

Biblical Notes – Matthew 5:17-19

17-19 – “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. [18] For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. [19] Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (17. Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἡλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον ἢ τοὺς προφήτας· οὐκ ἡλθον καταλῦσαι ἀλλὰ πληρῶσαι. 18. ἀμὴν γάρ λέγω ὑμῖν ἔως ὅταν παρέλθῃ ὁ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ ιῶτα ἐν ἥ μία κεραίᾳ οὐ μὴ παρέλθῃ ἀπὸ τοῦ νόμου ἔως [ἄν] πάντα γένηται. 19. ὃς ἔὰν οὖν λύσῃ μίαν τῶν ἐντολῶν τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων καὶ διδάξῃ οὗτως τοὺς ἀνθρώπους ἐλάχιστος κιληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν· ὃς δ' ἂν ποιήσῃ καὶ διδάξῃ οὗτος μέγας κιληθήσεται ἐν τῇ βασιλείᾳ τῶν οὐρανῶν)

“Matthew 5:17-19 is one of the key passages that some claim proves the sustained applicability of the Mosaic law during the church period. In fact, this passage provides the major justification for theonomy and reconstructionism. According to its advocates, Christ himself taught that the entire law abides forever (i.e., “until heaven and earth disappear”). Bahnsen further contends that “Jesus binds us to all the commandments of God forever.” To him, the Matthean passage teaches that Christ confirmed or established the law rather than merely fulfilled it. In order to sustain this thesis, the critical word *plerosai* must be understood as meaning “confirmed” or “ratified” rather than “fulfilled”; Christ is in fact arguing that he establishes or ratifies the law of Moses. The reconstructionist continuum model, however, is based on an erroneous understanding of *plerosai* in this passage. It is, of course, lexically possible to adopt the meaning “to confirm” for *plerosai*, since it takes this nuance in a few passages of the LXX and Apocrypha as well as three New Testament passages (Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 10:6; James 2:23). Yet the customary usage of this word is “to fulfill,” especially in reference to the realization of prophecies. One would expect to find the word *histemi* if the nuance were “to confirm or establish.” The contrasting idea in the verse of “abolishing the Law and the Prophets” also suggests the meaning of “fulfillment” for *plerosai* rather than “confirmation.” Furthermore, this meaning for *plerosai* harmonizes with Matthew’s use elsewhere in his gospel (e.g., 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 3:15; 4:14; 8:17), where it expresses the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.”

— Wayne G. Strickland, *The Inauguration of the Law of Christ with the Gospel of Christ: A Dispensational View in Five Views on Law and Gospel*, (Zondervan Publishing House; Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996), 257.

“In Matthew, the phrase “the Law and the Prophets” refers not simply to the Mosaic law, but to the entire Old Testament (d.7:12; 11:13; 22:40). Thus the term “law” in the following verse is an abbreviated way of referring to the same Old Testament. It should also be noted that the explicit reference to “Prophets” indicates that the author is speaking of prophecy. That fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament is in view is signaled by the phrase “until everything is accomplished” in verse 18. Some argue that this phrase should be translated “until the end of all things” (i.e., until the end of the world), further emphasizing the previous phrase “until heaven and earth disappear.” The link to prophetic statements, however, seems to argue against this understanding. Finally, the reconstructionist appeal to 5:17-19 actually leads to a contradiction within their system, since an absolute confirmation of the law would not allow for any abrogation of any portion of the Mosaic law. Though Christ rejects the thesis that the Old Testament Scriptures can be abolished, he does say that they must be fulfilled. The prophetic statements of Scripture can be abolished only when they are fulfilled, and Christ in fact perfectly fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament. As long as this world exists, there will be no repeal of the Law and Prophets apart from fulfillment. Since Matthew 5:17-19 must be interpreted along a “fulfillment/abolishment” continuum, it may not be used, as theonomists do, to support the abiding validity of the Mosaic law for the church-age believer.”

— Wayne G. Strickland, *The Inauguration of the Law of Christ with the Gospel of Christ: A Dispensational View in Five Views on Law and Gospel*, (Zondervan Publishing House; Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1996), 258.

“In four specific ways, Bahnsen’s treatment of Matt 5:17ff. is deficient. 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 πληρώ 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”.”

— T. David Gordon, *Critique of Theonomy: A Taxonomy*, Westminster Theological Journal Vol. 56:1 (Spring 1994),

Westminster Theological Seminary, 1994, 24-45.

"First of all, his understanding of *tous prophetas* is markedly different. Although the scope of the phrase "law and prophets" may vary in scripture, Bahnsen engages in the eisegesis of which he accuses others, when he restricts the meaning to "ethical stipulations". The pivotal argument for Bahnsen is his assertion that *pleroo* should be translated "confirm". Apart from the fact that his translation cannot make sense without reading "ethical stipulations" into "prophets", Vern Poythress has shown that the semantic evidence he presents is weak and that the standard lexicons are correct in supplying "fulfil"."

— Philip Ross, Reformed Theology and Theonomy - some comparisons, 30.



"For these reasons theonomists are committed to the transformation (reconstruction) of every area of life, including the institutions and affairs of the socio-political realm, according to the holy principles of God's revealed word (theonomy)."

— Greg Bahnsen, *No Other Standard*, 11.