

Saying Goodbye to Christian Reconstructionism

P. Andrew Sandlin

(Dec. 10, 2002)

I was impressed by my dear friend Larry Ball's impassioned plea on RazorMouth some time ago for reconciliation among a few devout Christian pastors, and I hope that his plea is fruitful. To keep some perspective on this latest fracas (a mostly Calvinistic affair concerning the doctrine of justification), we should remember that it's really a tempest in a teapot in the wider scheme of things; and the broader orthodox Church has (fortunately) taken little notice. Nonetheless, it threatens the fragile unity of a slender, isolated branch of Christ's vineyard. For that reason alone, reconciliation is desirable.

In this article, however, I wish to address only one aspect of Larry's deeply felt and candidly expressed opinion—its sociology rather than its theology. Larry writes,

It appears to me that since the death of R. J. Rushdoony and Greg Bahnsen, the [Christian Reconstruction] movement has splintered into a number of parties and factions. In my opinion, capable leadership is gone, and the movement is in shambles.

I agree with Larry's assessment of the present state of the Christian Reconstruction Movement (CRM), which God used for a great deal of good in many, many ways; but I am less troubled than Larry about its collapse. This movement, like all others, was destined to stop; and in God's good providence, it has stopped. We should not lament this development but see how it may pave the way for a greater advancement of his kingdom, which was at the heart of the best elements of the CRM vision. In suggesting this, I am not positioning myself to "decree" the end of the CRM (no one can do that), and in fact perhaps there are folks who want to pick up the mantle and carry it on. My article is simply an observation that includes personal reasons for my own odyssey away from the CRM, an odyssey that, in my view, simply coincides with (but surely did not produce) its end.

Creaturely Knowledge

The tenets of the CRM (like those of all theological ideologies and systems and creeds) are human creations based on an interpretation of the Bible. They can (and must) be improved on; this is what theological progress is all about. This observation should be unsettling only to people not fully committed to the Creator-creature distinction as it relates to human knowledge. Our ideas about the Bible are not equivalent to infallible divine truth, particularly when they are

clustered into systems and ideologies – and movements, make no mistake about it, cannot exist for long without a system and an ideology.

Our goal must be to check and judge these systems and ideologies in light of the Bible, our divine authority. By this act, we may nudge a little closer to the infallible truth – while never getting at it infallibly in this life (that's why faith comes in). This is how theological progress happened in the past, and this is how it happens today. This progress may mean the demise of a movement, but it also often gives birth to a deeper understanding of biblical truth, which is what I advocate.

Marks of a Movement

Let's give credit where credit is due: The CRM benefited the wider Church by stressing (among other things) the total authority of the Bible in all of life, the Christianization of culture, and an optimistic outlook. It was an avowed enemy of a Pharisaic pietism that substituted man-made rules for the written Word of God. It recalled the Church to champion the importance of the Bible in the civil realm, an emphasis increasingly shed since 1660 in England and 1865 in the United States.

It recovered 19th century postmillennialism, which animated much of the great missionary enterprise of that century. It highlighted the dramatically innovative apologetics of Cornelius Van Til, who would have agreed with the liberal Harnack in perhaps only one chief point: the danger that classical (chiefly Greek) thought posed to the Church. The CRM restored an interest in the wider cultural mandate advocated by folks such as Abraham Kuyper, seeing the faith as broader than the four walls of the institutional Church.

I applaud the CRM for these contributions, and I was privileged to have participated in them in a small way.

The CRM bore almost all the telltale signs of a movement, both good and bad – vision, camaraderie, enterprise, creativity, a plethora of publications, publicity, tight ideological thinking, public denunciations and recriminations, purges, family feuds, midnight firings, conspiracy theories, turf wars, and backroom cut-throat deals. As in almost all movements, personalities dominated. The dominant personalities of founders generally constitute the cohesion and density of movements, in fact, and when the founders die or lose prominence, the movement slows to a halt. This is no less true of the CRM than of, say, Karl Marx's Communism or Ayn Rand's Objectivism.

The movement usually displays characteristics of the founders themselves, both their brilliance and their blind spots, their virtues and their vices. When the founders pass off the scene, the influence of their personalities gradually withdraws, and their ideas (shaped heavily by those personalities) find a diluted home in places far removed from their original climes.

For instance, while most conservatives (both inside and outside Presbyterian denominations) have not embraced theonomy, many have come closer to seeing the Bible as providing norms for political justice. Postmillennialism has gained a new hearing largely as a result of the CRM. Christian cultural activism has pervaded almost everybody from charismatics to Baptists. The CRM was at least partly responsible for this development. So, even as its ideas were diluted, its influence spread.

Indeed, movements are often successful in influence while they fail in their wider objectives. This has surely been true of the CRM. At its inception, for instance, it was an almost exclusively Presbyterian phenomenon, but that has all changed in the last 20 years; and many of its tenets find greater reception today among Baptists and charismatics than among Presbyterians. My own work with the Center for Cultural Leadership is strategically catholic. Our recent conference in Santa Cruz was addressed by a charismatic (Craig Dumont), a Presbyterian (John Frame), a Southern Baptist (Rod Martin), and a neo-Calvinist (P. Andrew Sandlin).

When a movement is unleashed, you just never know – and you surely cannot control – where its influence will end. The CRM did create a greater impetus for Christian social and political involvement, though it did not seem to move the West toward a "reconstructed" society at all. Ironically, the movement's dilution and demise may contribute more to Christian culture than did its agenda and implementation. As it becomes less ideological and centered, more flexible and diffuse – indeed, as it "withers away," to borrow Marx's language – it may in its demise help to lay the groundwork for action that will, in fact, create a new Christian culture in time to come.

Ideology and Personality

All movements are ideological, meaning that they rest on "totalistic" interpretations of reality: ideas and programs purporting to give answers to just about everything (in the CRM we had our "five-point covenant model," for instance). But ideology is usually less influential than personality in movements. In Christian movements, this fact is usually obscured, because it's so easy to suppose that right belief about the Bible (its inspiration and infallibility) equals right biblical belief and that personalities have nothing to do with how beliefs are framed. Few assumptions could be more patently misguided. The Bible and Christianity do not lift us out of our personality or historical situations, both of which tend to influence our beliefs and actions, and without which our faith would be impossible. Individuals espousing the "movement mentality" (John Frame's language) are inclined to adopt a theology that appeals to their ontology (the bent of their being). This is no less true of liberals and evangelicals than of fundamentalists and reconstructionists – and this last coupling was intentional.

I have come to believe that in many ways the CRM was largely a sophisticated form of Protestant fundamentalism – which is one reason it appealed to so many of us fundamentalists, despite the CRM's hostility to dispensational eschatology, the doctrinal linchpin of fundamentalism. What the CRM shared with fundamentalism was its approach to the Bible. I was reared a

fundamentalist, and what appealed to me about the CRM was its vigorous attention to the whole of the Bible: on this, the CRM "out-fundamentaled" the fundamentalists! Like many other young, intelligent Christians, I wanted a fully explained view of life based on a careful reading of the Bible. Only later did I learn (painfully) that a fully explained view of life is a form of rationalism to which the Bible itself objects. We live by faith, not by sight – and certainly not by a biblical ideology (or "idol-ology," as someone once put it). Those who want to change the world (as I wanted) are easily attracted to ideologies. So were the Marxists. In this vein, Clark Pinnock was right to label the CRM the liberation theology of the right. I was deeply into liberation, and the CRM was a great vehicle for liberating the shackled world. I'm still into valid forms of liberation (and hope I always will be – John 8:36); but I no longer pin my hopes on a movement; I pin them on God and his good timing in his providence.

True Believers

Movements tend to be magnets for "movement types," people who find the solace of personal identity most fully in a movement. I surely did; there's a desire in many of us to belong to a group that has or purports to have – all or most of life's answers. The Bible does give those answers, but it alerts us that they are found chiefly in a Person, Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:21), not an ideology or coherent set of belief or movement program. If we don't understand this distinction, we tend to relish the us-vs.-them assumption underlying the movement, and it provides us a feeling of belonging that we have not found elsewhere – not even in the Church, where Christians should find it. This mentality was rather incisively detailed in Eric Hoffer's little classic, *The True Believer*.

It's easy for some such folks, if Christians, to act as though they alone are God's vehicles to transform the Church or the world, though most do not hold this view consciously or reflectively. I've observed this trend not only in the CRM, but also among certain Baptists, charismatics, fundamentalists, and Roman Catholics – all of whom were deeply ensconced in movements. (As someone rather prominently identified with the CRM for some years, I've been party to some of these traits, so I'm surely not patronizing.)

What Moves on When Movements Stop

To say that the CRM has finally ended doesn't imply that certain valid tenets of its theological views must stop. To the contrary, with the Center for Cultural Leadership (and I single it out only because I'm most familiar with it), we're trying to preserve what we see as the positive components of the CRM (for example, as noted above, the total authority of the Bible in all of life, the Christianization of culture, a consistent apologetics, and an optimistic outlook).

Concurrently, we're trying to shed what we believe are its negative characteristics, though of course not all of its advocates are guilty: hyperpoliticization, acrimony, insulting public

discourse, triumphalism, Holocaust revisionism, conspiracy thinking, simplistic biblical interpretation, and so on. We do this without arrogantly implying that we've achieved the "perfect balance" – how tritely distasteful!

The Irony of Movements

For movements to last beyond a single generation, they need bold, energetic, creative young thinkers and leaders to defend the movement against intellectual opposition and dilution, and to carry the ideological torch forward. The irony is that if this second generation is too bold, energetic, and creative (and these are good traits), it may feel compelled to revise what it considers flaws in the movement's ideology and thereby risk criticism that it has betrayed the movement's founders and founding tenets. But if there are no bold, energetic, creative young thinkers on the horizon, the movement will lose its vitality and peter out. A movement must have these new thinkers and leaders, but it can't afford to keep them. They will develop ideas in ways never envisioned by the founders and their adherents, as Marx did with Hegel. It's a classic case of doomed if you do and doomed if you don't.

I've been identified by some on the left and even some on the right as R. J. Rushdoony's intellectual (if not institutional) heir, but I neither deserve nor desire that mantle. RJR was a towering and courageous intellectual, but his fruitful life's work is now over, and no one will – or should – fill his shoes (though his ideas and writings should be perpetuated). This is as it must be – God buries his workers, but not his work. God halts movements, but not his Kingdom.

A Final Farewell

So, I say farewell to the CRM, and my spirit is not "Good riddance," but rather, "Thanks for the memories." The CRM accomplished good things – proper respect for the Old Testament, popularization of presuppositional apologetics, stress on the cultural mandate, and a serious attempt at a comprehensive biblical worldview. But let it be noted that these laudable features don't need the CRM to survive. In fact, it's altogether conceivable that another movement may be a much more suitable "delivery system" for that cluster of beliefs – coupled with other beliefs and practices that the CRM intentionally neglected or simply missed. This is why we need progress to move on to bigger and better things. We're not consistent postmillennialists if we want simply to muddle where we are and never grow in the Faith.

A New Movement?

But, given the inherent limitations of all movements, do we need a new movement? I don't think so. As the reader may have discerned, I am ambivalent about movements. God has truly used them, yet they carry inherent limitations that often render them as counterproductive as they are

beneficial.

At any rate, in the September 2002 Christian Culture (write for a copy), I state that I'm not launching a new movement; but I do propose a new paradigm, or way of looking at things and of acting in today's world that need not require a new movement. In fact, I couldn't launch a new movement even if I wanted to. Men do not launch movements; movements launch men. God can launch both.

So, while the CRM may have finally rolled to a halt, Christ's Kingdom moves on. As Gerry Wisz has written on RazorMouth, our supreme loyalty is to Jesus Christ, not cliches, movements, or even churches.

Let's be about the King's business – and let the movements take care of themselves.

<http://www.razormouth.com/NewsPub/Stories/2002/12/10/10395096344.php>