

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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Ecclesiastical Megalomania

John W. Robbins

Ecclesiastical Megalomania. A taped lecture by David Chilton. The Foundation for Christian Reconstruction, 1992. The cassette tape is available from Chalcedon, Post Office Box 168, Vallecito, California 95251.

In the March *Trinity Review* 1994 describing how Scott Hahn was the pastor of a Reconstructionist church in Virginia, I commented that someone should write a book about Theonomist/Reconstructionist churches. The book would be quite illuminating, for it would show how the ideas of Reconstructionism have played themselves out in practice. No one, to my knowledge, has written or is writing such a book, but David Chilton, a popular Reconstructionist author who was a member of the Tyler church for years, has given us a brief description of life in the most famous Reconstructionist church, the one in Tyler, Texas. That church was co-pastored by Ray Sutton--who is now [1994] president of the Philadelphia Seminary, formerly Reformed Episcopal Seminary--and James B. Jordan, who continues to write for Gary North and is now [1994] speaking at events sponsored by R. C. Sproul's Ligonier Ministries. Of course, Gary North himself was a prominent member of the Tyler church. Chilton left the Tyler church some years ago, but unfortunately he did not entirely leave the Tyler theology. Nevertheless, his account of the events in the Tyler church should be of interest to all. It appears to be quite accurate, for several people have

independently corroborated his account. It is impossible to give a full report on Chilton's talk here, but I have tried to hit the highlights.

Chilton begins his talk by recounting his personal experience in the Jesus Movement in California. He found the same abuse of ecclesiastical authority in that movement as in the Reconstructionist Tyler church.

The Jesus Movement

"In 1970, I was running a coffee house ministry--we had kids on drugs coming in...and we would have rock concerts there and I would preach at them.... There was a young woman who showed up at Calvary Chapel named Sandy. Lovely blonde--she was reputed to be a prophetess--she would float in and prophesy and then she would sing a little bit, play a guitar, and then she would float back out. We were all in awe of her.

"And one evening, very unexpectedly, she showed up at my coffee house, which was some...30 miles away from Calvary Chapel...and came in and we all made way for her, and she came up to the stage, announced that she had some prophecies..., and then she sang and exhorted us with a few things and floated back out. We were all very impressed. A real prophetess of God had been in our midst....

"Well, one night she came in and delivered a prophecy and then she took me aside. I had never

spoken to her directly; I was too much in awe--we all were. She was really somebody important. Everybody told us she was important and all the important people in the Jesus Movement gave great deference to her, and so we didn't really know what to say. So nobody ever talked to her. She just came in, made prophecies, and went out. She came up to me, and she needed to talk to me personally. She took me aside and informed me that God had told her that she and I were to be married....

"Here's this woman I don't even know and she tells me that we're going to get married. And so she looked at me expectantly and so I said, but I don't love you. And she looked at me with infinite prophetic sadness in her eyes and she said 'Oh, David, I'm so disappointed. Surely you know by now that you walk by faith, and not by feelings.' There was no answer to that one. So we walked back into the coffee house a few minutes later and announced our engagement.

"I was miserable and the longer this relationship went on, the more miserable I got. I found that she was very strange in a lot of ways.... I still didn't know her very well and hardly had conversations with her but she was now...my matriarch or something. But I kept putting this off and so discovering strange things about her. The thing is nothing she said was ever tested. She said it and it was Word and we all submitted to it. And I began to feel that there was something wrong with this but I didn't know how to oppose it exactly. She was a little bit miffed at me that I was moving too slow on this. She kept wanting to set a date for the wedding and I kept postponing it. And so finally she said, 'David, we're going to have to really get this together immediately or just call the whole thing off.'

"I said, 'You know, I've been thinking the same thing. Let's call the whole thing off.' And that was the end of that, I thought....

"There were these, what we called Christian Houses. They were Christian communes presided over by an elder--a patriarch, who was maybe all of nineteen years old, who didn't have a job. Everybody else went out and worked and then they

came in and brought [their pay] to him and he sat there meditating all day and telling everybody to move to Oregon and things like that. And so for months afterward, elders of Christian Houses were coming to me and telling me that I had disobeyed God in a very serious way--that I had rejected the Word of God because this woman, Sandy, was the walking Word of God. She was infallible. What she said was the Word of God and we could not question it. She eventually pulled it on a couple of other guys and one of them fell for it and they got married....

"And this really is the whole issue of what became known in charismatic circles and Jesus People circles as the Shepherding Movement. One of the prime theologians behind this is Watchmen Nee, and you can find these kinds of things in his writings where there's this real heavy top-down authority. Every move you make, every personal decision you make, certainly anything as important as moving from one place to another or anything like that, or getting married, there has to be a decision that comes down from the leadership. You aren't allowed to make decisions on your own.

"Coming into the Reformed faith for me was a great liberty and a release.... I found to my great delight that one of the most liberating verses in the Bible is *1 John 3:4*: 'Sin is the transgression of the law.' That may sound like bondage to some people, but it's not. It's the most liberating verse in the Bible or just about. Sin is the transgression of the law--that means sin isn't the transgression of anything else. It's only the transgression of the law.... But apart from that we aren't to make legislation for one another. And so I thought that coming into Reconstructionism and being surrounded by fellow Reconstructionists, we would all see things that way. Well, it didn't quite turn out that way...."

Reconstructionism in Tyler

After relating more stories about the Jesus Movement, all designed to emphasize the hippies' desire for collective control and their antipathy for individual decision-making, Chilton reports the rise of a "heretic in the making"--a quick study who read Cornelius Van Til and Rousas Rushdoony and

began making wild inferences from their views--in the church he attended in California. Chilton next turns to his experience at the Tyler church:

"There was a widow in the church...a little bit eccentric. She had quite a bit of money. She had it in gold and silver and precious stones and things like that. And she didn't trust banks.... She had read enough newsletters about banks so she didn't want anything to do with banks. So instead the elders of the church took her money or took her valuables for safekeeping. They stored her money or her valuables--her wealth--so that she would not have to trust it to one of those unregenerate banks out there. And somehow that money just disappeared.... She began to suspect things were going on and she asked for it back from the elders, and they resisted giving it back but eventually they gave her some--they just apologized and said that it was gone.... And this was in the tens of thousands of dollars. This is everything that the woman had.... They eventually gave her a few rusty tools and things they scraped together and that was all they gave her.... No one was ever held accountable for this....

"There was one deacon's wife--a very sweet woman who was caught up in this and consumed with guilt over what had happened. And I don't get this from hearsay. I myself witnessed her in tears uncontrollably confessing to this widow what had happened. Very upset. Very overcome. And the widow kept telling her, you know, it's not your fault, I know it's not your fault, it's okay. The deacon's wife couldn't stop crying. She was overcome with guilt. Eventually her marriage fell apart. A couple of years ago she committed suicide. This corruption that was going on was covered up.

"Paul says to Timothy that the elders that sin are to be rebuked before all (*1 Timothy 5:20*). But the elders of this church had a different doctrine.... The elders (one of the ministers of this church in particular) told parents not ever to make the mistake of confessing wrong to their children.... Don't say I'm sorry because that immediately lowers you in the estimation of your children. They won't have respect for you anymore...."

But the problems in the Tyler church were not simply conversion of funds and bad advice from the elders. The elders adopted, taught, and enforced a view of the church that has no support in Scripture.

Reconstructionist Ecclesiolatry

"This [notion of not admitting error to children] feeds into a doctrine that they developed there that became known as 'Father God, Mother Church....' [Where have we heard this before?—Robbins] The way it works is this: God is your Father; the Church is your Mother. How do you deal with things at home?... You do not allow your children to play off one parent against another.

"Father God, Mother Church. If Mother Church comes down with a decision to her children that is wrong, it is against what God's law says, God will back up Mother Church.

"Now this sent...shock waves through the church...and people immediately came up with the obvious objection: What if...the church commands you to, say, sacrifice your children on an altar or something...? How far does this go? Does God always back up Mother Church?

"And they said, oh, of course not. Obviously if the church ordered you as a member to sacrifice your children on an altar, that's not Mother Church anymore. Mother Church at that point has clearly become a harlot. And God will not back up the decisions of a harlot....

"That means, though, that if the church is wrong, if you say that the church is wrong enough for me to disobey, you're calling the church a harlot.... If Father God will back up Mother Church unless she is a harlot, [and] if you say that Mother Church is wrong on an issue, it had better be an important enough issue because what you have just done...is that you've called Mom a harlot. Now if you call my Mom a harlot, you'll get into trouble. And that's what happened in Texas....

"One of the things that was going on with this in the [Tyler] church was that we found that the elders of this church were very class conscious.... This church was not primarily built up from the

community. That's how local churches usually are developed. The Gospel takes root in a society and the church is built up from the local constituency. But that's not what went on in this church. People moved to come to this church. This was a Reconstructionist haven and so they moved to come there. People at great cost to themselves--people gave up good jobs to get lesser paying jobs and so on. And the church had a fair number of rather poor people in the church. The pastor of that church to other people outside the church said that one of the problems that he had to deal with in his church was that there's so many 'white trash' in the church....

"The sermons became increasingly mystical.... I would sit in church Sunday after Sunday and think, I have read Rushdoony, I've read Van Til.... You know, I may not be genius level but I've got an intellect. And I'm sitting here, I'm rather well-read, probably more well-read than most members of the congregation, and I can't make head or tail of what this man is saying. I have no idea what he is talking about in the pulpit. And if I can't figure this out, how are these other people doing?

"Well, one way the other people were coping with it was that they assumed that this has to be really hot stuff. 'This is profound because I can't understand it. I'm sitting here in awe and wonder at all these things that are being said from the pulpit, I don't understand it, but it must be true and it must be very important. And this is life-changing, culture-transforming stuff. I'm right here on the Inner Circle.' Nobody knew what he [the pastor] was talking about. Bizarre, I mean bizarre interpretations were coming forth from the pulpit....

"The congregation was given to understand that everything that was being said from the pulpit, that here we are at the central point of the Reconstruction of this country, of indeed the world, and the things that are coming forth from this pulpit you won't hear anywhere else.... As one Reconstructionist writer put it, 'I want to save Western Civilization at cost plus ten percent, plus postage and handling....' "

The White-Wall Tire Sermon

"There was this mysticism coming out of the pulpit. Nobody really understood what was going on. But sometimes it would not get mystical at all. There

was one memorable sermon put forth by a deacon--he was really the deacon of the church: there were other deacons, but this was the hammer--and he announced at the beginning and gave a little exposition that the job of the deacon is only to do what the elders tell him to do. He has no discretion outside of what the elders tell him to do. Every word that comes out of his mouth, every action that he performs is in complete subservience to the elders.

"At that point, he launched into a talk about how the rest of us are to submit to the elders. We were given to understand, naturally, that everything that he said, he was saying on the direct authority of the elders of the church because he had just said he can't say anything, he can't do anything, apart from their direct command. So everything he said was coming from the elders but it was coming through him. And this was playing it safe.... Prime ministers and presidents do this sort of thing all the time.... That kind of game is played. Well, it was played at this church as well. And so when people objected to this, the elders were able to say that they hadn't really meant any of this and that they weren't really apprised of what was going on when, in fact, it was exactly the opposite.

"But the statement was made that we are to submit to every whim of the church leadership. Even to disagree in our thoughts is an excommunicable offense.... So we have to discipline our thoughts and bring them into line with what the elders said.... And the deacon gave a very concrete, you might say rubber meets the road example. He talked about white-wall tires. And he said if you have white-wall tires and an officer of the church comes over to your house and commands you to change them to black-walls, you are required to do so, and any disobedience to that command is rebellion against authority, rebellion against God himself. And you can be excommunicated for that....

"I went up to the deacon afterward and gingerly asked him some questions. I pointed to a man in the congregation who was a policeman....

"I said, 'If that policeman comes over to my house and tells me to get white-wall tires, I will tell him,

with all due respect, to jump in the lake, because he doesn't have the authority to do that. He is exceeding his authority. And if I tell him to get lost, I'm not rebelling against authority, he is rebelling against authority, against his rightful authority. He is exceeding the law by coming over to me and telling me to do something that he has no right to tell me to do. So he's the rebel. I'm not the rebel if he is telling me to do something that he doesn't have the right to.'

"So I said, 'Does church authority--can you--is it possible for you to exceed your authority? Where's the line? I want to know at what point in my home I can draw a line and say you can't cross that. You cross that line and we get into a little dust up here. So where's the line?'

"And he didn't answer that. He said, 'Well, I'll tell you, you know, if you disagree with the decision of the elders--they tell you to get white-wall tires and you disagree with that, you're at liberty to go around to other people in the church and find out if they disagree. And if you have enough people that disagree, you can kick out the elder.'

"I said, 'Well, I've got two problems with that. Number one, does everything have to be that extreme? Can't we negotiate? Is it a choice of complete submitting, letting this iron boot step on my face forever, or I overthrow the authority? Can we negotiate here? Can we talk?'

"And he didn't say anything about that. He just smiled.

"So I said, 'Okay, my second problem with that is that while I'm disagreeing, and while I'm going around the church canvassing the church to find out who agrees with me and disagrees with the eldership, I am committing innumerable excommunicable offenses. Every time I think a thought against what the elders have said, I can be excommunicated for that. And certainly going around stirring up trouble, saying let's kick these guys out, I can be excommunicated for that, right?'

"And he just smiled again. And I went all cold inside....

"I would wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, terrified that I was going to be excommunicated for what I was thinking....

"At that point there was this real uneasy relationship between me and them. I was not on the staff of the church at all but I was, after all, David Chilton. And I wasn't the most famous member of the church, but people did come to the church to find David Chilton, and I was one of the advertising gimmicks of that church. And here I am going through these intense, gut wrenching struggles over the issue of whether I'm going to be excommunicated simply because of disagreeing over a subject like white-wall tires."

1984

"But it got worse. There were people who disagreed with school policy.... it had to do with fund raising. We were going to let children go out into the neighborhood and collect money.... Well, there were some people in the church and school who didn't like that. They said, I tell you what, you come to me and you ask me. If the school needs money, tell me how much you want me to give and I'll write you a check. But don't ask me to send my children around to the neighborhood collecting donations from heathens to build up this school....

"Now they did not start a revolution.... They stayed out of it. They didn't send their children around the neighborhood and on the appointed day, they did not show up. Now I was one of the ones that showed up. I didn't like it. I didn't feel comfortable about it, but we went along with it....

"The result of that was they [those who disagreed] began being brought in and interrogated by the elders of the church--interrogating husbands and wives separately, and refusing to allow these proceedings to be tape recorded.... Sometime before this I'd gone out to a bookstore and bought two books that I had read in high school and now was beginning to see the importance of. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984*....

"By 1985 I was sending out resumes very discreetly and quietly, begging and pleading with anybody to accept me anywhere. I was willing to do anything.

Just get me out of here. There was a real climate of fear.... A family in our church who had moved about 20 miles away-our church was very much into liturgy...--these people moved away and there was an Episcopal Church nearby.... They decided that they would like to go there to church. So they applied for a transfer and got it.... You can't imagine the shock waves that went through the church at that point. I had people coming up to me...saying, I didn't know you *could* get out.

"At this point there was something over 60 families in the church. And that one family moved out. And when people discovered that you could move out, people did so.... When that began to happen, that original couple was denounced from the pulpit in the most extreme terms, that they had left the faith, they weren't Christian anymore, and going to Hell....

"Perhaps the leading American Theonomist, if I can distinguish that from Reconstruction, but the leading, the most important, the most erudite American Theonomist was very strongly critical of the church there [in Tyler] and yet in his [California] church he routinely excommunicated people for disagreeing with him, excommunicated people for leaving, excommunicated people for transferring to another church in the same denomination. Think about that. You're in a church and you transfer to another church in the same denomination and the pastor excommunicates you for that.... There were members of our church there who, in escaping from this [Reconstructionist] church, fled to the relative freedom of the Roman Catholic Church. Think about that...."

There is far more in Chilton's tape than I can review here. If you are at all interested in tracing out the ramifications of Reconstructionism, this would be a good tape to purchase. Chilton is still enthralled by many Reconstructionist ideas, but he has given us a glimpse into the ecclesiastical megalomania of the most famous Reconstructionist church in the world.

Editor's note: After this speech, David Chilton subsequently suffered a heart attack from which he initially recovered and eventually died. One

wonders if the terror and desperation he felt in the Tyler Church contributed to his health problems. After his heart attack, Chilton and his lecture were viciously attacked by Gary North, the chief financier of the Tyler Church, both publicly and privately. This editor was threatened in writing with "destruction" by North for publicizing Chilton's speech. Several former members of the Tyler Church contacted the editor after we published this Review, saying that Chilton had not told the half of it. They were still frightened of the leaders of the Tyler Church years after they had left.