

The Commands of Christ

Part Three

Why I'm a Theonomist—A

Hebrews 2:2, 3; 10:28, 29

With Study Questions

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For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward,³ how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard *Him* (Hebrews 2:2, 3).

Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.²⁹ Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace (Hebrews 10:28, 29)?

Introduction

Many years ago, after exercising in my health club, I was standing in line to get a drink from the water fountain; behind me stood an elderly man with a beard wearing a shirt which read 'Born Again Atheist'. I couldn't resist—smiling, I said, "It must take a lot of faith to believe that." After a little interrogation he concluded that I was a Christian and was more than eager to enter into a fairly enthusiastic dialogue. I could tell he wanted to fight but I made the effort to keep things friendly—I think I succeeded.

A few days later my new friend found me at the club and asked me to step outside. I didn't think he wanted to fight so I accommodated him. He went to his car and pulled out an old dog-eared Bible. I thought to myself, I know few Christians who have such worn out Bibles and even fewer who are as evangelistic as this born again atheist. He opened his Bible to some passages that I must have read at some point (I had read the Bible all through more than once) but they still had the shock value he was hoping for.

He turned to the Old Testament civil codes in Leviticus 20; they were highlighted and underlined. They were a list of behaviors that might be called capital crimes--crimes which incurred the penalty of death—there were a lot of them. "Your God" my friend informed me, "is a bloodthirsty despot!" He was waiting for a response. I must admit (although outwardly I was keeping my cool) I felt my back was against the wall. I felt like I had to defend a dark side of the God who had saved my soul. But I also knew that if there was a problem, it wasn't with God or the Bible. If there was a problem, the problem was with me—perhaps I

had become so accustomed and desensitized to sin that that which was worthy of death, according to the character and nature of God, seemed shocking to me.

I gave my friend an answer that, unlike many first answers I give when confronted with a new subject, is still my answer. “If God thinks those behaviors are worthy of death, they must be.” He grumbled mightily at that response, but there wasn’t much else he could say. This was my first encounter with a theological issue called theonomy.

I began testing the evangelical waters on this issue. What would others say if confronted by the same atheist with the same issue?

I remember speaking with a young woman who was in the ministry regarding the death penalty in general. She was against it altogether. Her reasoning was that the New Covenant was a covenant of grace and not law. I asked her if she thought there should be any penalty for severe crimes. She believed in life in prison. But how is life in prison gracious? It seems that if you wanted to be consistent with that thinking there would be no punishment for crime at all. Criminals need merely apologize, agree to repent and be set free.

Running the subject by a young Christian lawyer I knew, he indicated that if he were to serve in Washington, he would never propose to his fellow legislators that we follow the Old Testament civil codes. He said they would laugh him off the floor. He was a knowledgeable Christian but believed there was some other standard more suited for the functioning of government than the standard given by Moses in the Law. I am still, genuinely, seeking to figure out how that standard works.

There is a general disposition, I have found, coming from both the world and the church that Christians ought to just keep their noses out of politics. I am routinely assailed by atheists and Christians alike for the columns I write (generally addressing some cultural or political issue) in a secular newspaper. Pastors, according to many, should be restrict their dialogue to their pulpits and those narrow parishioners with their medieval minds still willing to imbibe the mythology of Scripture as a legitimate life and world view.

Secular society is willing to allow those who believe in the God of Scripture to govern their own lives, households and churches by biblical standards (although that is coming under attack in our culture which is increasingly hostile to biblical Christianity), but the idea that kings, princes, presidents and legislators ought to consult the word of God for wisdom on how to govern has been rejected by almost all. It is precisely here that, even Christians, often unwittingly, are seeking to serve two masters.

In my opinion the zeitgeist (spirit of the age) of the sixties has infiltrated the heart of Christ's church to the extent that we have willingly sent two thirds of the Bible packing and have replaced it with a form of semi-biblical cultural relativism. I say semi-biblical, because we still believe that the Bible ought to be consulted at some level. But I have continually noticed the Scriptures trumped by a system of thought which became prominent (and even taught in schools) during my youth.

This system of thought was made popular by a man named Joseph Fletcher—although some feel Fletcher was merely popularizing something taught earlier by a Swiss theologian named Emil Brunner who wrote *The Divine Imperative*.

Joseph Fletcher was an ordained Episcopal priest who later became an atheist—in 1974 he was named Humanist of the year by the American Humanist Association. He served as president of the Euthanasia Society of America—later renamed the Society for the Right to Die. He was also a member of the American Eugenics Society (sort of a selective breeding organization) and the Association for Voluntary Sterilization. But it was Fletcher's book *Situation Ethics* that made waves. The book came out in 1966 and became part of the perfect storm of rebellion and hedonism (living for pleasure).

Fletcher promoted a sort of discovery of ethic via situation. I remember sitting in a small group in class and being asked to make ethical decisions based upon various situations. For example, we had to imagine being in a life-boat with ten people of various ages, background and health. In the scenario there was only enough food for nine people to survive so we had to decide who got thrown overboard—in other words, whose life is more valuable?

Ethics was determined by the situation. According to Fletcher there can be no pre-established rules of right and wrong. Every situation is unique—you cannot generalize—each case is handled on its own under vague notion of love. In each case do what is most loving. And, of course, the definition of love was itself up for grabs.

Fortunately, by God's grace, I was also exposed to a unique theological personality who was a contemporary of Fletcher—a man named Francis Schaeffer. Schaeffer wrote a book called *A Christian Manifesto* addressing how during his life he had witness a cultural and political shift from a Christian life and world view to a Humanistic life and world view. Much of Schaeffer's work focused on maintaining a biblical commitment in the political arena.

Later I was exposed to the lectures and works of Rousas John Rushdoony who wrote *The Institutes of Biblical Law* and also Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen who wrote

Theonomy and Christian Ethics. These theologians, in my opinion, were able to address the issue with which my born again atheist confronted me, more reasonably and with more biblical integrity than I had heard elsewhere. They were all experts on what became known as Calvin's Geneva—where John Calvin served to clarify the role of Christ in relationship to civil government. Many would disagree with their assessment of Calvin's position on theonomy (the word probably hadn't been invented yet). But, of course, everyone wants Calvin on their side. It will not be my intention to argue about which reformed theologians or theological camps agree or disagree with theonomy. What I would like to present is a biblical argument for the role of God's law in politics. If you recall this series was launched via the Great Commission where Jesus commissioned His followers to make disciples and teach them to obey all that He commanded. There isn't a lead case over politics that Christ doesn't see and isn't allowed entrance. So as a sub-topic of teaching the commands of Christ, I think it will behoove us to examine the issue known as theonomy.

Theonomy—A Definition.

What is theonomy? It's a combination of two Greek words *theos* God and *nomos* law; in short it means God's law. But more specifically, it has become a term referring to the study of the extent of the application of the Old Testament civil codes to modern politics. In the Old Testament we see God giving laws to Moses which were to be applied in the civil governing of Israel. Although we will see some of this in the New Testament, there is no place where the counsel of God is more thoroughly revealed in terms of how a nation ought to be governed than the law given to Moses.

It might be easiest to understand theonomy to be addressing things that are not merely sins, but crimes. All crimes are sins but not all sins are crimes. An easy way to determine which sins fall into the realm of criminal activity would be those sins which God calls men to punish after a due process. For example, the first theonomic statement in the Bible might be found in the ninth chapter of Genesis:

Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man (Genesis 9:6).

When someone commits murder, God is telling men that they must deal with that issue through a civil penalty—in this case, the death penalty. There are

many objections by Christians to theonomy. I will do my best to address those objections over the next few weeks. First, I would like to explain why I think the issue is important. It's not my desire to simply be a theological provocateur. I would like to offer at least four reasons why I think the subject is critical: The preeminence of Christ, the influx of relativism, the spread of the gospel and the justice of the gospel.

Why is Theonomy Important?

1. The Preeminence of Christ.

Not in order of importance, but the first reason I believe theonomy is an important issue has to do with the preeminence of Christ. It is not the goal of theonomy merely to clean up Washington and make life better and safer for our children (although I think it would certainly include that). Over and above whatever pragmatic benefits there might be to godly government, above it all is the acknowledgement of Jesus as the **“King of kings and Lord of lords” (1 Timothy 6:15)**.

Over the years, theologians have come to recognize three offices of Christ—prophet, priest and king. These are not offices He will someday have, but offices He currently has. There is generally agreement today among evangelicals that Jesus is our prophet (His word is the word of God), and our Priest (presenting His own blood and interceding for us before His Father in heaven).

But the majority of modern Christianity has a very truncated view of the third office. He may be king of our hearts, but He will not take that office, it is suggested, until He comes again. Or there are those who view His kingship as merely operating in heavenly or ethereal realms. But neither of those views work well with the biblical notion that Jesus is currently King of kings. “King of kings” is present tense not future and there are no other kings in the heavenly realm for Jesus to be king of.

As we finished the Great Commission Jesus made it clear that all authority had been given to Him **“in heaven and on the earth” (Matthew 28:18—emphasis mine)**. The followers of Christ are to make disciples based upon the fact that Jesus has *all* authority on earth—not just some authority.

In the second chapter of Philippians Paul uses the aorist (past tense) to explain that Jesus has been highly exalted and given **“the name which is above every name” (Philippians 2:9)**. Paul explains in Ephesians that Jesus is now at the Father's right hand **“far above all principality, and power and might and**

dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come” (Ephesians 1:21).

In Psalm 2 the Father says to His Son, **“Ask of Me, and I will give you the nations for Your inheritance” (Psalm 2:8).** Are we to assume Jesus didn’t ask? And who receives the warning in Psalm 2? **“Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth” (Psalm 2:10).** Psalm 2 has unavoidably political undertones.

In Colossians 1:18 we are taught that Jesus is **“the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.”** Preeminence *proteuon*, literally means first place. Jesus is to have first place in “all things.” This means in an ultimate sense television is to glorify Jesus, schools are to glorify Jesus, medical professionals should see themselves as serving Jesus, politicians and economists and entertainers, etc should recognize their efforts to be richer and deeper than they otherwise thought because they are doing their work to the glory of God.

At a time when the church had every reason to think Jesus had very little power over kings, the Apostle John gave a perspective we should still embrace today. He greets the churches in the name of Jesus Christ...

...the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler over the kings of the earth. To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood (Revelation 1:5).

In the one verse we see the “faithful witness” (Prophet) and the one who “washed us from our sins in His own blood” (Priest). Notice also that Jesus is “the ruler over the kings of the earth” (King).

A God glorifying aspect of theonomy is its recognition of the preeminence of Christ over all areas of life—including politics.

2. The Influx of Relativism

A second value to theonomy is its genuine answer to relativism in the monstrous arena of politics. What are we teaching our children and our watching culture when they see Christians spouting the verbiage of moral absolutes while functioning as political relativists? I have noticed that, at least in theory, it is here that almost all Christians are verbal theonomists.

What I mean by this is there is an almost unanimous agreement among Christians that allowing mere men to determine right and wrong has disastrous

consequences. Almost all Christians believe that kings and presidents should be on their knees and govern in a godly manner.

In the many seminaries I've attended and interactions I have had with numerous Christians from a wide variety of theological persuasions, I must say I have yet to meet anyone remotely Christian (and often non-Christians) who doesn't think that rulers ought to submit to the holy character of God.

At the same time, when the conversation gets down to practical discussions, our sources, in terms of what that character should actually produce is almost meaningless. In short, if you reject that special revelation given by God on how nations are to be run (primarily revealed in the Old Testament), you are generally left to leaders making decisions based upon their own vague notion of love or justice or jurisdiction. Politics is a giant blind spot where Christians like to claim absolutes, but have no idea where the absolutes are to be found.

3. The Spread of the Gospel

Thirdly I believe this issue valuable due to the spread of the gospel. Paul exhorts Timothy to pray **“for Kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life” (1 Timothy 2:2)**. When missionaries enter unevangelized areas they are often met with violence and sometimes imprisonment. We pray that those in authority might come to faith and utilize their position to open doors for the gospel.

“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). Often times, in order for the word of God to be heard, doors need to be open by those who are hostile to Christ. We pray they will repent, come to faith and open otherwise shut doors. As a church we pray for the saints in China who attended a seminar I taught there a couple of years back. Many were imprisoned and separated from their families and churches. Little doubt they ministered in prison. But our prayer is that they would have the freedom to bring Christ's message to all the world.

Governments and their laws play a large role in the advancement of Christ's kingdom. Their efforts at halting the gospel will fail. Again, Psalm 2 speaks to them:

Now therefore, be wise, O kings; Be instructed, you judges of the earth. ¹¹ **Serve the Lord with fear, And rejoice with trembling.**

¹² **Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, And you perish *in* the way,**

When His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed *are* all those who put their trust in Him (Psalm 2:10-12).

The gates of hell will not prevail against the kingdom of God (Matthew 16:18). Kissing means to respect the authority of (1 Samuel 10:1). It should be the prayer Christians that judges and kings respect the law of Christ, that, like with the king of Nineveh (Jonah 3:6-10), all under their authority would be blessed.

4. The Justice of the Gospel

Finally, theonomy upholds the justice of the gospel—the cross, after all, was a public execution where the “**just**” died “**for the unjust**” (1 Peter 3:18). It is in this civil arena where we see, more than anywhere else on earth, the full sense of the penalty for sin. When a society loses its sense of justice, its citizens lose their sense of guilt before God and need for a Savior.

When sins, which are crimes, go unpunished, a people become unacquainted with their own “**unjust**” (*adikos*—meaning unrighteous as compared to Christ who is “just” *dikaios*) condition. In the same way a church which refuses to discipline opens the doors of unacceptable behavior by failing, as the Westminster Confession teaches, to deter “**other from like offenses,**” a nation which calls “**evil good and good evil**” (Isaiah 5:20) become “**wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight**” (Isaiah 5:21).

The author of Hebrews utilizes the Old Testament civil system in this very way to punctuate man’s culpability before God.

For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward,³ how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard *Him* (Hebrews 2:2, 3).

This passage depends upon the unalterable justice of God (“**a just reward**” *endikon* fair or just *misthapadosian* reward or punishment) to make its point. The “word spoken through angels” was God’s law. This becomes even clearer later in Hebrews.

Anyone who has rejected Moses' law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace (Hebrews 10:28, 29)?

Notice the author's premise! The premise is the civil justice of the Mosaic administration, the execution of the offender on **"the testimony of two or three witnesses"**. To removed the validity of the premise (as those who reject theonomy tend to do) is to remove impact of the conclusion—"the punishment" of those who **"trample the Son of God underfoot."** The writer seems to be saying, "Since you know those penalties are just, how much more the eternal penalties?"

The New Testament utilizes the Mosaic Law to confirm the justice of God as it relates to believing or rejecting Christ. To reject the civil codes of the Old Testament softens the impact of the justice of the gospel. A culture devoid of a proper understanding of justice will have difficulty grasping their need for Christ.

But assuming Christians affirm the preeminence of Christ, the danger of the influx of relativism, the desire spread of the gospel and the legitimacy of the justice of the gospel—how do we go about serving Christ in the political venue? What are the rules? What are the laws? Where are they to be found? How does the New Testament interact with the Old Testament to reveal this information to us?

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Have you ever been confronted with passages in the Bible which catch you off guard? How do you respond (pages 2, 3)?
2. What are some of your initial thoughts about capital crimes and the death penalty as seen in Scripture (page 3)?
3. How would you characterize our society's disposition toward Christ and politics (pages 3, 4)?
4. What is relativism or situation ethics? Do you see strengths or weaknesses in these systems (pages 4, 5)?
5. Define 'theonomy' (pages 5, 6).
6. How does theonomy address the preeminence of Christ (pages 6, 7)?
7. Does theonomy provide strength against the influx of relativism in politics? Explain why (pages 8, 9).
8. In what respect does theonomy more strongly promote the spreading of the gospel (page 9)?
9. How does theonomy help bring to light the "justice of the gospel" (pages 10, 11)?