

An Overview of Theonomy

Trinity Baptist Church Discipleship Training

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Introduction:

How are we to understand the relevance of the Law of God as it applies to the gospel and the Church? Is the Law of God binding on believers today or has the gospel replaced the Law? There are numerous positions today, and while most hold to a non-salvific design for the Mosaic Law, there is disagreement as to the place of the Law for the Church. For example, Dispensationalists hold that God has dealt with mankind in a successive series of administrations or dispensations and that Israel was a unique nation ruled by God and governed by the temporary regulatory aspects of the Law which must be seen as distinct and separate from the church, thus there is a distinct discontinuity between the Law and the gospel. Also rejecting the continuity between the Law and the gospel is the newer position known as New Covenant Theology which seeks a middle ground between Dispensationalism and Reformed Theology.

On the other side of the spectrum is the view that all of the Old Testament laws continue into the New Testament known as Theonomy. To the credit of this position there is a great emphasis on the authority of Scripture which should be brought to bear on every aspect of life. To their fault they fail to consider the distinction between the types of Old Testament law, i.e. Moral, Ceremonial, and Judicial laws. The purpose of this study is to examine this belief. There will be little effort to examine the opposing views.

Since this study is simply a brief overview of Theonomy the bibliography is not extensive.

Bibliography:

Barker, William; Godfrey, Robert, *Theonomy, a Reformed Critique*, Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1990.

Gundry, Stanley: editor, *Five Views on the Law and Gospel*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press, 1999.

Reisinger, Ernest, *The Law and the Gospel*, Philipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1997.

Definitions:

1. Theonomists believe that all of the Old Testament laws are binding upon the church except those specifically abrogated in the New Testament. Old Testament law should be brought to bear upon the family, church, and state.
2. Theonomists have a keen sense of connectivity between the Old and New Covenants. Greg Bahnsen writes, "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."
3. Theonomists do not see the continuity of the covenants as absolute. Bahnsen writes, "Some discontinuities with the Mosaic law (or laws) are *redemptive-historical* in character and pertain to the coming of the new covenant and the finished work of Christ,

while other are *cultural* in character and pertain to simple changes of time, place, or lifestyle” (*Five Views on the Law and Gospel*, page 100)

- I. Theonomy is closely associated with Christian Reconstructionism
 - A. Proponents
 1. Rousas John Rushdoony – founder of the movement
 2. Greg Bahnsen
 3. Gary North – Rushdoony’s son-in-law
 4. Gary DeMar
 5. Andrew Sandlin
 6. David Chilton
 7. D. James Kennedy
 - B. Beliefs of Reconstructionism:
 1. Calvinism
 2. Theonomy
 3. Postmillennialism
 4. Presuppositional Apologetics
 5. Minimal centralized authority

- II. Theonomists hold a strict distinction among the spheres of authority (consistent with the tenets of the Reformed faith)
 1. The main spheres of authority are family, church, and civil (some would include employer) Each of these spheres of authority are strictly governed by the Bible.
 2. In the Old Testament under the Davidic administration there was a separation between the authority of the Priests (Levites) and that of the Kings. For example the priests could not pass legislation and the king could not offer sacrifices.
 3. The family has jurisdiction over its life and function with the father as head of the home.
 4. The Church has jurisdiction over morality with the power to excommunicate. The pastors are give authority over the congregation (elder rule)
 5. The civil government has limited power with jurisdiction over criminal matters, courts, and public defense with limited taxation. Civil rulers are morally obligated to enforce the laws of Christ the King.
Bahnsen writes, “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.”

- III. Theonomic Approach to the Law (*Five Views on the Law and Gospel*, pages 141-142)
 1. The Word of the Lord is the sole, supreme, and unchallengeable standard for the actions and attitudes of everyone in all areas of life.
 2. Our obligation to keep the law of God cannot be judged by any extrascriptural standard, such as whether its specific requirements are congenial to past traditions or modern feelings and practices.

3. We should presume that the Old Testament standing laws continue to be morally binding in the New Testament, unless they are rescinded or modified by further revelation.
4. God's revealed standing laws are a reflection of his immutable moral character and are absolute in the sense of being non-arbitrary, objective, universal, and established in advance of particular circumstances; thus they are applicable to general types of moral situations.
5. Christian involvement in politics calls for recognition of God's transcendent, absolute, revealed law as a standard by which to judge all social codes.
6. Civil magistrates in all ages and places are obligated to conduct their offices as servants of God, as agents of divine wrath against criminals, and as those who must give an account on the Final Day of their service before the King of kings, their Creator and Judge.
7. The general continuity that we presume with respect to the moral standards of the Old Testament applies equally to matters of socio-political ethics as it does to personal, family, or ecclesiastical ethics.

IV. Application of Theonomy

- A. The civil authority must function in accordance with Old Testament Law

“The Theonomy movement is composed of several groups of people whose ultimate goal is to reconstruct ‘Christian’ nations according to the model of the Old Testament Israel” (*Theonomy, a Reformed Critique*, page 74).

 1. The judicial laws of the Old Covenant are still binding

They support the reprimand of adultery, homosexuality, and Sabbath breaking each subject to the death penalty.
 2. Theonomists believe in limited taxation and limited involvement of the Civil government in the affairs of its citizens. They are largely libertarian with citizens taking responsibility for themselves.
 - a. Theonomists don't believe in welfare
 - b. They don't believe restrictive laws. For example there should be no need for speed limits. If you drive recklessly you will be personally responsible for damages to life or property.
 3. Theonomists believe in the Old Testament principle of restitution.
 4. Although Theonomists reject any combination of Church and State they do not believe other religions have equal stature beside Christianity. Holding to the tenets Reconstructionism, eventually non-Christians will be relatively few in number and other religions will simply fade away.
- B. The Old Covenant laws are binding upon the individual.
 1. The dietary laws are still in force
 2. They don't believe in the mixing of kinds

Leviticus 19:19 – “Ye shall keep my statutes. Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind: thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed: neither shall a garment mingled of linen and woollen come upon thee.”

 1. They would not wear a cotton/polyester shirt
 2. They don't believe in organ transplants since the body naturally rejects it as a foreign substance

- C. Theonomists practice a strict Old Covenant standard for economics
1. They believe we must return to the gold standard because the Biblical command for just weights and measures
Deuteronomy 25:13-15 – “Thou shalt not have in thy bag divers weights, a great and a small. ¹⁴ Thou shalt not have in thine house divers measures, a great and a small. ¹⁵ *But* thou shalt have a perfect and just weight, a perfect and just measure shalt thou have: that thy days may be lengthened in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.”

V. Strengths in the Theonomic position

1. Theonomists have many points in common with the classic Reformed view of the Law of God. They are committed to:
 - (1) the authority of the whole Bible (*tota Scriptura*) as the sole basis (*sola Scriptura*) for the development of faith;
 - (2) the excellence of the new covenant and the relevance of the law as the revelation of God’s perfections;
 - (3) the necessity of regeneration as a prerequisite of transformation and the need for a transformation based on the law of God;
 - (4) the correlation of faith and obedience (*sola fide*) (*Five Views on the Law and Gospel*, page 144).
2. Theonomists place an emphasis on a worldview in which all of life is to be under submission to the law of God.
3. Theonomists do an excellent job in defining and explaining the various realms or spheres of government.
4. We can appreciate the Theonomist’s emphasis on restitution in the criminal justice system. This, however, should fall into the area of taking the Old Testament judicial law and applying the principles to our criminal justice system today, especially as they represent God’s unchanging justice. This isn’t the same thing as taking every element of the OT judicial law as binding upon nations today including Cities of Refuge and kinsman retribution.

VI. Weaknesses in the Theonomic position

1. Theonomists ask the question, “God’s law (Theonomy) or man’s law (autonomy),” to which the Christians immediately answer, “God’s law.” Perhaps a better answer should be, “Which law?”
 - a. Theonomy fails to see the distinction between the types of law in the Old Testament and their purposes. “All of the time-tested, respected historic creeds, confessions, and catechisms, as well as Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, divide the laws given to Israel at Sinai into ceremonial, civil, and moral (*The Law and the Gospel*, page 50).
 - b. The Moral Law is summarized in the Ten Commandments and is perpetual and enduring.
 - c. The Civil laws pertained to God’s relationship with the nation Israel as a theocracy and were intended for the governing of that nation alone. While laws against homosexuality, adultery, etc. should be enforced as a part of

the Moral Law, there is no perpetual demand to make these laws capital crimes.

- d. The Ceremonial laws were designed as a figure to point to Christ and were fulfilled with His coming.
 - e. The Moral Law is the only Old Covenant law still binding upon those under the New Covenant although many of the principles taught in former laws still have value. For example, the Old Covenant law of placing a railing around the flat roof to prevent someone from falling off still has relevance in safety precautions like placing a fence around a swimming pool.
 - f. 1689 London Baptist Confession, Chapter 19,
Article 3:
“Besides this law, commonly called moral, God was pleased to give to the people of Israel ceremonial laws, containing several typical ordinances, partly of worship, prefiguring Christ, his graces, actions, sufferings, and benefits; and partly holding forth divers instructions of moral duties, all which ceremonial laws being appointed only to the time of reformation, are, by Jesus Christ the true Messiah and only law-giver, who was furnished with power from the Father for that end, abrogated and taken away.”
Article 4:
“To them also he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people, not obliging any now by virtue of that institution; their general equity only being of moral use.”
2. While Theonomy gives much attention to civil government it tends to be weak on the church.
While Theonomists recognize the church as the antitype of Israel today they do not give a consistent application to this truth. The church, not the civil government, is the closest representation of national Israel today. God has not chosen America. He chose the church. The church is to discipline blasphemy, apostates, idolaters, heretics, etc., not the civil authorities. The church, however, does not have the power of the sword and carries out its discipline through excommunication.
 3. Theonomists fail to take into account clear examples in the New Testament that demonstrate a move away from the strict application of the Mosaic judicial law. For example, the New Testament does not recognize the death penalty for adultery. Jesus spoke of divorce rather than the death penalty in cases of adultery. His point would be moot if the offending party was executed. Joseph did not turn Mary over to be executed for adultery and he was called a righteous man (Matt. 1:19).
 4. In spite of their persona of seeking to strictly obey God’s law instead of incorporating a subjective human autonomy, even the Theonomist finds himself subjectively applying certain laws: Year of Jubilee, sabbatical years, distinctive clothing (Deu. 22:12), the levirate (Deu. 25:5), etc.

Conclusion: Theonomy has many good points of which to ponder. We often struggle with how to apply the Old Covenant laws in the framework of the New Covenant. The answers are not nearly as clear cut as Theonomy sometimes suggests.