

The Pilgrim's Pathway

**The Bible, the Church, and the World:
A Third Way (4)**

**The First Way:
Theonomy/Christian Reconstruction (iii)**

Nelson D. Kloosterman

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Before moving on to consider “the second way” of relating the Bible, the church, and the world—one that we are calling “religious secularism”—we conclude our analysis of the use of Scripture in theonomy/Christian reconstruction with a look at John Calvin. Recall that the central issue in the theonomic argument involves *how* the interpreter moves from the OT law to contemporary application, from “then” to “now,” from the historical particular to the universally normative. Naturally, this “interpretive move” has decisive implications for how the church seeks to proclaim and apply the Bible to life in the world today.

John Calvin: Constitutio et aequitas

In addition to leaning on the Confessions, we draw further insight from the Reformed tradition. While not normative, it is illuminative for answering the question of the relation between Scripture and ethics, or the Bible and life in the world.

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin meets head-on the issue of how the church must properly interpret and apply the Scriptures, particularly the Decalogue, to living in the world:

We must, I say, inquire how far interpretation ought to overstep the limits of the words themselves [of the Decalogue] so that it may be seen to be, not an appendix added

to the divine law from men's glosses, but the Lawgiver's pure and authentic meaning faithfully rendered [II.viii.8].

This first principle of interpretation and application is that in his law, God employs what is called "synecdoche," which means that the one sin mentioned in the commandment covers the whole range of related transgressions. (For example, "murder" includes hatred of one's neighbor.) Anyone who "confines his understanding of the law within the narrowness of the words deserves to be laughed at. Therefore, plainly a sober interpretation of the law goes beyond the words; but just how far remains obscure unless some measure be set" (II.viii.8).

And just what is this measure, the limit of proper application of a certain commandment? It is what Calvin calls "the reason of the commandment," why God gave the commandment, the purpose or *telos* of the precept or prohibition. For example, the substance of the fifth commandment is that it is right and pleasing to God for us to honor those on whom he has bestowed some excellence. Moreover, it should be obvious to all that when a good thing is commanded, the evil it conflicts with is being forbidden; and when evil is forbidden, its opposite is being enjoined.

Later in Book IV of the *Institutes*, we see Calvin at work employing his own rules, in a way that recognizes the *eternal norm* expressed in *temporal form*, evident in the covenantal-historical context of the OT legislation. The subject is Israel's theocracy, and its relevance (or its normativity) for modern government. In *Institutes* IV.xx.14 Calvin addresses the matter of civil laws whereby modern states are to be governed, and writes,

I would have preferred to pass over this matter in utter silence if I were not aware that here many dangerously go astray. For there are some who deny that a commonwealth is duly framed which neglects the political system of Moses, and is ruled by the common laws of nations

Late he adds:

We must bear in mind that common division of the whole law of God published by Moses into moral, ceremonial, and judicial laws. And we must consider each of these parts, that we may understand *what there is in them that pertains to us, and what does not*. In the meantime, let no one be concerned over the small point that ceremonial and judicial laws pertain also to morals. For the ancient writers who taught this division, although they were not ignorant that these two latter parts had some bearing upon morals, still, because these could be changed or abrogated while morals remained untouched, did not call them moral laws [italics added].

The relevance of ceremonial and civil laws to the NT church is explained further in *Institutes* IV.xx.15, where Calvin argues that

those ceremonial practices indeed properly belonged to the doctrine of piety . . . and yet could be distinguished from {39} piety itself. In like manner, the *form* of their judicial laws, although it had no other intent than how best to preserve that very love which is enjoined by God's eternal law, had something distinct from that precept of love. Therefore, as ceremonial laws could be abrogated while piety remained safe and unharmed, so too, when these judicial laws were taken away, *the perpetual duties and precepts of love* could still remain [italics added].

All of this leads Calvin to declare in *Institutes* IV.xx.16:

What I have said will become plain if in all laws we examine, as we should, these two things: the *constitution* of the law, and the *equity* on which its constitution is itself founded and rests. Equity, because it is natural, cannot but be the same for all, and therefore, this same purpose ought to apply to all laws, whatever their object. Constitutions have certain circumstances upon which they in part depend. It does not matter that they are different, provided all equally press toward the same goal of equity [italics added].

So important is the law's *equity* that Calvin describes it as the goal, the rule and the limit of all laws. "Whatever laws shall be framed to that rule, directed to that goal, bound by that limit, there is no reason why we should disapprove of them, howsoever they may differ from the Jewish law, or among themselves." (Please don't be confused by the terms being used here. What I earlier termed Israel's "constitution" [the Decalogue, the concentrate which is permanent] Calvin identifies with the word "equity." And what I earlier termed "concretization" [the passing form] Calvin identifies with the word "constitution.")

From Calvin, then, we learn the technique that Reformed Bible interpreters have used throughout the centuries for applying the Bible to the church's living in the world. This approach involves discerning the principle or norm that lies at the heart of a precept, and distinguishing this principle from the enculturated form of the commandment as we find it in Scripture, in order then to apply the principle to a new situation of living in the world today. This approach taught by Calvin does affect, of course, how the church applies the Bible to cultural life today.

Theonomy and "the OT law in exhaustive detail"

From the analysis we have provided, it has become clear that the central claim of modern theonomists is inadequate for showing us how to relate the Bible, the church, and the world. Its argument sounds so simple and straightforward—every OT precept remains binding in exhaustive detail today unless the NT points to its abrogation; only the OT ceremonial laws are abrogated in the NT; therefore, every civil and moral law remains valid in exhaustive detail for modern life (and governments).

Legitimate criticism of theonomy has arisen, in my judgment, because of the lack of clarity on the part of theonomy's most articulate defender, Greg Bahnsen. Back in 1977 Bahnsen stated the central thesis of his position to be "the abiding validity of the OT law in exhaustive detail." Over the years, as his critics kept pressing him to explain his thesis, Bahnsen was forced to modify this claim significantly, confusing those trying to understand his position in relation to the Confessions and to John Calvin.

This point is illustrated by the following quotations from Bahnsen’s book *No Other Standard*. As you read the following quotes, notice the italicized phrases, each of which refers to what Bahnsen claimed to possess “abiding validity.”

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*. . . [32; italics added].

Later he writes:

. . . 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 [160; italics added].

The confusion is this: 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? What then remains of Bahnsen’s central thesis?

A useful analogy

The positive alternative to theonomy’s application of the OT to living in today’s world may be illustrated with an analogy.

When the first snowfall of winter arrives, parents instruct their children always to wear boots or overshoes outdoors. Later, when the snow melts and spring arrives, the boots will be

stored until next winter, and the children will be “free from the law” of boot-wearing. As the seasons change, the *principle* of the law (wear appropriate protective {42} clothing) remains, while the precise wording (*form*) of the law is no longer relevant to the situation. Moreover, part of the moral maturity that parents wish to cultivate in their children is that children “remember the law” by internalizing this principle and applying it year ’round to other areas of life without needing to be reminded.

True enough, there is something that abides—the principle. But in view of applying the principle in different ways in different situations, it simply is not helpful to speak of “the abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail.”

Important: study the references

Before leaving this discussion of theonomy, it may be worth mentioning the need to study carefully the Bible references often appealed to in support of the claims made by modern theonomists. One suspects that few theonomic sympathizers have taken the time to evaluate Bahnsen’s references to Scripture in support of his claim that the moral standards *and judicial laws* revealed in the OT are universally beneficial and perpetually binding. In the quotation above, he referred to Deuteronomy 4:2 and 10:13, Psalm 119:160, Matthew 5:19, and 2 Tim. 3:16-17. But these verses do not support Bahnsen’s claim at all.

In Deuteronomy 10:13, for example, the LORD is urging *Israel* “to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good.” This verse does not point to the *universal* benefit of God’s commands (other verses might, but not this one), but to their benefit *for Israel*.

David’s confession in Psalm 119:160, “The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever,” must be interpreted within the context of the entire Bible, since, as we have shown, even a number of the Ten Commandments has undergone changes in application as salvation history progressed (the Fourth Commandment, for example).

A careful study of Matthew 5:19 (“Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments [or: one of these least commandments] and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven”) will show that here Christ was quite possibly referring not to the OT laws and statutes, but to the requirements implied in the preceding beatitudes found in 5:2-11. Alternatively, Calvin suggests in his commentary on this verse that “Christ here speaks expressly of the commandments of life, or the ten words, which all the children of God ought to take as the rule of their life.”

Even the classic proof-text for inspiration, 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable . . .”), does not support Bahnsen’s argument, since the very point at issue is *how* “all Scripture” is “profitable” for training in righteousness.

Preliminary pause

Thus far, we have seen how theonomy/Christian reconstruction seeks to offer an alternative to dispensationalism regarding how Christians and the church should relate the Bible to contemporary living in the world. In contrast to dispensationalism, theonomy seeks to use the *whole* Bible, Old and New Testaments, as the *direct* source of rules for *all* people, in *all* areas of life, in *all* times. Spokesmen like Gary North and Gary DeMar defend the continuing validity and applicability of the whole law of God, including, but not limited to, the Mosaic case laws, as the standard by which individuals, families, churches, and civil governments should conduct their affairs.

According to our analysis, the central problem here is not that the whole Bible addresses all people at all times in all areas of life (a viewpoint that will receive further elaboration and defense). Rather, it is the claim that today the church must use the whole Bible as the *direct* source of public moral standards. In contrast to using the Bible as the *direct* source, we have seen how the Confessions and John Calvin use the whole Bible as an *indirect* source, because the

church must interpret the precepts of Scripture in terms of their place and function in covenant history, distinguishing a precept's principle from its covenantal-historical application so that we may apply that principle to our living today.

Up to this point, we have considered only the use of Scripture, or the hermeneutic, advanced by theonomy. We have yet to present and evaluate the accompanying ecclesiology, or view of the church, being advanced by theonomy/Christian reconstruction.