

# Some Thoughts on Theonomy

by

**G. I. Williamson**

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2Tim. 3:16, NASB). By "all Scripture," Paul meant the Old Testament, including the whole Law of Moses. It follows, therefore, that Old Testament laws have permanent value.

It was for this reason that Calvin, in his commentary on the five books of Moses, showed how every "case law" taught an abiding principle. He did this by arranging all of these laws under one or another of the Ten Commandments. He showed how each of them helps us understand the intent and meaning -- and proper application -- of the ten central commandments.

I remain convinced that the Reformer was essentially right. I don't think he was always right, or that he necessarily organized every case law under its proper heading (some could arguably be placed under a different commandment). But he has convinced me that there is an abiding principle in every Old Testament case law. In my opinion, the theonomists deserve credit here. They are trying to do in our generation what John Calvin did in his.

It may be well, however, to make one thing quite clear at this point. With the coming of Christ, the Mosaic *system* was set aside once and for all. If theonomy sought to put us under that system again, I would certainly oppose it. But does it? I have seen no convincing evidence that it does. Yes, I have heard opponents of theonomy allege this, but that is not what theonomists say for themselves. So we are really faced with one basic question: shall we still "use the testimonies taken out of the law ... to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel, *and to regulate our life* in all honorableness to the glory of God, according to His will" (Belgian Confession, 25, emphasis added)? I believe the answer can only be yes, and that this applies to civil rulers.

Here is the rub. Theonomy poses for many today the specter of civil oppression. "If we go along with this," they seem to be saying, "then we'll end up persecuting -- yes, even killing -- people." And it is true that the death penalty was required for some things under these laws that are not so punished today. But the reader should take time to reflect on two things.

The first is that the Law of Moses came from Jehovah. We must therefore beware of taking a negative view of these holy precepts. I may not understand why God required the punishment he did, but I have no right to set myself up as a judge of these laws. No, a thousand times no. There is nothing in these laws unworthy of the true God. If I have difficulty with them, the problem is in *me* -- not in these *laws*.

The second is that under our present law, there is killing, too. And right here I see a problem not yet resolved in the position of those opposing theonomy. It is the basic ambiguity in their argument for a pluralistic civil order.

One writer defends a non-theonomic view of the state with these words: "The state is necessarily 'pluralistic' in the sense that it allows its citizens freedom of conscience to worship as they believe they must." This sounds good. But now lay beside this his second principle: "The state must act when the basic and abiding moral principles (as contained in the second table of the Law) are being overridden or ignored." Here there is, for example, a reference to the state's task to execute justice against those who steal, murder, lie, etc. But I do not see how these two principles can co-exist in any stable relationship. Indeed, our problem today is precisely that the first of these two principles is eating the second away. Let me illustrate.

The law, in most Western countries, was at one time strongly anti-homosexual. Our laws were once intentionally close to biblical standards. In a word, we had some theonomy in civil matters. But now, all over the Western world, this is fading. Homosexuals are "out in the open." They demand the right to express their lifestyle. And when the state is pluralistic in allowing its citizens "freedom of conscience to worship as they believe they must," this cannot be avoided.

Some Christians have tended to say, "Well, so what? As long as they don't hurt others, what's the problem?" The problem is this: tolerance (by the state) of evil does harm other people. I give a few examples.

(1) If homosexuals have "equal rights" -- and may not be "discriminated" against, then the law must protect their right to teach children in the schools. But does anyone think they will not influence children by their lifestyle as well as by their teaching? Clearly, neutrality is a myth.

(2) In the general population, AIDS has been spread through blood transfusions. When "gays" donated their blood, AIDS was passed along with it. So you do not have a safe society if it is ultimately pluralistic.

(3) The old legal order is now fading, while a new order is more and more dominant. This is clearly seen in the fact that the state now sanctions the shedding of the blood of unborn children. The older -- somewhat theonomic -- legal order protected them. Now the emerging humanistic legal order protects those who kill them.

I am not impressed, therefore, by the "fear" argument. I refer to the fear that if the state adopted a biblical legal order, there might be a great slaughter. Admittedly, there would be killing. But there is killing now -- and plenty of it. The fact that the carnage is hidden from view does not mean that there is no such thing. There is. So the question is not shall there be killing, but rather, who shall be killed? Shall it be the innocent or the guilty?

Today, it is too often the innocent. Frankly, I much prefer the older system where it was more often the guilty.

When I grew up, John Dillinger was roaming around killing people. I felt better when news came that he had been killed. I thought, "Well, it's too bad his life had to end that way, but better that than to have more innocent people die." (In those days they still used the electric chair. True, an execution is a terrible thing. But there is something worse: to let murderers go out and murder again. This is what we often see today!) Readers of this magazine will agree with much of this. Take homosexuality, for example. We all oppose it. But that is not all. We also cite the Old Testament to prove that we are right. In 1980 we (the Reformed Ecumenical Synod) declared all homosexual practice to be sin, and quoted Moses to prove it. What strikes me, then, is this: we are all theonomists when it suits us. The real issue, then, is not theonomy or no theonomy. The issue is how consistent we are in applying these laws.

Do I sound like I am on the theonomists' bandwagon? I am not. One thing that has forced me to be cautious is the lack of consistency on the part of theonomists. Take, for instance, their view of the Sabbath. If I understand certain theonomists, they say there is not the same kind of continuity for this law as there is for the rest. But other theonomists take a sharply different view. Or to give another example, one theonomist strongly defends Christian schools, and yet has said labor unions are wrong. I do not find these things consistent or convincing.

What we need, then, is to get away from mere reaction to the word theonomy. Instead, we need to get down to specifics. If you say you're a theonomist, fine but tell me (as Calvin did) what this particular case law means for today. What is the principle in it, and how does it apply? If you cannot do that, then it is neither here nor there to me that you are a theonomist.

Likewise, if you come to me and say you're not a theonomist, I will say, "Fine! But now you show me the principle here, and its application." If the best you can say is "Well, that's Old Testament, and we're New Testament Christians," then I will not be able to buy your anti-theonomic position. What we need, then, is

an end to knee-jerk reactions and name-calling. We need, instead, to start treating one another with respect, and to discuss our differences patiently, carefully, and -- above all -- calmly, with constant reference to the text of the Bible.

*New Horizons, April 1994*

G.I. Williamson is the author of a number of books including *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*. He graduated from Drake University in 1949, and received the B.D. degree from Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary in 1952. An ordained minister, he has served congregations in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, The Reformed Churches of New Zealand, and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.