

Critique of Theonomy; a Taxonomy

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Introduction

Distinguishing Theonomy from Theonomists

One of the most difficult aspects of polemical theology is being sure that what is being evaluated is a distinctive viewpoint; not the individuals holding the viewpoint. Of necessity, when evaluating a given view, one evaluates those dimensions which distinguish it from other views. It would inevitably be lop-sided, then, to confuse an evaluation of the view with an evaluation of those who hold it. Presumably, those who hold a distinctive view also embrace many other views which are identical with those shared by the church catholic. Individual theonomists are not intended to be the point of an evaluation such as this; rather, what is evaluated is that viewpoint which distinguishes Theonomy from other approaches to biblical ethics.

Distinguishing Theonomy from Christian Reconstruction

As socio-religious phenomena, Theonomy and Christian Reconstruction are ordinarily identical. The individuals involved in the one are ordinarily involved in the other. However, theologically and religiously they can be distinguished. Christian reconstructionists exist in a variety of forms, and are ordinarily united in their belief that the Western world, and especially the U.S., has departed from the Judaeo-Christian ethical basis which once characterized its public discourse, with devastating results. Positively, reconstructionists wish to see the U.S. return to a more biblical approach, or even a more Judeo-Christian approach, to the issues of civil life. Theonomy is more specific than this, though it does not disagree with it. Theonomy wishes to see every

nation conform its civil practices to those revealed in the Mosaic legislation. Thus, Theonomy is more comprehensive than reconstruction (theoretically concerned that all nations observe the Mosaic legislation); and Theonomy is much more specific about the legislation which it believes is to be observed. Theonomy does not wish merely a return to a biblical ethic, or a Judeo-Christian ethic, but to the ethic of the Sinai covenant.

It is not my purpose to discuss or evaluate Christian reconstructionism here. It is a broad, many-faced movement, and is beyond the scope of my concern. My purpose is to discuss that much narrower program, adopted indeed by many reconstructionists, which we ordinarily call Theonomy, as I have described it. I am not arguing that it is wrong not to distinguish them, nor am I arguing that my label or description is the only useful one; I am merely trying to clarify the scope of my intentions.

Distinguishing Details from the Basic Program

A further introductory clarification is in order. It is also not my purpose to examine in detail the particular recommendations for legislation, nor the particular exegetical conclusions of the various Theonomists. Those varying particulars are worthy of separate analysis and discussion, but my purpose is much more limited; to examine the hermeneutic which governs the entire process. I am evaluating the engine, not the entire train. Further, I am aware that many who consider themselves Theonomists disagree about aspects of that hermeneutical program, and so it is not my purpose to “tar” every self-proclaimed “Theonomist” with the same brush. Individuals should be evaluated individually, and those who do not embrace the hermeneutic which I here critique are free of the critique.

Despite the variety on particulars, however, there can be little doubt that the clearest, most deliberate attempt to describe and defend Theonomy is contained in Gregory L. Bahnsen’s *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*.¹ It is my purpose to employ this volume as the most reliable indicator of what Theonomy is. Those who embrace a

particular variation which differs from Bahnsen's are thus free of the critique here developed, at least potentially.

Dividing the Question

It will also be my purpose to critique Theonomy in several ways, in terms of the varying arguments by which it is promoted. Theonomy does not stand on a single leg, but on several. Those individuals who already reject one or two of those legs may find it convenient to skip my discussion of those matters, and go on to the places where I discuss other aspects.

I will not attempt here a refutation of that particular leg of Theonomy known as Postmillennialism. Many others have very ably discussed that matter, and the reader is encouraged to read Geerhardus Vos, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., Herman Ridderbos, O. Palmer Robertson, Meredith G. Kline,² and others who have written in this area. An additional reason for my not evaluating postmillennialism here is that there are non-Theonomic postmillennialists. While Theonomy is more attractive to a postmillennialist than to anyone else, one can be a postmillennialist without agreeing with Theonomy.

The following "legs" of the Theonomic stool will be discussed in what follows: The argument from necessity; the Theonomic dependence upon and understanding of Matthew 5:17-21; the Theonomic understanding of covenant theology.

Giving credit where credit is due

As a final introductory comment, I would like to make clear that there may be nothing distinctive or original in what follows. It is not my intention to advance any new arguments against Theonomy, but rather, to gather in one place a brief taxonomy of the major arguments. I have been profoundly helped by others, and am not especially aware of having anything unique to contribute which was not already expressed or at least germinal in the writings of others. Especially to be acknowledged, in no particular order,

are: Meredith G. Kline, Vern S. Poythress, Paul D. Fowler, and Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.³ At the same time, none of these individuals should be held responsible for whatever is untrue, unclear, or unhelpful in what follows.

The argument from necessity

To my knowledge, Bahnsen's Theonomy in Christian Ethics does not depend in any particular measure on this argument. Yet, it is my observation from conversations with Theonomists that many others rely heavily on this argument. Indeed, many individuals seem to embrace Theonomy because of their conviction that Theonomy, or something like it, is necessary. The argument from necessity is essentially this: We need to know how to function in the civil arena, and therefore the Word of God must provide us with such instruction. This leads quickly to embracing the Mosaic legislation for such guidance, since all parties agree that the only place where statecraft of any sort is comprehensively recorded in the scriptures is in the Sinai legislation.

The invalidity of the argument (from necessity) in general.

Ordinarily, in any debated arena, the argument from necessity is fallacious, and evidently so from a theistic framework. The nature of the curse on the human race subsequent to the Fall has left us in a circumstance of having many pains and unfulfilled desires. Often these "desires" are confused with "needs," and we believe our needs must be met, at least potentially, somewhere. However, a Christian theist recognizes both that there is a distinction between "desires" and "needs", and that there will always be more desires than solutions to them, at least prior to the glorified state.

The similarity of statecraft to other human affairs: science, medicine, agriculture.

Where does the Bible address these other matters? Does the Bible contain a cure for cancer? Does it contain a solution to the long-standing debate between engineers and mathematicians regarding the stability of suspension bridges? And if it does not, why is

statecraft different from these areas? Is a well-run state more necessary than efficient agriculture? Is a well-run state more necessary than good medicine? If not, why do we expect biblical directives here and not elsewhere? Are we not obliged, as God's creatures, to serve Him in all aspects of life? Are we not obliged, for instance, as Christian practitioners of medicine, to bring glory to God in all that we do? And yet, we evidently do not have a comprehensive or particular directive in scripture for how to serve God in the field of medicine. If the Theonomic plea from necessity is valid in the field of statecraft, then someone should indicate either that it is also valid in other fields, or that statecraft is a different field of human endeavor, subject to special considerations.

Natural revelation is sufficient for all of these areas.

In fact, it is my judgment that natural revelation is a sufficient guide in each of these areas. In the field of natural revelation, the tools for understanding our duty are different than in the field of special revelation. In studying special revelation, we learn Hebrew and Greek, ancient history and culture, etc. In studying natural revelation, we learn to weigh, measure, test, etc. Put most plainly, natural revelation is studied by observation, and by trial-and-error.

In the field of medicine, for instance, we develop instruments which assist us in our ability to observe; more powerful microscopes, CAT-scan machines, etc. When we are able to observe accurately the physical realities, we then propose theories for dealing with them, and we test those theories by trial-and-error. It is not different in the field of statecraft. We observe human nature, and especially human nature in society (sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology and social psychology, history). From our observations, we propose theories, and test them by trial-and-error (or, by evaluating how such theories worked, when and if they have been tested in other societies).

If we could not develop and refine statecraft by this method, then how can we account for the fact that many governments have proceeded, with varying degrees of success, by this method? Further, by what method did the Roman government proceed in

Paul's day, and could it have been responsible for Paul to urge obedience to such authorities if he were convinced that such authorities were fundamentally wrong? Indeed, for all the admitted errors of the Roman government, Paul's argument for submitting to them is not merely that the Roman government existed by God's providential appointment, but by the additional argument that the Roman civil authority, at least in a general way, was indeed fulfilling the divine mandate to punish the wicked (Rom. 13).

The sufficiency of scripture

Many Theonomists appear to have developed a novel, and erroneous, understanding of the sufficiency of scripture. They imply that scripture is a sufficient guide for the various departments of life, in all their specificity. In fact, the Reformational doctrine of the sufficiency of scripture is a highly-nuanced and sophisticated doctrine.

The Reformational doctrine of the sufficiency of scripture does not mean that the scriptures are sufficient to answer all of our questions. Rather, the doctrine means that the scriptures are a sufficient guide to our communion with God, a guide to "faith and life" in the religious sense. WCF 1:6: "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture."

Theonomists often argue that it is "necessary for ...man's...life" that humans have revealed directives for statecraft. If this argument were valid, however, why would it not be equally (or more) valid to argue that it is "necessary for ...man's...life" that humans have revealed directives for medicine? Is it not the case when our loved ones die that the scriptures have not been, in their medicinal instructions, sufficient in providing what is "necessary for ...man's...life"? Is it not the case, when a suspension bridge collapses due to no construction failure, that the scriptures have evidently not provided adequate instruction in the field of design?

I have never received an answer to this line of questioning from any of the Theonomists with whom I have conversed. I don't think it likely that I will. Yet I think the line of questioning not only deserves an answer, I also think it reveals something about Theonomy's agenda. For Theonomists, statecraft is simply more important than medicine, science, engineering, etc. Possibly due to their postmillennialism, possibly due to their (understandable) heartbreak over the decline of the West, and possibly for other reasons, they have simply placed statecraft higher on their agenda than it is on other people's agenda. Yet they have not demonstrated why the solution to statecraft is more pressing than the solution to these other matters.

The Theonomic dependence upon and misunderstanding of Matthew 5:17-21

The role of Matthew 5:17-21 in the Theonomic hermeneutic

The pivotal, indeed crucial role of this passage

Paul Fowler correctly observed that Bahnsen's entire case for his approach to the "abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail" was based upon his understanding of Matthew 5:17-21.⁴ Fowler pointed out how frequently this passage is cited in Theonomy in Christian Ethics as proof of the observation. Even the casual reader of Bahnsen's treatise recognizes again and again that Matthew 5:17-21 is cited. Thus, if Bahnsen cannot make his case from this text, his case is not made.

The impossibility of establishing Theonomy otherwise

We might go farther and suggest that Bahnsen not only found in this passage a convenient defense of his hermeneutic, but that he could only have found such a defense here. The rest of the New Testament is so entirely silent on the issue, that it was necessary to Theonomy's case to establish itself on the basis of this text. Other New Testament passages provide counter-evidence. The sweeping statement (covenantally

conditioned) in Hebrews 7:12 that where the priesthood changes, necessarily the law must change; Paul's general statement that believers are "not under the law;" Paul's discussing the matter of civil obedience without any reference to the Sinai legislation (Romans 13); and the evident suspending of the ceremonial legislation by the Jerusalem council, Paul, and the author of Hebrews are matters which point compellingly away from Bahnsen's suggestion that the Sinai legislation is abidingly valid in exhaustive detail.

The Theonomic understanding of Matthew 5:17-21

In four specific ways, Bahnsen's treatment of Matthew 5:17ff. is deficient.⁵ First, he "washes out" the prophetic half of the "law and the prophets," effectively leaving only the "law" under consideration. Second, he misunderstands the use of *πληρῶ* in the passage to mean "ratify", rather than "fulfill." Third, if he proves his thesis regarding "exhaustive detail" he proves too much, and would be required to conclude that the Jerusalem council and the apostle Paul should be called least in the kingdom of heaven. Fourth, he fails to appreciate the genuinely temporal character of the parallel temporal clauses, "until heaven and earth pass away," and "until all things come to pass."

The 'legislative' interpretation of "law and prophets"

"Law and prophets" is a somewhat difficult expression in the scriptures, and we do not intend to suggest that its precise meaning is self-evident. There are places where it could be a reference to the OT scriptures in their comprehensive scope (Lk. 24:44: "Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you-- that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.'" Acts 24:14: "But this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our ancestors, believing everything laid down according to the law or written in the prophets." Acts 28:23: "After they had set a day to meet with him, they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince

them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets”). The expression could refer to an entire revelatory era in the history of redemption (Mt. 11:13: “For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came”). The expression might even be a reference to the written constitutional document of the Sinai covenant (Mt. 7:12: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” Mt. 22:40: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”). But it is very unlikely that “law and prophets” can be taken as a reference exclusively, or even primarily, to the “ethical stipulations contained in the canon of the entire Older Testament.”⁶ Even in the two texts where the expression appears to focus on the ethical requirements of that administration, it is both the law *and* the prophetic administration of that law which are referred to.

The significance of this observation is profound in its consequences for exegesis. Biblically, “law and prophets” are conjoined. They are together in their function, and the prophets are in fact executors of the Sinai covenant. Their anticipation of Messiah’s arrival is part of their declaration of judgment on Israel for her unfaithfulness to the covenant, because only the Messiah will be able to deliver from the curses of the Sinai administration. From a biblical perspective, if the Sinai legislation remains, then the prophetic office of preparing for the Messiah’s arrival remains also.

“Fulfil” in its Theonomic sense

The most daring dimension of Bahnsen’s interpretation of Matthew 5:17 ff. is his argument that *πληρωσαι* should be interpreted to mean “ratify,” rather than “fulfil.” This interpretation is consistent with his interpreting the prophets out of the “law and the prophets,” yet it is erroneous nonetheless.

His argument follows sound lexicographical considerations, but reaches erroneous conclusions, because some of the alternatives are not considered. Bahnsen is correct in attempting to interpret *πληρωσαι* as functioning antithetically in this passage to *καταλυσαι*. This is not only required by the general context, but by the fact that “law

and prophets” is the direct object of each of the two verbs in question. He then argues that it would not make sense to speak of “fulfilling” the law, but that it would make sense to speak of “ratifying” the law. He is certainly right that this is plausible. However, this would not make much sense of the prophetic dimension of the equation; how would Jesus be “ratifying” the prophets? It would be better to find an understanding of both verbs, *πληρῶσαι* and *καταλῦσαι*, which makes sense of *both* of the direct objects.

If we take the “law and prophets” together, as a reference to the Sinai covenant, or the era in which God’s people are governed thereby, then it makes sense to understand Jesus to be saying that he has not come (at least in his humiliated state) to abolish that covenantal administration, but to bring it to its conclusion. Since the other *ἤλqon*-statements of Jesus are routinely understood as being a reference to his humiliated state (his earthly ministry prior to his resurrection and ascension), there is also no conflict between such a statement and the reality that later he does terminate the one covenant administration and inaugurate a new one.

As Vern Poythress has demonstrated,⁷ such a rendering is also much more consistent with the ordinary understanding of *πληρῶσαι* in contexts where the direct object is prophetic. Indeed, there is no evidence that the prophets were ever thought of as legislating, but there *is* evidence, within Matthew’s gospel, that the law was conceived of as prophesying: “For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John” (11:13).

Thus, there is a way of interpreting *πληρῶσαι* in this text which is consistent with both “law” and “prophets,” which does not require a de facto “washing out” of the one or the other. This way of understanding the verb is consistent with how the verb is regularly related to “prophets,” it is consistent with Matthew 11:13, and consistent with the portrait of Christ elsewhere in the New Testament, as functioning within the Sinai covenant until he established the new by his death and resurrection, and therefore requiring his disciples to obey the Mosaic law until the New Covenant was inaugurated (Mat. 23:2-3 “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it”).

“In exhaustive detail” as self-refuting

Bahnsen attempts to establish a thesis that Jesus, in Matthew 5, reiterates for all time the validity of the entire Mosaic law, not merely the “moral” law, and that he does so “in exhaustive detail.” Such an interpretation, if correct, would necessarily either condemn Paul and the other apostles or destroy Theonomy.

If it is timelessly true, even into the New Covenant economy, that “whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven,” then the Jerusalem council, the author of Hebrews, and the apostle Paul, are together in a heap of trouble. Paul not only relaxes one, but several of the mosaic laws, and not merely the “least,” but several of the major laws, to wit, circumcision, the Jewish calendar, and the dietary laws.

Bahnsen’s only escape from such a conundrum is to argue that Paul does not actually break these laws, but apply them differently to another covenantal context. This consideration, while removing the hermeneutic from the hotseat, destroys the very thing which the hermeneutic wishes to accomplish. If the law requiring a bloody rite (circumcision) can be fulfilled by a non-bloody rite (baptism), then where would Bahnsen’s arguments for capital punishment necessarily go? Would we wash criminals today who commit capital crimes? If we would not, then why not? If we fulfil the requirement of not eating with Gentiles by eating with Gentiles, then do we fulfil the requirement of not murdering by murdering? If we fulfil the requirement of eating a feast on the day of atonement by not eating a feast on the day of atonement, then do we fulfil other mosaic laws by not doing them? If this were so, what would be left of Theonomy? How could the mosaic law possibly function as a guide for civil governments today, if the mosaic laws could be properly applied by not following them?

It would actually be the better of the two options for Bahnsen simply to conclude that Paul, the Jerusalem council, and the author of Hebrews (and, as the inspirer of their

words, the Holy Spirit) will share the honors as “least in the kingdom of heaven.” This would still preserve the hermeneutic to provide direction for civil governments today, and would only have the difficulty of requiring a blanket condemnation of those whom Jesus appointed to be the foundation of the church.

Of course, we believe the paint on the bottom of Bahnsen’s shoes was self-applied, as soon as he left the corner into which he had painted himself. Had the “law and prophets” been correctly understood as a reference to the entire revelation within the Sinai administration, with all that it required and all that it promised, then it would have been no problem to have understood Jesus to have been indicating that he would not abrogate any of the requirements or promises of that administration until he had brought it to its fulfillment and had established a new covenant.

The two temporal clauses not metaphorical

The strongest apparent exegetical case for Bahnsen’s viewpoint resides in his taking the two temporal clauses as metaphors which, when negated, mean “never.”⁸ Thus, the passage would be interpreted as teaching that all of the requirements of the Sinai administration continue forever. However, if these two temporal clauses can be demonstrated to be non-metaphors, and actual temporal clauses, then all that can be proven by Matthew 5 is that the Mosaic covenant, both in its prophetic and legal aspects, abides temporarily, until God changes it by causing heaven and earth to pass away, and by bringing “all things” to pass.

Matthew 24:34-35 demonstrates that the temporal clauses of Matthew 5:17 ff. are genuine temporal clauses: “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place (ἕως ἂν πάντα ταῦτα γένεταί). Heaven and earth will pass away (ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆς παρελεύσεται), but my words will not pass away.” Note that the two expressions in Matthew 5 that appear to teach that not a jot or tittle will ever pass away need not be understood in such a way. “All things” will come to pass, or take place, and heaven and earth will pass away.

True, within a modern cosmology, it is difficult to believe that “heaven and earth” can pass away. It is thus not far-fetched for Bahnsen to say regarding this verse that “the law will remain valid at least as long as the physical universe lasts.”⁹ But within a biblical cosmology, it not only can happen, but already did happen once before, and will happen again: “They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished (ἀπώλετο). But by the same word the present heavens and earth (ὁ δὲ νῦν οὐρανοὶ καὶ ἡ γῆς) have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction (κρίσεως καὶ ἀπωλείας) of the godless” (2Pet. 3:5-7). “Heaven and earth,” biblically, refer to the created order in terms of its created purpose, to serve God. The “destruction” or “passing away” of heaven and earth is also then spoken of when God judges its inhabitants. Cosmologically, the heaven and earth were not annihilated in the flood. Covenantally, however, the inhabitants thereof were judged by God, and the judgment was spoken of as perishing or “destruction.”

The only remaining issue, then, is when such judgment/destruction of the heavens and the earth will take place. Within a NT eschatology, I believe that there is a sense in which this took place with the death of Jesus, and another sense in which it will take place at his return. At Christ’s death, God’s judgment came upon the Representative of those under God’s wrath; at his return it will come upon those who are not under the Mediator’s representation. Thus, Matthew records that, at the crucifixion, darkness came upon “the whole earth” (σκότος ἐγένετο ἐπὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν, 27:45); even though earlier the darkening of the sun was prophesied to be that which would attend the return of Christ to judge (ὁ ἥλιος σκοτισθήσεται, 24:29). In each case, the portents in the heavens and earth were symbols of divine judgment. Similarly, signs elsewhere associated with the return of Christ to raise the dead were also provisionally fulfilled at his death: “Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints

who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many” (Mt. 27:50-53).

For our purposes, then, the expressions in Matthew 5:17ff. which suggest that the “law and prophets” will never pass away, nor any part thereof, must be understood as in fact genuine temporal expressions, indicating that they will not pass away until all the matters prophetically anticipated come to pass, as D. A. Carson (et. al.) has argued.¹⁰ From both an OT and a gospel perspective, OT prophecies are seen as coming to fulfillment at a single moment, which “moment” the remainder of the NT writings divide into two. Only the apostolic, post-resurrection instruction enables us, with any confidence, to determine which aspects are fulfilled in the first coming of the Messiah, and which in his second coming. And, such instruction plainly indicates that many of the “jots and tittles,” not the least of which are circumcision, the calendar, and the dietary code, have indeed passed away.

The Theonomic understanding of covenant theology

Historical-theological considerations

Not surprisingly, there has not been complete unanimity in understanding the relations among the various covenantal administrations in the Bible, even among those who consider themselves “covenant theologians.” It is not surprising, because developing a theology of the covenants, or a biblical theology (in the Vosian sense) is one of the most synthetic and comprehensive of the theological disciplines. For centuries, there has been discussion about how best to describe the similarities and dissimilarities between the various biblical covenants and the various redemptive epochs. Although I embrace one of those viewpoints, what follows is designed more to set the discussion of Theonomy within a history-of-doctrine framework, than to promote the viewpoint I hold.

Covenant theology in the seventeenth century

Prior to the Westminster Assembly's meeting, a fairly substantial amount of work had been done discussing the relations between the various biblical covenants.¹¹ Samuel Bolton provided a fairly thorough list of options which were present in his day, in a volume first published while the assembly was still in process (*The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, 1645). Interestingly, as early as the seventeenth century, the Sinai covenant was considered to be perhaps the most difficult covenant administration for covenant theologians to come to terms with. As Bolton discussed the matter, this was due to the way that covenant theology attempted to distinguish the covenants made with the two Adams from all other covenants. Having correctly determined that these covenants, made with two representative individuals who were sinless at the time of the administration, were necessarily different from other covenants, covenant theology then went on to distinguish these from other covenants, ordinarily by applying the label "covenant of works" to the Adamic covenants, and "covenant of grace" to the others. In and of itself, this was not too great a problem, but it became a problem when discussing the Sinai administration, which apparently all conceded had both legal and gracious aspects.

Bolton described four approaches to dealing with this situation:

1. Those who recognized a covenant of nature, a covenant of grace, and a covenant mixed with nature and grace;
2. Those who recognized a 'Foedus natura' made with man before the Fall, a 'Foedus promissi' made with Adam after the Fall, and a 'Foedus operi', a covenant of works made with the Jews at Sinai;
3. Those who recognized a 'Foedus natura' made with man before the Fall, a 'Foedus gratiae' (a covenant of grace made with us in Christ), and a 'Foedus subserviens' (subservient covenant) made with the Jews at Sinai;
4. Those who never did recognize but two covenants, one of works before the fall and one of grace after, "Yet...this covenant of grace was dispensed to the Jews in such a legal manner that it seems to be nothing else but the repetition of the covenant of works" (*The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, p. 90).

Interestingly, each of the four recognized tension between the desire to recognize two covenants (those made with the sinless mediators and those made with sinners) and the desire to recognize three covenants (Bolton, for what it's worth, adopted the third view, above). Further, the tension was caused by the Sinai covenant's having similarities both to the covenant of works/nature and to the covenant of promise/grace.

Covenant theology in reaction to dispensationalism

With the arrival of dispensationalism, however, an interesting thing happened to covenant theology, at least in some circles. Properly alarmed over the almost-total discontinuity alleged to exist between the Sinai administration and the New Covenant by dispensationalists, covenant theologians became shy about the "works" dimension of the Sinai covenant, which had always been candidly conceded before. Rightly reacting to the dispensational (and incipiently Arminian) denial of a unified purpose of redemption, covenant theologians became at times reactionary about the suggestion of any differences among the covenant administrations, as though admitting such differences would cause one to slide down the slippery slope toward dispensationalism. Perhaps the most celebrated example has been the tendency to perceive Meredith G. Kline's views as unusual or novel, when they are in fact virtually identical (in broad stroke) with the views discussed by Bolton in the early 1640's. Kline may be wrong, and it is not my intention to explicate or defend his views here, but his views (especially his belief that the Sinai administration contained both legal and gracious aspects) are not at all novel; they are over 350 years old. His views have been perceived as unusual in the context of a generation in full reaction against dispensationalism.

Covenant theology in the writing of John Murray

One of the interesting twists of the twentieth century (at least from a seventeenth century perspective) would be the covenant views of John Murray, especially as those views are expressed in his pamphlet, *The Covenant of Grace*. Murray recognized that his views on the covenant of grace were intentionally novel. On the fifth page of his

pamphlet entitled *The Covenant of Grace*, Murray said, “It appears to me that the covenant theology...needs recasting.” It is not odd that the twentieth century would find it necessary to recast earlier theology, of course. But what is interesting is the particular nature of Murray’s re-casting. The seventeenth century found a two-covenant approach difficult, so difficult that it either found itself proposing a three-covenant approach or a two-covenant approach with a “legal” administration as a subset of the second (sort of a two-and-a-half covenant view). Murray’s recasting however, became effectively mono-covenantal, as he proposed a view which perceived all biblical covenants as essentially similar. He did this in two ways. First, he omitted discussion of the Adamic administration from the *Covenant of Grace* pamphlet (though he discussed this administration thoroughly in his *Imputation of Adam’s Sin*, and in his paper, “The Adamic Administration”), thereby reducing the amount of difference among covenant administrations by discussing only the post-Fall covenants (which, of course, are much more similar one to another than they are to the covenants with the two Adams). Second, he was particularly resistant to recognizing any structural distinction between the promissory Abrahamic covenant, and the (at least partially) “legal” Sinai covenant. He spent less than an entire paragraph distinguishing the Abrahamic from the Sinai covenant, and in fact recognized only a difference of emphasis there. This made his view profoundly different from any of the four options mentioned by Bolton.

Now is not the time to enter into a full evaluation of Murray’s “re-casting,” though I am willing to concede that I think covenant theology was better off without his recasting. To Murray’s credit, he very honestly acknowledged the novelty of his views, and that he was intending to recast what was, to him, a deficient system. The point here is merely to indicate that, whether in conscious reaction to dispensationalism or not, Murray promoted a view which was intentionally quite different from that of the covenant theologians of earlier generations, and one of the differences resided in acknowledging fewer areas of structural discontinuity than had been previously recognized within covenant theology.

It may not be merely coincidental, then, that some of the more ardent proponents of Theonomy were either students of Murray, or students of his students. If Murray was uncomfortable recognizing fundamental differences in the structures of the Mosaic covenant and other biblical covenants, it would not be surprising if those influenced by him would be uncomfortable recognizing fundamental differences in the legislation within the various covenants. It should also be said that Murray was a Scot, and the majority of American Presbyterians have always differed with the majority of Scottish Presbyterians over the civil magistrate, which itself reflects a deeper (though often implicit more than explicit) difference over the Israelite theocracy. Was that theocracy a model for all civil government, or was it a type of the eschatological kingdom? Any good “crown and covenant” Scottish Presbyterian (and Murray was a good one) tends to answer this differently than a good American Presbyterian.

Covenant theology in Theonomy

“Mono-covenantalism” and Theonomy

Whether due to Murray’s influence or not, it is without doubt that Theonomy’s approach to biblical covenants tends toward mono-covenantalism. What is distinctive about Theonomy is its resistance to recognizing discontinuity in the legislation of the various covenants.

The neologism “Older Covenant”

What’s in a word? Well, in this case, plenty. Theonomy’s resistance to recognizing covenantal distinctions as they are represented in scripture goes even so far as nomenclature. Throughout *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, Bahnsen promotes the neologistic “older covenant” and “newer covenant.” Jeremiah was most assuredly not looking forward to a “newer” edition of the “older covenant;” he anticipated a “new covenant...not like the covenant I made with their fathers.” Jesus, similarly, did not institute, by his sacrifice, merely a “newer” covenant. He did not refer to the cup as a

“newer” covenant, but as a “new” covenant, and his apostles similarly considered themselves “ministers of a new covenant” (2 Cor. 3). The point is not merely terminological, but conceptual. The new covenant is not merely different in comparative degree from the Sinai covenant; it is also different in qualitative kind from that covenant; it is, at least in some respects, “not like” the covenant God made with the ancestors when he took them out of Egypt.

The abstracting of the Sinai legislation from its covenantal framework

If there is a hermeneutical commitment evident in Theonomy (despite the genuine differences on many particular exegetical points within Theonomy) it is the belief that the Sinai legislation, even in its judicial dimensions, is legislation which is well-suited for, and intended to be observed by, all nations and peoples. Now plainly, the duties of a given covenant are only obligatory on those who are parties to the covenant. For Theonomy, however, all peoples in all times are obliged to these duties, unless there is some instruction somewhere else in scripture exempting particular peoples from particular duties. The Theonomic approach, then, abstracts the legislation from its covenantal context. Apparently, for Theonomy, a covenant really was made at Sinai, but the legislation was a peripheral, incidental dimension of the covenant itself; or, a covenant was really made at Sinai, and the covenant itself continues until the return of Christ.

One of the most profound ironies has been the failure of covenant theologians (with some exceptions) to critique Theonomy on this point. One would think that covenant theologians would have some idea of what a covenant is. Do covenants have parties, or do they not? Do covenants have obligations and sanctions, or do they not? If a covenant has parties, how is it that non-parties are obliged to its duties? How could the Gentiles, described by the apostle Paul as “outside of the law” (ajnovmw”) possibly be obliged to the law? How could it possibly be meaningful for Paul to distinguish Jews from Gentiles because “to them belong...the covenants, the giving of the law” (Rom. 9:4), if the covenant and its laws oblige non-Jews equally with Jews?

The Westminster Assembly had already erred in abstracting the decalogue from its covenantal framework

Theonomists are not the first to abstract legislation from the Sinai covenant. The Westminster Assembly appears to have done it beforehand, though on a much smaller scale and in a more ambiguous manner. The divines at Westminster appear to have abstracted the decalogue from the Sinai covenant, and to have understood the ten words as timeless and, if you will, “covenant-less.” This is revealed at 19:1-2 of the Westminster Confession of Faith.

WCF 19:1-2 “God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it. This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables: the four first commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man”.

The Assembly asserted that God gave the ten commandments, or the equivalent thereof, to Adam, and then gave “this law” to Moses. This assertion then, if unchallenged, permits the decalogue to be perceived as a timeless, “covenant-less” expression of God’s moral will.

The biblical evidence contrary

This assertion is not only completely without any biblical evidence, but it is an assertion contrary to some of the evidence in scripture, most notably Romans 5:13, “sin was indeed in the world before the law”. Note that the Assembly places the law “in the garden”; Paul places it outside of the garden, after sin entered the world. The evidence becomes even greater when we recognize throughout the scriptures the virtual identity

between the ten commandments and the Sinai covenant. Biblically, far from being “abstractable” from that covenant administration, the ten commandments are the heart thereof. The biblical authors can speak, at least by synecdoche, of the Sinai covenant as being the ten commandments. Further, the “tablets” engraved at Sinai are often qualified as the tablets “of the covenant,” and this covenant is stated to have not been made with others prior to that generation.

Ten commandments equated with the Sinai covenant

Deut. 4:13 He declared to you his covenant, which he charged you to observe, that is, the ten commandments; and he wrote them on two stone tablets.

The tablets “of the covenant”

Ex. 31:18 When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

Deut. 9:9 When I went up the mountain to receive the stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant that the LORD made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water.

Deut. 9:11 At the end of forty days and forty nights the LORD gave me the two stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant.

Ex. 34:27 The LORD said to Moses: Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel. 28 He was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments. 29 Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.

The covenant not made with any others before Sinai

Deut. 5:2 The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. 3 Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today.

The Assembly's "abstraction" qualified in two ways

Although the Assembly appears to have contributed to misunderstandings of the decalogue in subsequent generations, it must be remembered that their purpose was catechetical, not biblical-theological. Their desire to find some location in which the moral will of God was "summarily comprehended" was catechetically proper, despite the misunderstanding of the covenantal role of the decalogue which may have resulted therefrom.

Further, it must be noted that the Assembly "limited" the damage done, by only abstracting the decalogue. In WCF 19:3 and 4, the Assembly indicated that there were other aspects of the Sinai legislation (which they called "ceremonial" and "judicial") which were covenantally conditioned.

Despite these qualifications, it must be admitted that the work of the Assembly established the precedent of abstracting covenantal duties from the covenant in which they were given. This precedent, combined with the reactionary response to the errors of dispensationalism, created soil in the twentieth century which virtually guaranteed that Theonomy, or something like it, would take root.

Theonomy abstracts all of the legislation from its covenantal framework

Theonomy follows the a-covenantal hermeneutic of the Westminster Assembly, yet without the qualifications or limitations of WCF 19:4: "To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require." Theonomy tends to abstract all of the Sinai legislation from its covenantal setting. While

some Theonomists borrow the confessional language of “general equity”, they rarely employ it with the four confessional qualifications, namely the recognition that those in covenant with God at Sinai were a “body politic” (unlike the New Covenant community); that those laws “expired together with the state of that people;” that such are “not obliging any other now,” and that the general equity only may require that some of that body of legislation would be equitable generally, to other nations.

Thus, Theonomy follows the Assembly in abstracting the decalogue from the covenant administration in which it is given, and of which it is the essential feature; and it does not follow the Assembly, however, in abstracting the other legislation therefrom. Theonomy agrees with the Assembly where I do not; I agree with the Assembly where Theonomy does not. On the particular issue at hand, the universal obligation to the judicial laws of Sinai, I agree with the Assembly and Theonomy does not. However, our confessional tradition has at least opened the door to a covenant-less understanding of some of the Sinai legislation, and is now reaping some of the consequences.

Further, this observation is intended to help explain, in part, Theonomy’s origins. Theonomy did not appear “out of the blue,” as some may think. Individuals in our tradition who consider Theonomy to be an outrageous or extreme viewpoint are only partially correct. It is true that Theonomy denies WCF 19:4, and it is true that Theonomy is even more extreme than Scottish Presbyterians such as John Murray in the resistance to recognizing the distinctive traits of the Sinai covenant. Theonomy would indeed establish the extreme end of the covenant theology spectrum. However, Theonomy genuinely shares some of the distinctives embraced by others within that tradition. It shares the Assembly’s abstracting of the decalogue from the Sinai covenant, and then goes further; it shares the tendency of some reactionaries to dispensationalism to deny unique features of the Sinai covenant which earlier generations routinely recognized.

Theonomy, thus, cannot be accounted for merely on sociological or psychological grounds. It is not merely a sociological phenomenon, resisting the tide of a post-Christian culture (though this is undoubtedly an important reason for the popularity of the

movement with some). Nor is it merely a psychological phenomenon, an uprising of authoritarian personalities (though there is undoubtedly a measure of truth to this). It is also an intellectual movement, an extension (albeit extreme) of ideas already germinal in some dimensions of the Reformed tradition.

¹Theonomy in Christian Ethics: Expanded Edition with Replies to Critics. Philipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984.

²I won't attempt here to give exhaustive bibliographies of these individuals. It is ubiquitous in Vos, Ridderbos and Kline, of course, and is evident in Palmer Robertson's "Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?" in Perspectives on Evangelical Theology, ed. K. Kantzer and S. Gundry, Baker, 1979, pp. 209-227, and in Richard Gaffin's "Theonomy and Eschatology: Reflections on Postmillennialism," in Theonomy: A Reformed Critique, ed. W. Barker and R. Godfrey: Zondervan, 1990, pp. 197-226.

³All of Kline's writings are implicitly germane, but especially his "Comments on a New-Old Error. A Review of Greg Bahnsen, Theonomy in Christian Ethics," WTJ 41 (1978-79): 172-189. Poythress's considerations are found in audio form in a series of lectures available through Westminster Media, and also in his The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses, Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991, esp. two of the appendices, "Evaluating Theonomy", 311-361, and "Does the Greek Word Pleroo Sometimes Mean 'Confirm?'" , 363-377, and again in his "Effects of Interpretive Frameworks on the Application of Old Testament Law" in Theonomy: A Reformed Critique, ed. W. Barker and R. Godfrey: Zondervan, 1990, pp. 103-123. Paul D. Fowler's (never-published-but-frequently-photocopied) review of Bahnsen's Theonomy is a very helpful work. Gaffin's influence is implicit, because of his understanding of NT eschatology generally, as reflected in his classroom lectures at Westminster seminary, and in his previously-cited article in the Westminster Critique.

⁴Unpublished typescript.

5The hermeneutical heart of Bahnsen's Theonomy in Christian Ethics can be found in chapter 2, "The Abiding Validity of the Law in Exhaustive Detail," pp. 39-86. Rather than clutter my manuscript with references to the particular places in this chapter, I would direct the reader to that chapter, and encourage to read that chapter in its entirety as the best place to find a succinct representation of Theonomy's hermeneutic.

6Theonomy, p. 50, emphasis his.

7Appendix C., "Does the Greek Word *Pleroo* Sometimes Mean 'Confirm?'," 363-377, in *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*, Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1991.

8"Given the cultural-literary milieu it is quite likely that this phrase was a graphic and strong way of saying 'never.'" Theonomy, p. 76.

9Ibid.

10From Sabbath to Lord's Day. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982, 77 ff. Cf. also Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition*. Cambridge: University Press, 1975, and John P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthew's Gospel*. *Analecta Biblica* 71. Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971.

11Mark W. Karlberg has provided a very good overview of various theories of covenant theology in his "Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant," *WTJ* 43 (1980), 1-57.
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