

The Pilgrim's Pathway  
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**The Bible, the Church, and the World:  
A Third Way (2)**

**The First Way:  
Theonomy/Christian Reconstruction (i)**

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[Published in Christian Renewal, vol. 26, no. 17 (June 18, 2008), pages 28-30.]

Several Reformed writers have analyzed the underlying premises and the resulting proposals of both theonomy/Christian reconstruction (Greg Bahnsen and disciples) and religious secularism (Meredith Kline and disciples). Two helpful essays are found in the volume entitled *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). The more general essay, by John M. Frame, deals with "The One, the Many, and Theonomy" (pp. 89-99), while the essay by Vern S. Poythress, "Effects of Interpretive Frameworks on the Application of Old Testament Law" (pp. 103-123), explains the distinct hermeneutical frameworks within which the views of Bahnsen and Kline operate. Readers will find in these essays a helpful introduction to the comparisons being offered here of these two opposing movements among Reformed and Presbyterian churches seeking to relate the Bible, the church, and the world.

***Dispensationalism as background to Theonomy/Christian Reconstruction***

To understand properly the rise and development of theonomy/Christian reconstruction, it is important to place this movement within the religious-cultural context known as dispensationalism.

The roots of dispensationalism lie in the Plymouth Brethren movement which around 1825 centered in Dublin, Ireland, and Plymouth and Bristol, England. Names associated with dispensationalism include J.N. Darby (1800-1882) and C.I. Scofield (1843-1921), along with

Lewis Sperry Chafer, Arno C. Gaebelein, Charles C. Ryrie, J. Dwight Pentecost and John F. Walvoord.

In addition to sharing a belief in the parallel-but-separate roles and destinies of Israel and the church, these writers share a particular hermeneutic by which they separate what, in the Bible, is addressed to Israel and what is addressed to the church. The former is “earthly” and is to be interpreted “literally,” while the latter is “spiritual” and is to be understood spiritually.

The term “dispensationalism” describes the view that history is divided into a series of epochs or dispensations, during each of which God works out a particular phase of his cosmic plan. (This term is a bit misleading, since all parts of the church have believed that there are distinctive epochs or stages in God’s redemption and rule of the world.) Most dispensationalists are premillennialists. The latter doctrine is much older, going far back beyond the Reformation. Historical premillennialism had no teaching that held out hope for Israel apart from the church, a teaching central to much modern dispensationalism.

Relevant for our purposes is the distinctive view about the character of the transition that occurred in history and in revelation with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This involves the relationship of continuity and discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament, between the only God who accomplishes his one plan of salvation and the newness of the age inaugurated by the person and work of the Mediator. These questions have a direct bearing on the use of Scripture in ethics, since our view of the OT (and of OT Israel) affects our use of its directives for Christian living. These questions become more and more pressing as Bible readers de-emphasize the historical, progressive character of biblical revelation.

### ***Sociology, culture, and dispensationalism***

Social and cultural forces that helped to forge dispensationalism into a system of thought include, first, opposition to Darwinism. The supposed truths of the exact sciences (geology and

biology, for example) are met in dispensationalism with the higher exactitude of truths from Scripture.

Second, fear of dangerous subjectivity in Bible interpretation, a danger to which modernism and cults succumb, led dispensationalism to appeal to the “plain” meaning of the Bible. This emphasis on the “plain”-ness of Scripture, thought to arise from the Reformation’s insistence on the perspicuity of Scripture, has led to simplicity in handling the Bible, often called “biblicism.” A biblicistic use of the Bible appeals to verses or passages without adequate consideration of their literary, historical, or cultural context. To assume that the Bible was written directly into our modern context makes direct correlation between modern {29} historical events and biblical prophecy inevitable and inviting.

Finally, dispensationalism became distrustful of ecclesiastical, confessional tradition and thus of traditional perspectives regarding the unity of Scripture, the nature of the covenant and the place of Israel, and the relation between law and grace.

### ***Two hermeneutical systems***

Perhaps the key issue distinguishing dispensationalists from non-dispensationalists is the issue of the interpretation and use of the OT. In terms of our discussion, the major hermeneutical difference is that the dispensationalist emphasis on the *discontinuity* between OT and NT is answered by the theonomist/Christian reconstructionist emphasis on the *continuity* between OT and NT.

According to dispensationalism, God provided Abraham a salvation administered on a by-faith basis, without moral conditions. All went well for the people of God until they made the rash and tragic mistake of abandoning their unconditional covenant position and accepting instead the conditional and legalistic Mosaic covenant. “The Dispensation of Promise ended when Israel rashly accepted the law (Ex. 19.9). Grace had prepared a deliverer (Moses), provided a sacrifice for the guilty, and by divine power brought them out of bondage (Ex. 19.4); but at

Sinai they exchanged grace for law” (*The Scofield Reference Bible*, ed. by C.I. Scofield, note 1 on Gen. 12.1; see also *Systematic Theology*, by Lewis Sperry Chafer, vol. 4, pp. 162-164). The Mosaic covenant is viewed as a legalistic parenthesis within a by-faith administration of grace that had begun with Abraham and would resume in the NT dispensation of Grace.

According to Gary North and Gary DeMar, who wrote *Christian Reconstruction: What It is, What It Isn't* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), Christian reconstructionists espouse the following distinctives:

1. Regeneration—salvation by grace through faith—is humanity’s only hope in this age and in the age to come. Only new people who reflect the image of God in Christ can bring about any significant social change, since social change follows personal change, and personal change can come only through regeneration. God’s sovereignty as it relates to personal salvation and to limited institutional authority is foundational for the salvation of man and for the abolition of tyranny.
2. The continuing validity and applicability of the whole law of God, including, but not limited to, the Mosaic case laws, is the standard by which individuals, families, churches, and civil governments should conduct their affairs.
3. A victorious view of the future progress of the kingdom of God prior to the return of Christ is foundational for the building of a Christian civilization.
4. Presuppositional apologetics (in contrast to evidentialism) acknowledges that God’s Word is self-authenticating and is the judge of all other supposed authorities, including human reason.
5. A decentralized social order where civil government is but one legitimate government among many other governments, including family government and ecclesiastical (church) government, is the basis for a free and orderly society (pp. 81-82).

These formulations do not eliminate confusion, however. For these authors continue: “In simple terms, however, a Reconstructionist is anyone who believes that the Bible applies in some way to issues beyond personal salvation” (p. 82). This is hardly helpful, since this simple description would qualify both Charles Colson and Jeremiah Wright as Reconstructionists! Colson argues

that Exodus 22 sets forth principles of prison reform through making restitution to victims by criminals, whereas Wright uses Scripture to denounce the U.S. policies in the Middle East.

It is the second claim above, however, that constitutes the central premise of theonomy: God's law (especially, but more than, the Mosaic legislation) is valid and binding today. God's law and obedience to it become the instrument for the postmillennial victory of Christians in society. According to Dr. Bahnsen:

The *methodological* point, then, is that we presume our obligation to obey any Old Testament commandment unless the New Testament indicates otherwise. We must assume continuity with the Old Testament rather than discontinuity. . . . [T]he word of God must be the standard which defines precisely what those changes are for us [between Old and New Testaments]; we cannot take it upon ourselves to assume such changes or read them into the New Testament. . . . To this methodological point we can add the *substantive conclusion* that the New Testament does not teach any radical change in God's law regarding the standards of *socio-political morality*. God's law as it touches upon the duty of civil magistrates has not been altered in any systematic or fundamental way in the New Testament (*By This Standard* [Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985], p. 3).

Most evangelical Christians would agree with the claim that Christian ethics obtains its character and direction from God's Word, whereas modern ethical positions are often based on philosophies of human autonomy. Theonomy begins to differ from some evangelicals when it insists that the *entire* Bible must function as norm for ethics. Specifying *how* the Bible functions as norm also tends {30} to distance theonomy from some evangelicals, given the theonomic claim of the abiding validity of the whole law of God in exhaustive detail.

Theonomic ethics operates with distinctions among the various laws of the OT, accepting the common evangelical teaching that Christ's person and work have completed the *ceremonial* laws so that they need no longer be observed. Nor is theonomy blind to discontinuity between the OT and NT. Bahnsen insisted that the New Covenant surpasses the Old in glory, power,

realization, and finality. From Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., we obtain this summary of six distinctives of theonomic thought:

Theonomy holds that Old Testament Law is: (1) *binding* (we are obliged to obey it for our *sanctification*); (2) *relevant* (because the Lord is all-wise and all-knowing, His Word remains practical for all times and applicable for all situations) when (3) *properly interpreted* by taking into account the full significance, purpose, and situation of the original intent of the various laws individually considered), and (4) *properly applied* by taking into account the flow of redemptive history and by paying proper attention to the New Testament precepts and principles; so that (5) the *details* of the Law are essential to Law-keeping (they form an essential part of the Law, as parts to the whole), and (6) are meant to be *equitably observed* by man on the personal, social, and civil levels of human existence (*God's Law in the Modern World* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1993], pp. 9-10).

Critics of theonomy/Christian reconstruction contend that (3) and (4), as well as perhaps (6), all work together to neutralize and void the pivotal theonomist claim that the whole law of God *remains binding in exhaustive detail*. With plausibility these critics argue that it is precisely those features of the original biblical situation and of the flow of redemptive history that affect the law's exhaustive detail in terms of modern ethical normativity and applicability.