

A Fraternal Reply to Nelson Kloosterman

By Greg L. Bahnsen

Dr. Nelson Kloosterman, who has favored the readers of Christian Renewal with a fine introduction and personal observations about a school of thought which I represent, has kindly invited me to enter into a dialog with him regarding the distinctives of a "theonomic" approach to ethics. He and I both love the Reformed faith and are zealous for a covenantal approach to Scripture, which alone is our supreme standard for doctrine and living as believers in Jesus Christ. Accordingly, he writes that theonomists "are worth conversing with," and I warmly affirm the same about him in return.

I have great appreciation for Dr. Kloosterman, not only because of his stand for the faith in this crooked generation, but also for the considerate, fair and studied approach he has taken to the discussion of theonomic (or "Puritan") ethics – something which many others sadly have fallen short of in recent years. His whole article is worth just the pastoral admonition against the bitter fruit and discord generated in Reformed circles by both theonomists and their critics.

Dr. Kloosterman is a Christian gentleman, and I engage his commentary on theonomy as a friend. It is a measure of his integrity as a scholar that he does not wish to carry on a "dialog" regarding theonomy where theonomists are not allowed a voice in the discussion.

Dr. Kloosterman begins with a simple and clear, three-part summary of the fundamental pillars of theonomy, quoting from a paper I wrote a dozen years ago (1981): "Chantry on Law and Reconstruction." (Unfortunately he did not indicate where the paper may be found so that readers might consult it fully. It is distributed by Covenant Media Foundation, 4425 Jefferson Ave., Suite 108, Texarkana, AR 71854, 1-(800) 553-3938, tapes@cmfnow.com.) A more detailed listing of theonomic convictions, followed by easy-reading chapters expounding the viewpoint, can be found in my book, *By This Standard: The Authority of God's Law Today* (Tyler, TX: I.C.E., 1985), which can also be secured from Covenant Media Foundation.

Theonomy maintains the inspired and continuing authority of the Old Testament as "profitable for instruction in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16-17), a pattern of sanctification for those saved by the grace of God. Dr. Kloosterman rightly observes that this is not legalism. Moreover, he insists that it is beyond question for Calvinists that God's word is the moral standard for each and every area of life.

Further areas of agreement with theonomic ethics are found by Dr. Kloosterman in the affirmations that: (1) the symbolic ceremonies of the Old Testament foreshadowed Christ and have been laid aside by His redemptive work, and (2) it is specifically the “core principle embodied in (the Old Testament judicial) laws” which binds New Testament believers in their civil conduct and relations. (This latter point was just as true in the Old Testament as it is today, Dr. Kloosterman might have noted. For instance, even Israelites who did not have flat-roofed homes were bound by the *core principle* of safety precautions which was illustrated in the divine law requiring a railing around the rooftop.)

Following these major, admittedly overshadowing, points of agreement, Dr. Kloosterman indicates a possible parting of ways with theonomy, however, when it comes to the civil penalties of the Old Testament law. He suggests that the penal sanctions might not be core principles, but simply “the passing form” appropriate only to the Old Testament theocracy. But the author disagreed with that assessment – and he taught as clearly and extensively as any New Testament writer about the “passing form” of the Mosaic law! For him the tabernacle, levitical priesthood, and animal sacrifices were a passing “shadow of the things to come” (cf. Heb. 10:1). But not so regarding the civil penalties. Hebrews 2:2 explicitly says regarding the Mosaic law’s sanctions that in the case of “every violation” they prescribed the “just recompense of reward” (ASV; NIV has “its just penalty”) – even as the penalty of hell will be exactly what justice demands (v. 3). Jehovah’s retributive justice is not culturally relative, variable and changing, or else the author’s entire argument falls to the ground.

Does this mean that theonomists “place an equal-sign between OT Israel and the modern state,” as Dr. Kloosterman suggests? I reply: it did not mean that the author of Hebrews placed an “equal-sign” there, so why should that mistake be laid at the feet of theonomic ethics? In portraying theonomy as equating the modern state with OT Israel, Dr. Kloosterman draws a logically fallacious inference about theonomy and ends up misrepresenting what it teaches. Through my publications – whether you look at *Theonomy, By this Standard, or No Other Standard* – I repeatedly deny the *equivalence* between the Old Testament theocracy and modern states. There are stupendous differences.

In the reasoning of the Biblical authors, however, those differences are not relevant to dissolving the *moral standards* by which God judges all human societies, Jewish and Gentile alike – without respect of persons. Moses surely understood Israel’s theocratic uniqueness, and yet he declared that “all these statutes” which God revealed to Israel for life in the land were supremely and undeniably “just” even in the sight of the surrounding peoples (Deut. 4:5-8). King David delighted, not in keeping these laws to Israel alone, but in “speaking them before kings.” (Ps. 119:46). And when Artaxerxes decreed that magistrates enforce the law of God far outside of Israel’s borders, even into the judgment of death, Ezra did not choke on this as a violation of God’s uniqueness, but rather raised his voice in praise: “Blessed be Jehovah, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing in the king’s heart” (7:25-27). The Old Testament prophets did not hesitate to prosecute lawsuits against the pagan Gentile nations for violations of the theocratic law delivered to Israel by Moses. If it morally applied to *them*, why not nations today? Surely the coming of Christ did not alter the gross wickedness of rape, kidnapping, abortion, homosexuality, etc., or the “justice” which is “due” to such crimes from the civil magistrate.

Given what we have just observed about Moses, David, Ezra, and the prophets, we must politely disagree with the categorical statement of Dr. Kloosterman that “the Lord nowhere commanded OT Israel to publish, propagate or otherwise enforce their own laws among . . . foreign nations.” Such a premise does not withstand Biblical scrutiny.

Dr. Kloosterman’s comment that Israel’s kings nowhere “enforced” Mosaic legislation outside of Israel is a red herring. They had no command from God for that kind of “enforcement” in the first place. The Jews certainly *were* expected, however, to “publish and propagate” their blessed and just laws to all the nations. Indeed, as Isaiah wrote, justice and peace cannot come to the nations until they repair to Zion for an obedient hearing of God’s law

(2:2-4). David lauded the day when “all the nations” – “unto the ends of the earth” – would serve and submit to Jehovah’s chosen King, who “judges with justice” by means of your judgments, O God (Ps. 72).

Dr. Kloosterman’s notion that the Mosaic legislation was restricted to “redeemed” people of Israel in a “specific land” – something which sounds unwittingly like cultural relativism regarding civil ethics – was not entertained by the inspired writers of the Old Testament. Jehovah’s justice, grounded as it was in the creation order (cf. Romans 1:32; 2:14-15), was universal, both in intent and application.

Dr. Kloosterman also offers us the idea – which has often been analyzed and refuted in theonomic literature – that ecclesiastical excommunication is “the NT equivalent” to the Old Testament theocratic penalties. On the face of it this notion is skewed, for many rapists or abortionists (etc.) are not even members of churches, and yet surely Dr. Kloosterman believes that a *civil penalty* is morally requisite – one which is “just” in the eyes of Jehovah. (Where else would this be found but in the law of God?)

Excommunications by the church today simply does not “equate” to the OT death penalty, restitution, or any other *civil* sanction. If it did, why were not *all* sins subject to civil penalty in the OT, as all are in principle subject to church discipline today? And why was repentance, which terminates church discipline today, not relevant to canceling a criminal’s civil penalty in the OT? The two are not the same. In the New Testament order, Paul not only directed the church to practice excommunication for impenitent sinners, he *likewise* taught that civil magistrates should “bear the sword” and express God’s “wrath” against criminal offenders (Rom. 13:1-4). It is mistaken to collapse the latter into the former. Where are the proper and needed standards for civil penalties to be found, if not in God’s revealed law? Certainly not in fallible and arbitrary human opinion.

Enough has been said by this point to lay open a few of the serious and systematic problems in the reasoning which leads some Reformed people to depart from theonomic ethics when it comes to the law’s civil sanctions. In addition to these root difficulties, though, I would like to add three quick corrections on subordinate points.

First, the citation of Galatians 3 and application particularly to the judicial laws of the OT is somewhat imprecise and misleading. It was not the civil legislation which Paul designated a “custodian, baby-sitter” – much less the Decalogue (to which Dr. Kloosterman’s comment would have to apply, unless he is arbitrary), but rather those features of the Old Testament economy which were “a tutor *unto Christ*,” teaching us “justification by faith” (Gal. 3:24). It was not the moral law (including civil applications) which performed this function, but rather (what we call) the “ceremonial law” – laws pertaining to things such as circumcision (Gal. 6:13) and the ritual calendar (4:10), disputes over which formed the historical occasion for this epistle.

Second, Dr. Kloosterman does not do full justice to what I have written about Matthew 5:17-20. He considers merely one word in that passage (“fulfill” in vs. 17), offering only a homiletical analogy regarding his conception of it, without linguistic or contextual analysis or evidence. But my complaint is that he does not portray the richness of this word in my treatment of the text, reducing it simply to a “confirming” of the law’s validity. But in *Theonomy* I wrote: “Jesus says in Matthew 5:17 that He came to confirm and *restore the full measure*, intent, and purpose of the Older Testament law (cf. vv. 21-48). He sees the *whole process of revelation* deposited in the Older Testament as finding its validation in Him . . . (The Greek word) *Plaroo* is subject to the norm both of literal Older Testamental wording *and the meaning of salvation manifested in Jesus Christ*” (p. 64, emphasis added).

Third, I believe that Dr. Kloosterman's citation of John Calvin is historically erroneous and misleading. (Readers interested in my course on the *Institutes*, comprising 81 tapes, may contact Covenant Media Foundation.) *Erroneous* because at the point in the *Institutes* cited by Dr. Kloosterman (IV. 20.14), Calvin was arguing against the Anabaptist sedition which denied the legitimacy of any civil authority which departs from the Mosaic law – a heretical notion not entertained by theonomists at all. *Misleading* because it takes a single comment completely out of the context of the corpus of Calvin's writings, giving the impression that he opposed using the OT civil law in his day – and overlooking the abundant literary evidence to the contrary (such as his later sermons on Deuteronomy, his defense regarding Servetus, etc.).

In fairness to Calvin's actual views, we would have to factor in such remarks as this censure (among many others in his writings) against those who argued that a Mosaic penal sanction could be laid aside by modern magistrates: "What is the meaning of this madness, in imposing a law upon God, that He should not make use of the obedience of magistrates in this respect? And what avails it to question about the necessity of this, since it pleases His will, for we must needs abide by His inviolable decree" (Comm. on Deut. 13:15). By itself, that certainly sounds "theonomic," doesn't it?

Well, enough "critical interaction" for now. It is important that readers not misread the analytical and scrutinizing nature of a theological discussion such as this one as contention or personal opposition. Dr. Kloosterman and myself have fraternal regard for each other. His article is a fine introduction to the theonomic debate in our generation, and even though I disagree with some aspects of his reasoning, I esteem him highly in the Lord for his teaching ministry and commitment to the Savior. Again let me thank him for opening up this dialog among Reformed brothers. We will keep talking to each other until we reach unity, for we both realize how crucial the issues in Christian ethics are. The enemies of Christ's people – enemies of humanism, tyranny, and theological defection – are at the gate in our day. We need each other.