they believe.”<sup>37</sup> This organization, to Marinov, teaches that “all that is necessary is individual salvation; that individual salvation is not supposed to nor expected to produce cultural changes.”<sup>38</sup> Marinov laments the fact that soon-to-be-missionaries are “are never instructed in a comprehensive worldview that builds a new Christian culture within the old pagan culture. They leave their churches illiterate about the biblical answers to the multitude of questions other cultures are asking.”<sup>39</sup> Marinov then explains that this entire methodology of missions is based on secular humanist principles, particularly Marxian historical materialism!<sup>40</sup> Peter Hammond in the piece “The Amateurization of Missions” is just as negative of the current missional scene. He calls the great majority of evangelical missionaries as “religious tourists” who travel to a location for a short amount of time, mostly for photo opportunities and a spiritual pick-me-up. To Hammond, it is an ecclesial disaster that there is a “flood of untrained, ill-disciplined, and unaccountable, lone-ranger, supposed ‘missionaries’ [pouring] into Third World countries.”<sup>41</sup> These religious tourists have little knowledge of scripture, a weak grasp of a biblical worldview, a limited understanding of history—particularly the history of the nation they have been sent to—and a nonexistent grasp of the local languages and customs. They are “untrained, unprepared, unaccountable, and even unaware of the way the local people perceive them.”<sup>42</sup> To Hammond, it is common-sense that brain surgeons should do brain surgery and engineers should build bridges, but it appears that completely untrained individuals can be trusted in spreading the gospel. This *amateurization* is derived from the ubiquitous principle that a mission is first-and-foremost a task of religious conversion and not cultural reconstruction.

Yet, it should be noted that the Reconstructionist critique of contemporary missions is frequently a strawman. Rarely, if ever, do figures like Hammond, Rushdoony, or Marinov cite an expert authority—either evangelical or not—on the proper methodology of missions. There are, instead, appeals to anecdotal evidence or usage of generalities. Truly, these critiques write as if all non-Reconstructionist missions are virtually identical.

The Reconstructionists envision missions as more than a soul-conversion, but a worldview transformation within the individual person and broader culture. As Marinov writes, “the reality is that the

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<sup>37</sup> Bojidar Marinov, “Don’t Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities.” *Faith for All of Life* (July/August 2011).

<sup>38</sup> Marinov, “Don’t Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities.”

<sup>39</sup> Marinov, “Don’t Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities.”

<sup>40</sup> By default, modern missionaries act as if the culture without Christ contains everything it needs and is good per se, or at least morally neutral. All it needs is individual salvation and an institution for dispensing religious experience, and the missionary is there to provide it with the least repercussions on the culture itself. History thus is independent of the gospel; it runs its course no matter what the religious faith and commitments of the people in the culture. Culture becomes a product of historical forces, or material forces, or chance; faith-and specifically faith in Christ-has no bearing on it: it is only an external addendum to the culture. *This is exactly the view of materialistic determinism, and specifically Marxism. Thus, modern missions are in essence Marxist and materialist in their philosophical outlook.*

Marinov, “Don’t Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities.”

<sup>41</sup> Peter Hammond, “The Amateurization of Missions,” *Chalcedon Report* (October 1999).

<sup>42</sup> Hammond, “The Amateurization of Missions.”

individual man is not really converted unless his whole worldview is converted. If he lives in a culture hostile to his private beliefs, and if he doesn't have a comprehensive answer to all the ideological challenges, he is not a believer, *only a future apostate*.”<sup>43</sup> Reconstructionists, keeping in line with Rushdoony's holistic biblical plea and hermeneutical proclivities from a theonomic perspective, see the true origin and proper practice of missions to be found, not in the New Testament, but the Hebrew Bible. “Foreign missions,” Marinov writes, “originated in the Old Testament and were intended as a means to expand the culture, or rather, the civilization created by the law of God in Israel, to all the nations on the earth.” Under this interpretation, missions have thus *never* been a practice whereby conversion is by “winning souls.”<sup>44</sup> Missions, since the earliest days of Israel, have focused on bringing all, via “cultural conquest” of civilization under God's law.<sup>45</sup> To Reconstructionists, Jesus's Great Commission must be read under this rubric: Jesus did not explicitly overturn this method of missions, nor can he in any sense contradict what was said and done in the Old Testament.<sup>46</sup> To go out and make disciples is to bring the masses of the earth under biblical law.

Reconstructionists, like Marinov, thus desire to construct “covenant communities” in which one's presuppositional paradigm is strengthened in the face of malignant secularism. A Christian mission is “is first and foremost an ethical/judicial undertaking, to change the hearts, behavior, practices, habits, customs, norms, laws of a nation so that the nation submits to God.”<sup>47</sup> Marinov calls this, as mentioned, “cultural conquest,” which is best achieved by the foundation of covenant communities. These communities are an alternative cultural sphere within the broader culture, an alternative economic system and also an alternative civil jurisdiction apart from the contemporary political order. Most importantly, is the creation of an alternative educational system. Reconstructionists, since the early writings of Rushdoony, have been opposed to public schools, believing them to be epicenters of secular humanism. As Ingersoll notes, “crucial to Rushdoony's critique of public schools... [was that] no educational system or curriculum would be religiously neutral.”<sup>48</sup> A public school without God, was in Reconstructionist reasoning, against God. To Marinov, a missionary must construct a covenant community that meets the educational needs of the congregation: “Christian homeschooling or institutional Christian schools must become the focus of the missionary's effort from the very beginning of his work with the local converts. Only when the children are safely accommodated into a system of Christian education under the control of their Christian parents can there be hope for the survival of the covenant community through the generations.”<sup>49</sup> The covenant community is thus the locus of theonomic transformation: all the activities fall under and thus become regulated by biblical law, from the purchasing of goods, worshipping, educating children, etc. It is through covenant communities that the Christian civilization is constructed, as per Gary North, “the basis for building a [biblical] society is evangelism and missions that lead to a widespread Christian revival so that the

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<sup>43</sup> Marinov, “The New Missionary.”

<sup>44</sup> Bojidar Marinov, “The Seminary and the Death of Missions,” *Faith for All of Life* (September/October 2013).

<sup>45</sup> Marinov, “The Seminary and the Death of Missions.”

<sup>46</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, “The Greatness of the Great Commission,” *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1981), 41-42.

<sup>47</sup> Marinov, “The Seminary and the Death of Missions.”

<sup>48</sup> Ingersoll, *Building God's Kingdom*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> Marinov, “Don't Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities.”



great mass of earth's inhabitants will place themselves under Christ's protection."<sup>50</sup> It is within these communities that congregations and new converts are properly converted: they are brought into obedience to God's law. Marinov is blunt: "*Building a covenant community that is an alternative to the culture is the only way to evangelize the world.*"<sup>51</sup>

The covenant community is started by missionaries who build upon a Reconstructionist intellectual foundation for the coming Christian civilization. To Marinov, a missionary must have a large supply of Reconstructionist literature in order to properly evangelize and construct covenant communities. He notes that "the sheer volume and ubiquity of Christian literature [in the pre-Constantinian era] created the intellectual foundation for the future Christian civilization."<sup>52</sup> Thus, the same kind of literary pervasiveness must be the case for the covenant community. A young missionary must both be well-read and establish a library for the newly converted. This library must be full of "high-quality books that help him understand the application of the gospel to every area of life."<sup>53</sup> These high-quality books are none other than "all the books of all Christian Reconstruction authors, for Christian Reconstruction has been the only movement specifically devoted to building a comprehensive biblical worldview, applied to practice in both man's life and in the life of his culture."<sup>54</sup> The intellectual orientation of the covenant community is thoroughly Reconstructionist, for any other literature can prepare neither the individual nor congregation to faithfully submit to the Bible. Marinov believes that contemporary seminaries, even the most evangelical examples, do not prepare the missionary well for their future vocation. Instead of teaching them Rushdoony, North, and Bahnsen, seminary courses "emphasize textual and etymological criticism, or liturgical details, or philosophical hair-splitting."<sup>55</sup>

Yet, these covenant communities are not the be-all, end-all of a mission— they are the beginning of cultural conquest. A society cannot be properly brought under God's law in just churches or merely alternative communities. Reconstructionist Kenneth Gentry remarks that "if Christ is confined within the structure of the institutional church...then He is not Lord at all. If the sphere of his dominion does not encompass the world outside the doors of the church, then he has... [in essence] no sovereignty."<sup>56</sup> The Reconstructionist mission, after creating epistemically self-conscious Christians, must then go out and exercise dominion. Rushdoony writes that "man is not saved merely to enjoy heaven but to serve the Lord with all his heart, mind and being..."<sup>57</sup> He says that our salvation is beyond ourselves: it is for the Kingdom of God, that which humans must seek first. Evangelism thus "begins with regeneration...[and] continues with sanctification and dominion."<sup>58</sup> A successful Reconstructionist mission is never complete until the broader society is under dominion by biblically obedient Christians.

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<sup>50</sup> Gary North, *Political Polytheism* (Tyler, TX: Institute of Christian Economics, 1989), 585.

<sup>51</sup> Marinov, "Don't Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities." Emphasis mine.

<sup>52</sup> Marinov, "The New Missionary."

<sup>53</sup> Marinov, "Don't Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities."

<sup>54</sup> Marinov, "Don't Plant Churches, Build Covenant Communities."

<sup>55</sup> Marinov, "The Seminary and the Death of Missions."

<sup>56</sup> Kenneth L. Gentry, "The Greatness of the Great Commission," 37.

<sup>57</sup> Rousas John Rushdoony, "Evangelism and Dominion," *Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (1981), 15.

<sup>58</sup> Rushdoony, "Evangelism and Dominion," 15.

While Reconstructionism has never been a visibly noticeable movement—its influence has always been indirect<sup>59</sup>—the movement has nonetheless produced several missionary organizations and programs. Marinov has spent decades as a highly successful missionary in Bulgaria where he founded Bulgarian Reformation Ministries. He has endeavored upon an extensive translation project which includes “over 30,000 pages of Christian literature about the application of the Law of God in every area of man’s life and society.”<sup>60</sup> Due to his prodigious translation and missionary activity, he has expanded his ministry to “include churches across the country, missions among the minorities, a publishing house, help to Christian entrepreneurs, Biblical worldview conferences, and others.”<sup>61</sup> Marinov has also taken his missional work into the public sphere as an active participant in the fledgling Libertarian movement in Bulgaria: he is the co-founder of “the Bulgarian Society for Individual Liberty and its first chairman.”<sup>62</sup> Marinov’s Bulgarian Reformation Ministries is a near-perfect example of how Reconstructionists view their missions. He is not just focused on converting Bulgarians—as the country has a sizeable number of adherents to Bulgarian Orthodoxy—nor does he merely build churches with a Reformed theological bent. He produces literature, establishes economic support networks to covenant members, and desires to establish serious change to the current Bulgarian political order. Marinov’s entire missional goal is for covenant Christians to exercise dominion over every facet of life—from faith, to education and politics—and thus thoroughly transform culture.

Peter Hammond is another Reconstructionist missionary whose organization Frontline Fellowship is located in war-torn African nations, such as Sudan, Angola, and Mozambique. While it is much harder to establish the type of covenant community Marinov proposes in nations of intense poverty, Hammond’s organization is dedicated to bringing Africa under biblical law. For example, the process of being an accredited missionary for Frontline Fellowship is an extensive undertaking: a two-year program that includes “courses such as the Great Commission Course, Discipleship Training Course, Biblical Worldview Seminar, Muslim Evangelism Workshop, First Aid courses, and participation in many outreaches, including street evangelism, Muslim evangelism, and Bible smuggling into restricted-access countries.”<sup>63</sup> Hammond, like Marinov, has “required reading lists, written assignments, and practical tests” which are primarily derived

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<sup>59</sup> “[The] influence [of Reconstructionism] is subtle, implicit, and hidden. It is neither consistent across, nor acknowledged by, the movement we know as conservative Protestantism, which is itself complex and composed of many smaller movements. But the popular translation of Reconstructionist ideas to the broader conservative Protestant subculture is so consistent, often even including the obscure terminology and phrasing used by the Reconstructionists, and the evidence of ties between the Reconstructionists and the early leaders of the religious right are common enough, that the influence is undeniable. Ingersoll, *Building God’s Kingdom*, 6. In light of this, one may ask: why care about a fringe movement, which has never garnered enough adherents to warrant demographic study? First, fringe movements can be incredibly important in moving intellectual discussion around a particular issue (Abolitionism, for example, was always a fringe movement in the Antebellum United States, but its gradual, and extensive political impact is undeniable). There has been plenty of anecdotal evidence and historical research that points to Reconstructionism’s shaping of American Religious Right political and theological discourse from the 1970s onward. Therefore, to discount Reconstructionism as unimportant because if its relative socio-intellectual seclusion, past and present, is to ignore the variety of means by which small movements historically have led to large change.

<sup>60</sup> Marinov, “The Seminary and the Death of Missions.”

<sup>61</sup> Marinov, “The Seminary and the Death of Missions.”

<sup>62</sup> Marinov, “The Seminary and the Death of Missions.”

<sup>63</sup> Hammond, “The Amateurization of Missions.”

from Reconstructionist literature.<sup>64</sup> The Frontline Fellowship thus trains missionaries who are specialized in Reconstructionist theology and application. In the midst of these beleaguered and poverty-stricken areas, Frontline Fellowship sees a sociocultural *tabula rasa* (independent of the prevailing Muslim-majority social conditions) in which institutions can be constructed along Reconstructionist lines without any serious secularist opposition. The main Christian representatives of Sudan and Angola, Frontline Fellowship hopes, are citizens of a theonomic order.

Covenant communities are also found in explicitly non-missionary ventures—at least non-missionary to a non-Reconstructionist. The history of Pastor Doug Wilson and his relationship with the town of Moscow, Idaho, demonstrates that, to Reconstructionists, missions need not be foreign: the task of having people submit to biblical law can occur within one's own backyard. While Doug Wilson is not a Reconstructionist *per se*, he nonetheless identifies as a theonomist<sup>65</sup> and has spoken in support of such concepts as "Libertarian Theocracy."<sup>66</sup> Wilson, and his main congregation Christ Church of Moscow, has "for years been planning a spiritual takeover of the town transforming both its politics and its soul."<sup>67</sup> Wilson has founded his own publishing house (Canon Press), a four-year liberal arts university and seminary (New Saint Andrews College), built church plants throughout the town, created a denomination centered in Moscow with almost 100 congregations worldwide (Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches) and has encouraged church members to run for the town city council. Even though the two Wilson-run congregations in Moscow "make up only about 5% of the town," the controversial pastor nonetheless believes that takeover is feasible. In one Christ-Church produced pamphlet, it clearly states Wilson's long term goal for the small Idaho college town: "Our desire is to make Moscow a Christian town... through genuine cultural engagement that provides Christian leadership in the arts, in business, in education, in politics, and in literature."<sup>68</sup> The Doug Wilson saga illustrates that the Reconstruction view of missions is more than merely the conversion of foreign peoples—it is a fundamental duty of the Christian to perform wherever he resides. The Christian must perform dominion over a fallen, apostate world, even if that world has a population of professing believers. Wilson has created a covenant community within Moscow, remarkably similar to the archetype founded and elaborated by Marinov.

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<sup>64</sup> Hammond, "The Amateurization of Missions."

<sup>65</sup> He wrote recently on his blog that every Christian, whether they like it or not, is a theonomist: "Back in the eighties, when Christian reconstruction was a thing, people used to ask me if I was a theonomist. 'Oh, no,' I would say. 'I hate God's law.' Suppose someone were then to say, 'You know what I mean,' I could reply that my ironic answer revealed that all Christians were theonomic in principle. What divided them was the exegesis and application of particular passages. But God's people all agree that we should do whatever God requires us to do. The debate is over what He has in fact required of us. *So in a certain sense, theonomy is inescapable in the same way that all societies are theocratic.*"

Doug Wilson, "Theonomy Is a Many-Splendored Thing," *Blog & Mablog*, January 24, 2018. Emphasis mine.

<sup>66</sup> Doug Wilson, "Theocratic Libertarianism," New Saint Andrews College, 15 Aug. 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Tracy Simmons, "Douglas Wilson's 'spiritual takeover' plan roils Idaho college town," *Religion News Service*, Nov. 5, 2019.

<sup>68</sup> Simmons, "Douglas Wilson's 'spiritual takeover' plan roils Idaho college town."

## CONCLUSION AND CRITIQUE

In Christian Reconstruction, the purpose of missions is to bring the world into obedience to the totality of biblical law. Conversion is seen, not merely as affirmation, but submission. Church-building is replaced by the construction of covenant communities, which direct their energies beyond evangelizing people and towards changing society, culture, and the political status quo. In other words, to be a missionary is to be a steward for dominion.

Yet, does Christian Reconstruction have it right? Is the proper, biblical means of missionary work a slow, institutional build-up with the hopes of remaking culture into a robust theonomy? I find there to be three problems within the Reconstructionist paradigm of missions. First, it appears that Reconstructionist missiology is with little New Testament support. As Larry Poston writes, “Neither Jesus nor Paul sought to transform their external circumstances in any more than a limited, local way. In our fulfillment of the great commission, we are called first and foremost to effect internal and personal changes in individuals...”<sup>69</sup> Second, it appears that the New Testament authors believed that the eschaton was fast approaching and it was important to spread the gospel as quickly as possible, in opposition to the gradualist, postmillennial dominion strategy of Reconstructionism. “The end of all things is near. Therefore, be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray” says the Apostle Peter (1 Peter 4:17), and the Gospel of John states that “As long as it is day, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work” (9:4). While this critique may be aimed more at postmillennialism in general, I am only pointing out that the gradualism of Reconstructionism seems to have slim New Testament support also. Lastly, the Reconstructionists rarely are precise with their notions of culture and theonomy. When does a culture become a proper theonomy? Does a nation under biblical law, yet prone to criminality, violence, and insurgency, truly count as a theonomy? Is a non-voluntary Christian civilization the best means towards achieving worldwide support of biblical law? These questions, I have found, are rarely or insufficiently answered. Christian Reconstructionists are focused primarily on proselytizing their ideas first while worrying about the details later (or bicker about minute details in exhaustively long books).

While Reconstructionism is not, nor has been, a large movement, it nonetheless represents an influential segment of the broader evangelical community. It would be foolish to ignore or trivialize what Reconstructionists have said and are still saying: their ideas and actions, like in Bulgaria, Africa, and Idaho, affect and change lives in spiritual, communal, and emotional ways. The Reconstructionist missiology is an example of how impactful and international those ideas can be.

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<sup>69</sup> Larry Poston, “Christian Reconstructionism and the Christian World Mission,” *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 23, no. 4 (October 1995), 474.