

A Reformed Classic

By Michael W. Kelley

No Other Standard: Theonomy and Its Critics, Greg Bahnsen (Tyler: Texas, Institute for Christian Economics, 1991), 345 pages, scriptural and general indexes.

Contra Mundum, No. 3, Spring 1992

Copyright 1992 Michael W. Kelley

Among present-day theological apologists, none stands higher than Greg Bahnsen. He is at the forefront of his profession. For sheer depth of insight, breadth of analysis, consistency of reasoning, vigor and incisiveness of argument, not to mention finesse of style, Bahnsen is unparalleled in talent. By most scholars in the field this appraisal would be received with an amused, even perfunctory, condescension; by some with an almost violent revulsion. The reason, of course, is that Greg Bahnsen is a “hated” theonomist. To make matters worse, he is an articulate advocate of theonomic ethics, a thinker whom the guardian aristocracy of the theological citadels cannot hope to match in debate, let alone refute. To the masters of institutional and academic theology, theonomy is viewed as a fringe movement, if not quite heretical then a sinister error. Some may even view it with begrudging respect; but none will ever allow it a legitimate voice in the curricula of theological and ethical discourse. A man of Bahnsen's caliber ought to have been appointed to the “Van Til chair” of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary. The fact that that institution prefers to have, in succession, less able occupants of that position is evidence of the indefatigable opposition that anyone who professes the theonomic viewpoint in ethics can expect to encounter. To settle for fifth best when the best is available is a clear indication of the impoverishment of academic wisdom even in an institution that prides itself on its supposed heritage of intellectual excellence. The aversion to theonomy runs deep.

Theonomy has emerged in recent decades as a “movement” which has disturbed the repose of the theological and ethical world of (so-called) evangelical Christian thought. At first, its detractors did not quite know what to make of it; then for a long time it was regarded with a studied indifference; finally, its growing influence excited apprehension among intellectual elites who then formed a rational distaste and a fierce antipathy to it. Theonomy was subjected to denunciation, ridicule, caricature and assailed with a ferocious clamor. Articles began to appear, notorious for the invective that was directed against this malignant ethical system. However, being longer on acrimony than on

substantive rebuttal, most lacked credibility as serious theological debate. Soon the amazing output of theonomic writers was bound to attract attention in the theological establishments. Consequently, the faculty of the aforementioned seminary produced what it considered as the official “Reformed” response to theonomy.¹ Such endeavors, far from silencing the printing presses of the theonomic zealots, merely stir them to greater exertions in advancing the cause. It is by reason of this confrontation between theonomy and its detractors that Greg Bahnsen has produced *No Other Standard: Theonomy and Its Critics*.

No Other Standard is Bahnsen's finest performance to date. This is not to suggest that his *Theonomy in Christian Ethics* is anything less than a landmark accomplishment.² It is simply meant to point out that the former work best exhibits the surpassing qualities of Bahnsen as an apologist and as a theological polemicist. It is clearly the best defense of theonomy yet published. The work is distinguished by its consistency of argument, its reasoned insight into Scripture, its eloquent and versatile control of the written medium³, and above all by its honest devotion to God's Word as the sole authority for man in the realm of ethics for every (including the “civil”) area of life. Bahnsen clearly is a thinker and author who makes the case on Biblical grounds better than any other, theonomist or non-theonomist alike. It is a work that deserves to be placed in the company of such outstanding polemical treatises as Machen's *The Virgin Birth of Christ* and O.T. Allis's *The Five Books of Moses*.

That theonomy represents something unique in the area of theological ethics is not a claim that theonomists would deny. Bahnsen admits as much: “Theonomic ethics is a definable and distinct school of thought.” (p. 19) But this in itself is no argument against it as Scripturally sound. For while it is true that theonomy is of recent appearance, and although it is easily distinguishable from other points of view, it is, however, a “school of thought” that has roots in a venerable and recognized theological context—viz., the historic Reformed theological tradition. For proof of this one may consult, for example, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (19:I,II&V) which reads: “God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, and perpetual obedience....This law, after his fall, continued be a perfect rule of righteousness....The moral law doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons as others....Neither doth Christ, in the Gospel, any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.” It is hardly credible to assert, as do the critics of theonomy, that its position represents some strange new aberration in ethics. As the Reformed

1 William S. Barker & W. Robert Godfrey, Eds., *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990). This work comprises various contributions from faculty members of Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia & California.

2 Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1984). What is of outstanding importance in this work is Bahnsen's magisterial exegesis of Matthew 5:17-20.

3 As a literary production the book is brilliant. There is only one major flaw in this regard, and that is the persistent grammatical abuse known as the “split infinitive”. E.g. (incorrect) “to thoroughly examine”, (correct) “to examine thoroughly”; (incorrect) “to greatly overstate”, (correct) “greatly to overstate”, and so forth. This literary *faux pas* is a common mistake with writers nowadays which needs to be pointed out.

doctrinal heritage has been the only one to take seriously the law of God in ethical conduct for “justified persons as others”, it cannot be alleged that theonomy is anything other than a further development and a contemporary application of this foundational confession. Furthermore, the core principle of the Reformed tradition—viz., *Sola Scriptura*—is as much at the heart of theonomy, perhaps more so, than is sometimes the case in those who oppose it. Consequently, it will not do to allege that there is a “Reformed critique” of theonomy without a better consideration of what has been “historically” Reformed.

Still, although its roots lie in Reformed soil, it does represent a distinct approach to ethics in that it advances the core insight of Reformed doctrine along lines that the earliest reformers might have had intimations of, but no clear and compelling reason to trace out as have the theonomists. This is because the theonomists inhabit a world that has all but severed connection to its Christian past, whereas a Christian values-system as the ethical basis of culture and civilization (certainly in the West) was all but taken for granted by its theological forebears three hundred years ago. As modern culture and society proceeded to work out its humanistic ethical assumptions the results became obvious: Western Christian civilization, or what was left of it, entered a period of profound crisis, which is where we are at present. Believing that God's word is to be man's sole authority for all of life, and believing the problem to be ethical at bottom, and apprehending that the ethic of humanism was the source of the problem, it was deemed essential to 'reconstruct' a more self-consciously Biblical ethic. Consequently, for theonomy, the law of God, the only standard of right conduct that was adhered to by the reformers, was simply examined far more meticulously and with greater attention to the present situation than had hitherto been done.

Now it is just this emphasis on the law of God that has brought forth such a storm of criticism—and this, not so much from the thought-world of humanism as from so-called *Christians!* What is more, from so-called Reformed Christians! In Bahnsen's view, the basis for this perfervid disapprobation turns on the question of *authority* in the area of ethical conduct. Any ethic, if it expects to come to expression in human behavior, must take hold of man's conscience as a “law”. If it is a Biblical ethic; i.e., if it has its source in God and His will for man, then it is absurd to deny that it can be anything other than “God's law”. It is this assertion that has led the opponents of theonomy to denounce it as a new “legalism”. But this claim, as Bahnsen observes, rests upon a false dispensational and antinomian hermeneutic that predisposes the mind of the interpreter in his approach to the study of Scripture. For the law of God, it is said, possesses validity only for the period of the Older Testament and not for the New Testament era in which the church presently exists. The argument is proffered, viz., that with the passing of Israel from the stage as the center of God's redemptive program, the so-called Mosaic law,⁴ which was given solely to govern the life of Old Testament Israel, disappeared as well. There has been a *change* from old to new, and with it a new conception of ethical stipulation as

4 There is a persistent refusal on the part of theonomic opponents to recognize that although the law first appeared in comprehensive and propositional form with Moses it does not follow that it is anything less than “God's” law, hence permanently valid.

well. While it is possible, even practical, to derive “wisdom” from the law of Moses, it no longer possesses authority to bind the conscience of man, certainly not in any explicit detail, and absolutely not so far as anything other than “personal” or perhaps “inner-church” relationships are concerned. This is to say, the law of God retains no socio-political applicability for civil association. It is this *presumption* of discontinuance of God's law that, in Bahnsen's estimation, must be called into question; for such an assumption rests upon a hermeneutic that imposes conditions on Scripture from outside of Scripture. What seems clear to him, as to theonomists in general, is that “Sinful creatures are in no position to question or correct the wisdom of God at any point where He has chosen to speak”, (p. 32) and with respect to His commandments He “expects His people to presume their continuing validity until He indicates otherwise”. (p. 28) It is, therefore, inadmissible to dismiss the propriety of the Old Testament law (just because it is in the O.T.) “or its socio-political requirements in advance of particular exegesis of texts which would justify doing so—whether they appeal to dispensations, covenant-canon, or theocratic topology, etc...” (*Ibidem*) The debate, then, between theonomy and its critics turns on this hermeneutical question, which then comes to expression in terms of a distinct socio-political philosophy. These are the two dimensions around which the discussion of the book revolves.

The inveterate animadversions of the more severe opponents of theonomy at least scarcely conceal the obvious fact that most of them are little or altogether unfamiliar with the broad range of writings which have poured forth from theonomic writers. Most refuse resolutely to study their works in any depth with the result that ignorance mixed with disdain compels a wide distortion of the theonomic viewpoint. Theonomy would produce a social despotism, they charge, dictatorially regimented by an inner clique of intemperate and merciless “Ayatollahs” who would enforce a rigid conformity to God's law in its most gruesome detail, the slightest departure from which would bring swift and capital retribution. One might almost wonder how such ignominious ideas could percolate but for the gloomy and jaundiced imaginations of feverish souls. Some anti-theonomists seem to be unaware of the presuppositions that infelicitously color their attempt to make a case against theonomy. But, in Bahnsen's view, the influence of these presuppositions become apparent in the nature of logical fallacies, three of which stand out as the most objectionable.

The first concerns the question of the relationship between God's authoritative word and human conduct. Where does one begin in defining the connection? Does one begin at God's word and proceed to human conduct; or, does one start at human conduct and then ask to what extent God's word has authority over it? With theonomic opponents the latter is typically the case. As a result they tend to submit God's word to an extra-Biblical criterion. They begin with the question: “Is God's law a 'reasonable' ethic for today?” “Reasonableness”, then, is made the a priori basis of what is acceptable as an ethical standard. For those who begin thus, the answer is invariably negative. And since theonomy begins with the former it is not refuted on the basis of Scripture, it is simply dismissed as “unreasonable”. It is this assumption that induces Bahnsen's reply.

The issue before the theologian is not whether every detail of the law can be readily understood and applied to our modern culture in a way which is congenial to our feelings or mindset in the twentieth century. Our obligation to keep the whole law of God may not be judged on the basis of whether its specifics strike us as reasonable or fit into our present way of thinking or behaving. The issue is rather what God's word itself says about the law of God. Scripture must interpret itself regarding the validity of God's whole law today. (pp. 58 & 59).

A second fallacy, closely connected to the first, is an argument from a “subjective impression” of what Scripture teaches verses a controlled exegesis of the objective text. Because we do not like Scripture upsetting our pre-conceptions, the proclivity is to retreat from the “text” and to appeal instead to “tenor”. One argues on the basis of overall impressions of Scripture as a whole rather than bothering to examine the details of its language. It is easier this way to make Scripture conform with our preconceived notions of what it must say about human conduct. Again Bahnsen responds: “Rather than allowing our present opinions and attitudes to be the standard by which we evaluate God's law, we ought to take God's law as the standard by which we evaluate and adjust our present opinions and attitudes!” (p. 60)

Lastly, there is what Bahnsen designates as “the argument from silence”. (p. 67ff.) Briefly, this argument alleges that the Bible does *not* say that we today are to enforce the full scope of the Old Testament Mosaic law with its penal codes and sanctions. In other words, at the very least the Scripture says nothing (i.e., remains silent!) about observing these obligations for the church in post-ascension history. What is meant, then, by the term “Bible” is really “New Testament”. The contention is that the New Testament requires no such continuing validity; in fact, if anything it claims to supersede *everything* in the Old Testament having a normative necessity for the life of man. The dispensational hermeneutic is the controlling assumption behind this argument. The New Testament is maintained to be a canon of authority within a canon. If anything, a kind of semi-Marcionist thinking pervades the mind of the anti-theonomist on the question of the total authority of Scripture for the ethical behavior of man. Bahnsen's response is to the effect that those who adhere to this canon of interpretation are compelled to ignore or dismiss Jesus' own words on the matter in Matthew 5:17-19. For in this passage it requires a consummate ingenuity to deny that Jesus regarded the law of God (“the least stroke of a pen”) as possessing a continuing validity “until heaven and earth disappear”, and not simply until the New Testament era arrives. For theonomists, therefore, it is best to have as one's controlling assumption the continuation of all that pertains to the law of God, unless God Himself should modify or abolish such requirements.

To these three basic assumptions on the part of the opponents of theonomy other considerations are added which are needed to make the case against theonomy more persuasive, but are equally of dubious value. In the first place, critics often reason that no distinction exists between types of law—moral, judicial, ceremonial. Some, therefore, might argue that all three are in fact one and alike and are together abrogated as the

quintessence of the Mosaic economy. None remains in force, for they have altogether been fulfilled in Christ. This is perhaps the more extreme position of those whose controlling assumptions are of the dispensational sort. On the other hand, there are those who perceive it necessary to make at least one distinction, viz., that between the ceremonial and judicial laws which have been abrogated and the moral law (summarized in the commandments) which remains in force, albeit in a modified form in this age of grace. After all, it is difficult to get away from the thought that God still disapproves of adulterers, murderers, liars, stealers, idolaters, and so forth. So at least this much should continue as ethical obligation. But even so “grace” takes precedence over “law keeping”. It is always supposed that grace and law stand in opposition to one another. But this is true only so far as the “achievement” of redemption and the restoration of communion with God is concerned, not as it regards men who have been redeemed. Grace does not oppose law, rather it establishes law. There is no other righteousness of God but that contained in His law, and it is faith (by grace) that appropriates this righteousness.

Regardless, theologians do recognize distinctions in types of law. This, too, is the legacy of the historic Reformed tradition. Where theologians have sought to modify this tradition is in the erroneous legal distinction between moral and judicial. These, to them, do not, and ought not to, define separate legal categories. They differ only in the nature of expression (what Bahnsen terms a “literary” [p. 94] difference). That is, moral law is a general or summary expression, whereas so-called “judicial” laws are delineations of specific applications of the former. What is more, both alike differ from laws governing ceremony or typology of redemption (what Bahnsen describes as “restorative” [pp. 93 & 94]). These latter clearly have a temporary application in that they point to the accomplished work of Christ. Naturally, with His finished work on the cross they cease any longer to require observation. However, the moral-judicial law remains in effect as a single moral and legal category of responsibility. And since the latter had civil as well as personal applicability in God's kingdom society in the past, they continue to have the same applicability in God's kingdom program for the present; unless one is prepared to maintain that God has *two* kingdoms in history.

It is due to the triumph of the dispensational hermeneutic in our day that scholars and teachers have precisely insisted upon a two-kingdoms theory in the interpretation of Scripture. On the one hand, there is the theocratic kingdom of Israel by which is meant that church and state were institutionally and jurisdictionally indistinguishable; and, on the other hand, the New Testament kingdom in which church and state are sharply separated. But behind this alleged distinction lurks a subtle dualism between the *sacred* and the *secular*. It comes to the fore as an antithesis between *religious* and *civil*. It is said that in the ancient theocracy the religious and the civil were indivisibly confused, whereas in the New Testament *church* and *state* must be divided as representative of the difference that now obtains between the religious and the civil. Furthermore, the lesson of Israel's theocracy only transfers to that of the church (the religious realm) and not to modern states (the secular realm). At the root of this assumption is that 'religious' defines only an aspect of man's life and does not undergird the whole of it, including the civil realm. But “religious” must be that which defines the totality of man's life in God's

creation. Even so, as “religious” in all of his experience, man as God's creature is not morally self-defined or definable. Consequently, only God can legitimately and morally dictate the terms of man's life in every context of his creation experience. What Israel represented (or at least was meant to represent) was total “civilization” in “religious” subjection to this God-defined ethical requirement. It is the picture of a complete kingdom program for man inclusive of every possible institutional distinction. There is no legitimate Biblical reason for denying that the same applies to God's New Testament kingdom. Institutional differentiation does not imply a dualism between religious and secular. Church and state (or civil society) should be simply viewed as different aspects of a common civilizational agenda in which both alike are in 'religious' subjection to the will (law-word) of God. Having said this, then, it becomes necessary to examine the second portion of Bahnsen's (theonomy's) thesis, viz., that which concerns a social-political philosophy.

Beside the dispensational hermeneutic that sits at the heart of the theonomic opposition there also reposes an inveterate antinomian doctrine concerning human conduct. What many Christians fervently desire in their religious lives, that which they apprehend to lie at the basis of a restored communion with God, is passionately determined by what "their experience" in the matter predisposes them to accept. Not surprisingly, such souls are prejudiced towards that in the Scriptural revelation which promises to amplify the “experience” of God that is so fulsomely solicited. What is looked for, more than anything, is that which appeals to one's assumptions of well-being. In this respect, in many circles there is an endless chatter about the “love” of God, of His “power” and His “blessings”, and all such things as one might imagine to make life exciting and wonderful. But there is little disposition to tolerate what also occupies ample space in the Biblical revelation; and that is the necessity to submit in all things to the absolute *authority* of God. We readily look to God for things which *we* want, things which may even have their basis in something God Himself has promised to provide; however, we are less willing to give to God the things which *He* wants, viz., our obedience. Little does it even enter our minds that God covenantally conditioned the so-called blessings on the foundation of covenantal *obedience* to all that He commands. This frame of mind easily lends itself to a repudiation of God's law for civil society. Consequently, it characterizes the opponents of theonomy, not only theologically, but socio-politically.

Because most Christians divide life into sacred (religious) and secular (civil), and reduce the civilization (kingdom) of God to soul-salvation and “church” matters primarily, they mostly withdraw from anything, other than what necessity imposes, having to do with civil society. Most certainly do not recognize any God-determined responsibility for civil society, except, of course, when Caesar compels us to disobey God. Then the obligation to resist must take precedence over all civic responsibility. But as to possessing a plan for the nature of civil society as such, most Christians adamantly deny that (after Israel) the Scripture offers any such guidance in the matter. Remarkably, some have taken exception to an attitude of monastic retreat from a Christian responsibility in society and politics. They would seriously contend that Christians must work for “justice” in all areas of life, if for no other reason than to demonstrate that Christians are not oddities in the social

landscape and that their God stands in favor of justice and does not ignore the poor, the downtrodden, the oppressed, nor disregard the “social” causes of their misery. As Christians we should “get involved” and help to promote political and economic solutions to “injustices” wherever they may be found. Those who hold such views believe that society, while it is preposterous to expect it to be *Christian*, should nevertheless be *just*, and accommodating to competing points of view. In doing so, then, one does not act on the basis of God's *law*, but on the basis of His *love*. The socio-political philosophy that encourages this involvement styles itself “principled pluralism”. It regards theonomy with a withering scorn and contemptuously views it as a capricious tyranny.

To so-called *pluralists*⁵ the law of God cannot be the moral authority upon which the modern state in its action should be guided. Rarely do they provide the least specific Biblical warrant for such a notion. In fact they make almost no appeal to Scripture except when it is a convenient sop to reassure their partisans that they have most Christians' approval for their vision of social action. Often they simply impose their notions on Scripture. They vehemently denounce the idea that a moral law from Scripture should guide political behavior; but, then, what moral law exists to guide such behavior? In what sense can they call themselves “principled”? If not Biblical “principle”, then what? It stands to reason that it must be non-Christian. They pretend to acquiesce in the humanist ideal of suppressing different and antithetical religious outlooks in order to fashion a society that supposedly transcends any specific point of view. But humanism is not some benignly neutral ethical ideal. It is adamantly opposed to biblical moral principles as well as the sanctions which Scripture imposes for their violation. The ejection of the Christian moral viewpoint is essentially what defines humanism's entire purpose. It systematically opposes any notion of crime and punishment that derives its doctrine from Scripture. How can pluralists claim to support a Christian ideal of justice and, at the same time, agree in essence with humanism's deceptive ideal of justice that supposedly transcends every particular religious point of view? Can one truly accept that something called “justice” is possible that is not the conclusion of this or that system of belief? Can Christians ever accept the notion that their belief system, with its concept of justice, is anything but what God specifically says it is? For Bahnsen, pluralism is not only exegetically inexcusable, it is logically impossible. Accordingly, he avers:

When one religious philosophy *requires* the death penalty for murder, and another religious philosophy *forbids* the death penalty for murder, the state cannot conceivably give “equal protection” to both viewpoints; whether it executes the murderer or not, the state will have violated one of the competing religious convictions, thus not honoring both equally. (p. 192)

There cannot be two moral standards for political behavior, and since the pluralists reject God's standard they are left with man's. Humanism's standard is *statist* in nature. What the state decides is what is just. Not surprisingly, pluralists are great supporters of

5 What Gary North styles “political polytheists”: see his *Political Polytheism*, (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989)

politically engineered solutions to so-called injustices. The welfare⁶ state, so dear to humanists, is the quintessence of their social philosophy.

All non-theonomists are essentially pluralists in their social thinking; that is, whenever perchance they happen to excogitate on such solemn affairs. More than anything, what they object to in theonomy so far as civil policy is concerned, is the concept that the magistrate is obligated not only legally to abide by Biblical ethical obligation, but that it is his sole duty to punish all such infractions (his own included) in accordance with the penal sanctions as documented in the law of God. (p. 211) It is not merely that this objection arises from the hermeneutical tenet that such legal-moral obligations are abolished for the church age, rather it is also accompanied by the deeply ingrained assumption that such a requirement could be fruitful of nothing but grave “injustices”. The obligation to enforce the Biblical penal codes is furiously scoffed at as harsh and tyrannous. Apparently, the application of such a penal code was not harsh during the theocracy of Old Testament Israel. The primary purpose of such codes were (1) to protect the honor of God's name in Israel, and (2) to make known the fact that God is a God of justice and that He does what is right by the “victims” of injustice. Is it any less so today? Are the critics prepared to tell the “victims” of such crimes that it is ungracious to punish their offenders as God requires? Are they prepared to call God unjust Who decrees such stipulations? Or do they prefer man's justice to God's? Law (any law) is unenforceable apart from the application, or the threat of the application, of penalties in lieu of its demand. If law is to be at all effective in the restraint of evil behavior it cannot succeed in this respect if it does not threaten punishments against violators. This is true whether it be man-declared law or God-ordained law. Thus, some penal code is inescapable. What is of the highest importance in any system of justice is that the penal code should act to reinforce it, not contradict or subvert it. Are we prepared to say that man knows better than God what is just, and that God cannot possibly understand what degree of punishment best serves to promote it? There is no doubt that anti-theonomists much prefer man's justice to God's.

Nothing in the mind of the anti-theonomist resonates this sentiment against the application of Biblical penal codes quite like the repulsive issue of “capital” punishment. So many of the judicial requirements found in the ancient law seem to demand the death penalty for their transgression. Is there no room for mercy and compassion? Are we to believe that a God of “grace” would be so rigid and unyielding, and unrelenting so far as the weakness of man is concerned? Theonomists are vigorously attacked for holding to such an “inflexible” application of these penal sanctions for today. But “inflexible” is a term of emotion that predetermines one's attitude toward the word of God. In reality, anti-theonomists impugn God as inflexible! They refuse to allow God Himself to decide how any principle of flexibility is to be understood.

In the first place, theonomists do not make some absurd claim that Scripture prescribes

6 “Welfare” as defined by humanists, not by God. And so far as politics is concerned “welfare” is anything that insures that the “politically correct” maintain power, and that “Biblical” principles are excluded from consideration.

the death penalty for every, or even most, committed crimes. They maintain the *jus talionis* principle because Scripture itself does so. This is the rule of “an eye for an eye”. (Deuteronomy 19:21; 25:12) It is the concept that the punishment fits the crime. (Hebrews 2:2) The “death” penalty, in other words, is only for those who deserve it. (Deuteronomy 21:22) Where theonomists differ from anti-theonomists is that they do not substitute man for God in the matter of who decides moral and legal worth. Secondly, it is even the case that where the death penalty is the “maximum allowable” as stipulated in the law, in most instances it is permissible to mitigate or commute it to a lesser punishment if the “victim” so chooses.⁷ the concern for justice, God permits the victim to participate in the decision. In this way, it is not just God Who is satisfied that justice has been done, but the human victim as well. Could anything be more compassionate? Furthermore, this ideal of justice and punishment places strict limitation on the state in its responsibility to “bear the sword”. (p. 213) Humanists love to speak of “fairness”, “equality”, and “justice” in the abstract. To them the language of “rights”, “freedom”, and “mutual consent” govern judicial discourse in advance of any responsibility to redress grievances. This allows political decisions arbitrarily to determine the nature of punishment. In practice, it offers injustice for justice in that the criminal perpetrator is a priori protected by abstract principles⁸ that are purely decided by man-centered criteria and not God's law.

Theonomy is a *civilizational* agenda of total Biblical proportions, not merely, as it is cast in the aspersions of its detractors, the grotesque political platform of some cult movement on the outer margins of modern Christianity. Because it sees the root nature of man to be religious-covenantal in each of the three societal areas of God's creation purpose for him—family, church, and civil society—it withdraws no obligation from any of these domains to conform in all particulars to the absolute moral authority of God's written word. It admits of no dualism between *religious* (family & church) matters and *civil* affairs (state) so far as responsibility to comply to the pattern and detail of righteous behavior as found in that written word and nowhere else. There is not one ethic for Christians in church, family, and personal relationships and another ethic for civil, social, and political concerns. God's kingdom is a civilization for man, and the sole authority of His law-word provides the only ethical foundation upon which it can be possibly constructed. Naturally, such a point of view necessarily collides with the humanistic assumptions that emanate from the kingdom of man (which is rooted in “the Lie”!). The two cannot co-exist. One or the other must triumph. The pretentious nonsense of “pluralism” that Christians and humanists can share a common civilizational program based upon a mutually agreed upon idea of justice is already the rejection of a Biblical-covenantal viewpoint. Humanists will cooperate with no one who claims that the law of

7 For a splendid discussion of this idea, see Gary North, *Victim's Rights: The Biblical View of Civil Justice*, (Tyler: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990).

8 E.g., the “rights” of homosexuals; or the “rights” of consenting adults; or the “right” a woman has over her own reproductive organs, or even the “right to life”. Anti-abortionists are no less guilty in this respect than abortionists. Further, such considerations as the “right” to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and the like, are all examples of stated human ethical values promoted in advance of God's law. All such ideals are nothing but the declaration of war against God's moral authority over man.

God is the irreducible moral authority over a total civilizational project. The pluralist's concession on this crucial matter means that humanists alone will set the agenda; and this, not just in the realm of civil society, but for church and family as well. Christians fool themselves if they think this is not so.

Already the outcome of the humanist vision is being felt in the area of civil law and political behavior. For centuries the Christian idea of law, as rooted in God's law, held this humanist aspiration in check. But beginning from the time of the Enlightenment a gradual shift began to emerge until, as Harold Berman has aptly noted, "the Western legal tradition, like Western civilization as a whole", is in the process of "undergoing in the twentieth century a crisis greater than it has ever known before..."⁹ Today a revolution is underway in the area of law and the legal tradition in which it is being loosed from its mooring in Christian moral obligation and has become the instrument for political and statist manipulation. Berman is correct to observe that the Western legal tradition was the product of beliefs or postulates that derived from Christian ethical order, which order was not seen simply as an instrument of the state for the purpose of effectuating the will of those who exercise political authority.¹⁰ Such a vision of law and legality was the foundation of an objective and permanent criterion of justice and not the subjective and utilitarian implement of ideological domination. Now, however, with the rise of humanism to the control of the civilizational agenda all that is changing. Accordingly, Berman asserts:

Today those beliefs or postulates—such as the structural integrity of law, its ongoingness, its religious roots, its transcendent qualities—are rapidly disappearing, not only from the minds of philosophers, not only from the minds of lawmakers, judges, lawyers, law teachers, and other members of the legal profession, but from the consciousness of the vast majority of citizens, the people as a whole; and more than that, they are disappearing from the law itself. The law is becoming more fragmented, more subjective, geared more to expediency and less to morality, concerned more with immediate consequences and less with consistency or continuity.¹¹

In other words, the idea of law is becoming the means politically to reconstruct society on totally humanistic lines. Law is made to be an instrument in the hands of political Messiahs who intend to jettison the totality of Western civilization's Christian past and to remodel all of man's life in the interest of humanist ideals exclusively. It is a tool for tyranny, injustice in the guise of justice. It was Frederic Bastiat who, with laudable perception, once decried the perverse tendency that was beginning to make its appearance in the minds of modern men who wished to substitute legality for justice as a tool by which to achieve politically engineered outcomes for whatever was deemed pragmatically and subjectively desirable:

9 Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 33.

10 Berman, p. 38.

11 Berman, p. 39.

The nature of law is to maintain justice. This is so much the case that, in the minds of people, law and justice are one and the same thing. There is in all of us a strong disposition to believe that anything lawful is also legitimate. This belief is so widespread that many persons have erroneously held that things are “just” because law makes them so.¹²

This confusion in law and morality has made it possible for the modern state to implement laws simply in the interest of furthering socially desired outcomes - which outcomes are more often forms of injustice. The hidden assumption is always that man knows what is “just” and the means to promote it. The cynical truth is that “justice” is what the politically powerful say it is.

Theonomy accepts that only God can tell man what is just and what forms of punishment injustice deserves in order that a just civil order may be both legitimately and morally upheld. As contemporary “evangelicalism” has demonstrated its bankruptcy so far as a Biblically-based social agenda is concerned, more and more those who readily discern that the moral rot of society cannot be arrested by rapturous appeals to the “love of Jesus” are finding that this school of ethical thought offers a substantive alternative to both the entertainment industry religion and the scholastic naval-watching that is so much in evidence in present-day theological academia. To them, Bahnsen's book will be both stimulating and reassuring.

¹² Frederic Bastiat, *The Law*, (Irvington-on-Hudson: The Foundation For Economic Education, Inc. 1981), p. 13.