

What Is "Theonomy"?

By Dr. Greg Bahnsen

Dr. Van Til taught us that "There is no alternative but that of theonomy and autonomy" (*Christian-Theistic Ethics*, p. 134). Every ethical decision assumes some final authority or standard, and that will either be self-law ("autonomy") or God's law ("theonomy"). While unbelievers consider themselves the ultimate authority in determining moral right or wrong, believers acknowledge that God alone has that position and prerogative.

The position which has come to be labeled "theonomy" today thus holds that the word of the Lord is the sole, supreme, and unchallengeable standard for the actions and attitudes of all men in all areas of life. Our obligation to keep God's commands cannot be judged by any extra-scriptural standard, such as whether its specific requirements (when properly interpreted) are congenial to past traditions or modern feelings and practices.

Jesus My Savior

When any of us come to Christ for salvation, it is with a sense of our sin and misery before God. Our very need of the Savior arises from a conviction of sin, brought home to our hearts by the Holy Spirit showing our guilt for violating God's commandments. As Paul wrote, "I had not known sin except through the law" (Rom. 7:7). The law defines what sin is (1 John 3:4). As such the law cannot be our personal vehicle for gaining favor with God. It rather aims at Christ as our only righteousness, tutoring us that justification must be by faith in Him (Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:24).

So theonomy teaches that since the fall it has always been unlawful to use the law of God in hopes of establishing one's own personal merit and justification, in contrast or complement to salvation by way of promise and faith. As Paul said, it was "through the law" that he learned to "die to the law" as a way of self-salvation (Gal. 2:9). Commitment to obedience is but the lifestyle of faith, a token of gratitude for God's redeeming grace. "By grace you have been saved through faith... not of works.... We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God previously prepared that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:8-10).

In *What is Faith?* J. Gresham Machen urged that "a new and more powerful proclamation of that law is perhaps the most pressing need of the hour.... A low view of laws always brings legalism in religion; a high view of law makes a man a seeker after grace. Pray God that the high view may again prevail" (pp. 141-142).

Jesus My Lord

After coming to Christ in faith and repentance we all naturally ask how a Christian should live. A. A. Hodge answers: "While Christ fulfilled the law *for* us, the Holy Spirit fulfils the law *in* us, by sanctifying us into complete conformity to it" (*The Confession of Faith*, p. 251). Paul wrote in Romans 8:4-9 that unregenerate men are enemies of God who cannot submit to His law, but those who walk by the Holy Spirit subject themselves to that law. Paul himself endorses that we should "delight in the law after the inward man" (Rom. 7:22).

The Christian confesses that Jesus is the Lord, thus looking to the directives of Jesus to guide his life. Jesus said "if you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15). Moreover, we will strive to teach others to observe whatever He has commanded us (Matt. 28:18-20). Such healthy and necessary moral standards are surely not burdensome to the believer who bows to Christ as the Lord (1 John 5:3).

As our Lord, moreover, Jesus teaches us that man is to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). We have no right to edit God's commandments for ourselves, deciding to follow those which agree with our preconceived ideas and rejecting the others. James teaches that we are not to become "judges of the law," but rather doers of that law (4:11-12); to break even one point of it is to be guilty of breaking it all (2:10). The whole law is our duty, except where the Lawgiver and Lord reveals otherwise. God forbids us to diminish His commands on our own authority (Deut. 4:2). "Every scripture" (even the Old Testament) is profitable, said Paul, for "instruction in righteousness" so that we would be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Accordingly theonomy views God's laws directing moral behavior to be a reflection of His unchanging character; such laws are not arbitrary, but objectively, universally, and absolutely binding. It is God's law that "you are to be holy because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16, citing Leviticus). The law may not be criticized or challenged by us. It is "holy, righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12). This moral law was revealed to Israel in oracles and ordinances, but even the Gentiles show the work of the law upon their hearts and know its ordinances from the natural order and inward conscience (Rom. 1:32; 2:14-15). Who, then, is under the authority of God's law? Paul answers "all the world" (Rom. 3:19).

Covenant Theology

The law revealed by Moses and subsequent Old Testament authors was given within a covenantal administration of God's grace which included not only moral instruction, but gloriously and mercifully "promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come" (Westminster Confession of Faith VII.5). God's revelation itself teaches us that New Covenant believers, who have the law powerfully written on their hearts (Jer. 31:31ff.; Heb. 8:8-12), no longer follow the foreshadows and administrative details of the old covenant. They are obsolete (Heb. 8:13), having been imposed only until the time when the Messiah would come (Heb. 9:10; Col. 2:17). Thus, for example, on the basis of God's own instruction, we no longer resort to animal sacrifices at the temple and a Levitical priest (Heb. 7-10); the cultic dietary laws have been set aside, for God has cleansed the unclean meats (representing the Gentiles) from which Israel was to be separate or holy (Acts 10).

Theonomy teaches, then, that in regard to the Old Testament law, the New Covenant surpasses the Old Covenant in glory, power, and finality. The New Covenant also supersedes the Old Covenant shadows, thereby changing the application of sacrificial, purity, and "separation" principles, redefining the people of God (e.g., Matt. 21:43), and also altering the significance of the promised land (e.g., Rom. 4:13; 1 Peter 1:4).

What is crucial to notice here is that theonomic ethics comes to these conclusions on the basis of Biblical instruction. Men have no right to alter or spurn Old Testament laws on their own say-so, social traditions, or preconceived ideas about what is morally appropriate or inappropriate in the Mosaic law. They have no right to include more in the discontinuity between old and new covenants than can be warranted from divine revelation.

Theonomy thus teaches that we should presume that Old Testament laws continue to be morally binding in the New Testament unless they are rescinded or modified by further revelation. Theonomy's methodology stands squarely against that of dispensational theology which maintains that all of the Old Testament commandments should be deemed -- in advance of exegesis -- to be abrogated, unless they are repeated in the New Testament.

On this issue the words of our Lord are definitive and clear in Matthew 5:17-19. Jesus declared that he did not come to abrogate the Old Testament Law and Prophets, but to give them their full measure. John Murray wrote that Jesus' "fulfillment" of the law "refers to the function of validating and confirming the law and the prophets" (*Principles of Conduct*, p. 150). With respect to the Old Testament's moral standards, Jesus went on to insist that until the end of the physical cosmos, not the slightest stroke of the law will pass away. "Therefore whoever shall break one of these least commandments and teach men so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven." Jesus confirmed the validity of the law, *even down to its least commandment*, and censures anyone who dares to teach otherwise (without authorization from the Lawgiver Himself). New Testament Christians must operate on the presumption of continuity with the Old Testament moral code.

King of Kings

That general continuity which we presume with respect to the moral standards of the Old Testament applies to political ethics. John Murray called it a fatal error "if it is thought that the Christian revelation, the Bible, does not come to the civil authority with a demand for obedience to its direction and precept as stringent and inescapable as it does to the individual, to the family, and to the church"

In addition to being the Head of the church, Christ has been made King over all other earthly kings (1 Tim. 6:15), the "ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev. 1:5); to Him by right they owe allegiance and obedience. He has been invested with all authority in heaven as well as on earth (Matt. 28:18), and it is to be our prayer that God's will be done on earth just as perfectly as it is in heaven (Matt. 6:10). Jehovah has established His Son as King upon His holy hill, and thus the kings and judges of the earth are now required to submit reverently to Him and serve the Lord (Ps. 2:6-12).

So theonomy teaches that civil rulers are morally obligated to enforce those laws of Christ, found throughout the Scriptures, which are addressed to magistrates (as well as to *refrain* from coercion in areas where God has not prescribed their intervention). As Paul wrote in Romans 13:1-10, magistrates -- even the secular rulers of Rome -- are obligated to conduct their offices as "ministers of God," avenging *God's wrath* (compare 13:4 with 12:19) against criminal evil-doers. They will give an account on the Final Day of their service before the King of kings, their Creator and Judge. Christian involvement in politics calls for recognition of God's transcendent, absolute, revealed law as a standard by which to judge all social codes and political policies. The Scottish theologian, William Symington, well said: "It is the duty of nations, as subjects of Christ, to take his law as their rule. They are apt to think enough that they take, as their standard of legislation and administration, human reason, natural conscience, public opinion or political expediency. None of these, however, nor indeed all of them together, can supply a sufficient guide in affairs of state" (*Messiah the Prince*, p. 234).

The Apostle Paul affirmed that one of the uses of the Old Testament law which we know to be good is the restraint of criminal behavior (1 Tim. 1:8-10). Jesus endorsed the penal sanctions of the Old Testament law, condemning those who would make them void by their own human traditions (Matt. 15:3-4). Paul likewise upheld the penal standards of the Mosaic judicial law (Acts 25:11). The author of Hebrews leaves us no doubt about the inspired New Testament perspective on the Mosaic penalties, saying "every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward" (2:2). God requires that judges not punish too harshly or too leniently, but assign a penalty proportionate to the crime (cf. "an eye for an eye..."). To uphold genuine justice in their punishments, magistrates need the direction of God's law. In observing the law which God revealed to Israel, all nations should respond "what great nation is there that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law?" (Deut. 4:8).

Although Israel as a political body has expired -- and along with it its judicial law as a constitution -- the *general equity* of those judicial laws is *still required* (Westminster Confession XIX.4). Similarly, when a public library goes out of business (and your library card thus expires), the truth of what was written in its books is not abolished or changed. Political codes today ought to incorporate the moral requirements which were culturally illustrated in the God-given, judicial

laws of Old Testament Israel. George Gillespie, widely regarded as the most authoritative theologian at the Westminster Assembly, wrote: "the will of God concerning civil justice and punishments is no where so fully and clearly revealed as in the judicial law of Moses.... He who was punishable by death under the judicial law is punishable by death still" ("Wholesome Severity Reconciled....," 1645).

Those who do not favor taking God's law as the ultimate standard for civil morality and public justice will be forced to substitute some other criterion. The civil magistrate cannot function without some standard of good and evil. If that standard is not the revealed law of God, then in some form or expression it will have to be a law of men -- the standard of self-law or autonomy. Men must choose in their civil affairs to be governed by God's law (theonomy), to be ruled by tyrants, or acquiesce to increasing social degeneracy.