

Contra Mundum No. 2 Winter 1992

Interview with Dr. Greg Bahnsen

Dr. Greg Bahnsen is this generation's foremost apologist, whose work has consistently underscored the abiding authority of the Word of God and the need to apply it to all of society. His seminal but controversial *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* is one of the foundations of the Christian Reconstruction movement. Dr. Bahnsen is an ordained minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, has taught at Reformed Theological Seminary and Ashland Theological Seminary, and is currently the Scholar-in-Residence at the Southern California Christian Study Center. *Contra Mundum* interviewed Dr. Bahnsen while he was on a tour of the eastern United States, which included a speaking engagement at the ACTRA conference in Johnson City, Tennessee.

CM: Your *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* first appeared in 1977. What is the main thesis of the book?

Bahnsen: I argue in *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* that the moral standards revealed in scripture have an absolute, unchanging character because they reveal God's character, which is unchanging. The book was directed against Dispensational ethics which sees different standards for different eras of time. My intention was to uphold the principle of Covenant Theology, which assumes continuity between the Old and New Testaments unless scripture teaches otherwise (e.g., infant baptism).

CM: *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* has gone through two editions and four printings. Are there any changes in the basic thesis?

Bahnsen: No; the basic thesis is the same. There are a couple of minor changes in outlook. I was persuaded, for example, that Dan Fuller had a better approach to Romans 10:4. But the substance of the book is unchanged.

CM: *Theonomy* was a controversial work. Why do you think there was such a strong reaction to your book, especially in conservative and Reformed circles otherwise committed to the authority of scripture?

Bahnsen: I never expected the kind of attention that *Theonomy* received, much less the negative reaction in Reformed circles. I would have expected critical reaction from Dispensationalists, of course. But without my intending it, *Theonomy* touched a nerve in Reformed circles. Allen Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* documents how our culture has endorsed relativism and opposes all types of absolutes. This cultural mindset has apparently affected the Christian church as well. The idea of moral absolutes that cover all of life does not appeal to contemporary Christians. Christians, without self-consciously admitting it, say that the Bible speaks to their private, devotional, and religious lives, but has nothing to say in the public sphere of politics, economics, etc. *Theonomy* stresses that there are moral absolutes and that the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, applies to all areas of life. And that is what the Reformed faith has always proclaimed. It is not a novel thesis - it is an old thesis which is now in disrepute in modern culture. Let me add that the controversy has been fueled for years and years by misrepresentation. There is often greater scholarly integrity *outside* of Christian circles. If critics in secular circles has so misrepresented a book's thesis, they would lose their jobs and/or credibility. I have had the happy experience - but one twinged with pain - of talking to people who finally read *Theonomy*, after

hearing all about it. They admit that as they read, they waited for the really bad stuff, but never found it. *Theonomy* is not a controversial thesis; it is a reasonable, Biblical development of a world and life view.

CM: You have had considerable experience in academia. If you were beginning a seminary education now, would you attend, and why?

Bahnsen: That is a sad question. All things being equal, I would not encourage anyone to attend seminary right now. Most seminaries are either very poor academically or theologically unhelpful. It would be a dreadful waste of three years and a lot of money - not to be taught the Reformed faith in an adequate way. In the smaller schools, there are problems with deficiencies in scholarship or theological prejudices, and that has not been characteristic of our Reformed fathers or Reformed education. Having said that, I realize and acknowledge that there are better and worse schools.

The Southern California Study Center was founded because of these concerns. We felt the need to offer, in a convenient way, a competent Reformed education. We offer an M.A. which covers everything treated in the traditional M.Div. degree except for practical pastoral courses (which should be done "practically" - in the church). It is convenient because students can stay in their home area and study at their own pace. Secondly, SCCSC offers a competent theological education, with instruction that is fully committed to Reformed confessional standards. My recommendation to anyone contemplating seminary or theological training is to study at the Center, or study with a local pastor. Such a method of learning is, I believe, the wave of the future.

CM: You have a Ph.D. in Philosophy from University of Southern California. How can a Christian with such strong commitments to the scriptures and the Christian faith survive in a modern university?

Bahnsen: First, you need to be well-grounded in the scriptures and have a consistent, clear world-view. Second, it helps to be in a department with a Christian instructor, even if he does not share all your theological distinctives. And third, the modern university has its own problems. It is ideologically disintegrating. Though there is certainly political hostility to Christianity, the Christian can offer a distinctive point of view which challenges the inadequacy of humanistic thinking.

CM: *Theonomy* is a central aspect of the Christian Reconstruction movement, of which you are considered a founding father. Do you consider it a "movement", and what reflections do you have on "Christian Reconstruction"?

Bahnsen: I don't consider Christian Reconstruction a "movement", but rather a school of thought. Christian Reconstruction includes people from a number of denominations and traditions. It has no central authority, or chain of command, or any other sociological marks of a "movement". But it *does* have fundamental theological distinctives: the authority of scripture, with a presuppositional approach to apologetics, the idea of moral absolutes where all the Bible is ethically relevant, and an optimistic view of redemptive history. In short, while it is not a movement, Christian Reconstruction is a distinctive and challenging school of thought.

CM: Some Reconstructionists have been very interested in symbolical interpretations of the Bible - what has been called "hermeneutical maximalism". You once addressed this in a review of David Chilton's *Days of Vengeance* in *Journey* magazine. What do you think of this movement?

Bahnsen: I believe that what has been called "hermeneutical maximalism" is very dangerous. It is not sufficiently controlled by the text of scripture, but depends on the imagination and creativity of the interpreter. People can come to peculiar conclusions through this stream of consciousness approach. But even when they arrive at orthodox conclusions, their methodology is not governed sufficiently by the Word of God. We need faithful conclusions - arrived at *faithfully*.

CM: Some Reconstructionists have been very interested in liturgical renewal, seen particularly in the movement to Anglican communions and the use of vestments. Any comments?

Bahnsen: Reformed theology has insisted on the regulative principle of worship because the Bible requires it. The stress on liturgical forms and significance goes beyond the scripture's teaching. I endorse the regulative principle, and thus the simplicity of New Testament worship. The days of symbolism and ritual (Old Covenant) have given way to the appearance of the Son and emphasis on the *Word* (New Covenant).

CM: The Reconstructionist moment today seems badly fragmented. Does it seem so to you? And if so, do you have any ideas as to why, and any suggestions for restoring unity?

Bahnsen: The fragmentation is hard to miss, and it is a very sad thing to see. The first generation of Reconstructionists - especially since it has had to struggle so hard against opposition - has produced leaders with very forceful personalities. And leaders with forceful personalities find it hard to get along. To restore unity, we should focus on the whole Word of God. That means going to Proverbs and learning about wisdom and humility. That means learning about the fruit of the Spirit - patience and gentleness - from Galatians 5. We need to be faithful - personally and interpersonally - to the whole Bible for the whole of life. And we need to be an example to the world of the consistent application of the Word to our own lives.

CM: Tell us about your work. Do you have any books in progress?

Bahnsen: *No Other Standard*, due out shortly from ICE, is my answer to the critics of theonomy, particularly the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary. [Ed.: Published 1991, xv, 345 pages, scripture and general indexes. Michael Kelley is preparing a [review of this book](#) for the Spring issue.] I am also working on a book on Van Til's apologetics, including readings from his works, interpretations, and answers to his critics.

CM: Tell us about the function of the Southern California Christian Study Center.

Bahnsen: We are celebrating our first anniversary. The center was begun by the church I pastored as an educational ministry of the church - it is not a "parachurch" ministry. The Center provides an opportunity to all believers to receive a convenient, competent, and challenging Christian education. We focus on Systematic Theology, Ethics, and Apologetics. There are three outlets for the center: 1) Writing and Publications; 2) My conference speaking and debating [Ed. : Dr. Bahnsen spent September lecturing and preaching on the East Coast; he was scheduled in October to debate with a Muslim leader]; and 3) Academic courses. Courses can be taken in residence (current and recent offerings include "The Incomprehensibility of God" and "Calvin's Institutes"), by correspondence (using tapes, guided readings, and telephone conferences), or thorough specialized tutoring.

CM: I understand that the center distributes a helpful tape of a debate between you and an atheist at the University of California-Irvine, as well as other material. How could people order that material and receive other information?

Bahnsen: People can receive our monthly newsletter, *Penpoint*, free of charge. A catalog of publications, tapes, and course listings is also available from the Center. [Ed.: For more information, write Southern California Center for Christian Studies, P.O. Box 18021, Irvine, CA 92713-9916. The debate with an atheist, Gordon Stein, is available for \$10 from Covenant Tape Ministry, 24198 Ash Court, Auburn, CA, 95603.]

CM: Can you tell us about the progress of Christ College in Virginia? Are you still involved with the school?

Bahnsen: Yes I am on the Board and also teach there. This year we will have ten students at second semester. I realize that this is not very many students, but the school provides a very close, family atmosphere. It also offers a fine, thoroughly Reformed, undergraduate education and training in the liberal arts.

CM: You have had some serious health problems in the past. Can you tell us how you are doing now?

Bahnsen: I have had open-heart surgery twice in the last 13 years. And I have had emergency surgery for a bleeding ulcer in 1987. With proper rest and medication, and by God's grace, I am doing well now. And I give Him all the praise for it, and for the ministry of His Word to which He has called me.

Contra Mudum

No. 15 Final Print Issue

A Gun Control Debate: Dr. Greg Bahnsen vs. Dr. James Atwood

by [Tom Albrecht](#)

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This debate was subtitled "A Debate Over Gun Control and Biblical Morality." Does the Bible speak to the issue of gun control? One of the participants in this debate says, "Yes," and the other says, "No."

Dr. Greg Bahnsen is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and resident scholar at the Southern California Center for Christian Studies. Dr. James Atwood is a minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and serves on the board of a handgun control lobby in Washington D.C.

The actual question debated was: "Is the civil regulation of firearms the scriptural norm for civil government?" The format of the debate included opening statements from both speakers followed by responses. There was an opportunity for each speaker to ask questions of the other with opportunity for a response. After closing remarks by the speakers, questions were taken from the audience.

Dr. Atwood spoke first and set the tone for the rest of his presentation when he answered the question by saying, "No, there's no scriptural norm for gun control in the Bible. No scriptural norm for a lot of the laws we have that are pretty good; stop at a stop sign, get the dog a rabies vaccination" Atwood prefers to speak of a "scriptural bias" and he justifies this by an appeal to "shalom," the idea of a "peaceable kingdom." He speaks of the coming of Jesus Christ into the world and the promise of the coming of the kingdom of God. He quotes from Revelation 11:15 (one of the few times he actually mentions the Bible directly) and speaks of a day, presumably yet future, when there will be "no more suffering, or crying, or grief, or death."

Atwood prefers that the issue of the Bible and gun control would be blurry rather than crystal clear. He claims that this is so opposing sides can "reason together," but it seems evident from his presentation that Atwood is very comfortable with a vague Word of God that does not address specific issues of human morality and conduct, especially when his preconceptions conflict with the Word of God. Atwood was quick to point out that his denomination is not opposed to hunting, or the recreational, sporting, or other

"legitimate" uses of firearms; a common refrain of gun control supporters. They are opposed, he says, to the private ownership of handguns and semi-automatic "assault weapons."

Atwood shares the story of a trip he made to Japan on which he took a shotgun for hunting. The authorities in Japan confiscated his shotgun until he could prove himself worthy of the privilege of possessing it. Atwood applauds the civility of Japan for their commonsense stand on this issue. For some reason it escaped his notice that Japan is a pagan society whose laws are based on pagan morality and a pagan view of the rights of man and the rights of society.

Dr. Bahnsen, in his opening remarks, does two things. First he outlines some of the present legal and academic literature on the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. He quotes extensively from recent academic studies on the matter of the relationship between gun ownership and violence in society. Bahnsen points out that guns are 83% effective when they are used [\[1\]](#), either by law-abiding citizens to defend themselves, or by criminals to commit a crime. They are, in fact, the most effective means of self-defense, according to studies by criminologist Gary Kleck [\[2\]](#).

Having proposed the "pragmatic" reasons against gun control, he then takes us directly to the Word of God as his ultimate authority on this matter. He mentions Exodus 22:2 (Killing a thief found breaking and entering); Judges 15 (the story of Samson killing many Philistines with the jawbone of an ass); Luke 11:21 ("When a strong man armed keeps his palace; his goods are in peace"); Nehemiah 4 (The builders of the wall armed themselves); Luke 22:36 (Where Jesus told His disciples to buy a sword). Bahnsen's point is that there is an abundance of Scriptures which speak to the issue of self-protection. Rather than being vague and imprecise, God in His word has spoken quite clearly on this subject.

The interrogatory portion of the debate proved to be an interesting exchange. Dr. Atwood asked Dr. Bahnsen about the Reformed understanding of the 6th Commandment. Bahnsen responded by going to the Westminster Larger Catechism, Questions 134-136, and pointing out that the Reformed understanding calls for two things; the preservation of innocent life and the punishment of evildoers. The answer to Question 135 reads, in part, "The duties required in the sixth commandment are ... avoiding all occasions, temptations, and practices, which tend to the unjust taking away the life of any; by just defence thereof against violence," Likewise, Question 136 refers to "necessary defence" as an exception to the rule of the preservation of life at all costs.

Bahnsen expresses a consistently Reformed understanding of the matter of self-defense and its relationship to the 6th Commandment. Bahnsen noted that we have abandoned Biblically sanctioned forms of punishment, namely restitution and the death penalty, in favor of more "humane" methods. Restitution and the death penalty have been replaced by extensive incarceration. Consequently, innocent parties are paying twice for the crime, once at the hands of the criminals, and once at the hands of a supposedly benevolent penal system.

Regarding the right of self-protection in this context, R.J. Rushdoony has observed:

"[S]ince one form of Biblical restitution was the right of self-defense, the right under certain circumstances to kill the aggressor or thief, the increasing limitation of the right of the injured to protect himself means that we are returning to barbarism without the protection barbarism involved, i.e., freedom to defend oneself.[\[3\]](#)

Biblical restitution involves self-defense, the right to protect innocent life against the attacks of lawless individuals. It is a return to barbarism when a society by its laws takes away that right of self-defense. Certainly, echoing Rushdoony and Bahnsen, when a society restricts access to the most efficient means of self-defense, it is well on the way to barbarism.

In his series of questions, Bahnsen did a masterful job of exposing the anti-scriptural basis of Dr. Atwood's premises. In the three questions to his opponent, Bahnsen took the audience back to the original subject of the debate: What is the scriptural norm for state intrusion to regulate the means of individual self-protection? Or, he asked, if there is no scriptural norm, as Atwood has already conceded, what are the bounds that delimit where the state can or cannot intrude? Bahnsen is most disturbed by Atwood's apparent openness to unbridled state intrusion in the life of the individual without scriptural warrant. He read from a sermon delivered by Atwood in which Atwood states, "If anything good is to happen it must be a political solution." Bahnsen responded by identifying the ultimate need for spiritual revival in the hearts of sinners, and answers the call for a political solution by saying, "If we have a political solution to just any problem that may come about I'm afraid that the state has become a messiah -- a monster messiah -- a huge, overgrown, bloated bureaucracy that does things God doesn't intend for it to do, and doesn't do them very well." Atwood seemed quite content to entertain the idea of a benevolent federal bureaucracy looking out for our good by taking away our guns ... at least some of our guns.

Bahnsen drives home this point by asking whether Dr. Atwood wishes to limit access to all means of violence, or just guns? Dr. Atwood expressed no interest in keeping "scissors and knives" out of the hands of citizens. Atwood would "permit" access to inefficient means of violence, he simply doesn't like nasty baby-killers like "Street Sweepers and Uzis."

Finally, Dr. Bahnsen asks, "Since you have endorsed state intrusion to regulate the conduct of citizens when that conduct might cause death, do you utterly oppose the alleged civil right of abortion?" Atwood protested that this was a debate about gun control, not abortion, and continued by refusing to answer the question directly, only making note of the fact that he personally opposes abortion as a means of birth control, while allowing it in the cases of rape, incest, and to save the life of the mother. He failed to see the relationship between the state's alleged right to intrude in the ownership of firearms to protect innocent life, which he is for, and the state's interest in restricting abortion to protect innocent life, which he apparently opposed. In both cases, Dr. Bahnsen identifies the inability of Dr. Atwood to take us to Scripture for a solution.

The debate was an unqualified victory for Greg Bahnsen. He was able to articulate an understanding both of the facts involving gun control, gun violence, and self-defense, as well as a clear summary of the Biblical teaching on the subject. Unlike Dr. Atwood, Bahnsen demonstrated that God has spoken to us in His Word about the matter of self-protection and preservation of human life.

Held in November, 1991, the debate was sponsored by gun owners and Second Amendment supporters. While Dr. Atwood gave permission beforehand for the reproduction and distribution of the debate, he later revoked that permission and threatened legal action if the debate was distributed. Judging from his poor performance, it's no wonder he tried to keep it out of the public domain. The producers of the tape obviously decided to call his legal bluff.

The debate is available in both video and audio formats from Covenant Tape Ministry, 22005 N. Venado Dr., Sun City, AZ 85373. Phone 602-584-3938. CTM can be reached via CompuServe at 70754,1752. [Note: Now [Covenant Media Foundation](http://www.covenantmediafoundation.com), 4425 Jefferson Ave, Suite 108, Texarkana AR 71854-1546, 800-553-3938, International: 501-772-2507, FAX 501-772-3161, email covenant@CMFnow.com.]

One comment on the quality of the video tape. This is not a professional production. The tape begins at some point into the opening remarks by the (unidentified) moderator. There are several minutes of camera instability and refocusing. These are distracting for a time, but eventually the tape settles down. Believe me, the imperfections in quality are worth enduring in order to observe Dr. Atwood's mannerisms and gesticulations, especially when Dr. Bahnsen springs the abortion question. It is quite apparent that theological liberals can become quite uncomfortable when confronted with their inconsistencies on the matter of limited government and defense of innocent human life regardless of the circumstances. **CM**

[1]"Use" means anything from simply showing a firearm to actually shooting someone. Kleck estimates that as many as 2.5 million defensive uses of firearms happen every year, 1.9 million of those involve handguns.

[2] Gary Kleck, *Point Blank: Guns and Violence in America* (Aldine de Gruyter, 1991) p. 149

[3] R.J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1973)* p. 276.

Presuppositionalism is the system of Christian apologetics attributed to [Cornelius Van Til](#) (1895-1987). Van Til was Professor of Apologetics at [Westminster Theological Seminary](#), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from its founding in 1929 until his retirement in 1975. Van Til, [J. Gresham Machen](#) and others, resigned from Princeton Seminary and founded Westminster after the former seminary took a decidedly liberal turn.

"... Van Til's distinctive approach is 'presuppositionalism', which may be defined as insistence on an ultimate category of thought or a conceptual framework which one must assume in order to make a sensible interpretation of reality: 'The issue between believers and non-believers in Christian theism cannot be settled by a direct appeal to "facts" or "laws" whose nature and significance is already agreed upon by both parties to the debate. The question is rather as to what is the final reference-point required to make the "facts" and the "laws" intelligible. The question is as to what the "facts" and "laws" really are. Are they what the non-Christian methodology assumes they are? Are they what the Christian theistic methodology presupposes they are?' (Defense of the Faith, Philadelphia, 1967).

"Not only to 'prove' biblical Christianity but to make sense of any fact in the world Van Til holds that one must presuppose the reality of the 'self-contained' triune God and the self-attesting revelation of the Scriptures. From this basis, the redeemed person then reasons 'analogically', 'attempting 'to think God's thoughts after him'. This means humans may know reality truly (for God, in whose image they are created, knows it truly), but not exhaustively (for God is infinite and they are finite).

"The presuppositionalist endeavors to convince the unregenerate first by demonstrating that, on unregenerate presuppositions of chance occurrence in an impersonal universe, one cannot account for any sort of order and rationality. Next, he tries to show that life and reality make sense only on the basis of Christian presuppositions.

"Van Til vigorously criticized the traditional apologetic approach of both Catholics and Protestants as failing to challenge the non-Christian view of knowledge, as allowing sinners to be judges of ultimate reality, and of arguing merely for the probability of Christianity. He considered himself in the line of Kuyper and Bavinck in his presuppositionalism and opposed the 'evidentialism, of Thomas Aquinas, Joseph Butler and Warfield."

[The above excerpt was taken from pages 704-705 of THE NEW DICTIONARY OF THEOLOGY edited by Sinclair B. Ferguson, et al. Copyright 1988 by Universities and Christian Colleges Fellowship. Used by permission of InterVarsity Press, P.O. Box 1400, Downers Grove, IL 60515. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission from InterVarsity Press.]

For more information, see [Dr. Bahnsen's article on Van Til](#).

For information on Christian reconstruction, see article at [New Religious Movements](#) page.

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