

The Pilgrim's Pathway

**The Bible, the Church, and the World:
A Third Way (5)**

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

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[Published in *Christian Renewal*, vol. 27, no. 1 (September 10, 2008), pages 34-35, 46.]

Up to this point, we have considered only the use of Scripture, or the hermeneutic, advanced by theonomy. In this article we present and evaluate the accompanying ecclesiology, or view of the church, being advanced by theonomy/Christian Reconstruction.

Keep in mind that we are focusing on the relationship between Scripture, church, and world, and various contemporary proposals for relating these three.

Here we immediately face the difficulty of identifying “the” ecclesiology associated with theonomy/Christian Reconstruction, for there have been multiple views among its leaders. A second reality is that some writers who were formerly associated with Christian reconstruction seem no longer to be interested in that identification, making it difficult to assess whether or not their views on the church belong to the movement.

A familio-centric view of the church

Back in 1985, in his editorial introduction to a book envisioning “the reconstruction of the church,” James Jordan identified what he termed an extremely important area of disagreement within the Christian reconstruction movement, namely, ecclesiology. He complained that co-Reconstructionist R. J. Rushdoony held a low view of the church, by wrongly emphasizing the priority of teaching over worship, and of the family over the church. Rushdoony envisioned the church and family as two separate, exclusive spheres. For Rushdoony the family was the primary social unit while the church represents a limited ecclesiastical organization of believers in Christ.

In chapter 14 of his *Institutes of Biblical Law*, Rushdoony sets forth his understanding of the church by beginning with a discussion of the meaning of the Eldership. For Rushdoony, the

OT background of the office and function of elders is essential to those elders in the NT church. In the OT, the elders formed the basis of civil government, and local civil government throughout Israel was conducted by the town elders. Later, elders became rulers in the synagogues, and thereafter the NT church took over the office of elder from Israel. “The purpose of the office was to create a new society, the Kingdom of God, to institute the new creation by means of the discipline of the law-word” (*Institutes of Biblical Law*, 740-41). Moreover, since the elder was always a man who ruled his household, he had to be a married man, someone tested in authority and government. Every elder must be a family man before he may govern the church.

In the time of the early church, the elder-as-teacher functioned in the family, in the area of ecclesiastical welfare, in church education, and as a civil magistrate in God’s court. One consequence of living in a hostile world was that the church was forced to assume the function of a total society, at the center of which were the elders. “The office of elder began with the family,” wrote Rushdoony, and the central goal of the elders and their teaching was to create a community of responsible believers. As officers of God’s law, elders are called to apply the law of God to every sphere of life, although as they do so, they are not necessarily always under the authority of the church. The church indeed calls and ordains elders, but this does not limit the office and labor of elder to the church. “Christians in education, civil government, the sciences, law, and other professions can constitute themselves as Christian bodies and examine and ordain men who will further the law and rule of God in their sphere” (p. 742). Although the NT elder is called to govern, to manage, and to adjudicate matters in the life of the church, theirs is primarily a pastoral office commissioned to a ministry of grace for the purpose of maintaining and extending the rule of Christ.

In the rest of his chapter on the church, Rushdoony reviewed the meaning and role of the sacraments, of the priesthood of all believers, of church discipline, and of ecclesiastical power.

By way of analysis, it is not difficult to understand how Rushdoony’s view of the church and of the elder’s office could pave the way for a familio-centric view of the church and of authority. Today there are some who insist that the church’s authority to govern, to catechize, and to discipline comes from—is ^{35} granted by—the family. According to this view, a father is the one God has ordained and appointed to be the head and authority over his children, which means that teachers teach these children and pastors pastor these children only by the consent of

the father. Just as the school is seen as an extension of the home, so the church is fundamentally an extension of the family.

We have written elsewhere about this view of the church and the issue of resurgent patriarchalism among conservative evangelical Christians. It is unfortunate that so many well-intentioned people, some of them committed to the ideals of home schooling, surrender to this error of anti-ecclesiastical disdain for the institutional church with its God-appointed means of grace and divinely ordained authority over doctrine and life.

The sacramental model of the kingdom

There are, however, other views of the church's relationship to the world to be found among Christian Reconstructionists. To the extent that they may still be identified as Christian Reconstructionists, both Peter J. Leithart and James B. Jordan have explored the liturgical and sacramental character of the church, and the implications for the church's role in public life. (For a variety of reasons, it seems necessary at this point, before going any further, to state that I do not agree with a number of positions advocated by these writers, positions relating to the doctrines of salvation, pneumatology, ecclesiology [including the sacraments], and eschatology.)

You may wish to work through what is perhaps the clearest and most thoughtful exposition of ecclesiology by a Christian Reconstructionist available today, namely, the book of Peter J. Leithart entitled *The Kingdom and the Power: Rediscovering the Centrality of the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1993). Throughout this book, Leithart stresses that in order to exert any positive influence in public life, the church must simply be the church. "Being the church" entails rediscovering the importance of the church's worship, sacraments, and discipline to nourish and sustain her identity and life in the world. "Liturgy is closer to the heart of the church's concern than a hundred pieces of legislation," writes Leithart. He is not calling, however, for Christians to retreat from engagement with the world, but to engage the world *as the church*.

But what precisely is the church? Perhaps Leithart's biblical-theological description will prove useful:

Out of our mother, the church, then, is born a race of new Adams and Eves, reborn by water and the Spirit in order to fulfill the original mandate of Adam to worship and obey God and to share His rule over creation. The reconciliation of Jew and Gentile is the seed

of the re-creation of a new human race within the human race. Jew and Gentile have in Christ become on new *Adam*. The people of the kingdom is not merely a fulfillment of the Mosaic order of things, or of the Davidic kingdom. The church is the fulfillment, the coming into fullness, of the Adamic order. In the church, we find the purposes of God for humanity beginning to be fulfilled. She is the continuing creation of the new humanity in the midst of humanity. In the church, as Irenaeus put it, “God has re-formed the human race.” (*The Kingdom and the Power*, p. 165).

As co-laborer with God, the church is called to nothing less than world conquest, world construction, in the widest possible sense. “She is called to labor by God’s power to bring every man, woman, and child into the life and under the dominion of the kingdom; to work to see that every institution in every nation conforms itself to Christ’s commandments; to bring every thought into captivity to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). Her mission is to see that every human being brings every created thing into service to God, so that the Adamic commandment [in Gen. 1.26-28] in both its royal and priestly dimensions is fulfilled. So, the church has a *mission*, and what a mission!” (173-174). The church’s calling is to continue the holy war being waged between King Jesus and Rebel Satan—to identify and maintain the antithesis between the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness. The church’s calling is to exercise Christian dominion on earth, to offer spiritual worship in God’s presence, to pursue unity and peace and to make disciples of the nations through baptism and teaching.

Probably for some people, the most frightening statement—surely for the untutored critics of Christian Reconstructionism who pontificate in the secular media—pertains to the church exercising Christian dominion on earth. But Leithart is clear about the character of this dominion: the saints do not rule by scratching and clawing for legal privileges, or by gaining access to the levers of earthly power. They rule by serving—which means not that serving is the *road to rule*, but that serving is the *mode of rule*. “The church rules by leading the world to faith and repentance, by sacrificing herself, by letting her light shine so that men will turn to glorify the Father in heaven (Matt. 5:14-16). . . . The church’s first response to the world’s hostility must always and ever be [her own] abandonment of idols and repentance toward God. Her first response must always and ever be to return to exclusive devotion to her Lord” (181, 183).

The church's mission in the world, then, is to produce a race of godly men and women through its teaching, worship, and discipline. Naturally, such teaching will affect the political views of church members as they themselves learn to honor the lordship of Jesus Christ, seeking to do God's will themselves on earth as it is done in heaven.

What influence, if any, should the church as such have on political life? Is it biblical to speak of "building" the kingdom through political action?

Leithart argues that the kingdom of Christ is not limited to the church. Passages like Matthew 28:18-20, Ephesians 1:19-23, Philippians 2:5-11, and Colossians 1:15-20, emphasize the cosmic dimensions of Christ's rule and authority.

Ironically, North American evangelicals are being criticized from two sides regarding how they relate faith and politics. Some, like those advocating religious secularism, are criticizing evangelicals for identifying Christian faith with their political convictions and for using the church as a political action group. These critics seem to be arguing for the separation not only between church and state, but also between religion and politics, and between faith and public life. Others, many of them Christian Reconstructionists, bemoan the evangelical dualism or dichotomy between faith and political action, the kind that fails to recognize the claims of Jesus Christ as King over all of life, including political life.

For Leithart, faith is not the same as political action, but faith can surely be *expressed* through political action. Where they are able, Christians are called to exercise political authority, by faith, in obedience to God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit. We may not overestimate the role of Christian political activity by claiming that it establishes the kingdom of God on earth. But neither may we underestimate the usefulness of Christian political activity by denying its serviceability to the King whose kingdom is coming from heaven to earth.

(As one respondent indicated, theonomy/Christian Reconstructionism has never advocated that the church, rather than the civil government, should exercise judicial authority. As others may be aware, many in this movement are sympathetic to the notion of "sphere sovereignty" and to neo-Calvinist, Kuyperian distinctions between the church-as-institute and the church-as-organism, all of which serve to describe how the Bible, the church, and the world should be related to each other. We hope, D.V., to return to this later.)