

Critique of Theonomy: A Taxonomy

—
T. David Gordon

I. Introduction

1. Distinguishing Theonomy from Theonomists

One of the most difficult aspects of polemical theology is being sure that what is being evaluated is a distinctive viewpoint, not the individuals holding the viewpoint. Of necessity, when evaluating a given view, one examines those dimensions that *distinguish* it from other views. It would inevitably be lopsided, then, to confuse a criticism of a view with a criticism of those who hold it. Presumably, those who hold a distinctive view also embrace many other views that are identical with those shared by the church catholic. Individual Theonomists are not intended to be the point of an examination such as this; rather, what is evaluated is the viewpoint that distinguishes Theonomy from other approaches to biblical ethics.

2. Distinguishing Theonomy from Christian Reconstruction

As socioreligious phenomena, Theonomy and Christian Reconstruction are closely related. The individuals involved in the one are ordinarily involved in the other. However, theologically and religiously they can be distinguished. Christian Reconstructionists exist in a variety of forms, and are ordinarily united in their belief that the Western world, and especially the United States, has departed from the Judeo-Christian ethical basis that once characterized its public discourse, with devastating results. Positively, Reconstructionists wish to see the United States return to a more *biblical* approach, or even a more *Judeo-Christian* approach, to the issues of civil life. Theonomy is more specific than this, though it does not disagree with it. Theonomy wishes to see *every* nation conform its civil practices to those revealed in the Mosaic legislation. Thus, Theonomy is more comprehensive than Reconstruction (theoretically concerned that all nations observe the Mosaic legislation) and much more specific about the legislation that it believes is to be observed. Theonomy does not wish merely a return to a biblical ethic, or a Judeo-Christian ethic, but to the ethic of the Sinai covenant.

It is not my purpose to discuss or evaluate Christian Reconstructionism here. It is a broad, many-faced movement, and is beyond the scope of my concern. My purpose is to

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discuss that much narrower program, adopted indeed by many Reconstructionists, ordinarily called Theonomy, as I have described it. I am not arguing that it is wrong not to distinguish them, nor am I arguing that my label or description is the only useful one; I am merely trying to clarify the scope of my intentions.

3. Distinguishing Details from the Basic Program

A further introductory clarification is in order. It is also not my purpose to examine in detail the particular recommendations for legislation, nor the particular exegetical conclusions of the various Theonomists. Those varying particulars are worthy of separate analysis and discussion, but my purpose is much more limited: to examine the hermeneutic governing the entire process. I am evaluating the engine, not the entire train. Further, I am aware that many who consider themselves Theonomists disagree about aspects of that hermeneutical program,

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and so it is not my purpose to "tar" every self-proclaimed Theonomist with the same brush. Individuals should be evaluated individually, and those who do not embrace the hermeneutic that I here describe are free of the critique.

Despite the variety on particulars, however, there can be little doubt that the clearest, most deliberate attempt to describe and defend Theonomy is contained in Gregory L. Bahnsen's *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*.¹ It is my purpose to employ this volume as the most reliable indicator of what Theonomy is. Those who embrace a particular variation differing from Bahnsen's are thus free of the critique here developed, at least potentially.

4. Dividing the Question

It will also be my purpose to critique Theonomy in several ways, in terms of the varying arguments by which it is promoted. Theonomy does not stand on a single leg, but on several. Those individuals who already reject one or two of those legs may find it convenient to skip my discussion of those matters, and go on to the places where I discuss other aspects.

I will not attempt here a refutation of that particular leg of Theonomy known as postmillennialism. Many others have very ably discussed that matter, and the reader is encouraged to read Geerhardus Vos, Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., Herman Ridderbos, O. Palmer Robertson, Meredith G. Kline,² and others who have written in this area. An additional

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reason for my not evaluating postmillennialism here is that there are non-Theonomic postmillennialists. While Theonomy is more attractive to a postmillennialist than to anyone else, one can be a postmillennialist without agreeing with Theonomy.

The following "legs" of the Theonomic stool will be discussed here: the argument from necessity; the Theonomic dependence upon and understanding of Matt 5:17-21; the Theonomic understanding of covenant theology.

5. Giving Credit Where Credit Is Due

As a final introductory comment, I would like to make clear that what follows is profoundly indebted to insights first raised by others. It is not my intention to advance exclusively new arguments against Theonomy, but rather, to gather in one place a brief taxonomy of the major arguments. I have been profoundly helped by others, and much of what follows was already expressed or at least germinal in the writings of others. Especially to be acknowledged, in no particular order, are Meredith G. Kline, Vern S. Poythress, Paul D. Fowler, and Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.³ At the same time, none of these individuals should be held responsible for whatever is untrue, unclear, or unhelpful in what follows.

¹ *Theonomy in Christian Ethics: Expanded Edition with Replies to Critics* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1984)

² I will not attempt here to give exhaustive bibliographies of these individuals. It is ubiquitous in Vos, Ridderbos, and Kline, of course, and is evident in Palmer Robertson's "Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?" in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology* (ed. K. Kantzer and S. Gundry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 209-27, and in Richard B. Gaffin's "Theonomy and Eschatology: Reflections on Postmillennialism," in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (ed. W. Barker and R. Godfrey; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 197-226.

³ All of Kline's writings are implicitly germane, but especially his "Comments on a New-Old Error: A Review of Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*," *WTJ* 41 (1978-79) 172-89. Poythress's considerations are found in audio form in a series of lectures available through Westminster Media, and also in his *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Nashville, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), esp. two of the appendices, "Evaluating Theonomy," (pp. 311-61), and "Does the Greek Word *Pleroo* Sometimes Mean 'Confirm'?" (pp. 363-77), and again in his "Effects of Interpretive Frameworks on the Application of Old Testament Law," in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, 103-23. Paul D. Fowler's review (never published but frequently photocopied) of Bahnsen's

II. Specific Arguments

1. The Argument from Necessity

To my knowledge, Bahnsen's *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* does not depend in any particular measure on this argument. Yet, it is my observation from conversations with Theonomists that many others rely heavily on this argument. Indeed, many individuals seem to embrace Theonomy because of their conviction that Theonomy, or something like it, is necessary. The argument from necessity is essentially this: we need to know how to function in the civil arena, and therefore the Word of God must provide us with such

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instruction. This leads quickly to embracing the Mosaic legislation for such guidance, since all parties agree that the only place where statecraft of any sort is comprehensively recorded in the Scriptures is in the Sinai legislation.

Ordinarily, in any debated arena, the argument from necessity is fallacious, and evidently so from a theistic framework. The nature of the curse on the human race subsequent to the Fall has left us in a circumstance of having many pains and unfulfilled desires. Often these desires are confused with "needs," and we believe our needs must be met, at least potentially, somewhere. However, a Christian theist recognizes both that there is a distinction between desires and needs, and that there will always be more desires than solutions to them, at least prior to the glorified state.

Where does the Bible address other matters, such as statecraft, science, or medicine? Does the Bible contain a cure for cancer? Does it contain a solution to the long-standing debate between engineers and mathematicians regarding the stability of suspension bridges? And if it does not, why is statecraft different from these areas? Is a well-run state more *necessary* than efficient agriculture? Is a well-run state more *necessary* than good medicine? If not, why do we expect biblical directives here and not elsewhere? Are we not obliged, as God's creatures, to serve him in all aspects of life? Are we not obliged, for instance, as Christian practitioners of medicine, to bring glory to God in all that we do? And yet, we evidently do not have a comprehensive or particular directive in Scripture for *how* to serve God in the field of medicine. If the Theonomic plea from necessity is valid in the field of statecraft, then someone should indicate either that it is also valid in other fields, or that statecraft is a different field of human endeavor, subject to special considerations.

In fact, it is my judgment that natural revelation is a sufficient guide in each of these areas. In the field of natural revelation, the tools for understanding our duty are different than in the field of special revelation. In studying special revelation, we learn Hebrew and Greek, ancient history and culture, etc. In studying natural revelation, we learn to weigh, measure, test, etc. Put most plainly, natural revelation is studied by observation, and by trial-and-error.

In the field of medicine, for instance, we develop instruments which assist us in our ability to observe: more powerful microscopes, CAT-scan machines, etc. When we are able to observe accurately the physical realities, we then propose theories for dealing with them, and we test those theories by trial-and-error. It is not different in the field of statecraft. We observe human nature, and especially human nature in society (sociology, anthropology, political science, psychology and social psychology, history). From our observations, we

Theonomy is a very helpful work. Gaffin's influence is implicit, because of his understanding of NT eschatology generally, as reflected in his classroom lectures at Westminster Seminary, and in his previously cited article, "Theonomy and Eschatology."

propose theories, and test them by trial-and-error (or, by evaluating how such theories worked, when and if they have been tested in other societies).

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If we could not develop and refine statecraft by this method, then how can we account for the fact that many governments have proceeded, with varying degrees of success, by this method? Further, by what method did the Roman government proceed in Paul's day, and could it have been responsible for Paul to urge obedience to such authorities if he were convinced that such authorities were fundamentally wrong? Indeed, for all the admitted errors of the Roman government, Paul's argument for submitting to them is not merely that the Roman government existed by God's providential appointment, but by the additional argument that the Roman civil authority, at least in a general way, was indeed fulfilling the divine mandate to punish the wicked (Romans 13).

Many Theonomists appear to have developed a novel, and erroneous, understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture. They imply that Scripture is a sufficient guide for the various departments of life, in all their specificity. In fact, the Reformational doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture is a highly nuanced and sophisticated doctrine.

The Reformational doctrine of the sufficiency of Scripture does not mean that the Scriptures are sufficient to answer all of our questions. Rather, the doctrine means that the Scriptures are a sufficient guide to our communion with God, a guide to faith and life in the religious sense. *WCF* 1.6: "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture."

Theonomists often argue that it is "necessary for...man's...life" that humans have revealed directives for statecraft. If this argument were valid, however, why would it not be equally (or more) valid to argue that it is "necessary for...man's...life" that humans have revealed directives for medicine? Is it not the case when our loved ones die that the Scriptures have not been, in their medicinal instructions, sufficient in providing what is "necessary for...man's...life"? Is it not the case, when a suspension bridge collapses due to no construction failure, that the Scriptures have evidently not provided adequate instruction in the field of design?

I have never received an answer to this line of questioning from any of the Theonomists with whom I have conversed. I do not think it likely that I will. Yet I think the line of questioning not only deserves an answer, I also think it reveals something about Theonomy's agenda. For Theonomists, statecraft is simply more important than medicine, science, engineering, etc. Possibly due to their postmillennialism, possibly due to their (understandable) heartbreak over the decline of the West, and possibly due to other, less tangible factors, they have simply placed statecraft higher on their agenda than it is on other people's agenda. Yet they have not demonstrated *why* the solution to statecraft is more pressing than the solution to these other matters.

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2. The Theonomic Dependence upon and Misunderstanding of Matt 5:17-21

(1) *The role of Matt 5:17-21 in the Theonomic hermeneutic.* Paul Fowler correctly observed that Bahnsen's entire case for his approach to the "abiding validity of the law in exhaustive detail" was based upon his understanding of Matt 5:17-21.⁴ Fowler pointed out

⁴ Unpublished typescript.

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how frequently this passage is cited in *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* as proof of the observation. Even the casual reader of Bahnsen's treatise recognizes that Matt 5:17-21 is cited again and again. Thus, if Bahnsen cannot make his case from this text, his case is not made.

We might go further and suggest that Bahnsen not only found in this passage a convenient defense of his hermeneutic, but that he could have found such a defense only here. The rest of the NT is so entirely silent on the issue, that it was necessary to Theonomy's case to establish itself on the basis of this text. Other NT passages provide counter-evidence. The sweeping statement (covenantally conditioned) in Heb 7:12 that where the priesthood changes, necessarily the law must change;⁵ Paul's general statement that believers are "not under the law";⁶ Paul's discussing the matter of civil obedience without any reference to the Sinai legislation (Romans 13); and the evident suspending of the ceremonial legislation by the Jerusalem Council, Paul, and the author of Hebrews are matters which point compellingly away from Bahnsen's suggestion that the Sinai legislation is abidingly valid in exhaustive detail.

(2) *The Theonomic understanding of Matt 5:17-21.* In four specific ways, Bahnsen's treatment of Matt 5:17ff. is deficient.⁷ First, he "washes out" the prophetic half

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of the "law and the prophets," effectively leaving only the "law" under consideration. Second, he misunderstands the use of $\pi\lambda\eta\rho\omega\upsilon$ 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."

"Law and prophets" is a somewhat difficult expression in the Scriptures, and we do not intend to suggest that its precise meaning is self-evident. There are places where it could be a reference to the OT Scriptures in their comprehensive scope (Luke 24:44; Acts 24:14; Acts 28:23). The expression could refer to an entire revelatory era in the history of redemption (Matt 11:13: "For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came"). The expression might even be a reference to the written constitutional document of the Sinai covenant (Matt

⁵ Cf. John Owen, *Works of John Owen* (24 vols.; London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1850-55) 21.431: "Besides, such was the contexture of the law, and such the sanction of it, ('Cursed is every one who continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them,') that if any thing be taken out of it, if its order be disturbed, if any alteration be made, or any transgression be dispensed withal, or exempted from the curse, the whole fabric must of necessity fall unto the ground." Owen rightly observed that the stipulations of Sinai could not be abstracted from the sanctions of Sinai, nor from the priestly atonement of Sinai. All were part of the same covenantal "contexture" or "fabric."

⁶ Following Moo, we would argue that Paul's use of $\nu\omicron\mu\omicron$ is ordinarily a reference to the covenant administration made at Sinai, and that the expression $\upsilon\pi\omicron\lambda\omicron\mu\omicron\upsilon$ is a reference to being a party to that covenant. Cf. Douglas J. Moo, "'Law,' 'Works of the Law,' and Legalism in Paul," *WTJ* 45 (1983) 80, 88: "What is vital for any accurate understanding of Paul's doctrine of law is to realize that Paul uses *nomos* most often and most basically of the Mosaic law.... As we have seen, the Reformers, as most theologians today, use 'law' to mean anything that demands something of us. In this sense, 'law' is a basic factor in all human history; and man is in every age, whether in the OT or NT, confronted with 'law.' What is crucial to recognize is that this is *not* the way in which Paul usually uses the term *nomos*."

⁷ The hermeneutical heart of Bahnsen's *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* can be found in chap. 2, "The Abiding Validity of the Law in Exhaustive Detail," 39-86. Rather than clutter my manuscript with references to the particular places in this chapter, I would direct the reader to that chapter in its entirety as the best place to find a succinct representation of Theonomy's hermeneutic.

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7:12: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets"; 22:40: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets"). But it is very unlikely that "law and prophets" can be taken as a reference exclusively, or even primarily, to the "ethical stipulations contained in the canon of the entire Old Testament."⁸ Even in the two texts where the expression appears to focus on the ethical requirements of that administration, it is both the law and the prophetic administration of that law which are referred to.

The significance of this observation is profound in its consequences for exegesis. Biblically, "law and prophets" are conjoined. They are together in their function, and the prophets are in fact executors of the Sinai covenant. Their anticipation of Messiah's arrival is part of their declaration of judgment on Israel for her unfaithfulness to the covenant, because only the Messiah will be able to deliver from the curses of the Sinai administration. From a biblical perspective, if the Sinai legislation remains, then the prophetic office of preparing for the Messiah's arrival remains also.

The most daring dimension of Bahnsen's interpretation of Matt 5:17ff. is his argument that pl hrw'sai should be interpreted to mean "ratify" rather than "fulfill." This interpretation is consistent with his interpreting the prophets out of the "law and the prophets," yet it is erroneous nonetheless.

His argument follows sound lexicographical considerations, but reaches erroneous conclusions, because some of the alternatives are not considered. Bahnsen is correct in attempting to interpret pl hrw'sai as functioning antithetically in this passage to katal u'sai . This is not only required by the general context, but by the fact that "law and prophets" is the direct object of each of the two verbs in question. He then argues that it would not make sense to speak of "fulfilling" the law, but that it would make sense to speak of "ratifying" the law. He is certainly right that this is plausible. However, this

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meaning of pl hrw'sai would not make much sense of the prophetic dimension of the equation; how would Jesus be "ratifying" the prophets? It would be better to find an understanding of both verbs, pl hrw'sai and katal u'sai , which makes sense of both of the direct objects.

If we take the "law and prophets" together as a reference to the Sinai covenant, or the era in which God's people are governed thereby, then it makes sense to understand Jesus to be saying that he has not come (at least in his humiliated state) to abolish that covenantal administration, but to bring it to its conclusion. Since the other hl qon -statements of Jesus are routinely understood as being a reference to his humiliated state (his earthly ministry prior to his resurrection and ascension), there is also no conflict between such a statement and the reality that later he does terminate the one covenant administration and inaugurate a new one.

As Vern Poythress has demonstrated,⁹ such a rendering is also much more consistent with the ordinary understanding of pl hrw'sai in contexts where the direct object is prophetic. Indeed, there is no evidence that the prophets were ever thought of as legislating, but there is evidence, within Matthew's Gospel, that the law was conceived of as prophesying: "For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John" (11:13).

Thus, there is a way of interpreting pl hrw'sai in this text which is consistent with both "law" and "prophets," which does not require a *de facto* "washing out" of the one or the other. This way of understanding the verb is consistent with how the verb is regularly related to

⁸ *Theonomy*, 50, emphasis his.

⁹ Poythress, *Shadow of Christ*, App. C, pp. 363-77.

"prophets"; it is consistent with Matt 11:13; and it is consistent with the portrait of Christ elsewhere in the NT as functioning within the Sinai covenant until he established the new by his death and resurrection, and therefore requiring his disciples to obey the Mosaic law until the New Covenant was inaugurated (Matt 23:2-3: "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it").

Bahnsen attempts to establish a thesis that Jesus, in Matthew 5, reiterates for all time the validity of the entire Mosaic law, not merely the "moral" law, and that he does so "in exhaustive detail." Such an interpretation, if correct, would necessarily either condemn Paul and the other apostles or destroy Theonomy. Paul not only relaxes one, but several of the Mosaic laws, and not merely the "least," but several of the major laws, to wit, circumcision, the Jewish calendar, and the dietary laws.

Bahnsen's only escape from such a conundrum is to argue that Paul does not actually break these laws, but applies them differently to another covenantal context. This consideration, while removing the hermeneutic from the hotseat, destroys the very thing which the hermeneutic wishes to accomplish. If the law requiring a bloody rite (circumcision) can be fulfilled by a non-bloody rite (baptism), then where would Bahnsen's arguments for capital punishment necessarily go? Would we *wash* criminals today who

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commit capital crimes? If we would not, then why not? If we fulfill the requirement of *not* eating with Gentiles by *eating* with Gentiles, then do we fulfill the requirement of not murdering by murdering? If we fulfill the requirement of eating a feast on the day of atonement by *not* eating a feast on the day of atonement, then do we fulfill other mosaic laws by not doing them? If this were so, what would be left of Theonomy? How could the mosaic law possibly function as a guide for civil governments today, if the mosaic laws could be properly applied by not following them?

It would actually be the better of the two options for Bahnsen simply to conclude that Paul, the Jerusalem Council, and the author of Hebrews (and, as the inspirer of their words, the Holy Spirit) will share the honors as "least in the kingdom of heaven." This would still preserve the hermeneutic to provide direction for civil governments today, and would only have the difficulty of requiring a blanket condemnation of those whom Jesus appointed to be the foundation of the church.

Of course, we believe the paint on the bottom of Bahnsen's shoes was self-applied, as soon as he left the corner into which he had painted himself. Had the "law and prophets" been correctly understood as a reference to the entire revelation within the Sinai administration, Jesus' intention would have been clear: he would not abrogate any of the requirements or promises of that covenant administration until he had brought it to its fulfillment and had established a new covenant.

The strongest apparent exegetical case for Bahnsen's viewpoint resides in his taking the two temporal clauses as metaphors which, when negated, mean "never."¹⁰ Thus, the passage would be interpreted as teaching that all of the requirements of the Sinai administration continue forever. However, if these two temporal clauses can be demonstrated to be non-metaphors, and actual temporal clauses, then all that can be proven by Matthew 5 is that the Mosaic covenant, both in its prophetic and legal aspects, abides temporarily, until God changes it by causing heaven and earth to pass away, and by bringing "all things" to pass.

¹⁰ "Given the cultural-literary milieu it is quite likely that this phrase was a graphic and strong way of saying 'never'" (*Theonomy*, 76).

Matt 24:34–35 demonstrates that the temporal clauses of Matt 5:17ff. are genuine temporal clauses: "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place [eḡ" aḥ panta genhta]. Heaven and earth will pass away [o] ouranoi kai h̄parel eusetai], but my words will not pass away." Note that the two expressions in Matthew 5 that appear to teach that not a jot or tittle will ever pass away need not be understood in such a way. "All things" *will* come to pass, or take place, and heaven and earth *will* pass away.

True, within a modern cosmology, it is difficult to believe that "heaven and earth" can pass away. It is thus not farfetched for Bahnsen to say regarding this verse that "the law will remain valid at least as long as the physical universe lasts."¹¹ But within a biblical

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cosmology, it not only *can* happen, but already *did* happen once before, and will happen again: "They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God *heavens* existed long ago and an *earth* was formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world of that time was deluged with water and *perished* [apwl eto]. But by the same word the present heavens and earth [o] del nuh ouranoi kai h̄ gh] have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction [krisew" kai apwl ein"] of the godless" (2 Pet 3:5–7). "Heaven and earth," biblically, refer to the created order in terms of its created purpose, to serve God. The "destruction" or "passing away" of heaven and earth is also then spoken of when God *judges* its inhabitants. Cosmologically, the heaven and earth were not annihilated in the flood. Covenantally, however, the inhabitants thereof were judged by God, and the judgment was spoken of as perishing or "destruction."¹²

The only remaining issue, then, is *when* such judgment/destruction of the heavens and the earth will take place. Within a NT eschatology, I believe there is a sense in which this took place with the death of Jesus, and another sense in which it will take place at his return. At Christ's death, God's judgment came upon the Representative of those under God's wrath; at his return it will come upon those who are not under the Mediator's representation. Thus, Matthew records that, at the crucifixion, darkness came upon "the whole earth" (skoto" egeneto epil pa'san thh gh, 27:45), even though earlier the darkening of the sun was prophesied to be that which would attend the *return* of Christ to judge (o] h̄ io" skotisqhsetai, 24:29). In each case, the portents in the heavens and earth were symbols of divine judgment. Similarly, signs elsewhere associated with the return of Christ to raise the dead were also provisionally fulfilled at his death: "Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many" (Matt 27:50–53).

For our purposes, then, the expressions in Matt 5:17ff. which suggest that the "law and prophets" will never pass away, nor any part thereof, must be understood as in fact genuine

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Additionally, it is possible that there is some relation between the *inhabitants* of the created order (especially humans, with the God-given duty of cultivating the created order) and the created order itself, so that the judicial destruction of the inhabitants of the created order is spoken of as a destruction of the created order itself. Either understanding is compatible with the results of this study.

temporal expressions, indicating that they will not pass away *until* all the matters prophetically anticipated come to pass, as D. A. Carson and others have argued.¹³ From

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both an OT and a gospel perspective, OT prophecies are seen as coming to fulfillment at a single moment, which "moment" the remainder of the NT writings divide into two. Only the apostolic, post-resurrection instruction enables us, with any confidence, to determine which aspects are fulfilled in the first coming of the Messiah, and which in his second coming. And such instruction plainly indicates that many of the "jots and tittles," not the least of which are circumcision, the calendar, and the dietary code, have indeed passed away.

3. The Theonomic Understanding of Covenant Theology

(1) *Historical-theological considerations.* Not surprisingly, there has not been complete unanimity in understanding the relations among the various covenantal administrations in the Bible, even among those who consider themselves "covenant theologians." It is not surprising, because developing a theology of the covenants, or a biblical theology (in the Vosian sense), is one of the most synthetic and comprehensive of the theological disciplines. For centuries, there has been discussion about how best to describe the similarities and dissimilarities between the various biblical covenants and the various redemptive epochs. Although I embrace one of those viewpoints, what follows is designed more to set the discussion of Theonomy within a history-of-doctrine framework, than to promote the viewpoint I hold.

Prior to the Westminster Assembly's meeting, a fairly substantial amount of work had been done discussing the relations between the various biblical covenants.¹⁴ Samuel Bolton provided a fairly thorough list of options which were present in his day, in a volume first published while the assembly was still in process (*The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, 1645). Interestingly, as early as the seventeenth century, the Sinai covenant was considered to be perhaps the most difficult covenant administration for covenant theologians to come to terms with. According to Bolton, the difficulty was due to the way that covenant theology attempted to distinguish the covenants made with the two Adams from all other covenants. Having correctly determined that these covenants, made with two representative individuals who were sinless at the time of the administration, were necessarily different from other covenants, covenant theology then went on to distinguish these from other covenants, ordinarily by applying the label "covenant of works" to the Adamic covenants, and "covenant of grace" to the others. In

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and of itself, this was not too great a problem, but it became a problem when discussing the Sinai administration, which apparently all conceded had both legal and gracious aspects.

Bolton described four approaches to dealing with this situation. (1) Those who recognized a covenant of nature, a covenant of grace, and a covenant mixed with nature and grace. (2) Those who recognized a *foedus natura* made with man before the Fall, a *foedus promissi* made with Adam after the Fall, and a *foedus operi*, a covenant of works made with

¹³ *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 77ff. Cf. also Robert Banks, *Jesus and the Law in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), and John P. Meier, *Law and History in Matthew's Gospel* (AnBib 71; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971).

¹⁴ Mark W. Karlberg has provided a very good overview of various theories of covenant theology in his "Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant," *WTJ* 43 (1980) 1-57.

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the Jews at Sinai. (3) Those who recognized a *foedus natura* made with man before the Fall, a *foedus gratiae* (a covenant of grace made with us in Christ), and a *foedus subserviens* (subservient covenant) made with the Jews at Sinai. (4) Those who never did recognize but two covenants, one of works before the Fall and one of grace after, "Yet...this covenant of grace was dispensed to the Jews in such a legal manner that it seems to be nothing else but the repetition of the covenant of works."¹⁵

Interestingly, each of the four views revealed a tension between the desire to recognize two covenants (those made with the sinless mediators and those made with sinners) and the desire to recognize three covenants (Bolton, for what it's worth, adopted the third view, above). Further, the tension was caused by the Sinai covenant's having similarities both to the covenant of works/nature and to the covenant of promise/grace.

Charles Hodge's view in the nineteenth century reflected the same tension reflected in the seventeenth century in understanding biblical covenants. Especially important for our purposes was Hodge's candid recognition that Sinai was indeed difficult to describe, precisely because it continued the covenant of grace while also retaining (for typological reasons) a "legal" element:

Besides this evangelical character which unquestionably belongs to the Mosaic covenant, it is presented in two other aspects in the Word of God. First, it was a national covenant with the Hebrew people. In this view the parties were God and the people of Israel; the promise was national security and prosperity; the condition was the obedience of the people as a nation to the Mosaic law; and the mediator was Moses. In this aspect it was a legal covenant. It said, "Do this and live."¹⁶

It should be noted, however, that while there was widespread willingness to concede a legal dimension to the Sinai administration, there were also individuals unwilling to speak in this manner. Perhaps most prominent among these voices, in the nineteenth century, was that of Robert Lewis Dabney.

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Coming now to the last stage of the old dispensation, the Covenant of Sinai, we find several marked and impressive additions to the former revelations. But they will all be found rather developments of existing features of the gospel, than new elements.

The Covenant of Sinai has seemed to many to wear such an aspect of legality, that they have supposed themselves constrained to regard it as a species of Covenant of Works.... This is untenable; because it is inconsistent with God's spiritual and unchangeable character, and with His honour.¹⁷

Dabney's disagreement was partially due to a misunderstanding. Dabney apparently believed that a covenant was *either* gracious *or* legal. Believing this, and rightly recognizing that there were true saints under the Sinai administration, who would profit from the gracious atoning work of Christ, Dabney could not describe such an administration as "legal." What he appears to have misunderstood is that the legal dimension recognized by many at Sinai was only *one dimension*. That is, other orthodox theologians had not argued that the Sinai administration was exclusively, or even primarily, legal; they had argued that there was a legal dimension, related to the inheritance of the land of Canaan.

¹⁵ Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964) 90.

¹⁶ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 2.375.

¹⁷ Robert Lewis Dabney, *Lectures in Theology* (repr. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 452-53.

Dabney's disagreement was also due, however, to a genuine error on his part, one which would not remain confined to him. Note that Dabney considered it "untenable" for Sinai to be legal, because this would be "inconsistent with God's spiritual and unchangeable character." For Dabney, an unchangeable character is not capable, apparently, of revealing "new elements" to subsequent covenant-administrations, but only of revealing "developments of existing features." For Dabney, covenants (and laws) are reflections of the character of the one establishing the covenants (and laws) and thus are no more changeable than the character of the one so establishing them. Dabney fell philosophically in the Western tradition of natural law, mediated to him most directly through Scottish Common Sense philosophy. This is even clearer in his discussion of law than in his discussion of covenants:

These (moral distinctions) are intrinsic in that class of acts. They are not instituted solely by the positive will of God, but are enjoined by that will because His infinite mind saw them to be intrinsic and eternal. In a word: Duties are not obligatory and right solely because God has commanded them; but He has commanded them because they are right.... Just so; it is admitted that the basis of the moral distinction is *a priori* to all volition of God.¹⁸

Space does not permit a refutation of this brand of natural law theory here, though any theist can quickly perceive the direction such a refutation would take.¹⁹ Rather, our

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purpose is to indicate that some covenant theologians were resistant to the notion of "new elements" entering various covenant administrations, and that they did so because of certain philosophical commitments which had long-standing roots in the West.

With the arrival of dispensationalism an interesting thing happened to covenant theology, at least in some circles. Properly alarmed over the almost total discontinuity alleged to exist between the Sinai administration and the New Covenant by dispensationalists, covenant theologians became shy about the "works" dimension of the Sinai covenant, which had been candidly (though not unanimously) conceded within covenant theology before. Rightly reacting to the dispensational (and incipiently Arminian) denial of a unified *purpose* of redemption, covenant theologians became at times reactionary about the suggestion of *any* differences among the covenant administrations, as though admitting such differences would cause one to slide down the slippery slope toward dispensationalism. Perhaps the most celebrated example has been the tendency to perceive Meredith G. Kline's views as unusual or novel, when they are in fact virtually identical (in broad stroke) with the views discussed by Bolton in the early 1640s. It is not my intention to explicate or defend Kline's views here, but to remind that his views are not at all novel; they are over 350 years old. His views have been *perceived* as unusual in the context of a generation in full reaction against dispensationalism.

One of the interesting twists of the twentieth century (at least from a seventeenth-century perspective) would be the covenant views of John Murray, especially as those views are expressed in his pamphlet, *The Covenant of Grace*. Murray recognized that his views on the covenant of grace were intentionally novel: "It appears to me that the covenant

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 352.

¹⁹ Such a view as Dabney's essentially affirms moral law to exist in the universe apart from the volition of the Creator. Yet who created the universe with such inherent law, other than the Creator? Who caused such law to inhere in the universe, if not God? By whose volition was such a universe placed into existence, if not God's? Can it possibly be that there are "intrinsic and eternal" moral laws in the universe, prior to God's volition, which God does not establish but only recognizes?

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theology...needs recasting."²⁰ It is not odd that the twentieth century would find it necessary to recast earlier theology, of course. But what is interesting is the particular nature of Murray's recasting. The seventeenth century found a two-covenant approach difficult, so difficult that it either found itself proposing a three-covenant approach or a two-covenant approach with a "legal" administration as a subset of the second (sort of a two-and-a-half covenant view). Murray's recasting, however, became effectively mono-covenantal, as he proposed a view which perceived all biblical covenants as essentially similar. He did this in two ways. First, he omitted discussion of the Adamic administration

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from the pamphlet,²¹ thereby reducing the amount of difference among covenant administrations by discussing only the post-Fall covenants (which, of course, are much more similar one to another than they are to the covenants with the two Adams). Second, he was particularly resistant to recognizing any structural distinction between the promissory Abrahamic covenant and the (at least partially) "legal" Sinai covenant. He spent very little space distinguishing the Abrahamic from the Sinai covenant, and in fact recognized only a difference of emphasis there.²² This made his view different from any of the four options mentioned by Bolton.

Now is not the time to enter into a full evaluation of Murray's "recasting," though I think covenant theology was better off without it. To Murray's credit, he very honestly acknowledged the novelty of aspects of his views, and that he was intending to recast

²⁰ John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace* (London: Tyndale, 1977) 5, emphasis mine.

²¹ Though Murray discussed this administration thoroughly in his *Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1959) and in his paper, "The Adamic Administration," in *The Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977) 2.47-59.

²² "At the outset we must remember that the idea of conditional fulfilment is not something peculiar to the Mosaic covenant. We have been faced quite poignantly with this very question in connection with the Abrahamic covenant. And since this feature is there patent, it does not of itself provide us with any reason for construing the Mosaic covenant in terms different from those of the Abrahamic" (Murray, *The Covenant of Grace*, 20). "What needs to be emphasized now is that the Mosaic covenant in respect of the condition of obedience is not in a different category from the Abrahamic" (p. 22). Yet earlier, in his description of the Abrahamic covenant, Murray had said, "The grace dispensed and the relation established do not wait for the fulfilment of certain conditions on the part of those to whom the grace is dispensed" (p. 19). Since Murray has already defined the essence of the covenant to consist in the vital communion established, and since that particular dimension is sovereignly determined, he is correct in saying that this dimension does not await the "fulfilment of certain conditions on the part of those to whom the grace is dispensed." The problem is that the inheritance of the land, as a distinctive feature of the Sinai administration, *does* depend on the "fulfilment of certain conditions on the part of those to whom the grace is dispensed." Yet when Murray discusses the Sinai covenant, he does not refer to the conditions of inheriting the land. I would not disagree with Murray's saying, for instance, "This fact links the Mosaic very closely with the Abrahamic and shows that religious relationship on the highest level is contemplated in both, namely, union and communion with God." What I would disagree with is the tendency of Murray to thus discount land inheritance as a significant feature of the Mosaic administration, and with it, obedience as the *condition* of inheritance. Ironically, Murray has overlooked the eschaton (functionally, anyway) in his description of "religious relationship on the highest level. In heaven, which I would think consists of religious relation on the highest level," the *place* in which the communion exists is not insignificant. It is a *place* free of sin and sinners, free of all of the enemies of God's people, "holy" in the highest and most perfect sense. And, in my judgment, Canaan was a *type* of that heavenly place. In diminishing the role of Canaan (and the condition of its inheritance) in the Sinai administration, Murray has not only failed to describe that covenant administration adequately, but, ironically, he has disserved his own attempt to describe accurately the *relational* dimension of biblical covenants, since one feature of that relation is that it is exclusively a relation between God and his people. This exclusive feature is only fully realized in heaven, when all who are not God's people are excluded; but this feature is typified, beautifully, by the land aspect of the Sinai administration.

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what was, to him, a deficient system. The point here is merely to indicate that, whether in conscious reaction to dispensationalism or not, Murray promoted a view which was intentionally quite different from that of some of the covenant theologians of earlier generations,²³ and one of the differences resided in acknowledging fewer areas of covenantal discontinuity than had been previously recognized within covenant theology.²⁴

It may not be merely coincidental, then, that many of the more ardent proponents of Theonomy are influenced by the same tradition that influenced (and possibly culminated in) John Murray. If Dabney, Murray, et al. were uncomfortable recognizing fundamental differences in the stipulations of the Mosaic covenant and other biblical covenants, it would not be surprising if those influenced by them would be uncomfortable recognizing fundamental differences in the *legislation* within the various covenants. The majority of American Presbyterians have always differed with the majority of Scottish Presbyterians over the civil magistrate, and this difference itself reflects a deeper (though often implicit more than explicit) difference over the Israelite theocracy. Was that theocracy a model for all civil government, or was it a type of the eschatological kingdom?²⁵ Any good "crown and covenant" Scottish Presbyterian (and Murray was a good one) tends to answer this differently than a good American Presbyterian. If space permitted, we would attempt to demonstrate that this difference itself rests upon philosophical presuppositions. The Scottish Common Sense interpretation of natural law theory conceives the universe as having an unchanging order inherent within it, and thus tends to view anything which is

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"new" as merely a clearer understanding of what was always incipiently present. Individuals influenced by this tradition tend to see later biblical covenants merely as organic developments of what was incipient in earlier covenants.²⁶

²³ Murray's view was not entirely idiosyncratic, however. His resistance to recognizing the "legal" dimension of the Sinai administration reflects the same tendency in R. L. Dabney.

²⁴ What Murray appears to have done is to have defined "covenant" in terms of the *effects* of the various covenants, namely, the establishing of some sort of vital relation between God and his people. This is somewhat different, and indeed narrower, than the biblical definition of covenant as inclusive of the particular administration itself, not merely what was effected thereby. Thus, Murray's somewhat brief discussion of the stipulations or requirements of the varying covenants is due to his belief that such stipulations are not really part of the *essence* of covenants. Not surprisingly, then, he perceives little difference between the Abrahamic and the Sinai covenants, since the *effect* of each will be so similar: "I will be their God, and they will be my people." Paul, by contrast, describes covenants in terms of their administration and their stipulations or requirements, and thus contrasts the promissory character of the Abrahamic and the "works" character of the Sinai covenant in, e.g., Galatians 3. The earliest covenant theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries appear to have employed the term "covenant" more as Paul did, including both the stipulations and the effects of varying covenants, and this is why for them (more than for Murray) the Sinai administration could be perceived as having a genuinely legal/works dimension, although not with regard to salvation but with regard to inheriting and prospering in Canaan.

²⁵ For evidence that Geerhardus Vos and Cornelius Van Til perceived the theocracy as a type of the final, eschatological kingdom, see references in my Van Til and Theonomic Ethics in the forthcoming *Festschrift* for Meredith G. Kline.

²⁶ In this regard it may not be insignificant to recall that Charles Hodge studied in Germany, and was influenced philosophically by the Continent, whereas Dabney's philosophical leanings were evidently British. This different philosophical orientation may very well have accounted for Hodge's willingness to speak of the Sinai administration as different in kind from the Abrahamic, and Dabney's unwillingness to do the same. Similarly, Geerhardus Vos, representing the Continent again, recognizes in his biblical theology not only what he called the "organic principle" (his label for continuity), but also what he called the "principle of periodicity" (his label for discontinuity). Cf. Vos's *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 16.

(2) *Covenant theology in Theonomy*. Whether due to the direct influence of Dabney and Murray or not, it is without doubt that Theonomy's approach to biblical covenants tends toward mono-covenantalism. What is distinctive about Theonomy is its resistance to recognizing discontinuity in the legislation of the various covenants.

What's in a word? Well, in this case, plenty. Theonomy's resistance to recognizing covenantal distinctions as they are represented in Scripture goes even so far as to change conventional Christian nomenclature. Throughout *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, Bahnsen promotes the neologistic "older covenant" and "newer covenant." Jeremiah was most assuredly not looking forward to a "newer" edition of the "older covenant"; he anticipated a "new covenant...*not like* the covenant I made with their fathers" (Jer 31:31-32). Jesus, similarly, did not institute, by his sacrifice, merely a "newer" covenant. He did not refer to the cup as a "newer" covenant, but as a "new" covenant, and his apostles similarly considered themselves "ministers of a new covenant" (2 Corinthians 3). The point is not merely terminological, but conceptual. The new covenant is not merely different in comparative *degree* from the Sinai covenant; it is also different in qualitative *kind* from that covenant; it is, at least in some respects, "not like" the covenant God made with the ancestors when he took them out of Egypt.

If there is a hermeneutical commitment evident in Theonomy (despite the genuine differences on many particular exegetical points within Theonomy) it is the belief that the Sinai legislation, even in its judicial dimensions, is legislation which is well-suited for, and intended to be observed by, all nations and peoples. Now plainly, the duties of a given covenant are only obligatory on those who are parties to the covenant. For Theonomy, however, all peoples in all times are obliged to these duties, unless there is some instruction somewhere else in Scripture exempting particular peoples from particular duties. The Theonomic approach, then, abstracts the legislation from its covenantal context. Apparently, for Theonomy, a covenant really was made at Sinai, but the

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legislation was a peripheral, incidental dimension of the covenant itself; or, a covenant was really made at Sinai, and the covenant itself continues until the return of Christ.

One of the most profound ironies has been the failure of covenant theologians (with some exceptions) to critique Theonomy on this point. One would think that covenant theologians would have some idea of what a covenant is. Do covenants have parties, or do they not? Do covenants have obligations and sanctions, or do they not? If a covenant has parties, how is it that non-parties are obliged to its duties? How could the Gentiles, described by the apostle Paul as "outside of the law" (*ajnomw*) possibly be obliged to the law? How could it possibly be meaningful for Paul to distinguish Jews from Gentiles because "to them belong...the covenants, the giving of the law" (Rom 9:4), if the covenant and its laws oblige non-Jews equally with Jews?

Theonomists are not the first to abstract legislation from the Sinai covenant. The Westminster Assembly appears to have done it beforehand, though on a much smaller scale and in a more ambiguous manner. The divines at Westminster appear to have abstracted the decalogue from the Sinai covenant, and to have understood the ten words as timeless and, if you will, "covenant-less." This is revealed in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* 19.1-2 (emphasis mine):

God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it. *This law*, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness;

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and, as such, *was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai*, in ten commandments, and written in two tables: the four first commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man. [WCF 19.2, emphasis mine]

The assembly asserted that God gave the ten commandments (or the equivalent thereof) to Adam, and then gave the same law to Moses. This assertion then, if unchallenged, permits the decalogue to be perceived as a timeless, "covenant-less" expression of God's moral will.

This assertion is not only completely without any biblical evidence, but it is an assertion contrary to some of the evidence in Scripture, most notably Rom 5:13, "sin was indeed in the world before the law." Note that the assembly places the law "in the garden"; Paul places it *outside* of the garden, after sin entered the world. The evidence becomes even greater when we recognize throughout the Scriptures the close relation between the ten commandments and the Sinai covenant. Biblically, far from being "abstractable" from that covenant administration, the ten commandments are the *heart* thereof. The biblical authors can speak, at least by synecdoche, of the Sinai covenant as *being* the ten

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commandments. Further, the "tablets" engraved at Sinai are often qualified as the tablets "of the covenant," and this covenant is stated to have *not* been made with others prior to that generation.²⁷

Deut 4:13: He declared to you *his covenant*, which he charged you to observe, *that is, the ten commandments*; and he wrote them on *two stone tablets*.

Exod 31:18: When God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, he gave him the *two tablets of the covenant*, tablets of stone, written with the finger of God.

Deut 9:9, 11: When I went up the mountain to receive the stone tablets, the *tablets of the covenant* that the LORD made with you, I remained on the mountain forty days and forty nights; I neither ate bread nor drank water....

At the end of forty days and forty nights the LORD gave me the *two stone tablets, the tablets of the covenant*.

Exod 34:27-29: *The LORD said to Moses: Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel. He was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.* Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the *two tablets of the covenant* in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God.

Deut 5:2-3: The LORD our God made a *covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us*, who are all of us here alive today.

²⁷ Stuart Robinson recognized this years ago: "You are now ready to ask - What then is the nature and purpose of the Sinai revelations: and what place and relation do they hold in the gospel system? The answer to this question is not left to our conjecture or to mere ingenious inference. In much fuller detail than in the case of any of the preceding revelations is the whole matter expounded for us by the Scriptures themselves. This is a *covenant transaction*, and this law, so called, constitutes simply *the stipulations of that covenant*. So it is expressly declared of it, 'The Lord our God made a *covenant* with us at Horeb.' It was ratified formally, as a *covenant*, when first received, the people being called upon solemnly to swear it, after it had been written down in a book" (*Discourses of Redemption* [Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1866] 124, emphases mine). It should be noted, however, that Robinson was completely unsympathetic with the thesis here proposed. Later Robinson said: "It is no theory of mine, therefore, but the Holy Ghosts, that this Sinai law is our law. And just as truly was it with you and me, brethren, 'who are alive *this day*,' that he made that covenant" (p. 138; emphasis mine).

Although the assembly appears to have contributed to misunderstandings of the decalogue in subsequent generations, it must be remembered that their purpose was catechetical, not biblical-theological. Their desire to find some location in which the moral will of God was "summarily comprehended" was catechetically proper, despite the misunderstanding of the covenantal role of the decalogue which may have resulted therefrom. Further, it must be noted that the assembly "limited" the damage done, by abstracting *only* the decalogue. In *WCF* 19.3-4, the assembly indicated that there were other aspects of the Sinai legislation (which they called "ceremonial" and "judicial") that were covenantally conditioned.

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Despite these qualifications, it must be admitted that the work of the assembly established the precedent of abstracting covenantal duties from the covenant in which they were given. This precedent, combined with the reactionary response to the errors of dispensationalism, created soil in the twentieth century which virtually guaranteed that Theonomy, or something like it, would take root.

Theonomy follows the a-covenantal hermeneutic of the Westminster Assembly, yet without the qualifications or limitations of *WCF* 19:4: "To them also, as a body politic, he gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the state of that people; not obliging any other now, further than the general equity thereof may require." Theonomy tends to abstract *all* of the Sinai legislation from its covenantal setting. While some Theonomists borrow the confessional language of "general equity," they rarely employ it with the four confessional qualifications, namely, the recognition that those in covenant with God at Sinai were a "body politic" (unlike the New Covenant community); that those laws "expired together with the state of that people"; that such are "not obliging any other now"; and that the general equity only *may* require that some of that body of legislation would be equitable generally to other nations.

Thus, Theonomy follows the assembly in abstracting the decalogue from the covenant administration in which it is given, and of which it is the essential feature; it does not follow the assembly, however, in abstracting the other legislation therefrom. Theonomy agrees with the assembly where I do not; I agree with the assembly where Theonomy does not. On the particular issue at hand, whether the obligation to the judicial laws of Sinai is universal, I agree with the assembly and Theonomy does not. However, our confessional tradition has at least opened the door to a covenant-less understanding of *some* of the Sinai legislation, and is now reaping some of the consequences.

Further, this observation is intended to help explain, in part, Theonomy's origins. Theonomy did not appear "out of the blue," as some may think. Individuals in our tradition who consider Theonomy to be an outrageous or extreme viewpoint are only partially correct. It is true that Theonomy denies *WCF* 19:4, and it is true that Theonomy is even more extreme than Dabney or Murray in the resistance to recognizing the distinctive traits of the Sinai covenant. Theonomy would indeed establish the extreme end of the covenant theology spectrum. However, Theonomy genuinely shares some of the distinctives embraced by others within that tradition. It shares the assembly's abstracting of the decalogue from the Sinai covenant, and then goes further; it shares the tendency of some reactionaries to dispensationalism to deny unique features of the Sinai covenant which earlier generations routinely recognized.

Theonomy, thus, cannot be accounted for merely on sociological or psychological grounds. It is not merely a sociological phenomenon, resisting the tide of a post-Christian

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culture (though this is undoubtedly an important reason for the popularity of the movement with some). Nor is it merely a psychological phenomenon, an uprising of authoritarian personalities (though there is undoubtedly a measure of truth to this). It is also an intellectual movement, an extension (albeit extreme) of ideas already germinal in some dimensions of the Reformed tradition.

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