

Preface

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Ecclesiastes 12:12

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R. J. Rushdoony's REVOLT AGAINST MATURITY¹

by Gary North

The subtitle of this book, "A Biblical Psychology of Man," introduces us to the main theme. But unlike all other books on psychology today, this one is a comprehensive rejection of all humanistic psychologies. He writes near the end of the book: "They are varying aspects of man's revolt against maturity and forms of justification for man's apostasy and rebellion. Where they admit the fact of sin, sin is redefined as an offense of man against man, or man against himself, as immaturity or arrested development, as anything other than an act of war or rebellion against God" (p. 332).

Rushdoony wrote in *The One and the Many* (1971):

The increasing prominence of psychology is an important sign of the times. When man becomes a problem to himself, psychology comes into its own. As man's inner problems grow, his ability to cope with the outer world and its problems declines. Thus, a psychology-oriented age is an age in decline, unsure of itself, and incompetent in the face of its responsibilities. It is significant that modern man talks so much about "alienation"; his position of modernity isolates him from God and man and leaves him a prisoner of his isolated ego (p. 368).

It is also significant that Jay E. Adams' book, *Competent to Counsel*, published in 1970, had sold over 250,000 copies by the early 1980s—by far the best-selling book Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co. has ever had. (Rushdoony does not think very highly of Adams' contributions, because they offer "too meager an application of Biblical doctrine to the issues at hand" [p. 168]. This reflects Rushdoony's interest in intellectual matters, as distinguished from the day-to-day problems of counselling church members.) By the late 1970s, Christian books on family life, single life, child rearing, and self-help had become a flood, far outdistancing the topic of eschatology.

How comprehensive are these books? Not very. One prominent Christian pastor, Charles Swindoll, may now be the best-selling Christian author in America, or second only to Dr. James Dobson (whose books are serious). He has sold hundreds of thousands of thin paperback books with titles taken from tennis (another aspect of the "fitness" mania of the 1970s): *Strengthening Your Grip* and *Improving Your Serve*. (I am expecting his book on adultery to be called *Out of Bounds*.) Yet Rev. Swindoll's dispensational eschatology is ultimately pessimistic with respect to the abilities of regenerate men to build permanent institutions that will reshape society. If he were more honest concerning

his views on what he really expects for society, his books would bear titles such as *Into the Net*, *Double Fault*, and an introductory handbook for Christian counsellors who, like Rev. Swindoll, believe that biblical law is not for the church age: *This Is a Racket*.

The modern church has abandoned the study of God and His theology for the study of man and his theology. Psychology was once a branch of theology, but since the nineteenth century, it has become a science of **experience**: evangelical pietism vs. scientific experimentation, Rushdoony argues (p. 335). Thus, "the popular psychology of our time has no rightful place in the church, in that it is implicitly anti-theological and man-centered rather than God-centered. For pastors to borrow from contemporary humanistic psychologies means to introduce an alien doctrine of salvation to their congregations" (p. 336).

Mature Mankind

The general theme of the book is found in its title. Man was created by God as a mature being, ready to exercise dominion over nature. "This is a fact of central importance. We thus cannot make child psychology basic to an understanding of man. . . . Humanistic psychology looks backward to a primitive past in order to explain man, whereas Biblical psychology looks neither to the child nor a primitive past to explain man but to a mature creation, Adam, and to God's purpose in man's creation" (p. 6).

Man's sins and shortcomings represent not a lingering primitivism or a reversion to childhood but rather a deliberate *revolt against maturity* and the requirements of maturity. By ascribing to man, as humanistic psychologies do, a basic substratum of primitivism and racial childishness, this revolt against maturity is given an ideological justification; the studied and maturely developed immaturity of man is encouraged and justified. If man is reminded rather that he was created in Adam into maturity and responsibility, and that his revolt is against maturity and responsibility, his self-justification is shattered (p. 6).

It is unfortunate that the word "maturity" is not defined by Rushdoony at the beginning. It does not appear in the index. What does he mean by the word? The best answer is found in volume I of the *Institutes*. He argues that "perfect" in the Bible refers to spiritual maturity "The Old Testament words translated 'perfect' mean upright, having integrity, blameless, and the New Testament words have the meaning of mature, complete. Clearly, this is something other than sinlessness. . . . Perfection means uprightness and maturity in terms of a goal or purpose, an end established by God. . . .

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maturity requires continuous growth towards God's appointed purpose" (pp. 628-29).

This growth process is **ethical**, not metaphysical; it in no way points to an evolutionary process, either biological or social. It is the working out, in time and on earth, of the **perfect humanity of Jesus Christ** which regenerate men receive by judicial decree, not an evolutionary development toward the attainment of divinity. Rushdoony insists that psychology must begin with a doctrine of man which affirms that **man has a fixed nature**, for he is God's image. He is not an evolving being with a plastic nature. He cannot be molded at the will of others (p. 1). Contrary to the Greeks, Aquinas, and John Locke, man's mind is not a clean slate at birth, ready to receive sense impressions neutrally (p. 2).

Rushdoony sees man's history in the four stages described by the Puritans: state of innocence, before the fall; state of depravity; state of grace, meaning after individual redemption; and the state of glory, after the resurrection (p. 3). Of course, he could also have included the state of wrath for the unregenerate after the resurrection. Later in the book, he says that **work** is the common link in all four states. Work is therefore essential to the state of glory, as it was to the state of innocence (p. 298). Work is basic to man's very being "To separate men from work is to separate them from meaning and life. Man's life is not defined by play but by work and dominion. Where man finds his work futile, there the disintegration of man becomes manifest" (p. 21). Made in the image of God to exercise dominion, he dies without work "A work-free society will finally be a man-free society" (p. 21).

Inescapable Concepts

Revolt Against Maturity is really a collection of 37 short essays. This is characteristic of all of Rushdoony's books published after volume I of *Institutes of Biblical Law*, although many chapters in this book were written before *Institutes* was published in 1973. Since 1973, he has written few essays longer than about ten pages, and usually not this long. This makes his more recent books easy to pick up and read for only a few minutes, and still come away with several insights. But it also makes the continuity of the books more difficult to discern, and therefore it is very easy to forget his insights, or forget where you read them. It is not always clear just how he is applying (or even sticking to) the unifying theme or themes in his later books. You tend to remember a few of the individual insights, but not the book as a whole. This is the problem with *Revolt Against Maturity*.

The "mental handle" I have used to keep this book's topics in mind is the phrase he uses in other books, the "inescapable concept." He lists several psychological concepts that have Christian and non-Christian implications: the image of God in man, dominion, atonement, personalism, justification, coercion (Satan's outward coercion or God's inward coercion), violence (related to atonement), and confession. He may regard other concepts in this book as inescapable, but these are the most clearly presented as inescapable. He surveys many of the themes of modern psychology and politics in terms of these fundamental concepts, demonstrating how humanism leads to errors of interpretation because of its starting point, autonomous man.

But what, exactly, does he mean by "inescapable concept"? He has written in several places about other inescapable concepts in human thought. There are dozens of them, perhaps hundreds. An inescapable concept is so basic to human thought that it cannot be avoided. F. A. Hayek's familiar statement on economic planning is representative "It is never a question of planning or no planning. The question is, **Whose** plan?" Rushdoony offers many variations of this insight throughout his writings. His most

famous example is that of **predestination**: "The only alternative to the doctrine of predestination is the assertion of the reign of total chance, of meaninglessness and brute factuality. The real issue is what kind of predestination we shall have, predestination by God or predestination by man? Shall we accept God's eternal decree, His total planning, or will we submit to man's total planning, man's dream of playing god and planner over all creation?" (*The Biblical Philosophy of History*, 1969, p. 6). In short, it is never a question of predestination vs. no predestination; it is a question of **whose** predestination.

He even wrote a book called *Infallibility: An Inescapable Concept* (Ross House, 1978). In it, he writes: "For a man to live successfully, he must have an ultimate standing ground; **every philosophy is authoritarian**, in that, while it may attack savagely all other doctrines of authority, it does so from the vantage point of a new authority. This new authority is a basic pretheoretical presupposition which is in totality religious and which rests on a particular concept of infallibility. Every man has his platform from which he speaks. To affirm that foundation without qualification is an inescapable requirement for human thought" (p. 4). In other words, it is not a question of authority vs. no authority; it is a question of **whose** authority.

Atonement

Here is an inescapable concept, although Rushdoony does not use this terminology in this book. Man needs atonement. Someone must be punished for sin. Man knows this, even in his rebellion. So what do we find? Pseudo-atonements, created by man to escape the fear of God's wrath.

One of these escapes is **sadism**. Men seek to inflict pain on "the enemy"—defined as the incarnation of evil—in order to expiate sin. As he says, "Sadism is a form of do-it-yourself atonement" (p. 158). The other major form of humanistic self-atonement is **masochism**, or self-punishment. "The masochist wants punishment in order that he may in effect pay the price of his sin. According to his accounting system, sins have their price; when that price is paid, a man has both freedom to commit the sin and to be absolved of sin and guilt" (p. 159). Thus, society must deal with the need for atonement. It is an inescapable concept.

God's atonement takes away the self-absorptionistic atonement. Guilt leads to an intensive and unhealthy introspection and self-absorption. The pressing problem of the guilty is how to work off the burden of sin and guilt. Whatever activity they embark upon, whether it be religious, political, educational, or charitable, assumes a sado-masochistic orientation. It becomes an aspect of self-atonement. Much of human activity has this characteristic. Guilty men seek a mantle of self-righteousness by means of their charitable acts, or by passing socialistic legislation to "improve" mankind and its lot. These self-righteous acts can assume a politically charitable form (charitable foundations oftentimes have such an origin), or a politically radical form (such as socialistic measures or policies). In either case, the self-righteousness involved is a form of atonement. It is also masochistic (pp. 160-61).

Rushdoony makes a very significant point that such action is geared to **human guilt** rather than to God's law. The motivation is **egocentric**, whereas the reverse is true of God's atonement. Because of the egocentric focus of social action based on the self-atonement impulse, it is the **terminal point** for the humanist. In contrast, the Christian doctrine of the atonement is the **starting-point** for the Christian.

This is fundamental to a proper understanding of the dominion covenant:

Christ's obedience makes all those born again in His image to be righteous, or law-keepers. The atonement is for them the glorious starting-point, whereas for the humanist, it is the terminal point. From the fact of atonement, the redeemed go on to apply God's law-word to every area of life and to re-order all things in terms of Christ (p. 161).

Society cannot escape the need for atonement. Guilt is autonomous man's inescapable burden. Our humanistic age has seen a superabundance of psychiatrists and psychologists, "all feeding on this burden and intensifying it by their failure" (p. 161).

Justification

"Man's conscience is geared to God; it requires justification, and, if it will not find it in Christ, then it will seek it elsewhere" (p. 269). But what is justification? It is a **judicial declaration**. It is not a matter of feeling; it is a legal fact (p. 188). It is the legal consequence of Christ's atoning death, applied judicially by God to the sinner (p. 189). It removes the guilt of sin. It takes place outside the sinner, and is a "once for all" act (p. 189). God declares a man redeemed.

Rushdoony's important insight into the meaning of justification is that it involves man's desire for **moral order**. This, in turn, involves some sort of **law-order**. "Because man is created in God's image, he is geared to law, and he wants the moral order of the universe righted, and the moral order of his soul restored. Even in his sin, he longs for moral order, so that he brings judgment on himself and works subconsciously against his sin" (p. 191). Men are constantly trying to justify themselves and their actions in order to affirm their lawful place in a moral universe. This leads Rushdoony to castigate one of the great resource-wasting activities of mankind: **introspection**. It is the great enemy of social energy.

For anyone who trusts in Christ as Savior to waste time on self-justification is a sin and an abuse of energy. Faulty theology which requires a concentration on sins is like a leaky pipe: it delivers too little water to the tap. The pressure and energy leaks out before it can accomplish its ordained purpose (p. 192).

Once again, Rushdoony returns to the familiar theme of **dominion**. Introspection is an enemy of dominion.

A society in which godly justification prevails will thus be marked by social energy and vitality. Instead of dissipating its strength on inner warfare and futile self-justifications, it will move forward to re-order all things in terms of God's law-word. Instead of being group-directed, inner directed, or past-oriented, it will be future oriented and God directed (p. 192).

Rushdoony's hostility to **pietism** must be understood in terms of this evaluation of the social impact of a fallacious doctrine of justification.

Forgiveness

Another inescapable concept is the need for forgiveness. How does this need manifest itself in the field of psychology? Men seek **verbal assurances** from others that the others have forgiven them. Marriage partners nag each other for forgiveness. A guilty party confesses to another, and he expects forgiveness in return. If he does not receive it, he resents it. "Absolution from sin is thus reduced to a humanistic confession and forgiveness. Forgiveness is thus entirely of man and is essentially a matter of an exchange of

words. It is more than a change of heart and restitution which is left out: God is entirely left out. The demand is for cleansing, on man's terms" (p. 280).

The lack of a doctrine of forgiveness is at the heart of the **stagnation of Asia**.

Without forgiveness and regeneration, there can be nothing new in history. Man the sinner would then endlessly repeat his sin, compound his guilt, and have no escape save the hope of eternal death. Asiatic religions, recognizing this inevitable and persisting inheritance, formulated the doctrine of Karma. Man's life, his cycles of birth and death, or transmigration, *samsara*, is a product of *Karma*. A man's *Karma* is the physical causation or causality in his life; it is the unmitigated, unforgetting, and unforgiving law of retribution working out precisely the good and evil in his life. Because evil predominates in man, good becomes little more than a form of escape from *Karma*, causality, into death and oblivion. History thus is an endless cycle of retribution with a minimal possibility of escape. The stagnation of the Orient has thus been religious (p. 282).

In short, "The energy of the West has not been racial: it has been religious. Because of the fact of forgiveness and regeneration, man has been able to break out of the bondage of his past and the burden of his guilt" (p. 283).

Confession

As is the case in the previous "inescapable concepts," Rushdoony sees this one in a broad social context. This is a characteristic feature of Rushdoony's entire ministry: developing the social, political, and economic implications of the orthodox creeds and doctrines of Christianity. (His book, *Foundations of Social Order*, is perhaps his most impressive example of this approach.) Confession cannot be bottled up inside the bedroom or the sanctuary.

Man was created by God to be a confessing creature, to confess God in all of his activities, research, study, and science. In every area, man makes a religious confession in all that he does and is. Man's life is a confession before the world of faith and purpose which govern his heart. Man's life is also a continual confession before God and to God. Every thought and motive of man is naked and open before God (p. 274).

Group confessions of guilt can be used by pagan men to remove a sense of guilt. By sharing guilt verbally, they hope to escape the effects of guilt. Rushdoony mentions group sex. Another example would be the brainwashing techniques used by the Communists in Korea to break down the resistance of American prisoners of war. This is a practice that has always been used within Communist Party organizations throughout the world. Group confession is also an important part of many cults and secret societies in maintaining control by the leaders.

Man cannot be alone, meaning outside the presence of God. This is a joy for the regenerate man and an outrage for the unregenerate. Nevertheless, unregenerate men seek confession. The popularity of psychoanalysis is one example. Though he fails to mention it, Rushdoony might have discussed the power of the confessional over members of the Roman Catholic Church—a power the German sociologist Max Weber said has been at the very heart of the Church.

In the field of criminal justice, the **informant** is crucially important. Again, confession is an important motive here. Even criminals seem to have a compulsion to confess in some instances (p. 276).

Without restitution, however, confession of sins can become a means of inflicting pain. People who tell you that they are so sorry that they spoke of your terrible arrogance, or your spendthrift ways, or whatever, are really finding a way to slander you to your face, Rushdoony says. "Sin in such cases masquerades as faith" (p. 277).

Dominion

As is the case with Rushdoony's other books, this one stresses the need for dominion. The revolt against maturity by fallen man is seen in his attempt to create several alternatives to a God-governed social order: a static political order, the ultimate goal of revolutionaries (pp. 172, 176); tyranny, the attempt by an elite to usurp divine authority (p. 130); or the secular city without God (p. 93).

The ethical rebel must deal with the dominion impulse. He cannot handle it. With every increase in pagan man's power, there is an increase in his responsibility. The more responsibility he has, the more areas for guilt to arise (p. 116). Every relationship of man is affected by guilt. Although Rushdoony does not cite Luke 12:47-48, the biblical principle stated there is clear: much is expected from the person to whom much is given. "A world of causality and consequences haunts them. Man the sinner wants to be god in a world without any consequences, guilt, sickness, disease, or death" (p. 118).

Pagan men seek to deny their guilt by denying their dependence on God. "*But independence from God is gained at the price of dependence upon men*" (p. 125). Men seek to be free from God, and thereby freedom from responsibility to God. The consequence is a growing immaturity (p. 127).

Human progress is the product of God's grace. It is not the product of trouble. As he says, "If 'bad weather' or trouble made for progress, China, India, and Africa should have assumed world leadership centuries ago" (p. 52). Progress is also not the product of revolutionary violence, contrary to the Marxists. Revolutionaries aim at a static social order, one which is anti-growth and anti-progress (pp. 172, 176). As he writes, "the state of grace is not static nor past or present bound, but future oriented. The state of grace is not without sin, but it is never without growth" (p. 175).

Other Observations

Because of its many brief chapters and numerous brief insights, many of the gems in this book are not easily classified in a review. Examples:

The **disinherited mind** of humanism: wandering,

rootless, driven by sin and guilt (p. 211)

Revolution as an example of **instant gratification**; social growth (maturity) takes time (pp. 225-26)

The **headless religion** and **headless psychology** of modern pietism and fundamentalism: a religion of feeling, hostile to the intellect and to propositional truth, the religion of fragmented men (pp. 48-49)

The cross of Christ as the **tree of life** (p. 303)

Hell as man's autonomous urge to **paradise** (p. 56)

The **elitism** of the **intellectual**: reason gives him his pretended autonomy from God and the masses (p. 126).

Corruption: from **above** (evil rulers), **below** (evil masses), or **within** (indwelling sin) (pp. 214-16)

The **God of ecumenism** is the **future** (p. 62)

The **graveyard society**: humanism's anti-work, anti-time, anti-clock society (p. 231)

Peace as both wholeness and **power**—a rejection of pacifism's view of peace as impotence (pp. 252-54)

Autonomous man's **holiness**: separation from God, not separation from sin (p. 34)

The more **birth control** devices and propaganda humanism provides, the more **illegitimate births** (p. 103)

The difficulties of **unchastity** (p. 15)

The success of Christianity in assimilating and changing nineteenth-century immigrants to the U.S. (pp. 220-24)

Conclusion

Revolt Against Maturity is a call for a reconstruction of the categories of psychology in terms of Rushdoony's recurring themes: the Creator-creature distinction, the sovereignty of God (predestination), salvation by grace, postmillennialism (future-orientation), biblical law (restitution, obedience), and dominion. It is a condemnation of all humanistic psychologies, and a condemnation of any attempt to restructure Christian theology in terms of any of them. Without a biblical psychology, he implies, efforts at reconstructing society will be hampered. "Social growth rests on personal growth" (p. 176), and personal growth demands a regenerate, healthy psychology.