

# Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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## WHY GOD HAS ABANDONED THIS CIVILIZATION

by Gary North

*And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? (Matt. 27:46).*

Of all the words in the Bible, this cry of despair is the saddest. God incarnate, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, cried out to His eternal Father, asking Him a rhetorical question. It was surely a rhetorical question, for Jesus knew exactly why He had been abandoned by the Father. This was the curse of God on perfect humanity, the legal basis of Jesus' substitutionary atonement for all mankind (common grace) and the elect (special grace). To pay for both forms of grace, God made an atonement: His own Son. **The price of sin is abandonment by God.** This could not be any plainer.

Moses at the end of his life warned Israel that God would abandon the nation when it apostatized, which it surely would (Deut. 31:16-18). At the same time, God had promised Israel that He would never forsake them. "When thou art in tribulation, and all these things are come upon thee, even in the latter days, if thou turn to the LORD thy God, and shalt be obedient unto his voice; (For the LORD thy God is a merciful God;) he will not forsake thee, neither destroy thee, nor forget the covenant of thy fathers which he swore unto them" (Deut. 4:30-31). So, how can we sort this out? How can we make sense of it?

### The Masses and the Remnant

God promised to forsake them if they abandoned true worship for the sake of idols. **If they abandoned Him, He would abandon them.** Their abandonment would be spiritual. His abandonment would be cultural. He would leave them to the not-so-tender mercies of the political representatives of their false gods. The result of Israel's apostasy, every time, was slavery to foreigners, either inside the land or outside. The worship of foreign gods brought the tyranny of foreign rulers. This was the story of Israel from the time of the judges until the exile.

But inside the boundaries of Israel there was always a remnant. God told Elijah in the midst of his despair: "Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him" (1 Kings 19:18). These seven thousand anonymous representatives of the true religion had preserved the nation from total destruction. The king's right-hand man, Obadiah, had been part of this: he had hidden a hundred prophets in caves and

had supplied them with food during the drought-induced famine (1 Kings. 18:4). The doctrine of covenantal representation secured Israel some degree of protection from total destruction. Just as Jesus represented mankind, protecting the whole world from the wrath of God, so did the remnant of Israel protect the nation.

God still honored His covenant with Israel in Elijah's time. He had promised them this. The existence of a comparative handful of culturally anonymous representatives was what secured Israel from God's total wrath. The doctrine of representation - point two of the biblical covenant model - always is in operation: from Adam to Jesus, from Eden to the final judgment.

The covenantal faithfulness of the remnant preserved Israel from complete abandonment by God. He abandoned them culturally, leaving them under the authority of Jezebel and her court prophets. But this visible representation by covenant-breakers, while comprehensive culturally, was not more fundamental covenantally than the anonymous representation by a handful of covenant-keepers.

In short, Israel had been abandoned culturally by God, yet she had not been abandoned covenantally. **The representative faithfulness of the covenant-keeping remnant preserved the continuity of God's covenantal relationship with Israel in history.** There was legitimate hope for Israel's future because of the faithfulness of the remnant in the present. This hope was grounded in God's previous covenant promises: "And Samuel said unto the people, Fear not: ye have done all this wickedness: yet turn not aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart; And turn ye not aside: for then should ye go after vain things, which cannot profit nor deliver; for they are vain. For the LORD will not forsake his people for his great name's sake: because it hath pleased the LORD to make you his people" (1 Sam 12:20-22).

Israel's masses chose their representatives: Jezebel and her subordinates, including her husband. Only briefly, on Mt. Carmel, did they abandon the ecclesiastical representatives (1 Kings 18:40). But like dogs returning to their vomit, they returned to obedience to covenant-breakers. Yet God still refused to break His covenant with them. Though the masses had departed into idolatry, the remnant had not. Though the culture had become pagan, the remnant persevered. God preserved His covenant with Israel as a nation for His name's sake. His remnant served as the judicial means of maintaining the national covenant's continuity. The representatives chosen by the masses counted culturally, but they did not count

covenantally. **They counted historically, but they did not count eschatologically.** Israel (Jacob) had announced prophetically that Israel would be preserved as a nation until Shiloh came (Gen. 49:10). Jesus was the promised Shiloh.

### Cultural Abandonment and Covenantal Faithfulness

The twentieth century, as no other in history, has been the age of abandonment. The once-Christian West has self-consciously abandoned God in every area of culture. As a proper response, God has abandoned this culture. This pattern is as old as the fall of man. God leaves men alone in their respective gardens to see whom they will worship in His visible absence. After Adam's fall, God sees who the remnant are. They are few and far between in eras of apostasy. In times of very great apostasy, they are invisible even to the prophets. But they are there, and they are respected by God as agents of His kingdom. Their office as culturally anonymous representatives of God is covenantally significant, for it is the judicial basis of the perseverance of God's kingdom in history.

The church today does not view itself as eschatologically important because it sees only its cultural impotence. It sees that God has abandoned Western civilization, and it concludes that He has no place eschatologically for the church. Dispensationalists see national Israel, not the church, as the key to prophetic interpretation. Historic premillennialists see the church as eschatologically significant in history, but only in its post-Second Coming stage: a lieutenant (probably a mere second lieutenant) to Captain Jesus and His angels. Amillennialists see the church as a remnant until the final judgment, but they see this remnant as increasingly besieged because of its loss of protective anonymity. Cornelius Van Til expressed this pessimism well in his 1946 book, *Common Grace*.

But when all the reprobate are epistemologically self-conscious, the crack of doom has come. The fully self-conscious reprobate will do all he can in every dimension to destroy the people of God. So while we seek with all our power to hasten the process of differentiation in every dimension we are yet thankful, on the other hand, for "the day of grace," the day of undeveloped differentiation. Such tolerance as we receive on the part of the world is due to this fact that we live in the earlier, rather than in the later, stage of history. And such influence on the public situation as we can effect, whether in society or in state, presupposes this undifferentiated stage of development (p. 85).

I know of no more pessimistic eschatological assessment in the history of Christianity. Van Til insisted that Christians are supposed to seek to differentiate covenant-keepers from covenant-breakers by means of evangelism, yet their very success in persuading the lost of the reality of this distinction will lead to the covenant-breakers' escalating persecution of the church. This culturally pessimistic outlook is the cultural heart, mind, and soul of amillennialism. Amillennial evangelicals call the Christian remnant to step into the limelight and call down the wrath of the covenant-breaking masses on their heads. Even the anonymous remnant of Elijah's day received a more pleasant historical assignment from God than the

church's: just refuse to bow the knee to Baal.

The loss of hope implicit in Van Til's amillennial eschatology is nearly universal in the church today. He spoke representatively for all pessimillennialists: **the Great Commission is a call to a ministry of condemnation in history.** The church supposedly condemns the world to victory in history, while condemning itself to progressive cultural defeat and abandonment in history. This message condemns the world to defeat in eternity. **There is therefore no cultural continuity between time and eternity.** Covenant-breakers will experience an unexpected reversal at the last judgment, while covenant-keepers will experience their hoped-for, long-awaited reversal.

**This viewpoint abandons culture to representative hell.**

J. Gresham Machen warned against this in his 1912 lecture to the incoming freshmen class at Princeton Theological Seminary. The lecture was published as "Christianity and Culture" in *The Princeton Theological Review* (Jan. 1913). Machen said this:

In its effort to give religion a clear field, it [pietism] seeks to destroy culture. This solution is better than the first. Instead of indulging in a shallow optimism or deification of humanity, it recognizes the profound evil of the world, and does not shrink from the most heroic remedy. . . . Therefore, it is argued, the culture of this world must be a matter at least of indifference to the Christian. . . . Are then Christianity and culture in a conflict that is to be settled only by the destruction of one or the other of the contending forces? A third solution, fortunately, is possible—namely consecration. Instead of destroying the arts and sciences or being indifferent to them, let us cultivate them with all the enthusiasm of the veriest humanist, but at the same time consecrate them to the service of our God (pp. 3-5).

Machen was a postmillennialist in the tradition of Old Princeton. He could call for cultural consecration and restoration because he believed that a future Reformation was coming, which he stated repeatedly throughout his battle against theological liberalism in the Presbyterian Church. But his spiritual heirs have adopted eschatological pessimism and the remnant mentality of the anti-cultural pietism that Machen rejected. Meanwhile, modernism is the dominant culture today.

### Conclusion

The modern Protestant church has abandoned the ideal of Christian cultural transformation, and God has abandoned the church culturally. The church finds itself compromised by the culture of modernism, yet it has neither hope in transforming culture nor the tool of dominion: biblical law. The church lives in a remnant condition, not as a temporary shield of anonymity, but as a preferred way of life. No wonder evangelism has nearly died in the West. No wonder God has withdrawn His Holy Spirit to the sidelines of culture. God is giving His people what they have sought: cultural remnant status. They have wilfully abandoned the ideal of Christian culture—the ideal of Christendom—so God has abandoned His church culturally. Unpleasant, isn't it?

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