

AN APPRAISAL OF THEONOMY

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Theonomy: A source of confusion

Columnist Cal Thomas once chided New York governor Mario Cuomo for his soft stand on abortion. Governors, wrote Thomas, are accountable to the Lawgiver for their stewardship while in office. *Is this theonomy?*

Charles Colson believes that Exodus 22 sets forth a basic principle of prison reform—that criminals should make restitution to their victims. *Is this theonomy?*

William Bennett, Richard John Neuhaus, Joseph Sobran, and other conservative columnists plead for the recovery of public virtue and goodness rooted in the acknowledgement of divine authority and standards. *Are they all theonomists?*

Clearly, if everybody who wants to apply the Bible or God's law to modern problems is a theonomist, then we need to look more carefully at our terms.

Greg Bahnsen is probably the most articulate defender of theonomy today. He insists on "the abiding validity of the Old Testament law in exhaustive detail." But that central claim has become the source of considerable confusion and has required significant qualification.

For example, the law requiring rooftop railings is applied today to swimming pool fences and workplace safety. I agree with this application. The warrant for this application is given in the Belgic Confession (art. 25) and the Westminster Confession (chap. 19.4). They teach that while the *form* (shadows) of the Old [8](#) Testament law has passed away, the *equity* (principles) remains valid to direct morality in every age. Rooftop railings belong to the form of the law, and liability for injury belongs to its equity or pith (Calvin's term).

But this confessional formulation doesn't sound like the theonomic insistence on "the abiding validity of the Old Testament law *in exhaustive detail*." Faced with this difference, defenders of theonomy qualify and refine their central claim. But the confusion remains, leading me to

wonder exactly what it is that continues to be binding upon God's people today.

To grasp this point, study the italicized phrases in the following quotations from Bahnsen's book *No Other Standard* (p. 32, italics added):

The theonomic principle is objective and Biblical in character. Its policy for Old Testament interpretation and for application of the laws found there is that *the moral standards* revealed by God are all beneficial and *continue to be binding* unless further revelation teaches otherwise (Deut. 4:2; 10:13; Ps. 119:160; Matt. 5:19; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). As a result, the theonomist concludes that most of *the judicial laws* of the Old Testament, having not been modified or canceled by Scripture later, *continue to be binding according to the principle which they teach or illustrate*.

Later he writes (p. 160, italics added):

The underlying *principles* of the Old Testament civil *law* are the abiding moral *standards* which should continue to guide civil magistrates in our day. That is why the Mosaic law is a 'model' to be emulated, not a code to be simply quoted or read into modern statute books (p. 160; italics added).

But precisely what is it that continues to be binding—the judicial *law*, the moral *standard*, or the illustrated *principle*? If only the principle remains valid, have not the exhaustive details of the law passed away?

As I write these words we are literally knee-deep in snow, so that I've instructed my children always to wear boots or overshoes outdoors. When the snows melt and spring arrives, the boots will be put away until next winter, and my children will be "free from the law" of wearing boots. As the seasons change, the *principle* of the law (wear appropriate protective clothing) remains, while the precise wording (*form*) of the law is no longer relevant to the situation. Moreover, part of the moral maturity I wish to cultivate in my children is that they "remember the law" by internalizing this principle and applying it year-round to other areas of life without my having to remind them.

Isn't this analogy pretty close to the relationship between Old Testament law and Christian living today? Is theonomy saying something more than this? I'm not sure.

Theonomy: A timely opportunity

Some may perceive what I'm about to say as no more than a gesture of required courtesy, but it's far more than that. I want to speak a word of genuine appreciation and encouragement to those who are giving careful attention to Old Testament law. This discussion forces us to face two specific challenges.

First, theonomy forces us to discuss and understand more clearly *the place of the law in the history of redemption*. What does it mean, for example, that God gave his law to Israel after the Exodus, but before Israel's entrance into Canaan? Of what significance is it that the Decalogue alone was written by God's finger on the stone tablets, that it was stored in the ark of the covenant, and that it seems to have functioned as the organizing pattern for the rest of the law? What impact does the passing away of Israel's theocracy have upon our use of the law? Jesus Christ came to fulfill the law—what does this mean for our use of it today? Theonomy is compelling us to think carefully about the relationship between the testaments, and ultimately about the depth of our commitment to an authoritative Bible!

Second, theonomy forces us to think more carefully about how we apply God's Word to specific aspects of Christian living. Theonomy contributes to the formation of a world-and-life view that unites and integrates human relationships, ambitions, and motives in service to God and his glory. I admit that using the Bible is more important than thinking about how we use the Bible. The destination is, after all, more important than the route. But without developing communal map-reading skills, our confession of the Bible's authority will become hollow and individualistic.

In our lawless age, we must cling to the Law and the Prophets—that is, to *all* of God's Word. Let us not reject dispensationalism as a doctrine, only to ignore Old Testament law in practice.

A call to conversation

This symposium is a good example of how we ought to reflect together on the Bible's teaching about morality. I am worried that some critics of theonomy (in contrast to several OPC and PCA assemblies, which have refused to condemn it) are claiming that it is a very serious error, un-Reformed and inherently divisive.

At the same time, no one can remain blind and deaf toward those (9) who have been injured by theonomists. The intense sharpness, bordering on brutality, of some of its defenders cannot be justified and

needs to be corrected. Moreover, we must constantly guard against a spirit of legalism, and not forget that the law is only a means to an end, not the end itself.

All Calvinists committed to the Westminster Confession and the Belgic Confession are convinced that the Old Testament law is profitable for Christian living today (2 Tim. 3:16-17). For the sake of ourselves and our children, we must specify what that profit is. If that requires educating church members in terms of our credal statements, let's do it. If it means working up fresh studies of the Pentateuch for group discussion, what are we waiting for?

We must not allow this debate to frighten or divide us, for that will loosen our grasp of the Bible and weaken the church. Formulating the answers so desperately needed by our sin-sick, dying culture will inevitably drive the church back to the Bible—the *whole* Bible. To the extent that the Lord may use theonomy as a stimulus, I am grateful. To the degree that church leaders resist going to the whole Bible for moral direction, I am concerned. And to the degree that theonomists and non-theonomists calmly listen to one another, I am hopeful.

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