

## "Cross-Examination: In Defense of Theonomy"

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

### An Odd Review

At the request of a few friends, this month's column will address a critique of the theonomic position in Christian ethics which was written, as well as personally published, by John W. Robbins in his own newsletter, *The Trinity Review* (no. 84: Feb, 1992; for a copy write to P. O. Box 700, Jefferson, MD 21755). I understand that other periodicals declined to publish it.

What has come to be called the "theonomic" approach to ethics has been expounded in this column previously (see Sept., Oct., Nov., 1991). It is also explained at length in my books *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (1977, 1984), *By This Standard* (1985), and most recently *No Other Standard: Theonomy and Its Critics* (1991).

Oddly enough, the 1992 piece by Mr. Robbins comes to us in the form of a book review of my *By This Standard*, which was published fully *seven years* earlier (1985)! It has taken him some time to accomplish the task.

Equally odd is that Mr. Robbins chose to *overlook* the very book, published only a year ago, which forthrightly answers would-be critics like himself. Why would he close his eyes to possible answers and skirt dealing with relevant material? (He rationalizes his minimalist approach to research and understanding by gratuitously assuming that Bahnsen might "differ from himself in another book" -- and by whispering the gossip, utterly imaginative and untrue, that "a new, revised edition of this book [is] already in the press"!)

Another oddity: although purporting to be a review specifically of the book *By This Standard*, the article by Mr. Robbins sets off by wandering far and wide to criticize the positions and vocabulary of men like Gary North, R. J. Rushdoony, and R. E. McMaster. We have to wade through nearly a quarter of the article -- all of it essentially *irrelevant* material -- before reaching the author's attempt to address and challenge the specific book under review. And then, it wasn't worth the wait.

## A Reluctant Reply

For fifteen years I have tried to listen carefully to those who disagree with the theonomic thesis, either to be corrected where it is necessary or to reply to mistakes and misrepresentations on the part of the critics. I have usually made an effort to respond to their charges, aiming to be courteous in every instance (even though in some cases the refutation might need to be stated strongly). I ask forgiveness where I have failed in this aim.

However, in some cases the critic is so irresponsible -- so academically outlandish and/or personally nasty -- that I have felt it the better part of Christian wisdom not to answer at all (cf. 2 Tim. 2:23; Prov. 26:4; 29:9). As a general rule, strife with unreasonable or contentious men does not produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jas. 1:20), and it is usually just not a good use of time (cf. Eph. 5:16). These principles once again came back to my mind when I finished reading the Robbins critique, copies of which a handful of people had sent me. His tone was openly arrogant and sarcastic.

The content of his article, in my humble but honest opinion, was so ridiculous as to warrant a failing grade if this were a college assignment. (Professors will sometimes write on student papers rebukes like: "Jack, I do not expect you to agree with Kant's view [or Plato's, etc.], but I *do expect* as a minimal requirement that you will portray that view *accurately* -- and not pretend to correct your author as to what his view actually is!")

Accordingly, I simply put aside what Mr. Robbins had written -- put it in the same file with pieces like the diatribe by a Baptist preacher who wrote an absurd newsletter against theonomy on the basis that it (allegedly) calls for a return to the practice of animal sacrifices! If men will not read what their opponents actually write -- or will not read any better than this -- then they deserve no serious response. Thus I am reluctant to take any time with the Robbins critique. However, some friends have encouraged me to pen a reply, and it might ultimately save me time (from repeating myself) to record some comments in this public column.

## Bahnsen, the Illogical Moron

What does Mr. Robbins find wrong with the theonomic thesis presented in *By This Standard*? At various points in his article Robbins is not shy to voice the utter severity of his condemnation: "Bahnsen abandons logic." Bahnsen fails to exercise "logical rigor." Bahnsen is committed to "Anti-Rational Theology"; like Van Til, he affirms and denies the use of logic in theology. "Bahnsen advocates two irreconcilable views." "Oblivious to the contradictions, Bahnsen slogs on." "The contradictions in Dr. Bahnsen's book are patent, numerous, and insuperable." His position is "utter nonsense." "Theonomy is simply not biblical." "It is, in fact, anti-Christian." Mr. Robbins tells his readers with bravado that "it is all too easy to lay waste" my arguments.

This is, to be sure, one possibility. I cannot hide behind a doctoral degree in philosophy (specifically epistemology), or behind high marks in graduate school logic, or behind my teaching many courses in advanced logic. That is not an absolutely sure defense, I realize. I still *might* have published utterly contradictory views on the law of God. Mr. Robbins may indeed be correct. Perhaps in my book I lapsed into a state of blithering stupidity and, like a moron, did not even notice my logical blunders. "Patent, numerous, and insuperable," as Robbins asserts.

But in all fairness of mind, there is *another* possibility as well which should at least be considered. Isn't it at least possible that maybe it is Mr. Robbins who is utterly confused? Just maybe? In his haste and bravado -- not to mention his notorious and perpetual disdain for anyone favorable to Van Til -- might not Mr. Robbins have misconstrued and distorted his opponent's view, to the point of creating for himself an artificial appearance of internal contradiction, when there is none there in reality? Which hypothesis has initial plausibility?

Is there any possibility -- even presumption -- that an author is more familiar with his own views and published position than a secondary reviewer? If so, then you might expect a reviewer to be somewhat cautious and *hesitant*, if not duly humble, about leaping to the immediate and emphatic judgment that an author has made the schoolboy mistake of explicitly contradicting himself -- indeed, that his logical gaffs are numerous, patent and insuperable. If it *seems* he has, shouldn't the reviewer stop and reconsider? Ask if he (the reviewer) is not the one who has not understood? But not so for Mr. Robbins.

Get this. According to the critique written by Mr. Robbins, he finds the author *already* guilty of outrageous contradiction by *page 3* of the (362-page) book under review! Reflect for a moment on that -- on this accusation being lodged at the *very outset* of the book. I submit that even the friends of Mr. Robbins must recognize that such haste strongly suggests prejudicial thinking and preconceptions on the part of the reviewer. Mr. Robbins claims to perceive an insuperable contradiction right at the threshold of my book. More likely, he arrived with jaundiced vision to begin with -- and an ax to grind.

## The Case Against Robbins' Accuracy

So then, on the one hand maybe Bahnsen's book contains patent contradictions. Or on the other hand maybe Robbins himself has prejudicially misconstrued the theonomic position. Let's look and see.

According to Robbins, my book sets forth *two* contradictory views regarding the validity of God's law: one is the view of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the other is something Robbins *calls* the reconstructionist or theonomic view. The former view allows for changes in the Mosaic law with the coming of the New Covenant, even though the principles of the ceremonial law are applied in Christ and the general equity (underlying point or purpose) of the judicial laws is still binding. According to Robbins, the "theonomic" view does not allow for any changes in the Mosaic law with the inauguration of the New Covenant.

Holding both of these views (change allowed, no change allowed) would indeed be self-contradictory. But I have *never held* the latter view -- my books being witness.

According to Bahnsen, the "theonomic" view is not at all what Robbins alleges (viz., no change allowed). It is rather the view that although there are many, even radical, changes regarding the Mosaic law in the New Covenant, the categorical presumption (working assumption) is that of continuity between the covenants; accordingly, New Covenant changes regarding the law are to be warranted on the basis of Biblical exegesis (not the dispensational principle of general abrogation).

Who is correct about the true nature of the "theonomic" thesis? The preposterous character of Robbins' critique becomes manifest with the very asking of that question.

Mr. Robbins defines "theonomy" one way. I wrote an entire book (more than one actually) which defines "theonomy" in a different way. *Indeed, the very book under review by Robbins was written to explain and set forth my conception of the "theonomic" viewpoint!* So then, when Mr. Robbins got to pages 3-4 of the book and found that *my* definition of the theonomic position was in conflict with *his own* conception of what my theonomic view was expected to be, rather than recognize his own error, instead he eagerly pounced on the fallacious inference that "Aha, Bahnsen must be contradicting himself!" This is buffoonery unworthy of Mr. Robbins' intellectual abilities.

For the record, I want the reader to see for himself what was written on pages 3-4 of my book *By This Standard*. You decide for yourself whether "theonomy" maintains, as Robbins alleges, that no changes in the Mosaic law are allowed in the New Covenant. "Given this instruction [in Matthew 5:17-19], our attitude must be that all Old Testament laws are presently our obligation *unless* further revelation from the Lawgiver shows that some change has been made.... What has been said above is simply that the *presumption* should be that an Old Testament law is binding in the New Testament. This does not in any way preclude or reject many radical differences between Old and New Testaments. Changes do indeed come through the course of redemptive history, so that there certainly are exceptions to the general continuity that characterizes the relation between Old and New Covenants.... *the New Testament should interpret the Old Testament for us*" (all italics original).

Robbins very well knows that I have said these things (and at the very outset of my book, no less), for he even quotes part of them in his review. But alas, he stubbornly takes them as evidence that I am thereby "repudiating" the theonomic view of law, rather than explaining it! (cf. Proverbs 18:2)

Also for the record, I would like the reader to realize that Mr. Robbins could no more justify his pseudo-conception of the theonomic view (no changes allowed in the law) from my preceding book on the subject, entitled *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (1977), than he can from the book he has lately reviewed. As a sampling, fifteen years ago I spoke of "legitimate and noteworthy discontinuities" with the Old Testament law -- indeed "radical differences." I wrote that the Mosaic system of shadows was "intended to be superseded." Nevertheless, "only God has the authority and prerogative to discontinue the binding force of anything He has revealed... [and] we are not warranted to affirm discontinuity with the Older Testament except where expressly indicated otherwise.... the New Testament must be used to understand, not undermine, the Older Testament; again the *presumption* would have to be continuity, not contradiction" (pp. 213, 313, 366, 431).

Has Bahnsen blatantly contradicted himself, or has Mr. Robbins simply displayed his inaccuracy as a reviewer, notably in his (pre)conception of theonomic ethics? The reader can decide for himself.

## The Case for Robbins' Artificiality

Rather than taking this correction to heart, I fear that Mr. Robbins instead might complain that his misconstruing of the theonomic position (*viz.*, overlooking that it indeed allows for Biblically-based changes in the Old Testament law) is really Dr. Bahnsen's fault. I can imagine Robbins grumbling that there are sentences in Bahnsen's book which affirm the continuing validity of the Old Testament law, but which do not (each and every time) explain that this is a categorical *presumption* and which do not (each and every time) acknowledge the *exceptions* which are possible. Thus, he might protest that these many unqualified statements give the natural impression that theologians do not allow for any changes whatsoever in the Old Testament law.

If this were the way in which Robbins would attempt to justify his belligerent charge of self-contradiction in my book, it would be appropriate to call down the artificiality of his scholarship and criticism.

1) Human communication by means of language would come to a grinding halt if it were illegitimate ever to express yourself by way of generalizations which do not explicitly acknowledge qualifications and exceptions. Lawyers may specialize in the fine print of complicated legal contracts, but even they do not speak that way in ordinary discourse. A father who asserts that his son is a fine basketball player is not guilty of falsehood or deception simply because he does not add that, of course, his son has some bad games.

Generalizations which state an accurate summary or the prevailing principle are not, as generalizations, faulty or inaccurate. Does Mr. Robbins chastise gospel writers Mark and Luke? They generalized our Lord's teaching by saying that anyone who divorces and remarries thereby commits adultery (Mark 10:11; Luke 16:18) -- and they completely omitted the qualifying exceptive clause, found only in Matthew (19:9), that this principle did not apply to cases of fornication. Mark and Luke are not faulted because they did indeed express the prevailing principle -- the main point Jesus intended to make.

2) In a book written to explain that Scripture teaches one prevailing principle over another -- covenantal presumption of continuity in the law over against dispensational discontinuity -- it would be expected that the specific prevailing principle which is supported from Scripture would be expressed often by way of generalization, rather than with all the qualifications and exceptions mentioned every time.

After all, the *entire* book was purportedly given to explain the position being taken, and thus all of the sentences in the book must be taken into account to get a fair and accurate view of that position -- not simply the categorical generalizations (which are repeated for the sake of simplicity in referring to the thesis), but *also* the qualifying explanations and stated exceptions which the author discusses elsewhere in the book. It is a scholarly expectation that students, reviewers, etc. will pay attention to the entirety of the book under consideration, not just selected parts. Context is crucial, after all.

3) The appropriateness of theologians summarizing or generalizing their thesis that the entire law continues to be binding in the New Covenant, yet not immediately adding the qualifications, is

nowhere more strikingly obvious and grandly sanctified than in the words of our Lord Jesus Himself. *He* is the one who *categorically* asserted the abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail, *without at that point* explaining the presumptive sense of His words or the exceptions to the generalization given. (To gain the fuller interpretation, we must go to other texts.)

All evangelical believers -- not simply theologians -- must hear these words of Christ and somehow take them into account in their theological convictions: "I came not to abrogate... not one jot or tittle shall pass away until heaven and earth pass away... Therefore, whoever teaches the breaking of the least of these commandments shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:17-19). Our Lord did not at this point add qualifications to His categorical declarations. Thus those critics of theonomic writers who would reproach categorical statements of the law's continuing validity are unwittingly guilty of heaping their reproach upon the Savior Himself.

4) In his review Mr. Robbins acknowledges that I teach that it is the underlying *principles* of the judicial and ceremonial laws which are valid today -- rather than the literal or cultural details by which those principles are expressed and illustrated. (We do not bring animal sacrifices today, but the principle is still valid that there is no atonement without shedding of blood -- indeed is at the heart of gospel proclamation. We do not build railings around our housetops, but the principle of providing for the safety of others is still valid, etc.) He then turns around and with shameless artificiality says that this approach contradicts my assertion that the law is binding in "exhaustive detail" (or that "every stroke" is confirmed).

But come now. Isn't this the naive mistake made by many dispensational fundamentalists? To assert the *authority* of every single word of God's law is not at all to assert that those words may only be *interpreted* in a literal manner. (The professor who requires his students to pay attention to "every line" in a Shakespeare play is not *thereby* claiming that Shakespeare never used figures of speech!) And remember: Jesus is the one who declared that every "jot and tittle" of the law remains valid until heaven and earth pass away. Does Mr. Robbins now accuse *Jesus* of self-contradiction because that to which He holds us accountable (evident from other texts of Scripture) are the *principles* of the law -- both ceremonial (Heb. 9:11-14, 22) and judicial (1 Cor. 9:9-10)? When Jesus ended the story of the Good Samaritan by saying "Go and do likewise," does Mr. Robbins really believe this means all believers are to walk the Jericho road with a donkey and flask of oil? Presumably Mr. Robbins believes that all of the New Testament has moral validity. Does he then literally practice the giving of a kiss in salutation (1 Peter 5:14)?

You see, therefore, what a game this reviewer would like to play. He interprets the statements in my book in the most wooden and contrived manner -- a manner completely *at odds* with ordinary language analysis and at odds with the way in which he himself understands language elsewhere, including his own -- as a *pretext* for turning around and accusing me of self-contradiction when I explain my own words as applying to underlying principles or allowing for generalization and illustration, etc.

A further example of his artificiality when it comes to understanding and using language is his suggestion that words may not be used in different ways. He bristles at the idea that some law might be "binding" in *one sense*, and yet not "binding" in *another sense* -- e.g., obligatory as to

essential principle, but not operative in outward conduct. However the English language is full of examples where the same word is used (even with the same object) in differing ways. I'll bet that Mr. Robbins "honors" the President of the United States (his office, or some of his actions), and yet does not "honor" the President (his person, or other actions taken). Does it not seem to many people that although Gordon Clark is "dead," yet for Mr. Robbins the philosopher nevertheless "lives"? Surely Robbins recognizes this feature of human language.

He should upon reflection, then, not have had such terrible difficulty in properly understanding theonomic claims like the statement that some Old Testament laws are "valid" (not abrogated as to their principle demand) and yet "not valid" (inoperative in outward usage). After all, it is God's own infallible word which makes *both* of these claims, not just theonomists! Christ insists that even the least commandment is "not abrogated" (Matthew 5:17-19), although Paul can say that certain commandments were "rendered idle" by the redemptive work of Christ (Ephesians 2:15). By resorting to interpreting his opponent's statements in an artificial manner, Mr. Robbins is playing with words and straining to find a criticism. Thinking he has finally found one, he unwittingly ends up being critical of God's own word. In fact, he calls the conjunction of the (Scriptural!) statements that the ceremonial law is confirmed and yet put out of gear "utter nonsense"! What a dreadful position for a theologian to put himself in.



## Summation and Appeal

We are led to conclude, then, that the self-assured charge leveled by Mr. Robbins that *By This Standard* is guilty of patent and insuperable self-contradictions -- advocating two irreconcilable views -- only exposes his own lamentable *inaccuracy* and desperate *artificiality* as a scholar. That is why I said earlier that his review would merit a failing grade in school. The perversity of his forced and incredible interpretation of his opponent, as a pretext for criticism, might even disqualify him as a candidate in many graduate departments, to be honest.

Worst of all, though, the way in which Mr. Robbins has distorted and abused the views of a Christian brother (I do not believe I am the only one) dishonors our common Lord whom he endeavors to serve by his writing. May God be merciful to me where I have done likewise. And may Mr. Robbins accept my sincere offer for peace; we are not really so far apart as he may imagine. Let's *together* turn our attention to deal with the real enemies of God's truth and Christ's kingdom, rather than biting and devouring each other.

### Further Investigation

For further studies about theonomic ethics on tape, write for a catalog from Covenant Tape Ministry, 24198 Ash Court, Auburn, CA 95603. CTM can also supply copies of Dr. Bahnsen's books: *Theonomy*, *By This Standard*, and *No Other Standard* (an answer to critics of theonomy).

To receive Dr. Bahnsen's free monthly newsletter, *Penpoint*, write to Southern California Center for Christian Studies, P. O. Box 18021, Irvine, CA 92713.