

## PENULTIMATE THOUGHTS ON THEONOMY

by John M. Frame

After some twenty years of studying, discussing and debating theonomy, I would like to summarize the points I think are most important. I would like to believe that these will be my final "thoughts," but I have learned never to regard any of my analyses as final. Hence, I call these "penultimate."

"Theonomy" can be defined broadly as adherence to God's Law, which would make all Christians, especially Reformed Christians, theonomists. Here, however, I define the term more narrowly as a school of thought within Reformed theology that prefers literal, specific, and detailed applications of Mosaic civil laws to modern civil government. The word "prefers" gives us some leeway. At points, the theonomists, like the rest of us, apply the Law only in general and non-literal ways. But they tend more than the rest of us to prefer the specific and the literal.

Clearly theonomy so defined is not a clear-cut hermeneutic which prescribes the answer to every exegetical question. Theonomists differ much among themselves as to how the civil laws are to be applied. As I have argued elsewhere, the line between theonomists and more conventional Reformed thinkers is not sharp but fuzzy. Rather, theonomy as defined above is an *emphasis, a tendency*.

Whether the theonomist tendency or the more conventional Reformed tendency is correct will depend, in my opinion, not upon general theological principles, but on the exegesis of specific passages. If, on investigation, the best exegesis finds that these texts warrant highly specific, literal and detailed applications, then we will have to say that the theonomists were right. If that exegesis more commonly points the other way, we will have to say that the theonomists were wrong.

I cannot here present exegeses of all the relevant passages; but perhaps the following comments will be found helpful.

1. Historically, Reformed thought has shown elements of both relatively theonomic and relatively non-theonomic emphases. I do not believe that either approach may claim unequivocally to be "the Reformed position." Of course, Reformed people are not antinomian. They believe that Christians are governed by God's Law, and that includes the Old Testament. But Reformed exegetes including Calvin have varied greatly as to how literally and specifically they apply the details of the Mosaic legislation to their own situations.

2. Kline's rejection of theonomy presupposes some ideas which are themselves controversial and in my opinion dubious: (a) the sharp distinction between life-norms and faith-norms; (b) the derivation from the Noachic Covenant of a religiously neutral state; (c) his view of the New Testament as the sole Canon of the Christian church. We

should not, therefore, assume that Kline any more than theonomy represents the Reformed tradition unambiguously.

3. Other critics of theonomy tend to be very vague in their arguments, or even reveal a certain antipathy toward the Mosaic laws themselves (e.g. the horror displayed at the very idea of making homosexuality a capital crime).

4. Both Bahnsen and Kline make broad, bold, programmatic statements that they modify considerably in their detailed discussions. This happens to such an extent that in my opinion their bold programmatic statements do not really or fairly represent the views they are presenting. In actual fact, they are much closer together than their rhetoric would suggest.<sup>1</sup>

5. In the application of Scripture, there is never unity without diversity or diversity without unity. Every law of Scripture must be applied to situations. Since every situation is different, every application is somewhat different. On the other hand, since all Scripture is God's word, all applications have one thing in common: they are applications of the Word of God, applications of a fundamental unity. Rhetoric, therefore, which denies unity or diversity is misleading. Contrary to theonomic rhetoric, there is *always* "change" from one application to the next of the same law. Contrary to anti-theonomic rhetoric, all of God's word must be brought to bear upon all of human life (Matt. 4:4).

6. "Change" in this connection applies both to redemptive-historical change (e.g. Old Testament to New Testament) and to cultural change (e.g. we no longer fence our roofs because we no longer use the roof as living space). Assessing the relevance of all these forms of change is not always easy. Should believers wear tassels on their garments? Is that ruled out by redemptive-historical change? Is it ruled out because the tassel has no symbolic value in the present-day world? How about head-covering for women in worship? We should not assume that for each of these questions there is one obvious and easy answer, such that those who come to opposite conclusions are insincere or heretical. God has ordained, and therefore takes account of, our epistemological limitations.

7. There is some confusion in theonomy between present and future application of the Law. Often when Bahnsen is pressed as to the difficulty of enforcing theonomy in today's world, he argues that the Mosaic laws should *not* be enforced today. They presuppose, he argues, a people who understand and believe the Law and who are committed to be God's people. But this idea turns theonomy from a practical present program to a future ideal. Yet, the rhetoric of theonomists is often calculated to arouse immediate action. I suspect that few of us would disagree with theonomy if it were simply presented as a future ideal. Sure, if the postmillennial hope is realized and the world-society with its institutions becomes largely Christian, then most of us would find very attractive the prospect of living under something like the Mosaic civil law. Now I

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<sup>1</sup> See my essay in the WTS volume *Theonomy: a Reformed Critique*.

agree that there are elements of the Mosaic Law that would be enforceable and helpful in contemporary society, e.g. double restitution for theft without prison sentences. But the question of what is or is not to be implemented now is a difficult question, and it is made all the more difficult by the present/future distinction. We need not only to determine how literally the Law is to be applied in the ideal situation; we must also determine how it is to be applied in the non-ideal situation of today.

8. Much of the rhetoric of theonomy is based on the assumed need for certainty on specifics. I often heard Bahnsen ask candidates for licensure/ordination how they would argue against, say, bestiality, without referring to Old Testament case law. We need the case laws, the argument goes, because the other parts of Scripture are not sufficiently specific. Another example: theonomists typically deny the appeal to "natural light" (an appeal commonly made by Calvin and his successors) because the natural light is not sufficiently specific in its directives. The argument suggests that we need divine direction that is perfectly specific, that leaves no room for human reflection; else we will be obeying ourselves rather than God.

But in my view, that is not the nature of Christian ethics. In Christian ethics there is always a "situational perspective." There is always a situation to which the Law must be applied. And Scripture does not always specify that situation in detail. There is, therefore, always a role for human reason: to take the word of God and apply it to the situation. No command in Scripture is perfectly specific; all commands in Scripture are general to some extent. Scripture does not tell me what key to press on my computer as I write this article. But it does tell me in general what I ought to say. Scripture does not anywhere specifically forbid abortion; we determine that abortion is wrong by applying the eighth commandment and the language of Scripture concerning the unborn. Scripture does not speak of nuclear war, of the use of artificial life-support, etc.

Thus, we should not be frustrated that we do not have, say, a scripturally dictated maximum figure limiting government taxation. We will never escape the need to apply general principles to specific situations. If we wish to call that an appeal to "natural law" or "conscience," we certainly may.<sup>2</sup>

9. After some reflection, I have come to the conclusion that theonomy (like Dooyeweerdianism in the 1960s) is a good case study of how theological ideas should *not* be introduced. Forgive the personal reference, but consider this: In my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* I introduce a "multi-perspectival" approach to theology. Now imagine how I might have written the book in a very different way: I might have said that multi-perspectivalism was the clear teaching of Scripture and of the Reformers, but that since the Reformation down to the present the church has been dominated by wicked mono-perspectivalists who have impoverished and disempowered the church by their stupid and willful heresy. With the right rhetoric, I might have sent my students forth to start all sorts of battles in churches, denominations, Christian schools and other organizations between "mono-perspectivalists" and "multi-perspectivalists." Eventually,

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<sup>2</sup> Though I have some criticisms of the natural law *theory* of ethics.

I might have become the founder of a denomination called the "Multi-perspectivalist Presbyterian Church" (MPC, of course). And perhaps in time I might have been interviewed by Bill Moyers.

I could have made a case for such a polemical and partisan approach. In fact, I believe that Scripture *is* multi-perspectival and that most good theology (like that of the Reformers) is also multi-perspectival. I also believe that the church has been impoverished by certain narrower approaches which absolutize certain "emphases," or "orders," over against others and which over-generalize and misapply scriptural principles by ignoring perspectives other than their own. Such theology creates rifts in the church. That is denominationalism, in essence.<sup>3</sup>

But I did not present my case that way, for I hate ecclesiastical factionalism (1 Cor. 1-3) as much as I love multi-perspectivalism. And I believe that the best way to communicate multi-perspectivalism is gently, leading Christians to see that this is what they already believe in their heart of hearts, rather than creating adversarial relationships with my readers before they even understand what I am saying.

The sharp polemics of the theonomic movement (and, to be sure, of its critics in return) have been in my view quite unnecessary and indeed counter-productive to its own purposes. People have a hard time seeing the important truths that theonomy communicates; it is hard to learn from someone who is always accusing you of something. Reformed people have always had a high regard for God's Law. They are not, on the whole, antinomians and should not be stigmatized as such. Theonomy's approach should not be to attack them for "latent antinomianism," but to ask probing questions, to guide those readers gently into more thoughtful and accurate applications of God's Word.

Am I condemning here the accusatory language used by the Reformers and Scripture itself? Doubtless there is a place for harsh language. Jesus was harsh with the Pharisees, but not with the woman of Samaria, although he certainly did convict her of sin. In general I think the Reformers were justified in their polemics, but I confess I have often wondered how much more persuasive they might have been if they had more regularly observed the adage that "you catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

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<sup>3</sup> See my *Evangelical Reunion*.