

"What Kind of Morality Should We Legislate?"

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

To the surprise of the secularists all around us, the 1980s have demonstrated that bible-believing Christians expect to have a voice in the political arena. In the 1960s we were told that ours is a "post-Christian" era where ethical absolutes must give way to situational morality. In the 1970s, if the media gave attention to any "Christian" political option at all, it was given to "liberation theology," an odious mixture of Marxist ideology and Biblical phraseology. Who could have ever expected, then, the widespread revival of interest in a specifically Christian -- a Biblically guided -- approach to politics which has been activated in the 1980s, evident everywhere from a Bible-thumping presidential candidate to the pro-life and anti-homosexual forces to the Coalition on Revival and American Vision.

Unbelievers have openly expressed their dismay. That should not astonish us. It is characteristic of unbelievers to rage against Jehovah and His anointed King, wishing to cast off any bonds of political servitude to Jesus Christ. Psalm 2 explicitly tells us as much (verses 1-6). The gospels illustrate this same political rage. The chief priests bolstered the crowd's demand for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ by insisting "We have no king but Caesar" (John 10:15). The Apostle Paul's experience points to this same political fury. He taught that Jesus was "King of kings" (1 Timothy 6:15) -- the primary political king under whom all earthly leaders, "the powers that be," are ordained as "ministers of God" (Romans 13:1-7). For this viewpoint he was run out of Thessalonica, daring to teach "contrary to the decree of Caesar" by saying "that there is another king, Jesus" (Acts 17:7).

Secular, unbelieving opinion has always antagonistically raged against any approach to politics which is subject to the Biblically revealed word and direction of Jesus Christ. So the dismay of many in our society to the revival of specifically Christian politics today is not surprising. The astonishing thing is that some professing *Christians* should concur with them! But sadly that is what we find in a recent issue of the *Fundamentalist Journal* (July/August 1988), in a well-meaning but theologically confused article by Norman Geisler, entitled "Should We Legislate Morality?" His answer is yes, but he stumbles badly over the question of *what kind* of morality we should legislate. Geisler is adamant that "The Bible ... is not normative for civil law." I propose that we examine and seriously evaluate that amazing proposition.

Preliminary Misconceptions

Dr. Geisler's article is aimed quite specifically at the "Reconstructionist" theological perspective, calling it a "religious extreme" which is to be as carefully avoided as the opposite extreme of secular relativism. It is Geisler's hope to find some middle ground in politics -- a "just government" which is *neither* relativistic nor "religious," with a moral basis for civil law which is not the special revelation of God in the Bible. This is Geisler's primary and predominating misconception, a conceptual and theological misunderstanding which underlies and flaws his entire thinking on the subject. Jesus, our King, precluded any room for such middle ground: "He that is not with Me is against Me" (Matthew 12:30). "Now therefore be wise, O ye kings: Be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve Jehovah with fear ... Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and ye perish in the way" (Psalm 2:10-12). Given this divine dictate, political neutrality toward Kind Jesus is an impossibility. We shall return to the primary error in Geisler's article later.

In addition to Geisler's fundamental misconception, there are a number of preliminary misconceptions expressed in his article which we should address. Dr. Geisler has here disqualified himself as a critic of Christian reconstruction for the simple reason that he will not accurately portray what the reconstructionist truly believes and advocates. He contents himself with misrepresenting reconstructionist convictions and then knocking down a straw-man.

For example, inappropriate and emotive expressions like "chilling legalism" -- the view that salvation is based on law-works -- are tossed before the reader by Geisler without cautious concern for definition or even a shred of substantiating evidence. All reconstructionists believe we are saved by grace through faith, so that no man can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9). Geisler ambiguously pins "the reinstatement of the Old Testament legal system" on reconstructionists, without differentiating between the "system" understood as the old covenant *administration* (with its sacrifices, priesthood, favored people, geography, etc.) Reconstructionists simply try to adhere to the teaching of Jesus that His coming did not abrogate even "the least commandment" in the (Old Testament) Law and Prophets (Matthew 5:17-19).

Misrepresenting The Facts

Geisler also says things about reconstructionists which are nothing short of slanderous, for instance that they "aim to set up their own postmillennial kingdom without Christ." This is not even close to anything resembling the truth. Reconstructionists have no interest in "their own" kingdom at all, much less one that is "without Christ.." We glorify the King of kings who has come into history and, by His own saving power demonstrated in the resurrection and ascension, established for Himself the promised kingdom, having been granted all authority in heaven and on earth so that all men might bow before Him and submit to Him as Lord over all. In so doing, we say nothing but what the Apostles themselves declared (read it for yourself in Matthew 28:18-20; Luke 22:29; Romans 1:4; 1 Corinthians 15:27-28; Ephesians 1:20-22; Philippians 2:9-11; Hebrews 1:3, 8-9; 2:7-9; Revelation 1:5; 17:14). Reconstructionism simply pursues the Lord's prayer: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth" (Matthew 6:10) -- simply lives in terms of the Hallelujah chorus: "The kingdom of this world *has become* the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ" (Revelation 11:15).

This is not the first time that Dr. Geisler has used the unfair tactic of maligning his reconstructionist opponents. In *Moody Monthly* for October, 1985, Geisler offered "A Premillennial View of Law and Government," where (again) his shots at reconstructionist thinking were aimed at nothing but a straw-man. Let me illustrate personally. Geisler claimed that I hold to capital punishment for drunkards, when I maintain exactly the *opposite* in my book, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Craig Press, 1977, p. 213), where this is seen as a ceremonial law which was unique to Israel. Geisler claimed that postmillennialists hold that the church should assume Israel's sword for establishing the kingdom, when I maintain exactly the *opposite* in my book, *By This Standard: The Authority of God's Law Today* (Tyler, TX: I.C.E., 1985, pp. 9, 166, 322), where biblical warrant for the change from old to new covenants is cited.

Dr. Geisler alleged that postmillennialism is a humanist attempt to overlook man's depravity and "bring in the Millennium without divine intervention," when I maintained exactly the *opposite* in the *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* (Winter, 1976). The issue is not whether God must intervene, but *how* He does so to bring the millennium -- in military might (premillennialism) or by the Spirit working through the word (postmillennialism).

Irresponsible criticism which rests upon misrepresentation is always a falling short of the mark for us as Christians. Dr. Geisler's criticisms of reconstructionist thought are simply futile because they do not first pause to portray accurately the position he wishes to oppose. Reconstructionists oppose what he falsely calls "reconstructionism" as much as he does! We can thus safely ignore his critical remarks. But what about Geisler's own political conceptions? Let's diagnose his proposed alternative to the reconstructionist viewpoint.

An Amazing Proposition

In his *Fundamentalist Journal* article, Dr. Geisler proposes that "The Bible may be informative, but it is not normative for civil law." Why would a fundamentalist committed to the authority and inerrancy of God's holy Word say such a thing? Is it because the Bible is totally silent about just civil laws? The Bible says a great deal about political ethics, from the laws of Moses through the Proverbs to the Epistles of Paul and the Book of Revelation.

What Is Normative?

Why, then, is this body of revealed material not "normative" for believers? Is it because only certain parts of the Bible carry divine authority? That opinion can hardly stand up in the face of Paul's categorical declaration that "every Scripture" (denoting the Old Testament for Paul) is "profitable for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16). If the man of God is to be "thoroughly equipped for *every* good work," he cannot discount any part of God's revealed word (v. 17). If any opinion, practice, or precept in the political domain is to count as "good," then the Scriptures equip us for it. Indeed, when Paul spoke of dealing with murderers, sexual offenders, perjurers and the like, he spoke with apostolic clout, saying "we know that the law [the Mosaic law] is *good*" (1 Timothy 1:8). The author of Hebrews took it as an unquestionable assumption that the law of God is "steadfast," providing a "just recompense of reward" for every transgression or offense with which it deals (Hebrews 2:2).

So we ask again, why would Dr. Geisler propose that the Bible is to be deprived of its normativity when it comes to civil law? Is it because God is no longer concerned for social justice or because the Lordship of Jesus Christ does not extend to politics? The Bible would lend no credence to such ideas at all. Christ is there recognized and confessed as Lord over all -- over all mankind and over all areas of life. The first and great commandment tells us so: You are obligated to "love the Lord your God with *all* your heart and with *all* your mind." (Matthew 22:37). John Murray rightly observed that "the law of God extends to all relations of life. This is so because we are never removed from the obligation to love and serve God. We are never amoral. We owe devotion to God in every phase and department of life" (*Collected Works, vol. 2, 0. 78*). Peter reminds us that a holy God demands that His people "be holy in *all manner* of living" (1 Peter 1:15). We may not legitimately withhold from the Lord Jesus Christ any aspect of our lives -- even political thinking and action -- because our "*every* thought" is expected to be brought into "captivity to the obedience of Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:5). In Him are deposited "*all* the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3) -- even the treasures of political wisdom.

To neglect the normativity of the Bible's extensive teaching regarding political ethics is seriously to curtail the authority of the Bible and to reduce the universal scope of Christ's rule as Lord. All things were created for His service (Colossians 1:16). He justly expects all nations to observe whatsoever He has commanded (Matthew 28:18-20). On the great and final day He will judge all men according to their every deed (2 Corinthians 5:10). He is the ruler over all nations (Psalm 22:28) who has been granted all authority on earth (Matthew 28:18) -- thus "the ruler of the kings of the earth" (Revelation 1:50). He is "head over all things for the sake of the church" (Ephesians 1:20-22) and punishes those who dare to act lawlessly (Matthew 13:41). His law therefore binds all men in all places in all aspects of their lives. He is "Lord over all" (Acts 10:36), the "Lord of lords and King of kings" (1 Timothy 6:15).

So we return to our crucial question: Why would someone like Dr. Geisler who is committed to full Biblical authority and inerrancy propose such a questionable notion as that the Bible is not normative for civil law? At one point he answers that this "would be a violation of the First Amendment" of the U.S. constitution -- which only impeaches his proficiency as a legal historian (as various teaching materials from American Vision or the Rutherford Institute would indicate). But Dr. Geisler is a better Christian than this. Even IF the First Amendment forbade the enactment

of Biblical civil laws (which it does not), the Christian would still be bound by loyalty to the King of kings to prefer God's commands to human obstacles. "Let God be true though all men are liars" (Romans 3:4). The Apostles knew very well that "we must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Is the Bible Silent?

So there is only one reason left to Dr. Geisler if he refuses to honor the normativity of God's revealed word (the Bible) for civil law. He must argue that *the Bible itself* does not teach that it is normative for civil affairs. How does he attempt to establish that? With reasoning which is thoroughly, embarrassingly specious. He claims that the civil laws of the Old Testament, for instance, were never addressed to anybody but the Jews. "Nowhere in the Bible are Gentiles ever condemned for not keeping the law of Moses," he says (mistakenly). Those laws were only for Israel, according to Geisler's thinking. "God no more holds today's governments accountable to His Divine Law to Israel than present residents of Massachusetts are bound by the Puritan laws at Plymouth". The fallacious nature of this reasoning ought to be obvious. God revealed His word, in every case, to particular people in particular historical circumstances, but He fully expects that revealed word to be light to all mankind. By Geisler's reasoning, the moral injunctions revealed through Paul to the Romans are only binding on the ancient city of Rome in the days of the New Testament. Paul wrote to Ephesian children to "obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Ephesians 6:1). Using Geisler's logic, this divine imperative applies to only the youth of ancient Ephesus! This kind of argumentation is ethically absurd.

An Unbiblical Premise

Furthermore, Geisler's premise that the Mosaic law was meant only for the ancient Israelites is directly refuted by the repeated teaching of Scripture itself. The premise is simply a false (even if common) preconception that cannot be verified by a reading of the Biblical text.

At the beginning of the book of Deuteronomy, when Moses exhorted Israel to observe God's commandments, he clearly taught that the laws divinely revealed to Israel were meant by the Law-giver as a *model* to be emulated by all the surrounding Gentile nations:

Behold I have taught you statutes and ordinances even as Jehovah my God commanded me, that you should do so in the midst of the land whither ye go in to possess it. Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, that shall hear all these statutes and say, Surely this great nation is there that hath statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day? (Deuteronomy 4:5-8).

The manifestly righteous requirements of God's law should be followed by all the peoples -- not simply by Israel. In this respect, the justice of God's law made Israel to be a light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 51:4).

God never had a double standard of morality, one for Israel and one for the Gentiles (cf. Leviticus 24:22). In His ethical judgments, "there is no respect of persons with God" (Romans 2:11). Accordingly, God made it clear that the reason why the Palestinian tribes were ejected from the land was precisely that they had violated the provisions of His holy law (Leviticus 18:24-27) -- a fact which presupposes that the Gentiles were antecedently obligated to obey those provisions. Accordingly, the Psalmist could condemn "all the wicked of the earth" for departing from God's statutes (119:118-119).

"Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people" (Proverbs 14:34). Accordingly, the Old Testament prophets could repeatedly excoriate the Gentile nations for their transgressions against God's law (e.g., Amos, Habakkuk, Jonah at Ninevah). Accordingly, Isaiah looked forward to the day when the Gentile nations would stream into Zion, precisely that God's law would go forth from Jerusalem unto all the world (Isaiah 2:2-3).

Of course, there were many *unique aspects* of Israel's national experience, important discontinuities between Israel and the pagan nations. Only Israel as a nation stood as such in an elect, redemptive, and covenantal relation with God; only Israel was a type of the coming kingdom of God, having its kingly line specially chosen and revealed, being led by God in holy war, etc. But the relevant question before us is whether Israel's standards of political ethics were ALSO unique -- embodying a culturally relative kind of justice, valid for only this race of men. From Psalm 2 it is evident that they were not. David calls upon all the kings and judges "of the earth" to serve Jehovah with fear and kiss His Son (verses 10-12).

Gentile magistrates have no exemption from God's just demands as revealed in His holy law. Accordingly, speaking of the kings outside of Israel, David declared in the longest psalm extolling the law of God (Psalm 119) that he "would speak of [God's] testimonies before kings and not be

put to shame' (v. 460 -- which clearly assumes the validity of that law for such nontheocratic kings. The personified Wisdom of God declared: "By me kings reign and princes decree justice; by me rulers govern, and nobles, ALL the judges *of the earth*" (Proverbs 8:15-16). As Paul later taught in Romans 13:3, all rulers (Jewish and Gentile alike) are to be a "terror to the workers of iniquity" (cf. Proverbs 21:15). And how did Paul define the "evil" which magistrates are to punish? According to *the Law of God!* (vv. 88-10).

All political rulers, even those outside of the Jewish nation, are morally bound to the political requirements of God's law. We can see this by the fact that the most evil political ruler imaginable, "the beast" of Revelation 13, is negatively described as substituting his own law for that of the law of God, figuratively written upon the forehead and hand (vv. 16-17 in contrast to Deuteronomy 6:8). Those who oppose this wicked ruler are, by contradistinction, twice described as believers who "keep the commandments of God" (12:17; 14:12). Paul's condemning title for this wicked ruler was precisely "the man of lawlessness" (2 Thessalonians 2:3), indicating his guilt for repudiating the law of God in his rule.

Is Natural Revelation Morally Abbreviated?

The only defense left to Dr. Geisler at this point is to resort to the baseless idea that a wedge can be driven between the just requirements revealed in the Bible and those revealed in natural revelation -- that is, to hold that civil government should not be guided by the morality of the Bible, *but instead* by "God-given moral rules called Nature's laws." Distinguishing between the moral *content* of special revelation and the moral *content* of natural revelation (as though the latter is merely a parallel subsection of the former), Geisler maintains that "God ordained Divine Law for the church, but He gave Natural Law for civil government."

Nothing like this dichotomy (and truncating of natural revelation's moral content) can be found in the teaching of the Apostle Paul, however. The Apostle teaches that even pagans who do not have the advantage of the specially revealed law ("oracle") of God (Romans 3:10-12) nevertheless know the just requirements of that law since they are inescapably revealed through the created order and human conscience (1:18-23; 2:14-15). They know the holiness and justice of the living and true God well enough that they are guilty for not worshiping Him aright in any area of their lives; thus God's wrath is revealed from heaven "against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (1:18) -- against all transgressions of His righteous law (cf. 7:7, 12).

Paul says nothing to suggest that there is a difference in the *moral content* of these two revelations, written and natural. The written law is an advantage over natural revelation because the latter is suppressed and distorted in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18-25). But what pagans suppress is precisely the "work of *the Law*" (2:14-15). Natural revelation communicates to them, as Paul says, "the *ordinance* of God" about "*all unrighteousness*" (1:29,32). Because they "know" God's ordinance, they are "without excuse" for refusing to live in terms of it (1:20). What the law speaks, then, it speaks "in order that *all the world* may be brought under the judgment of God" (3:19). There is ONE law order to which all men are bound, whether they *learn* of it by means of natural revelation or by means of special revelation. God is no respecter of persons here (2:11). "*All have sinned*" (3:23) -- thus violated that *common* standard for the "knowledge of sin" in all men, the law of God. (3:20).

The Primary Error

With Geisler's theologically faulty view of natural revelation (or natural law) in mind, we can understand how his article commits its primary conceptual error: the attempt to enunciate a *moral* standard for civil government (contrary to secular humanism) but one which is *Not religious* (contrary to reconstructionism). He asks what kind of laws should be enacted by the State, "Christian laws or Humanistic laws?" He immediately answers: "Neither. Rather, they should simply be just laws. Laws should not be either Christian or anti-Christian; they should merely be fair ones."

What is naively presupposed by that statement, though, is that we can establish a common conception and standard of "justice" (or "fairness") apart from reference to a *religions* commitment -- without gaining that moral standard from the philosophical worldview within which we work, whether it be atheistic, deistic, pantheistic, cult, Christian, or whatever. But this is nothing but an illusion -- the illusion of religious neutrality in making moral decisions. Humanists and Christians do not agree as to what constitutes "justice"; neither do Hindus and naturalists, etc. These fundamental disagreements do not arise because advocates of one worldview or the other have made intellectual errors (of fact or logic) which are readily correctable. They disagree precisely because of the irreconcilable conflict in their fundamental religious (or philosophical) commitments.

Geisler is simply playing a game with words when he advocates a "just government" instead of a "religious government." There is no religiously neutral concept of justice that could make sense out of this distinction. When men claim to be relying on natural reason (or even "natural law" gained from the world), they endorse grievous moral conclusions -- such as Dr. Geisler's early condoning of abortion under some circumstances! (*Ethics: Alternatives and Issues*, Zondervan, 1971, pp. 220-223). But even more important and relevant to Geisler's hypothesis about political ethics, those who claim to be following natural reason or natural law still do not end up concurring with each other over the most elementary political issues -- as the history of both philosophical opinion and political theorizing illustrates.

Conclusion

In the political sphere Dr. Geisler has made an unwise (and hopefully unwitting) tradeoff. He has traded the Christian religion's conception of political morality for the religious conceptions of political morality advanced by the "natural man" who cannot receive the things of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14). Dr. Geisler has traded the special revelation of God's one moral will for a "natural revelation" which is suppressed and distorted in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18). And in so doing he has politically traded the divine King, the Lord Jesus Christ, speaking clearly in the Bible for "Caesar," a human lord who speaks according to his own view of natural revelation. Dr. Geisler has consigned those who accept these tradeoffs to tyranny and arbitrariness in civil government -- as history repeatedly shows us. The truly Christian alternative, even in politics, is to abide in the revealed word of Jesus Christ. Then shall we know the truth which makes us free indeed (John 8: 32-33).