

# **The Dominion Mandate and the Christian Reconstruction Movement**

by Robert DeWaay

A recent theological movement known as Christian Reconstruction has made a significant impact on American Christianity in the past several decades. It is based on a Reformed, Calvinistic view of theology with some significant, unique twists. The most prominent one is the conviction that the Scripture gives the church a mandate to take dominion over this world socially and culturally before the bodily return of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> This teaching is known as the “dominion mandate.” The principal Biblical passages that are cited to prove this mandate are Genesis 1:26-28; Genesis 9:1-5 and Matthew 28:18-20. The key question to be answered is whether these passages teach the dominion mandate as understood by Christian Reconstructionism. The thesis of this article is that these Biblical passages do not teach a social or cultural domination of the world by Christians before the bodily return of Christ. This issue is important because one's understanding of the Great Commission is at stake. This paper will exegetically examine these passages to demonstrate this thesis.

## **I. Genesis 1:26-28**

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. And God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

### **A. Christian Reconstructionism's Understanding of the Passage.**

Christian Reconstructionists continually cite this passage as a proof text for the “dominion mandate.” It is also called the “dominion covenant.” Christian Reconstructionist Gary North, the son-in-law of R. J. Rushdoony who is considered the founder of the movement, wrote a book entitled The Dominion Covenant, which is the first in what he hopes will be a multi-volume, economic commentary of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> He states, “This is why Genesis 1:26-28 is truly a covenant: it establishes the basis of the relationship between God and man. . . . Man is actually defined by God in terms of this dominion covenant, or what is sometimes called the cultural mandate. This covenant governs all four God-mandated human governments: individual, family, church and civil.”<sup>3</sup> The **range** of dominion then, includes dominion over other humans and human institutions.

Reconstructionists contend that this dominion was lost when Adam sinned:

The church is Christ's instrument of rule. More than that, the church actually participates in Christ's rule over the nations. The ascension of Christ thus marks a transition in *our* relationship to God's dominion over the world. Man was created to rule the earth, as a subject of the heavenly King (Gen. 1:28). When Adam sinned he lost dominion.<sup>4</sup>

This shows the idea that certain humans (here Christians) are to have dominion and that this dominion extends over other humans. It was supposedly lost by Adam and regained *for us* by Christ. Unfortunately, according to

Christian Reconstruction, thus far through church history we have not properly used this regained dominion. Gary North clarifies the Reconstructionist understanding of dominion:

The way to regain the ground we have lost is by becoming knowledgeable and involved in the ordering of earth's governments, including *civil* government. . . Since the Lord has given us the task of holding "dominion . . . over all the earth" (Genesis 1:26), we are not taking up our assigned role as stewards if we refuse to become involved in the activities of governing. I further point out: How can we discipline the earth if we are not involved in running it?<sup>5</sup>

The **means** of dominion for Reconstructionists is **law**. The idea of "theonomy," which simply means "God's law," is that the laws of the Bible (particularly the Old Testament Laws) are given by God to His people for the purpose of sanctification and for their implementation to take dominion over the nations and institutions of the world. Gary North states, "God has placed on His people the moral requirement of transforming the world through the preaching of the gospel. He has also given mankind the tools of dominion, His laws."<sup>6</sup> Reconstructionist Greg Bahnsen gives this definition of theonomy: "By 'theonomy' I will mean that verbalized law of God which is imposed from outside man and revealed authoritatively in the words of Scripture."<sup>7</sup> Bahnsen's scholarly work delves into theonomy in great detail, relying heavily on a particular interpretation of Matthew 5:17 as the basis of his theology of dominion through law.<sup>8</sup> If Genesis 1:26-28 is not about dominion over other people or over cultural and sociological structures, then theonomy has no relevance to the passage. Beasts, birds, fish, minerals and plants do not respond to verbal moral and judicial laws! Therefore, the validity of the dominion mandate is essential for the concept of theonomy to have the purpose and application it is given by Reconstructionists.

Reconstructionists are correct in identifying autonomy as the key human problem. Gary North discusses sin and autonomy: "Sin, however, is not limited to the attempted rejections of the covenant of dominion. It is also very much in evidence in the attempts of self-proclaimed autonomous men to exercise humanistic dominion apart from God or God's law-order."<sup>9</sup> This is a good statement about the need to exercise dominion as God's imagers in a manner in keeping with submission to God. The problem is the presupposition that this includes some humans exercising dominion over others by a Genesis 1:26-28 mandate. This is not demonstrated in the text of Genesis 1:26-28.

#### **B. Non-reconstructionist views of Genesis 1:26-28.**

Leonard Verduin, who is not writing particularly about Christian Reconstructionism, but against the justification of slave holding (slavery under certain circumstances is endorsed by reconstructionists<sup>10</sup>) by some Christians in South Africa states, "In the Christian vision all men are in the image of god and are, for that reason, intended for dominion-having; every man is the subject of the transaction and no man is the object of it."<sup>11</sup> He also asserts, "Slavery happens if and when, and only if and when, men lengthen the Biblical catalog of the to-be-subdued so that now it includes also human beings."<sup>12</sup> Christian Reconstruction makes the error of lengthening the list. Clearly other humans, fallen or not, are not included in the Genesis 1:26-28 list.

Dave Hunt cites Genesis 1:26-28 as, “The few verses from which the new dominion teaching is derived.”<sup>13</sup> He understands the passage as follows: “God is stating in clear language nothing more nor less than the simple fact that man, as a higher order of creation made in His image, has been given dominion over the earth and everything upon it - the trees, herbs, fish, fowls, animals, and all other life-forms.”<sup>14</sup> He sees Reconstructionists making four false inferences which include: (1) ruling over other humans, (2) that dominion was lost by Adam, (3) that Christ died and was raised to restore this lost dominion, and (4) that the Great Commission of Matthew 28 is a restatement of the Genesis “dominion mandate.”<sup>15</sup> He concludes, “Upon this faulty foundation, the entire Reconstruction movement has been erected.”<sup>16</sup> He is right that Reconstructionists teach these things. The Biblical evidence suggests that he is right that they are a faulty foundation. It is remarkable how much emphasis is placed on Genesis 1:26-28 as being a mandate to rule over cultures and human institutions in a fallen world when at the time that Adam was given this mandate, no such cultures existed and the world was not fallen. The text says nothing about cultures or subjugating other people.

H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice argue that whatever dominion humans had was not lost at the fall, because Psalm 8:6-8 states it as still existing.<sup>17</sup> They cite “Calvinist John Robbins” who says, “The Dominion Mandate `clearly gives mankind dominion over the animals and the earth. It does not give men dominion over men.”<sup>18</sup> It should be pointed out that the Genesis text under consideration says “let them rule,” which included man **and** woman. One was not given dominion over the other, man and woman were equally given dominion over the non-human creation. If there are social priorities (such as submission in marriage - Ephesians 5:22 or submission to civil rulers - Romans 13:1), Genesis 1:26-28 is not discussing them. All humans were given dominion over the rest of the creation and no amount of massaging the text will make it state that some humans have a mandate to subjugate other humans.

This major exegetical flaw gets the Christian Reconstruction movement off the ground on a foundation which will not hold it up. All the brilliant Biblical work and logical reasoning such as can be found in Bahnsen's Theonomy In Christian Ethics goes to naught if the dominion mandate that Reconstructionism presupposes does not exist. The issues of law and grace are yet subject to debate and interpretation; but if the agenda of Christianizing the world through the forced application of Old Testament law is removed, the debate takes on a different urgency. The primary issue remaining would be the means of the sanctification of the Christian, which is important in its own right, but outside of the scope of this analysis of the dominion mandate.

## **II. Genesis 9:1-6**

And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. And the fear of you and the terror of you shall be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky; with everything that creeps on the ground, and all the fish of the sea, into your hand they are given. Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give all to you, as I gave the green plant. Only you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And surely I will require your lifeblood; from every beast I will require it. And from every man, from every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever

sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed, For in the image of God He made man.

### **A. Christian Reconstructionism's Understanding of the Passage.**

The instructions God gave to Noah clearly echo those given to Adam. Reconstructionists see this as an extension and reiteration of a dominion mandate that includes cultural domination. Gary North, in a written polemic against Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, states:

What he conveniently neglects - and he could not conceivably be ignorant of the passage - is that God gave the same cultural mandate to Noah, after the Flood (Gen. 9:1-7). It should be obvious why Dr. Lloyd-Jones conveniently neglects this passage: *it spells the doom of his entire misinterpretation of the Bible*. We cannot escape the moral burden of the cultural mandate - what I have called the dominion covenant - just because of man's ethical rebellion. We are the sons of Noah.<sup>19</sup>

North reasons that since the Genesis 9 mandate succeeded the Fall, the Fall must not have invalidated the mandate given to Adam. The problem is that Reconstructionism's understanding of Genesis 9 is derived from their understanding of Genesis 1. If there was no "cultural" dominion mandate given to Adam, then Genesis 9 could not have reiterated it. Genesis 9 is clearly about beasts, birds, fish, insects and plants. It says nothing about culture other than the prohibition of murder. Man is created in God's image and this image still exists after the fall in some sense. This is the reason that one cannot shed man's blood without impunity. The contrast in the passage is between humans and the rest of creation. One human cannot take another's (like he or she might kill a beast) because humans are imagers of God.

Greg Bahnsen does a good job of handling verses 5 and 6 of Genesis 9. He states in reference to Genesis 9:5 f and Romans 13:1-4, "The man created in God's image who has the responsibility of rule in human government (not citizens, not the church) is required to punish violators of God's law for the welfare of his country; he has the right to do this because he is the imager of God and has God's law to direct him."<sup>20</sup> His argument is carried on in his following pages to the effect that magistrates, whoever they are, are imagers of God. He does not argue from Genesis 9 that the church must dominate the world for God's laws (particularly the punishment of murderers) to be executed by civil governments. Bahnsen's use of Genesis 9 and Romans 13 would fit with many non-Reconstructionist understandings of theology. All humans are imagers of God, therefore it is not just Christians who can be providentially used by God to enforce law.

However, in another work with co-author Kenneth Gentry, Bahnsen apparently endorses the cultural, dominion mandate understanding taught repeatedly by Gary North. After giving reference to Genesis 1:26-28 and 9:1ff they state:

As will be demonstrated, the Gospel Victory Theme of post-millennialism comports well with God's creational purpose. It highlights the divine expectation of the true, created nature of man qua man. It expects the world as a system (or *kosmos*) to be brought to submission to God's rule under the active, sanctified agency of redeemed man, who has been renewed in the image of god (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24). *Postmillennial eschatology expects what God originally intended.*<sup>21</sup>

What is unclear then is if humans in general as imagers of God have always run civil governments and enforced law as indicated in Romans 13 or whether “redeemed man” must dominate society before the Genesis 9 mandate is to be considered operational. Is Genesis 9:1-6 a mandate for the church or for humankind in general? On the same page Bahnsen and Gentry cite Psalm 8 as being a repetition of the “Creation Mandate,” which would indicate humankind in general as the subject of it. Psalm 8 certainly does not speak of one class of humans subjugating another class of humans. The Reconstructionist position seems inconsistent at this point.

The same difficulty can be seen in Gary North's writing on this issue. He states that humans bearing God's image have a special place in creation by linking Genesis 1:26 and Psalm 8:5<sup>22</sup> and then seems to indicate that this image bearing extends to all people. However, he chides Christians for not teaching the “cultural mandate” which obviously must include more than having dominion over the non-human creation:

At least one small American Presbyterian denomination has explicitly denied the post-Fall legitimacy of the covenant of dominion (also referred to as the cultural mandate), thereby ignoring the explicit reconfirmation of this covenant by God with Noah (Gen. 9:1-2). Prior to 1980, virtually all twentieth-century fundamentalism and pietism by implication and practice denied the existence of such a covenant. The idea that men are responsible, as faithful servants of God, to bring the whole world under the rule of God's law, is repulsive to the vast majority of professing Christians.<sup>23</sup>

Ruling the human world by using law is not the same as ruling the non-human world in a lawful manner, in keeping with good stewardship. If all are imagers of God and therefore have dominion, who is to be subjugated by others? On pages 45 - 47 of Backward Christian Soldiers he links Genesis 1:28; 9:1, Matthew 28:18-20 and ICor. 15:24,25 and draws some conclusions about the failures of modern Christians:

*God said. . . but modern Christians prefer not to listen. They do not want to hear about their comprehensive responsibility to master the word of God, and to apply His standards in every area of life, bringing the whole world under the reign of Jesus Christ. They prefer to minimize their responsibility, calling men out of the world, rather than calling them to rule over the world under the authority of Jesus Christ.*<sup>24</sup>

If one gets the impression that he is merely speaking of using good ecological stewardship, what follows corrects it. Speaking of Americans, “Today, they are glumly reconciled to seeing the loss of American power, American honor, and the American dollar. *Men without hope are ripe for defeat by men who have hope.*”<sup>25</sup> He gives an “encouraging” example of what he means on the same page, “We must not forget what happened to the Roman Empire. *Rome fell to Jesus Christ.*”<sup>26</sup> Dominion by humans as imagers of God over the creation has somehow become dominion (“defeat”) by some humans over other humans in the name of Christianity!

Elsewhere, other Reconstructionists (DeMar & Leithart) teach that dominion will be achieved not by power, but by service. “But the exercise of dominion is *ethical*. It does not come automatically, nor is it imposed top-down by a political regime or by an army of Christians working frantically to overthrow the governments of the world.”<sup>27</sup> They encourage godly Christian service working for the benefit of others as a

means of dominion. This toned down version of dominion seems more palatable than North's vitriolic rendering, but nevertheless still presupposes that dominion is for some humans (Christians) and not others. "The dominion of Christians is a benefit to the world only because Christ works in and through them."<sup>28</sup> It is this point that seems to be a departure from what can be properly exegeted from Genesis 1 & 9 and Psalm 8.

### **B. Non-reconstructionist views of Genesis 9:1-6.**

Opponents of Reconstructionism also see the Genesis 9 passage as reiterating the command that was given to Adam in Genesis 1. The difference is that they do not see the "Cultural Mandate" particularly granted to Christians in either passage. House and Ice affirm, "The Cultural Mandate has not been withdrawn since its giving and restatement as the Noahic Covenant in Genesis (1:28-30; 9:1-3). The Cultural Mandate was given to Adam and to all of humanity, whether redeemed or unregenerate."<sup>29</sup> Dave Hunt contends,

And why does North apply dominion only to "His people," when it was given to all men? Its exercise is an innate characteristic of our humanness that results from the very fact that mankind, saved or unsaved, is a higher order of creature than the animals, birds, fish, and insects. To make anything more out of dominion is to be guilty of manipulating the Word of God and doing violence to common sense.<sup>30</sup>

Keil and Delitzsch in their Commentary on the Old Testament see dominion over animals given to man in general in Genesis 9:1-4.<sup>31</sup> They provide a comment on verses 5 & 6 which does concern humans relating to other humans:

Hence the command does not sanction revenge, but lays the foundation for the judicial rights of the divinely appointed "powers that be" (Rom. xiii. 1). . . If murder was to be punished with death because it destroyed the image of God in man, it is evident that the infliction of the punishment was not to be left to the caprice of individuals, but belonged to those alone who represent the authority and majesty of God, i.e. the divinely appointed rulers, who for that very reason are called *Elohim* in Ps. lxxxii. 6. This command then laid the foundation for all civil government, and formed a necessary complement to that unalterable continuance of the order of nature which had been promised to the human race for its further development.<sup>32</sup>

There is no hint here that a certain group of persons was to seek dominion over others through whatever process. They understood the civil authorities to have been appointed and put in place by God as indicated by the reference to Romans 13:1. This was given to the "human race" and not just certain classes of people. The use of civil law to punish murder has been the case throughout history in most cultures and does not await a future, post-millennial domination of the world's cultures by Christians to take effect. Also, in context the contrast is between animals and humans. Animals can be killed for food, but the blood is not to be eaten. Human blood is not to be shed because humans are created in God's image (in contrast with animals which are not). If anything, the passage thereby forbids a certain type of dominion taking (shedding blood) as it might erroneously be conceived to apply to humans.

Christian Reconstructionism strains to find its dominion mandate in the passages we have considered

from the book of Genesis. Their basic presuppositions seem to have been read into the passages. Dave Hunt states tersely about the attempt to make the rest of the Bible fit the view they claim to have gotten from Genesis, “However, the dominion mentioned in Genesis 1:26-29 has absolutely nothing to do with the church, the Great Commission, Christianizing the world, or taking over institutions or nations. Such theories are pure fabrications for which those who promote them will have to answer to God.”<sup>33</sup>

### III. Matthew 28:18-20

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

#### A. Christian Reconstruction Understanding of the Passage.

Christian Reconstructionists consistently tie the dominion mandate to Matthew's account of the Great Commission. In it they see the call of God for the church to “disciple” the “nations.” This they understand (along with the usual understanding of preaching the gospel) to be teaching God's law (theonomy) to geopolitical social institutions for the purpose of Christianizing the world and creating a post-millennial, golden age before the bodily return of Jesus Christ. Kenneth L. Gentry Jr. has produced a 184 page book which attempts to show how this understanding can be exegetically found in Matthew 18.<sup>34</sup> He reiterates the arguments of Reconstructionism about the Genesis dominion mandate.<sup>35</sup> He argues that because God spoke the mandate to Adam and that Adam had “federal” headship of the race, that the Great Commission must be an extension of the mandate because Christ spoke it and He is the “federal” head of the new creation race.<sup>36</sup> He claims that the Genesis and Matthew mandates cover the same task, “Both the Creation and New Creation Mandates are designed for the subduing of the earth to the glory of God.”<sup>37</sup>

He pulls together several brief quotations from commentators to the effect that the authority Christ said was His was delegated to the church for the purpose of dominion.<sup>38</sup> The church is to use this authority as follows:

. . . militancy characterizes her [*the Church's*] energies. . . for a very important purpose the Church is “in the world” (John 17:15): to go forth with kingly authority to confront the nations with the demands of God. Thus, the Commission makes reference to His authority over “the earth” (v. 18b) and our obligation to enforce that authority over the nations (v. 19a.)<sup>39</sup>

He argues for the definition of ἔθνη in verse 19 as “nations” or “men as individuals united together in all their socio-cultural labors and relations.”<sup>40</sup> This is a defensible definition of the Greek word. The goal of discipling these nations is, “*As the numbers of converts increase, this providentially leads to the subsuming under the authority of Christ whole institutions, cultures, societies, and governments.*”<sup>41</sup> It remains to be seen whether the apostles understood Christ to mean this when He told them to “make disciples of all the nations.” So far it has not happened, but Reconstructionists conceive of history lasting as long as necessary for this to happen. Gary

North states, “God will not pull the plug on history until the whole world is brought under His institutional sovereignty. There *is* hope for the kingdom of God on earth, precisely because there is *no* hope for God's people to escape the sting of death.”<sup>42</sup> They claim that those who look for a “rapture” are pessimistic about history and tend to waste their lives looking for an escape from their dominion responsibilities.

According to Gentry, the world as a systemized whole, including all cultural units, will be “saved.” This he sees taught in such passages as John 3:16,17; 1John 4:14, and John 1:29.<sup>43</sup> He concludes about these verses, “Thus, in each of the passages passing under our scrutiny, we have reference to the aim of full and free salvation of the *kosmos*, the world as a system.”<sup>44</sup> He evidently disregards the qualifying statement of John 3:16, “that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” Reconstructionists claim to not believe that every individual has to be saved for their golden age to be valid. How then can John 3:16 be used to teach a fully “saved” world when according to the text only those who believe will be saved? Logic would seem to demand that he either use the text differently or come out in favor of universalism (that everyone in the world is going to believe in Him).

Elsewhere he and other Reconstructionists eschew universalism as understood by liberals and teach personal repentance and faith for salvation. Yet, Kenneth Gentry claims, “Salvation is designed for the ‘world as a system’ (*kosmos*) involving men in their cultural relations (*ethnos*).”<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, we are sent to save the world and we do so by teaching the nations as cultural entities to obey the laws of God, including the laws of the Old Covenant in “exhaustive” detail. This does not exclude personal salvation which is a step toward this larger goal.

In dealing with baptism, Gentry makes a strong connection between the idea of covenant and family solidarity. While holding to individual conversion and repentance, he also teaches infant baptism and family solidarity.<sup>46</sup> A number of Christian denominations would go along with this practice, but it seems to present a problem - **it does not go far enough to fit Reconstructionism's own understanding of Matthew 28**. In every other application of the passage (nations are disciplined, nations are taught, nations are subjugated to Christ's authority) a broader scope is given. Why then are not nations “baptized”? In a later chapter he will claim that they are. Even granting the argument that the process of world “salvation” happens partly through mass conversions,<sup>47</sup> individual by individual, the result is supposedly a “disciplined” nation as a cultural unit. It would seem that the same unit ought to be baptized if the grammar of Matthew 28 is applied consistently. How is it that Christ, in the middle of a sentence and with no warning or indication, ceased speaking of nations and began speaking of families? It seems logical that those disciplined, baptized, and taught (“them” in verses 19 and 20) are the same group of persons.

In a later chapter he rectifies this problem by teaching that indeed “nations” will be baptized. He states, “The *nations* are expected to become Christians by discipleship and to be marked out as under God's rule by baptism.”<sup>48</sup> The problem is that he never explains how one baptizes a tribal unit, geo-political entity, or a



culture. Saying that the church is to “baptize” nations as cultural units in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit seems quite implausible. It has not happened yet church history.

If the point is that we disciple individuals from the various nations, baptizing and teaching them, then the only argument between Reconstructionists and non-Reconstructionists is the expected numbers of people who will respond. Clearly there is more than this involved. They argue that cultures are to be saved and disciplined - “I will select two classes of evidence for the discipling and baptizing - the Christianization - of the world,”<sup>49</sup> says Gentry. He then refers back to the earlier argument about a completely saved *kosmos*. Greg Bahnsen also understands Matthew 28 like this, “The great commission will one day be fulfilled, a day in which *all nations* (not just representative individuals in them) shall have been disciplined.”<sup>50</sup>

### **B. Non-reconstructionist views of Matthew 28:18-20.**

The more traditional understanding of the Great Commission is that individuals from all of the nations (some would translate ἔθνη as “Gentiles” though this translation is not crucial to the argument) are to be disciplined, which includes baptism which follows personal faith and repentance. Those who respond in this manner are taught the Word of God. This accords well with the accounts of the Great Commission found in Luke 24:47 and Mark 16:15,16. Hal Lindsey states,

Nothing in these great commission passages [*Luke 24:46-48; Acts 1:8 & Matthew 28:18-20*] implies that we will convert the world and take dominion over it. We are commanded to go out in the power of the Holy Spirit and to proclaim the Gospel. We are told to make disciples from out of all the Gentiles. You don't disciple nations, you disciple individuals, so the Greek word translated *nations* should be understood in its most frequently used sense - *Gentiles*.<sup>51</sup>

Ice and House state about this issue as it relates to the Matthew 28 passage, “The Reconstructionist implication that discipleship includes a social and political aspect of running things is not supported by biblical usage.”<sup>52</sup>

Dave Hunt comments on the Reconstructionist connection between the “dominion mandate” of Genesis and the Great Commission, “Most evangelicals, of which Gentry is one, would be appalled by an interpretation that would turn Christ's command ‘that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations’ (Luke 24:47) into an assignment to subdue the earth and domesticate lower creatures! . . . Nor is it honest to suggest that the dominion given to Adam is now restated in the Great Commission and involves ‘cultural Christianization.’”<sup>53</sup> He concludes, “Without any exegetical basis whatsoever, dominion theology is simply imposed upon Matthew 28:18.”

A detailed, scholarly analysis of Matthew 28:16-20 is offered by Robert D. Culver.<sup>54</sup> He analyzes the grammar of the Greek text, showing that the imperative verb in the passage is μαθητεύσατε (second person plural, aorist imperative active). The words for “go, baptize” and “teach” are all participles. He cites a number of scholars and shows how they have agreed or disagreed on the meaning of the Greek text. He gives the following summary of the work of scholarly commentators over the last century:

(1) It is presupposed that disciples carrying out this commission will be deployed upon the scene of doing

so - among the nations. (2) The commission is to make disciples of all the nations. This is the single command and is comprehensive. (3) The command to make disciples is carried out in two activities, baptizing and teaching. (4) The teaching is of an evangelistic sort preliminary to baptism, leading to decision, and of an edifying sort after baptism.<sup>55</sup>

It seems clear that the participle “going” is not the command. It is corollary to the main verb and could be rendered “having gone, disciple.”<sup>56</sup> The participles “baptizing” and “teaching” receive an imperative force by their relationship to μαθητεύσατε.<sup>57</sup> As we go we are to make disciples of all the nations, baptizing and teaching them. Culver states, “Make disciples in the particular nation among whom you dwell. You need not go somewhere else to operate on the great commission program!”<sup>58</sup>

After extended technical discussion of the Greek words of the passage, he offers the following in paraphrase of verse 19:

As ye go, therefore, and wherever you may be, as my disciples (Mark 16:20; Acts 2:9-11; 8:1, etc.) in this world, make disciples of all the nations, for I have authority among them all. You are to begin making disciples by instructing (not excluding witnessing, preaching, and evangelizing) men. Men thus informed by you and convinced by the Holy Spirit of the truth as it is in Christ and who wish openly to confess their submission to the Lordship of the Triune God are to be baptized in the name of the Father, and (in the name) of the Son, and (in the name) of the Holy Ghost. After baptism they are further to be instructed in all the teachings of Christianity. They should guard these truths in their own lives.<sup>59</sup>

This seems to fit what actually happened in the books of Acts (other than the triune baptismal formula).

It seems that Reconstructionism has imported its presuppositions into the passage. Trying to think of discipling cultural units of various types through baptizing and teaching them seems confusing. You can only literally baptize one person at a time. Comparing various accounts of the Great Commission (if Mark 16 is allowed in spite of its textual uncertainty) shows the arena of the gospel. Matthew speaks of the ἔθνη, as does Luke in 24:47. Mark has us going into the “κοσμος” and preaching to all the “κτίσει.” Luke in Acts mentions Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the extremity of the “γῆς.” The commission then involves the nations, world, creation, and earth. Wherever humans may be and in whatever social configuration, we are to preach the gospel to them with all of its attendant claims. The idea of ruling over them in their social and cultural aggregate and coercing (or at least convincing them by very persuasive means) them to obey the Old Testament law in full detail (excluding ceremonial laws) does not clearly appear in any of these passages. It is fair to ask if anyone who had not presupposed Reconstructionism's version of post-millennialism would understand any of the Great Commission passages, including Matthew's, in this manner.

This is true of infant baptism, church liturgy, and many other modern issues some are wont to find in Matthew 28. Culver notices how commentators find their own denomination's views in the passage. “The author [Lenski] sees fulfillment of the Old Testament promises of Christ's universal kingdom in ‘all the nations’ (standard amillennialism) and proof that Jesus foresaw the baptism of infants before catechism. . .” He quotes

other commentators who agree on the basic meaning of the Greek but somehow see modern ecclesiastical matters in the text. He makes a poignant comment about how Matthew 28 as it has been handled over the years, “Everyone seems to bring all his own soteriology and ecclesiology to the passage and leave again with all his baggage intact.”<sup>60</sup>

A disciple is a person who sits under a teacher and learns the ways and beliefs of the teacher. To be a disciple of Christ is to submit to His authority and believe His teachings, seeking to put them into obedient practice by the power of the Holy Spirit. Matthew 28:20 gives the content of the teaching, “all that I commanded you.” The primary place to find the teaching of Christ is in the Gospels and the Epistles. Some of the personal disciples of Christ to whom this commission was first given, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote the content of the faith. Things that Christ has not clearly commanded us as recorded in Scripture are not within the scope of the type of discipleship mentioned in Matthew 28. Those who would teach other matters have a difficult time establishing the content of the faith (Jude 3).<sup>61</sup> See Appendix for an analysis of the New Testament's view of God's people living in this world.

### **Conclusion**

The conclusion that follows from the Biblical texts themselves is that Reconstructionists have read their own presuppositions into the passages in which they “find” their agenda. As shown, Genesis 1:26-28 and 9:1-6 do not teach or imply the rulership of Christians over the world system or other people of any sort. Matthew 28:18-20 is not a reiteration of these Genesis passages. The Great Commission of Matthew 28 does not teach the cultural Christianization of the world before Christ's return. Disciples are persons not political or cultural aggregates as defined sociologically. Rather, they are people joined to the Lord and one another to make up the church. They have been called out of the world as it exists in its system of autonomy and rebellion, but not out of it geographically. They still function in the world, interacting in the arena of human affairs (another meaning of *kosmos* in the New Testament) as lights in a dark world. Paul admonishes, “That you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world” (Philippians 2:15). The Great Commission instructs us to preach the gospel, baptize converts, instruct them in the teachings of Christ and to continue to be His witnesses through the power of the Holy Spirit who indwells us. Failure to teach the Reconstructionist, cultural dominion mandate is not sin and rebellion against God as they say. Christ will triumph, His agenda will be fulfilled and victory is assured to those who love and obey Him.

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All italics in quoted material are in the original.

### **End Notes**

1. William S. Barker & W. Robert Godfrey editors, Theonomy A Reformed Critique, (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1990) contains a chapter written by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (chapter 9, 197 - 224) that distinguishes Reconstruction postmillennialism from what used to be called "postmillennialism" in some Reformed circles. He shows that the term "amillennial" was introduced to differentiate between the views of those Reformed theologians who considered the entire church age to be the millennium (previously called "post-millennial" for the reason that Christ would return after this "millennium" which is the church age in its entirety) and those more recent views (such as Reconstructionism's) that see the millennium to be a yet future time of Christianity's "triumph" in history before the return of Christ. Therefore, many earlier theologians who were known as post-millennial (on page 199 he gives as an example John Murray who wrote a major commentary on Romans) were actually amillennial by the terminology which is now used.
2. Gary North, The Dominion Covenant: Genesis, second printing, revised, 1987 (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1982, 1987) ix.
3. *ibid.*
4. Gary DeMar and Peter Leithart, The Reduction of Christianity, (Atlanta: American Vision, 1988) 220.
5. Gary North, Liberating Planet Earth, (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987) 25.
6. *ibid.* xiii.
7. Greg L. Bahnsen, Theonomy In Christian Ethics, second edition (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1977, 1984) 33.
8. Since this paper is concerned with the dominion mandate and the passages used to prove it, theonomy as the means of dominion is outside of its scope. Many books and theological journal articles have been written debating just the theonomy issue. The key passage used to support it is Matthew 5:17-19 to which Bahnsen devotes an entire chapter (chapter 2 - "The Abiding Validity of the Law in Exhaustive Detail" - in Theonomy). Many opponents of Christian Reconstructionism (and other exegetes not particularly debating this movement) claim that the passage means that Christ came to "fulfill" (Greek B80DäF"4) the law. Bahnsen argues for the meaning "to confirm." A good article discussing the issues and giving references to other works for further study is: Robert P. Lightner, "Nondispensational Responses to Theonomy," Bibliotheca Sacra, Vol 143 #570 (April-June 1986) 134-145. Lightner states about Bahnsen's unusual translation of B80DäF"4, "This particular meaning is absolutely essential to his entire theonomic perspective. If it cannot be sustained, and there is serious question that it can be, the entire theonomic structure is in danger of collapse in a domino fashion" (pages 136,137).
9. North, Dominion Covenant, 29.
10. Rob Boston, "Thy Kingdom Come," Church & State, Vol. 41 (September 1988) 175. Commenting on R. J. Rushdoony's plan for criminal justice: "Whipping would be prescribed for minor offenses. Those convicted of some offenses would pay their debt through forms of restitution, including indentured servitude - slavery."
11. Leonard Verduin, Somewhat Less Than God, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1970) reprinted section in Millard J. Erickson, Editor Readings in Christian Theology Vol 2 Man's Need and God's Gift, (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1976) 65.
12. *ibid.* 64.
13. Dave Hunt, Whatever Happened to Heaven, (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1988) 224.
14. *ibid.*
15. *ibid.*
16. *ibid.*
17. H. Wayne House and Thomas Ice, Dominion Theology: Blessing or Curse?, (Portland: Multnomah, 1988) 141.

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18. John Robbins Pat Robertson: A Warning to America, (Jefferson, Md: The Trinity Foundation, 1988) 93. cited House & Ice *ibid.* 141.
  19. Gary North, Backward, Christian Soldiers?, (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1984) 76.
  20. Bahnsen, Theonomy, 443.
  21. Greg L. Bahnsen and Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., House Divided, The Break-up of Dispensational Theology, (Tyler Tx.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989) 151.
  22. North, Dominion Covenant, 27
  23. *ibid.* 28.
  24. North, Backwards, 46.
  25. *ibid.* 47.
  26. *ibid.*
  27. DeMar and Leithart, Reduction, 24.
  28. *ibid.* 25.
  29. House & Ice, Dominion Theology, page 159.
  30. Hunt, Whatever Happened, 229.
  31. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986 reprint) 152.
  32. *ibid.* 153.
  33. Hunt, Whatever Happened, 232.
  34. Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr. The Greatness of the Great Commission, (Tyler Tx.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990)
  35. *ibid.* 9,10.
  36. *ibid.* 12.
  37. *ibid.* 13.
  38. *ibid.* 45.
  39. *ibid.* 48.
  40. *ibid.* 54.
  41. *ibid.*
  42. North, Backwards, 234.
  43. *ibid.* Gentry, Greatness, 55.
  44. *ibid.* 56.
  45. *ibid.*
  46. *ibid.* 89.
  47. *ibid.* 82 - "And this union [baptism] is essential to the ultimate Christian cultural renewal resultant from the effects of great numbers of conversions."
  48. *ibid.* 101.

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49. *ibid.* 102
  50. Bahnsen, Theonomy, 192.
  51. Hal Lindsey, The Road to Holocaust, (New York: Bantam Books, 1989) 49.
  52. House & Ice, Dominion, 153.
  53. Hunt, Whatever Happened, 232.
  54. Robert D. Culver, "What is the Church's Commission?," Bibliotheca Sacra, #125 (July 1968) 239-253.
  55. *ibid.* 248.
  56. *ibid.* 246.
  57. *ibid.* 249.
  58. *ibid.* 252.
  59. *ibid.* 253.
  60. *ibid.* 243.
  61. For example, Reconstructionists want to disciple the nations using right wing, free market capitalism (taught in North, Dominion Covenant) as the economic paradigm. Other advocates of various "social gospels" want to establish a socialistic model of Christian society. Both see a mandate from Scripture for their Christianized culture. Could it be that both of them are bringing their baggage to the Scripture? Assuming that the church is not the world, not a subset of the world, and not to rule the world politically, one comes to a different understanding. It is bemusing to witness the books being written by Christians (such as Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger and Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators) promoting or attacking one view or the other. How will we have a Christianized world culture if Evangelical Christians have antithetical ideas of what it would be like once established?