

Theonomy: Weighed and Found Wanting

1. What is theonomy?
2. Why is it wrong?
 - a. It ignores national Israel's nature and unique status.
 - b. It ignores the biblical witness about Mosaic Law.
 - c. It ignores progressive revelation.
 - d. It ignores covenantal distinctions.
3. What is the alternative?
 - a. A proper view of Israel.
 - b. A proper view of law.
 - c. A proper view of Scripture.
 - d. A proper view of covenants.
4. Conclusion

Part 1, What is theonomy?

In researching this topic, it became apparent that there are many variations of theonomy. I will identify which theonomists I am using and do not pretend to answer variations not identified.

“Theonomy, in the technical sense, teaches that Old Covenant judicial laws are the universal moral standard of civil law for all Gentile nations. The basic presupposition of theonomy is that God gave the judicial law to the nation of Israel as a universal law of perfect justice for all nations because it is a perfect reflection of God’s own moral character. Some of the most prominent early proponents of this kind of theonomy include Greg Bahnsen, Rousas Rushdoony and Gary North.”¹ The summation: law given by God to national Israel is a universal law of perfect justice; this denies the progressive revelation of Scripture.

In the Prologue to Greg Bahnsen’s *By This Standard*, Gary North wrote: “As Christians rediscover that at one time in American history, this was a Christian nation, and Western civilization was once Christian civilization, the question then arises: What makes a Christian society appear visibly different from any other kind of society? The answer today is exactly what it was in Moses' day: ethics.”² He goes on to assert the ethics we need are those found in the Mosaic Law. Do not pass over this: North claims a nation and an entire civilization were once Christian; this is grossly simplistic and reminiscent of how papist Rome sees the world. North sees no difference in the ethics given by God to Christians than what was given to a mostly unregenerate people 3,000 years ago, living in a different covenant community. This flat perspective pervades theonomic theology.

Bahnsen gave this description:

The most distinctive aspect of theonomic ethics, if not also its most controversial application, is its endorsement of the continuing validity and social justice of the penal sanctions stipulated within the law of God. Were it not for the fact that the theonomic

¹ <https://cbtseminary.org/why-is-theonomy-unbiblical/> (Tom Hicks)

² *By This Standard the Authority of God's Law Today*, (Gary North), page xiv.

position leads to this conclusion, if one is to be logically and Biblically consistent, many critics would not find it necessary to try to refute the position.

Critics have used a large variety of methods to avoid being driven to an endorsement of the Old Testament penal code. In the meantime, they have done precious little to propose an alternative and Biblically sanctioned approach to the punishment of criminals in our own day. What little they have to say regarding this subject is easily faulted for embodying the same arbitrariness and/or tyranny which characterizes the penology of humanists. Why should the divinely revealed standards of crime and punishment found in the Bible be unacceptable? When we turn to the arguments of non-theonomists, we do not find very compelling answers.³

Note the position of the theonomist: Using the Old Testament penal code as the standard of penal sanctions in modern societies. Failing to do this results in arbitrary standards and tyranny. Lacking in these apologetics for theonomy is any discussion of the laws at work in the New Testament times and how Christians are taught to live within those arbitrary, tyrannical societies; as well as how these societies operated without the sanctions insisted upon by Bahnsen and his fellow theonomists.

More from Bahnsen:

Quite simply, *civil magistrates ought to mete out the punishment which God has prescribed in His word*. When one stops to reflect on this proposition, it has an all-too-obvious truthfulness and justice about it. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25). If civil magistrates are indeed “ministers of God” who avenge *His* wrath against evildoers, who better would know what kind and degree of punishment is appropriate for every crime than the Lord? And where would He make this standard of justice known but in His word? The penal sanctions for crime should be those revealed in the law of the Lord...Where God has prescribed it in His word, such civil punishments for crime are quite necessary.⁴

This is the drumbeat of the theonomists: God’s penal laws are just, they are found in the Mosaic economy, they are to be imposed on every society as the only sane, honorable sanctions known to man, given by God. A lack of biblical theology (the study of the redemptive history in Scripture) is the glaring error in Bahnsen’s view.

“Those who hold to “Dominionism” and the various expressions of it (Theonomy, Christian Nationalism, and some forms of the doctrine known as “Biblical Patriarchy”) use a hermeneutic that employs Old Testament Scripture to interpret the New Testament Scripture to prove the veracity of its claims.”⁵ This statement shows how critical it is to understand how progressive revelation is employed by the Holy Spirit as Scripture was written. This desire to establish God’s kingdom on earth has been the misguided goal of some of His covenant people before and after His first advent. In 17th century England, a movement to install Oliver Cromwell as the king of

³ *No Other Standard – Theonomy and its Critics* (Greg Bahnsen), pages 211, 212

⁴ *By This Standard the Authority of God’s Law Today*, (Greg Bahnsen), pages 271, 272

⁵ This book, chapter 1, (Joshua White) page __.

England with “the law of God” as its rule caused quite an uproar, drawing in saints from all groups. This movement was called the Fifth Monarchy; its fundamentals were later summed up in a poem by William Blake:

Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
Bring me my Arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold;
Bring me my Chariot of fire!
I will not cease from mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand;
Till I have built Jerusalem,
In England's green and pleasant land.⁶

The goal of the Fifth Monarchy was to establish the kingdom of God “in England’s green and pleasant land,” by dint of force with carnal weapons. Much of the dominion theology for the Fifth Monarchy was derived from the misappropriation of Daniel 7, wherein they described the four kingdoms as contemporary states of their time – with the return of Christ Jesus being after those kingdoms were subdued. Their charge was to subdue those kingdoms and establish a righteous kingdom for the Lord to accept. This mindset is focused on things below; the Lord Jesus bids us to fix our eyes on the heavenlies (Colossians 3:2). And it is, as Joshua observed, using the Old Testament to interpret the new in addition to using current events to interpret Scripture. Neither of these hermeneutics leads to the proper biblical understanding.

Part 2, Why is theonomy wrong?

a. It ignores national Israel’s nature and unique status.

National Israel was founded by God as a theocracy, a nation in which priests rule in the name of God. “In the name of God” carries the meaning that what is said and done is according to His will. To facilitate this, God gave to this nation law that was not given to any other nation. In all of the world’s history there has been only one theocracy.

As He was giving law to Israel, YHWH explained why He was doing this. “*For you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and the Lord has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.*” (Deuteronomy 14:2, NKJV) This type of language describing the relationship between national Israel and God is found all over the pages of Scripture; see 2 Samuel 7:23-24 for another example. Of no other nation has He spoken in such terms, except for the spiritual nation of which national Israel was a type and shadow. The type was a carnal people, the anti-type is a spiritual people. The world is not Israel, either national Israel or spiritual Israel.

Our Presbyterian brothers are fond of claiming the “church” today is the same as the “*church in the wilderness*”. This is part of their scheme of claiming one people of God with one law to bind them. This is one of the consequences of failing to comprehend the meaning of words based on context. The Greek word behind “church” means “assembly”

⁶ *The Fifth Monarchy*, (Louise Fargo), pages 12, 13.

or “congregation” and is used to describe the Hebrew people (Acts 7:37 – 38; Hebrews 2:11 – 12), an assembly of town-folk (3 times in Acts 19:32-41), and the called ones of God in Christ (Matthew 16:18; 1 Corinthians 15:9; Ephesians 3:9 – 11, and many more). The *ekklesia* of Christ are of a different nature than the *ekklesia* of Moses; the former is a spiritual people who are the body of Christ, the latter were a temporal people (with a remnant who were spiritual), a shadow of what was to come.

When one ignores national Israel’s status, there is the tendency to treat others as Israel and apply the laws and covenant promises and penalties to them. This will cause unregenerate people to ridicule and rebel, while those imposing these laws and penalties tend to coercion and carnal means to impose their will on others.

b. It ignores the biblical witness about Mosaic Law.

The Mosaic Law is called that because it was given as the foundation of the Mosaic Covenant. The biblical context for each mention of the Decalogue or the ark of the covenant shows the Decalogue to be an integral part of the Mosaic Covenant and the testimony or witness of that covenant (Exodus 31:18, 32:15, 34:27 - 29). This key aspect of the Decalogue being a testimony of God's covenant with Israel is further developed in Exodus 25 and 26, with the ark being the “*ark of the testimony*” (see Exodus 25:22 for emphasis). This is reminiscent of Exodus 16:33 - 34 when Moses was commanded to put manna in a jar as a testimony of God's promise of provisions, seen in Exodus 16:4 – 5.

Paedobaptists are the originators of making the testimony of the Old Covenant equal to God's eternal moral law that binds all men. But where do we see the warrant in the text for appropriating the testimony of the Sinai Covenant as binding on anyone outside that covenant community? Let us read what is recorded:

And Moses called all Israel, and said to them: “Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your hearing today, that you may learn them and be careful to observe them. The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. The Lord did not make this covenant with our fathers, but with us, those who are here today, all of us who are alive. The Lord talked with you face to face on the mountain from the midst of the fire. I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up the mountain.” (Deuteronomy 5:1-5, NKJV)

Right after this, Moses repeated the Decalogue. Right there, you have the covenant tied to the capstone of the laws within tied to the people to whom it all was given.

There is a range of opinions among theologians as to how to view the Mosaic Law. In defending his view of this division in the Mosaic Law, Bahnsen wrote:

A category distinction is unmistakable in God's declaration, "I desire faithful love, not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). That statement would have made no sense whatsoever if Israel could not tell the difference between the laws demanding sacrifice (which we call "ceremonial") and the laws demanding faithful love (which we call "moral")

and "civil"). Are we to believe that the ancient Israelites lacked the mental acumen to catch the contrast between laws which bound Jews and Gentiles alike (e.g., the death penalty for murder, Lev. 24:21-22) and those which bound Jews but not Gentiles (e.g., the prohibition on eating animals that died of themselves, Deut. 14:21)? Whether they used the verbal labels of "moral (civil)" and "ceremonial" (as we do) is beside the point. Indeed, if the Israelites of old could not tell the difference between moral laws (defining moral obligation) and ceremonial laws (defining redemption for those who sin against the moral laws) - and if we today do not draw that distinction - then the purity of the gospel has been compromised.⁷

Bahnsen's position doesn't recognize the condition of ethnic Israel (mostly unbelieving) and assumes they are able to understand Hosea 6:6 in that state. Israel was told many things they failed to understand, as were the disciples of Christ. Do not miss the concluding statement about how important these categories of law are: "if we today do not draw that distinction - then the purity of the gospel has been compromised."⁸ How can this be, when Bahnsen himself goes on to tell us that our obedience to these laws is the *outcome* of our salvation, not the *cause* of it. Bahnsen is unable to see that law is tied to covenant and priesthood and, as with those two, can be brought to an end as *regulation*. Since - as Bahnsen rightly notes - all Scripture is for instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16 - 17), law remains as *revelation*. Paul's use of Mosaic Law in 1 Timothy 5:18 does not warrant the presumption that all Mosaic Law is binding on the saints as regulation, but it is reason to embrace that it is useful to us as revelation which instructs and edifies.

If the Lord meant the Mosaic Law to be seen as divided up into 2 or 3 categories, why did He mix all these alleged categories up in the same passage or verse? Take the Decalogue for example. The 4th word, both versions (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5) have phrases that are "ceremonial" and not "moral" and other aspects that are "moral" but not "ceremonial." Many passages in Leviticus are likewise a chaotic mush IF the intention was for us to see two or three categories of law therein. "The Mosaic law is viewed by the Scriptures as a unit. The word torah ("law") when applied to the law of Moses is always singular, although it contains 613 commandments"⁹ It's reasonable to admit there are distinctions within the Mosaic Law, as there is in USA law. We have laws against capital, felony, and misdemeanor crimes; Israel had similar distinctions. Picking up sticks on the 7th day was nothing for the Gentile; it was a capital offense for the Jew. I think what He intended was for us to see different covenants with different laws; all covenants and laws from God will have some things in common, yet they also have some differences. When you divide the law into parts, it's all subjective as to which laws go in which box.

The placement of the Pentateuch beside the Ten Commandments within the ark of the covenant demonstrates its equality in terms of divine origin, authority, and

⁷ *No Other Standard*, (Greg Bahnsen), pages 97 - 98.

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ *Hebrew Christianity: Its Theology, History, and Philosophy* (Arnold Fruchtenbaum), page 18.

covenantal essence. Moses specifically recalled that the two tablets held tightly in his two hands were representative of the covenant (Deut. 9:15). Yet the value of this compendium is better comprehended if one knows the particulars from which it is derived. Therefore, the details of the covenant are more important judicially than is a summary. The Ten Commandments, though unique in delivery, do not hold a higher position of authority than the rest of the Law, or of Scripture in general any more than the words of Jesus in the NT made distinct by red type. The tables of stone epitomized and represented the Lord's covenant with Israel which included not only moral law, but ceremonial law as well.¹⁰

While Paul freely referred to Old Covenant law and instructions in his letters, does this lend support to the tripartite view, especially with its “moral law” emphasis?

Two observations from these texts suggest that the tripartite view is too simplistic in its formulation. First, in contexts of moral instruction, Paul cites from the entire law, not just the moral law. Paul certainly highlights the Decalogue as instructive (Rom. 13:9; Eph. 6:2)—often the Decalogue is cast as the moral law or at least a summary of it—but by no means does Paul use only the Decalogue in allowing the law to instruct Christians. As seen above, Paul's moral teaching is informed by the civil law (1 Cor. 9:9; Gal. 5:13–14; 1 Tim. 5:18–19) and even the ceremonial law (Eph. 5:2; Phil. 4:18). Apparently for Paul, the entire law of Moses retained the ability to instruct, not just the moral law. In this regard, the argument that Paul's ongoing use of the law proves the binding validity of the moral law proves too much, since Paul cited more than just the moral law for moral instruction. The tripartite view fails to explain adequately the ease with which Paul can find support from anywhere in the law for his moral instruction.¹¹

We don't find the Hebrew people making distinctions of various categories of law, but of the dreadful consequences one faced when breaking any of the law YHWH had given them. Doug Moo points out that the Jews saw the Law of God as a unit: “Because the point is so important and so easily obscured by the history of interpretation, we must insist again: First-century Jews viewed the law as a unity. It was the *tôrâ*, given by God through Moses to the people of Israel as their guide for the whole of life. Jews did not make any fundamental distinction between “moral” and “ceremonial” laws or “moral” and “redemptive” laws.”¹² It is helpful to recognize that “*torah*” has a primary meaning of “instruction or precept,” and a secondary meaning of “law.” It can also refer to the five books of Moses and to the idea of redemption (Strong's concordance, H8451). For whatever reason, our English Bibles most commonly present “*torah*” as “law” and we have been conditioned over the past 600 years to think this usually means the Decalogue – the ten words. This has led to the tablets of stone being esteemed differently than Scripture presents them.

¹⁰ *The Sabbath Complete*, (Terrence D. O'Hare), page 43.

¹¹ *Paul and the Tripartite View of the Law of Moses*, (Joshua M. Greever) pages 53, 54.

¹² *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, “Response to Greg L. Bahnsen”, (Doug Moo), page 167

No part of the Mosaic Law, including the Decalogue is referred to as “the moral law” or any similar phrase. People who insist on dividing the Mosaic Law into civil, judicial, and moral categories reveal a misguided attempt at tearing the theocracy and its law into parts to make that law suitable for another form of temporal government. In truth, the Mosaic Law is a unit (break one and you've broken them all). What we actually see therein are laws against felonies and misdemeanors within that theocracy. “Division into three categories of law is unmasked as a fallacy by the testimony of the Book of Deuteronomy alone. Moses’s second exposition (4:44—26:19) presented the Decalogue and then illustrated each of the Ten Commandments by means of various legal stipulations. Such an arrangement demonstrates that the so-called civil and ceremonial stipulations are inextricably interwoven with what are considered to be the moral laws. Violation of any of the stipulations is a breach of the Decalogue.”¹³

While the Scripture does not call the Decalogue “moral law,” it does have specific language by which it describes those commands. In Exodus 34:28 they are called “*the words of the covenant*,” in Exodus 24:12 we see these “*tablets of stone and a law, and commandments*” were given to Moses; and in Deuteronomy 4:13 we read that “*he declared unto you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, even ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone.*” These tablets are called “*the Testimony*” of the covenant in Exodus 25:15, 16 and 40:20. All of these witnesses declare the Decalogue to be the capstone or foundation of the Mosaic Covenant; none describe it to be a summary of God’s moral law, a thing which is not described in Scripture. Theologians come up with solid-sounding terms to describe something when they want to use that thing in a way Scripture does not teach.

Are the stone tablets sacred? We see in Scripture that temporal objects made of stone are not eternal – the hearts of stone are replaced with hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26); the message of Christ is written on the hearts of His people, not on tablets of stone (2 Corinthians 3:3); the fine Jewish temple of noble stones would be torn down (never to be useful again) and replaced by a temple of Christ's body (John 2:19 – 21).

When theologians claim the Jewish weekly Sabbath is given to all people, or any people other than the Hebrew community, they are showing a disregard for what the Bible says about that day; it was given as a sign of the covenant He made with them on the mountain (Exodus 20:12, 20; 31:13, 17). The weekly Sabbath is not discernible from nature, it had to be revealed by God. Unlike the day, month, and year, the week is hidden from nature. How could this be a sign to Israel if it were common to all people? Further, nowhere in Scripture is the weekly Sabbath moved from the last day of the week to the first day. And while Jewish practice of the weekly Sabbath developed during the intertestamental time to include elements of worship, as given to the Hebrew people that weekly day of rest specified nothing regarding worship.

¹³ <https://drbarrick.org/files/papers/other/tmsj10o.pdf>, *The Mosaic Covenant* (William D. Barrick), page 229

In Galatians 3:15–18 Paul teaches that since the law-covenant of Moses arrived subsequent to the promises to Abraham, it did not add to or render invalid the promises. The law was not meant to bring about the inheritance, for such was given by a promise to Abraham. Positively, in Galatians 3:19–25 the law’s temporal purpose is made clear, as the number of temporal words or clauses indicates.

- a) till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made (3:19)
- b) before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law (3:23a)
- c) kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. (3:23b)
- d) the law was our tutor¹⁴ to bring us to Christ (3:24)
- e) after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. (3:25)

Similarly, Paul resumes the temporal words and clauses in 4:1–7, this time utilizing the metaphor of maturation to describe Israel under the law of Moses.

- a) as long as he is a child (4:1)
- b) until the time appointed by the father. (4:2)
- c) when we were children (4:3)
- d) when the fullness of the time had come (4:4)
- e) Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son (4:7)

According to these texts, God planned the law of Moses to be in effect only for a time, until the time of fulfillment through the Messiah. The Sinai covenant’s legislation was never meant to be final and definitive, nor was it intended to bring about the inheritance, life, or righteousness (3:18, 21). Instead, it was meant to show Israel her need to obtain the Abrahamic promises through faith in the Messiah (3:24–29). It was meant to be in force only until the maturation of God’s people—the fullness of time—when the Messiah would arrive (4:4–7).¹⁵

Lastly, those who claim the Decalogue is “the moral law” and binding on people outside the Mosaic Covenant community, are left adrift because the penalties for breaking those commands are sprinkled through the books of Moses. The theonomist is consistent in wanting the penalties carried over; those who merely want the Decalogue are left to determine by their own wisdom what penalties are appropriate for violating those commands.

The Mosaic Law, as law, was given only to national Israel. As revelation from God, it is instructive for all who desire to know all He has revealed to us.

c. It ignores progressive revelation.

¹⁴ “Tutor” or “schoolmaster” are common words used in verses 24 and 25, but these are based on later definitions of “pedagogue” that did not exist in Paul’s day. The Bible Dictionary of Ancient Greek 748 defines “pedagogue” as “the man, usu. a slave...whose duty it was to conduct a boy or youth...to and from school and to superintend his conduct gener.; he was not a ‘teacher’ (despite the present meaning of the derivative ‘pedagogue’...When the young man became of age, the π . was no longer needed.”

¹⁵ *Paul and the Tripartite View of the Law of Moses*, (Joshua M. Greever) pages 51, 52.

An undeniable truth (nonetheless denied by some) is that the special revelation given us in the Bible expands on itself providing more clarity about the nature of man and of God. One review of Geerhardus Vos' book on Biblical Theology had this helpful description:

The unfolding or progressive character of revelation enables the biblical theologian to trace the increasingly rich display of God's own self-disclosure to sinners. In this way, the Scriptures become more than a proof-text of doctrine; more than a "topic" for the present-day. The Scriptures are seen to be organically linked and historically interconnected. One part of Scripture is integrally united with other parts. Hence the advocate and practitioner of biblical theology is always searching backwards and forwards in the unfolding history of redemption. The crucial question for the interpreter of the Bible becomes: how is this passage organically related to what God has disclosed of himself before, and what he will yet disclose of himself in the future? Indeed, if all Scripture is God-breathed, then every part of revelation is directly related to the plan of the Revealer for the history of redemption. His revelation, given in history, has both a retrospective (looking backward) and prospective (looking forward) dimension. The new order or the new creation which God progressively displays in Scripture, advances toward its fulfillment and consummation.¹⁶

Here's an example from Scripture that should shed light on this. In Exodus 25, the children of Israel are given skills to do all the work He required (see Exodus 31), which was initially told to Moses in chapter 25:8 & 9 *"let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show you, that is, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, just so you shall make it."* The true meaning of this elaborate earthly tabernacle is not found in the books of Moses, nor in the stone temple that gets so much attention. Scripture tells us the tabernacle of Exodus was a copy of the heavenly things, that Christ is better than the Levitical priests because His one-time sacrifice put away sin permanently for His people (Hebrews 9:23-30).

All of Scripture builds upon what was previously revealed. One cannot properly understand the Word of God by stubbornly clinging to the Old Covenant as the final word any more than "unhitching" the old in favor of the new. The last book of the Bible relies on a solid knowledge of the Old Testament, the true meaning of which relies on a spiritual knowledge of the New. Theonomy wrongly assumes Old Covenant laws can be lifted from their covenant context and applied to any nation and people. The truth of Scripture is that God has given mankind law in conjunction with the Fall and knowing this gives the Christian what he needs to know in order to advocate God-honoring laws in his country. This "universal law" as I call it (some call natural law – I do not like this term because nature does not create or give laws) is demonstrated in history within and without Scripture, leaving no man the excuse that he doesn't know right from wrong, evidenced by Cain's response to his crime. This universal law is not a written code but a principle based

¹⁶ <https://www.kerux.com/doc/0201a4.asp>, (James T. Dennison, Jr.)

on knowing good and evil. Stoning a child who was disrespectful of his Jewish parents was the law in Moses' day (Leviticus 20:9) but that does not mean that is the proper punishment in all nations and cultures. Theonomists tend to not be able to handle the tension of laws and penalties that do not line up with the Bible. First century Roman government was not in accord with God's laws and it was the unbelieving Jews who wanted a Messiah that would physically overthrow Rome. Jesus and His apostles spoke not a word about rebelling against the government to establish a "Christian rule," but they did teach by word and deed how to live a God-honoring life in spite of being ruled by reprobates. We would do well to keep in mind the new sheds light on and interprets the old; theonomy rests on a flat view of Scripture, where all people are subject to nearly every law and regulation of the Mosaic Covenant. That's where the most detailed legislation is found, given to a mostly unregenerate people. Law-keepers love lists. But the law is not faith (Galatians 3:12).

d. It ignores covenantal distinctions.

This problem is foundational and underlies many of the issues already reviewed. There are many who claim there is a grand Covenant of Grace which has two administrations, Mosaic and New. It appears this mono-covenant view was developed by Ulrich Zwingli, as a means to convince himself of "infant baptism" after his belief of credo-baptism became known by the state-church that employed him – and threatened him with the loss of his position if he did not turn back.

In the end, Zwingli's new doctrine of baptism was built around a completely new hermeneutical approach to Scripture as whole, i.e., the idea of the unity of the covenant of grace. This was a doctrine forged in the heat of the Anabaptist controversy in the summer of 1525. It was first used to bolster the argument for infant baptism in Zwingli's "Reply to Hubmaier" in November of that year.¹⁷

This has been enshrined in the Westminster system of theology, as one of their modern theologians confirms: "This one Covenant of Grace is administered in different ways during different periods in the Bible....these are simply different methods of administering the same Covenant of Grace. The character of the covenant is not changed by these different methods of applying it....So there is one Covenant of Grace but different ways of administering that covenant."¹⁸ Other well-known theologians in this camp include Louis Berkhof, John Calvin, Charles Hodge, and John Murray. They argue that, since children were included in the Old Covenant they must be included in the New Covenant, seeing as how both covenants are merely two administrations of the Covenant of Grace. This fails to recognize progressive revelation and the truth of Scripture, which tells us the New Covenant is *not like* the Old Covenant.

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah — not according to the

¹⁷ *Baptism: Zwingli or the Bible*, (Jack Cottrell), page 32

¹⁸ *The Covenant of Grace* (Calvin Knox Cummings), pages 12 – 13.

covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (Jeremiah 31:31 – 34)

This well-known passage is glossed over by far too many. In the Mosaic Covenant, most members did not know God – they only knew about him. In the New Covenant, all know Him, from the least to the greatest. In the Mosaic Covenant, sins were covered for a season, for the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin. In the New Covenant, the once for all sacrifice of Christ provides an everlasting forgiveness of sin, which will be remembered by God no more. What a contrast to the never-ending shedding of blood that reminded Israel of their sin every week of every year!

John Owen was a congregationalist, a group that agreed with much of the Westminster System other than the hierarchy the Presbyterians had established. Owen was considered by 17th century Baptists to be a like-minded brother in many areas, including his view of the old and new covenants:

we may consider that the Scripture doth plainly and expressly make mention of two testaments or covenants, and distinguish between them in such a way, as what is spoken can hardly be accommodated unto a twofold administration of the same covenant. The one is mentioned and described, Exod. xxiv. 3—8; Deut. v. 2—5; namely, the covenant that God made with the people of Israel in Sinai; and which is commonly called the covenant, where the people under the Old Testament are said to keep or break God's covenant, which for the most part is spoken with respect unto that worship which was peculiar thereunto. The other is promised, Jer. xxxi. 31—34, xxxii. 40, which is the new gospel covenant as before explained, mentioned Matt, xxvi. 28; Mark xiv. 24. And these two covenants or testaments are compared one with the other, and opposed one unto another, 2 Cor. iii. 6—9; Gal. iv. 24—26; Heb. vii. 22, ix. 15—19.¹⁹

One must ignore what Scripture says to claim the old and new covenants are but one covenant with two “administrations.” They differ in purpose, membership, structure, priesthood, mediator, and law. The Old Covenant was comprised of mostly unregenerate people; the law and covenant and religion given them was tailored to such a people. It is described as shadows of the heavenly things. People with stone hearts were given a law written on stone tablets, and they worshiped in a stone temple. In the New Covenant,

¹⁹ *Covenant Theology from Adam to Christ*, An Exposition of Hebrews 8:6-13 (John Owen), pages 186 – 187.

people with hearts of flesh have the law of Christ written on fleshly tablets, and they are the temple of God! We who are in Christ must not retreat to the shadowlands.

Part 3, What is the alternative?

The alternative to theonomy is to humbly seek to understand how the Bible reveals to us we are to engage the world. The four sections reviewed above will be re-examined to see a better way of allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture. Allowing a system to drive us to a conclusion is likely to lead us away from the intended meaning in Scripture, as God Himself cannot be fully described or comprehended by a theological system contrived by man.

a. A proper view of Israel.

Scripture reveals two peoples identified as Israel, one people based on an ethnic identity forged by God and another people based on a spiritual identity forged by God. Here's how YHWH describes ethnic Israel: *“For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples; but because the Lord loves you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”* (Deuteronomy 7:6-8, NKJV) Here's His description of spiritual Israel: *“Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”* (Ephesians 2:19-22, NKJV) Ethnic Israel was redeemed from Egypt and Pharaoh's rule; spiritual Israel was redeemed from sin and Satan's rule; the former is the type, the latter is the anti-type. They are not the same.

b. A proper view of law.

God gave different laws to different people in different covenants. He gave His “universal law” to mankind in conjunction with the Fall; He gave Noah and all mankind specific laws within that covenant (Genesis 9:1-16); and He gave ethnic Israel law within the covenant He made with them on Mt. Sinai (Deuteronomy 5:1-5). Lastly, and most important, God gave a new law, a spiritual law to the spiritual people He is gathering into the New Covenant (Hebrews 7:12). It is overly simplistic to think God – who is, in Himself, unchanging – has given the same law, in type or detail, to all people. Carnal people need detailed laws and punishments to corral them and allow authorities to punish them. Spiritual people have a new heart and the God-given ability to do what pleases Him (Philippians 2:12 – 16). This does not do away with our need for all the Scriptures, for they are for us, to edify and build us up as the body of Christ (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

First, we should seek to understand the purpose and design of the Mosaic Law. David Dorsey provides an overview:

1. The corpus was designed to regulate the lives of a people living in the distinctive geographical and climatic conditions found in the southern Levant, and many of the regulations are inapplicable, unintelligible, or even nonsensical outside that regime.
2. The corpus was designed by God to regulate the lives of a people whose cultural milieu was that of the ancient Near East.
3. The Mosaic corpus was intended to regulate the lives of people whose religious milieu was that of the ancient Near Eastern world (particularly Canaan) and would be more or less inapplicable outside that world.
4. The code of laws was issued by God to lay the detailed groundwork for and regulate the various affairs of an actual politically- and geographically-defined nation.
5. The corpus was formulated to establish and maintain a cultic regime that has been discontinued with the Church (cf. Heb 8:18; etc.).²⁰

Secondly, we should seek to understand how the Mosaic Law is to be applied to the saints in the New Covenant:

I would suggest the following theocentric hermeneutical procedure for applying any of the OT laws, whether the law be deemed ceremonial, judicial, or moral:

1. Remind yourself that this law is not my law, that I am not legally bound by it, that it is one of the laws God issued to ancient Israel as part of his covenant with them.
2. Determine the original meaning, significance and purpose of the law.
3. Determine the theological significance of the law.
4. Determine the practical implications of the theological insights gained from this law for your own NT circumstances.

What theological insights come from this law? The Person who issued this law is obviously concerned about the physical and emotional well-being of the poor. Moreover he apparently wants his people to have a similar sensitivity toward the poor, to be willing to help the needy sacrificially.²¹

Another brother helps us understand a critical aspect of this discussion: what is a law? Here he is discussing a written, codified law; not a principle.

To be “law” there needs to be the following:

- i. Clearly defined.

²⁰ “The Law of Moses and the Christian: A Compromise”, (David Dorsey) https://www.etsjets.org/files/JETS-PDFs/34/34-3/34-3-pp321-334_JETS.pdf

²¹ Ibid.

- ii. From a recognised and respected authority (even if it is imposed).
- iii. Publicly announced – so that its subjects know what they have to obey.
- iv. Adequately administered, with visible/audible ‘reminders, and necessary policing.
- v. Enforced with due penalties for infringement.²²

“Commandments” do not need to have the last two items noted for “law” – commandments are “bare commands” which rest on the authority of the one giving them. This is the nature of Christ’s commands. The teaching of how to live in submission to Him is not “law” as a codified list of demands and sanctions, but instruction.

To be antinomian is to be against law. This is the term some people use to describe those who do not see the Mosaic Law as binding as law on the saints. They assume if you don’t subscribe to the rule of Mosaic Law you must be against law. This is the fallacy of the excluded middle; there is a position between these two extremes. This “middle position” is the teaching we find in the New Covenant Scriptures, explicitly taught in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, where Paul distinguishes between Mosaic Law and the Law of God, or Christ’s Law and the apostle declares his obligation to obey the latter, not the former. This is the reality of being in the New Covenant.

Further, the believer is dead to the law and free from the law (Romans 7); not under the law (Galatians 5:18). How can the Mosaic be the rule of life for those who are dead to it, have been set free from it, and are not under it? The law of the Spirit of life has set us free from the law of sin and death (Romans 8:2). And it must be noted: the law of sin and the law of the Spirit are not codified lists, they are principles, as sure as gravity on this planet.

General equity is claimed by Reformers as the means to have the Decalogue as a rule of life for the world and the saints. In the legal world, equity addresses topics and cases that law doesn’t satisfactorily address; equity is outside the law and can be at work when there is no law.²³ I see no support, in the legal system or theologically, to use general equity to impose the capstone of Mosaic Law to those outside that covenantal community. Biblical history reveals no nation other than Israel being bound by those commands. Yes, the pagan nations were judged by God for their sin, breaking that universal law given man when Adam fell.

Paul’s inclusion of some Mosaic Law in his teaching shows a continuity of the moral principles in Scriptures with a discontinuity of the implementation of the specific laws and punishments of the Mosaic Law. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul uses several allusions to Mosaic Law (verses 2, 5, 7 – 9, 11 – 13) yet he departs from the penalty of death found in the Mosaic Law (Leviticus 18:11, 20:11) and commands the unrepentant saint be disfellowshipped instead. This is a New Covenant use of Old Covenant law – not “general equity” but redemptive as applied to Christians in the assembly of saints.

Are theologians correct in applying Mosaic Law to nations? I find not one example of Moses or Jesus and His apostles working to or advocating for the deployment of Mosaic Law in any nation other than ethnic Israel. Jesus, Paul, and Peter each write about our obligation to render unto

²² *Love not Law* (David White), page 12

²³ <https://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/equity#>

Caesar what is his, but none imply that the state must be under the Law of Moses in order to reward those who do good and punish those who do evil (Romans 13) or in order that we might live tranquil, peaceful lives (1 Timothy 2) and live free as God's slaves (2 Peter 2). The rules to be employed by the state to render these circumstances are not given in Scripture. "Surely Paul would not object to a legal code that resembles some of the second table of the Decalogue, but he would do so not because civil magistrates are beholden to the Decalogue per se but because some of the Decalogue resembles natural law. ... he never applies the law of Moses to the civil government but instead expects civil magistrates to protect and uphold a basic standard of justice and goodness, which accords with natural law and the created order ... But the standard of justice and goodness to which those laws should conform is one distinct from the covenantal legislation at Sinai."²⁴

So many errors creep in when we fail to comprehend how the New Covenant Scriptures convey and apply Old Covenant principles. It is helpful to recognize that much of what we call the New Testament is describing life under the Mosaic Covenant. Much of the gospels reveal the time of transition as the Son was teaching about His kingdom. It is shown later that the kingdom Jesus was introducing is comprised of people who have been given new hearts (Ezekiel 36:26-27) indwelt by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; 2 Timothy 1:14; Romans 8:11); a new priesthood based on the power of an indestructible life (Hebrews 7:15-17) which brings a new law by which to lead the saints (Hebrews 7:11-12).

Those who love to keep lists of their accomplishments have a difficult time accepting the fact that the Law of Christ, which is engrafted onto the souls of the saints, is not a detailed list of "do this and don't do that" with corresponding lists of rewards and punishments for compliance or non-compliance. All of the New Covenant teaching of how we are to love one another as Christ has loved us are teaching us how to fulfill this spiritual law, based on the two great commandments. We bear each other's burdens and so fulfill the Law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). Romans 12 is a wonderful class on this idea, something we need to pay close attention to because our old nature was addicted to list keeping; man is hard-wired for works righteousness. But grace cannot be grace if we add our work to it.

Law-keeping is list-keeping; one must keep a list of how well he and others are doing in keeping the law. Love keeps no record of wrongdoing (1 Corinthians 13:5). In the phrase "thinks no evil" in the NKJV, the word "thinks" (*logizomai*) means "to take inventory." Hence the idea that love keeps no record, no inventory, of *kakos* – bad, ugly, wrong, worthless, wicked actions and words.

Listen to Paul as he explains this to those who desired to live under the Mosaic Law. *Are you so foolish? **Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh? For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them."** But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for **"the just shall live by faith."** Yet the law is not of faith, but **"the man who does them shall live by***

²⁴ *Paul and the Tripartite View of the Law of Moses*, (Joshua M. Greever) pages 60, 61.

them.” (Galatians 3:3, 10-12, NKJV) The Jerusalem council in Acts 15 addressed a twofold problem: some were saying a person must be circumcised to be justified (Acts 15:1) **and** live according to the Law of Moses as a rule of life. *But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”* (Acts 15:5, NKJV). Peter called this a heavy yoke that man could not bear (verse 10). The resolution reads like 1 Corinthians 8, with a touch of the Noahic Covenant, as the saints were told *to abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from things strangled, and from blood.* (verse 20, NKJV) The commands of Christ are worked out in myriad passages which sometimes refer to Mosaic Law but are not bringing that law in as rule of life – they are subordinate to His teaching us to love rightly.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul calls himself and the saints ministers of the New Covenant (verse 6) and he said the minds of Israelites have a veil over them when the Old Covenant is read (verse 14). The Old Covenant is identified with the Decalogue, which is styled the ministry of death (verse 7) and is said to be brought to an end (verse 11) at the time Paul wrote this letter. Unless the Decalogue can be shown from Scripture to have authority outside the Mosaic Covenant, it has no authority as law for anyone since that covenant is no longer in force.

The idea of progressive revelation ought to give us pause as we consider how the laws God has given man over the centuries ought to be applied to life today; both within the body of Christ and in the world at large. We do not need to “unhitch” the Old Testament from our faith, we need to properly understand how it applies to those within and without the household of faith. Ethnic Israel (the type) has given way to spiritual Israel (the anti-type). We have a new priesthood and that requires a new law.

c. A proper view of Scripture.

As noted several times, progressive revelation is inherent in Scripture, as God has revealed more to us as redemptive history is unfolded in the pages of the Bible. In his book *Gospel and Kingdom*, Graeme Goldsworthy reviews biblical theology and its role in the study of God’s Word:

Since our concern is with biblical theology first and foremost, we intend to follow the method which biblical theology requires:

- a) We begin with the New Testament because it is there that we encounter the Christ of the gospel, through whom by faith we are made God’s children.
- b) The *New* Testament drives us back to the Old Testament because it everywhere presupposes the Old Testament as the basis for the gospel.
- c) The New Testament establishes for us that the Old Testament involves promise and hope of a goal which is fulfilled in Christ. It thus directs us to take account of ‘the dynamic’, the living process and movement of the Old Testament which leads us on to the Christ of the Gospels. Because

the New Testament declares the Old Testament to be incomplete without Christ we must understand the Old Testament in the light of its goal which is Christ. Jesus is indispensable to a true understanding of the Old Testament as well as the new.²⁵

Progressive revelation recognizes the connection of shadows and fulfillment, types and anti-types. As Moses went up into a mountain to get the old Law, so Christ went up into a mountain to give the new Law (Matthew 5-7; 2 Corinthians 3; Hebrews 7:12). We see some similarities and continuity from old to new, but Scripture mostly reveals contrasts and discontinuity. With increasing clarity as we move into the New Covenant Scriptures we can see the contrast between those who trust in the flesh and those who trust in the Spirit.

The law *chiseled in stone* compared with the “law written on the heart” is undeniably a major core difference between the old and the new covenants. The law written on the heart cannot be a formalized written code – there is no actual internal writing of words. No, it is an intimate, intuitive and personal, individual knowledge of God, not mediated through external codification, although it is still informed and moderated by God’s written word. Rather than having more than 600 laws with sanctions imposed as in the Mosaic Covenant, in the New Covenant we have much teaching on Christian ethics, focusing on Grace, not law; obedience of faith, not fear of judgment: Romans 12, 15; 1 Corinthians 6: 1 1 Thessalonians 5: 2 Thessalonians 3: and 1 Peter 4, and so forth.

Speaking to those who trusted in their fleshly lineage, John the Baptizer said, “*do not think to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father. For I say to you that **God is able** to raise up children to Abraham from these stones.*” (Matthew 3:9, NKJV). Paul would later sharpen this a bit more, showing his kinsmen of the flesh what matters: “*For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.*” (Romans 2:28 – 29, NKJV) This contrast between the realms of flesh and Spirit take up much of Romans, such as “*Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.*” (Romans 8:12 – 14, NKJV).

It is by this technique of contrast that we creatures are best able to see truth and error. With regards to how law is presented to us, the Spirit has provided another point of contrast:

Keep the law. tēreō (5083): from teros (a watch; perhaps akin to <G2334> (theoreo)); to guard (from loss or injury, properly by keeping the eye upon).

Fulfill the law. plēroō (4137): from <G4134> (pleres); to make replete, i.e. (literal) to cram (a net), level up (a hollow). In conjunction with prophecy, to complete, to bring to

²⁵ *Gospel and Kingdom*, (Graeme Goldsworthy), pages 48 – 49.

the intended conclusion as in Matthew 2:23: “*And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, “He shall be called a Nazarene.”*” (NKJV)

This “prophetic” meaning of plēroō is the common way the word is used in the gospel accounts. In Matthew, of sixteen occurrences, only two mean to fill up: in 13:48 the fishing nets were plēroō, filled up; in 23:32 the Jewish leaders are told to plēroō, fill up the measure of their father’s guilt. Similar usage in Mark, Luke, and John – the preponderance of use is prophetic, to bring about or complete that which had been prophesied.

The new covenant is a Spirit-covenant, not a law-covenant; an unconditional covenant, not a conditional covenant. Imperatives are exhortations, and “let us” statements, not “thou shalt” language. “The whole inner workings of the covenant are radically different. The dynamic of living for God, for believers, has become the vital, beating heart of God Himself inside the souls of the saints, Christ in us – the hope of glory!”²⁶

d. A proper view of covenants.

The Mosaic Covenant was explicit in many ways and written in order that unregenerate people could understand and obey. By contrast, the New Covenant is written such that natural man cannot understand it, because it is a spiritual covenant and can only be understood by those made alive by the Spirit.

Membership into the Mosaic Covenant was by (for the males) circumcision of the flesh (Leviticus 12:3; Exodus 12:48 for the resident alien) and a promise to obey the commands of God given in that covenant (Exodus 19:3-6). Once Moses had passed from the scene, the administration of the covenant and its law was given to the Levitical priests (Deuteronomy 31:9-13) for under that priesthood they were given that law (Hebrews 7:11). Faith in God was not required for membership in the Mosaic Covenant community, as the people by and large had stiff necks and uncircumcised hearts of stone (Exodus 32:9; Deuteronomy 10:16; Ezekiel 36:26; Acts 7:51).

Entrance into the New Covenant is by grace through faith in the Son of God (Galatians 2:16; Acts 15:11; Romans 4:22 – 25) and all who are in this covenant know God (Jeremiah 31:34) and be cleansed from all sin and have a new heart wherein the Spirit of God dwells and His people walk in His ways (Ezekiel 36:25 – 27). Paul summed this up in several places, including:

In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of

²⁶ *Love not Law* (David White), pages 14 – 15.

requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross. Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it. (Colossians 2:10 – 15, NKJV)

These things could not be said about the nation of Israel, though there was a remnant of believers ever in their midst. These things are true about the Israel of God, though there be false brothers in our midst.

In Hebrews 12:18 – 24, “The writer contrasts the nature of the old covenant, which was all about tangible, very physical phenomena, with that of the new, which is concerned with the realities which those ‘shadows’ merely represented. It is critically true of the believers’ covenant that it is to do with ‘what may not be touched’.”²⁷ In this grace-based covenant, “*we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal*” (2 Corinthians 4:18, NKJV), because “*faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.*” (Hebrews 11:1, NKJV) The old covenant could not be described in this way.

John 1:17 contrasts old and new covenants, law vs truth and grace. “Note that Moses is the ‘conduit’ for the Law. Jesus is the ‘carrier’ of .. what .. more law? New law? No, of ‘grace and truth’. This is significant. At the very point where it could have been emphasised, beyond doubt, that the gospel was the implementation of a superior ‘law of Christ’, John says no such thing. His message is that Jesus brings grace and truth to us. Truth in the form of His own person. Not in the form of ‘law’. The contrast is not between the law of Moses and the law of Christ. It is between the law of Moses and the grace-and-truth of Christ.”²⁸

This contrast is also seen in Galatians, as Paul wrote in Galatians: “*I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another; so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.*” (verses 16 – 18, NKJV) Law-keeping is not the solution for sin, walking in the Spirit is. Law-keeping was the basis, the foundation of the Old Covenant; walking in the Spirit with love for one another is the foundation of the New Covenant.

Positively, the two covenants can be understood and delineated by two specific ‘givings’ of God. Both happen decisively, declaratively, determinedly and definitively.

The first ‘giving’ of God – the Law:

The old covenant ‘giving’ happened on Mount Sinai. It defines the covenant. It was unmistakable. With its full range of terrifying ‘audio -visual’ accompaniments -thunderings and lightning, cloud, the sound of a trumpet, God

²⁷ *Love not Law* (David White), page 15

²⁸ *Ibid*, page 35

pronounced that He was giving law to Israel, as their land-law for living in Canaan. In the whole of human history, God has given law only once. And He made absolutely sure that anyone within audible or visual range knew about it.

The second ‘giving’ – the Spirit”

The second ‘giving’ of God was on Mount Zion. It happened on the Day of Pentecost – the very feast where the Jew remembered Sinai, fifty days after the Exodus and the Passover. Fifty days after the cross, the great deliverance from the Egypt of sin, God poured out His Spirit and birthed the new covenant church. This ‘giving of God’ was also accompanied by audible and visual signs. And, as Hebrews tells us, the first giving was a ‘shadow’. The second is its ‘substance’. The Law – the shadow; the Spirit – the substance. The second ‘giving’ of God defines the new covenant. It is a Spirit-covenant, not a law-covenant.²⁹

In conjunction with the establishment of the Mosaic Covenant, God gave through Moses the law of that covenant, with the Tablets of Testimony as the capstone thereof. By keeping this law, the Hebrews would be known as the people of God.

In conjunction with the establishment of the New Covenant, Jesus gave His apostles a new commandment: *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”* And it was further stated, *“By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”* (John 13:34 – 35, NKJV).

Note the contrast, again, between the law covenant and the truth and grace covenant. Many rules and penalties in the law covenant; one bare commandment with equipping by the Spirit given to all within the new covenant. Weekly Sabbath-keeping and circumcision of the flesh marked those who belonged to the law covenant; love for one another which flows from being loved by God in Christ marks those who belong to the grace and truth covenant.

The new covenant is a Spirit-covenant. Not a law-covenant. The difference is critical. Paul says, in Romans 7 vs 6: *“But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.”*

Note the ‘new way’. He is not merely saying that the old, Mosaic Law is obsolete, its control over lives which it once ruled, broken. He is saying – and very loudly – that the old ‘dynamic’ of the way the law, ‘written code’ worked is gone and has been replaced by the Spirit’s new dynamic, the new way. This is how new life in Christ ‘works’.

And so, I am convinced that the difference between new covenant and old is not just that the law given to them no longer applies to us ‘as law’. It is much, much more. The whole inner workings of the covenant is radically different. The ‘dynamic’ of

²⁹ *Love not Law* (David White), page 30

living for God, for believers, has become the vital, beating heart of God Himself inside the man, inside the woman. Christ is in us – CHRIST is in us: “*To [His saints] God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*” (Colossians 1:27).³⁰

Part 4, Conclusion

It’s been said that every Christian is a theonomist because all of us believe in some law from God as the rule for life. Yeah, but. Recall how Greg Bahnsen defined theonomy? “The most distinctive aspect of theonomic ethics, if not also its most controversial application, is its endorsement of the continuing validity and social justice of the penal sanctions stipulated within the law of God.”³¹ That’s why some of us don’t call ourselves theonomists – we do not see direct equivalence of the Old Covenant into the “church age.” There is some continuity, as all is guided by the hand of God; but there is some discontinuity, as He has given new revelation. “*God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things.*” (Hebrews 1:1-2a, NKJV) We are bid to listen to the Son, He was set apart from the law and the prophets, being left alone as the mediator and final Word to which we must pay heed (Matthew 17:1-8).

But man is by nature hard-wired for works-righteousness and inclined to cling to a list to measure himself against. This was the Pharisees’ position and it is a characteristic of every state-church that has existed.

Some of the saddest periods of church history have been caused, because the church went back to OC practices of life and worship. The crusaders looked to Joshua instead of His antitype Jesus. The inquisitors modelled themselves of Moses and not the true lawgiver. The radicals at Munster followed David and set up a theocratic kingdom, rather than following Christ and worshipping in Spirit and in truth. The Puritans at Salem followed the Levitical code rather than NC ethics. Chismar points out that:

The Puritan experiment in New England was an enforced experiment in applying God’s law as the rule of society. Its aim was the model Christian community, and no one was permitted to tamper with their experiment. They were honest about this. They had come for their own religious freedom but were not concerned about allowing religious freedom to others.

The church today would be mistaken if it believed it could not also fall into the same trap as those who have gone before.³²

Law-keepers tend to coercion to get others to follow their way. Every state-church in history has persecuted those who did not submit to their system. This is the way of the world, not the way of

³⁰ *Love not Law* (David White), page 14

³¹ *No Other Standard – Theonomy and its Critics* (Greg Bahnsen), page 211

³² *A Better Covenant*, (Robert K. Miller), page 88

Christ. He is the good shepherd who knows what's best for us and He provides what's best for us out of a divine love that cannot let us fall away as He leads us in the ways of righteousness.

The Lord Jesus was clear - His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). Yet Christians have been overly focused on worldly things since Peter tried to stop Jesus from going to the cross. Theonomic Reconstructionists believe Mosaic Law is to be forcibly imposed upon society, apparently oblivious to the covenant structure in Scripture which applies law given within a covenant to those in that covenant. Man does not have the authority to extract laws from a covenant without express warrant from Scripture.

Whenever men try to impose Mosaic Law on society, they tend to make their own rules, trying to redeem culture and make the world ready for Christ's return, putting themselves in place of God. Every time this agenda is pursued, men claiming Christ use force of arms to gain support for their cause. Baptists and our forerunners have consistently resisted such movements, seeing the overlapping division God has instituted between His kingdom and the state. We participate in state affairs, but we do not conflate the state with the spiritual kingdom to which we belong.

One of the earliest Baptist confessions, written by John Smith, proclaimed, "the magistrate is not to meddle with religion, or matters of conscience, to force and compel men to this or that form of religion, for Christ only is the king and law giver of the church and conscience."³³ Much of the abuse of saints has been the product of actual and professing Christians who hold to a state-church; most of which believe they are to use man's law and the Mosaic Law as means to enforce compliant behavior.

Let us humbly seek to understand what our Lord and King has said to us, learning the nature of the written revelation given us and the nature of the salvation we've been called to. The Lamb of God will return, not to deal with sin (for He finished that work during His first advent), but to gather those who eagerly await Him (Hebrews 9:28). Enforcing Mosaic Law onto a society cannot redeem it, but it can make those who imposed and enforce that law feel satisfied with themselves. When the Sons of Thunder wanted to call down fire from heaven on those who did not welcome them, Jesus simply led them to another city to see if others would have an ear (Luke 9:52 – 56). We do not impose Christianity on a culture by force, but by the proclamation of the gospel, trusting in the only One who can give life to change lives.

Judgment Day is looming large, and all will give an account to Him. Let us entrust ourselves to the only just Judge, the Lord Jesus, and resist the siren call to force people to walk like Moses. Let us set the example by walking in the footsteps of our father Abraham (Romans 4:12) and our Lord, Christ Jesus.

Bibliography

Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Hebrew Christianity: Its Theology, History, and Philosophy*, (Canon Press, Wash. D.C., 1974), page 18

³³ *The Fifth Monarchy* (Louise Fargo), pages 6 & 7.

Calvin Knox Cummings, *The Covenant of Grace*, (Great Communications Publications, Suwanee, GA, 2000), pages 12 – 13.

David Dorsey, “The Law of Moses and the Christian: A Compromise”, (The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, September 1991)

David White, *Love not Law*, (Independently published, 2017), page 14, 15,

Douglas Moo, *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, “Response to Greg L. Bahnsen”, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996) page 167.

“Equity”, Legal Dictionary, (The Free Dictionary website, 2023)

Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*, (Paternoster Press, Cumbria, UK, 2000), pages 48 – 49.

Greg Bahnsen, *By This Standard the Authority of God’s Law Today*, (Institute for Christian Economics, Tyler, Texas, 1991), pages 271 – 272.

Greg Bahnsen, *No Other Standard – Theonomy and its Critics* (Institute for Christian Economics, Tyler, Texas, 1991), pages 211 – 212.

Jack Cottrell, *Baptism: Zwingli or the Bible*, (The Christian Restoration Association, Manson, OH, 2022), page 32.

James T. Dennison, Jr., *What is Biblical Theology?*, (Northwest Theological Seminary, 1987)

John Owen, An Exposition of Hebrews 8:6-13, *Covenant Theology from Adam to Christ*, (Reformed Baptist Academic Press; Reprint edition, Port St. Lucie, FL, 2005), pages 186 – 187.

Joshua M. Greever, *Paul and the Tripartite View of the Law of Moses*, (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022), pages 51, 52.

Louise Fargo, *The Fifth Monarchy* (Brogden’s Books, La Vernia, Texas, 2021), pages 6 – 7, 12 – 13.

Robert K. Miller, *A Better Covenant*, (Independently published, 2018), page 88.

Terrence D. O’Hare, *The Sabbath Complete And the Ascendency of First-Day Worship*, (Wifp & Stock, Eugene, OR, 2011),

Tim Gallant, “Fulfillment in the Gospel of Matthew: Theonomy and Matthew 5:17–20”, <https://timgallant.com/essays/fulfillmentmatthew/>

Tom Hicks, *Why is Theonomy Unbiblical?*, (Covenant Baptist Theological Seminary, April 2021)

William D. Barrick, *The Mosaic Covenant*, (The Master’s Seminary Journal, 1999), page 229.