

# Some Thoughts On "Theonomy"

By G.I. Williamson

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Did you ever read John Calvin's commentary on the last four books of Moses? I have, and one thing impressed me greatly. It is the fact that Calvin did exactly what some criticize the "theonomists" for doing today.

What was it? Well, Calvin showed how every one of the Old Testament "case laws" (ie. a law dealing with one specific situation or "case") taught some principle of abiding validity. In his commentary he rearranged the whole body of these various case laws under the heading of the Ten Commandments. What he endeavored to show was that every case law helped us to better understand the intent and meaning -- and also the proper application of the ten great central commandments.

And I, for one, remain convinced that the Reformer was essentially right. Note that I say essentially right because I don't think Calvin was always right in every detail, or even that he organized every case law under its proper heading. But he does convince me that there is an abiding principle, relevant for all time, in each of these case laws.

When Paul wrote to Timothy saying, "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16, 17), it seems self-evident to me that he was referring to the Old Testament writings, including the whole law of Moses. There has to be something permanent, then, in every part of this teaching. It is therefore my humble judgment that, on this, the theonomy people deserve credit.

## **The Mosaic System**

Yet I hasten to add something else which, to me, is of the utmost importance. With the coming of Christ the Mosaic system -- as a whole -- has been set aside, once and for all. And if theonomy sought to put us under that system again, then I, for one would have to oppose it.

But does it? I haven't seen any convincing evidence that it does. Yes, I've heard opponents of theonomy say so, but that's not what the proponents of theonomy say for themselves. So we are driven to one basic question: "Can we still 'use the testimonies taken out of the law...to regulate our life in all honorableness to the glory of God?'" (Belgic Confession, XXV.) I believe the answer can only be, "Yes," and that this also applies to those who are civil rulers. And it is right here, in my opinion, that so many today have a problem.

## **The Question of Civil Rulers**

The reason for this is the fact that, for many people, there is the spectre of civil oppression. "If we go along with theonomy," they seem to say, "then we're going to end up punishing -- even unto death --all sorts of people." And it is certainly true that the death penalty was required for quite a few things, under these various Mosaic laws, that are not so punished to-day in our society.

But it seems to me that we need to ponder two things. The first is the fact that the whole law of Moses came from God in the first place. We must beware, therefore, of taking up a negative attitude toward any of these holy precepts. We may not understand why the Lord required the exact punishment that he did require. But that gives us no right to set ourselves up as judges of any of God's commandments. No, a thousand times, No! There is nothing in these Mosaic laws unworthy of the true and only God. So if we have any difficulty with any of them, we are the ones who need the changing, not His laws.

The second thing is that we must not be naive! Under our present laws, too, there is killing. Plenty of it, matter of fact. And it is right here that I see a problem not yet resolved in the position of those who seem to me to be anti-theonomic. It is what I see as a basic ambiguity in their argument for a "pluralistic" society.

### **Pluralism's Murderous Contradiction**

I saw a statement of this pluralistic view a few years ago. It was stated in two propositions. [1] "The state is necessarily 'pluralistic' in the sense that it allows its citizens freedom of conscience to worship as they believe they must." And, [2] "The state must act when the basic and abiding moral principles (i.e. As contained in the second table of the Law; or commandments five through ten.) are being overridden or ignored."

Here there is, for example, a reference to the state's task to execute justice against those who steal, murder, lie, etc." Now my problem is that I can't see how both of these ideals can coexist in any stable relationship. And indeed, it's precisely our problem today that the first of these two principles is 'eating' the second away. Let me try to illustrate.

Journey readers are no doubt aware of the fact that civil law, in most Western nations, was at one time strongly anti-homosexual. One could truly say, in my judgment, that the law at that time was intentionally close to biblical standards. In a word, we had some "theonomy" then, in this matter. But now, all over the Western world, this has been fading.

Homosexuals are more and more "out in the open." They even demand the full right to free expression of their life-style. And one must admit that when "the state is pluralistic" in the sense defined above, this can hardly be avoided. Up to now even some Christians have tended to say, "Well, homosexuality is bad, but as long as they don't hurt anyone else, we'll just have to tolerate it."

But right there is the trouble, because the very tolerance of this evil (by the state) does harm other people. Let me give two examples. [1] If the homosexual has "equal rights" – and his homosexual preference can't be used to "discriminate" against him -- then he would have as much right as anyone else to influence others (as a teacher in a public school, let us say) by his chosen life style. The myth of neutrality doesn't provide much comfort when it is your children who have to sit under this teacher!

And [2], what about the threat of "AIDS" (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome)? This lethal disease is now spreading rapidly in most Western countries, and it first came to notice in so-called "gay" communities. "Well," you might say, "it serves them right, living in such wickedness." Yes, but that is not all – not by a long shot. It is now becoming a threat to the general population because of the rapidly increasing number of infected people, and the fact that it can be spread through blood transfusion.

It is also true that neither of these illustrations considers the negative effects of the wrath of God. He is not "pluralistic!" He's offended by such immorality. If we think AIDS is destructive, it is miniscule by comparison with the full power of the Ancient of Days! Wantonly sinful societies lie exposed to this wrath. My point is that you just can't have a safe society if it is ultimately pluralistic. The old law-order (which did reflect, to a much greater degree than at present, biblical standards) is now fading out of the picture. A new law-order (drawn from humanism) is more and more dominant in our culture.

This is clearly seen in the fact that to-day the State sanctions the shedding of the blood of unborn children. The old somewhat "theonomic" law-order protected the unborn, shedding instead the blood of those who tried to kill them.

## **The Fear Argument**

You can see, then, why I'm not impressed -- in the current debate about "theonomy" -- by the "fear" argument. (I refer to the fear that, "If the State goes back to a Biblical law-order, that the result will be a great slaughter.") Yes, I admit that there would be some killing.

But as I noted earlier, what needs to be remembered is that the killing has already commenced -- viciously. The fact that we don't see the unpleasant mess doesn't mean there is no such thing. There is. So the simple fact is that the real question is not, "Shall there be killing?" No, the real question is, "Who shall be killed?"

Shall it be the innocent or the guilty? Today it is too often the innocent! Frankly, I would much prefer the older system where it was (at least most often) the guilty. When I was growing up in the

Mid-West, the famous gangster John Dillinger was killing people. And there were other gangsters like him. When I heard the news that he was killed, I thought, "Too bad that his life had to end that way, but far better that, than that more innocent people be gunned down."

That was in the day when they not only had the electric chair but also used it. True, the electric chair is a terrible thing. But I know something worse. It is to let people who kill other people go free, so they can go out and murder again.

Now, of course, most readers of this magazine will agree with much of this. I assume, for instance, that we are all op-posed to abortion. Not only that, but when it comes to abortion no one seems to mind going back to the Old Testament scriptures. We all seem to be "theonomists" when it suits us. And no wonder. We studied the larger Catechism, didn't we? Did we not learn right there that these case laws do have something binding to teach us?

## **The Key of a Consistent Hermeneutic**

As I see it, then, the real question is not "theonomy" or "no theonomy." If we are Reformed, it is already settled that we will take the whole of the Old Testament (as well as the New) as the rule of our faith and practice. The question, then, is how consistent we are in the application of these Old Testament case laws.

Does this sound partisan? Does it sound altogether "pro-theonomy?" Well, it is not. One of the things that has driven me to caution is precisely the lack of consistency on the part of some of the writers known as theonomists. Take, for instance, R.J. Rushdoony's (and Gary North's) view of the Fourth Commandment. If I understand these men, there is not the same kind of continuity with respect to this commandment as there is with the others.

Yet Greg Bahnsen takes a sharply different (more traditionally "sabbatarian") view, even though he works from the same perspective as the first two men. I also know of one "theonomist" who strongly defends the idea of a Christian School, and yet condemns all labor unions (cf. And here I'm talking about the idea of association and not force!) I can't see the consistency of this at all.

What we need then is to get away from mere reaction to a word -- namely

"theonomy." Instead, we must get down to specifics. If you tell me you are a theonomist, fine -- but now tell me (as John Calvin did in his commentary) what this particular text means for today. What is the abiding principle in it, and how does it apply in our situation? If you can't do that convincingly, then it is neither here nor there to me that you are a theonomist.

Likewise, if you come to me and you say, "I'm definitely not a theonomist," I'll say, "Fine. Now you show me what this text teaches us for today, and how we ought to apply it." And if the best you can do is to say, "Well, that's Old Testament, and we are New Testament Christians," then I'm afraid that I won't be able to buy your "anti-theonomy" position.

## **Modesty, Work, Care & Honesty**

Both sides in the current debate about theonomy need to be modest in their claims. The "theonomy" people have tons of hard work to do to produce a convincing and consistent system. They may think they already have it. But I can say they haven't yet made it clear to me. But I will listen. And I am impressed very much by one thing – these theonomists do take seriously the text of the bible – and to me that is always essential.

And I'm not always sure their opponents do this, at least they haven't convinced me. The anti-, or even non-theonomy, people also have some hard work to do. They need to show how they take just as seriously the whole text of the scripture. They also need to do some hard thinking about the present situation in the Western nations.

For a long time it has been assumed that the State can be "pluralistic" and yet, at the same time, "act when the basic and abiding moral principles (as contained in the second table of the law) are being overridden or ignored." Does not the whole trend in our culture today prove that these two propositions cannot stand in a stable relationship?

What we need now, rather desperately, is the biblical solution. If theonomy isn't the answer we need, then we'd better get busy and find it. I would therefore plead that we not "write off" one another, but that we listen to each other and strive to attain to the right understanding of scripture. After all, don't we believe that the answer is there -- and that it can be found -- if we will diligently seek it?

*1986: G. I. Williamson is one of the elder statesmen of American Calvinism; and pastors the Carson Orthodox Presbyterian Church, ND. "GI." was a frequent contributor to the old Presbyterian Guardian, and now we are glad to count him as one of our frequent contributors.*