

# Christian Reconstructionism

*An Evaluation from the Theological Perspective of  
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
October 2015*

## ***History, Beliefs, Practices***

### **Identity:**

Christian Reconstructionism, also called Theonomy (“God’s law”) or Dominionism (from God’s command in Gen. 1:28 that Adam and Eve should “have dominion”), is a movement dedicated to the belief that Christians have the responsibility to work for worldwide dominion and apply biblical law to all aspects of life and society.

### **Founder:**

Rousas John Rushdoony (1917-2001)

### **Statistics:**

In his writings, Rushdoony claimed 20 million followers. Rushdoony’s son-in-law, author Gary North, cites instead the 25,000 to 40,000 names on subscription lists.<sup>1</sup>

### **History:**

R. J. Rushdoony was a Presbyterian pastor and former missionary to Native Americans. In 1965, he founded the Chalcedon Foundation, named for the ecumenical council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) that decreed “Christ was God of very God and man of very Man—an affirmation which for Rushdoony meant that no human power could make claims to divinity.”<sup>2</sup> Since dominion rightly belongs to Christ, Christian Reconstructionists want to bring every sphere of life, including the state, education, the arts, science, law, and economics—in America and in all nations—under His dominion. Rushdoony opposed the American public school system and secular humanist education, believing that to “‘surrender children to the state’ by enrolling them in public schools ‘is to turn them over to the enemy.’”<sup>3</sup> According to author Michael McVicar, “Rushdoony’s impact on the pedagogical and epistemological presuppositions of homeschooling parents is inestimable.”<sup>4</sup>

The Christian Reconstruction movement gained popularity in the 1970s with the publication of two books by Rushdoony, *Thy Kingdom Come* (1970) and *Institutes of Biblical Law* (1973). Reconstructionists also appeal for support to the example of the New England Puritan colonists, the writings of John Calvin (1509-1564), and the work of Dutch Calvinist theologian Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Anson Shupe, “The Reconstructionist Movement on the New Christian Right,” *The Christian Century* (October 4, 1989), 881-882.

<sup>2</sup> William Edgar, “The Passing of R. J. Rushdoony,” *First Things* (August/September, 2001), 24.

<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Mouw, “A Real Theocrat,” review of *Christian Reconstructionism: R.J. Rushdoony and American Religious Conservatism*, by Michael J. McVicar, *First Things* (April 2015), 53.

<sup>4</sup> Mouw, 53.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Vander Hart, “Abraham Kuyper and the Theonomy Debate,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 2:1 (1986): 63.

A movement at times associated with Christian Reconstructionism is the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), a Pentecostal movement featuring end times prophecy and a religious-political agenda. NAR leaders include Pastor Mike Bickle of the International House of Prayer and author C. Peter Wagner. The NAR has a “Seven Mountains” campaign—an effort to bring government, education, the media, the arts, the family, business, and religion under Christian control. Another Reconstructionist advocate is Gary DeMar, head of American Vision, an organization that produces books and videos about Reconstructionism.

### **Texts:**

An important, if not founding, text is R. J. Rushdoony’s 1973 book, *Institutes of Biblical Law*. Other important works include Rushdoony’s book, *Law & Liberty* (1984), and Gary North’s *An Introduction to Christian Economics* (1976).

### **Beliefs and Practices:**

In his 1987 book, *Paradise Restored*, author David Chilton wrote that Reconstructionist strategy “begins with reformation, reconstruction of the church. From that will flow social and political reconstruction, indeed a flowering of Christian civilization (Hag. 1:1-15; 2:6-9, 18-23).”<sup>6</sup> George Grant, another Reconstructionist author, stated: “It is dominion that we are after. Not just a voice. It is dominion we are after. Not just equal time. It is dominion we are after. World conquest.”<sup>7</sup>

Reconstructionists are postmillennialists who believe “God’s Kingdom will eventually be established on earth through the faithful preaching of the gospel and the faithful application of God’s law to society.”<sup>8</sup> According to the postmillennial view, Christ will return after a golden age of prosperity and peace (the millennium) that “will arrive gradually under the increasing influence of Christianity, leading to the pervasive reduction of evil and to greatly improved conditions in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres. In fact, the entire world will eventually be Christianized to the point that the Christian belief and value system will become the accepted norm for all nations. Matthew 28:18-20 will become a reality.”<sup>9</sup>

Reconstructionists believe that the Bible contains the blueprint for the right ordering of society: “The determining proposition is that the Mosaic law given at Sinai was not just for Israel but is God’s design for all nations of all times.”<sup>10</sup> “[W]hen Jesus said he came ‘not to abolish the law but to fulfill it’ (Matthew 5:17), he meant to ratify the law—to establish it—not to surpass it.”<sup>11</sup> Old Testament ceremonial laws are not included because Jesus fulfilled those priestly responsibilities. Gary North suggests ways to apply Mosaic law to modern life, including indentured servitude as an alternative to prison for non-violent crimes and the death penalty for murder, adultery, homosexuality, rape, witchcraft, and blasphemy. Reconstructionists believe that the economy must also be brought under the dominion of Christ. Economic growth is thought to be a sign of God’s blessing. North writes that “[it is a] general

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<sup>6</sup> Robert P. Lightner, “Theonomy and Dispensationalism,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (January/March 1986): 29.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Richard John Neuhaus, “Why Wait for the Kingdom? The Theonomist Temptation,” *First Things* 3 (May 1990), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Edgar, 25.

<sup>9</sup> *The End Times: A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism*, Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (September, 1989), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Neuhaus, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Edgar, 25.

phenomenon [that] those living under the rule of God's law-order will prosper and that those living in societies that are in rebellion to God will not prosper."<sup>12</sup>

Christian Reconstructionists believe that the process of claiming dominion over the earth may take hundreds or thousands of years. Severe penalties for crimes would only be possible in a reconstructed society, and by then, Reconstructionists believe, capital crimes would be almost unknown. Gary DeMar of American Vision says that "Reconstructionists generally believe they have time, lots of time, to accomplish their ends . . . Biblical postmillennialists can afford to wait for God to judge ungodly regimes, bide their time, and prepare to rebuild upon the ruins."<sup>13</sup> In Reconstructionist thought, Jesus' command to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19) is expanded to include "sociology [as] well as salvation; it must include reform and redemption, culture and conversion, a new social order as well as a new birth, a revolution as well as a regeneration. Any other kind of evangelism is short-sighted and woefully impotent."<sup>14</sup>

### ***A Lutheran Response***

"The heavens are the LORD's heavens, but the earth he has given to the children of man" (Ps. 115:16). God appointed men and women as stewards—managers or caretakers—of the earth: "You have given [man] dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas" (Ps. 8:6-8). The command to "have dominion" is not given to Christians alone, but to all people. It is not a matter of political control, but of caring for God's creation and using its resources to provide for human needs (Gen. 1:28-29; Gen. 9:1-3).

Christians are not called to work for worldwide political dominion. Dominion already belongs to our crucified and risen Lord, to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given and who commanded us to make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18-20). His worldwide mission is not a matter of *claiming* political and economic dominion, but of *proclaiming* repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name (Luke 24:46-47).

The Lutheran Confessions reject the belief that "before the resurrection of the dead the godly will take possession of the kingdom of the world, while the ungodly are suppressed everywhere."<sup>15</sup> Christ's kingdom is spiritual, but it permits us "to make outward use of legitimate political ordinances of whatever nation in which we live, just as it permits us to make use of medicine or architecture or food, drink, and air. Neither does the gospel introduce new laws for the civil realm. Instead, it commands us to obey the present laws, whether they have been formulated by pagans or by others, and urges us to practice love through this obedience."<sup>16</sup> The Church, the spiritual power, "should not invade an alien office. It should not set up and depose kings. It should not annul or disrupt secular law and obedience to political authority. It should not make or prescribe laws for the secular power concerning secular affairs. For Christ himself said [John 18:36]: 'My kingdom is not from this world.'"<sup>17</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in David A. Rausch and Douglas E. Chismar, "The New Puritans and Their Theonomic Paradise," *The Christian Century*, August 3, 1983, 713.

<sup>13</sup> Larry Poston, "Christian Reconstructionism and the Christian World Mission," *Missiology: An International Review* 23:4 (October 1995): 472.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Neuhaus, 19.

<sup>15</sup> The Augsburg Confession, Article 17, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 51.

<sup>16</sup> The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 16, *The Book of Concord*, 231.

<sup>17</sup> The Augsburg Confession, Article 28, *The Book of Concord*, 92.

While some theologians emphasize God's sovereignty and controlling power, Lutherans emphasize God's love. Jesus did not accomplish His mission of salvation through the power of this world's governments. Gene Veith addresses the problem of confusing the sacred and secular kingdoms: "The church does not depend on power, social prestige, rhetorical manipulation, or human designed programs. All it has are the Word and Sacraments, which, though they seem weak to the world and to all theologies of glory, in fact carry the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>18</sup> Veith also writes, "Trying to 'impose' one's religious beliefs on others would indeed be a violation of the Gospel. The church, Luther insisted, may not use coercive power."<sup>19</sup>

Jesus' kingdom among us remains hidden under suffering and the cross until He comes again in glory (Matt. 25:31-34). Many people wrongly tend to "regard the glory of God as the center of theology, rather than the mercy of God revealed, and yet hidden, in the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross for the sins of the world."<sup>20</sup> Jesus is not anticipating a worldwide political dominion of the saints when He says, "In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). The first Christians did not attempt to transform the Roman Empire into a Christian kingdom. They did, however, witness to their faith before "rulers and authorities," often at the risk of imprisonment or martyrdom (Luke 12:11; see also Acts 4:8-12; Acts 26:27-29; Phil. 1:12-13). As Christians, we are subject to the governing authorities (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17).

Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17-18). He was "born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law" (Gal. 4:4-5) and He fulfilled all that was written about Him "in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44). "The whole Old Testament is a divine revelation, and so its minutest precept has religious significance which should find recognition and proper understanding in the New . . . There is a gleam of Gospel glory in the midst of the proclamation of the Law, implying a fulfillment which was to be made, and was in fact made, in and through the person of Jesus Christ."<sup>21</sup> The kingdom of God—the dominion not of Christians but of the Christ—is not something that will eventually come about through human effort. The crucified, risen and ascended Christ reigns now at the right hand of the Father, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Eph. 1:21).

### ***For Further Reading***

Adams, David L. and Ken Schurb, eds. *The Anonymous God: The Church Confronts Civil Religion and American Society*. St. Louis: CPH, 2004.  
 Baker, Robert C. and Roland Cap Ehlke, eds. *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*. St. Louis: CPH, 2011.  
 Carty, Jared A. *Divine Kingdom, Holy Order: The Political Writings of Martin Luther*. St. Louis: CPH, 2012.  
 Hoyer, Theo. "Church and State." In *The Abiding Word*. Vol. 2, ed. Theodore Laetsch, 562-607. St. Louis: CPH, 1947.  
 Huegli, Albert G., ed. *Church and State Under God*. Concordia Heritage Series. St. Louis: CPH, 1985.  
 Veith, Gene E. *The Spirituality of the Cross*. St. Louis: CPH, 1999.

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<sup>18</sup> Gene Veith, *The Spirituality of the Cross* (St. Louis: CPH, 1999), 103.

<sup>19</sup> Veith, 101. Veith's chapters on "Theology of the Cross" and "Living in Two Kingdoms" are especially helpful in addressing issues concerning Christian Reconstructionism.

<sup>20</sup> *The End Times*, 42.

<sup>21</sup> Paul E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible: The New Testament*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: CPH, 1921), 26

Walz, Jeffrey S. and Steven R. Montreal. *Lutheran Pastors and Politics: Issues in the Public Square*. St. Louis: CPH, 2007.

### ***Links and Websites***

*The Bible and Christian Citizenship* (Reprint of an article from the July 1996 *Lutheran Witness*)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=359>

*Civil Obedience and Disobedience* (CTCR Report, 1966)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=367>

*The End Times: A Study on Eschatology and Millennialism* (CTCR Report, 1989)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=417>

*Guidelines for Crucial Issues in Christian Citizenship* (CTCR Report, 1968)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=366>

*Render Unto Caesar . . . And Unto God: A Lutheran View of Church and State* (CTCR Report, 1995)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=360>

*Together With All Creatures: Caring for God's Living Earth* (CTCR Report, 2010)

<http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=341>

*We the People: Citizens of Two Kingdoms* (Lutheran Hour Ministries DVD Study, 2010)

<http://www.lhm.org/men/studydetail.asp?id=15579>