

The Problem With Christian Reconstruction

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The reform movement in the Christian church, known as Christian Reconstruction or Christian Reconstructionism, is a multi-faceted attempt at the application of Christian faith and ethics to the problems of society. As American society, at the dawn of the 21st century, degenerates into chaos in the implications of it's past century and a half of paganism, nothing could be more needful than the success of such an attempt. Sadly, however, the work is fatally flawed by the failure of many of it's leading proponents to understand and apply true biblical theology to the situation.

Without doubt the movement was spawned in the writings of Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987) in apologetics. Van Til sought a consistent application of the Reformed Faith - the faith of the Heidelberg Catechism, Belgic Confession, Westminster Confession and the Larger and Shorter Catechism's of that assembly - by men witnessing to the truth of the gospel. His critique of the methods employed by nominally 'Reformed Theologians', The Defense of the Faith, is a classic and enlightening work. Van Til pointed out that the view of man's fallen nature, implied by the methods the theologians use, was not consistent with the Reformed theology they claimed to believe. Asking a man dead in sins, to judge on a series of evidences the one witnessing presents, without ever challenging the legitimacy of his judgment, never gets to the heart of the matter of man's fallenness.

In seeking to illustrate this, Van Til went back in the history of apologetics to show the origin of such thought, in the synthesis between Christian and Aristotelian philosophy in the Romanist Church of the 13th Century. He then came forward, distilling in essence the difference between Christian thought and paganism, in the areas of being (metaphysics), knowledge (epistemology), and law (ethics). Classic statements of Van Til in each of these areas stand as sign posts in the pursuit of a truly Christian apologetic:

There are only two kinds of people in the world.....two circle people and one circle people (the circles were illustrations on the blackboard). This is to say that the Christian position on being is a 'two circle' position - there is non-created being and created being. The one does not become the other (not even in the person of Jesus Christ contrary to the teaching of Eutyches). Thus the Creator/creature distinction is basic to Christian theology and to Christian apologetics, epistemology, and ethics.

The possibility of human predication presupposes the truth of the Christian faith. This statement surveys the entire field of philosophy and epistemology on a presuppositional basis. No non-Christian position has ever been able to make an intelligible account of how man knows anything. His knowledge has always been dependent upon God, and denying that, he makes a fool of himself in the philosophy of knowledge. All human philosophies ultimately end in skepticism. Part of the apologetic task of man, therefore, is to press men to give an account of how they know anything. Van Til was once on a train from Detroit to Grand Rapids where he saw a little girl sitting in her fathers lap.

The little girl slapped her father in the face. He asks - how could she do that? Only because he held her in his lap. What if he dropped her - inside the train/outside the train? There would be no slapping. In other words, in epistemology man has to presuppose God (being held in his lap) in order to deny him.

There is no alternative but Theonomy and autonomy. This statement stands at the end of the 1958 class syllabus on Christian Theistic Ethics, right before VanTil's brilliant exposition of the Sermon on the Mount. In Van Til's book by that name, it is now about the middle, as later sections were added to the syllabus. The statement is his conclusion on man's attempts at formulating a system of ethics apart from God. Every formulation that does not begin consistently with the Law of God as revealed, is fatally flawed. It is another example of human autonomy, making waste the earth.

Van Til has been criticized on the point of ethics, as if he himself never said what Christian ethics were to be. But anyone reading Christian Theistic Ethics, from the standpoint of the Reformed Confessions and Catechisms, would place little credibility on that claim. His exposition of the Sermon on the Mount is a brilliant defense of the unity between the ethics of Jesus and Moses. He makes clear and convincing argument of the fact that '*you have heard it said by them of old*' was not the original intent of Moses, but the Pharisees perversion of his words and command. Van Til was no pioneer in the field of ethics, he was simply re-stating the Reformed Faith of the Heidelberg Catechism's Questions 86-115 (part of the section on Gratitude); and the Westminster Larger Catechism's Questions 91-153. His argument was that ethics were revealed by God graciously, and ought to be received by man on authority.

It is worthy of emphasizing again, that Van Til was operating from the theology of The Reformed Faith in both Dutch and English expressions. He was schooled as a youth in the Old Dutch Standards, and he taught at Westminster Seminary in light of its English Confessional history. It is the Reformed Faith he defended, along with Ecumenical Creeds like Nicea and Chalcedon. He sought to extend that faith in application through his writings. His book on apologetics begins with a statement of the Reformed Faith in Chapter One. This is the system he was building upon, and the reason for such controversy over his writings. For he pointed out that others were not consistent with its teaching, when it came to apologetics in application.

Van Til spawned a movement - his work was brilliant, insightful, timely, and opened up the very nature of the problem we face in the modern church and world. But the question arises: Who was to extend this work? Who would come along, and build upon the teaching, extend its implications, and show its application in the now present circumstances? There have been numerous claimants in the almost 30 years since Van Til's death. Many have made important contributions to the work. However at the heart of the problem that true Reconstruction faces, is the fact that many of the leading figures propounding it have abandoned its foundation in the Reformed Faith. They no longer hold the Confessional Faith of Van Til, but feel free to jettison that same historical Christianity on their way to building the 'biblical society' of their dreams.

Men identifying with the work have denied Justification By Faith Alone, and have adopted the ancient heresies of Montanism, and Pelagianism, among their lesser departures from the truth. In

surveying this fact with respect to Christian Reconstruction, we can see the seeds of this laid from the beginning of its extending influence.

In 1990 Mark Duncan published a pamphlet entitled: The Five Points of Christian Reconstruction from the Lips of Our Lord. This was a defense of the movement upon the presupposition of 'New Testament Christianity' - "if you only accept Jesus as authoritative, then I'll show you he taught this also" (Mark Duncan is now a part of the Reformation denying Federal Vision Theology). The 5 Points were Calvinistic Soteriology; Covenant Theology; Presuppositional Apologetics; Postmillennialism; and Theonomic Ethics. Supposedly this summed up those things necessary to be considered a 'reconstructionist'. The point is, however, they are reductionary. Mark Duncan, denying *Justification By Faith Alone*, can still hold these five points in some fashion. Likewise can a *Montanist* who believes in continuing revelation. And so on it goes in the reconstruction camp. They have jettisoned the foundation of the thought in the Reformed Faith. Now the expression of the principles will be skewed by the false theology the leaders of the movement hold.

Let's consider Theonomic Ethics in terms of the Federal Vision. Obedience to the law is no longer an expression of gratitude or thankfulness with the Dutch Standards. It is no longer what the Westminster Divines considered it in the *Sum of Saving Knowledge* when they said:

Now, for the evidencing of true faith by fruits, these four things are requisite: 1) That the believer be soundly convinced, in his judgment, of his obligation to keep the whole moral law, all the days of his life; and that not the less, but so much the more, as he is delivered by Christ from the Covenant of Works, and curse of the law. 2) That he endeavor to grow in the exercise and daily practice of godliness and righteousness. 3) That the course of his new obedience run in the right channel, that is through faith in Christ, and through a good conscience, to all the duties of love towards God and man. 4) That he keep strait communion with the fountain Christ Jesus, from whom grace must run along, for furnishing of good fruits.

Obedience is again, with Romanism, part of a formula of works justification, whereby a man becomes more or less justified. Man maintains his place in the covenant by his works.

Theonomy on the Montanist principle is also deadly to true godliness. After all, continued revelation comes to men as a guide of their actions. The theonomic Montanist is erecting a conflicting standard of human action. He has a theory of revealed standards in the law of God, but a practice of supposed continued revelation whereby he modifies his actions by the bidding of the spirit. It is not hard to see which of the two conflicting standards will win out in the conflict. Montanism in every modern expression has been just as lawless and as much a shame to the profession of Christ as it was in the ancient world. When men are taught that the prompting of their own hearts is God's guidance, then sin is accomplished in the name of Christ.

Greg Bahnsen, at the end of his career, and shortly before his death, surveyed the condition of the Reconstruction movement in a sermon entitled Law and Wisdom. He recounted the lawlessness in personal ethics among theonomists, and concluded that true biblical wisdom was

necessary: “*The law of God in the hands of fools is an ugly thing*”.

I turn now to address myself to all the young men who search the blogosphere for articles and leadership in this area called theonomy and reconstruction: I have this to say: *You have no leadership out there*. You are looking for leadership among men who have rejected the very basis upon which Van Til saw clearly what the issues were. They speak great swelling words, and think to have condemned the foolishness of pagan society with their knowledge. But they know not that they are wretched and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked. As Bahnsen said, it is all very ugly.

If the truth is to be salvaged, it must begin with you. If you know that you are a nobody then you have the humility to proceed. You must study the Reformed Confessions and adopt the theology of those Confessions. And when you have studied them - when you know Westminster like the back of your hand (or the Dutch Standards) - and when you have looked up the proof texts and understand how they interpret the scripture - then you will be ready to build on what you've been given. You must obey the law of God in the way you speak (see Question 145 of the Westminster Larger Catechism). You must obey the law of God in the way you work at your vocation - the way you approach the life of family - the way you keep the Sabbath day - and the way you raise children. The private sphere of your life is the first place to apply theonomic ethics, and unless you do it here first, you will never be more than a babbling fool with all of your own swelling words.

Moving out from the personal sphere to the sphere of government, the church has great need of the Reformed Faith. The departures from the truth among supposedly reformed Pastors and Elders is shocking. You will spend your life in search of other faithful men (assuming that you are faithful in your calling). But it is only from the standpoint of such faithfulness with the governments of family and church that God will give victory to the truth. The church has nothing to say about faithfulness in the state, as long as it teaches and acts the way it does. If the government of the state was suddenly dropped into the hands of church leaders, it would move left. If it was suddenly dropped into the hands of the current theonomists, it would be such a catastrophe that men would never again hazard such a sorry idea.

We also must, like Nehemiah, build with sword in hand. We must speak to the problems of the civil state, we must rebuke and exhort in the exposition and application of Scripture. But this is meaningless unless we stand first upon the truth we have received - the Reformed Faith. Herein, again, lies the problem with the present Reconstruction.

If you take what I am saying seriously, I think there is hope. Truth will demand union. The faithfulness of others will be an encouragement to all. God is well able to give the victory to his truth, and at just the time when men think it is hopeless. The reforms in the days of Hezekiah were made ‘suddenly’ for the Lord had prepared the hearts of the people.