

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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CUTTING EDGE OR LUNATIC FRINGE?

by Gary North

Twenty years ago, the Christian Reconstruction movement did not exist. The theological system itself did not yet exist. The missing link, biblical law, was only beginning to take shape in the mind of R. J. Rushdoony. He did not begin his weekly lectures on biblical law until 1968; these became *The Institutes of Biblical Law* in 1973.

I had already begun applying biblical law to economics, but economics is only one small segment of society. Something much broader was necessary. In 1967, we did not yet have it.

What we (he and I; there was no one else doing any writing) did have in 1967 was Van Til's presuppositional apologetic method, outlined in Rushdoony's *By What Standard?*, traditional postmillennialism (but no writings, other than Boettner's 1958 book, *The Millennium*), and the traditional Calvinist doctrine of predestination. We also had Rushdoony's two books of somewhat related essays on American history (*This Independent Republic* and *The Nature of the American System*), his book of essays on the founders of American progressive education (*The Messianic Character of American Education*), his short book on education, *Intellectual Schizophrenia*, and his mini-book, *Freud* (which I still regard as the best single piece of scholarly writing he ever produced). Craig Press had not yet published *The Mythology of Science*, which came later that year. What we had, in short, was a series of essays critical of what has come to be called secular humanism, plus some historical materials pointing to a better cultural beginning two centuries earlier, but a culture that the humanists had long since captured.

We also had Rushdoony's *Chalcedon Report*, which was less than two years old, and which was being fronted by a non-Christian educational foundation that neither Rushdoony nor I controlled in any way. His income was dependent on donations to this humanistic foundation. His two-year grant from the moribund Center for American Studies had just about run out. Maybe it already had.

Four years earlier, Rushdoony had been on the staff of the Center, and riding high. It controlled the tens of millions of dollars from the "distribution" (change in name) of the assets of the old Volker Fund, and it looked as though the Center could become the major academic foundation in the American Right. It also looked as though Rushdoony's perspective would dominate the Center. Such was not to be. It began shutting down in 1964, and by 1967, it was an empty shell. (A few years later, the \$20 million or so in its coffers was given to the Hoover Institution.) Rushdoony had come close, but no cigar.

There was never to be a cigar for Christian Reconstructionism: no "sugar daddy" or "fat cat" with a vision farther forward than his nose has ever come forward with blank

checks for one and all. We should thank God for that; it has kept the movement lean and mean. Nobody owns it. No one person calls the shots. It is sufficiently decentralized so that no one figure or vision represents the whole movement. This is as it should be. Luther had to contend with Calvin, and they both had to deal with Knox. Beza and Bucer were there too, and a lot of other bright people with effective pens and access to printing presses.

Were We Crazy?

What did we have in 1967? A typewritten and mimeographed newsletter, a few books that hardly anyone had read, an eschatology that had been written off as dead by virtually everyone, one full-time writer, one graduate student, a handful of supporters (virtually all of whom eventually drifted away or went away screaming their defiance), and hardly any money. Worst of all, we had no church. All the movement had was a Sunday afternoon and Sunday evening Bible study. Rev. Rushdoony did preach Sunday mornings for a couple of years at a tiny congregation of a splinter offshoot from the Episcopalian Church, but this was simply a way to earn part-time income; it was not in any way a Reconstructionist church. Even this link was to end in the late 1960's.

Would you have invested your life savings in such an effort in 1967? Would you have expected Christian Reconstructionism to have become, if not the major ideological movement in the Protestant Right, then at least the most controversial? How did it happen? (Or has it really happened? Is Christian Reconstructionism today on the cutting edge or the fringe?)

The missing element in 1967 was biblical law. Once the details of the "theonomist" position began to take shape, Christian Reconstructionism became a full-fledged system. It could appeal to disgruntled Christians who recognized the collapse of humanism (just as Francis Schaeffer had recognized it) and who were willing to consider an alternative (which Schaeffer was not). Biblical law establishes the basis of a positive alternative. It provides an answer for all of civilization to Rushdoony's question: By what standard?

Rushdoony had recognized that Van Til had utterly destroyed the philosophical foundation of natural law theory and all other common-ground intellectual constructs to link intellectually the believer and the unbeliever. In principle, he had thereby also destroyed the cultural and civilizational links, but he never discussed this inescapable implication of his work. He self-consciously confined his writings to philosophy and the narrower definition of apologetics. Rushdoony began with Van Til's apologetics and began his search for something to put in place of what Van Til had shown to be a compromised Christian-humanist intellectual

(and therefore cultural) tradition.

Van Til never adopted biblical law as his proposed alternative. He never proposed any alternative. Van Til was like a demolition expert; he spent his life blowing up bridges between covenant-breakers and covenant-keepers. But he offered no solutions. Thus, he gained few followers, and he offered no earthly hope. His amillennial pessimism was fully consistent with his cultural pessimism. He never trusted theonomic postmillennialism, which is why we search in vain for any public acknowledgement on his part of the existence of Rushdoony or me, or any favorable printed words for either of us. He regarded the Christian Reconstruction movement as a fringe movement, not the cutting edge.

Was he correct? Furthermore, were his critics correct about him? Bernard Ramm, in the first edition of his textbook on apologetics, *Varieties of Christian Apologetics*, devoted a chapter to Van Til. In later editions, he dropped it. Apparently, he came to regard Van Til as a fringe figure. Van Til had put a pox on all the neo-evangelical compromises, and Ramm did not appreciate this. Van Til was clearly not a team player. Ramm placed him off the scale of being in later editions.

I think you get the idea. Each group has certain people it regards as fringe figures who are not worth the time and trouble even to notice. Yet these "fringe" people regard themselves as the cutting edge.

Who is correct? Do we have to wait for history to tell us, or even the final judgment? Or can we use the Bible to tell us in advance? Does the Bible give us guidelines for making such an evaluation?

Biblical Standards

I think there are five fundamental marks of identification that can be used today to distinguish cutting edge movements from both the lunatic fringe and the muddled mainstream. Understand, I am not speaking here of specialized groups with limited goals; I am speaking of identifiable movements.

First, does it begin with the presupposition that there is nothing written or spoken that is equal in authority to the Bible? Obviously, if a group elevates some man-written document to equality with the Bible, the group has become a cult. This problem has not generally characterized fringe Protestant groups. Even the most fringe-oriented of members recognizes this assertion of written equality for what it is. But sometimes they have equated someone's visions, spirit voices, or personal revelation with the Bible, and this is a mark of the fringe. Anything that is equated with the Bible really has to be seen as better than the Bible, for God will allow nothing to be equated with His Bible. The Bible labels all co-equals as imposters. It interprets itself, testifies to itself, and judges all things. Nothing calls it into question. Anyone who tries to question it has moved into the lunatic fringe.

Second, the Bible specifies one **institutional** mark of a "cutting edge" above all others: **membership in the church**. If a movement does not begin with the church, work with the church, and allow itself to be judged by the church, it is part of the fringe. Of course, Protestants argue endlessly about the marks of a true church, but these are the three basics: preaching that is self-consciously based on the Bible, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper, and institutional discipline enforcing members' adherence to a confession of faith and publicly moral lives. There must also be a system of orderly transition of leadership; otherwise, it is a one-man show that will not survive the founder, or at least not in a form that the founder would have approved.

Third, is the movement fully committed to educating the next generation in an explicitly Christian environment? Is it committed to Christian day schools and Christian home schools? If not, then it is not on the cutting edge; it is in the humanists' sandtrap, or possibly even in humanism's quicksand. It cannot successfully reproduce itself if it does not control the educational standards and environment of the next generation.

Fourth, is the movement committed to the anti-abortion fight? If not, it is irrelevant. To avoid getting involved socially on an issue of literal life and death is to avoid getting involved in anything relevant to this generation. This does not mean that the anti-abortion fight is the only fight to get involved in; it simply means that at least there must be some concern to commit some resources to this fight.

Fifth, does the movement distribute printed literature that clearly sets it apart from the humanist worldview and the compromised Christian versions thereof? If there is no publishing wing of the movement, then it is not part of the struggle for ideological supremacy. It cannot identify its own unique qualities in a world that is filled with groups and ideas calling for attention.

It is certainly possible for a group on the fringe to have all five of these aspects. Possessing all five does not automatically place a group on the cutting edge. But not having all five automatically removes a group from the cutting edge and puts it either into the fringe or into the amorphous mainstream.

Going Over the Edge

There is no guarantee that anyone or any group that starts on the cutting edge will not fall off into the lunatic fringe. The easiest way for this to happen is for the group to abandon the church as too "stodgy." The key word to look for is **churchianity**. If someone starts complaining about Christ's church as a whole becoming a false religion that has substituted "churchianity" for Christianity, this is a sure sign of lunatic fringiness. It means that the critic has set up his little group as the only true Christian group, meaning the only true church in our day. It means that another self-appointed Pope has appeared, dispensing favors and proclaiming communionless excommunications. When people join a self-conscious non-church (no sacraments, no creeds, no system of institutional discipline) in the name of joining the "true church," you can write off that group historically. It has moved into the fringe. It will not survive the death of its Pope, or at least the struggle that follows his death.

To prevent a drift over the edge into the fringe, the group must be in constant contact with other groups and especially other churches. They must seek a multitude of counsellors. If this is not done, then the group risks becoming self-certified and isolated. It feeds upon itself. If it relies only on its own members for self-criticism, new ideas, and acclamation, it has become a cult.

Conclusion

The Christian Reconstruction movement will keep from going over the edge only if it continues to feed its literature into the churches, and the churches respond steadily to this message. If the message does not produce church renewal and reform, then all of its hoped-for political and educational reforms will come to naught—fringe politics, fringe education, or worse. Christian Reconstruction without the sacraments is just another form of lunatic messianic movements. Its motto must be: "Sacraments first; then reconstruction."

Accept no substitutes.

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