

What is Theonomy?

By Jay Rogers

Theonomy means literally, "God's law," or the belief that the moral laws of the Old Testament are still binding today. This idea states that only Old Testament laws specifically fulfilled in the New Testament are non-binding (such as sacrificial laws, ceremonial laws and dietary laws). The moral Law of God is still the ethical standard for governing individuals and society.

In discussing theonomy, we should first explain clearly what we are not talking about. We are not talking about salvation, but merely government of individuals in society. Salvation cannot come through the Law, but only by grace through faith. A Christian is not under the Law as a means of obtaining salvation; nor are we under the curse of the Law since we were justified by faith. Yet when modern evangelicals claim, "I'm not under the Law," what they often mean is that they are not in favor of it or they are not keeping it. Such a view is called: antinomianism (anti-Law) -- a heresy.

We should next distinguish between justification and sanctification. It is grace alone through faith alone which is the means of our justification and our sanctification. But the moral Law of God remains the measure of sanctification for the believer. Thus, grace is not merely a "covering for our individual acts of sin" but it is "power over all sin."

The moral Law of God, when codified as a basis for civil law, restrains the passion of the sinner (i.e., capital punishment is a deterrent to violent crime). It also acts as a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. Knowledge of the moral Law of God brings individuals knowledge of sin. Then more may be converted through faith in Christ as Lord and Savior. How can we be saved unless we first know that we are sinners?

Theonomy implies the systematic theology of covenantalism: the belief that God operates through covenants, or eternally binding legal agreements; that there is no division between the Old and New Testaments; that the New Covenant includes the moral Law of the Old Covenant; that the Old Covenant required grace through faith in Jesus Christ as a means of obtaining personal salvation.

The system of government resulting from theonomy is called a theocracy: literally, "God's government." When we speak of a theocracy, it should be clear that we are not talking about a state run by a national church, or an ecclesiocracy, such as the Holy Roman Empire, or the totalitarian military dictatorships in Muslim fundamentalist states. In a true theocracy, the state does not control the church, nor the church the state, but both spheres of society are under the government of God. There is implied a decentralization of power or a "Christian Republican" form of government.

Opposed to theonomy and covenantalism is the system of dispensational theology proposed by J.N. Darby. Dispensationalism has become popular in the last 150 years through the Scofield reference Bible, which systematized Darby's teachings. Although dispensationalism is currently in vogue, it was not the theology of the reformers Luther and Calvin, the Puritans, the revivalists of the Great Awakenings, nor of great theologians of the 19th century such as Charles Spurgeon and Charles Hodge. It was the Protestants of the Reformation and the Puritans who developed the theology of covenantalism in modern times.

How Theonomists Differ from the Christian Right

The Christian Right may be criticized for putting an undue emphasis on "political solutions" and for not relying strictly on biblical law. Simply put: either we will have man's law or God's law as a standard for civil legislation. We are not looking for a "voice at the table" nor are we seeking "equal time" with the godless promoters of pornography, abortion, safe-sodomy subsidies,

socialism, etc. We want them silenced and punished according to God's Law-Word.

Here is a brief list intended for the defense against the usual distortions, misunderstandings and apprehensions regarding some of the goals of Christian Reconstruction.

1. We believe that civil government is only one sphere of government. In fact, it is not even the most important one. We advocate regeneration first and only then reconstruction. We do not advocate revolution.

We are postmillennialists and believe that in the long term the majority of society will be saved or will at least outwardly conform to God's Law. Therefore, our goal is not to capture the political realm, but to work for regeneration of individuals and families at the local level and to reform the church by teaching correct doctrine especially in the area of biblical law. A brief perusal of Reconstructionist books will prove that this is the case. A few deal with civil politics. Most deal with families, the church and Christian education. Most of the early materials for home schooling children were written by Reconstructionists.

A little known fact: R.J. Rushdoony, aside from being the founder of Christian Reconstruction, is also the founder of the modern home schooling movement. Most people who deride the Reconstructionist movement for being "too political" don't realize that.

2. We do not advocate the domination of the church over the state. Nor do we want the state to dominate the church. We want both church and state to conform to God's law. Thus we advocate a "theocracy" -- the rule of God in society through His law. We do not advocate an "ecclesiocracy" -- the rule of the state by the church. We want both church and state to independently conform to biblical law.

How will this be accomplished? From the bottom up, not from the top down. We do not want the state to rule in our private lives. We do not want the state to educate our children or otherwise intrude into our families.

You may ask, In a biblically reconstructed society: Who will be able to vote? Who will be able to rule? Elections will still be determined by popular vote of the people and legislation will still be voted on by representatives. Communities will have been reconstructed through personal regeneration so that the majority of the electorate will be Christian or will hold to a "Christian philosophy." Therefore, the only people qualified to rule will be professing Christians who will uphold the moral law of God. This may be called a "theonomic representative democracy" or a "theocratic republic."

3. We recognize that someone must rule. Either the ungodly or the godly will rule. Take your pick. In a biblically reconstructed society, Christians would have the choice of rulers. This choice might be between a Baptist or a Presbyterian, but both would stand for biblical law. An antinomian or an atheist may run for office, but his views would be so unpopular that he would stand no chance of being elected.

Q:--Would differing theologies among Christian rulers affect their view of civil law?

A:-- Undoubtedly!

Q:-- Would civil rulers be able to interfere with the affairs of the church?

A:-- Definitely not!

Thus, while we believe that theology cannot be divorced from a man's view of civil politics, we do not believe that church polity can in any way be regulated by the civil government.

4. We recognize that the only standard for civil law is biblical law. Civil law must have some standard: either it is human autonomy (what man sees as right in his own eyes) or it is biblical law

(what God declares to be right in His Word). Again, take your pick!

Some have objected that this would lead to the mass stoning of homosexuals and incorrigible children. Reconstructionists must emphasize that what we want is not strong rule by the federal government in determining these matters, but the freedom for individual Christians, families, churches, and local community governments to rule without interference from a centralized state. We believe that Reconstruction is from the ground up. Mass regeneration must precede Reconstruction. As more are converted to Christ, more individuals become self-governing. This leads to stronger families and churches and the ability of local communities to govern their own affairs. Thus the total numbers of cases of sodomy or of uncontrollable children would grow less and less. The state would rule in fewer and fewer cases.

5. We do not want any one religious denomination to dominate political life in America. The is apparent from viewing the Reconstructionist movement. Some are Baptist, some are Presbyterian, others Charismatic, Episcopalian, Congregationalist, Methodist, etc.

We are united on our adherence to Reformed Social Theory, Biblical Law, Eschatology of Victory, Christian Dominion in Society, and Presuppositional Apologetics. We are all Protestants, but we have very different ideas in terms of theology. No person in a biblically Reconstructed society would be forced to adhere to any one denominational belief.

6. We do not want to return to Old Testament Law in its entirety. The New Testament has rescinded certain aspects of the Mosaic Law, such as religious ceremonies, feasts, and dietary laws. There are moral laws given in the New Testament as well. We believe that all of Scripture is the basis for law, not merely the Old Testament.

7. We believe that there are two biblically prescribed punishments enforceable by the state: execution and restitution. We do not believe in jail sentences. We believe in only the biblically prescribed punishments for violations of the moral law.

We do not believe that the state is the final arbiter in all matters pertaining to the moral law. Most of these cases would be resolved within families or within churches. However, only the state may execute criminals for capital crimes; only the state "bears the sword" (see Romans 13).

8. We want civil government to punish evil doers according to biblical sanctions. We want all moral laws of the Old Testament to be enforced according to biblical standards.

Some may object: Isn't this harsh? Isn't this barbaric? No, in fact it will lead to greater liberty for the godly. We want the ungodly punished according to God's Law-Word because it is what God prescribes. We have been conditioned according to a humanistic worldview to reject Old Testament law as "barbaric" or "outdated." God's law is not harsh, barbaric nor antiquated, because God is neither harsh, barbaric nor antiquated!

Main Premises of Theonomy

The general principles used by Reconstructionists with regard to interpreting the Law of God can be enumerated as follows:

1. God's law is eternal. Jesus said that not one jot nor tittle would pass away before heaven and earth passed away. This includes the laws of Moses.

2. Not all law is "binding" on Christians under the New Covenant. For instance, the obligation of sacrifices was satisfied when Jesus died on the cross. When Christ said: "It is finished," he died once for all our sins. Therefore, sacrificial laws are still valid (they have not passed away) but they have been fulfilled once for all. Other laws not considered binding have to do with cleanness and uncleanness, dietary laws, feast days, and religious ceremonies. These are still valid and have

meaning, but both the laws and their sanctions have been fulfilled through Christ's death on the cross.

3. Old Testament Laws are no longer binding only if addressed by the New Testament. If a law was specifically addressed by Jesus or one of the apostles in the New Covenant as having an altered New Covenant application, then that law or category of laws, is no longer considered binding. In Covenant Theology, this is known as a "Covenantal Shift."

4. All "moral" laws are still in effect. The principle here is if the New Testament is silent on a moral law, then the Old Testament law is still binding. For instance, the New Testament says nothing about bestialism. Surely, no one would claim that that is no longer valid because it is in the Old Covenant. Moral laws do not need to be specifically "renewed" by the New Covenant to be binding. Jesus, in fact, renewed all of the moral laws.

5. The sanctions of the moral laws are also still in effect. However, all the major Reconstructionist thinkers argue that there has been a "covenantal shift" in regard to sanctions dispensed by the church and sanctions dispensed by the state. Only the state may execute criminals under the New Covenant. For crimes that come under the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical government, the church may excommunicate its members and pronounce imprecations (curses) on sinners. But the church may never execute its members. Here, the way the law is enforced has changed.

6. All the sanctions of the law are still enforced, but some are enforced in a different manner. Under the New Covenant, crimes against God (blasphemy, idolatry, etc.) are punished in a way that seems less harsh in this life, but in reality, being delivered over to hell with the church as a witness is a far more serious punishment.

Reconstructionists differ and argue about how the law is to be applied in some cases. We do not understand how to apply it in every case. Sometimes it might be difficult for us to understand. But does that make the Old Testament law invalid? Does that make it wrong, because we don't understand it, or it may seem harsh to our modern sentimentality? Absolutely not! The enemies of God's law like to argue that laws that do not seem right in their own eyes, cannot be valid. They say, "I cannot see how this could be true," or, "I accept this law, but I cannot accept that law." We need to be careful that we do not become a law unto our own selves. The standard is always the Word of God.

Common Questions on Theonomy

The points outlined above, are a fair and accurate description of Christian Reconstruction. This is by no means comprehensive, but it represents the main premises of theonomy as agreed upon by all major Reconstructionist thinkers.

I obviously cannot answer all questions that have been posed about Christian Reconstruction in so short a space. However, here I will briefly answer some of the more common questions about theonomy:

1. In what specific sense, and to what scope, does Christian Reconstruction see Old Testament Law as applicable to modern society?

In general, all the moral laws of the Old Testament are still binding, while dietary and ceremonial laws are non-binding.

2. What practical means does Christian Reconstruction advocate for applying Old Testament Law?

Mainly through regeneration. Reconstructionists do not advocate a strong federal government, but we advocate self-government with liberty.

3. Would theological "orthodoxy" be an area enforced by civil government?

No, absolutely not. This is the domain of the church.

4. Who would determine what is orthodox and how would it be determined? What penalties would be prescribed for heresy?

The church has the power of excommunication. One of our goals is to reform the church so that it becomes more uniform in doctrine and practices church discipline. This would be accomplished by advocating creedal orthodoxy (i.e., the patristic creeds of the church: Apostles, Nicene, Athanasian, Chalcedon). Beyond this we would like to see every church voluntarily adopt a confessional statement which outlines their theological views; their form of government; and other beliefs. We stand for a great deal of liberty in this -- the freedom to disagree on the "non-essentials." However, we believe that Protestantism with its emphasis on the sovereignty of God and salvation by grace through faith, will become more widespread in the world as time goes on. The Holy Spirit accomplishes this in men's hearts. It is not imposed externally, but comes by internal revelation through the Word of God.

5. How would Christian Reconstructionism define "freedom of religion"? Is it an "inalienable right" to be protected by the government?

Any person -- Jew, Moslem, Catholic, Protestant -- would be free in a Biblically Reconstructed society under the civil law to worship. The civil government has no power to restrict religion. The civil government has an obligation to see that all people obey the moral law as it falls into civil jurisdiction. Thus religious expressions which contradict the Ten Commandments would not be publicly tolerated. The domain of the church is to preach truth. Because Reconstructionists are postmillennialists, we believe that eventually, organized false religions will become rare, if not extinct. This will be accomplished mainly through the efforts of the church, not the state.

6. Are you saying that all of the moral laws of the Old Testament are applicable to modern society? What about Old Testament laws that require stoning, such as Exodus 21:17, "And he who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death."

The question about incorrigible children is a common one. The so-called "harshness" of this punishment is often posed to refute the idea of theonomy as the basis for civil law. However, I know that this law and its punishment under the Old Covenant was just because God is just. Therefore, I ask, what has changed under the New Covenant so that the law and its punishment are now unjust? Has God changed? No! Has the Law changed? Jesus said: Not one jot! Therefore I ask: Why not now? Perhaps the problem is with us and not with the law?

However, I will attempt to explain this. We are talking about incorrigibility here. Cursing one's parents does not mean simply swearing. What is implied here is far more serious. Incorrigibility would be required to be proven before the local civil elders before the child could be executed. It would need to be demonstrated that the child is out of control and will not obey his parents even when the most serious punishment -- death -- is threatened.

In the United States of America, in this century, there were laws on the books in some states that said that a thief could be put to death for repeat offenses. This goes beyond what the Bible prescribes, but we see the same principle at work -- capital punishment for incorrigibility.

Rebellion against one's parents is listed together with the most heinous crimes in Romans. In this case, if he persisted in his rebellion against God, it would be the responsibility of the civil elders to deal with him. Isn't it likely that such a rebel would ultimately be put on trial for some other capital offense and be put to death?

The family is one of God's governmental units. Rebellion against the government is commensurate to treason. Today, we have no problem with seeing treason against the civil government as a capital crime. The problem is that we have a low view of the family today. The family is actually a higher form of government than the state and deserves greater protection. Rebellion against the family is an expression of rebellion against God's first established form of government and therefore against God himself.

Capital crimes against the family include rebellion to parents, homosexuality and adultery. Sound harsh? Then what you are saying, in effect, is that God is harsh and that treason against the family is "not as bad" as treason against the state.

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