

# ARISE & BUILD

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## DIALECTICAL CULTURE

BY MARTIN G. SELBREDE



In *The One and the Many*, Dr. R. J. Rushdoony deals with an issue that is wrongly assumed to be merely philosophical in orientation, whereas it actually has momentous consequences in the realm of politics and culture. In fact, Christian Reconstruction itself rises or falls to the extent that the Biblical resolution of this issue becomes our foundational presupposition.

The more we circle around the *one and the many* issue, the better we'll understand it and how man's humanistic response has disfigured the world we live in. Let's start with Dr. Rushdoony's observations about how the concept plays out.

If all things are basically one, then differences are meaningless, divisions false, and definitions are sophistications, in that the tyranny, or destiny, of oneness is the truth of all being. But, if all things are basically many, and if plurality is ultimate, then the world dissolves into unrelated particulars ... The first leads to the breakdown of differences and the liberty of atomistic individualism and particularity; the second is the breakdown of fundamental law into nihilism and the retreat of men and their arts into isolated and private universes.<sup>1</sup>

You'll notice that whichever path is taken (toward the one, or toward the many), a *breakdown* inevitably follows. Man tries to balance on the knife edge between these two paths leading to social breakdown without recourse to God's solution. History testifies to the futility of this mad dance.

### THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM: THE DEAD END OF DIALECTICAL CULTURE

Men simply do not want to build their society upon God's Word. As David Chilton put it concerning the Bible's usefulness as a blueprint for building God's city, "Nobody in his right mind wants the City to look like *that*!"<sup>2</sup> The phony resolution of the *one and the many* problem has been the earmark of this folly ever since.

Man tries to solve the problem by posing a *dialectic tension* between the *one and the many*. He wants to have his cake and eat it, unaware of how mutually corrosive these claims to ultimacy are.

Unity and diversity cannot be made compatible on this plane, and dialectical approaches promise what they can never deliver. State coercion becomes the mechanism behind the *one* being dominant. The Soviet Union was held together by force, as was Yugoslavia. Once that force falters, Balkanization sets in: the glue fails and the *many* then overcome the *one*.

The increasingly strident political animosity of late is driven by opposing visions of unity. The pretense of civility (the last gasp of a collapsing dialectic) is in rapid retreat.

### THE CERTAINTY OF FAILURE WITH DIALECTICAL CULTURE

Cultures eventually "drop the procedural tensions which for a season gave rise to liberty."<sup>3</sup> "Current libertarian movements are radically premised on the same grounds as messianic statism, on the Enlightenment and its faith."<sup>4</sup> Our

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“cultural premises have as their basis a philosophical tension.”<sup>5</sup> It was remarkable that any liberty whatsoever appeared, as Dr. Rushdoony notes:

Liberty often arises as a by-product of dialectical imbalance, as was the case in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, only to disappear subsequently. As the recognition of the irrevocability of the tension becomes more and more clear, the culture collapses.<sup>6</sup>

When the *many* is stressed, the result is a “consequent cynicism and cultural collapse.”<sup>7</sup> When the *one* dominates, then “individuation is an unhealthy separation.”<sup>8</sup> Both emphases “involve a denial of an aspect of reality and run into both a wild emotionalism and a ready castration of the whole man and his life.”<sup>9</sup> Contempt for culture “epitomizes the recurring temper of diseased societies.”<sup>10</sup> Building on dialectical foundations that are “equally sterile in the long run” leads to tyranny by the “destruction of the concept of fundamental law.”<sup>11</sup>

The Enlightenment sought to “overcome the handicap of man’s previous dialectics”<sup>12</sup> and failed. It reframed the tension as being between *nature and freedom*, replacing the Greek *form-matter* motive and the Roman Catholic *nature-grace* motive.<sup>13</sup> *Nature versus freedom* mutated into *science versus faith* and then into *fact versus value*—with Rushdoony noting that when you pit fact against value, “this very statement of the dialectic is its breakdown.” It collapses upon itself, whereby “crisis again grips the West, already twice rescued by the entrance and revival of biblical faith.”<sup>14</sup>

“The continual shattering of cultures”<sup>15</sup> exemplifies the shaking of all things until the unshakeable remains (Heb. 12:27). These cultures, in denying the triune God and the transcendent One and Many, put themselves on an imploding foundation of incompatible opposites.

Even libertarianism, for all its positives, “still fails to answer the dialectical tension.”<sup>16</sup>

## LAW AND LIBERTY

Biblical law alone places the correct limitations on power and liberty. When power isn’t limited, the pendulum swings to the *one*, to the monolithic state, where coercion secures compliance. When liberty isn’t limited, anarchism prevails and the *many* overcome the *one*. When law emanates from inside the Creation, it triggers this conflict of interest between the *one and the many*.

Contemporary facets of the humanistic dialectic, however hostile, share a common destiny as the dialectical tension tears their world apart.<sup>17</sup>

The question which haunts the dialectical culture is this: how to have unity without totally undifferentiated and meaningless oneness?<sup>18</sup>

The dehumanizing results of the flight toward the one have been well chronicled by Solzhenitsyn and Orwell, though the elite planners ignore those warnings at our peril.

Law from any other source than God destroys true liberty, as Dr. Rushdoony argues:

When a man’s authorities are of this world, then man is in danger. These authorities are then not only ultimate, they are also proximate or present. They stand right over him with all their imposing claims, and, because they occupy the same ground man does, they limit and destroy the liberty of man.

Two things of the same world cannot occupy the same point in time and space. If a man’s gods or authorities are of this world, they will insist on occupying *his* place in time and space, and the result is the enslavement and eviction of man from his due liberties and station in life. A man cannot compete with his authorities, with his gods; they are by his own recognition above and over him. If a man’s gods are of this world, and if they are man-made and humanistic, they know only one realm to occupy, man’s realm.<sup>19</sup>

Man is in danger when the unifying force isn’t transcendent but is crowding him out in the same space and time that he lives in.

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When we hear men say “there is no higher law than the Constitution,” they invite the danger described above. By placing all authority on our human level, they are targeting liberty. When humanistic unity becomes the highest good, all power must enforce it; restraints upon that power are considered evil. This is why the Biblical family is often targeted as evil, as are homeschoolers.

Anarchy has the same problem: what’s to stop others from infringing your liberty? The Non-Aggression Principle of the civil libertarians is an inadequate defense when ultimacy is transferred to the atomistic individual. Men prey upon one another.

This is why natural law (as normally defined) is gored on the horns of the dialectic dilemma: it props up an ultimate authority that is not transcendent but on our level. Natural law codifies authorities that are “proximate and present” and occupy man’s time and space, putting man in danger. Natural law rejects transcendence, dooming man to a pending dialectic implosion (quite aside from the prior question of the *content* of natural law).

The idea that you should be secure in your person is considered a quaint illusion by those promoting the *one*—an illusion that only postpones assimilation into the collective. Individual rights have no claim against collective rights. Biblical law is the only answer that doesn’t deliver total fragmentation of human society.

### THE PROBLEM CRYING OUT FOR AN ANSWER

The problem, though rarely discussed, is a global one. “Every society is an attempted answer to the problem of the one and the many.”<sup>20</sup> “Dialectical philosophy has sought to retain both social order and the particular individual, both the unity and particularity of being.”<sup>21</sup> “The world is torn between growing totalitarianism and growing anarchy as dialecticism breaks down and the one and the many pursue their independent and hostile directions.”<sup>22</sup>

Van Til says that in non-Biblical systems, “there are assumed to be two

ultimate principles, the one of temporal plurality and with it of evil, and the other of eternal being which is a form and is good.”<sup>23</sup> Individualism is deemed evil while centralized power is good.

But ultimacy does not inhere in the created order, but only in the Creator who is transcendent over His creation. The transcendent One and Many of the Trinity resolves this man-made crisis.

A dialectical culture is unstable. “Apostate man will become progressively more dialectical in his thinking.”<sup>24</sup> “There is no solution outside of the Bible. “*All non-biblical thought is dialectical*”<sup>25</sup> because it rejects the triune God. Meaning, too, is destroyed as dialectical cultures work out their implications, and liberty swiftly follows meaning into the trash bin. “That true world of meaning must first be restored if liberty is to be given its rightful place and respect.”<sup>26</sup>

### VAN TIL’S ANSWER TO THE PROBLEM

If the universe is created by God, then “the time-space world cannot be a source of independent particularity.”<sup>27</sup>

[It is created] in accordance with the plan of the universal God. Hence there must be in this world universals as well as particulars. *Moreover they can never exist in independence of one another.* They must be equally ultimate, which means in this case that they are both derivative.<sup>28</sup>

When God is treated as ultimate, this fatal dialectic tension disappears.

Humanism, by its severe dislocation of ultimate authority, can only build dialectical cultures that implode and that undermine liberty. Liberty is only possible under Biblical law. Humanistic law squeezes man out of his place under God only to place him under the jackboot of his fellow man.

Each subsequent attempt to build a supposedly new dialectical culture fails, as have countless previous attempts. The planners expect to gather figs from thistles. As Dr. Rushdoony says, “Men have avoided the answer to the problem of the one and the many because they reject the God who is the answer.”<sup>29</sup>

## THE WORLD UNDER GOD'S LAW: NO DIALECTIC TENSION

There is no need for the cultural yawning between a destructive collectivism and an atomistic particularity.<sup>30</sup>

When Dr. Rushdoony points out the Biblical answer to the *one and the many* problem, he recognizes that this answer embraces both faith and liberty. “The question of liberty is thus in a very real measure a question of faith.”<sup>31</sup>

God's law is transcendent, promoting a harmony of interests with no dialectic tension (due to the equal ultimacy of the *one and the many*). This key aspect of God's nature is where ultimacy is found: the *conflict of interests* is a humanistic illusion to be supplanted by a *harmony of interests* in Him.

Dr. Rushdoony depicts such a future in his upcoming commentary on Paul's letters to the Corinthians, where the reader can better envision what the endgame will look like. The liberty that God's Kingdom brings doesn't merely deliver from dialectical culture but from *all overreach*, whether by church or state.

What we have are two different worlds of government. According to the Bible, the people take care of themselves, and then they take care of one another ... You create, when you have a Biblical government, a free society. You create a social order radically different from anything that the world has known outside of the Bible ... As long as Israel was faithful to God, it was very difficult, if not impossible, for the kings or judges to gain undue power.

Paul is trying to teach these Corinthians this new way of life. They are not to sit back and say, “Well, let's let Rome take care of it,” or “The Roman Office of charitable activities will make a handout in due time.” On the contrary, we take over. We meet the need; and that is important.

They saw here another way of life, another way of meeting human needs, without creating a vast bureaucracy. Whenever the federal government seeks to do something, it creates a bureaucracy.

We are in process of creating a different world. “The government shall be upon His shoulders” (Isa. 9:6), we are told. And how can it be so unless we stop all statist activities and replace them with godly ones?

This amounts to promoting God's transcendent unification of all things over dialectical culture:

Not statist welfarism but Christian charity is to prevail. Institutional charity and salvation are to be replaced by the activity of the Christian to take over one area of life after another by Christian obedience to the law of God. Human needs are to be met by Christian action.

We do not appreciate the fact that in antiquity and all over the world, gifts apart from the state were virtually unknown. Everything was handled by the state. If you moved outside the state to accomplish what you did, you were a dangerous man.

We really are not going to understand the Bible and the Kingdom of God and what it means until we understand that the law of God, by and large, is not enforced by the state, nor by the church; that it is for individuals to enforce.

As you can see, God's Kingdom is not a statist one, nor an ecclesiastical one. It is not controlled by church nor state, nor by compulsion. It is controlled by the faith of believers ... This is the way the world should be ruled. Just as we are to be ruled by faith, so, too, is the world.

The key that unlocks this new picture is the resolution of the *one and the many* problem, so that culture and society can be delivered from the deadly dialectic that still afflicts them to this day. 🏰

1. Rousas John Rushdoony, *The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, [1971] 2007 [original printing by Thoburn Press, Fairfax, VA, 1971, page numbers given for the newer edition]), p. 24.

2. David Chilton, “The Case of the Missing Blueprints,” *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* Vol. 8, No. 1, Summer 1981 “Symposium on Social Action,” Gary North, editor, p. 133.

3. *The One and the Many*, p. 23.

4. *ibid.*

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# THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND CHRISTIAN INDEPENDENCE

BY MARK R. RUSHDOONY



**M**an desperately needs to believe in an overarching meaning in order to view his own life of some great significance.

When he fails to look to the sovereign Creator as his source of truth, he only wanders in the imaginations of his own mind and self-will.

## THE MIND OF THE COSMOS

The Greeks assumed there was an order to the world, a principle of meaning, a wisdom, power, logic, or scheme of things that man could ascertain. They called this impersonal order to the cosmos the *logos*. John appropriated the word in his gospel to identify this truth not as an *impersonal* characteristic but in terms of the *person* Jesus Christ, the Creator-God who was incarnate in human flesh and “dwelt among us,” whose divine glory John had personally seen (John 1:1-14; cf. Luke 9:28-32).

John was not borrowing a term casually. He was confronting Greek thought head-on. In declaring Jesus to be the *logos*, John was saying that in order for man to understand the cosmos and its meaning one had to look to Jesus Christ. The world was itself made by Him (John 1:3,10), who declared He was “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

## GOVERNING PERSON NOT PRINCIPLE

Jesus was born at a time when the near universal philosophic and religious perspective of the time was that the incarnation of deity was a repugnant idea. To the dualist, the non-material realm was a higher one and matter the locale of evil. When this prevailing idea entered the church through converts, the language of “flesh” and “spirit” was seen in a dualis-

tic mindset. Such converts assumed the task of “fixing” the Christian message by interpreting it in terms of their dualistic perspective. This is why the first great theological debate after the apostolic era was regarding dualism. For four centuries after the Ascension of Jesus the church fought over the nature of the incarnation. There was a strong opposition by dualists to any literal incarnation of God that was not officially resolved until the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451. The Chalcedon formula held to the uniqueness of the God-man Jesus Christ as the only mediator between God and man. This meant that there was no impersonal *governing principle* for man to discern and interpret, as in Greek thought, but rather a *governing person*, the Lord Jesus Christ.

## THE IMPLICATION OF CHALCEDON

It is a myth that the church formulated doctrines such as the Trinity. What they did over many generations was respond to the dualistic attempt to deny the incarnation of God in human flesh. This led to multiple defenses and definitions of both Christ’s nature and the incarnation. The formulations of the early church were not creative but descriptive of what they felt the Scriptures taught and the apostles themselves believed (the “apostolic tradition”).

Chalcedon was a great theological victory, but its impact extended much further, as the theological implications of the unique and exclusive mediatorial role of Jesus Christ worked themselves out over the course of Western history. For all its very real faults, the Roman church did develop a Christendom that was God-centered in its perspective, so Chalcedon’s stand on the uniqueness of the mediatorial role of Jesus had a profound effect.

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Since Chalcedon held Jesus to be the unique God-man, it put a theological limitation on all men and institutions, as they could not make what would be a blasphemous claim to that role. Men had often claimed that prerogative in the ancient world. Monarchs of antiquity were typically said to be either divine or priest-kings, chosen mediators and spokesmen of their gods. Julius Caesar and Augustus were declared divine at their deaths, but later emperors claimed divinity during their reigns. The Republic was then dead, and Rome returned to the ancient pattern of absolute authority in a king who assumed a claim to divinity. To oppose any ruler who claimed divinity was thus both treason and blasphemy; it precluded the possibility of opposition, much less liberty. Any “rights” were no more than exemptions, privileges granted by the state whose head was divine or embodied a divine order.

Even the Roman Church rebelled against Chalcedon in practice when it acted as the continuing incarnation of Jesus Christ. It took centuries for the theological implications of Chalcedon to work themselves out in the political arena. If Jesus Christ was the unique link between God and man, then no man or institution could claim that role. Both church and state had a role in God’s order, but both were limited in their jurisdiction. Neither could claim a “divine right” to absolute rule.

### **THE ONE AND THE MANY**

The doctrine of the incarnation cannot, of course, be separated from that of the Trinity. Again, this was not a doctrine the church would have created, as it is ultimately inexplicable. The definition of this doctrine, though, does have important implications for human thought, ones we ignore at great peril.

The doctrine of the Trinity reveals that there is both simplicity and complexity in the godhead, both unity and diversity, yet with both in perfect harmony. We are limited creatures both by virtue of our creaturehood and our

fallen natures. We tend to oversimplify to find an idea or principle we can grasp, then force-fit it across the board. In other words, we “dumb” down the complexity we find and then operate in terms of that simplistic reduction.

There is an old expression that has been referenced in philosophy for many years, “the problem of the one and the many.” It is a summation of the gamut of ideas on how to metaphysically understand the seemingly disparate and conflicting ideas of simplicity and complexity.

We are commonly confronted by the question of the one and the many even if that term is not used. Some years ago, it was a common group exercise to posit a question about men on a lifeboat. One was mortally injured yet was consuming the limited water rations. The question was should the man (the “one”) be given water or should it be saved for those (the “many”) who might survive until rescued. In such an exercise, the morality debated was whether the responsibility was to the one or the many, the individual or the group. Of course the “problem” was stated so as to hint that the “one” individual was certain to die anyway, so the “solution” was typically in favor of abandoning the individual (or worse). It was a justification for murder by means of an ostensibly higher motive for the good of many, a rationale not as foreign to our world as we would like to believe.

Another example of the problem is in approaching a troubled marriage—which is most important, the individuals or the institution? Marriage counsellors sometimes hold to the one extreme or another. There is a view in some Christian circles that the institution of marriage is all-important and that the individual must suffer any abuse to maintain it. Others see only the happiness of the individuals. Men tend to over-simplify the complexity of life to find a single principle, but the Trinity teaches us that in God neither oneness nor plurality are ultimate. In the case of the marriage

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covenant, neither of the individuals is ultimate, nor is the institution. Marriage is a covenant to work together under God's law to further His Kingdom.

Left to his own reckoning, man tends to extremes, either *oneness* and some form of collective unity or to *diversity* and individualism. The *one* usually prevails in politics and society and most often in the forced unity of statist power, because the state can always claim to be the highest collective voice of individuals and hence the representative of the "greater good." It is not without reason that the Scriptural allusions to organized opposition to and persecution of God's people reference the absolutist ancient regimes—Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. If there is both oneness and plurality in God Himself, our reductionist over-simplifications should be avoided and the role of both should be acknowledged in all human relationships and activity.

### LIBERTY AND CHRISTIAN INDEPENDENCE

Our talk of liberty often represents just an anarchistic freedom from the "oneness" of statism, but that is only a first step. The larger issue is what we seek freedom *to*. What path does our liberty place us on? If it is only one of individual autonomy, we are choosing one simplistic answer, the atomistic "many" over another, the collective "one" of statism. Too much thinking about liberty is merely a rejection of statism, but our calling is not to a mere negation, even of evil.

When man is governed by God's law he has a very real level of independence from other false attempts at unity or an anarchistic independence. The avoidance of debt, for instance, produces a freedom unknown to the slave to debt and the giving of tithes and offerings frees a man both from the legitimate guilt of robbing God and to a joy in wealth as a steward of God. Instead of playing god, man submits to the true God and His law.

When a man is governed by God's law, he has a freedom of conscience. Our culture today frequently manipulates by ascribing guilt, but when a man knows

he has fulfilled his obligations and his charitable duties before God, he has a sense of freedom that transcends man's accusations. Such freedom under God is available to all men, regardless of the political and social context of their lives.

Politics today should be seen as a *defensive* movement to protect ourselves against the encroachment of statist claims. The *offensive* movement we need is that of citizens building the Kingdom of God by faithfulness to every Word of God. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you" (Matt. 6:33). Our purpose is not merely to be survivors of the collapse of humanism, but to be "more than conquerors through him that loved us" (Rom. 8:37). 🏰

### M. Selbrede, *Dialectical Culture, cont...*

5. *ibid.*, p. 24.

6. *ibid.*

7. *ibid.*, p. 26.

8. *ibid.* It is considered "unhealthy" by many regarding the COVID-19 vaccination controversy.

9. *ibid.*, p. 28. Castration seems a strong word, but note how cancel culture can drive targets to grovel for forgiveness.

10. *ibid.*

11. *ibid.*, p. 29.

12. *ibid.*

13. *ibid.*

14. *ibid.*, p. 31.

15. *ibid.*, p. 25.

16. *ibid.*, p. 34.

17. *ibid.*

18. *ibid.*, p. 24.

19. Rousas John Rushdoony, *Law and Liberty* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, [1984] 2009), p. 41.

20. Rousas John Rushdoony, "Van Til and the One and Many Problem" in E. R. Geehan, ed., *Jerusalem and Athens* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1971), p. 341.

21. *ibid.*

22. Geehan, p. 342.

23. Qtd. in *ibid.*

24. *The One and the Many*, p. 37.

25. *ibid.*, p. 34.

26. *ibid.*, p. 38.

27. Van Til qtd. in Geehan, p.343.

28. Van Til qtd. in Geehan, p. 343.

29. Geehan, p. 347.

30. *The One and the Many*, p. 36.

31. *The One and the Many*, p. 25.



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Our objective is to help equip Christians to “take back” government from the state by means of Biblical self-government and to apply their faith to every sphere of life and thought. We’ve already

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