

# Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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## THE PARALYSIS OF THE PARACHURCH MINISTRIES

by Gary North

*But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord, that we should not be condemned with the world (1 Cor. 11:28-32).*

Christians today are humble people. They have much to be humble about, as Winston Churchill supposedly said of Clement Atlee. (He did not actually say this.) Christians pride themselves on their humility. Matthew 5:5 rings in their ears: "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth." They do not perceive that **meek** in this case refers to meek **before God**. (They also do not perceive that **inherit the earth** means inherit the earth **in history**.) Meekness before God produces a confident, activist faith: "Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world" (1 John 4:4). Instead, Christians perceive "meek" as meaning "meek before men and institutions."

If this perspective were true, why did the Psalmist say, "I will speak of thy testimonies also before kings, and will not be ashamed" (Ps. 119:46)? Why did Solomon the king say, "Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men" (Prov. 22:29).

### A Denial of Covenant Theology

Why have Christians achieved so little culturally in the last two centuries? Why, with the unique exception of Wycliffe Bible translators, have Christians not built institutions whose accomplishments dwarf those of their rivals? I think it has something to do with their progressive abandonment of covenant theology, with its five points: the absolute sovereignty of God, the doctrine of hierarchical representation, the doctrine of biblical law, the doctrine of God's sanctions in history, and the doctrine of inheritance. The church does not preach it, and so it shivers in the shadows of humanist society.

The doctrine of God's absolute sovereignty is proclaimed today only by a tiny handful of Calvinists. Similarly, the doctrine of the continuing authority of biblical law has been denied by almost every Christian group, including the Calvinists. "No creed but Christ, no law but love" is the antinomians' battle cry of cultural surrender. The doctrine of long-term inheritance – postmillennialism – is having a revival today, but for well over a century, Christians have affirmed **pessimillennialism**: that until Jesus comes again bodily to reign on earth, the church will experience a series of inevitable defeats.

Why such pessimism? Because in a world in which

autonomous man rather than God is believed to have the final say regarding personal salvation ("decisions for Christ"), law ("natural"), and inheritance ("pie in the sky, by and by"), what else should we expect? So, what can we do to persuade ourselves and others that such a view of history is wrong? I suggest that we examine the twin doctrines of authority and sanctions as they apply to the church of Jesus Christ.

### Sacraments and Authority

God blesses His church. This is a positive sanction. It is His church, the Bride of Christ, that He will elevate above all other institutions in eternity. What is generally denied today by Christians is that **God also elevates His church progressively in history**. In this sense, they stand arm in arm with modern humanists, who also take a highly skeptical view of the authority of the church and God's blessing it in history.

Christians acknowledge that the church alone will survive as an institution in eternity. Both the family and historical civil governments will disappear in eternity. Non-Christians have no biblical doctrine of eternity, so they deny this unique status to the church. This is why both **familism** (patriarchal clans) and **statism** have been the chief rivals of the church in history.

What is unique about the authority of the church? What does it possess that no other institution possesses in time and eternity? Answer: **the church alone possesses the God-given monopoly of the sacraments**. It is through the sacraments that God draws near to men judicially. He brings regular judgment on them so that they in turn can lawfully bring His covenant lawsuit against a rebellious world. **He who is not publicly under the judgment of the institutional church is not authorized by God to exercise judgment over others in His name**.

Without partaking of the sacraments a Christian is, at best, progressively relegated by God to the outer edges of relevance. The excommunicated person is publicly condemned in history to the eternity of hell and the lake of fire unless he repents in history: "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. 5:4-5). The **self-excommunicated** person – the person who willfully refuses to join a local church or take communion – announces that he prefers historical impotence to influence, irresponsibility to responsibility. God then gives this to him. We can see this process institutionally in the recent demise of the parachurch ministries.

### The Crisis of the Parachurch Ministries

Again and again, the leaders of these ministries have

refused to submit themselves and their organizations to the formal judgment of a local church or a national ecclesiastical body. Even when they do formally submit, as soon as they are threatened with discipline, they remove themselves from any ecclesiastical jurisdiction. One by one, they have faded in influence. The 1980's have brought most of them down. The others are struggling mightily for mere survival. Only the women's ministries persist: Phyllis Schafly's, Beverly LaHaye's, and James Dobson's ministry to women. (Even Dobson is now complaining publicly of financial cuts.) The Christian women of America have pulled the financial plug on these ministries, and in American Christianity, this means bankruptcy. **Women write most of the donation checks.** Paying the pipers, they call the tunes.

The case of Jim Bakker is the most glaring. He thought that he was above God's judgment. He refused to submit to God's laws governing marriage and debt. He refused to honor the Assemblies of God's threatened covenant lawsuit against him. The result was not just the decline of his ministry. He is in jail for a long, long time. First, the humanist media brought judgment against him. Then the civil government did. **Spurning the church's covenant lawsuit, he came under the state's.**

Unleashing a media feeding frenzy, Bakker made his peers victims. Jerry Falwell tells the story of the time he got into a cab in the Northeast. The cab driver was staring into the rear view mirror at him. One of Falwell's assistants asked: "Do you know who this is?" The cabby answered: "I sure do. That bimbo sure got you, didn't she?" He had confused Falwell with a Jimmy: either Bakker or Swaggart. It really did not matter which. This was Falwell's point: the collapse of those two Pentecostal ministries affected his morally untarnished fundamentalist ministry. December 1989 saw the final issue of Falwell's *Fundamentalist Journal* and the lay-off of 500 employees. He said he would now concentrate on his church's ministry and his college.

### A Question of Sanctions

The modern church, because it has no doctrine of the covenant, has little confidence in its own sanctions, either positive or negative. How many churches were involved in pro-life Sunday this year? Very few. How many churches publicly pray down God's curses on identified **pre-born baby killers** (commonly called abortionists)? Very few. The pastors do not believe that God will back them up. They really believe that God has vacated the judicial bench in history, or at least during the so-called "Church Age." They have preached this view of God in the pulpits of America for over a century. Thus, they now hesitate to bring God's covenant lawsuits.

When they do bring charges, they get sued in civil court or else the defrocked defendant thumbs his nose at the church's jurisdiction, takes his money and his remaining followers, and walks away. Nevertheless, one by one, the nose-thumpers stumble. They never again recover the ministries that they controlled prior to their public fall. They fade away.

The churches have lost faith in negative sanctions. As a result, they are themselves under negative sanctions: **small budgets.** Churches are all short of money. Why? Because they do not preach **and formally enforce** tithing ("legalism"): negative sanctions. But it is not just negative sanctions that the churches have lost faith in. They no longer really believe in positive sanctions. They do not believe in Christian civilization. **They do not believe in the comprehensive nature of the gospel.** Christianity is said to be limited to the soul, the church, and the family. The churches are therefore unwilling to fund with a portion of

their tithes the specialized activities of parachurch ministries. They have forgotten the inevitable rule: **those who pay the piper call the tune.**

This tight-fisted policy of non-support has encouraged the parachurch ministries to make a kind of **end run** around the churches, which radio, television, and direct-mail techniques have made possible. Technologically, the parachurch ministries have had great advantages since the 1920's.

The advantage is not simply technological; it is also personal. The parachurch ministries are frequently involved in dealing with Christians in the broader world of culture. The churches have self-consciously walked away from culture. For example, churches have not funded scholarships to Christian day schools, high schools, and colleges. They have ignored explicitly Christian education, for this would raise questions of explicitly Christian intellectual standards, i.e., **biblical law.** They have not preached biblical law to the exclusion of "neutral" natural law.

So, the sons and daughters of the faithful are sent by their parents to distant, tax-funded, humanist collegiate pits. Who is on campus to help them? Only the collegiate parachurch ministries. Churches located close to the campuses do not cooperate with churches back home to see to it that out-of-town students are attending church regularly. To do so would imply that **the local churches are legal representatives of distant churches**—a denial of independent (Baptist) ecclesiology—and also that **the church possesses lawful sanctions.** Thus, we have lost millions of college-age former church members to the humanists. Only the parachurch ministries are there to help.

Meanwhile, the head of InterVarsity Campus Ministries downplays the horrendous nature of homosexual relationships. Meanwhile, the local church leaders of Maranatha Campus Ministries fired Bob and Rose Weiner and began shutting down the national ministry last December. The crisis is upon them.

### Conclusion

If I were a donor to a parachurch ministry (or any other kind of Christian ministry), I would specifically enquire of the head of the ministry regarding his local church membership and the name of the church's senior pastor.<sup>1</sup> If he is not a member of a local church, I would cut off all contributions. (This is not the same thing as refusing to buy services or goods from a ministry.) Also, these ministries should make it clear that they do not seek people's tithe money (the first ten percent); they should be supported exclusively by **individual offerings above the tithe** and from **contributions from churches.** These are measures to be taken by donors. But due diligence by donors is not sufficient to change the system. Until the churches start preaching covenant theology and enforcing it, there will be no fundamental change.

Time is now running out on independent parachurch ministries. This is why the 1990's will be the window of opportunity for the churches, meaning **the window of increased responsibility.** The churches are now faced with two major responsibilities: 1) replacing the parachurch ministries as the latter decline, which the churches are presently unwilling to do; or 2) bringing both positive and negative sanctions against the parachurch ministries, which they are equally unwilling to do. Without covenant theology, pastors flee responsibility like the plague. Preaching Christian impotence as a way of life, they produce it.

1. Mine is the Good Shepherd Reformed Episcopal Church, Tyler, Texas, pastored by Ray Sutton.