

# Law – Theonomy (Critique)

There is much to like from the Reconstructionists & Theonomists for their boldness in upholding the Law of God as the only standard, but I have much that I disagree with them on:

1) There is much internal disagreement within the Reconstructionist & Theonomic camps about which Old Testament Laws are applicable today, which leaves me concerned about how one is deriving these conclusions. There ends up being so much speculation about which laws govern, that most of it just ends up being speculative:

“So ‘the abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail’ isn’t quite what it may appear to be at first glance. . . . Thus theonomy is not quite as radical as one might have initially supposed. . . . The reconstructionists find much in the Old Testament law that we cannot follow literally today. . . . The disagreements and divisions within the reconstructionist movement itself indicate that these tasks [of interpretation and application] are not at all simple.”

— John Frame, Theonomy: A Reformed Critique (1990), 91-92.

“For instance, many (like myself) do not affirm R. J. Rushdoony’s view of the dietary laws, Gary North’s view of home mortgages, James Jordan’s stance on automatic infant communion (without sessional examination), or David Chilton’s attitudes toward bribery and “ripping off” the unbeliever.”

— Sam Waldron, Theonomy, A Reformed Baptist Assessment, link:

<http://www.reformedreader.org/rbs/tarba.htm>.

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2) Theonomy includes 3 crucial elements: Presuppositionalism, Biblical Law, and Postmillennialism. As a Premillennialist I can't get behind the Postmillennialist position of Dominionism. I don't believe this is the call of a Christian, to reconstruct or reform "every area of life".

“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.

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3) I also—as a Dispensationalist—believe that we are not under law, but under grace, seeing the discontinuity here, rather than the continuity that Theonomists see.

Romans 6:14-15 NASB

For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace. [15] What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!

Romans 7:4-6 NASB

Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. [5] For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. [6] But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.

Romans 10:4 NASB

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

2 Corinthians 3:3-11 NASB

being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. [4] Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. [5] Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, [6] who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit

gives life. [7] But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, [8] how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? [9] For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. [10] For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. [11] For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.

Galatians 2:19 NASB

For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God.

Galatians 3:24-25 NASB

Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. [25] But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor.

Galatians 5:18 NASB

But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the Law.

Colossians 2:14 NASB

having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

Hebrews 7:12,18-19 NASB

For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also. [18] For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness [19] (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.

Hebrews 8:4-7,13 NASB

Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; [5] who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned by God when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, "See," He says, "THAT YOU MAKE all things ACCORDING TO THE PATTERN WHICH WAS SHOWN YOU ON THE MOUNTAIN." [6] But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. [7] For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. [13] When He said, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.

Hebrews 10:9 NASB

then He said, "Behold, I HAVE COME TO DO YOUR WILL." He takes away the first in order to establish the second.

"With the coming of Christ at his incarnation, the full manifestation of God's redeeming grace to sinners terminates the need for the pedagogical use of the law in the history of redemption."

— Karlberg, Mark W, 'Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant', (WESTMINSTER THEOLOGICAL JOURNAL 43, 1980), 29.

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4) Bahnsen's argument really stands or falls on Matthew 5:17-19. Sadly the crux of his argument stands on eisegesis, not exegesis.

Matthew 5:17-19 NASB

"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.

"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 πληρώω 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.

"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; GrandRapids, 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; GrandRapids, Michigan, 1996), 258.