
Review Articles

Christian Reconstruction – *Hywel Jones*

A review article on 'Theonomy', editors William S Barker & W Robert Godfrey, published by Zondervan, 413 pages at £10.35

Theonomy is a shorthand term for a school of thought which is also referred to as **Christian Reconstruction**. Those two terms taken together indicate what is distinctive about this outlook. It consists of a particular view of the legal portions of the Old Testament (Theonomy) and a fervent commitment to their enactment by the governments of contemporary states - penalties included (Reconstruction).

The publication of R J Rushdoony's work on Biblical Law in 1973 and the writings of Greg Bahnsen, Gary North and others have brought this movement to the fore. While it is a North American movement in origin, it owes something to Dooyeweerd and his philosophy of *law spheres* and it has now become a feature of the British scene. A journal entitled **Calvinism Today** has appeared, edited by Stephen C Perks of Whitby, and one or two conferences have been held. It is not impossible that it might have similar effects here as on the other side of the Atlantic where Christians and churches have become not only divided but alienated and the reformed witness has been hindered. This book is therefore a very timely one and it provides useful information about the movement and pertinent rejoinders to it. In addition, its tone is brotherly, unlike the vituperation which some theonomists use with reference to brethren who do not agree with them.

The work is in the nature of a *symposium* to which sixteen scholars associated with Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia and Escondido have contributed. As one expects, the essays are marked by scholarly erudition but they are not difficult to follow. This is not the first symposium to be produced by faculty members of Westminster but it is the first of its kind. A previous volume was devoted to the defence of the orthodox doctrine of Scripture, but in this one, issue is taken with the views of fellow reformed theologians. Why? The preface informs us that the work was undertaken partly because churches pastored by alumni of the Seminary were being divided by theonomic teaching. But also important, no doubt, was the fact that Theonomy had arisen from within the reformed camp and yet no evaluation of it had appeared from that constituency. Hence the sub-title of the book which is **A Reformed Critique**.

The perspective on Theonomy which is common to all the writers is that it is a 'distorted view' of the reformed tradition which results from a different 'hermeneutical perspective...It overemphasizes the continuities and neglects many of the discontinuities between the Old Testament and our time' (pp 10&11). A similar lack of 'sensitivity and...discrimination' (p 348) appears when it handles historical data and pastoral/social concerns (pp 265ff). The chapter entitled **Theonomy and the Poor** indicates a rather unfeeling treatment of that subject. The adjectives 'simple' or 'flat' are used in the book to describe Theonomy's biblical perspective and they have real point. The formidable presentation of the theonomic case can leave folk at a loss to know how to reply to it, so it is comforting to read in this scholarly book that there might be 'something to the typical Christian 'gut reaction' to Theonomy' (p 42).

The precise dispute addressed in this book is over how the following question should be answered:

'How is the Israelite theocracy under Mosaic law to be understood and its typological significance related to the proper role of the church and of the state today?'

That is the nub of the issue and those who write on it agree with Theonomists that Jesus Christ is Lord of the nations as well as head of the Church. But a more important question is also involved. What is *the church's* message and primary task in the world today and how is that to be undertaken? Is it to assert and practice the *cultural mandate* as expressed at the end of Genesis 1 or the Great Commission at the end of Matthew? Is the kingdom of Christ to be advanced primarily by the power of the state or by the weakness of a suffering church, not yet glorified? Is it by the gospel or the statute book?

The symposium is divided into five parts with a conclusion. Each part is preceded by an editorial summary of the main point of the essay it contains which is likely to be a great help to the reader. Sixteen essays are contained in the book and each writer provides valuable footnotes to his text. Some of these are quite extensive.

The editors sum up the overall treatment as follows:

Part I seeks to provide basic orientations to the matter of applications of biblical law.

Part II contrasts theonomy with other systematic approaches to biblical theology.

Part III deals with New Testament teaching concerning the nature of the continuity of Old Testament law. Part IV addresses what we perceive as triumphalist dangers in theonomy. Part V is concerned with the historical question of theonomy's relation to the heritage of John Calvin and the Puritans. The Conclusion seeks to end the volume with a constructive challenge to Theonomy.

Some interesting pieces of information about Theonomy are found scattered in these pages, eg that its leading exponents viz Rushdoony, Bahnsen, North and Chilton do not always agree on how OT laws should be interpreted and that there are now different groups of theonomists which are not only separated geographically by distance. This is significant, given the seeming simplicity of their claim that all that is required is fidelity to the plain sense of the biblical text regarding law and penalty, and a determination to apply them to the contemporary situation. If that is so, how can there be room for disagreement, we may wonder? Or perhaps all is not as straightforward as is claimed? Then there is also the link between the charismatics and the Theonomists, partly through Gary North's adoption of the charismatic viewpoint. Does the dominion theology of the charismatics coincide with Theonomy's view of the law and reign of God (p 251). Is there a link between *the health and wealth gospel* and Theonomy? (pp 270&271) Or is there an uneasy theological moratorium here, in the interest of pursuing practical aims? Can it all be held together?

The essay by John R Muether (pp 246-259) which describes the sociological context in which Theonomy has arisen, is well worth pondering. Muether does not seek to explain away the Theonomic case by indicating the social factors which were at work at the time of its origin or subsequent appeal, but it would be naive of anyone to think that Theonomy is purely the result of the study of Scripture. His essay is entitled **The Theonomic Attraction** and he lists in his discussion non-theological features of American society and of the movement itself.

William Barker's essay shows that the New Testament recognises the civil government of the day and does not outlaw a pluralism in society. By *Pluralism* is not meant, of course, a pluralism of faiths but 'the freedom of religious belief and practice' accorded to a variety of groups without any one of them in particular being favoured. From our Lord's statement 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's,' Barker points out that 'the Lord did not expect the civil authority to support the true religion.'

Part V of the book (pp 299-384) examines Theonomy from the standpoint of the history of the Reformed tradition in Switzerland, England and America. What emerges from these historical studies by Robert Godfrey, Sinclair Ferguson and Samuel T Logan is that Theonomy does not stand in the direct line of descent from Calvin, the Westminster

Assembly men or the New England Puritans. These are very interesting chapters and exhibit careful scholarship on the subject of how those referred to regarded the law of God in its bearing on civic affairs.

While historical study has a place in this evaluation, all the writers recognise that the primary element in the reply to Theonomy must be biblical in character. In addition, they are agreed, as has been said, in locating the waywardness of Theonomy in its lack of sensitivity to 'the progress of biblical theology' (p 289), that is the progressive unfolding of the mind and will of God in covenants through history as recorded in Holy Scripture. The answer to Theonomy, therefore, is obtained by a careful study of the legal portions of the Old Testament in their own setting and also in the New Testament to see how such material is dealt with there.

Of the essays which are devoted to this biblical examination some are general in character and others focus on detailed subjects. Important matters are treated in them which Theonomists need to consider. What is more, the entire discussion will help the reader to think seriously about the relationship between the two Testaments.

Robert Knudsen deals with laws (and Law) and the gospel in the nuanced way in which these are presented in the Old and New Testaments. In the course of doing so he points out that law is not given the *up front* position in the New Testament that it is in the Old. While *Law* has a place in the New just as *Gospel* has in the Old, what has to be determined, he argues, is how Law 'fits' into the new age of the Spirit, which laws do so and how they do. 'The criterion for its (ie any law's) usefulness will be a New Testament one' (p 36). An example would be that the destruction of idols which the Old Testament requires is not required in the New. What is to take place instead is the destruction of the thinking which results in idol making and worship (p 147) and that not by carnal weapons. This emphasis on the New Testament treatment of Law and laws touches the Achilles' heel of Theonomy.

Bruce Waltke writes on other theological views of the Old Testament legal material. Interestingly he sets Theonomy alongside Dispensationalism on the one hand and Meredith Kline's *intrusion ethic* view on the other. (The latter sees the legal portions of the Old Testament as typifying life in Christ.) The value of making this comparison is to point out to Theonomists that other views about the legal material of the Old Testament are held by those who seek to be faithful to Scripture and that they do not hold the field alone, so to speak. Of course Dispensationalism does not come into the reckoning as far as Theonomy is concerned but Kline's theological credentials cannot be as easily dismissed. What does emerge in the course of this discussion is that although it is not always easy to differentiate between what is ceremonial and what is civil, to be able to categorise laws does help in authentically interpreting them. It is not easy to abstract the civic laws from the covenant with which they are obviously connected. Their future is therefore bound up with what happens to that covenant.

The essays by Dan McCartney on the New Testament use of the Pentateuch, Moises Silva on the Law and the Promise in Galatians 3 and Richard Gaffin on the framework of New Testament Eschatology provide an overall biblical perspective for the critique of Theonomy. We shall come back to the first two. Gaffin effectively shows how there is no room in the Theonomic programme for the reign of Christ to be extended in the world by a weak, suffering church whose glory is largely hidden from the world and yet that is the story line of the latter part of the New Testament! Theonomic post-millennialism is not in keeping with the New Testament at this point.

Two other essays complement each other and perform a very useful role in the whole work because they relate to the vexatious matter of the Mosaic punishments. The first is by Tremper Longman who looks at these in their Old Testament setting, while the second by Dennis Johnson examines how such punishments are made use of in the Epistle to the

Hebrews. Longman points out that while Theonomists do recognise that a cultural gap exists between OT Israel and America (or any modern state) and take this into account in deciding how civil laws are to be applied today, they do not let the fact that Israel occupied a unique place in the flow of redemptive history have a similar effect upon their thinking - an inconsistency, surely. In addition, Theonomists usually charge those who disagree with their views with being subjective in their use of Scripture, while being seemingly oblivious to the fact that they are not free from subjectivism themselves. For example, Longman refers to the fact that Rushdoony regards the death penalty for sabbath breaking as being non-applicable to states which are not in covenant with God but Bahnsen refuses to make this allowance. In addition, there are some laws in the Old Testament which specify a variable penalty and leave the decision to the judges. Who would decide on how to settle this in a Theonomic state and, more importantly, *on what basis* would they do so? How could that be decided by Theonomists without their making use of the New Testament in some way? And if here, why not elsewhere? What about the New Testament evidence that the death penalty is no longer applicable to adultery - and that by our Lord's decision?

Dennis Johnson has the best way of expressing and responding to the main difference between Theonomy and Reformed thinking (together with Dispensationalism). He sees that they all operate with the continuity/discontinuity outlook in relation to the Testaments but differ on a level of 'predisposition' and this 'shows itself in differing assumptions about where the burden of proof lies in questions concerning the applicability of Old Testament law. In general, Theonomy argues that the *burden of proof* rests on any contention that a particular Mosaic stipulation does *not* apply as it did for Israel' (pp 173 & 174). The reverse holds for the opposite view. So, the disagreement revolves around the silences of the New Testament. Theonomy assumes that laws continue in force unless they are specifically repealed whereas the other viewpoints work on the basis that they need to be re-affirmed in order to be valid.

Johnson then points out that the ways in which the New Testament statedly uses Old Testament laws needs to be the starting point of study and not any of its silences, however loudly they may seem to call out to any interpreter. He then demonstrates conclusively from a study of the epistle to the Hebrews that the Mosaic penal sanctions relate to 'the discipline and purity of the covenant community', ie the church and not the state.

This matter of the New Testament's application of Old Testament material to the church and not the state touches Theonomy at a point of weakness from a *Christian* point of view and this is brought out forcefully in the essays by McCartney and Silva to which reference has already been made. McCartney shows that the use of the Pentateuch in the New Testament proceeds on the basis of a 'covenantal christocentrism' with ecclesiological and ethical implications. This is a massive shift but it is in the nature of a fulfilment of the Old Testament in its entirety. To think of a Theonomic State is to go against the direction of biblical revelation. Silva's essay examines the features of the new and the Sinaitic covenants in Galatians 3 and, while not denying some continuity between them, demonstrates that life is only found in the new. This further strengthens the anti-theonomic case.

The appeal made to theonomists in this volume by their reformed brethren is to join them in study of the legal portions of the Old Testament from the standpoints of exegesis and Biblical theology. One hopes that there will be a positive response to that invitation for, the reasons given. If heat can be turned down, perhaps light can break through. Meanwhile what can we learn from all this? Two things at least suggest themselves. The first is to do with how the Old Testament is to be interpreted and the second with how the task of the *church* in society is to be conceived.

On the first, we must abide by the definitiveness of the New Testament's interpre-

tation of the Old. Without demanding that what continues to be valid from the Old Testament must be specifically endorsed by the New Testament (so one can still recognise the Old Testament as Holy Scripture) what must be appreciated is that there is no possibility of interpreting the Old Testament except in the way in which the New Testament does. The New Testament is not only the last word in a chronological sense but qualitatively too. It is the definitive word of God on all that it says - the interpretation of the Old Testament included. Both Testaments of Scripture are linked to covenants - the Old largely to the Sinaitic, the New to the covenant. For there to be an interpretation of the Old beyond that which is set out in the New, there would have to be another covenant made. An unthinkable - *God forbid*.

Secondly, the task of the church, as distinct from that of individual Christians in their respective relations and walks of life, is not to try to Christianise society by means of the law. The New Testament church did not see that as being even faintly its business. It set about worshipping the Triune God and proclaiming to all nations the good news of his salvation from the demands of the law and its penalty in Jesus Christ. It was more concerned about eternity than time, about heaven (or hell, than earth. That is what is to preoccupy the church in every age. *Is Theonomy therefore sufficiently Christian?*

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Clinical Theology – Brian Harris

A review article considering the biography of Frank Lake by John Peters, published by Darton Longman & Todd, 250 pages at £12.95

Reading this book was an illuminating experience, since for the past 25 years one was only just aware of Frank Lake as a name somewhere in the background of psychiatry. It is the reviewer's opinion that the book begins to make sense only when it has been concluded that Lake was probably not an evangelical (at least in any commonly accepted sense of the word). Indeed one of the greatest disappointments of the book is that no clear outline is given of Lake's theological persuasion.

The book has eight chapters of varying length. The first is a short Introduction, beginning with a statement of the aim of Clinical Theology, ie "the reintegration of the person through the healing and reconciling resources of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit". The death of Dr Frank Lake, the founder of the Clinical Theology Association was in May 1982 at the age of 67, and this biography attempts to review the man and his work. There is an outline of the background and description of the time of crisis from which clinical theology arose. From a theological point of view the late 50's and early 60's represented a time of great uncertainty and confusion; from an official psychiatry standpoint psychiatric training had discounted religion entirely; and from a medical point of view there seemed to be no training for doctors in counselling. One of the aims therefore of clinical theology was to develop a technique, "for integrating religious values with clinical practice".

The second chapter gives a summary of the history of the Clinical Theology Association. Apparently 1958 was a key year in that Dr Donald Coggan (later Archbishop of Canterbury) and others, personally recommended Lake and his ideas to eleven Diocesan centres so that a series of seminars was set up and convened twelve times a year. This was very much an Anglican venture and it would seem that to begin with there were common sense aims and ideas behind Clinical Theology. "Seminars consisted of a talk (in detail) by a tutor taking up some aspect of Clinical Theology followed by a role play which both illustrated the subject and gave counselling practice to the bolder and more adventurous participants in the seminar".