

REGARDING THEONOMY: AN ESSAY OF CONCERN

Douglas E. Chismar and David A. Rausch*

In recent years the word "theonomy" has become prevalent in discussions among evangelical theologians. A new group has come on the scene, the Christian Reconstruction movement, whose members view themselves as the defenders of theonomy. This movement, however, has been followed by controversy on campuses throughout the United States, and *ad hominem* argument has abounded on all sides. In a less frenzied fashion we would like to examine some of the main premises of the theonomic viewpoint in an effort to exhibit some of its undesirable implications while expressing our concern.

The term "theonomy" lends itself to two interpretations. Both are employed by theonomists. "Theonomy" in the general sense means a system of ethics founded on God's revelation, as opposed to "autonomy" (self-law) or "heteronomy" (sociological law). Most Christian ethicists have claimed to be theonomists in this sense; John Murray, Helmut Thielicke, Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich are examples.

A more narrow or specific interpretation of theonomy is that which holds to "the abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail."¹ The entire Bible "in its far-reaching details" is to be the source of ethics. To cite a leading theonomist: "The Christian is obligated to keep the whole law of God as a pattern of sanctification and . . . this law is to be enforced by the civil magistrate where and how the stipulations of God so designate."² This thesis is more specific in that it makes assertions as to how God's revelation is to be handled as a source of ethics and assertions concerning the means by which God's revelation is to be propagated in society. It is this thesis that is the source of present controversy.

In the December 1981 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Greg Bahnsen put forward a philosophical argument for the theonomic approach based on the doctrine of God's immutability (unchangeable nature).³ Non-theonomic approaches to ethics, according to Bahnsen, are based on the changing beliefs, values and whims of humans. Thus they often fall into arbitrariness, tribalism, relativism and trendiness. Only a foundation for moral authority and truth based on the absolute revealed will of God (a divine command theory) avoids contamination by these passing fancies of human society. But what, asks

*Douglas Chismar is chairman of the department of philosophy at Ashland College in Ohio, and David Rausch is professor of Church history and Judaic studies at Ashland College Theological Seminary.

¹G. Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* (Nutley: Craig, 1979) 45.

²Ibid., p. 34.

³The following argument and all quotes (unless indicated otherwise) are taken from a cassette tape of Bahnsen's address, "The Immutability of God's Commandments," to the Evangelical Theological Society, December 28, 1981.

Bahnsen, of Plato's *Euthyphro* objection that God himself might be arbitrary in his decrees? Are the passing whims of God preferable to those of human culture? Bahnsen's response, as is standardly argued by divine command theorists, is that God's commands are nonarbitrary because they are an expression of his unchanging character.

Thus far the argument has followed the rather conventional lines of defending a divine command theory of ethics (theonomy in the general sense). But at this point the argument takes an interesting turn. From the fact that God's commands are an expression of his immutable nature it is inferred that the commands themselves must therefore be immutable. To quote Bahnsen:

What we see then, in the biblical, evangelical search for ethical absolutes, is that such absolute principles are grounded in the nature of the immutable God; consequently, for our Bible-based moral principles to *be* absolute, in answer to Plato and Fletcher and the others, they must be, even as Scripture portrays them as being, *unchanging*. That is, moral absolutism presupposes the immutability of God's commandments. Without that premise, our position sooner or later succumbs to relativism.

Therefore not only is God's nature unchanging but also his commands are unchanging.

Now Bahnsen takes the third and final step. He maintains that if God's commands are truly unchangeable or immutable, then they must be construed as forever binding. Evangelicals, he alleges, are too often guilty of an unconscious incoherence or inconsistency in their thinking. Though they sometimes argue vigorously for ethical absolutism, at other times they succumb to moral relativism by suggesting that some of God's laws have changed—i.e., that they are no longer binding. According to Bahnsen the only remedy for this "latent antinominism" is to hold that all of God's commandments, as absolutes, continue to be applicable and authoritative unless specifically superseded by later commandments or initially limited in scope by the context of the giving of the command. We are thus led to the position of "theonomy" in the specific sense: "the abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail."

The analysis of this argument might proceed in a number of directions. Our concern here will be to clarify and critique some of the philosophical concepts employed in the argument. In particular we will seek to show that the concept of "immutability" employed in the philosophical argument for theonomy, reproduced above, is a slippery and, it turns out, vacuous one that does not solve the hermeneutical problems of application raised by situational relativists.

We will begin by making clear the difference between a situation-relative and an absolutistic ethical system. One might define a situational ethic by considering the following imaginary excerpt from the situationist encyclopedia of moral obligations, presented in schematic form:

In any situation, characterized by C_1 , do w ;
 in any situation characterized by C_2 , do x ;
 in any situation characterized by C_3 , do y ; etc.

Here w , x , and y stand for actions, and C_1 to C_3 denote sets of situational variants—morally relevant properties affecting the decision in each case, but different enough from each other to avoid being captured by a general rule. In contrast to this the absolutistic approach might be described as follows:

In any situation (whether characterized by C_1 or C_2 , etc.), do x.

Or, in other words:

In every situation, do x.

Absolutistic rules apply and are binding across all situations (except those where the action in question is entirely irrelevant to the situation at hand), while situational commands apply and are binding only relative to individualized or particular situations.

The notion of an immutable command also requires further definition. As noted earlier, Bahnsen holds that the immutability of a commandment denotes the permanency of its binding authority. The following sort of statement captures this adequately:

For all times, every person S who is a P should do x.

An example of such a command would be:

For all times, every person who is a young male reaching age 18 should register for the draft.

The problem with a command of this kind, however, is that one can easily conceive of times when it is not applicable. For example, what about times when there is no draft? Surely the command would not apply then as well. But if it does not apply at all times, then has there not been a change—to the detriment of immutability?

One clever way to avoid this problem is suggested by the following kind of statement:

For all times, if it were 1980, then the Cleveland Browns would be the AFC central division champions.

The proposition, “the Cleveland Browns are the 1980 AFC central division champions,” is immutably true, because it describes a state of affairs that existed in the past and, as we all know, the past never changes. The question is: Can we confer immutability on moral commands in a similar manner? Certainly. Consider the following command:

For all times, if any person were a young male reaching age 18 during a time when the draft is operational, then he should register for the draft.

Or, stated schematically:

For all times, if any person S were a P and found himself in situation C_x , then he should do x.

Removing all of the counterfactual (“if it were . . . then”) language:

It is morally binding for all times that whenever any person S is a P and finds himself in situation C_x , he should do x.

These commands are immutable, but this is vacuous immutability because the command may make no difference for most situations in life. Commands immutable in this sense may be applicable or binding over only the smallest bit of time or the most particularized situation. Yet they are immutable because they are forever binding (on those bits of time or particular situations). Ultimately, this form of immutability amounts to saying:

For all times, the commandment c is binding at time t.

There is nothing contradictory about this statement. It is just vacuous.⁴

Another more gutsy and important kind of immutability is the following:

For all times, for any person S and situation C_n, do x (where "n" covers all situations, a through z).

Thus:

For all times, no matter who you are or what your situation or time, do not ever commit adultery.

This commandment is immutable in the sense that one can envision no situation that might change it—i.e., cause it to no longer be binding. This strong immutability (so we shall call it) is more impressive, but it suffers from the seemingly fatal difficulty (noted earlier) that it prevents building in any applicability conditions. There are essentially only three ways to solve this problem: (a) One can insert the applicability conditions into the variable n in C_n. The problem is that if these are made very specific, one ends up sacrificing the absoluteness of the command, leaving one with the kind of situational ethic described above. (b) Sacrifice strong immutability altogether and adopt vacuous immutability. (c) Keep absolutism and strong immutability but define n in general terms. According to this strategy (probably the most common among Christian ethicists), one maintains that there are ethical absolutes that are forever binding but only in the form of general principles. As such they are not restricted to overly narrow applications and hence do not require extensive and highly specific applicability conditions.

The problem of application is one that all ethicists face, theologians included. Bahnsen acknowledges the problem, admitting that "there are obviously some Old Testament commandments which we are reluctant, sometimes loath, to follow today." Which strategy do theologians adopt in response? Obviously approach (a)—the situational approach—is out. Also approach (c)—the general principles approach—is ruled out by theologians. Bahnsen strongly asserts that God "did not deliver to us merely some broad and general moral principles, but He revealed very extensive, specific, and all-encompassing commands."⁵ And these, as noted earlier, are held to be eternally binding. How then do theologians solve the problem of changing applications?

The theonomic response consists, first, of classifying the OT law according to "genres." Briefly summarized, Bahnsen's classification is as follows:

1. *Special imperatives*—intended for a particular use and specific time, obvious at first reading or by context
2. *Standing laws/moral policy laws*—justice-defining in purpose
 - a. summary laws—"given in summary form, very general"
 - b. case laws—"which illustrate, define, and in some ways qualify the summary laws that are found"
3. *Redemptive laws*—ceremonial and restorative laws—mercy extending in purpose

⁴An analogous transformation of categorical statements to hypotheticals is performed in his criticism of Kantian ethics by A. N. Prior, *Logic and the Basis of Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979) 40-41.

⁵Bahnsen, *Theonomy* 35; cf. p. 260.

Bahnsen acknowledges that “the very nature of some commands, when properly interpreted, do not require the same thing of us today.” For example, special imperatives (1), such as the command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, obviously are irrelevant to twentieth-century Christians. Also, commands falling under heading (3) would, for theological reasons, cease to be binding today. But what has happened to immutability? The answer: Nothing. Provided these commands are understood as particular, they can still be conceived as immutable. Thus Bahnsen asserts that “it is always the case that Abraham was bound to sacrifice Isaac when God said so.”⁶ This is true even when God is not currently saying so; it is “true universally when the conditions are met.”

This approach is nothing other than the appeal to vacuous immutability. This explains, as well, how theonomists can hold that the case laws (2b) and not just the summary laws (2a) are binding for all time, despite apparent radical changes in application. The problem with this strategy, however, is that it accomplishes so little. Vacuous immutability does not provide any differentia that distinguish it from situational relativism, as illustrated by the following vacuously immutable commandment:

For all times, if any person S were a P and found himself in situation C_i, then he should do w.

Even if the case laws of the OT are vacuously immutable, the present situation must be consulted to determine if one should presently obey it. Vacuous immutability reduces to situational relativism, a tragic outcome for the strongly anti-relativist theonomic approach to ethics.

Can anything be salvaged from the theonomic insistence on the abiding relevance of the case laws of the OT? A useful hint can be gleaned from Bahnsen’s book, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*:

Now the ten commandments are an *excellent* summary of God’s law, but a summary does *not cancel the content* of that which it summarizes. Love summarizes the law, but it does not replace it; the decalogue summarizes the biblical ethic, but it is not a substitute for the whole. The ten commandments cannot be understood and properly applied without the explanation given them throughout the case laws of the Older Testament. The case law illustrates the application or qualification of the principle laid down in the general commandment by means of a concrete illustration . . . Given the extended series of case laws for this commandment throughout the Scriptures, the law has information and direction to impart; its summary nature is not disquieting.⁷

This passage hints at another way that all the moral commands can be forever binding. We might construe the case laws as playing a permanent definitional—i.e., epistemic—role. In playing this role the case laws help to provide or make explicit the underlying principles (or “summary laws”). They do so, as even Bahnsen admits, by illustrating the application of the law “in terms of the various cases and situations which confronted the leadership in the Mosaic era”—that is, they are binding as illustrations or paradigm cases. The case laws are

⁶Bahnsen offers as another example: “Everybody with the following fingerprints on January the 2nd is to do the following thing. . . .”

⁷Bahnsen, *Theonomy* 313-314. If this were all the theonomists were suggesting, we would not be writing this essay.

epistemically binding for all times in that they provide the paradigm instantiations of the principles or summary laws. Only the principles, however, are morally binding for all times in anything besides the vacuous sense of immutability.

This makes much more sense out of the theonomist approach. Thus we are not bound to put fences around our roofs today, but we may be bound to put them around our swimming pools. Likewise, Paul can infer from the case law forbidding the muzzling of the ox while it is treading out grain that it is wrong (for us) to refuse to give the minister his proper compensation. The case laws, in these instances, are not morally binding today, except in the vacuous sense. However, they are epistemically binding for all times in the important way of helping us to generate new laws from the general principles (summary laws) found in the OT.⁸

The notion of epistemic immutability seems to make good sense out of Bahnsen's call for the "abiding validity of the Law in exhaustive detail." But it does so by adopting strategy (b)—that it is the principles, and not the case laws, of the OT that retain moral authority for God's new-covenant people. And it is just this view that theonomists have been eager to repudiate. As is clear from the last chapters of Bahnsen's book and other theonomist literature, the movement wishes to insist that the law is morally binding for all time in exhaustive detail. We have seen that this will not work (in fact, it leads to situational relativism). There is, however, one last-ditch escape hatch that offers itself to the theonomists. The only way that the highly specific case laws of the OT can have anything more than a vacuous kind of immutability is if our society were to actually satisfy the conditions of the antecedent of the immutability counterfactuals—that is, if OT case laws are morally immutable only in the following sense:

For all times, if any person S were a P and found himself in situation C_x, then he should do x.

Then we must be in situation C_x for the commandment to have anything but vacuous moral immutability. But situation C_x was the theocratic state of affairs described in the OT. The only way the individual case laws can be nonvacuously morally binding for us today is if we are, in fact, still under the OT theocratic system. And it is just this that theonomists hold to be the case.

In response to this, two important points must be made. First, there is the problem that even a contemporary theocratic state of affairs does not guarantee that all characteristics of the OT situation are replicated. Perhaps we are, in some sense, under God's theocratic reign today (at least we shall grant this for argument's sake). This still does not take care of the massive cultural/technological/geographical differences that exist between OT society and our own. Being under a theocracy today does not guarantee that all or any of the case laws are

⁸Two ways the case laws might serve as paradigm instantiations of the principles are: First, the case laws might serve to provide the "third term" of a moral syllogism, by which modern modes of conduct might be related to those described in the principles. For example, "muzzling the ox" might help to suggest a third-term bringing together, say, "stealing" and "not giving the minister his recompense." Second, a number of case laws instantiating one principle may provide a data base on which one performs an induction to locate the common characteristic of all of the specific kinds of conduct. This common characteristic then becomes the third term. For example, the many kinds of sexual sins prohibited by the case laws may be compared in search of some common characteristic (e.g., sex outside of marriage or forced sexual participation) that makes them forms of *porneia* (the principle, cf. 1 Cor 6:9). The difficulty with both procedures is determining which principle is being instantiated. Case laws are not catalogued in this manner uniformly.

still literally applicable. Bahnsen admits as much when he finds himself forced to translate putting a balustrade around one's roof to putting a fence around one's swimming pool. The attractive simplicity of the theonomic approach ("just follow the case laws") does not enable us to escape these difficult (and, we would argue, principle-bound) translation tasks.

Second, there are theological difficulties surrounding the assertion of a NT theocracy. Besides the exegetical issue of Jesus' view of the kingdom (cf. John 18:36; Acts 1:6 ff.; etc.), important questions must be raised concerning those characteristics of the old covenant that do not appear to be present under the new. Briefly summarizing what is a vast area of inquiry, these would include such things as the geopolitical nature of the OT kingdom and its ethnocentricity (Deut 4:7-8) and the direct supernatural participation by God in the legal system of Israel (e.g., through the priests, Deut 17:8-13; through lots, Josh 18:6 ff.; through the Urim and Thummim, Exod 28:30; through the waters of bitterness, Num 5:11 ff.; through supernatural anointing, 11:10 ff.). Also, there is the hardness of their hearts (Matt 19:8; cf. Jer 31:33 ff.), the brutality required to motivate them to obedience (cf. Lev 26:14 ff.) and the permission (most probably due to the hardness of their hearts) of such practices as polygamy, divorce, slavery and ethnocide. Vengeance is no longer allowed under the new covenant (cf. Rom 12:19 ff.), a fact that has radical implications for interpersonal relationships as well as for supposedly Christian legal codes based on the concept of retribution (cf. Matt 5:38-59). The holiness requirements of God would also apparently be altered, inasmuch as God no longer makes his house in a physical dwelling place with its incumbent environmental demands (e.g., Deut 23:12-14). All of these are genuine and serious theological issues—especially crucial to the theonomist since he has made the present-day relevance of the OT state of affairs the preventative against relativistic forms of ethics.

Unfortunately the problems with the theonomist's concept of a theocratic society go beyond the theological, ethical and philosophical realm. Theonomic economist Gary North has provided the movement with an economic theory that claims that the Bible teaches free-market capitalism and that this is God's economic system. North stresses that the United States as a "Christian" nation has held in the past to God's law in economic practice and, therefore, has been blessed. "Long term economic growth is a sign of God's blessing on His people," North contends. "Rapid growth is a blessing of God which points to our final deliverance from sin and bondage."⁹ According to North, it is a "general phenomenon" that "those living under the rule of God's law-order will prosper and that those living in societies that are in rebellion to God will not prosper."¹⁰ North writes:

But long-term poverty is always a sign of God's curse. The so-called underdeveloped societies are underdeveloped because they are socialist, demonist, and cursed. Any attempt to blame the poverty of the underdeveloped world on the prosperity of the West is absolutely wrong. This is the old Marxist and socialist line. It blindly fails to acknowledge the wrath of God on demonic, tyrannical, and socialist tribal cultures . . . The Bible tells us that the citizens of the Third World ought to feel guilty, to fall

⁹G. North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Program for Victory* (Tyler: Geneva, 1981) 162-163.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 163.

on their knees and repent from their Godless, rebellious, socialist ways. They should feel guilty because they are guilty, both individually and corporately.¹¹

We feel that these statements do not do justice either to the poor or to the economic realities of the third world. In particular, this view fails to take account of the effects of a long history of colonialism, the political instabilities created by superpower meddling, and the unjust mercantilistic way in which third-world countries are handled in the world economy.

In addition, it is our opinion that these concepts adversely affect the theonomist's view of history. During a debate with Ron Sider at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, North explained:

And historically, if we look at Western history, what do we find? Where are the nations that have stamped out pestilence, stamped out famine, stamped out plague? Where are they? They are universally Protestant . . . Because more than any other group on the face of the earth it is Protestantism, for all of its weaknesses, for all of its rebellion, for all of its unwillingness to conform to the covenants of God, the Protestant countries have been blessed. Catholic countries do have the problems, but not to the extent that pagan nations have them. God blesses them comparably.¹²

This appears to be a very parochial view of history, but the theonomist defends it because he believes that the "secular humanists" have written history and distorted it. Thus what history theonomists use they feel compelled to rewrite or carefully edit. In relation to God's law and Christian society, the Byzantines are seen to have had some positive ideas, Calvin's Geneva progressed toward the goal of "dominion," and the Puritans went even further. In fact it is the Puritan application of the law that fascinates the modern theonomist. For example, many of the articles in *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* are devoted to or quote from the Puritan fathers (or John Calvin).¹³ These theonomic articles usually attempt to prove that the Puritans had a "better idea" and that they have received a bad press from "secular humanist" historians. In the Puritans theonomists see a movement that used Biblical law as a tool of dominion, an attempt to make the OT case laws the basis of their systematic reconstruction of all areas of life—indeed, to build a Christian (i.e., Puritan) society. The theonomist views any failure of the Puritans (such as the Salem witchcraft trials) as a violation of otherwise sound Biblical principles.¹⁴

¹¹Ibid. Cf. R. J. Rushdoony, *The Foundations of Social Order* (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972) 224. He adds: "A free economy allows the deserving to get out of the slums, and there has always been an exodus of those with character."

¹²"Ron Sider vs. Gary North: Debate at Gordon-Conwell Seminary" (Tyler: Dominion Tapes, 1981). Right before this argument, North compared Satan's "snubbing of his nose" at God to the third world's snubbing of its nose at God.

¹³Note also the three issues of *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* on Puritanism: "Symposium on Puritanism and Law," 5 (Winter 1978-79); "Symposium, Puritanism and Progress," 6 (Summer 1979); and "Symposium, Puritanism and Society" 6 (Winter 1979-80).

¹⁴See K. House, "The Salem Witch Trials," *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 5 (Winter 1978-79) 133-152. House states: "The fundamental error here seems to have been an insufficient appreciation of Christ and his word" (p. 151). Emphasis is given to the fact that some of the accused were involved in witchcraft and other occult practices, underscoring the weakness of the congregational system and the failure of early Puritan economics. Cf. editor's note on pp. 6-7.

We are, frankly, concerned about such a view. The Puritan experiment in New England was an enforced experiment in applying God's law as the rule of society. Its aim was the model Christian community, and no one was permitted to tamper with their experiment. They were honest about this. They had come for their own religious freedom but were not concerned about allowing religious freedom to others. Dissenters had the "freedom" to leave, and the sooner the better. May we suggest that historically the separation of Church and state has not been maintained under such conditions, and that one of the major problems revolves around the question of who administers God's law in the absence of Jesus Christ (or other forms of direct divine participation, as mentioned earlier in this essay)?

This is, of course, the problem the New England Puritans had. John Davenport wrote John Cotton about the New Haven colony, a colony that hoped to be an improvement on the Massachusetts Bay experiment. Davenport suggests that in all actuality the Church of Christ should be over the state. Cotton recoiled at the thought and wrote a discourse emphasizing to Davenport that Church and state should be separate. Nevertheless by the time one sorts through Cotton's description of "separation" and arrives at the end of his essay we have gone from "Theocracy, or to make the Lord God our governor, is the best form of government in a Christian Commonwealth [Argument 1]" to "That form of government [in which] the power of civil administration is *denied unto unbelievers* and [is] committed to the saints is the *best* form of government in a Christian Commonwealth [Argument 4]."¹⁵ So much for pluralism. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Even the Israelites, for whom theonomy was originally designed, rallied around Moses, holding the laws of God with great enthusiasm and determination, and saying, "All that the Lord has said we will do and obey." Despite severe punishments by God's own hand, special miracles, blessings, and his divine presence with them as an extra boost at its inception, theonomy failed when control and responsibility was left in the hands of men.

Semantically, the word "theonomy" should present no problem. In fact, to some evangelicals the movement that takes theonomy as its banner may seem appealing at first glance. But, as has been shown, it represents a religious movement with some basic philosophical, ethical, theological, economic and historical problems about which the evangelical must be concerned.

¹⁵J. Cotton, "A Discourse About Civil Government," in *Church and State in American History* (ed. J. F. Wilson; Boston: D. C. Heath, 1965) 7. This discourse also declares: "Members fitly chosen out of the church and made free burgesses are fitter to judge and determine according to God than other men [are]" (p. 6).